

## D. Diver 421

Chapter 421

[Minutes earlier in The Great Plains.]

I watch from the perspective of one of my body doubles as my main body falls into the Titan's domain.

My last thoughts before creating these clones were to notify myself at the halfway mark, and another 2-3 minutes before it looks like the Titan will leave through the rift.

Both body doubles wait patiently, airstepping high in the sky to watch from above as the Titan slowly makes its way across the 2km stretch of rolling grasslands toward the closing rift.

I stand in silence as minutes pass, and I know weeks and months are going by within the creature below us. In just under 13 minutes, it reaches the halfway point between where it started and the rift at the back of the dungeon.

The body double to my right side looks over to me and speaks using telepathy. I hear my own voice ring in my head.

"I'm off, I'll use my self-destruct Unique Buff in another dungeon as to not make too much noise here. Wouldn't want it changing speed with another mana disturbance in the area."

I nod back, and in the blink of an eye, my other double Dungeon Walks away to send the first halfway mark signal to my original body.

I'm still unsure if the signals are getting through, but as a double, I'll do my job to send the second message. I cross my arms and activate stealth, floating high in the sky above the great plains and watching the massive creature silently trudge along below me.

My eyes keep darting back and forth from the monster to the rift, and can't help but realize the rate at which it's closing seems to have slowed down...

This is the opposite of what I assumed would happen, but the fact that I'm in full stealth mode and my other double just Dungeon Walked away may have put less stress on the rift itself to collapse.

Even the approaching Titan's swinging arms are slowing, and its footsteps are becoming less rushed and constant.

This is a good thing because my main body will have more time in the domain, but a bad thing because I may not know if the 2nd message got interrupted for some odd reason. Thinking in the shoes of my main body, I'd most likely leave early just to be on the safe side.

All I can do is wait and watch, then send the signal once it's actually time to leave.

More minutes pass and the rate at which the rift is closing and the Titan approaches it slows even more, but comes to a steady pace once it's about 400-500 meters away. Just about 25 minutes has passed since my real body entered, so this was the perceived time of impact when I left.

Now there seems to still be about 3 to 5 minutes remaining before it will begin to get close.

I take a deep breath and watch for a full extra minute as the Titan slowly walks over the final rolling hill to get within a proper line of sight to the rift and begin to activate my dungeon walker skill to blip away, planning to use the same self-destruct feature as my other double.

However, I stop myself as I see a faint red glow growing inside the black abyss of the Titan.

It's only a matter of seconds before the crimson light begins to shine bright enough that it envelops the entire Titan. The black blob of mass is now blood red, and I recognize the skill being used very easily.

"That's Ember's Plunderer skill, I guess there's no need for me to send the signal after all."

My main body waited quite a long time but still played it safe and left before I sent a message. If my calculations are correct, I spent just over 5 months in there.

A thin and dense blade of flames tears the red Titan in half, and a bright white release of light dissipates the creature into the air like it was never even there.

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The bright glow allows an incredible amount of excess MP into the dungeon, but it is quickly dissipated as the silhouette of a massive black-scaled dragon and a hunter in a black cloak and flaming sword remain in the wake of the defeated Titan.

The only thing that throws me off is the eerie sense of there being no mana at all in this hunter. As the debris of the explosion disperses, I definitely see my main body standing next to Ember, but there's no mana signature coming off me at all.

I even activate my All-Seeing Eye, and nothing comes up... It's like I'm an unawakened hunter...

As the body double, I'm unable to use Qi so it's impossible for me to sense what is really going on here, but it seems as though Ember taught me well, I really learned Mana Suppression in 5 months and mastered it...

I whisper under my breath.

"I wonder how much stronger I've really become."

With a grin on my face, I start air-stepping over, but a wave of telepathy hits me from my main body as I see myself pointing toward the rift.

"Enter it, I'd like to see what's inside before it closes."

I don't slow down for a moment and continue air-stepping over my real body and Ember to soar toward the rift.

"Good idea."

As I fall closer, the rate at which the rift is closing speeds back up again. The fall of the last Titan just moments before it made it back has accelerated the closing speed, and by the time I plunge through into the deep black darkness, the rift is less than 2 meters in diameter and seems to have only tens of seconds left until it finally closes.

With no fear at all, I step through the black Abyss into another world; the place where these Titans spawned from.

The world around me becomes dark, so I activate my buffs and light my hands with dim flames as my feet hit a hard smooth floor.

In the same moment as I squint my eyes and try to look around, the rift behind me closes and fully disappears, leaving me here trapped for good.

I take a cautious breath, stepping forward and exploring the range of my light source. My initial surprise is that I'm not floating in an endless void of darkness like I assumed, but the mana in the air here is quite dense...

As my light finally gets bright enough, I can see the walls and ceiling of an incredibly tall and long hallway. It's over 30 meters high and 10 meters wide, made of dark grey stone polished until glossy.

When I activate my enemy detection skill, I don't get a single reading, my entire sensory system is screwed up and seems like a massive blotch of mana is scrambling everything.

Even so, I walk forward full of curiosity, wondering what this hallway leads to and what hidden information I could unlock by venturing further in.

Constantly absorbing mana from the atmosphere to keep my dim light going, I walk down the hall at a steady pace. Soon, I start running, airstepping, and even using extreme speed to push myself further into the endless hall of darkness.

Over half an hour passes, and multiple kilometers have been trekked before the faintest glow of another light source is visible to me in the distance.

My eyes widen at the sight of it, and I deactivate all my flashy skills, turning stealth on, and continuing my march through the darkness with newfound vigor. It takes another 10 minutes to finally make it down the hall far enough to see the light expand into a dim archway. It looks as if it opens up into a much more well-lit setting.

Maybe this was just a hidden entrance to a rift, and there's a colorful new world outside.

As I get closer and closer, the dim white light source grows, but my enemy detection senses still give off the same scrambled reading. Now it may be even stronger than before, but it's hard to tell.

Once I finally make it close enough to step outside, the sight before me is like nothing I ever would have imagined...

I step out into an impossibly large circle-shaped room.

The other side of the room is dark, and it's impossible to see. The only light source is 2 massive glowing white orbs easily 3 kilometers above me, creating a dim glow to light up a dome-shaped room. It would be easy to fit a small mountain inside here.

The walls and ceiling are all made of the same glossy dark grey stone.

When I look left and right, all I see is more archways, leading down more dark hallways just like the one I left. There are hundreds of them, maybe thousands; they go on further than my eyes can see all around.

My eyes widen even more when I see dozens of black Titans slowly walking into various dark walkways, all coming from the pitch-black center of the room.

I try to wrap my mind around what I'm seeing here, but many things aren't making sense. If this place is what I think it is, then every one of these halls has its own rift at the end of it, and these Titans are draining mana from dungeons systematically.

Just as my gaze points back to the center of the room, wondering how they're possibly all walking in from the center, I freeze with awe and terror.

The two white orbs of light kilometers above in the sky turn toward me, and stare straight through me even with my stealth skill fully activated.

I feel an immense, mana-imbued pressure crushing me from above, and the outline of a jet-black humanoid monster too massive to fathom entirely fills my senses. I don't hear, see, or think about anything else as it stares through me. The mountain sized creature has no defining features other than its glowing white eyes and the overwhelming aura that exudes the feeling of endless greed for energy.

My body double is killed instantly by its presence alone.

All the memories of this experience come surging back to my main body in The Great Plains fractions of a second after the rift closes.

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"So that's the Void Creeper Lord."

I turn to Ember, and he responds.

"Oh? You actually met it?"

"Meeting it isn't exactly what I'd call that... More like it killed me the second I laid eyes on it."

Ember nods.

"Sounds about right... If you were killed in an instant, you have nothing to worry about."

He turns back to the direction where the rift closed moments ago and continues to speak through our link.

"It's already been too long back in that world for that creature to remember you even existed. I've never been myself, but I assume pests like us jump through the rifts all the time."

I tell Ember the details about what happened, and we both have a good laugh, but also appreciate the perspective of power it just showed me.

Those greed-filled eyes and its overwhelming strength is burned into the back of my mind. Even kilometers away, all my senses were scrambled by its passive aura. The more I think about it, the more I understand there isn't even a point in being scared. The power gap is so large it's impossible to understand. In that world, it has absolute dominance.

Even though it was only for a brief second, through the eyes of my double, I still have a perspective of what is possible. It's clear I only grazed the surface of its capabilities, but power like this is something I one day aspire to achieve.

In this world, there are still many monsters and people far stronger than me. I have to master the power at my fingertips and continue to train by only facing opponents I am certain I can defeat. By

taking it one strong enemy at a time, with careful and calculated steps, I can rule like the Lord of that world...

Thinking back further, I recount the image of what my body double saw when it tried to sense me from afar when I re-entered The Great Plains. I really do seem like just a weak unawakened human from the perspective of non-Qi users now.

With a thin smile, I whisper to myself.

"Perfect."

Then, I open up my item storage and let Ember hop inside.

"I have some work to do."

The last 2 months inside the Titan's Domain were even more productive and eye-opening than the first 3.

I managed to almost double my Qi capacity again, gaining an additional 120% by cutting my rest and relaxation time down, while upping the training output to not consider fatigue into account. In doing this, I managed to burn through an additional 1.6 Billion MP in just 2 months.

I upped the ante on using my buffs and elongated my time gathering Qi by combining the two training methods together. Once I became able to conjure physical Qi around my body at a constant rate for long periods of time, circulating it in waves around the outside of my body rather than inside added to my control considerably.

This gave a large surface area for new Qi in the room to gather upon me and also allowed me to multitask gathering, control training, and training my Qi barrier.

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I used a Full restore potion around the midway point when my mana fatigue became overwhelming, and it completely washed away 90% of the tiredness. With my growing control, I only needed about 5 hours of sleep every 7 days by the end of it all.

That's a 260% increase in Qi capacity and a 3 billion MP increase in total control since the start of this session.

As I use Dungeon Walker to teleport myself back to the 28th Floor of the Labyrinth, there's a thick flowing white layer of Qi present around every square centimeter of my body. I've gotten used to holding up the highest setting of a barrier, and with my immense control training, it's become an extension of myself.

On command, I can let the Qi that surrounds my body flow back into my core at any speed I'd like. It still feels as if there are ocean waves of energy crashing and flowing all around me, but my mind can guide the energy almost as easily as breathing now.

It's a more instinctual way of controlling energy than the rigid activation of mana, but I've finally gotten the hang of it.

I do a full scan of the dungeon using enemy detection and find there are only 2 monsters left in here, and they're very far away from the exit portal and boss room. I come to the conclusion that Bri has already finished up here and moved to the 29th floor.

I dungeon walk to the mountainous region to check and see if my assumption is correct, and almost immediately see a white bird battling a shimmering orb of light high in the sky above the nearest mountain.

Large waves of mana are expelled after every exchange. The white feathered bird dive bombs in, and Bri retaliates with her blades and attempts to confuse her opponent with light magic and her ranked up buff.

About a minute goes by before the battle is over, and Bri successfully outmaneuvers the monster, letting its bloodied corpse fall to the ground and airsteps downward to collect the loot.

I inspect Bri to see she's already made it up to level 620 in such a short amount of time, but it's clear there was quite the struggle in that battle. As she stands next to the dissolving body and drinks an HP and MP potion to heal her wounds and mana depletion, I confirm she's nearing her max level possible with her current mana control.

This dungeon on the 29th floor may be the last safe one for her to hunt in alone for the time being.

I airstep over, covered in a thick barrier of Qi, but hide behind rocks and trees. I get within 50 meters, but her head hasn't turned, and not a single sign of there being an enemy nearby is triggered.

It hasn't been the full hour she requested, so I'll let her farm here longer. In the meantime, I might as well see what the floor above this one has to offer.

I Dungeon Walk away, far deeper into this dungeon, and dip into the boss room portal to challenge the boss.

An enormous level 667 Bird with bright white feathers and fierce advanced wind magic appears and lets out a screech. Then, after a moment of silence as its battle cry echoes away, it blows mana-imbued wind magic allthroughout the boss room.

I slowly airstep into the sky to meet its eye level and pull my black sword from my item storage. The moment I lift it in the air, the dense Qi swirling around my body flows into the blade, oversaturating it in an instant. The same thick barrier of Qi around my body now surrounds my blade as well.

To the boss monster's perspective, I have no magic power. It sees me as a bug, ready to be squashed with a single swing of its long sharp talons.

However, once it dives down to attack, I simply swing my blade upward and let the bird's own momentum cut itself in half against my Qi imbued sword.

It wasn't even a challenge, and the Boss was confident until its last breath it would be the victor.

Now falling to the Boss room floor are two halves of a mighty bird that has no idea how it died.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

I hit level 647, absorb its MCP, and collect the mana crystal and [White Feather of Agility] it drops with a 110% Agility buff. I place them all in my item storage before the transport magic brings me to the 30th floor.

Once the transport magic fades, I activate my enemy detection skill along with my All-Seeing Eye and airstep high into the sky to get a better view of this dungeon.

The readings I get show monsters ranging anywhere from level 550 to 750.

Monsters in a dungeon have never ranged this far apart in level on a single floor, and the variety of skills I pick up using my appraisal skill is also a confusing piece of data to receive. However, it's best to take opportunities when they're presented.

I whisper under my breath while pinpointing which monster I'd like to challenge first.

"Now this is going to be interesting..."

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As far as I can see, the dungeon is split into three different parts. It's like a pie split into triangles, stretching out a few kilometers each.

I seem to be hovering over the rocky region of the dungeon right now. There are massive rock formations, plains of rocky dirt and soil, and large forests with small mountains and hills. At first, my view was blocked by a large plateau-like structure, but now I can see the rest of the dungeon clearly.

Nearby, I sense a huge lake filled with crystal clear, blue-tinted water for almost as far as the mountain region stretches. There are a few small islands in the lake, but it's almost entirely open water.

Then lastly, the furthest away from here is a region filled with hot flames and volcanoes. It has the lake on one side of it and the rocky region on the other. Its black stone pathways are glowing orange and red hot from the mana-imbued molten rock that trickles down from the massive volcano at the back of the region.

The entire dungeon has a light breeze flowing through it and light white puffy clouds high above in the sky.

To top it all off, there's a grey swirling boss room portal in the middle of all three sections. I can sense it slowly spinning where all of the regions meet in the middle, but am unable to see it with the naked eye just yet.

"This is the most fascinating dungeon I've ever seen..."

As these words barely leave my mouth, the closest monster to me that I pinpointed on my radar seconds ago comes within visual distance. A brown-colored creature screeches loudly as it flies up from one of the rock formations in the earth region of the dungeon below me. I do a quick appraisal of it while readying my Qi-covered sword with one hand in a focused nonchalant manner.

It's level 579 and has three active skills along with a ranked-up buff.

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Active skills:

[Intimidation][Special Grade]

[Body Hardening][Legendary Grade]

[Combat Magic][Advanced Earth Summoning]

Bufs:

[Brown Wyvern's Rock Prison]

---

Stone begins to form around me in a dome shape as the Brown Wyvern stares me down with its sharp eyes.

I don't bother moving and let the weak magic wall of curved stone completely envelop me. It locks into a sphere shape, and the walls start shrinking and closing in. The Wyvern below me gets closer and closer as the sphere shrinks to the point where it begins to touch the layer of Qi that surrounds my body.

Without changing its upward trajectory in the slightest, the stone prison begins to crumble like sand the moment it hits my Qi barrier, and its upward momentum meant to collide with me in a weakened state once the trap crushes its prey is actually met with a Qi-imbued sword that slices it clean in half. It ends just like the boss room monster from the 29th floor.

"What's going on today...? These monsters really like killing themselves, don't they?"

I smirk and continue to airstep forward deeper into the rocky mountain region, knowing I won't have to get serious fighting a single opponent on this floor. However, some are at a higher level than me, so there's good reason to travel into level up and farm extra PP, and create dungeon walker points all over this place while I have the chance.

As I make my way through the rock structures of the earth region, more Wyverns come diving in from above and below with a similar attack strategy. Every time, I let them dive at me and decimate them without using much energy at all. Though, one thing stands out to me.

The further in toward the center of the dungeon I travel, the higher level the monsters become.

Once I kill my 5th one, I'm almost halfway through the region toward the center of the dungeon, and a familiar ringing sound can be heard in my head.

[Level Up]

I reach level 648 after defeating a level 655 Wyvern.

Upon closely examining my enemy detection skill with its level inspection perk, I conclude my theory is true.

It seems the closer I get to the center of the dungeon, the higher the level of spawned in monsters become. This means if I stay at this distance away from the boss room, I can farm mobs directly above my level and cash in on the maximum MCP and PP gains.

Over the next half-hour, I use air-steps and dungeon walker to move back and forth throughout this portion of the earth region using my inspect skill to only pick the right opponents, clearing out every Wyvern within 5 levels above me as I raise my own.

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I sporadically check my Dungeon Walker skill to see Bri farming on the floor below me, but she hasn't yet hit her maximum level for that floor. I can tell she's still determined to keep going, so I decide to give her some extra time while I have some fun farming up here on the 30th floor myself.

While doing so, I close the distance between myself and the blue lake region nearby too, there are some interesting readings coming from within I'd like to check out. One of which being a new skill I don't have yet.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[+1PP]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[+1PP]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[+490 Agility]

[+39,340,050 MCP]

I hit level 660 fairly quickly, by only absorbing PP and MCP, the leveling process moves up very fast. One of the kills even triggered the absorption perk that allows me to take a portion of my opponent's stat points.

I would be sticking around to collect loot too, but they mostly only drop mana crystals. I've killed dozens, but nothing interesting drops until this most recent kill.

As I'm airstepping away toward the lake and the Wyvern's corpse falls to the floor, an unusual pulse of energy comes from it.

I stop my search for other Wyverns and circle back to see what it has dropped.

Resting on the rocky floor is a tan-colored stone with thousands of MP pouring out of it in the form of liquid mana-imbued rock that forms into small boulders. The floor beneath it is growing at a fairly quick rate, and I can tell the energy from within is being expelled.

The grin filled with amusement covers my face as I make my descent downward to collect the item drop.

"An earth stone, huh? Looks like I have another rare resource-packed dungeon to farm."

I open up my item storage and let the stone fall inside. In doing so, the ground growing with rock and rubble ceases to move. A mound of fresh earth is left in its place as I continue my hunt.

My gaze turns to the other two regions in this dungeon, and my curiosity is spiked. If this region drops earth stones, there's a possibility the others drop different elements too.

I speed up my steps and finally make it above the shimmering blue lake region where the artificial dungeon sun reflects off the lightly crashing waves below. Off in the distance, a bright blue Wyvern comes my way and clocks in at level 661.

I appraise it too.

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Active skills:

[Intimidation][Special Grade]

[Body Hardening][Legendary Grade]

[Combat Magic][Advanced Water Summoning]

Bufs:

[Blue Wyvern's Fury]

---

My eyes widen at the sight of its skills.

I'd already picked up on the fact that there were water wielders here when I first entered the dungeon but didn't recognize it at first glance. The only Wyvern I faced in the Arena back in Valor City looked exactly like this one, yet it had Fire magic instead of Water.

I don't let the change in color throw me off too much, and let the creature with wide wings, sharp talons, and furious eyes come swooping in while summoning tens of blades of water all around me in a dome shape.

They all come closing in as I take a deep breath to swing my sword with ease, negating every one of its blades in an agile spinning motion while airstepping forward and piercing its dense mana shielding like butter.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: [Combat Magic][Advanced Water Summoning]

[YES][NO]

I accept the skill as well as its MCP but turn my head to the side as another one bursts out of the water below me and tries to attack in the same fashion.

Swinging my blade gracefully and aiming with great precision, I take out its level 657 partner in an instant too.

More blue Wyverns come rocketing out from the deep water below me, and I dance around the air easily dodging and slicing through each new one that gets in my way.

Over half a dozen of them come out from the lake before one unique Wyvern catches my eye as it flies at me from the direction I just came, seemingly spawned from the space in between the water and earth region.

Its scales are bright blue just like all of the other monsters attacking me, but on its status, I see [Combat Magic][Advanced Earth Summoning]. As it screeches and begins to attack, stone spears are sent flying my way in the air, and a dome of rock surrounds me, but it's glowing blue just like the Wyvern from the arena.

"A mutant?"

I chuckle as the monster gets closer, but in a matter of seconds, it's defeated and torn to pieces just like all of the previous attackers.

The glowing blue earth it attacked me with falls down below into the lake. Every splashing sound it creates makes me more curious about this whole situation. The main question on my mind is wondering what kind of element stone a mutant like that would drop.

I continue on, hovering over the lake, diving just a tiny bit deeper in closer to the center of the dungeon to face a few more monsters. Their levels rise, but their difficulty is all the same. They don't even make me break a sweat.

Some dive bomb in from above, while others come soaring up from the bottom of the lake.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[+1PP]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[+48,600,770 MCP]

By the time I've almost made a full circle around the dungeon, the edge of the volcanic region is in sight. I've sliced through a few dozen Blue Water Wielding Wyverns hitting level 668 but haven't yet tried out the new skill I absorbed from the first.

A crimson-colored Wyvern comes my way and breathes out a dark red wave of flames.

"This may be a good place to test things out."

I put my sword on my hip and release a small portion of the swirling Qi barrier from my now freed-up right hand. Instead of suppressing all of my magic, I let one half of my mana control be used as I activate my new water summoning skill and place my hand in front of me facing the Red Wyvern.

This is similar to what I do under the bottoms of my feet, allowing the Qi barrier to thin out so just enough air magic can come out to propel me higher and keep me in the sky. But, considering this is an attack on an enemy, I use a bit more power.

My palm glows bright blue, and a pillar of water comes flowing from the center of my hand, expanding larger and larger until it makes contact with the ball of flames sent my way from the level 665 Wyvern that attacked me from the volcanic region.

In an instant, the creature's flame is engulfed by the stream of water, and once it makes contact with the Wyvern itself, its body is disintegrated by the water pressure.

The water jet continues forward, making contact with a small hill of molten rock 100 meters away.

I stop releasing magic, but the attack that hits the structure punctures clean through leaving a gaping circular hole in the rock formation.

I deactivate my skill and let my Qi barrier reform around my hand while I grab my sword and chuckle to myself.

"Noted... I guess half my mana control is probably still a bit too much."

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[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[+1PP]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[+1PP]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[+1PP]

[Level Up]

[+102,509,223 MCP]

Close to another hour passes as I continue to farm in the volcanic region, testing out my new water summoning skill and finding that if I use about a fifth of my mana control, they can put up a better fight.

I reach level 684 before one of them finally drops an advanced fire stone. It burns hot and gives off a dark aura. I place it in my item storage for later, as this is the strongest fire stone I've ever seen.

There are plenty of stronger Wyverns deeper in, closer to the Boss room portal, but I want to take my time farming here. Killing monsters just above my level gives me the optimal amount of MCP and PP gains per level up. On top of that, I'm looking to get the maximum number of kills in order to farm element stones too.

The drop rate here seems to be less than 2%, but for such a valuable resource, it's actually pretty high.

The main reason I've stopped now is because I'm well over the agreed-upon timeframe I said I'd meet back up with Bri, and she finally hit level 645 in an intense duel against one of the white-winged hawk creatures on the 29th floor.

Unfortunately, I couldn't find another mutant Wyvern despite camping by the borders of the regions. However, I'll be back here very soon.

"Dungeon Walker."

I blip back to see Bri less than 100 meters away and air step down to the ground nearby with my Qi barrier fully activated.

I wave at her as she collects the mana crystal from her last battle and looks at me with a confused and half-startled expression.

"I was wondering when you'd show up... and secretly hoping you'd let me keep at it until I hit the max level in this dungeon... odd how things worked out-"

I take a few steps closer until we're less than 10 meters apart, then she takes a step back and the confused expression on her face grows.

"You- look a lot different... and your aura... it's gone."

Bri tightens her gaze to look me up and down, unable to piece this puzzle together. I reply.

"It's a new ability. Probably better if you don't ask. I'm unable to share this one."

Her stare remains on me for a moment, and I decide to allow about 20% of my aura out, just like I did while facing the strongest Red Wyvern in the dungeon above us. Her expression shifts back to normal. She replies once my aura is able to be felt.

"Interesting... to my senses, it seemed like you weren't even here. It almost felt like my eyes were playing tricks on me."

"Interesting."

I make a note to myself that I should probably always let a small portion of my mana leak out when interacting with people. A hunter with 0 mana control at all would be even more suspicious than one with an overwhelmingly high amount.

Bri reaches into her item box around her waist and walks closer with a smile, pulling out a small concealment case.

Once she opens it up with a click, I can see what's inside.

"Two of the highest quality wind stones I've ever seen. I'm looking forward to seeing what I can craft with these."

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She pauses for a moment.

"Hey, I know you said you have a meeting to get back to tonight, but do you think you have a little time to come back to my office? I have a few extremely high-grade items I've been waiting for the right time to craft. With the use of your skill, and my recent strength improvement, I'm sure I can make something extremely unique."

I nod and place a hand on her shoulder, dungeon walking us to one of the exit portals that leads into the underground dungeon hub. I activate my conceal skill to shift my face and let my cloak morph into a generic black business suit.

While doing this, I also increase my Qi barrier's density to let out an even smaller amount of mana, similar to that of a level 350 hunter that has barely scraped the surface of awakening mana control. We walk out into the underground black market.

It doesn't take very long until we make it back to Bri's building and the same blond-haired guard greets us and lets us in.

On the first floor, all of the workers have left for the night, and the front doors are locked and fortified. On the second floor, the two twins have left for the night as well, but Bernard still sits at his desk in front of his library of books, deeply immersed in one as he sits with very good posture at his desk.

He gives us a nod as we walk up the stairs into her office. I make a comment in a whispering tone, simultaneously putting up a Hush barrier around us while we make it to the top floor.

"You know, your security here is rather lacking. I got past unnoticed the first time I showed up and even left a clue for your two men out front that I was here. I assume they never notified you?"

Bri shakes her head as I continue.

"The second time, all it took was a little sweet talking to the guard down below in the black market to let me through. Once we're partnered, I think some elite-level guards are in order. Or at least some higher-level mana shielding with an ID scanner as a security precaution."

She nods while walking back over to her desk.

"You're right, you're right. Up until now, all threats and attempted break-ins I receive are from E and D class hunters at most. There's no point in coming to the black market as a higher grade hunter with access to the Dungeon Hub and Association-partnered shops. Even if someone of C-Class or higher were to go rogue, the Association always takes them out before they're much of a problem. That is, unless they can escape to the Dark Continent, there are exceptions of course."

She gives me a sly smile, insinuating she means people like me.

I sigh and respond.

"That makes sense, but I just wanted to put it out there. If any of our C and B-Grade goods are being produced and shipped out here, security needs to be heightened. I trust you're strong enough to protect this business yourself, but there will always be times when you're away. Extra backup is needed."

She nods while I activate my Rising Emperor's Domain buff and give Bri the Mythic Grade Crafting ability.

"Check your status, the skill should be there. I have a bit of time so make whatever you'd like."

Bri's eyes light up as her blue status screens begin to form all around her, and she digs into her desk, pulling out many items with varying abilities and buffs ranging from 50% up to 120% and odd-colored stones and potions I've never seen before in my life.

I don't really care to watch, as I have quite a few other things on my mind.

The first thing that still piques my curiosity is what kind of elemental stones the mutants on the 30th floor drop. However, the second most significant topic that has been on my mind for months of perceived time, ever since my second Qi training period in the Titans Domain, concerns what Fisher and Lydia will reveal about their findings in Sector 2.

It's been a huge mystery looming over me ever since I entered Valor City, and I'll be having a final meeting with Lith tonight to secure the details of the trade routes and finally figure out what kind of territory I'll be venturing out to next.

I sit with my feet up on a coffee table, and my hands behind my head, staring at the ceiling deep in thought as flashes of light continuously go off in the back portion of the room.

Bri's voice rings out to me after about 20 minutes and a glowing silver ring comes flying my way.

"Hey, I made something for you, it's one of the highest quality items I think I've ever produced, so please accept it as a gift for helping me rank up today."

I use appraisal while catching the shiny silver-colored ring in my hand, while not moving any other part of my body from the comfortable couch.

Platinum Ring of Visual Manipulation [+151% Mental Strength][+111% Speed][+100% Agility]  
[+99% Strength][+74% Defense][Illusion Attribute]

My eyes stay focused on it for a moment, and the platinum glimmer and smooth surface of the item are captivating. A bright white aura comes off the ring, and Bri continues to speak.

"It has a light attribute imbued that should allow you to put up small walls of illusions similar to my own. Meaning you'll be able to make people around you invisible if they're close enough, even if you don't share that stealth skill with them."

I smile and accept it, taking off my Platinum Amulet of Frost [+137% Mental Strength] [+90% Ice Magic Strength] to replace it with this new item with much better stats. I slip the smooth platinum ring on my finger.

"Thanks, I'll make good use of it."

I place my hand above me in the air and let out a much higher amount of my mana control to let the illusion attribute of the ring activate. A long 1 meter by 2 meter rectangle of shimmering mana comes out, making the ceiling above me disappear, allowing me to put whatever I'd like in its place.

Light flashes in the back of the room as Bri continues to craft random items, and I become very entertained by changing the rectangle of ceiling that I control to look like various dungeons I've been to before.

Another 20 minutes or so go by before the sensation of someone approaching from below us hits both mine and Bri's mana senses.

We stop what we're doing, and I release the hush barrier just in time for a few knocks to ring out from the side door at the top of the stairs.

Bri looks to the back of the room, and I turn my head to face the visitor.

It's Bernard. In a neatly fitted suit, thin-framed glasses, and a book still in his hand at his side, the craftswoman's assistant speaks up in a professional tone.

"I'm very sorry to bother you in the middle of a meeting, Ms. Briana, but there's been important news from an informant that I think you'd be very interested to hear."

He looks over to me, then back at Bri, waiting for her response.

She nods.

"Very well, this client is trusted, don't worry about keeping secrets. What is the news?"

Bernard pauses for a moment, then blurts out something that leaves the whole room in shock.

"Well, this is directly from our informant that infiltrated the Association. There's been a violent high-grade dungeon break near the Green Ridge Mountain Lookout. It's unlike any break they've ever seen before. The energy dispersed has created 14 brand new dungeons in its place."

## Chapter 425

A few hours ago, at the top of the Association's HQ Tower in Vice City, a blond-haired woman named Samantha picks up her transmission tablet while she looks out the glass window of the top floor of her office suite.

She is the assistant to the Vice Region's Director.

The transmission tablet in her hand glows brightly for a few seconds before the deep voice of the Director, Brutus C. Matthews, replies on the other end.

"You know I'm out on business in the Apex Region right now. What might be so important that you'd call at a time like this, and on my emergency line? The room is listening."

The tall blond-haired assistant continues to stare out the window as an enormous mushroom cloud of white energy continues to expand at a distance of about 20 kilometers away from the city.

"I believe the matter is urgent, I wouldn't have called otherwise. I'll have all available Vice Region elites sent out on the issue immediately, but I wanted you to be the first to know; It looks like we're having another surge. Or something of similar magnitude."

The Director stays silent on the other end of the call as Samantha recounts the events of the distress signal from the Green Ridge Lookout Dungeon and now the fading white cloud of light that illuminated the entire sky for the city to see.

After a long pause, the Director's voice echoes back through the transmission tablet.

"Very well, secure the perimeter and I'll make my way out there as fast as I can. Thank you for the swift action and professional response."

The transmission tablets go dark on both ends as Samantha watches the remnants of the blast fade away. Her tablet lights up again as she calls all units that are available in the city to make their way out to survey and secure the blast zone as the Director ordered.

Meanwhile, Brutus sits in a dark room with 9 other people at a large round table. The edges of the room fade off into shadows, and no one is able to see anyone's exact facial features; there are only outlined silhouettes.

As he puts his small silver tablet back into a pocket, he speaks up, facing the man in the largest seat directly across from him at the table.

"I'm sorry for the interruption, Mr. Freeman. Please, let us carry on with this year's B-Class exam preparations. I'll attend to this matter once we've finished up here."

The large shadowy figure at the back of the room nods slowly one time, then a bright golden light shines from one of the rings on his right hand.

Simultaneously, the same golden yellow glow shines brightly in the shape of a collar around the necks of two A-Class Hunters that sit next to his left and right sides. They both stand up and bow toward the center of the table as the shimmering golden light disappears from their necks. As they both bring their heads up, they move in opposite directions.

One of them uses a telekinesis power to levitate the shadowy figure's chair just above the ground, turning it toward the back of the room filled with darkness as the other man speaks to the remaining people at the round table.

"The Apex Region's Director wishes for all of us to go back to our posts. Even if it is a false flag, it is best we all prepare for a surge in our home regions. We've covered most of the topics we wanted to tonight. Although our trade routes have been limited since the disappearance of a main distributor in the Dark Continent, we're making do with what we have stocked up on for now and what we can farm from the Apex Dungeons. The B-Class Exams are still over a month away, so we shall meet again next week to continue this discussion. Directors, please leave your closing notes or concerns, then you are all dismissed."

Once he finishes, the A-Class Hunter speaking for the Apex Director places a small black box with a thin slit on its top in front of him on the table. He waits patiently for all members at the table to write a few notes on small pieces of paper folded in half to voice anonymous concerns about this week's meeting and ideas that they would like brought up in next week's meeting to be discussed.

Once all papers are put in, the Hunter picks up the box and follows into the darkness at the back of the room to assist Mr. Freeman.

There are some rustles of papers and a few whispers between the remaining 7 Directors including Brutus, but it's soon followed by bright glows of transport magic being activated, and various directors making their way back to their home regions as requested by their leader.

Brutus takes out a transport crystal from a miniature item box in one of his other suit pockets and crushes it in his hand to teleport back into the Association tower's only teleport platform deep underground.

Stolen story; please report.

"Welcome back, Mr. Director, Samantha notified me you would be stopping by."

A tall silver-haired artificer in a purple cloak, decked out in all kinds of magical gadgets and gear, greets Brutus with an open door and a wide smile as he walks through the long halls of the underground testing labs of the Association.

"Nice to see you too, Leo. It's been a while, but I'm not in the best mood right now. That Director's meeting didn't accomplish a single thing. Our unique trade items from the Dark Continent are still on standby, we're getting no extra support from the Apex region for Labyrinth farming, and the B-Class exams are coming up fast... so we're bound to lose even more Elite manpower."

Leo calmly walks the halls next to Brutus, allowing him to rant all he wants until the two of them get to the elevator that leads to the main lobby.

The doors open with a ding, and Brutus walks inside with a long sigh, straightening his back and putting on a professional smile.

"Anyway, good seeing you, Leo, hoping next time on better terms. It's all part of the job, order must be kept by any means necessary, am I right?"

"Of course you're right."

The Artificer lets out a chuckle and waves the Director goodbye as he turns to quickly make his way back down the hall to continue a few late-night experiments.

Brutus meets up with Samantha who's patiently waiting with a silver information tablet in hand. They both walk out of the lobby into the dead of night very quickly to make their way to the forest.

The distance is far, but the two of them make it deep into the forest fairly quickly, passing a few association workers illuminating the forest path with various skills on their way.

What was previously a very dark dirt path is now covered in mana-imbued light sources, and the aura of dozens of late-night workers can be sensed out in the forest along with the sensation of many dungeon portals that were not previously in this location.

Once the Director makes his way into the clearing where the trees don't block any extra vision from the blast zone, the site before his eyes is like no dungeon break he's ever seen before.

"You weren't messing around, whatever caused this reaction packed some serious power, but I highly doubt it has anything to do with a surge... All of the dungeons in the main hub give off stable readings, this must be an outlier."

Samantha nods and looks down at her information tablet as the deep crater of dirt and rock stretching out for kilometers on either side, and over 200 meters down in a light slant toward the center comes into view.

Many blue swirling dungeon portals have spawned, littered all around the shallow hole where a mountain used to be, and small work stations of Association hunters have been set up outside each one.

Some tables have mana crystals and loot, while others are empty and the exploration parties are still inside.

Samantha speaks up as they both begin walking down into the crater.

"We've found 14 of them total so far. They're all E and D class dungeons. Some are unique, so we'll have a few new item sources to farm here, while 6 so far are duplicates of dungeons we already have control over in the main hub. It will still take a few hours to get all of the approximate boss levels and loot drop percentages figured out, but it will most likely be all complete by morning."

The Director stares down at the dungeons and thinks to himself for a full minute while the two of them walk by the first spinning portal.

Some of the guards and Association workers recognize him as he walks by and give bows and salutes, but Brutus doesn't care to acknowledge them as he's deep in thought.

Finally, he speaks up to Samantha.

"Are the guards that manned the Green Ridge Lookout still alive? I'd like a word with them if they are. Also, all high-level hunters in the vicinity with earth elements awakened and craftsmen of any level, have them report here immediately. I have a plan to fix this mess by the morning."

"Of course."

Samantha pulls out her transmission tablet and begins to make a few calls. A few flashes of light blip all over the forest as many hunters between level 100 and 550 come over the moment they're called.

Two of the hunters are the guards that were meant to be watching the Green Ridge Lookout dungeon in question when the blast went off.

Brutus has them explain the events that they can remember, but the fact that all they know is the portal turned red and they woke up unharmed almost 10km away doesn't sit well with him. Samantha uses her lie detector skill to confirm they are in fact telling the truth, so he decides to leave this mystery for a less urgent time.

"Fine, you two, go back to the Association. Samantha will arrange a luxury suite for each of you to take a rest. I suspect there is much more to this than meets the eye, and believe you're not at fault. Still, we will question you further at a later date. Your weekly pay will continue as usual as you rest and recover."

They both graciously leave the crater, and Brutus turns to the others.

"Alright, the rest of you, let's get to work on turning this into a new dungeon hub. Considering the strength of the dungeons I've spotted so far, it'll be a good place to train new recruits, and possibly an area where we can expand the city."

He turns to the three earth magic users on standby, then points to all the dungeons with an open palm.

"Your team's job is to make even pathways connecting all the dungeons together, making nice arching entrance gates to each one, then once you're finished there, make the dirt path back to the city presentable."

He turns to the small team of craftsmen next.

"I need mana-imbued lights put up along the pathways for nighttime hunters, and basic D-Grade mana shielding put up around every one of these newly spawned portals as a safety precaution."

Brutus turns to Samantha.

"Make sure the signs are put up above each stone archway put in place denoting the dungeon's skill level, we'll double check them ourselves before it's written in ink. Then, have 1 guard per gate assigned by morning at 1 letter grade above the gate's grade. Pay them standard weekly rates."

She nods and writes down information on the tablet, meanwhile, the crowd of craftsmen and earth magic users all get to work on their tasks.

Brutus whispers under his breath while crossing his arms.

"Whatever happened here, it's going to end up being very profitable for the Association, but I'd still like to get to the bottom of what exactly it was. This was not a natural phenomenon."

Chapter 426

Back in Bri's office, the room stays still as we take in the news about dungeons being found in the forest region where the Green Ridge Lookout used to be.

My eyes open wide, and so do Bri's; we turn to meet each other's gazes. I'm the first to whisper under my breath.

"No way..."

Silence looms in the room for another few seconds before Bri responds to her assistant.

"Thank you very much, Bernard. This is valuable info, and I appreciate the good job in closing up the shop today too. You're dismissed for the night."

He bows and replies before walking down the stairs.

"Thank you, Ms. Briana, have a good night. I'll see you when we open tomorrow."

As he leaves, I put up my Hush barrier again, and Bri speaks in a curious tone.

"That cursed item you set off seems to do a bit more than just collapse dungeons and blow up mountains."

She raises an eyebrow and continues.

"I'm sure the Association is all over the blast site by now if our D-Grade informant has already sent in the news. Elites must be on the scene; I'd love to check it out, but there's no way I'm getting by without being seen or sensed now."

I think about what has happened in my mind's eye, picturing all of the concentrated energy from within the dungeon erupting from the wind stone just a few hours ago.

Usually, when a dungeon collapses, it just disappears into thin air or slowly lets out its energy in the form of overleveled monsters. The uniqueness of this collapse was the fact that all the energy from within the dungeon left in an instant, and in a stable form.

When it was inevitably released and dispersed in the blast, it must have naturally settled back together in dense points to form new dungeons.

However, I've never heard of anyone forming a dungeon with just dense pockets of mana. If it was that easy, then I'm sure bigger organizations and countries would be making new dungeons left and right. There must be a unique factor about the way I collapsed this dungeon that created new ones.

Deep in thought, unconsciously covering my temples with my index and middle fingers to think deeper into the issue, I finally perk back up and respond to Bri.

"You're right. You'll probably be spotted if you go and check things out, but I need to know what happened out there... Depending on what results I may find will conclude whether or not I decide to do this test again."

A grin creeps across my face as Bri responds hastily.

"Not around here you won't! We were lucky that first blast wasn't bigger or faster than it already was. Even by a magnitude of 2 times larger, and we could have been in serious trouble. That was a one-time thing; don't go blowing up the city for your own amusement."

"Yeah I know. If I ever do it again I'll go out in the open desert of the Dark Continent or something similar, don't worry."

She lets out a sigh and sits back in her chair while I lay back down on the couch in the middle of the room.

Then, speak up after about 2 seconds of silence.

"I am going to go check it out though."

She responds while standing up from her desk.

"Oh I know, just be careful out there. Promise me you won't get into any extra trouble before we even start our business together."

"I'm just taking a quick look. I'll be completely concealed, I won't let anyone even know I was there."

I get up from the couch at this, and we walk down the stairs of her shop, and she unlocks and relocks the front doors as we walk out into the street and say our goodbyes.

"See you soon."

"See ya."

We walk our separate ways as I activate my stealth skill underneath a veil of Qi, making myself invisible to mana users even hundreds of levels above me.

I airstep through the sky above the low-income area of the city and spread my enemy detection skill far and wide to find no one anywhere near Elite level nearby.

That is, until I finally make it to the edge of the forest.

The once dark and unused dirt pathway through the thick trees is now covered in a smooth raised stone walkway that is connected to the main road on the outer edge of the city. Every 20 meters or so, a long pillar of stone holds a bright mana imbued light orb on top of it, illuminating the walkways just enough to make it to the next one without falling into darkness.

I soar high above the path, totally invisible to the eye or anyone's mana senses, and follow the winding pathway through the forest with a fast-beating heart and eyes full of curiosity.

Once I'm about a kilometer in, the pathway ends abruptly, but I see a level 398 hunter with an advanced earth summoning combat magic skill sitting down on a nearby fallen tree, drinking an MP potion, and wiping sweat from his forehead. Nearby, there's a level 114 special grade craftsman combining mana crystals and large glass spheres he keeps taking out of an item box.

I nod, spotting their Association Badges on their shirt collars and thinking to myself how interesting it is that they've managed to set all of this up so quickly.

A dim light source glows out in the distance where I remember the blast going off hours ago, and I soar higher in the air off in that direction to soon find another team of earth magic and craftsmen forming the same style of trail coming to meet the team approaching.

At the pace they're moving, it shouldn't take more than another hour or so to meet in the middle.

I continue to fly further in until the trees thin out so much I can finally see the enormous crater in the ground where the mountain and Green Ridge Lookout dungeon used to be. I come to a halt and drift downward to stand on the edge of the blast zone with my stealth skill activated and Qi barrier on its highest possible density.

The immense size of the hole in the ground is hard to fathom; it doesn't even look real. The landscape is changed so drastically, it seems as if there were never any trees or wildlife here in the first place.

My widened eyes spot 14 mana dense silver boxes covering the crater in random points, and stone walkways connecting each of them to the main path that's being connected to the city.

The boxes are clearly mana shielding barriers put up in case of more breaks, but they don't seem very intense. The dungeons themselves don't seem strong either. There's nothing here over a D-Class dungeon at best.

This confirms my theory before that all of the energy from the original high-grade C dungeon was dispersed and condensed, used to create these dungeons. Meaning, none of them have a chance of ever being as strong as the original; they're just the remnants from the blast.

Considering this, relieved that I'm not missing out on any new high-grade dungeons, I begin to turn back, but then the door of one of the mana shielding barriers around a dungeon in the center of the crater opens up.

Out of the small stone archway, dimly lit by a pillar of light, a tall armored man and a thin blonde-haired woman with a clipboard walk out.

With my heightened senses, and increased perception of sight and sound, it's as clear as day who walks out from that portal.

The Vice Region's Director.

The man that screwed my whole team over for a reason still completely unknown to me. It could have been for a quick buck, or standard procedure for when teams come in contact with Demonic Energy, or just an order from the higher ups. What ever that reason may be, it doesn't make me hate him any less right now.

I can hear his nonchalant voice speaking to his assistant from over a kilometer away with the use of my enemy detection skill and boosted perception.

"Another D-Class Dungeon tracked and surveyed. Wonderful. That just leaves 3 more to go, where to next?"

His assistant points to another mana shielded box and outlines the detailed information that the Association workers gave while farming earlier. They just need to go inside to verify.

Meanwhile, my vision tunnels in on the level 745 man walking slowly up a newly made stone pathway.

I do a full scan of his status and inventory, seeing that he's gained 14 levels since the last time we met. Then, as my eyes look at the array of new protection gear maxing out all of his item slots with +150% and higher defense stats and magic resistance items, my gaze falls on a blank slot that shows an item reading that sends a shiver down my spine.

[??? Access Denied]

My gaze tightens, and I even shift my vision straight at the item itself that seems to be a ring.

It glows gold, and wisps of energy trail from it as he walks away from my general direction at a slow pace.

My mana senses pick up a reading so dense it's hard to calibrate how strong the ring is or what it does, and my Qi senses pick up large amounts of energy trapped deep within it as well. It gives off an evil presence, like it has a wandering mind of its own.

No Qi seems to be present in the Director's body at all, so my only guess is that it is a soul energy imbued ring. This may be a very rare opportunity to get the Director out in the open all alone. However, I promised Bri I wouldn't cause any trouble for her, and it's not in my best interest to challenge an unknown power like this without preparation.

Despite being almost the same level as me, I've seen this Director order around people like Bri's brother Rodrigo even though he's high above level 1000. If it has anything to do with that ring, I don't want to find out how it works the hard way.

As much as I hate this man for selling out my team to a Dark Continent Sector Leader, attacking him blindly just because I feel like it is not a good idea.

Reluctantly, I reach into my item storage to take out a transport crystal that leads back to the Galeheart Tower.

With my eyes locked on the Director and grip tightening around the fragile gem, I bite my bottom lip and make my final decision.

Chapter 427

The transport crystal breaks in my clenched fist, and I'm teleported back into the main lobby of the Galeheart tower.

I can feel the dense layer of Qi around my body get pulled through the instant transport rift with me, and I stand alone in the center of the white-walled room with both lobby men looking around with startled gazes.

The teleport platform registered a user arrive, but no one is visible in the room.

I deactivate my stealth skill and let my concealment items and skills deactivate too, revealing my regular form but keeping my Qi barrier strong while walking forward toward the elevator. As I become visible, one of them speaks up.

"You're just in time. Mr. Galeheart got back just half an hour ago, I'm sure he'll be ready to meet with you on the top floor."

I nod with a smile as the elevator doors open and close, and I walk inside.

While the extremely fast-moving room brings me to the top floor, I adjust my mana control to about 1/3 of its natural output. This is greater than it was the last time I met with Lith. Showing off a bit of growth is better than suppressing it much lower.

As the doors of the elevator open with a ding to Lith's office, the walls are already showing off the holograms of the nighttime city lights, and there are two other people in the room aside from the MErcenary Guild Leader sitting down.

The people sitting in comfortable chairs, facing Lith, are two figures I'm very familiar with but haven't seen in a very long time.

They turn their heads as I walk in the door.

"Lydia, Fisher, nice to see both of you still in one piece."

I activate my inspect and appraisal skills to see them both at exactly level 602, but wearing the same gear as I remember them wearing before. The water-wielding swordsman and white-haired ice mage get up from their seats as I walk closer, and their eyes open wide.

Fisher is the first to reply.

"You look almost as old as me now! It's only been like 2 weeks... What happened to you? And where'd you get that fancy cloak?"

He looks me up and down as the flowing magic manifested fabric of the cloak wavers in non-existent wind.

Before I reply, Lydia is already eyeing me up and down too with her arms crossed.

"Your mana control has risen quite a bit. You managed to find more Mana-imbued Essence stones? Or is this just from training in that Arena Lith keeps talking about in the Silver District?"

She turns to Fisher, then back to me with a light chuckle.

"And yeah, I agree with Fisher, it looks like you've been training in the mountains for years or something. Whatever it is, it's working."

She shrugs as I finally make my way over, seeing Lith watch our interaction with a thin smile from his desk. I reply to my old teammates.

"Yeah, training in the mountains alone, basically nailed it."

I roll my eyes and chuckle to brush her comment off as a joke, but in reality, I have been training in isolation for almost a year's worth of time over the last few days, and much has happened since the last time I saw these two.

The last time we talked was before the Sector 2 leader was even killed. They look a bit different themselves, but unfortunately, I can't sense much change in their mana control.

I reply.

"On a real note, I've gotten my hands on some interesting items and done my fair share of training recently. The arena and resources in this city have been very useful in gaining strength; I've been using a lot of unique methods to get stronger while you were gone. I'd like to share them with you when you have time to train. However, I think you have the more interesting story to tell today. What'd you find in Sector 2?"

As I raise the question, both of their expressions shift to one of surprise and Fisher is about to speak up, but Lith interjects before he can reply.

"How about we all sit down and wait for the remaining 3 members to arrive before we start our show and tell?"

My eyes turn to Lith, and I already have my inspect and appraisal skills instinctively activated. I'm hit with the usual [??? Access Denied] screens all over his status because of the use of some concealment enchantment, but for a moment I see the lettering flicker. It feels like if I were to use 100% of my control, I could easily break through it and see what Lith is hiding.

\*Ding\*

My concentration is interrupted by the sound of the elevator, and I don't try to push my mana control any further than it is in fear of revealing my full power. So, I let it be and get seated on the opposite side of Lith's desk.

Both Fisher and Lydia get comfortable on the other side again too, and the elevator door opens, and I sense 2 fairly strong mana controls enter the room with Qi cores less than 1/5th the size of my own.

It is a bit off-putting how well the dense shielding of these walls blocks the presence of others even just in another room, but also convenient so that I'm sure no one outside the tower can sense my own power inside.

Abby and Maria come walking out from the Elevator and make it halfway through the room before they stop dead in their tracks, seeing the massive flowing waves of Qi surrounding my body. I immediately open my telepathy link between all 3 of us and send a message.

"Don't say anything about it until we're alone. As you can see, I've had quite the breakthrough... but it's going to take some time for me to teach you how to do the same."

They both keep their eyes locked on my aura for a few seconds while walking toward the desk at the back of the room, but understand and then turn their gazes to Lydia and Fisher.

Maria hugs Lydia, and the 4 of them have a normal greeting and update as well. The duo that was sent out for Sector 2 reconnaissance can't help but comment on Abby and Maria's mana control increase just like mine.

Fisher is the most interested.

"So it wasn't just Jay. That Arena is really that efficient for training? Maybe I can give it a shot too! I leveled up quite a bit while away last week, I'd like to test out how far I can get."

They continue to talk back and forth, but Fisher's comment that he's leveled up this week catches my attention. I saw on his status that he and Lydia were both over level 600, but didn't comment on it before.

I join the conversation as Maria and Abby sit down on two other chairs, leaving only one seat open.

"You leveled up too? There are high-level dungeons out in Sector 2? Or a Labyrinth? Or enemy hunters? How'd you manage to gain so many levels?"

Fisher turns to me from across the room with a grin.

"Oh, all of the above and much more. It's a chaos-filled gold mine out there... Especially with the Leader gone, every day we stayed out there got worse... I don't know how anyone survives in a region like Sector 2."

He turns to Lydia, and she gives a nod, confirming his points and opening her mouth to add to it, but another ding of the elevator draws all of our attention to the opening doors.

I turn my head the quickest, as an energy I haven't felt in a while seeps into my senses.

Arie, the team's archer put in charge of leveling up Chester to secure Sector 4 as a guaranteed trade route, walks out of the elevator into the Office to greet us with a very serious expression on his face.

His sharp eyes focus straight ahead not looking at any of us in particular. His physique looks much more toned and buff than before, and the faint aura of refined Demonic Energy lingers all over him.

## Chapter 428

My gaze tightens as I conduct a full body scan with my All-Seeing Eye on the tan-skinned archer who walks through the room and sits down in the last remaining empty seat in front of Lith's desk.

I'm not sure what I was expecting to see, but I'm surprised to find no Demon's Core inside Arie's body. With the amount of used-up Demonic Energy lingering around in his aura, it seems as if he just finished up a battle with a Demonic Creature.

Only one other possibility enters my mind as I open my telepathic link with him.

"Have you been training in the Abyss?"

His gaze quickly turns to meet mine, and he replies through our link.

"I have... but it hasn't been easy. How'd you know?"

I nod and look back to Lith, but reply through our link.

"I can sense the remnants of defeated Demonic Creatures all over you. You can see them?"

Arie looks back toward Lith too, answering but making it seem as if we're not even talking.

"I can sense them, yes, and the more I fight them, I can see them more. However, I've found normal mana attacks are very dangerous to use inside the Abyss. I have to use my ranked-up buff as well as the red hydra's power to take them out without harming myself."

I think to myself for a moment as silence in the room continues to settle. I knew Arie's skill was always a bit unique. Spirit Arrows aren't exactly a skill that I've ever seen in anyone else, and with his new ranked-up buff to manipulate this energy allowing him to hunt Demonic Creatures, it must come with some odd special effects too. The last comment about the red hydra's soul energy aiding his fights makes the most sense, however, I still have a lot of questions I'd like to ask.

"Let's talk after this meeting, I'm sure we have some insight to share about the Abyss."

He gives a small nod.

"Of course, you're the only other person that's even acknowledged the monsters in there are real. We definitely have a lot to talk about."

As his words echo in my mind, Lith talks out loud to all of us sitting in the chairs in front of his desk.

"Looks like the whole crew is finally all together in one place. Now, let's get down to business and finish up these final negotiations. We have a continent to conquer, don't we?"

His gaze turns to me, and I reply, rehashing the same deals we spoke of in our last 2 negotiation conversations, moving back and forth on the numbers a few more times before we come to a final agreement.

I restate it out loud while standing up and putting out my right hand to shake his.

"So, before we discuss the actual details of Sector 2, let's get our numbers straight. We will keep 100% of the profits from all trade deals with the other sectors and regions from the mainland outside the walls. The only exception will be trades to Sector 1. You will only pay the price it costs my craftsmen to make it up to 100 Platinum per month in product. After that, it's 50% off market price indefinitely as long as I still retain a 30% or greater profit margin on those goods."

Lith nods and brings his hand closer, replying.

"Yes, and in return, I am allowed to post as many guards as I wish around the Sector 2 Territory, but none will be allowed within 500 meters of your main distribution center or base of operations wherever it may be. Along with this, you may hire your own craftsmen and do as you wish as long as I continue receiving the product I need to maintain my business here in Sector 1. My mercenaries need gear, and the shops and businesses I sell to need my product as well."

I nod, bringing my hand closer too.

"Of course. In return, you'll be the 3rd party broker for the Sector 3, Vice Region, and Apex Region deals the first month of business, as they are more familiar with you as a business associate. But after this, you will introduce me to the main contacts under an alias so I can maintain trade with them long term."

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Our hands are so close to shaking I can feel the heat coming off his palm as he replies.

"Yes, all this, and I grant you access to all my amenities here in the Galeheart mercenary guild, and you will kill The Dark One. There is no time limit, but of course, sooner than later. You know as well as I do after facing those Arena Monsters this is an urgent matter."

I grip his hand as we both stand over the desk and smile at each other, knowing we're both about to profit heavily from this arrangement. I reply.

"You have my word. Give me the means to get strong and rich enough, and I'll personally deliver The Dark One's head on your desk at my earliest convenience."

We both let out a laugh and give a firm handshake before sitting back in our chairs facing each other to discuss the fine details of the arrangement.

Maria and Abby are happy to continue training in the Arena, stacking money and training their new abilities for the time being. They don't explicitly say what abilities they're training because of all the people in the room, but it's clear to me they want to refine their Qi control to the point where they can beat the 7th Stage without the help of the Red Hydra's Buff.

I agree that this is a good idea for them for the time being, but I won't be joining.

As much as I'd like to test my own power in the Arena again, I'm certain it's a bad idea. I know I could beat a Ghoul now with my Qi control alone, and most likely face off against a Wraith in the 8th stage too without much issue, but I haven't even begun to awaken my own Soul Energy, so there's no way I can stack up against the true enemy in this city.

Showing off my new power is just asking for trouble, so, I speak up in the middle of our discussion, turning to Fisher and Lydia.

"I'd rather venture out and see Sector 2 for myself. What's it really like out there?"

Fisher replies with arms crossed and a confident smirk.

"Oh yeah? You want to be on the front line of the clean-up patrol out there with us too? It's really a chaos-filled wasteland, I already told you."

I chuckle.

"Yeah, I'd like to know. What'd you two see..."

Lydia pulls out a few sheets of paper from her item box and spreads them out on Lith's desk while Fisher begins to explain.

"Well, if you see here in the outer regions of Sector 2, the portion at least that borders Sector 1, it's mostly a wide-open desert."

Abby pokes her head into the conversation too.

"So, similar to the landscape we explored initially in Sector 4?"

Fisher nods.

"Kind of. When Lydia and I first made our way out to survey the land, everything seems pretty tame. Every 20 to 50 kilometers or so, there was another small village or settlement connected by stone or dirt roads for trade."

Lydia interjects.

"However, after about 2 days of travel into the Sector, some of the settlements ended up being abandoned or burned to ash. More crime and looting became rampant the closer to the center of the sector we came, it was so odd."

Fisher nods and picks up from there.

"After 4 days in, not a single town wasn't covered in graffiti or burned to the ground, only the larger settlements we found even had people left in them. Even those were lawless. Plenty of merchants and normal villagers were fleeing to try to get to Sector 1 or move toward Sector 4 in a hurry."

I raise an eyebrow at this.

"So it's all pretty recent? People are moving because of something?"

Lydia replies.

"I think it's just the lack of authority in the main Sector 2 Capital."

Fisher nods slowly and explains.

"Yeah, when we got to the Capital, it was already overrun with thugs, crime, and monsters. Plus, everyone is on edge with the Abyss approaching too."

Arie's eyes perk up at the mention of the Abyss, but Maria butts in with excitement for the first time in this conversation at the mention of something earlier in Fisher's statement.

"Monsters? In the City? Outside of dungeons?"

Fisher proudly replies.

"That's right. The Capital is right next to a canyon in the desert that goes deeper than even my own vision could see. Lydia and I tried to explore it a bit, but turned back before we got lost. It's truly massive. There are hundreds of dungeons inside it, but some of them have recently had breaks, so monsters flooded out from the canyon and took over parts of the city."

Lydia adds to Fisher's point.

"It's dangerous for low-levels to roam the streets alone. The only reason people stay in the city is because of the abandoned warehouses. The Sector 2 leader has many materials and experimental magic items locked away in various underground and aboveground secret locations all over the Capital. Rogue Hunters anywhere from level 50 to level 500 have made their own gangs and search parties all over the city to try and strike gold. There are human wars and monster wars happening every day in that hellhole."

Fisher points out the portion of the papers where maps of the Capital city are drawn.

"This is the best we could do, but the location of monster attacks, gang raids, and newly discovered warehouses are changing every day. The longer we spent there, the worse it got."

He lets out a sigh. Then, sits back into his chair and crosses his arms.

Lydia takes a similar stance.

"We're all strong, we can handle cleaning that place up if you really think it's worth it. But, it's not going to be easy."

After this, everyone sits and thinks about their words for a full 30 seconds before I speak up to reply.

"I don't want to spend another second in Valor City, and the sound of hundreds of new dungeons to be explored definitely piques my interest..."

I scratch my chin, but follow up my statement pretty quickly.

"I'll check it out and help with the cleanup, sounds like a good opportunity to me. I'm in."

Lydia smiles.

"Great."

Fisher grins.

"Looks like you'll be getting down and dirty with us after all, Jay, I can't wait to see what kind of fighting style you've grown into."

Then, out of the blue, Arie speaks up for the first time this whole meeting.

"If the Abyss is close by, I'll join too."

Chapter 429

The conversation winds down and basically settles on the fact that we have to go out to the Sector 2 region to make any more progress.

Abby and Maria are tired out from their training in the Arena, so they head back down to the Isolation Pods to rest until morning. As they leave, I send a telepathy message to both of them, asking to get Monk to offer more Qi pills for all of us to train with; but the condition being I won't be coming back to meet with him in the monastery.

If they want to learn my quick Qi capacity advancement method, they'll either have to come back to the Galeheart tower where our powers are concealed or somewhere very far away from the city.

I have an idea that I believe will simulate the environment of the Titan's Domain, boosting the cultivation time of my teammates, but it still needs some testing. The Isolation pods in this building are a key component of my plan.

Abby and Maria leave through the elevator doors, and both Fisher and Lydia are the next two to stand from their seats. Fisher is the one that talks first.

"Well, we've given you the map and all the information we can on Sector 2 so far. We'd be happy to tag along, but after 2 weeks of exploration, even a full day's worth of time in those isolation pods isn't enough of a rest."

He turns to me, then to Lith, then back to Lydia.

"How about giving us a day off? I just want to enjoy the city for a little bit. We've been hiding around in dark warehouses and dirty dungeons for as long as I can remember. Plus, it should take almost a week for us to get back out there anyway. We need to stock up on food and gear in the morning, right? What's the harm in waiting a day?"

I shrug, and Lith gives a similar reaction. I give the response.

"Fine by me. However, I think I can get out there a bit faster if I go alone. Take tomorrow off and enjoy the luxuries of this city, you earned it. Thank you for the valuable information."

Lydia points down at one of the maps showing the border between Sector 1 and 2.

"Suit yourself. If you find a faster travel path, that would make our life a whole lot easier. Though, if you just want to use the route we took, just trek straight this way, you can't miss it. But it's not

like there are any teleport points out there, so travel time can only be shortened so much when moving in a straight line."

I nod as the two of them start to turn to leave.

"I know. I just may be able to find a faster way, you never know."

After Lydia and Fisher both leave the room, only Lith and Arie are left here.

The archer speaks up.

"I'll go with you."

Our telepathic link is still open, so Arie comments again right after without Lith listening.

"I assume you'll be using your teleportation skill once you find a dungeon out there to make an easy access point."

I nod and reply through the link.

"Yes. I believe it would be faster for you to stay behind as well. From the distances shown on these maps, I can make it to this place at full speed in just a few hours. I can come back and bring you after I make a teleport point."

I think to myself, picturing Ember's top flying speed if we just soar high above the sky. Then, reply out loud.

"You look exhausted from training. Maybe a break would be better for you too. Have you tried the isolation pods yet? If Abby and Maria still haven't gone in, I'm sure they could show you how they work."

He nods, replying to me with telepathy.

"Got it."

Then again a real answer out loud while stretching his arms in his seat.

"Maybe you're right. One of the guards did show me how the pods work when I first arrived, but I never tried them out. A good rest could do me well..."

He lets out a sigh and gets up to leave the room.

"I'll take a 6-hour break in the pods, so nearly a day and a half inside. If there are no updates by then, I'll join Fisher and Lydia for time off. But, if you make any progress, I want to be the first one on the scene."

As the elevator door opens for him, he replies with telepathy through our open link.

"I want you to teach me about this Demonic Energy. I need to get further into the Abyss."

Before I have a moment to even ask him why he wants to go into the Abyss so badly, the dense mana shielded doors of the elevator shut and our link is severed.

I turn back to Lith, as we're the only two people left in the Penthouse office room as finally get to the questions that have been eating away at me.

"So, now that we're partners, I have a few questions I'd like to ask."

I stand up from my seat and he does the same.

We walk over to the holographic depiction of city lights and towers below us.

He replies.

"I could tell you had a few things on your mind. After I watched that fight you had in the 8th stage of the Arena, I knew things were starting to get serious."

I nod once and reply.

"Yes, I did talk with the corrupted Royal Guards, and they even told me the Dark One is watching."

Lith's eyes widen, but I continue quickly to calm his nerves.

"They said it just views me as entertainment and not a threat, but that's enough of a hint for me to know it's time for me to leave this city until I'm strong enough."

"Good decision... So, if that's the case, then what are your real questions?"

I pause, looking over at him and seeing the [??? Access Denied] symbol on his status over his skills and items waver and flicker again.

I up my mana control just another 10% out of curiosity, and the symbol finally breaks completely, revealing a small portion of his status for just a fraction of a second.

Under the [Active Skills] section, [??? Access Denied] changes to [Combat Magic][Extreme Wind Summoning] then immediately turns back to [??? Access Denied] once I let up on my high perception skill use.

I get a peek at some of his gear like rings and amulets too, but they seem to be pretty standard 130-200% buff items for a Hunter of his caliber. Lith is over level 800 and the leader of the Strongest Trade and Mercenary guild in Sector 1.

Then, raise the question.

"Where did you get this status blocking gear? I didn't find it too weird that you, the Royal Guards, and even the old Sector 2 leader had it on. But I recently spotted an Association Director with the same symbol. I assume your gear was made by the Sector 2 leader just like the special armor for the royal guards, but I'm more curious about a single item that I saw on a Director's hand. It was a gold ring."

Lith's head turns to me quickly, and he immediately replies.

"The gold ring? You didn't encounter Mr. Freeman, did you?"

He takes a step back from me, looking me up and down and squinting at every one of my magic items. His vision moves to my neck, and his gaze tightens again. Without any extra words, Lith takes another step back and asks the same question.

"Well, did you encounter that man? How do you know about the gold ring?"

I stare back with a confused look and shrug.

"Mr. Who? Freeman? I don't know who this is. If you wanted to know who I saw it on, it was the Vice Region's Director, Mr. Matthews. Or, better known as Brutus... That backstabber."

Lith lets out a sigh of relief and takes a step closer to me, putting his hands back down at his waist.

"Oh, Brutus..."

He thinks to himself for a moment.

"That's interesting, I guess the vice Region has been growing quite a bit lately. They trust him with a ring, who would have thought."

He chuckles to himself but I interject.

"Well? What is it? Was it made by the Sector 2 leader? What does that thing do? It gave off readings more powerful and ominous than anything I've ever felt before."

Lith nods.

"Yeah, no wonder you were spooked. I've seen Items like that in some trade meetings and auctions. It's definitely the work of the old Sector 2 craftsman, but it's bonded with an energy that I'm still not quite sure how it works or where to find it. Similar to the Soul Stones you and your team managed to absorb, those rings give off power that makes pure mana attacks useless against it. I've seen countless A-Class Hunters in the Association fall in line without a second thought when faced against the gold ring you speak of. If you just ran on instinct, I'd say don't look back."

I think to myself about what Lith just said, but it doesn't confirm anything I couldn't have guessed on my own. Just looking at the ring on The Director's finger, I already knew it was bonded with soul energy, but the way Lith is speaking, it seems like he's in the dark about the intricacies of Qi. For the split second I broke through his concealment defenses, I did see an element skill at a rank higher than my own, and a very high mana control, but there was 0 presence of any other energy in his body.

I let out a sigh and decide to move the questioning to a different topic as I don't believe he'll have any useful insight on how to beat this power if he doesn't know how soul energy even works in the first place.

"Okay, anyway, the next thing I wanted to know is how you managed to get teleport platforms and crystals to go with them in the Galeheart Tower? Did you get Luminite from an auction and craft it yourself? Or do you have a special supplier? I'd like to purchase some myself if you have a link."

Lith clasps his hands and cracks a grin.

"A lot of hard-hitting questions today, huh? I wonder how you even heard of that element in the first place..."

He lets out a sigh and continues as his smile leaves his face and he becomes more serious.

"All of the teleport platforms in this building and in every city of the Dark Continent, as a matter of fact, were all installed by the Association quite a while ago. We have to purchase new teleport crystals to go with them whenever we run out. They aren't very pricey compared to the convenience they bring. If you set up a base of operations in the Dark Continent, I'm sure the Association would gladly install some for you too. However, that does mean they have access to your platform if they wish."

He turns to look me in the eyes.

"Purchasing some for private use isn't possible, sadly. I've seen small amounts of Luminite, the base for transport platform and crystal crafts, show up in some very high-end auctions, but I was always outbid over 10 times my maximum buy."

He pauses.

"You know my pockets aren't shallow. My guess is the Association plants small amounts in auctions every once in a while to see who's interested, then outbids them. They would never actually let the public get their hands on it."

I exhale, thinking deeply to myself before finally responding.

"But what about farming it from dungeons?"

Lith laughs out loud.

"That old myth? People have theorized that every once in a while, after a dungeon break trace amounts of the transport magic is left behind in solid form, yes."

He shrugs and continues to talk.

"I for one won't believe it till I see it. I've been around plenty of dungeon collapses and never once saw this so-called Luminite. I think it's just a story the Association spread around to keep people looking in the wrong place. You're better off trying to outbid the government in an auction. Seriously."

I look out at the night sky, wondering if Bri really was fed misinformation about this point, but the next words out of Lith's mouth make me believe she was on the right path all along.

"The same drunken A-Class hunter that told me this rumor also told me at the core of every Luminite crystal there is the potential to form an entirely new dungeon. You just need enough mana, and enough explosive force to be the catalyst. If this was true, I'm sure the Association would be making new dungeons every day."

He sighs.

"Then again, who knows what they do up in the Apex Region."

We stand in silence for quite a while after this point.

None of my questions were really answered directly, but a few things are starting to make a lot more sense to me. I finally nod and turn away from the window, asking the final question that's been on my mind all this time.

"This may not have sounded very productive to you, but I assure you, it helped a lot. I'm going to head off to Sector 2 tonight, but before I go, could I borrow an Isolation Pod? I'd like to take one apart and see how they're made. Maybe the time dilation could be tweaked if a larger amount of mana was used as an energy source. What do you think?"

Chapter 430

Lith walks over to the elevator with me and agrees to grant my request.

"Sure, I don't see why not. This is another item specially crafted by the old Sector 2 leader, so there's a good chance it will be impossible to replicate. You can try to dissect the Isolation Pods all you want, at least they'll go to some use instead of rotting away in the storage room."

The elevator moves down quickly to a very low floor and opens with a ding as we walk out into a room filled with crates overflowing with magic items and sheets of unused mana shielding up against the walls.

Lith speaks up while rummaging through a few crates, pointing to the back wall at two large silver cylinders.

"There are two deactivated isolation pods. They were the first models I purchased quite a while ago. However, they started running low on power after about 4 years of consecutive usage. The time dilation is hardly noticeable anymore. Feel free to take both of them apart and do whatever you please with them. I don't need them back."

I walk over out of curiosity and activate my All-Seeing Eye and Appraisal skill to fully scan the machines. The only thing I get back is tons of thick metal, mana shielding, and a dense crystal of energy at the top of the cylinder. It's concealed and kept in place very efficiently, so it's hard to tell how much MP exactly is inside.

All I can tell is it's a lot, and it would probably not be the best idea to go tinkering with high-density mana stones in confined spaces like this.

So, I spread out my cloak and open up my item storage and place the two large metal cylinders inside to make it seem like a storage item. I'm sure Lith is already well aware that I'm a multi-skill user, but it feels right not to openly show every one of my tricks.

While turning back to Lith, I see him holding up two handfuls of gems from another one of the now-open crates.

One hand is full of white crystals that shimmer with a rainbow shine and the other hand is full of dark blue crystals that I can see through just a little, but haven't ever seen anything like them before. They don't give off any mana readings, but I can tell they're definitely high-grade magical items.

Lith speaks up as he sees my confusion, handing the crystals over to me.

"Here, if you're heading out now, I want you to have a few extra transport crystals back to the Galeheart Tower in case of emergency."

I gladly take the white gems and place them into my black cloak with my item storage underneath in a similar fashion that I did the isolation pods, but my gaze lingers on the blue crystals.

"And these? What are these?"

Lith hands them over and replies.

"They're recording crystals. A simplified version of what the surveillance system in the city uses."

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As I accept them, placing all but one into my item storage, Lith speaks again.

"Channel a small amount of mana into it, then point the crystals at any target you'd like to record."

I squint at the dark blue glossy stone and channel MP into it like Lith said to. It glows lighter blue and an invisible array of mana surrounds the room.

Lith speaks again.

"Now that it's activated, continue channeling a steady source of mana into it, and it will continue to record the scene that it's pointed at. The more mana you imbue, the further the range and quality of recording."

Lith walks in front of the crystal and continues to speak, waving his arms directly in front of the invisible array of mana that comes out from the crystal.

"You may be able to perceive the recording zone much more efficiently now that you're the one casting the magic, but I assure you, anyone else being recorded will not notice anything unless their perception senses are abnormally high."

I nod, stopping the flow of extra mana into the gem and the array of invisible energy ceases to come out. I toss the now dimly glowing blue gem up and down in my hand, then point it at one of the blank walls as it feels natural to do this.

A projection of light comes out of the gem in a crystal clear image and shows a copy of Lith waving his arms up and down. I can even hear him explaining how the crystal works just as he was moments ago.

Once the recording stops, Lith makes a comment on it.

"If you drain the MP from the gem the recording will disappear forever, but if left untouched, the recording can be played back many times over. I haven't found a limit, but I'm sure over a long period of time the mana will naturally leak out and it will go bad."

"Interesting."

I continue throwing the gem up and down in my hand, then eventually put it into my item storage as Lith speaks again.

"They may come in handy if you'd like to give instructions once and have them played on repeat, or take moving pictures of certain parts of the abandoned Sector 2 region to mark for later. You never know what you may need out there. I've used many of these for training the Royal Guards and easy presentations for trade deals."

I nod and smile, placing my hand out for a shake.

"You're right, this is quite the useful gift. I appreciate it, thanks."

"No problem."

We shake hands again, and board the elevator while Lith confirms that he will get all of the new trade deals and meetings situated and have exact item order amounts along with dungeon types and crafting recipes by next week to fulfill these orders.

"Very well, I think we're set. I'm off to do my own personal survey of the Sector 2 land."

I use the other set of teleport crystals in the transport room to leave the Galeheart Tower, getting far away from Valor City, and into the train station platform in the trade city below the mountain.

Activating my stealth skill, I deactivate my Qi barrier as there's no need for it if I'm already invisible, I walk in the middle of town in the dead of night and air-step high into the sky unnoticed until the small lights of civilization below me almost disappear from my senses.

I recall Lydia's directions, looking down at a rough copy of extra notes she made for me. She said it's a straight shot in one direction if I traveled by land and would take almost a week to get out there, but I'm going to fly.

I take about 30 minutes to air-step upward and get so far away from the city that it would be impossible to see me. Then, open up my item storage to let Ember out into the dead of night.

For extra protection, I activate my Rising Emperor's Domain perk and give him my stealth skill the moment he enters the real world. With both of us invisible to the eye or any radar skills up to an absurdly high mana control, I feel very confident that we won't be seen.

I update Ember on the news, showing him a copy of the map and approximate distance to our destination as he flaps his glossy black wings to find a natural air currents to increase our speed without exerting extra force. We set off toward the border between Sector 1 and Sector 2 at high speeds.