

D. Diver 461

Chapter 461

[Many Hours Earlier in the Day (Around Noon): Body Double POV]

I leave my main body at the edge of the canyon and use the transport crystal to teleport back into the lobby of the Galeheart Tower.

I put up my mana shielding, but unfortunately don't have Qi to block my overwhelming mana control presence in this form. Only the ability to block my intimidation aura. That will have to do for now, I won't be able to go outside the tower into Valor City without being noticed in this form.

So, I call out to the lobby men while walking toward the front desk.

"Lith, I need to talk with Lith."

Ding

The elevator door opens, and the man in question walks out, replying to me promptly.

"Back so soon? I assumed you'd make it to Sector 2 quickly, but this kind of speed was not expected. That answers the question of where Arie went earlier too. Seems you've been busy. I guess Fisher and Lydia won't be getting their full day off."

He chuckles, but I reply in an urgent tone.

"Yes, I made it out to Sector 2, but the Dark One managed to send a few of its higher level guards out there too... I think they were looking for me ever since I ditched the arena event last night."

Lith's eyes widen.

"You managed to come face to face with multiple Dark Guards and made it out alive?"

I nod.

"Yeah. Six of them showed up in the sky and attacked on sight. I managed to kill them all. Even the strongest one that was over level 1000."

I recount the events of my dealings in the town, excluding the mention of any unique riches found in the warehouses and of course the help of Ember in my battle, but make sure to keep Lith fully informed of what went down so he knows the severity of this situation.

I point to the ceiling for my next ask.

"Pull up the surveillance system. I need to find my teammates. That 7th Rank Dark Guard threatened them before I killed him, so I'd like to make sure they're safe before the Dark One finds out what I've done. There probably isn't much time left."

Without question, Lith brings up the live surveillance of Valor City, and we begin scrolling through it together; watching ordinary people go about their day-to-day lives in the Silver, Gold, and Platinum districts.

After scouring the streets, zooming in and out of every corner inside shops and behind buildings, there's no sign of Abby or Maria in sight.

"They must be training with Monk..."

I let out a sigh and shift my focus back to the Silver and Gold districts.

"If they're in the monastery, we won't be able to sense them until they come out. Considering the arena event doesn't start for another 6 hours or so, this is going to be a long wait..."

I zoom in on a very fancy upscale lounge in the Gold district. There are large comfortable looking recliners, an active spa treatment in session for clients inside, and many courses of delicious food being served on golden platters.

Beautiful young women in maid outfits are serving the men while handsome men in butler uniforms serve the women.

Right in the middle of this display, I see my other two teammates, Lydia and Fisher sitting back with hot towels over their faces, enjoying the day.

I almost can't believe what I'm seeing...

Then again, they did want the day off to rest and explore the city.

I let out a sigh and turn away from the moving image projection, scratching my head and thinking to myself.

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"Let them rest for now, this is fine. Those two have never been in an arena event, so I doubt the Dark One has its sights set on them."

Lith speaks up.

"I could send one of my workers into the city to wait outside their shop to tell them to come back to the Tower once they've finished their fun."

I nod.

"Sure, that would be perfect."

My gaze shifts back to the Platinum district, and I zoom in on the monastery. Its entrance looks like a dark black void, as no mana can be picked up on this surveillance system. I speak up again.

"Could I get a sheet of paper and a pen? I'd like to send a message to Abby and Maria, but I doubt it's going to be as simple as walking up to the monastery and handing them a letter."

I think to myself for a moment in silence as Lith motions for the lobby men to fetch me paper, then I continue speaking.

"If we notify them right now, the entire Dark Guard could swarm the Platinum district in an instant. It would be rather odd for an unknown person to approach the monastery without Monk's permission. Even if the Dark One knows they're here, it doesn't bother attacking because it doesn't fear them. If too many odd events begin occurring at once, it will surely become much more suspicious."

Lith responds.

"So, we wait until they naturally come out on their own."

"That would be the safest bet."

I take the papers from the lobby men and begin to fill in the events of the last few hours along with what I believe is the best course of action for them.

In simplified terms, the core message reads "Run! We've got company, get back to the Galeheart Tower Now! -Jay".

However, once I hand the paper off to one of Lith's workers that looks just like a very generic businessman in a presentable manner to infiltrate the city unnoticed. The other guard called forward to retrieve Fisher and Lydia looks like a weekend shopper with less professional attire.

It's impressive how quickly he manages to get his team together for specific jobs. All I can do now is sit back and wait.

Lith turns to the elevator and motions for me to follow.

"Come on, this is going to take a few hours, we might as well get comfortable."

I walk into the elevator with him, and we're brought back up to his office.

The surveillance system comes online in his penthouse suite as well, and I sit back on a comfortable chair with my arms crossed, staring up at the city watching people go about their daily lives.

In the back of my mind, a timer ticks away.

While my real body trains Arie and begins to climb the Labyrinth on its way to reach level 1000, hours go by here in the city.

Fisher and Lydia finish up their time at the spa and go on a short shopping spree to buy some new interesting magic items and accessories, then are briefly filled in on the situation by the undercover shopper brought in by Lith.

They casually take their time leaving the city not to draw any extra attention and use their transport crystals to come back to the tower once they're far away from the city and out of sight.

Once they get back to the tower, both of them come up the elevator and begin to question me more about this cryptic warning, but after an explanation, they begin to see the seriousness of all of this and cease their complaints. They watch the surveillance of the monastery with us up in the penthouse office.

We all patiently wait for our other teammates to come out and for the businessman standing in the lobby of a partnered trading company's tower nearby with a message in hand to give it to them.

It's rather natural that many businessmen would be waiting for meetings or finishing work in these buildings. Standing around fiddling with paperwork isn't very uncommon.

Another hour or so passes before three figures emerge from the dark hallway. As soon as they do, the businessman sees them from across the street and walks out the door, making his way down the road to coincidentally cross paths with the trio.

He pretends to accidentally not be looking where he's going, and stumbles into their path. With a worried look plastered on his face, he apologizes for making them stop in their path by bowing and reaching out a hand to Monk.

As he shakes and accepts his apology, it's clear there's more to this interaction.

Once his eyes meet the paper, he squeezes his hand closed tight and speaks up to Abby and Maria.

"I forgot one thing, please, let us head back to the training rooms momentarily."

With confused expressions, they agree, and my heart rate stops beating at such a rapid pace once I see them step back inside the black monastery door.

Twenty minutes later, they all come out again, walking to the Platinum gate entrance at a fast and steady pace, not saying a word.

They make it through and move to the Gold district.

However, out of the corner of my eye, I see a large black suit of armor come out from one of the private towers in the Platinum district.

It flashes its wristbands and makes its way into the Gold district. The Platinum guards bow down to the Royal Guard that is making a rare appearance in the main city.

As the trio walks to the next gate, making their way into the Silver district, the Royal Guard isn't far behind. It is quickly and calmly closing the gap between them until they make it to the final gate that leads to outside.

As they do, the Royal Guard motions for the Silver guards to halt their activities, and Monk, Abby, and Maria have to directly confront the mysterious Black armored guard.

The words that echo through the surveillance system from the Royal Guard are quite surprising.

"You three must compete in the arena event tonight. Without the Flame Emperor present, our newest guests still wish to see a show. We can't have our top performers leaving the city so soon..."

Lith rotates the angle of the live video, and a large number "5" is printed on the black armored guard's chestplate, glowing bright orange through its heavy armor.

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I can't sense the guard from here inside the tower, but that number "5" on its armor looks eerily familiar to the "7" I saw on the Dark Guard that I fought in the desert.

Considering the strength difference it showed compared to the lower-leveled guards, I can only assume this one is far stronger than that Double Ranked Up Colossal. If it really wanted my teammates dead, there's no question it'd already be done. This means it has something else planned. There must be a reason it wants them to enter the arena.

I watch as reflexively, all 3 of them reach for their item boxes on their waists, but the Dark Guard speaks up again while the large number 5 glows brighter on its chest.

"Not so fast..."

A pulse of red-orange energy comes out of the Guard, and two long Soul Energy Manifested swords form in its hands.

Faster than the eye can see, the guard strips each of them of their storage pouches and holds one sword to Monk's neck, and the other in front of both Abby and Maria.

"Like I said before, you won't be leaving the City just yet. The Dark One is expecting a show and wishes for repayment for breaking his toys."

The Dark Guard lets its energy blades disappear back into its body and dangles the three item storage pouches in the air while walking right down the middle of the street away from the exit gate and toward the arena.

"Come on, fight in the arena tonight, then you're free to do as you wish."

All three of them are frozen in place, most likely feeling a similar sensation to the one time I was face to face with the 7th ranked Dark Guard in the arena before I was powerful enough to take it on.

Although I can't sense the energy levels of this interaction, I can see clear as day on the surveillance system that the power gap here is immense.

As blue and green energies begin to swirl around the two women, and I see red lights sparking up in both of their eyes, Monk's voice can be heard, stopping mayhem from breaking loose.

"We'll do it, we'll fight. But please, leave our storage pouches close by in the training hall, I have important family goods in there. It's important they're not damaged or lost. I don't care for the money or high grade items, but you understand sentimental value, right?"

The Dark Guard doesn't stop walking toward the arena but replies.

"Fine, as long as each of you agrees to actually fight to the 7th stage, we'll keep your belongings close by. Heavily guarded, but close. If even one of you thinks about running away or quitting the fight, you're all dead."

"Deal."

The three of them follow the Dark Guard into the arena to register, and all I can do is watch and wait.

A million theories turn through my mind, and tons of options including getting my main body and ember to come to help with this situation come up, but nothing seems like a viable option.

This entire city is under lock and key, with a minimum of half a dozen more double-ranked up Dark Guards lurking in the shadows, not to mention their boss watching every move.

As bad as it may seem, waiting and letting them figure out how to get out of this situation themselves is the best course of action. From my letter, and the time spent inside the monastery after Monk read it, I'm sure they are aware of how powerful the monsters they're dealing with are.

Considering this, both Maria and Abby are very skilled fighters and strategists themselves. Monk has been living within these walls for many years too. Odds are, they're already coming up with a plan to get those item boxes back themselves.

I let out a sigh and sit back on my comfortable seat in Lith's office, but continue to keep my eyes glued on the surveillance screen, not missing a beat while the starting announcements for tonight's fight events echo through the room.

Lydia and Fisher nervously watch, and Lith sits at his desk with his hands clasped, thinking deeply to himself and staring at the projections not showing any external emotions similar to my own stare.

The surveillance system is split into two halves on the ceiling now.

Half shows the upper area where the fights are taking place, and the other shows the underground training room where all of the contestants wait their turn to fight.

There's a packed house tonight, and many new faces of strong newbie fighters along with familiar legacy fighters are down below.

However, the air is very tense tonight because the Dark Guard stands by the exit stairs that lead to the surface.

A pile of everyone's external loot is heavily guarded by three of its underling royal guards, but I can tell just by their stances these 3 are nowhere near the Dark Guard's level. Still, however, they hold a bit of prestige in this city so no one dares defy them or challenge their wishes.

The first few rounds of the Arena go on as normal.

The stone maiden starts off with a flashy first round, many newbies give it their best shot to become legacy fighters, and both the Shield and Ace give great showings.

After a few more newbie rounds, Monk takes his appearance in the ring and punches his way through all 7 stages without a single missed blow. He's brought back to the training room and Abby takes the stage next.

Spears are thrown, Qi is channeled, and 7 rounds of monsters are defeated even quicker than Monk's.

The audience roars with joy, placing bets, getting drunk, and enjoying the show late into the night.

I wait to see Dark Guards storm the ring and force them to move onto the 8th stage, but it never happens...

I can tell everyone is getting rather nervous downstairs. Abby heals everyone up after their matches and strategically begins moving closer to the three Royal guards near the side of the room guarding the miscellaneous gear.

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Another newbie takes the stage after her battle, then the Ice Empress is called to fight.

Maria takes the stage and freezes every opponent she faces into sculptures of ice, then slices the 7th stage ghoul in two to end the performance of the night in a dazzling attack. The announcer continues hyping up the crowd and showing replays of the fight as Maria is transported back into the underground training room.

She sees that both Abby and Monk have migrated closer to the piles of gear. As she walks over in the silent room, this is when the tension in the air finally snaps.

The Dark Guard that stands in front of the exit speaks again, reaching into an invisible storage portal in his chest and pulling out a large orange glowing crystal.

"First of all, I thank you all for the wonderful show tonight."

He takes a step closer and the orange crystal glows brighter.

In the background, the cheers of the crowd and the announcer's voice showing highlights of the battles almost drown out the buzzing sound that gets louder from the gem.

The Dark Guard lets go of the crystal and takes a step back.

It floats in the air for a moment, then drifts slowly toward the floor.

"Thank you for your service entertaining the community. The Dark One has invited each and every one of you to join its ranks. A new strong loyal group of subordinates is just what we need to get rid of a certain pest that cut our ranks in half."

No one says a word in the room; they all just watch the gem drift closer to the floor in awe.

"You all will now serve as Royal Guards and have a special power bestowed upon you by the Dark One himself. A sword that can cut through any barrier of mana, a shield that can block any mana-based attack, and a body that can outlast any mere mortal in this dreaded world. You will become far stronger than you ever knew was possible."

The tip of the crystal touches the white floor of the training room, and it looks as if a pebble has fallen into a pond.

The floor ripples and the crystal disappears, sending out slow-moving orange shockwaves of light.

"Join our forces, and rule the world. The Dark One shall Reign Supreme!"

The young man who was one of the newest newbie fighters closest to the impact point on the ground is hit by the slow-moving wave of light, and a gruesome scene follows.

His armor and clothes are all burned away as orange light starts to creep over his entire body. He begins to scream out in agony, and all that remains of his figure are bones and a beating orange heart left behind.

In a matter of seconds, the light hits 3 other fighters and the same thing occurs, ridding them of flesh in violent yells, but imbuing their hearts with dense soul energy that keeps their skeletal structures upright.

Upon seeing this, Abby wastes no time and lunges toward the weaker Royal Guards with her eyes locked on the item boxes that were stolen from them earlier. Bursts of red hydra's Soul Energy come leaking off of her as Abby uses her earth magic to impale the guards and dive into the pile of gear.

Simultaneously, enormous red structures of ice begin to erupt from the floor as Maria activates her ranked-up ice buff aided by the Red Hydra's Soul Energy, piercing right through the shielding in the ceiling and shaking the room while creating a maze of mirrors and walls of shields tinted crimson.

Monk channels all of his Qi into his palm and thrusts it upward at the ceiling as well, sending a shockwave of Qi through the entire area floor and making visible movement in the dirt flooring above.

However, the shielding doesn't budge, and the ceiling stays intact without a single crack. There seems to be many layers of the A-Grade Shielding between the training room and the arena itself.

The room beneath the arena goes into pure chaos as no amount of magic can stop the slow-moving orange light. It even ripples through Maria's walls of ice with ease, melting and shattering them to pieces without slowing its flow at all.

The legacy fighters all use their elemental and speed-based powers to attempt pushing the rippling light back, but it's no use. As much as they try, even they fall subject to its curse. It's painful to watch fighters I fought alongside and had drinks with scream out in agony.

However, unlike the weaker newbie fighters, the 3 legacy fighter's bodies stay intact and aren't burned away. They're enveloped in a bright yellow-orange glow and fall to the floor unconscious as runes with illegible letterings spin above their hearts.

The echoing voice of the Dark Guard sounds out through the room.

"It's no use trying to run or fight back. This is the Curse of The Lich King. If our God wishes to bring you to our ranks, there is nothing you can do to stop it. Your friend, The Flame Emperor, killed one of the Upper 7 Dark Guards in Sector 2. This crime will not go unnoticed. We will find you all and wage war."

An excited yell comes from the side of the room in Abby's voice.

"I found them!"

She holds three item boxes in one hand while grasping 3 white shimmering crystals in the other.

Maria and Monk's heads turn toward her, and she throws two crystals through the air using all her strength and buffs to them.

The Dark Guard notices its error and pulls out its energy blades to stop what's occurring by any means necessary.

The crystals are being thrown less than 5 meters, while the dark guard stands back at the exit more than 20 meters away.

Maria is closest to the approaching gems and lets out another burst of overwhelming power, letting her walls of ice glow bright red, become far more dense with mana and soul energy, and push into the ceiling even harder.

She uses massive red ice crystals from her back to push her toward the teleport crystals faster.

Monk moves all of his Qi into his heels, pushing forward at the gem nearest to him, letting the world around him fade away and only see the glimmering gem that will bring him to safety.

In the same moment, the Dark Guard lunges forward, releasing two dark red-orange energy crescents flying out from the swords. One is aimed at Abby and the other is heading straight for Maria and Monk. It's clear this guard is shooting to kill. It'd rather have them dead than get away.

Abby is closer to the Dark Guard and crushes the transport crystal in her hand the instant she senses life-threatening danger. She's done her part and knows there isn't anything left for her to possibly do but get out of there and survive.

Maria senses danger approaching too, as she's in between the blades and Monk, but knows there's no time to dodge.

Its energy blade is slicing through her walls of ice like butter and rocketing their way.

Her entire body glows with the Red Hydra's buff, and it's being pushed to a limit I didn't know was possible. It looks similarly to when I was using it to fight that Wraith for the first time, but far more concentrated and deadly.

The depths of Maria's energy control are even more impressive than I believed was possible.

Violent dark red tendrils of Soul Energy erupt from her body, increasing her speed and reflexes while also making stronger walls of ice. She digs deep into her energy control capabilities and

channels every last drop of the Red Hydra's Soul Energy to make one final wall of ice that erupts from the floor and makes itself steady by piercing through the ceiling.

I can see the red energy leave her body completely. The blood-red wall is formed, and no more Qi or Soul Energy remains in her aura as she continues to fly through the air toward the transport crystal.

The metallic clang of energies colliding vibrates through the room as Monk grasps his gem behind Maria and crushes it in his hand, teleporting away to safety.

The Soul Energy crescent sent from the Dark Guard collides with the final blood-red wall of ice and is stopped in place for a fraction of a second.

Its outer layer is ripped away, lessening its attack power just slightly and altering its course.

Maria grabs the teleportation crystal in the air while the Soul energy crescent breaks through her final defensive wall. Due to the small alteration in course, the blade misses her heart by centimeters as she's sliced across the chest and opposite shoulder. Even so, she still manages to break the crystal in her hand and disappears in a flash of white light.

The room is filled with the echoing angered yell of the 5th Ranked Dark Guard.

A massive Blood Red Ice crystal sticks up through the arena floor, completely destroying the training room below, and disabling the shielding of the fight ring on the surface.

Screams of innocent bystanders in the crowd begin to spread, and the announcer of the event tries to calm everyone down. On this cue, I immediately shut off the surveillance system and run to the elevator.

The multiple seconds of waiting as the cart brings me to the lobby floor feels like an eternity.

The white floor is stained with blood, and my heart races faster as the elevator door opens.

Green flashes of light from Abby's Restoration magic fill the room. However, my attention is solely captivated by the warm blue eyes and radiant white smile that greets me from across the lobby, reassuring me that everything worked out.

Chapter 463

[Main Body POV ~ Midnight]

My teammates approach me from the canyon, and my double points a finger to its forehead to kill itself. The memories of the arena come rushing into my consciousness.

Imagery of the 5th ranked Dark Guard trying to possess my teammates, and Maria's overwhelming display of energy control to give Abby and Monk a chance to get away alive repeat in my mind.

The fact that the 5th ranked Dark Guard already knows I defeated the 7th ranked Dark Guard, and said the Dark One is waging an attack to get revenge makes me wonder where all of the other guards are.

Especially the 6th, and the question of the actual power gap between guards also concerns me.

Even using every last drop of the Red Hydra's buff in a single attack, Maria managed to only shift the trajectory of that monster's basic slash. It was impressive, but considering it took all of her power and she's most likely the strongest out of all of them, it's actually more concerning.

If they didn't have a getaway plan and were in an actual fair fight, none of them would have lasted a second.

I look at Maria, Abby, Monk, Fisher, and Lydia as they float up onto flat ground. They stand on the newly built stone road, lit up in the night and I do full scans of each of them, accessing displays of their powers and abilities quickly, coming to a single conclusion.

Maria speaks it aloud before I can say it myself.

"Jay, we need to get stronger. Those Dark Guards are on a level far above anything I've seen before. In our current shape, we stand no chance."

In the same moment, I see all 5 of their gazes shift to the sky behind me and get in a battle-ready position. However, I speak up and put my hands up in the air.

"Hey, hey don't worry. You're safe here for now. That's an ally."

Ember and my double come floating down from deep within the desert. They must have just come from collapsing another dungeon. It's been almost 5 hours since I sent them off to continue collecting energy for the Isolation Pod.

My double's mana control is off the charts which is probably what sent my teammates into attack mode, I can sense it like a beacon in the sky. However, Ember is basically invisible to all of their senses.

As they touch down, I continue to speak.

"There's no need to fill me in on the details, my double already caught me up to speed."

I look toward the crimson-haired human form of my dragon partner, then turn back to my teammates.

"I'd like you all to meet the newest member of our party. Everyone, meet Ember!"

He walks toward the five of them with a calm expression and graceful silent steps, scanning them with an unknown aura of energy.

He silently stares at them and looks each of them up and down with a natural-looking smile. I remember he did a similar thing with Arie. It was weird then, and it's still weird now, but Ember doesn't exactly spend much time with humans so my best guess is he's just acting natural.

Or, a more likely explanation is he knows it's odd and just doesn't care what anyone thinks. So, he acts as he pleases.

I shrug and place a hand on my head.

"He's been away from people for a while, so just know he means well. Ember is strong, and an ally I trust with my life. So I hope to see you all treat him like you would treat me. He'll grow on you soon."

I let out a sigh, then begin walking slowly back and forth while deeply thinking to myself.

He can handle greetings on his own, I need to figure out our next plan of action; and fast.

What Maria said is right, I need to find a way to get them all in fighting shape for the inevitable confrontation with the Dark Guards.

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Arie greets each of the team members briefly, and Abby introduces him to Monk, but it's clear to see on his face he's still spent from training his Demonic Energy Manipulation all day.

While my mind wanders, Arie and my double step aside to observe while Ember begins to confront my teammates. He speaks up for the first time after examining Fisher and Lydia.

"You two are strong fighters. Proficient in mana control and have very refined and practiced sword techniques. Out of everyone here, you may not have the highest degree of overwhelming natural talent, but your experience and training shows."

He puts out a hand and silently shakes both of their hands with nods of respect, then slowly walks over to Abby next. He gets up close to her face and stares her in the eyes for a few seconds before displaying a grin and stepping back.

"Restoration Magic. Is that so? I haven't felt this presence in quite a while."

Ember looks up to the sky, muttering to himself "Not since... hmm... Was it that Dryad that became a Divine Beast a few centuries ago? Was she the last one that had that skill? Too bad her immortality was cut short like the others during the incident. Though, it explains why her talent is still floating around looking for a host."

He looks back into Abby's eyes, then puts out a hand to shake.

"Nevermind that. Anyway, nice to meet you. It seems fate works in mysterious ways, I'd say I'm surprised you're in Jay's party, but honestly that would be a lie. It will be a pleasure fighting by your side."

They shake hands, and Ember's attention quickly moves to Maria.

The Dragon's bright red eyes pulse with energy at the sight of the limitless potential it sees within Maria's energy control.

Ember doesn't move for almost 5 whole seconds, examining the fluctuations in her aura and seeing the Qi rest calmly in her core yet acting like an abyss that calls for more.

His grin that's still plastered on his face from meeting Abby widens even further, and he lets out a laugh.

"Incredible. Such an insatiable hunger for energy, yet wielded by a delicate looking woman. Appearances are very deceiving, aren't they?"

Maria responds, stepping forward with a confident look on her face and a sharpened gaze.

"You're right... about all of us. And if Jay trusts you, then so do I... but I don't understand your words and tone. What is all of this talk about immortality, Divine Beasts, and most importantly what energy source are your abilities coming from. I can't sense a drop of Qi or Mana coming off your body. Whoor What are you?"

Ember takes a step back and stops chuckling, crossing his arms.

"Maria, right? Your name is a very familiar one floating around in Jay's mind. When our telepathy is linked, it shows up in my subconscious often. I always wondered what you'd be like, and I'm not disappointed. You may have the greatest potential of everyone here. What an interesting team."

He puts out a hand to shake, and Maria stares down at it, not wanting to accept the gesture just yet.

Ember speaks again.

"I promise you, in time more will become clear. Jay keeps his secrets for good reason. I'm one of his most guarded ones. This is the beginning of a road to see him opening up much more in the future. See me as a bridge to his mind, I believe you will learn more about his motives and desires soon."

She continues to look at the hand for a few more seconds in silence, then decides to shake it with her own.

"Okay, fine. Nice to meet you, Ember."

They release their grip, and Ember finally moves to Monk who waits patiently, staring off into the empty desert with his arms crossed and gaze steady.

Ember curiously looks him up and down, then poses a simple question.

"Do you worship the Originators?"

Mention of that word makes Monk's head turn to meet his eyes in an instant.

He doesn't say anything back, but it's clear Ember struck a cord with this line. Ember leans in closer, scanning every part of his body, then eyeing the item pouch around his waist.

"What? I don't care if you do or don't. Everyone knows the Origin Civilization left us to a higher plane before any modern tools of record-keeping existed. It's not like I'm accusing you of anything, just wondering if you care to study their practices. Your lack of mana control and the contents of that storage pouch just lead me to such a conclusion."

His eyes widen even more, then he finally speaks.

"You know of the Origin Civilization?"

Ember shrugs, responding in a nonchalant manner.

"Hardly, only rumors and replicated texts. Most of the real books that taught proper Qi control and the creation of the system were lost in wars on planets that no longer have names I can remember."

He lets out a sigh and waves a hand in the air.

"Trust me, I looked for answers longer than anyone. If they wanted to be found, they'd have shown themselves by now."

Ember points a finger to Monk's storage pouch again.

"Any relics you believe will show you the real truth one day are nothing more than junk left behind by those that have moved on. They took everything valuable with them."

Monk closes his mouth and bows, keeping silent for a few seconds then bringing his head back up.

"I understand, but it is my life's journey to continue my search."

Ember nods again.

"Very well. There's no point in trying to stop you. Who knows, maybe a stone or two haven't been looked under yet. There's always a chance. Whatever the case may be, you are strong. I look forward to fighting with you."

Ember puts out a hand and they shake.

He turns back to me in my main body as I finally finish with my brainstorming, and I've come up with a perfect plan.

The rumbling sound of wooden carts full of heavy rocks sound nearby as the grunts under mind control come walking our way.

I step up and look my teammates in the eyes.

"Welcome to Sector 2. This is our new Territory, run by me, The Flame Emperor."

I burst into a display of fire that signals the grunts to turn around and walk back toward the town.

"I have a lot to explain, and we have a lot of training to do. However, together we'll defeat every single Dark Guard and take the Head of The Lich King. So, follow me. Tonight, we will prepare for war."

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After the group acknowledges our goal, and me as their leader in this moment, I get the option to add Fisher, Lydia, and Monk to my Rising Emperor's Domain system. I do so without notifying them of this change and now see their status screens and geopoints light up in my mind's eye.

Then, I give instructions to my body double and Ember to go back to charging up the isolation pod while I train with my team.

Arie tags along with them, and I give permission to use one of the saturated stones on the pod that hasn't been charged up yet. Aerie needs a rest after training, and using the fully charged pod would be a waste to use now. I need that supercharged pod exclusively saved to use for Qi control training for myself and my teammates.

I don't mind a few billion mp being used up to bring the other pod up to 8x dilation for future use though. According to the old crafter's note, not much energy will be lost from anything under 10x. So, using 1 stone to make a pod where 1 hour of rest will equal over a full night's sleep will be perfect for the session we're about to have.

Once he's rested up, my double will find us in the Labyrinth.

The three of them go off into the canyon, and I turn to the remainder of my team.

"By foot, the journey out here from Sector 1 may take days or even weeks. By sky, it would take hours, maybe a day at most. My guess is they will travel by flight again, so an enemy attack could come at any time... However, your escape from capture and run-in with the 5th Ranked Dark Guard means the Dark One's forces are not all on their way just yet."

I pause and walk to the edge of the canyon, making another body double to max out all 3 copy slots of this skill. I order it to watch over the town and survey the skies to alert me if anything unusual approaches.

As it flies away, I turn to my teammates again.

"This means there may be an attack coming soon... any moment actually... but we also know there is still time to prepare. We'll need to get you all in fighting shape by sunrise."

I jump down into the canyon onto the nearest pathway that leads to a blue glowing portal.

"Come on, it's time for all of you to receive some major strength upgrades."

I dungeon walk all of them back down to the 30th floor and share my absorption skill with each of them to allow my MCP absorption perk to make its full use.

Staying within 100 meters of each of them, we circle around the outer ring of Wyverns and slowly make our way into the center of the dungeon.

With the use of temporary skills gained from my absorption skill, Monk is able to fly in the sky with us using water and earth magic from a few of the first wyverns killed.

Fisher and Lydia let loose and reap the benefits of gaining millions of MCP after every kill, using their Red Hydra's buffs to speed up the training time and having Abby heal them every few minutes once they deactivate the soul energy perk and face the consequences of the debuffs.

Whenever nearby flocks of monsters are killed, I dungeon walk everyone to more dense portions of dungeon where respawns take place to expedite the process. I find enemies and they constantly fight them, absorbing their energy and moving onto the next.

Many thousands of MP in mana crystals are left behind after monsters dissolve without us nearby, but I always make it a point to retrieve element stones if they drop.

Maria and Abby easily make it to the center of the dungeon without using any Soul energy or Qi. Monk also easily takes out his opponents.

It takes nearly an hour to clear this floor and bring everyone up to level 750, but everyone has gained over a hundred million MCP each and they're all revving to fight more.

As we beat the 30th floor boss and wait to move onto the next floor, Monk and I have a long-awaited conversation.

He reaches into his item box to pull out a large silver briefcase.

"I thank you for your note of warning before we left Valor City, I managed to bring over a large portion of our remaining Qi pill supplies with us. I'm still looking forward to hearing the method you used to gather so much Qi in such a short period of time. If just over 150 pills brought you this far, we will all have enough to reach a whole new level."

He clicks open the case and I see hundreds of white pills inside, possibly over a thousand. Monk grabs a few out and hands some to Abby, Maria, and myself, then eats one himself before clasp the case shut and placing it back in his inventory.

I nod and eat one of the pills as well, looking forward to filling my Qi stores up to their max for the first time after ranking up again.

As the hot energy fills my body, I respond to his earlier question.

"Of course. Ember and my body double are working on getting the preparations for my expedited cultivation method as we speak. Once you've all made it to a considerable strength by morning, you'll be ready. I want to add at least 500 million extra MCP to all of your base mana controls before you attempt my method."

"Understood."

The corner of Monk's lip turns up, and the rush of Qi from the pill he just consumed fills his body too.

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We're transported to the 31st floor, and my teammates begin farming levels and mana control again.

The sensation of Qi rushing into my body hits me too, but I don't feel quite as satiated as I usually do after a pill. Not even a drop of overflow comes out of my pores either.

While my teammates zip across the dungeon, I decide to take another pill.

After this one, my core finally hits its saturation point and the excess Qi leaks out like usual.

"How interesting... I've grown enough to the point where 1 pill isn't enough to fill my core. I didn't know that was even possible."

I consider that it must be a result of the natural energy control upgrade that occurred after my rank up. My capacity is now roughly 1.5 Qi Pills.

Halfway through farming this floor, a flash of light and the teleportation of Arie and my double arrive nearby.

The archer looks fully rested and ready to train as well.

He floats in the air next to me and I fill him in on our goals here to train our way to the highest floor possible together.

It is true I could just powerlevel them myself by repeatedly sharing experience points with them by bringing my full team to a high-level boss room and clearing it myself. That wouldn't be great in the long term though; they need the combat training as well as the MCP that comes with killing mobs yourself using my absorption perk.

Relying on their Red Hydra's Buff for training now is a loophole I'd rather not have them get used to, because it will be used up in the future. Half of mine is gone and Maria's is completely used up.

The permanent buff that was on her status before is no more... I witnessed it disappear myself.

However, it's the fastest way to farm mana control and levels, so it has to be done.

As Arie joins the team, red flashes of light fill the air and we begin clearing more and more floors.

Once everyone makes it within 5 levels of the floor boss each time, we move up to the next floor. It takes 3 more hours to clear the next 7 floors bringing everyone near level 900 and adding close to 400 million additional MCP to their mana controls.

If we were to go back down and farm these monsters again, the MCP gained would be much lower. The main reason for such a high gain is that they're consistently beating monsters at higher levels than their own, giving a higher percentage of mana control gained than weak mobs.

The overwhelming power of the Red Hydra's Soul energy has cut through everything in its way so far, but finally comes to a roadblock where its strength is not enough.

On the 38th floor, my teammates face off against the giant armored worms that even gave my mana control trouble when I was training up here before ranking up.

The crimson covered energy blades don't do as much damage as I imagined they would. Fisher and Lydia meet their match, and only crack the outer shell of these beasts. No matter how many attacks they throw in solo fights, the rapid regeneration of the worms continues to keep the monsters alive.

The two of them are easily able to get away; they're just not powerful enough to quickly take the monster out alone for training purposes.

Together, they're able to take a single beast down in a few minutes and a brutal all-out battle, but it's clear we're making it to a crucial point in training where power leveling any further may not be possible in the short time constraints we have left. They alternate final blows to share the MCP and EXP gains.

Arie, on the other hand, is able to use Red Hydra imbued Spirit Arrows to pierce the flesh of the worms. His Spirit Energy has unique properties, and with the recent boost in mana control from the previous 8 floors, he's able to take the worms out alone in just a few hits when timed right.

It makes me wonder how strong his Demonic Energy attacks would fare against these creatures, but it's understandable that he doesn't want to bring that volatile energy into a life and death battle like this just yet.

Abby, Maria, and Monk waste no time on this floor after seeing the struggles of their teammates. This is the first battle where Qi imbued blades are necessary to take opponents out.

Abby imbues her Daggers with Qi and slices through the Worms' flesh and armor with ease. Maria's sword, hot with Qi, can carve up these monsters like butter, and Monk uses a technique of fists imbued with energy that sends waves of Qi through the worms' bodies and slowly cooks its insides, killing it in under 10 punches.

I watch them train for another half hour until every worm in this dungeon is killed, and decide to move onto the next floor instead of waiting for the respawn.

Once we make it to the 39th floor and take on the Minotaurs, I explain that this is the final floor they'll be able to train on, recounting some of my experiences on the 40th and 41st floor.

Less than 10 monsters spawn up on this 39th floor every 30 minutes, so we take turns testing our skills just like the worms.

Fisher and Lydia give it their all, sending red waves of water and ice at their level 966 opponent, ruthlessly stabbing and pounding the monster to the dungeon floor. They're pushed to their limits and I can feel the massive amounts of Red Hydra's Soul Energy being used up in every attack to the point where I hypothesize they are also draining its power away like Maria did, but to a much slower degree.

It takes over 10 minutes, but in a combined effort, they defeat the Elite Minotaur. Even after Abby heals them up, it's clear they've hit their limit and are very tired.

"Great job today. You two have gained over half a billion mana control each, improved just about 300 levels, and have defeated the strongest base level monster in the Labyrinth we'll be able to fight today. You may rest."

They give satisfied smiles and are happy with their progress. I look forward to teaching them Qi in the future, but there's no time to bring them through the full training process now.

I turn to the others.

"Now it's up to the rest of you to show off how far you've come."

Arie manages to use his new and improved crimson spirit arrows to take out the Minotaur in just 3 direct hits to the head.

Abby and Maria use Qi to slice their opponents' heads off before the battle even starts, and Monk does his signature attack pattern, punching the minotaur from every angle and defeating it in 17 blows.

I think about bringing them to face the lone mutant, but my double takes care of it before I get the chance to try.

"It's probably better that way..."

I bring all of my teammates to the boss room, and let them take on the level 997 Minotaur boss together.

With Qi infused weapons and Red Hydra's Soul Energy filling the boss room, the Massive Minotaur doesn't even get a chance to fight back.

Abby, Maria, and Arie are the only ones who continue to fight. Fisher and Lydia rest while Monk and I watch with our arms crossed.

Everyone in the boss room shares EXP from a boss kill, so whoever would like to fight has the option to.

Curiously, we're all transported right back to outside the boss room once the transport magic activates. There's still a 30-day cooldown ticking down in the 40th Floor, so no other challengers are welcome. The 41st is out of the question, even for me.

I point back at the grey spinning boss room portal.

"Well, you've all made it this far. It's almost morning, so our first portion of training here has almost come to an end. You may feel like you're strong now, but I assure you the gap between these Minotaurs' power and a Dark Guard is unimaginable."

We all step through the boss room portal to fight another Minotaur at level 995.

"This is a great start, but we have a long way to go. We'll take on this boss a few more times to max out all of your levels. Then, for a few of us, the next stage of training will begin."

Chapter 465

After clearing the boss room 18 times over the next 45 minutes, everyone in the group reaches level 994. We could most likely push everyone up to 997 if we farmed here for a few more hours, considering the Minotaur Boss consistently appears at level 993 to 997. However, the minuscule gains aren't worth the extra time wasted right now.

So, we leave the Labyrinth back to the dungeons in the canyon.

The sound of heavy stone being pulled in wooden carts hits our ears as the red-orange morning sun rises over the sand dunes of the desert.

I float up out of the canyon and see the tired pack of grunts trudging my way.

They look pale, hungry, thirsty, and on the edge of death's door. Some of them even look angry at the sight of me, letting out grunts and sneers.

I sigh and order them to drink another vial each of suggestion elixir from my item storage to make all of them fall back in line. In my time away, the effects of this potion began wearing off.

However, if I work them any harder, they may actually die.

As that may be a fitting fate, their labor would still be useful in the future.

I activate my earth magic and disperse all of the stone in the carts. Then, I look far off the stone trail about 50 meters near the canyon's edge and instantaneously form five small worker huts in a line out of stone with nothing more than hard beds and a single table in each of them.

They have no windows, and an open door, but will be more than enough to keep these men out of the heat and keep them from dying. I pull out rations of food, water, and more elixir from my item storage and evenly distribute them in the huts using telekinesis from a distance.

I stand before the dazed grunts and point to the huts.

"Take your rest. Eat and drink up, make sure to take your elixir once you wake up and await my orders when I return."

They all let go of their carts and begin moving toward the makeshift housing. I move the carts off to opposite sides of the desert path in neat lines. They'll most likely be useful again at some point in the future. So, there's no harm in leaving them out here for now.

As my teammates follow behind and we approach the town, they have mixed thoughts on my punishment of the grunts. However, we take a slow and peaceful walk back to town on the stone path while I fill them in on the exact details of what happened in the town yesterday. After this, they're far more understanding of my harsh treatment.

Abby and Arie are especially on board and think I should be pushing them harder than that, even violent torture is on the table in their minds. Maria agrees with me almost entirely, believing that an eye for an eye is good punishment. Fisher, Lydia, and Monk don't care to make any comments on the matter.

Once we get back into the small settlement, the topic of conversation shifts to what the end goal is with all of these people.

They're from all over the Dark Continent and have no place to call home, they're stranded out here in Sector 2.

As we walk through the doors of the empty guild hall and down into the mana-shielded bunker, I respond to this point.

"I'll be giving all of them a few options shortly. I can tell they still need their rest, I'll wait to make a speech to everyone until they're all awake."

One by one, we walk down the spiral stairs, and right on cue, one of my doubles and Ember arrive from the sky. They too walk down and join us shortly after I open the middle wall and let everyone inside the mana-shielded base.

Once the initial awestruck moment of admiring the room passes, my double takes its item storage contents out to place in the center of the empty half of the room.

Two large isolation pods come out, and I immediately activate my craftsmanship skill along with other perception perks to examine them.

One says [Current Dilation: 8.7005x]. It must be the one set aside, using only one containment stone that Arie rested in before coming to train with us.

The other reads out [Current Dilation: 46.9209x].

My double turns to me, and I expect it to kill itself to share its memories with me, but it speaks up.

"Open up your storage, I have an item I need to transfer over carefully."

I create a small white portal, doing as it says. My double opens its spatial magic portal millimeters above mine, and a small white shimmering stone makes itself visible for a fraction of a second before falling inside.

It was only detectable because I was watching so closely and carefully. My double places a finger on its forehead the next second and the memories of a 2nd dungeon collapsing and that white stone falling from it just like the first rush into my mind.

"So the farming process is replicable..." I whisper under my breath with a grin.

I make a new double, and have him and Ember go off to continue making containment stones for later use.

Then, I'm left alone with my teammates and two lightly humming isolation pods.

One of them hums significantly louder than the other, it's clear there's a difference.

I turn and point to them.

"This here, is our next stage of training."

They all look at the pods with different expressions on their faces.

"Most of you already know these are isolation pods. Machines that allow us to rest for 6 to 8 hours in a trance-like state filled with dense mana while only an hour goes by in the outside world."

Monk's eyes open at the sound of that, but my other teammates have already witnessed their power.

I continue all the same.

"They're made with very dense mana shielding that isolates us from the outside world. No sound or external energy is let in other than the energy and mass circulated through the core of the machine at its top. This also means, whatever is inside, stays inside."

Of course, this seal isn't perfect, or it would act like my item storage system and no energy at all would ever leak out. But for my explanation, it gets the point across.

I point to the weaker pod. Then turn toward Maria, Abby, and Monk.

"When you take a Qi pill, and its total contents exceed your core's limit, the excess leaks out and dissolves into the air. However, when confined in a semi-closed place like a room in the monastery, the walls can trap excess Qi and the absorption rate of energy gathering increases in speed and effectiveness."

Monk speaks up at the weaker pod.

"So what you're saying is, I could gather Qi in a super saturated environment where no Qi could leak out while also taking advantage of time moving faster by almost ten times..."

I smile.

"Yes, precisely. Eight days in there would only be 1 day in the outside world. Plus, let's say you were to bring 100 Qi pills inside. You would be swimming in dense Qi, forcing your body to absorb it at a much faster rate than normal. The pod may be used up multiple times as well, its charge should last upward of a few years before it totally runs out of energy."

Then, I turn to the other pod that hums louder.

"This one is supercharged... We'll only get one shot at using it before it falls down to below 10x dilation. My guess is 36 to 48 hours is going to be its limit. The Dilation is nearly 50x, it's 46.9 to be exact."

Monk pulls out his silver briefcase and clicks it open.

I continue talking as the sea of white pills come into view.

"Ember and my double are off working on getting more materials to supercharge another pod. However, getting enough to bring this weaker one up to such a high rate will take another 12 hours to do. We could cut that time in half and use the materials from a 5 to 6 hour farm and bring a pod up to 30-35x. Though, I believe it's most efficient to try to bring them closest to 50..."

Monk whispers to himself, "That would be over 90 days... 3 full months of isolated Cultivation in a supersaturated environment. In just 2 days here in the outside world..."

He looks up to me and responds.

"I see... So you'd like to go one at a time then."

I nod.

"Well, we really don't have any other choice. The materials I use for these machines come from the 39th Floor. The Minotaurs only spawn in so fast."

He thinks deeply to himself, then speaks up again.

"So then the best candidate for the first round would be Maria."

I'm quite surprised at his response, but happy he sees my vision too. He's been wanting to try out my cultivation method all this time, and supplying all of us with precious resources, yet he still isn't jumping in to get first picks.

With a satisfied smile, I respond.

"A very logical deduction. That was my first choice too. If danger is approaching, we need to get our strongest fighters with the highest potential for growth a chance to take advantage of these pods first."

Everyone turns toward the blond-haired hunter dressed in silver, white, and blue. She doesn't say a word at first, just looking down at the Qi pills then back up right at me.

"You're right. I can still see that Soul Energy blade of the Dark Guard fresh in my mind. If I want to be able to fight back against a monster like that, a major leap in power is necessary."

She pauses again, but the determination in her gaze grows as she turns her head toward the strongest loudly humming Isolation Pod.

"I'll do it."

Chapter 466

I take a few minutes to explain to Maria how I believe the gathering process in the pod will go. I give her some technique advice on long-term cultivation training. Isolation pods are a little bit different than my time in the Titans' domain, though.

They make the user slip into a calming and relaxing state, making it easier to channel energy, float in place, think through tough problems, or even sleep for prolonged periods of time.

It truly is the ideal environment for this type of training. I'm eager to try myself, but am happy to see Maria take the first shot at it. Considering the amount of Qi on hand, and the smaller enclosed environment that we'll be testing the process in, the Qi absorption rate may actually be more efficient than in the Titan's Domain...

Meanwhile, Monk begins to separate the Qi pills into even piles on the center table of the room.

I finish transferring enough food, water, and comfort supplies to Maria, and we all turn back to Monk as he's separated the white pills into 5 piles. Then, he takes out smaller silver containers and places them inside each of them for easier storage.

"There are 1,688 pills. I made 4 groups of 300 for us Qi users to take full advantage of, then 488 leftover pills to utilize for battle and further training for non-Qi users."

Monk points to Arie, Fisher, and Lydia.

"While Maria gathers Qi, Ember prepares the next pod, and you deal with the waking townspeople; I can awaken and begin to train these 3 with Qi."

He looks around the room.

"This is a closed-off and sturdy enough environment to go through the awakening and beginning stages of their development."

At his words, I use telekinesis and move the Isolation pods to the furthest side of the room to give way for maximum open space in the center area, then speak up again.

"The mana shielding won't affect their training? One of the perks of the monastery is that the only energy available to use is Qi. It may be tempting or distracting with all this excess mana in the air."

He reaches into his item box and pulls out another silver briefcase, but this one is full of black bars of stone that look just like the monastery walls, and identical to the small bar he gifted me with my first set of Qi pills.

"They'll be isolated from mana while training as well. Their mana control allowance is off the charts after the training in the labyrinth we just went through, meaning their aptitude for learning Qi will be heightened too. All three of them will have the basics down by nightfall. However, for intense combat, it'll be a few days before they'll really be ready. I think the first wave of whatever comes our way is going to need to be handled by the 4 of us who already wield Qi."

He turns to Arie.

"However, I can tell you've already been partially exposed. Your learning curve may be much quicker. Only some time and testing will make it known."

Maria stands in front of the pod with a determined stare at the back of the room, at the same time, I begin to sense hundreds of people moving around on the surface above us now, telling me pretty much everyone in the town has woken up from their long night of rest.

"Alright. The preparations are complete. It's now or never. Every minute wasted thinking about it is almost an hour gone inside the pod. It's been almost 16 hours since I defeated the 7th ranked Dark Guard, and just over 6 since you all got away from the 5th. They could be arriving 10 seconds from now... 10 minutes... 10 hours... Or 10 days... Whenever it may be, we need to be as ready as we can to fight."

Maria turns around and walks toward the center table, then grabs a silver casing with 300 pills inside.

"You're right, let's do this. I'm ready."

I smile and take a casing with 300 pills off the table myself, then reply, following her over to the pod and viewing all of the dilation settings and timer numbers while she walks inside.

There's a very intense wave of dense and pure mana that pours out when the door is opened, and it looks like there's an endless white void inside the pod. It's on a whole different level than the 6-7x Dilation pods I witnessed back at the Galeheart tower.

The pod is set to open back up automatically in 48 hours but can be opened from the inside at any time. As a Mythic Grade Craftsman, I also have an override function to open the door from the outside if need be, but I'm hoping I won't have to use that option. It would distract her isolated cultivation, and waste valuable Qi trapped inside.

Maria looks at me as the door slowly closes.

"I'll come back stronger soon, protect everyone while I'm gone, Jay."

"I will."

Click

The pod closes and a 48-hour countdown timer starts on the top of the pod.

Monk begins explaining the basics of Qi to Arie, Fisher, and Lydia. So, I walk over to Abby.

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"Alright, I'm going to go confront the townspeople now. You can come and help if you'd like. With all my body doubles busy, I'm going to need a hand."

She shrugs while taking her silver casing of Qi pills off the table and following me as I walk up the spiral stairs.

"Sure."

Before we hit the surface, I use my concealment abilities to turn back into the flaming man that saved every group of refugees here. On top of it, I mask my presence with a dense Qi barrier to make sure I don't overpower anyone's psyche by accident from walking by.

I give Abby the option to use my conceal skill, but she decides to walk out of the empty guildhall in her unaltered form. To my surprise, there are quite a few people wandering the streets.

Many are still inside the bedrooms that were made for them yesterday, but some are curious to see what is going on for themselves.

I begin walking through the town on my way to the densest part of the housing area.

People that see me on my way there have mixed expressions of thankfulness, awe, confusion, and fear. There's a wide mixture of people getting down on their knees to thank me, while others stand in shock without saying a word, then a few just run away screaming.

My response to all of them is to meet me at the guildhall in an hour, that I have more food and water for all of them, and a very important announcement.

I walk in and out of all the housing developments crafted by my double and the slave grunts last night, making sure every single person in the town knows that there is a meeting.

Once I make my rounds, I circle back to the guildhall, and Abby asks a question.

"So... you'll be taking care of them for now it seems, the burden isn't too heavy to bear? I feel bad that they're all stranded out here too. What's the long-term goal with everyone here? Start up a new town and have them help in working for the new Sector 2 trading company once we're in business?"

I nod, responding as we approach the empty guildhall entrance.

"Yeah... something like that. There's going to be a lot of useful positions these people can take on. However, I'd like to give them the choice."

I detail my plans a little further with Abby and hear her simple critiques and feedback while a crowd begins to form all around the center square.

Abby and I decide to float up to the guild's rooftop for a better view of the people approaching, and I wait the full hour like I promised before making a headcount.

"347 showed up, almost all of them, not bad..." I whisper under my breath.

The chattering noises of villagers fill the streets. People are beginning to get antsy, and they're all clumping up on of the square in particular, closest to where I stand.

I step off the roof and slowly float down toward them, then stop about 5 meters off the ground.

Everyone stops talking, and their eyes stay fixated on the illusion of rippling black flames that give off no heat.

I activate my [Screech] skill, and use its special perk to project my voice throughout the entire town square, but keep the tone even and calm.

"Welcome all, I'm glad you came to hear what I have to say."

All of the lingering chatters cease once my voice echoes through everyone's ears.

"First of all, you may call me The Flame Emperor. I will be taking over Sector 2 as its new leader, and my reign begins here."

Again, no one speaks in the crowd, but some of the neutral faces from before turn to worry and fearful looks.

To combat this, I continue.

"Fear not, I won't subject you all to mindless labor like your captors that I've disposed of. I am merely here to give you all a choice, and another shot at a fruitful and successful life."

The gazes calm down and people begin to think about my words.

"I want to make a fair and peaceful settlement here. One where this guild hall behind us may give work to hunters that farm in the dungeons, and one where merchants and businessmen can trade those hunters' goods. I wish to see restaurants, community, and entertainment thrive. I want the people here to enjoy a life they thought was gone forever."

Some of the dull gazes in the crowd begin to see a glimmer of hope in their eyes, while some more cynical thinkers try to determine what the catch in all of this must be.

"I am powerful and wealthy enough to support and protect many, or even all of you if you wish to stay in my growing settlement. Safe shelter, weekly food, water, and basic need supplies will be provided free of cost during our first few months of buildup. I will personally interview each and every one of you to find a suitable job and place where you fit in to help this town grow."

Then, a scruffy man with a mean gaze yells out from the crowd in a sour tone.

"What's in it for you? How do we know we're not being saved from one slave labor camp and taken into another? All of that sounds too good to be true!"

A few crowd members begin to murmur and agree with him, while others complain that he's trying to ruin the only good chance they have.

I think about raising this man up into the sky and burning him alive to prove a point, but the only point I'd be proving is his own, not mine. A little fear-induced loyalty is a good thing to possess as a leader, but too much may become a very negative trait quickly.

So, instead, I just burst into a bigger illusion of flames and let under 0.5% of my intimidation perk's intensity bleed out of my Qi barrier.

It instantly suppresses the crowd's chatter, and they listen closely again.

"You're right. This does seem like an offer that benefits only one side. I see where you're coming from and hear your concerns."

No one moves a muscle, and I let my Qi barrier cover my body again so the intimidation aura stops leaking out.

"You all have 2 options. You may swear your loyalty to me, The Flame Emperor, as your leader and stay here under my protection and guidance for as long as you please. Or, you may leave unharmed and with enough food, water, and money to survive a month on your own. I will make arrangements to drop you off in Solara if this is the path you wish to take."

I leave the crowd in silence again, and murmurs, chatter, and conversation fill the air.

I float down toward the crowd, and people move away, making a wide-open circle on the stone for me to land.

Soon after, Abby floats down behind me, and I turn around to walk inside the guild hall.

As the door opens and I walk through, I leave the crowd with a final remark.

"Once you've made up your mind, come inside the hall and meet with me one-on-one. Whatever your decision is, make sure it is final. If you attempt to deceive me, I will know, and you will face a punishment worse than death."

The guild hall door shuts behind me, and I'm left in the empty octagonal room with Abby as the volume of chatter outside grows and grows. However, no one approaches the doors; they're all hesitant to come inside.

Both Abby and I walk into the middle work space, and I begin pulling large portions of non-perishable food out from my item storage along with piles of silver and bronze coins that show the fire and dragon emblem on their sides.

Before I can even finish sorting them, a familiar face bursts through the door.

She points right at me with a single finger, and her light blue eyes show the same determination that they did at the moment she was resisting the Elixir of Suggestion from the deceased grunt named Finn.

She yells out in a tone I can't tell apart from anger or excitement.

"It's you! It's really you! You're the same guy from yesterday, I'm sure of it! Your flaming disguise can't fool me!"

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She takes a step closer to the glass window of the octagonal reception center and continues to speak in the same tone.

"First of all... I thank you for saving me and everyone else that was captured by these horrible men. However, my eyes are sharper than anyone here. I'm not agreeing to any terms before you explain to me what kind of unique powers you're using and what you're really after in this city. Why did you save us?"

I stare back at her as she confidently makes her way toward the table.

Her tan skin and dark hair, cut short at the shoulders, contrast with the empty guild hall and white flooring.

"You want the honest truth? I can answer your last question much more easily than the first. I saved you all purely by chance. I needed a resource-dense and highly secluded place to call my home base, and with the recent disappearance of this Sector's leader, his old hideout and production town seemed to be the perfect place to take over. There just happened to be a gang of thieves and slave drivers inhabiting this town, and you all are lucky enough to have the option of working for me now, or going off back to your old lives."

I pause for a moment but continue while activating my All-Seeing Eye's ability to scan her energy flow up close, while imbuing a small amount of Qi around my eyes to see even further.

"My abilities that you ask of on the other hand, I'm afraid I can't go into details about them to strangers."

As I finish my sentence, I also finish my scan, and find that the same odd sensation of something more than mana in a light shade of bluish-white circulating throughout her body. It's most dense around her eyes and brain.

She puts out a hand to shake in front of me by the gap in the glass.

"Well then, my name's Luna! We're not strangers anymore, are we? Your power looks just like my old village leader's. I haven't seen anyone wield it since then..."

I don't shake her hand, because there's no deal being made here. And on top of that, there is no silent notification that rings when someone new has joined my Rising Emperor's Domain.

She doesn't trust me...

I ponder how familiar her name sounds while giving a response.

"Nice to meet you too, but my terms are mandatory. Pledge your loyalty to me as your leader if you'd like to stay in my city, or reject my offer and I'll bring you back to Solara to start a new life. It doesn't matter who you are or what powers you have, trust and loyalty is the only thing I care about. So, Luna was it? Wait- Luna..."

Once I say her name out loud, a story Arie told me earlier before his Demonic Energy training comes to mind, and her weird Soul Energy-like power starts to make sense to me.

My eyes widen and I pose the only question I can think of.

"Arie. You know Arie, don't you? The archer with spirit arrows..."

Another memory from the grunts' conversation earlier when I was doing my surveillance of this town comes flashing back to me. They said that this woman was captured fleeing from a small village that was overrun by the Abyss in Sector 4.

That sounds exactly like Arie's hometown backstory, and this woman's ability, name, and circumstances line up too perfectly to be a mere coincidence.

She responds with widened eyes too.

"I- How- How do you know Arie?"

Her face turns pale, and the life seems to drain out of her.

"What-What have you done to Arie? Who are you people?"

Even now, Abby standing next to me begins to get a bit confused, but keeps herself from asking questions.

The expression on Luna's face twists to anger and fear now, and I can tell she's nearing her breaking point.

All of the stressors from whatever hardships she's been through the last few months are starting to take their toll, so I don't blame her for acting this way. My mention of Arie flicked some switch inside her, and whatever that may be, I'm not capable of dealing with it right now.

I turn to Abby and whisper to her to bring Luna downstairs to meet Arie. It's been well over an hour, so the initial stages of their Qi base development is already complete. It may still be a lot to throw on him right now, but he's the most capable and knowledgeable one to handle this situation. I don't know the intricacies of their relationship in the past, but I'm sure he'll be happy to find someone from his village alive.

"Understood."

As Abby walks out of the center room and easily escorts Luna inside with a tight grip, I switch open the hatch and they walk down the spiral stairs. She resists slightly, but is in more of a dazed state, glaring at me while Abby guides her movements.

I feel a bit sorry for not easing her into all of this, but she'll probably forgive me for the scare once she gets downstairs.

A dense wave of Qi flows out from the underground bunker, letting me know the others are hard at work. The two women dive into the dense white mist.

Soon after, Abby returns to the surface without the young woman by her side.

I shut the hatch and smile while seeing an image of Luna and Arie hugging each other tight in my mind's eye thanks to my enemy detection perk.

"Good, thank you."

Abby responds.

"Seems like they really do know each other... I sensed an interesting aura coming off her too, maybe she will be an asset to us in the future."

I shrug.

"Time will tell. I trust Arie to explain things to her and fill in the picture. If he trusts her, then she's alright in my book. I'm interested in her power as well, but i don't have time to spend on her at the moment."

The front door opens again after I say this, and three elder women come walking through.

The moment their eyes hit mine, all of them drop down to their knees and begin praying in mumbles and rhythmic hums.

Once a few seconds pass, I get a silent notification on my Rising Emperor's Domain interface alerting me that I now have 11 members under my leadership.

The women's statuses and geopoints immediately show up in my mind's eye as well.

My heart races with excitement, and I whisper only loud enough for myself and Abby to hear, "Now this is more like it."

I speak up, reading their names from my interface at the top of each of their status screens.

"Rise, Isabelle, Charlotte, and Harper. Your praises have been heard, I accept you into my settlement and would love to hear more about you."

They all hold their heads down to the floor for a moment longer then look up at me with stars in their eyes, overjoyed that I knew their names before even asking.

The women walk over and I interview them quickly with Abby and begin to explain their potential futures.

I give each of them enough food, water, and sanitary supplies to last far longer than a week. Along with this, they each get 2 silver and 10 bronze coins with the Flame Emperor's markings on them.

"You will receive care like this every week from now on until the town is thriving and self sufficient. In a few months, I will reassess the situation and continue aid if needed. Please, do seek

comfort in the temporary housing I've provided you yesterday, and know larger residences will be built in the near future."

They gladly accept my gifts and treat the coins as if they're prized possessions.

"I welcome you to The Crimson City. I promise to protect you as long as your loyalty to me as your leader remains."

The women walk out of the opposite side of the building with starry eyes and religious-like bliss.

This is what I'd expect from some people that are saved from the depths of despair by a man with absolute power, but I'm relieved to see not everyone is so far out in a delusional trance like them.

The next man and woman that enter through the front door are holding hands tightly, looking at me with skeptical stares.

The man speaks up as they approach the glass window.

"Sir, I thank you for saving all of us from a terrible fate, but I do not wish to stay here. My wife and I have friends and family we were ripped away from back in Sector 4. You said you have a way to get back to Solara? If we could get back to our old life and community, we would be forever in your debt."

I nod, and Abby helps me hand them supplies while I dig through the unmarked coins that I decided not to turn into The Flame Emperor's currency.

We hand them their packages of supplies and enough money for a few inns and entertainment for about a month, then I respond.

"Of course, take these as a parting gift. Stay behind in the square. Once the crowds die down and I've interviewed everyone, I'll make sure to arrange your travel plans."

The man gives me a kind smile, hiding his tiredness and built up mental pain, then his wife gives me a thankful look as well, and they leave through the back door and wait in the square.

Over the next hour and a half, more and more people come through the front doors and meet with me to confess their loyalty or tell their story and ask for some way to get back home.

Many were ripped away from their family and friends, kidnapped or swindled into taking the Elixir, and subjected to torture and forced labor for months. Over half of the crowd wants a ride home, which was expected.

Some are from Sector 1, and others even from Sector 3, but I only have easily accessible dungeon walker points in the dungeon hub of Solara in Sector 4, so my plan is to bring them all there and have them walk out pretending to be rogue adventurers.

Letting a few dozen through at rush hour tonight separated throughout all of the dungeons will be perfect. Solara is the largest city in the Dark Continent population-wise, so it's the best place for all of them to go anyway.

The other half either worship me like a god-like savior, or are level-headed hunters, business-minded young men and woman, or hard workers that have been ripped from their old lives, but have no money or connections worth going back to. So, many of them see living here as an adventure and an opportunity to start over and grow in a community of people that all share a common past.

I hand out more and more of the Flame Emperor's coins, flooding the townspeople with silver and bronze.

They have nothing to buy right now, as I'm giving away everything for free, but I assume they'll begin trading or gambling amongst themselves with the coins, and get used to their value as I continue to flood the economy with more every week.

As the crowd begins nearing its end, and only 50 or so people are left standing outside to meet with me, a notification pops up after another man pledges his loyalty to me and walks off with his care package.

[Congratulations! Rising Emperor's Domain Milestone Reached]

[100/100 New Party Members Added]

[New Perk Unlocked: Power Holder]

A new rush of information hits my subconscious, and I can't believe my eyes once I realize what the perks of this new milestone allow me to do.

"This... Will make me unstoppable..."

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[New Perk Unlocked: Power Holder]

Info: The caster may borrow 10% of all Base Stat Points and Mana Control efficiency from Party Members under the allegiance of the Rising Emperor. In addition, 10% of the caster's Base Stat Points and Mana Control may be temporarily distributed to any Party Members under the allegiance of the Rising Emperor.

The caster may only borrow or share exclusively; both actions cannot be performed simultaneously.

Members affected by this perk must be within range of the Rising Emperor's Domain.

My eyes widen, and I'm left in awe reading this new ability.

Up until now, it really only helped my teammates to gain new strength and temporarily use my skills when close to me.

Finally, I'll be able to reap the benefits of this perk myself, and in an incredible way.

Even though most of the people that swore allegiance to me are fairly low leveled, some below level 50, and a majority below level 150, their average is still around level 100 considering the outliers.

With an average base stat increase per level of roughly 2 points, a level 100 would have the base stats on Strength, Defense, Speed, Agility, and Mental Strength at roughly 200 each. Temporarily borrowing 10% of each of these may only raise my own stats by 20 points each... but the fact that I now have 100 people loyal to me means I can activate this perk and use all of their power whenever I wish.

That would be a 2000 point base stat increase. Adding the hundreds of % increases from my gear that stack upon my base rating, I just unlocked a new temporary buff that raises all of my stats to a tremendous degree with unlimited potential as long as I continue bringing more people into my settlement.

The only downsides I can think of are that it can only be activated when people are within my Domain's range, which is just over 100 meters in diameter at the moment. As my mana control and level grow, this will as well.

On top of that, I'm able to borrow mana control efficiency from my party members too. The only ones I'd really be benefiting any noticeable change from would be my core teammates, still 10% from each of them may mean the difference between life and death in a future battle.

I nod to myself, reading over the perk's description a few more times and confirm it's really all exactly how I see it, then mutter to myself. "Very good, now let's continue."

A new pair of middle-aged working men walk through the front door and I finish the sorting process for the final 50 people that come in from the square.

The final numbers end up at roughly 130 wanting to stay and live in this town. The majority of them took their care packages and thankfully made their way back to the housing I provided for them until further notice.

Just under 200 are lined up around the square with all their belongings in hand, ready to leave, while a small group of 30-40 still wait inside the guild hall as undecided.

While some have interesting circumstances and propositions, I let them step aside to talk to them later. Others are quite literally undecided, their indecisiveness wouldn't allow them to choose. They would neither declare loyalty to me, nor tell me straight to my face that they want to leave and go back to Solara.

I understand their situation may be tough, shock and trauma may be halting their abilities to react to my offering. However, I have no room in my heart and mind for people's feelings right now.

We're on the verge of war, and I'm giving them an opportunity with a simple choice. Stay or leave. If they haven't come up with an answer by the time I'm done with the line, they're packing up and leaving with everyone else.

I let out a sigh and turn to Abby while pointing toward the small crowd of undecided.

"Alright, bring over more supplies, it's time to wrap this up."

We walk over to the people that are split evenly into 3 groups. Two of the groups are the cases of interesting individuals I wanted to have another chat with, while the larger group are the undecideds I need to deal with now. I turn to them and speak up.

"Alright, I gave you more time to think. All you have to do is give me a simple response. Yes, you want to stay and follow me as your leader. Or, No, you'd like to leave and have a free trip back to Solara with some money and food as a parting gift."

As I stop talking, none of them want to speak up. Most shuffle around, looking at the floor or waiting for another to step forward first.

So, I speak up again while stepping forward and pointing to the closest young man I see.

"You, you're first."

He looks up at me, and I speak to him like I'm speaking to all of them.

"Just yes or no. Even if you leave now, I'll always accept you back here if you'd like to swear loyalty to me in the future. This isn't a permanent deal, just one I need to make now for efficiency."

He nods to himself, then looks up at me with a scared look in his eyes, and responds after a loud gulp.

"Okay, I'll stay... I swear my l-loyalty to you as a-"

While he speaks, red mist oozes from him, only in my vision as my lie detector skill senses untruthfulness in his words.

Before he even finishes his sentence, something twists and changes in his face, and he reaches into his back pocket to pull out a dagger and thrusts it toward me.

In my advanced perception, I saw this coming and could have dealt with him before the blade came out of his pocket, but I want to make an example out of his actions for everyone to see.

So, I allow him to foolishly thrust his hand into the side of my maximum density Qi Barrier gripping a silver blade tightly.

He lets out a yell as the metal melts along with half of his arm as it's met with no resistance from my barrier, but instantly disintegrates his arm down to the elbow.

His eyes open wide and his yells grow louder as he falls backward in pain and my expression doesn't change at all.

I let out a sigh and point a finger, using telekinesis to lift him off the ground to hover in front of me.

"I gave you one rule to follow, and you managed to break it. Do not attempt to deceive me, it is impossible."

I put up a dome of mana shielding around only us two for a split second and release a wave of unprotected intimidation straight into his psyche.

The man foams at the mouth and passes out on the spot, then I drop him to the floor.

I turn to Abby, and use telepathy to talk to her.

"Could you please bring him out to the huts near the canyon for me? Restore that arm and feed him a vial of elixir, have him wait for me to return before he does anything else."

She picks up the passed-out man and walks out the door, and I turn back to the undecideds again.

"It is a simple yes or no, do not lie or attempt to deceive me. If you don't know what to say, just say you don't know, I will decide for you."

After my display, they all begin to answer and be much more cooperative.

13 of them decide to leave, and 8 of them swear loyalty to me and want to stay.

I sort their gear out myself and have them leave the guild hall so I can finally get to the interesting folks I wanted to talk to initially.

I would say that coincidentally worked out in my favor, but I felt his animosity for me from the start, and his hand kept tapping his back pocket every time he looked at me from afar. I was guessing something like that would happen and was happy to make an example out of that man.

"Thank you all for waiting. I hope the little incident there didn't frighten you. I do not have a high tolerance for crazy people. Please make logical decisions and speak your opinions outloud. As long as you tell the truth, there will never be an issue."

I turn to the remaining two groups of men and women left in the guild hall.

One has 7 people in it, their spokesperson is short but looks very strong with a thick dark beard and mustache. All of them wear manual labor uniforms and carry enchanted tools like hammers and fine-tuned drills.

He's the first that steps forward with both hands on his waist and a smile across his face.

"Not at all, Sir Flame Emperor. You made the rules, and he broke them to the highest degree, I see nothing wrong with your actions."

I nod and turn to him directly, and he continues.

"The name is Maurice. Maurice Ablemen. This is what's left of my team, I used to run an architecture firm, building small-scale projects and traveling town to town in Sector 4 right outside Solara. The only reason neither me nor my team have decided to swear our loyalty to you is that we do not know what that entails. As you must envision this town as a city that will grow, I know you need an advanced team of builders to work on the woodwork, sewer systems, and mana-based power lines. I'm sure my team could handle this if you give us the chance, but we're skeptical of another incident after being deceived by the leader of the Green Mist."

He lets out a sigh and steps back to hear my response.

I take a moment to ponder his claim, doing a full appraisal of him and his men and women workers.

Most of them have extreme strength and body hardening skills to help with the heavy lifting and burdens of the job, but the young man to his right side has an earth summoning skill and their leader has a very interesting status.

[Lv. 114] [Structural Perception][Special Grade]

I dig deeper into his status using my all-seeing eye, and it shows that this skill works similarly to my swordsmanship skills' legendary perk. It seems he's able to see and manifest images of advanced systems and structures to see and test how they would work best with moving parts added to them over time by letting his subconscious take over and show him the way.

My guess is it is a skill usually used for craftsmen making small items, or even may be useful for a combat magic user to use to bend mana and matter to their will to create more efficient spells.

However, it is a truly unique use of this skill to use it for advanced architecture.

Based on his backstory, it seems he's never worked on any major projects, and only built what small villages needed to get by and survive.

I nod and reply with a smile only visible beneath my flaming mask.

"So, you'd like to use my growing city as a sandbox to create your dream architectural creations? But wish to not be held back by the potential constraints of what submitting to me as a leader may entail."

The corner of the man's lip turns up as well, and he nods.

"You can see my vision, can't you?"

I reply just as Abby walks through the back door of the guild hall again.

"I believe I do, and I believe you see mine. I wish to create an Empire greater than anything the Dark continent has ever seen. One that in time, can rival the Association. I will grow the funds, and I will grow in power. However, this will only work if every member that lives in this city serves me, and only me as their leader. Treat me with honesty and respect, and that will be what is given back to every member of this community. Nothing more, nothing less."

His eyes sparkle, and another string of silent notifications ring in my inner ear.

All 7 of them get down on one knee after Maurice, their leader, and pledge loyalty to me.

As soon as they get back up, I ask Abby to get them their coins and basic supplies.

Then, the voice of the second group leader hits my ear and I turn to see a tall man in a rogue hunter's uniform with 5 beautiful women behind him in tight colorful clothing.

He takes a step forward with a white smile, chiseled jaw, blond hair, and piercing green eyes.

"Nice to meet you. The name's Dan Striker. I plan on being your number 1 competition."

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I try not to laugh, scanning his status to see he's level 219 and has one of those rare team buff skills that increases everyone's strength stat by 25% in a small radius for a limited amount of time.

It's a great skill to have for helping newbies learn to fight, and beneficial to hunting squads that farm dungeons, but it's nothing special. However, he's very charismatic and confident. He said he had a business proposition for me when I met him and his girlfriends in line earlier without a drop of fear, so I decided to let him pique my interest.

I raise an eyebrow and reply.

"My competition... huh? Explain."

Despite his cheerful attitude and the charismatic stance he holds, with women standing behind him holding his arms and back, green mist oozes from his body, letting my lie detector reading tell me that he's 100% serious about what he just said.

The man speaks up again.

"That's right. I come from Sector 1. I used to be the manager and head promoter of a small mercenary pub in the entertainment district of one of the settlements a few hundred kilometers away from Valor City."

I perk up at the sound of this but still don't know exactly what he means by him being my number one competition.

He continues before I get the chance to ask.

"I see you're going to have a guild hall here to buy and sell goods from the nearby dungeons, right?"

I nod.

"That's right. Stable prices will be placed on materials from the dungeons necessary for my craftsmen to conduct trade with other sectors and regions in bulk quantities."

He nods with his bright white smile still plastered across his face.

"Exactly what I thought... So, think about this. What will you do with the items that are useless for the bulk order crafts you need? Who will you be hiring to form training parties that help newbies level up? Where can people go to if they want to buy and sell their goods outside the guild run by the government of this city? Something like a mercenary bar, or a guild hall ran buy the locals. Imagine a place where anyone can post a quest and name their price, and anyone strong enough to carry it out first can collect the bounty."

He smiles even wider as I think about his words.

This man has a pretty solid point. While having my guild hall be the sole place for hunters to buy and sell goods from the dungeons would be very profitable and keep the supply and demand prices in my control entirely, it could lead to problems down the line.

Villagers having the option to trade amongst themselves, even buy and sell the same items in another place, is a good way to make the people feel less smothered by my all-powerful hand.

Even if they are using my coins, and living in a society that I'm building, people need the illusion of choice.

Just like the Association allows private guilds to function in society while their organization still reigns supreme.

I nod and reply.

"Fine by me, but while you're functioning in my city, you will still have to pay a tax to the city from every quest reward. We will iron out the exact percentages and details with every new business in further town meetings. I have no problem with private guilds and mercenary forces, I fully support them, but you all still must pledge your loyalty to me as this city's leader if you wish to stay and do business. No matters of deceptions or lies will ever be tolerated."

Without any hesitation at all, the man bows in place and the five women behind him bow their heads as well.

"Of course, with you as our leader, I see my dreams of becoming the greatest mercenary guild owner coming true!"

He mumbles under his breath to the women around him one by one. "Then, we can start up some restaurants, some late-night clubs, and that cat cafe you always wanted to run, and sure, even a salon for you too. This is it, I'll be the business mogul that brings life to the entertainment district in this city."

I chuckle to myself, as he's a bit scatterbrained about his end goals, but has great ideas to go with it. Plus, the energy, ambition, and charisma that he has may actually be enough to make it all happen. I see no problem with him starting up some private businesses and attempting to bring life to the entertainment side of this city.

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"Very well. Let's get you all situated, then I'll be on my way. I have to arrange the travel for all of those that wish to leave the city. So, until then..."

I turn to Abby and give her a detailed plan of what I'd like done while I'm away, bringing these men and women to Solara.

She writes everything down on a notepad and happily nods.

"That's quite the undertaking, but it makes sense. Got it, I'll get it done."

"Great."

I wave her off and walk out the door to meet with the large crowd of people while she begins to talk with Maurice and Dan inside the guild hall.

The chatter is getting pretty loud, and I can tell everyone is getting quite antsy standing out here in the hot sun, so I float above all of them and use my [Screech] perk to make my voice heard among the whole crowd.

"Alright, everyone. Follow me. Your ride back to Solara is this way."

I float above them and through the streets slowly, making my way toward the road that was built last night. The crowd slowly follows and chatters amongst themselves as we make our way through the desert and to the edge of the canyon.

It takes just under half an hour to get everyone here, and there are some stragglers, but eventually, everyone gathers around and I speak again.

"Alright, split into groups of 5 to 10 maximum. I'll be using a teleportation technique that only works in dungeons on each of you in small groups. Don't ask any more questions, that is all you need to know. I will lead you all to the Solaran Dungeon Hub. The transfer will be instant, but this process will take a while as I can only bring a few people along at a time."

I watch them all split into groups and line up on the road in roughly 30 separate groups varying from 5 to 10 members just as I asked.

The first group steps forward, and I activate telekinesis to make them all float in the air.

"Perfect, I'll be back very soon."

I jump off the edge of the canyon and float down to the nearest dungeon portal with everyone behind me. Not saying another word, I jump through and instantly dungeon walk all of us right in front of one of the E-Grade dungeon portals in Solara.

The group of men and women look back at me with confused stares as the dungeon environment changed before their eyes, so I speak up.

"It's already over. Walk through that portal and you'll be back in Solara."

Their eyes widen. Some thank me again many times, while others hurriedly jump through without another word.

I wait a few seconds before all of them are gone, then activate stealth and follow them through.

Each of them leaves through the dungeon gate and out into the crowded square without any of the guards batting an eye.

I walk past the guards too, and quickly slip in and out of every dungeon I can that has an open door to set more dungeon walker points.

Luckily, it's midday now and most hunters here are coming in and out of the square for lunch, rest, late starts, and even early end of day loot cash-ins. It's the perfect time to slip a few more people through unnoticed.

I dungeon walk back to the canyon in Sector 2 and begin bringing every team through one by one to randomized gates.

I leave a few minutes in between every teleport just to watch and make sure they make it out of the square and into the city alright before coming back.

After another 2 hours pass, I finally finish up with every team and am left staring at an empty road back to my town.

"Well, I'm glad that's over with."

I let out a sigh and turn to the workers huts off in the distance where there are now 21 people waiting in a trance-like state for my orders.

There's nothing I need to have done in the immediate future, but I'm sure that team of builders wouldn't mind some free labor in the coming days. I'm sure the people that were taken advantage of will enjoy making their past captors suffer the same fate.

However, once these initial projects are done, and people's immediate revenge is satisfied, we'll need to make a voting system and I'll establish clear and written out rules to follow along with their punishments if broken.

A new growing society like this needs order eventually, it can't always be ruled with chaos wielded by the strongest hand.

With this in mind, I make my way back to the town to see Abby waiting for me inside the guild hall with a stack of papers.

"I got what you asked for. You were right about Maurice alright! He's an architectural genius, look at these!"

I make my way over to her and walk inside the center room of the guild hall to begin sifting through the many papers.

They consist of intricate systems using the underground streams from the canyon to create a clean drinking water system, a sewer system that flows out the opposite direction, a power grid with multiple sources of energy that need to be supplied with mana crystals, and many other intricate designs.

I see zoning layouts for residential areas, small and large shopping areas, food markets and restaurants, as well as an entertainment district with land plots and their estimated pricings for if in the future I'd like to sell segments of the city to vendors.

Every sheet of paper comes with more and more plans for expansion that detail how these systems need to be tweaked and built upon when larger populations come to the city.

It's all outlined in far more detail than I imagined.

My grin can't be hidden as I murmur to myself, shuffling through more and more of the pages.
"This is perfect. Exactly what I wanted and more..."

I get to the last page and a list of materials is laid out consisting of massive amounts of heavy brick, lumber, metal, cement, and various conductors and unique building materials. The quantities needed for each material are in the thousands, and I can tell this won't be cheap. Hundreds of gold will be the price in bulk wholesale even at its lower end.

However, I specifically told Abby to let Maurice run wild and not hold back, as long as it's for the good of the city.

"This will do."

I grab the paper with all the necessary building materials for the first stage of construction and begin to walk out the door again.

"Thanks Abby, you were a great help this morning. Keep an eye on the city while I go put in an order for these construction materials. There's only one place I know that would have these kinds of goods available in such high quantities."

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Abby replies.

"Of course. Good luck."

I walk out the door again, but this time, I use extreme speed and wind magic to quickly fly through the desert back to the canyon.

Once I set foot in a dungeon, I teleport to the dungeon hub in Vice City.

I change my face and appearance to that of a D-Grade hunter with average gear and allow my Qi Barrier to emit the tiniest amount of mana, making it seem like I'm just at the cusp of level 250. My new appearance is that of a very strong hunter, but nothing crazy enough to turn any important heads.

With a confident stroll, I walk out of the gates and make my way to a part of town I've never been to before.

It's a sectioned-off corner of the city near the forest region that has many factories and processing plants. They create many non-magical materials and ship goods to various regions all over the main continent.

Some of them still run on electricity.

It's the remnants of the old world before the Great War, and before dungeons began popping up in this world. The lumber, stone, and metal industries are still thriving, which most of the world relies on for the infrastructure and construction of cities and for maintaining roads and buildings.

While over 50% of this district is just warehouses filled with raw materials ready for processing and sold in bulk orders, the other half are the plants that process, ready, and ship these orders out. A very tiny percent of tall buildings are lined up near the border of the factory district and the main city. They act as a bit of a smog guard for the lower income housing and forest region nearby, these large

buildings house offices for company managers, ensuring everything continues to move smoothly in the processing plants and warehouses.

I walk up to the busiest office building I can find with large white lettering on the side of its building spelling out [Unity Building Supply Co.] in bold print.

As I walk into the front office, many men in suits wait in the lobby. After a quick inspection and appraisal, I find none of them are leveled high at all. Some aren't even awakened, to my utter surprise. They're level 0 with no skills or systems, meaning they've never even killed a monster in their life.

It's been quite a while since I've seen people like this...

The smell of cigarettes fills the air, and the old carpeted floor is soft beneath my feet. Outside, the sounds of saws cutting wood and metal being clanged fill my ears. The warm yellow light of the room is a change of pace for me too, as I'm used to very bright white mana-imbued lighting.

I walk forward and approach the man at the back of the room behind the wooden lobby desk.

His name, on a small golden triangle propped up on his desk, reads [Leonard Mayson III]. He speaks up while looking me in the eyes with a steady and professional gaze.

"Welcome to The Unity Building Supply Company. What can I help you with today, sir?"

I feel the glares on my back from the businessmen waiting patiently in the lobby behind me, but ignore it and just continue to do what I came here for, placing the sheet of paper with all the supplies I need on the table in front of the man.

"I'm sure there's a normal process to place orders through your company, but I'm in quite the rush, so I decided to come in and ask in person. Is there any way I can place this order, pay in full, and walk out of here with these supplies today?"

The man nods and takes the sheet of paper from me, pulling a pair of glasses from his shirt collar and placing them on to read it.

"I'm sorry to tell you, sir, we don't take orders in this manner. Our company has very strict"

He stops mid-sentence once he begins reading the page.

His eyes widen as they move back and forth all the way down the sheet of paper, then he looks back up at me.

"You said you're able to pay in full today?"

I smile and nod, reaching into my item storage beneath my fake hunter's gear and pull out a few shiny platinum bars for only him to see.

"Of course. I'm ready to pay right now if you'll confirm you can fulfill the order."

His gaze tightens on the bars of metal, then he realizes what material they're made from and immediately rings a bell at the side of his desk. An older woman about the same age as him comes out from a door at the other side of the room.

If you spot this narrative on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

"Tracey, could you bring this young man up to meet the Boss? He has an urgent order that needs to be taken care of. We may have a way to meet our quota this month after all."

"Yes, will do."

She looks at me and motions for me to follow.

"Right this way."

The elevator at the back of the room opens, and I thank the lobbyman while following the older woman into the cramped elevator.

It shakes as it slowly rises up 8 floors before reaching the top, then a large office with a beautiful handcrafted wooden desk sits at the back of it. A tall office chair is behind it, and the walls surrounding the room are lined with hundreds, if not thousands, of books, maps, and stacks of paper.

There are two large windows on opposite sides of the room. One that faces the factories is shut, while the window that has a view of the forest and the rest of Vice City is open, and a cool breeze comes in.

A very old man, seemingly on the edge of death, sits behind this desk in the chair, and a name tag is displayed on the table [Leonard Mayson II]. He lifts his head up while putting out a cigarette in a small dish full with other bright orange butts.

I smile and walk forward as the woman speaks to introduce me.

"This young man has an urgent order to be filled out. Leo told me to send him up."

She backs up into the elevator again and leaves to go back downstairs.

The man looks at me with disgust as I walk forward and speaks in a raspy breath.

"You're a contracted hunter, aren't you? No fancy getup today? You are with the Association, right? I told you we'd get everything settled by the end of the month. What do you want, kid?"

I smile and shake my head.

"No, no... Trust me, I'm as far from the Association as you can fathom. I don't know what business you have with them, and quite honestly, I don't care to find out. I just need a large amount of building supplies and assumed your company was the best place to ask on short notice."

I stop in front of his desk and give him the sheet of paper just like I did what I can presume to be his son down in the lobby.

He does the same exact action, taking the list from me and attempting to read it while taking his glasses from his collar and placing them on his face.

"Well, if my boy sent you up here, it must be for a good reason... Let me see here..."

His eyes track the page up and down while he mumbles to himself in a grumpy tone with words I can't understand.

I'm left to wait in my own thoughts while he checks his papers and looks at my own, writing down things on a new sheet right by its side.

Finally, after a few minutes, he gets to the bottom, then looks back up at me.

"Well, first things first, I'll tell you the price. Then we can see if this conversation will even continue. You're looking at 558 Gold, 62 Silver, and 19 Bronze in raw materials here. To get them moved from warehouses into a general location, plus processing some of the more unique items, it's going to be more. Plus, our company and city tax will be added on top of that too."

He scribbles down more on a small piece of paper, adding numbers up before looking up at me again.

"We're looking at just over 604 Gold, but I'll round it down and call it 600 even. With an order of this size, we'll take care of the loading fees for free if you bring your own trucks over or have item boxes big enough to carry a small town's worth of building materials like this here."

I nod and think to myself if asking for the exact pricing on each item to haggle a few gold is even worth my time right now, but the old man breaks my train of thought.

"So, you still interested, kid? This is a serious order, I don't have time to play around."

I look up at him and respond, pulling 6 platinum bars from my item storage and placing them on his desk lightly. Even though I'm careful, the bar's weight still makes a loud thud that echoes through the room for a moment.

"Yeah, let's do it. What's the fastest you all can process this order? I'd like to get things moving as soon as possible."

The old man's eyes don't open wide with surprise like his son's; he just nods and pulls out a scale from beneath his desk, then starts weighing the bars one by one.

"Exactly 600 gold worth of Platinum, it seems. How interesting. It's not everyday I see this kind of metal used as payment in the Vice Region."

A grin shows on his face.

"Where are you from, kid? Who do you work for? With supplies like this, you could build an entire city ready to house a few hundred people... I'd like to ask for your ID, or at least a name I can write down here on our balance sheets, as that's company policy for any and all orders"

I place a 7th platinum bar on the table before he finishes his sentence.

He changes his tone.

"Well It looks like I have all of the identification I need."

I smile and take a step back.

"I thank you for being considerate of my privacy needs. I hope this will be the first of many purchases I make with you all. So, I'll ask again, when is the earliest I'll be able to pick these goods up?"

As these words leave my lips, a rush of memories hit my subconscious, and I see my body double get slaughtered far out in the desert.

I can't help but to exhale with surprise and step back while more visuals rush into my mind.

A massive brown bird with a wingspan of at least 10 meters soars through the sky rippling with dense wind magic and soul energy. On its back, there is a black suit of armor and they are flying high in the sky coming from the same direction as Sector 1.

My body double managed to confront them and get a clear visual before its sliced into too many pieces to count by an invisible wind energy attack.

The last thing it managed to see is a number 6 glowing bright orange on the underside of one of the large bird's wings.

I shake my head and step forward, keeping my composure as I'm in the middle of a meeting.

"Sorry, go on."

The man responds to my question as a bead of sweat drips down the side of my forehead and I try to estimate how fast that bird was flying and how far away from the town my double was.

"We have all of these materials on site; we can have them processed and sorted by the end of the day if you'd like."

I nod back to his response, but my mind is somewhere else coming to the conclusion that however fast this bird is flying, I have no time to waste thinking about it any longer.

My gaze turns to the open window at the back of his room, and I quickly reply.

"Alright, perfect. Get everything ready for me and I'll be back after sunset. I look forward to doing business with you, Mr. Mayson."

Leaving the old man with a curious look on his face, I run toward the window and jump out without saying another word.