

D. Diver 471

Chapter 471

The man doesn't get a chance to reply as I airstep toward the center of the city, activating my stealth skill and expanding my All-seeing Eye to find the closest dungeon to my location right now.

At my current speed, I'll get to the main hub in less than a few minutes, but the underground train ride to a nearby dungeon could be unpredictable, adding even a few more minutes to my travel time.

Crossing downtown and going into the underground dungeon hub may be faster, but it will also take a few minutes too many.

As I finish my scan of the city, I pinpoint one of the mana-shielded boxes containing a portal underground that connects to the main dungeon hub transport system. Seeing this, I make my decision to create a much faster route in.

I focus on the center of an empty alleyway in a residential area, and dive with a single outstretched fist through the hard stone road.

It crumbles and disintegrates instantly beneath the pressure of my Qi and mana shielding, leaving a smooth circle in the ground leading deep into the city's lower levels.

I phase through the road and narrowly avoid important city infrastructure, but don't stop my momentum as I come in contact with one of the outer walls of a mana shielded protection barrier put in place to keep monsters out in case of breaks.

It buzzes loudly and releases a large amount of mana as I break through. It all happens so fast that I don't bother to wait and watch what happens after I dive through the blue floating dungeon portal before me.

Fractions of a second later, I'm flying out of the canyon in Sector 2, rocketing toward the spot in the sky I remember detecting the approaching Dark Guards.

As I airstep through the sky leaving a blue trail of extreme speed behind, I think to myself if they timed all this or if it was a coincidence that they attacked the only hour I was away from the city. All night I stayed up and watched the city, and in the morning I kept a keen eye out for any approaching guards.

Thinking about it more doesn't get me anywhere though, the good thing is I made it in time to stop them from approaching before they made it to the town.

Less than 5kms away, I see them as clear as day; the sharp yellow-orange eyes of an enormous hawk-like bird, leaking orange energy behind it as it rides on a wave of invisible wind magic.

I catch a glimpse of the underside of its wing again, and confirm it says the number 6, but do a full inspect and appraisal to know without any doubt, this is another Dark Guard infected by the Curse of the Lich King.

[Lv. 1377]

Active Items:

[NONE]

Active Skills:

[NONE]

Bufs:

[Curse of The Lich King]

No items, no skills, and no other buffs show on its status, but I can feel that it's using wind magic.

However, it's being powered by the Soul Energy within it, just like the 7th guard I fought before. This proves my theory further that when an entity is infected by the Curse of the Lich King, every bit of their being is stripped away and granted new borrowed power to grow stronger under new rules.

Old elements of the user's past abilities can be manifested artificially by using Soul Energy as its power source.

This is a far different use of Shared soul energy than the [Red Hydra's Buff] I've used myself, or [The Sun God's Curse Mark] that I recall the 40th-floor boss having. Both of these shared Soul Energy perks allow the user to retain their original buffs and skills, but The Lich King's Soul Energy works much differently...

As my pulse of energy to read the large bird's status and do a full body scan of it with my all-seeing eye comes back, the massive creature shifts its gaze toward me.

I try to scan the armor standing on its back, but nothing comes back, before I attempt to push my senses further the hawk's trajectory shifts right toward me and I hear a static-filled voice enter my head while the hawk stares me down and speeds up.

"I just killed you. Pesky bug, I knew it wouldn't be that simple if the Dark One Ordered us to finish this job personally. You cannot live, I will be the cause of your demise."

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Before the static message stops, I already sense over 20 blades of invisible wind flying my way in all directions creating a sphere of sharp mana blades closing in on me.

I can see how my body double got trapped in such an attack. Every blade of wind here is denser and stronger than the soul energy armor of the Ranked Up Colossal's final form.

Pure mana alone would be useless trying to stop an attack like this...

However, after my own recent rank up and increase in Qi capacity and efficiency, these slow-moving blades of wind are both visible and easily blockable from my line of sight.

I chuckle to myself and pull out my Wind Tyrant's Dagger Set from my item storage, separating the crimson blades imbued with wind magic into two parts and saturating them with Qi to the point where they begin to leak white hot energy with every fine movement I make.

"These kinds of attacks aren't even worth drawing my real sword... Bring it on..."

With a smile on my face, I begin gracefully dancing through the barrage of attacks, but use my Legendary Dagger Mastery along with Dual Wielding to watch two threads of intent guide my movements.

As the wind prison closes in, my blades break every slash at their weak points one by one, dancing through the sky toward the approaching hawk without slowing down my speed at all.

In less than a second, all 24 of its attacks disperse into nothing more than energy in the air, and there's a sparkling display of white Qi dissolving soul energy as it drips from my blades.

The Enormous Hawk's eyes sharpen, and I see the number 6 glow on its wing far brighter than before.

Then, the telepathy channel we were just linked to buzzes with static and cuts out as the bird speaks to the suit of armor on its back, but their words are a mystery to me.

The armor nods once, and jumps off the creature's back, floating in the air right where it jumped staying back while the monstrous bird dives toward me.

Another invisible sphere of wind magic attacks me from all around, but I perform the same graceful dance to dodge and disperse all of its incoming strikes.

The moment I do, the bird sends off another attack and it ends just the same.

The closer I get, the more wind blades it throws, but I just increase the speed of my dance in the sky, not even breaking a sweat.

Its eyes are larger than my entire head, and they burn bright orange while they track my every movement. At the speed that its pupils dart across the battlefield to track me, I'd assume it could throw far superior attacks than the ones it's using now.

Once I get within 50 meters of the monster, its intentions finally become clear while the static noise flows into my ear.

"Your precision with the blade is admirable, but I'm afraid no one's eyes are as precise as mine. I know all of your movements, and this is really the end. Any last words?"

I sigh, twirling my daggers in my hands while I airstep closer.

"Any last words? An Admirable fighter? You all sound the same.... Every last one of you.... Bring it on, let's see what you've really got."

The sky around me changes color.

It shifts from a bright blue with hardly a cloud in the sky, to a murderous shade of orange.

Hundreds of wind crescents appear from this air, coating in a dense orange layer of wind magic and plummet toward me at over 4 times the speed its previous attacks did.

My eyes sparkle with the flame of battle as I finally begin imbuing Qi into my footsteps and around my eyes to aid my vision for the first time during our exchange. My reflexes are enhanced, my visual perception of soul energy is awakened, and my movement speed increases for a whole different level.

I grip my daggers even tighter, and dance through the sky again.

The ringing sounds of Qi on Soul Energy clash through the sky at over 30 beats per second.

Plumes of white energy erupt from my daggers and orange mist fills the air, staining the sky with its coloring.

Midway through my routine, the hawk that set up this attack dive-bombs in at me to take advantage of the confusion it believes its caused.

The monster's sharp eyes begin to overflow with orange energy, and its hard beak sucks all of the protective Soul Energy around its body toward a main point, like sharpening and hardening its weapon to focus on a final attack.

I sense it coming from above me before it's even finished hardening its beak and whisper under my breath. "You really think I'd fall for something like this..."

Either I've gotten immensely stronger, or this dark guard is far too overconfident for its own good. The answer feels like it's obviously both.

Whatever the case may be, it's leaving itself wide open, so I'll prepare to strike once it comes within range.

The bird dive-bombs in, and its speed increases to impressive highs. At its perfect calculated angle, it drops through the storm of wind slashes and threads the needle perfectly on track to make contact with me in the center.

However, my own power is far from hitting its max, and I have plenty of tricks I haven't shown this opponent yet.

It falls into the sphere of wind, and has its beak pointed straight at what it thinks is my blind spot while I continue to fend off its normal attacks.

Once it's less than 10 meters away, and there is no way for it to change directions in time, or else it'll be torn apart by its own blades, I set up my own counterattack.

I activate my flash skill to its maximum potential, lighting up the entire ball of wind into a second sun in the sky. Then, separate into many different illusions using phantom step to disperse into many plausible directions within the slashes of wind.

Next, I activate stealth to disappear from its senses entirely and use my speed buffs to position myself in front of the diving bird's underbelly.

Last, I saturate my daggers with over half of the Qi in my core to release a devastating dual slash of energy on course to slice this enormous graceful bird into pieces.

"It's over..." Leaves my lips just a few milliseconds too soon.

The slashes of Qi are less than a meter away from slicing through the monster's heart and stomach, guaranteeing this victory for myself, however the second flash of light in the sky ruins all of my perfectly calculated plans.

Far away from our fight, over 500 meters above, an enormous release of mana and soul energy hits my senses the instant this lethal attack leaves my blades.

The black suit of armor that was waiting patiently in the sky explodes into pieces and a flash of silver light comes out of it.

It looks like liquid metal streaking toward us, and it's so fast, it makes my own Qi imbued footsteps look like I'm taking a leisurely stroll.

The silver streak of light cuts the distance in an instant and swerves in front of my dual slash.

All I can see in the blur of light is my blades of Qi being completely deflected and thrown off in another direction and a bold number [2] printed on the silver forearm of the figure that deflected them.

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"Let me handle this... Dumb bird..." is the only thing I hear as the same silver arm that blocked my attack punches the brown bird in the underbelly.

Its wind magic attacks all disappear in an instant, and it goes flying high into the air without even having to flap its wings. It isn't killed, but definitely knocked unconscious in a single blow.

I jump backward and go on the defensive immediately, scanning the figure in front of me, but hardly believe what I see when a [Lv. 1894] appears on its status along with the [Curse of The Lich King] buff and nothing else.

I get a good look at the Guard, and its figure starts to look less and less human to me the more I examine it.

With three horns coming out of its forehead, shimmering silver skin, athletic striated muscles, and eyes that stare directly through my soul as if this creature has been living for a million years.

The pupils and irises are both jet black, while the outer edges that are usually white are a dull, matte silver, a few shades darker than its skin.

Whatever this creature is, it is far from human.

The silver aura that surrounds its body is dreadful. It feels colder than ice, but looks like a constant stream of evaporating metal particles coming off its body.

It makes a motion as if it were about to step forward in the air, but before its foot even completes a full stride, a silver flash of light fills my vision and it's right in front of me, staring me in the eyes less than half a meter from my face.

"Fight me. I was told you are a strong one, I hope that attack was not the full extent of your power."

The creature doesn't strike me even though it's clearly within range; it just stares into my eyes with a lifeless gaze and waits for me to answer.

I use this opportunity to continue my motion backward, placing my daggers on my waist and pulling out my fire-imbued sword while swallowing a Qi pill to restore the half of my core that was used up in my last attack.

I concentrate my Qi into my blade and use the excess in my barrier to only cover my vital organs with the maximum density possible. The rest of my body is still covered at 75% strength, but considering my opponent's speed and power, it feels necessary to defend for any potential lethal strikes.

It steps forward again, and it takes most of my perception skill, purely focused on its movements, to watch the silver flash come closer. Its right hand glows brighter silver and a long spear appears that looks like bubbling metal being summoned from seemingly nowhere.

It lunges forward with the silver spear and throws a basic attack straight at my heart.

Its eyes are locked on the target, and it moves with absolute confidence.

No matter the direction I move, it will surely follow, and given the time I have until it makes impact, the only thing I can do is block.

I grit my teeth and focus everything I have into my swordsmanship skill, letting Qi flow through my hands into the blade while glowing brightly with all my buffs.

I airstep sharply to turn my body in the same direction I swing my sword, and it collides with the sharp edge of the spear.

Silver soul energy reacts with the plumes of Qi that erupt from my sword, and for a moment both of us are stood perfectly still in the air as if we're evenly matched.

However, the silver figure pushes forward with unyielding force, consistently pressing on without a single change in its expression or soul energy released whatsoever. My own power is fluctuating greatly as I continue to push its limits and fend off the attack aimed to end my life.

As my airsteps' force catches up to me, my angle of momentum relative to the creature's spear shifts, and my body rotates out of its direct path.

There's an explosion of white and silver energy that sends me flying to the side while I follow through with my swing, pushing me farther away, and the silver spear misses my body entirely by just a few centimeters.

The instant I ready myself in the air again and look for my opponent, it's already turned at a right angle and come back at me with machine-like precision.

I block again, twisting my body to the other side, using up precious Qi, but avoiding a fatal blow.

This time after our separation, the spear comes back much faster than the first two times.

The incoming strike is so quick I can't even move my sword fast enough to block it. I want to activate my newest ranked-up buff to increase my size, speed, and power, but its activation time takes far longer than what I have to work with here.

The best possible option I have in a moment like this is to move all of my Qi to cover my heart and head, then brace for impact.

It lunges forward and the tip of its silver spear comes within millimeters of making contact with my chest, but it disappears before my eyes again.

Next thing I see is the creature to my side thrusting his spear through the back of my left knee. It disappears and reappears, and I feel it thrust another attack through the inner side of my right elbow. It vanishes two more times, thrusting its weapon through both of my opposite knee and elbow with no resistance at all.

Searing pain erupts from the center joints of all 4 of my limbs, and it becomes impossible to move at the same speed I did a moment ago. The creature appears in front of me with the same

emotionless look on its face, staring me straight in the eyes, then pushes its palm on my chest where my Qi barrier is still the strongest.

An incredible pressure knocks the wind out of me, and I'm blasted back, down toward the desert floor.

This all happens in fractions of a second, that it's almost too fast for me to comprehend until after the fact.

Its words echo in my mind as I fall, "As I thought... you are just another weak Human," and the visual of it punching its brown bird partner from the sky moments ago replay in my head, showing that in this form I was really just as weak to it as the 6th ranked guard was to me.

Even though it stares at me with an emotionless gaze high above in the sky with its arms crossed, and silver spear floating by its side, I can still feel the cold sensation of its attack in my legs and arms.

If anything, it's getting even colder.

I ignite my body in a sea of flames, but the cold sensation doesn't stop.

Once I look down at my legs and at both of my arms, I see the silver Soul energy growing from the injuries this creature gave me. It looks like metallic slow-moving ice is growing from my joints, and it's freezing my flesh and bones no matter how much fire I summon onto it.

I attempt to cancel out its ability by flooding the areas with Qi, but it does nothing more than eat up the white energy and drain my stores.

All of the energy in the infected areas is being sucked away.

I even activate my Red Hydra's buff, but it's even less effective than my pure Qi, so I shut it off the moment I realize it's futile. On top of this issue, I'm also hurdling toward the ground at speeds faster than anything I've ever experienced. Once my multiple attempts at healing come back with definite failures, I imbue my sword with a raging hot fire to slice through my own legs above the affected area, destroying the problem entirely before it spreads too far.

I slice off my own left arm, then regrow only it to hold my sword and slice off my right.

An item storage portal forms above me, and the frozen silver limbs float up into suspended animation while I regrow my other three limbs and focus on the bigger issue at hand. Based on my downward velocity, impact will not be survivable if I fall on my neck or back. I activate wind magic gusts below myself to slow my fall. This works, but my momentum is too great to stop entirely.

The golden sand below me gets closer very quickly. I position myself upright to land on my feet, making impact on the ground with an echoing thud that displaces the sand all around for over 100 meters wide and over 20 meters deep.

As the dust clears, I quickly open my item storage. My subconscious creates a new method for retrieving gear from my inventory.

I open 4 simultaneous portals beneath my feet and in front of my hands, plunging all 4 limbs into my storage, and retrieving the unaffected gear from the limbs I cut off previously back exactly where they were on my body before.

My rings, boots, and gauntlets come out of my storage system on my body as I pull myself out of the spatial magic. With it, I pull out another Qi pill and swallow it on the spot, expanding my perception range to locate the Dark Guard in the sky.

Before this creature can get a chance to attack me again, I activate my newest buff [Rising Emperor's Greater Form].

Instantly, I feel my power grow and my feet lift off the ground.

Energy erupts from the cloud of dust that formed from my impact, and an enormous black shadowy energy projection of myself is left staring up at the sky.

The silver entity feels the disturbance the moment my transformation starts and zips down to the desert floor to see what has happened.

It stares forward with its silver spear slowly floating around its body in circles while it patiently waits for my transformation to reach its peak form.

Then, it finally speaks up.

"Weak... Dumb...Humans... You do not understand how pointless it is for me to fight an inferior creature like you. Merely by existing, I have already won."

I don't listen to its words, I just charge up my sword with everything I've got. I create my most destructive attack possible. To do so, I plunder mana crystals that fall from my item storage and feed my main body with mana, and imbue the inside of the attack with Qi.

The enormous shadowy armor that amplifies my strength by over 7 times mimics my actions, showing my sword glow and flicker with jet black flames. The inner core of the Greater Form's sword glows white with Qi, as energy leaves my body continuously feeding into this buff's powers.

The sand beneath my feet and all around me is melting and turning to liquid glass as I continue charging up and waiting for any signs of movement from the Silver Figure, but it doesn't budge.

It just continues staring forward with its arms crossed. It speaks again as I pull back my sword to swing.

"I will make you understand how weak you really are."

I swing my sword forward at its cryptic message, and a wave of Qi surrounded by fire magic multiplied by my ranked up buff's power tears through the desert, melting every rock, sand dune, and shrubbery in its way.

The 2nd ranked Dark Guard doesn't budge, and it's hit directly by the mountain-splitting slash.

I feel immense amounts of energy drain from me but watch in amazement at my own power as it collides with the floating silver mass of soul energy.

Based on the Dark Guard's confidence, I was still partially considering the fact that it could block an attack like this if it tried.

I can sense its estimated soul energy density, and I created a slash strong enough to easily break through its barriers, but for some reason, the monster still stays standing in one place as my slash makes contact.

The creature is sliced in two.

There is hardly any resistance at all actually...

A small eruption of soul energy, Qi, and flames burst out on contact, but the guard made no effort to increase its shielding or dodge the blast.

Most of its body is incinerated through; all that remains are a few parts of its arms, legs, and the top half of its spear.

My heart beats loudly in my ears as I regain my MP stores and take another Qi pill to recharge.

I keep a safe distance away, and hold my blade at the ready for something to happen, but nothing does.

The part that irks me is the fact that there wasn't even a level-up reward for defeating this opponent.

I murmur to myself, "This can only mean one thing... it's somehow not dead..."

The scattered tiny bits of silver parts all throughout the desert begin to vibrate and move.

My eyes try to track them all as they begin to come back to a central point.

Once they do, the silver cells begin replicating and growing, reforming the horned creature's body to look exactly the same as before it started.

The eyes of this menacing monster look as emotionless as when the battle began.

It grabs its spear as it completely reforms in its hand, and speaks again.

"Do you understand now, how weak humans truly are?"

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The silver-coated creature stares at me, completely unharmed after taking a point blank hit from my most powerful attack.

I'm positive I just blew apart and incinerated over 70% of its body, but in mere seconds it managed to completely regenerate despite me destroying all of its organs and even its entire head.

The creature walks forward and speaks up again.

"Do you see why you are weak? A simple hit to the head or heart will cause irreversible damage in a human body. No matter how much you train, or powers you gain, you will always be an inferior species."

I grip my sword tight and point it forward in a ready stance, waiting for it to finish its point and for the battle to move on.

"Just like my birdbrain partner that I use for a ride, even it is fragile enough to be taken out by your Qi-based attack. One hit in the vitals and it's all over. Such weak creatures..."

My eyes widen as he speaks these words.

From what I recall, fighting the 7th ranked guard, it couldn't see my Qi blades at all, and from what I saw in my moments fighting with the 6th, it wasn't able to perceive them either. Somehow, this metal monster is able to...

Almost as if it has read my mind, the 2nd Ranked Dark Guard continues.

"Just like your Red Soul Energy, I too have borrowed power from the Dark One I am capable of using. However, myself and two other Dark Guards have cultivated Qi and awakened our own Soul Energy. This is why I choose to leave the Dark One's Power Dormant, it's not necessary."

The figure grips his spear tight.

"The Dark One. That being is the only one that is truly strong. You are a fool for challenging its all-powerful might. You're just a human..."

He points his spear forward at me, then lunges forward in a flash of silver speed.

A loud vibrating twang echoes throughout the open desert as the layers of silver energy around its spear tip collide with the dense energy manifestation of my Mana and Qi soaking my sword.

Its spear is deflected and it bounces back in the air a few meters before flying back in toward me.

In my greater form, I'm much larger than it is. Even so, its speed and power do not surpass my own. I'm able to easily block its incoming strikes as it sends in more and more pointed at my heart, head, and upper spine.

It isn't hard to block any individual attacks, and the amount of mana and Qi being used up for just pure defense is rather manageable. It feels as if I've finally obtained the advantage in this exchange. However, there is no time to relax. Its machine-like precision still keeps me on guard.

Every few exchanges, I'm able to see an opening in its movements. There is no mistake that it's made, it's just not physically quick enough to escape my blade.

I land slashes across its torso, slicing off limbs, and even an attack with my elongated sword in my Greater form that cuts off his head at the neck and incinerates it entirely on the spot.

Every time, its mass bubbles and reforms, regrowing everything it's lost without any change in expression or power level. The monster even blocks a second incoming attack with the tip of its spear before its entire head has even grown back.

Over 10 of my attacks land, and over 30 total exchanges of blocks and dodges pass, but not a single time has it managed to land any on me.

It doesn't show any emotion, and no signs of slowing down, so I decide to try a few more options.

I attempt to lock the creature in place with rock and ice, but its strong body breaks through my traps without any resistance because my mana manifestations aren't reinforced with Qi.

Flames from my blade are only super effective when Qi is imbued inside the slashes, and both wind and water attacks are just as effective as the stone and ice. They make the creature exert more energy by breaking them, or pushing through the pure force of the attack, but there is not nearly as much lasting damage as my sword strikes. They don't even slow it down or make a dent in its body.

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It speaks as I continue my testing,

"I've watched your tapes in the arena, I've analyzed your fighting style, I know all of your skills and tricks. This is not a matter of how I will defeat you, it is just a matter of when you will decide to give up. I know your strength and you cannot defeat me."

Its voice rings in my ears, and I decide to activate the one new skill that I've been waiting to try.

All of my other elemental skills are advanced grade combat magic powers, but there is one that I have most recently acquired that is one tier higher.

"Extreme Lightning Summoning..."

As the silver monster comes in to attack with another barrage of calculated spear thrusts, golden arcs of electricity begin to form all over the massive shadowy Greater Form that stands out in the desert.

At first, it just looks like mild static, but as I channel more and more of my MP into it, the arcs of electricity begin to burst outward at a violent uncontrollable rate.

Energy surges through my body, making me feel even faster, and more alert. It's as if I just activated a speed and perception buff, this must be an extra passive perk from an extreme grade elemental skill.

I drain MP crystals from my inventory to allow the skill to fully activate, using up tens of thousands of MP per second to expand the lightning's range outward. I visualize the orb of static that the 40th Floor Boss Created when fighting me, however, as I use it, my arcs of electricity look a bit different.

They're not expanding outward in an even sphere like I remembered before, they're all arcing outward in many directions, then curving in toward a single point.

A bright yellow and white line of concentrated electricity hits the metal man with all of its power.

It seems the arcs of electricity are drawn to it, no matter what direction I spew them out from, they all direct right back into the silver figure that lunges toward me with its spear. Its body vibrates violently on a microscopic level. I see its silver skin twist, swirl, and make thousands of pin-sized spikes all over uncontrollably in rapid succession. Even so, its forward momentum does not stop and it continues to attack.

After a full half a second of pure discharge, I deactivate my lightning skill and focus on swinging my sword down to block its incoming spear strike like usual.

However, this time, the Dark Guard's movement feels slightly off...

It feels like it's lagging behind, as if it's lost half a second of planning time while its body still moves forward in an attack.

For the first time in this entire battle, Its eyes dilate and widen for a split second as it tries to readjust its course, but I don't let that happen. I swing my sword downward and slice the creature in two, releasing extra waves of Qi and black flames I wouldn't have been able to produce and hit so precisely if I didn't have the opportunity of its misstep.

The monster's spear hand in its right half still lunges at me, and I block its hit, jumping back and pushing it back as well.

It reforms into its original form, and its eyes revert back to its normal state, but I'm sure I caught it off guard for a moment. My lightning attack is naturally attracted to its metallic body, and when it was hit with everything I had, I'm positive it froze with shock and made an error.

I grin ear to ear, and activate my lightning summoning skill again, running forward with my sword and going in to test my theory once more. It sprints into full battle mode too, and we run forward to clash.

The same exact results occur, as my lightning blast makes contact, my opponent is stunned for a fraction of a second, and I land an even higher damage-dealing blow, incinerating a solid amount of its body away, but retreating after my attack just in case, to not get hit by a counter.

I do it again, and again, over 5 more times.

Each time I manage to land stronger hits, and I get in position to land the final blow.

If I can land the same attack it let me throw at it earlier, but at closer range, I'm nearly certain I'll be able to incinerate every last particle of this monster and kill it for good.

The only reason it's able to regenerate, is because there is a portion of it remaining. The only logical thing I can think to do is make sure none of it remains...

Attacks with my greater form's sword without releasing any significant percents of my core's Qi are able to incinerate 15-25% of its body mass in a single strike. In its weakened state, the moment after an electric shock, a slash is capable of destroying 25 to upward of 40% of its mass.

With that being said, I managed to decimate over 70% of its mass in a single strike when releasing Qi from my core in a concentrated fire blade when it gave me a free shot. If I'm able to land this attack right after electrifying it, there's a high chance I'll be able to win this battle on the next strike.

My breathing slows, and I get in tune with my heart rate and the rhythm of battle, fending off its robotic attacks and waiting for the perfect time to release another lightning strike.

Eventually, my moment comes.

I release arcs of static from the perfect distance, and ready my manifested blade full of Qi and mana.

Tons of mana crystals from my farming yesterday are drained by my plunderer skill as I focus on making my attacks as dense and potent as possible.

The instant my electricity ceases, I swing my blade and let the black crescent of flames covering a blade of Qi fly across the desert floor, heading toward the silver man frozen in place less than 10 meters away.

It is on a path to hit the creature at point-blank range, and destroy it completely.

Right before impact, the air pressure changes, and I jump backward while restoring my mana and Qi with crystals and pills.

The last thing I see in my enhanced perception skill before impact is the outer layer of its eyes shifting from silver to the bright orange borrowed Soul Energy of the Lich King.

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The orange soul energy spreads from its eyes to surround its entire body.

Its three horns atop its head grow larger and begin to turn into a shimmering orange metallic color.

The creature's eyes look sharper, and I can tell that it is now operating on a whole new level that just fractions of a second ago...

The attack I threw at its base form, hoping to incinerate it to pieces, collides with the outer layer of its orange shielding, and an eruption of black fire, orange soul energy, and white Qi disperses from the attack.

My ultimate strike manages to slice through its shielding, but large amounts of its firepower are blasted away.

Less than half of the attack even makes it through to make contact with the monster itself. An impressive wound still rips the horned beast in half, disintegrating most of its left side, but this is far from what I was hoping to see.

Even a direct hit in its most vulnerable position using my most powerful attack is not going to be enough to kill this monster.

It immediately heals and thrusts its spear forward at me with far greater strength and speed than it did in our exchanges before. The orange energy from the Lich King is boosting its natural strength and energy control by at least two times.

It's clear it was holding back before because it believed I wasn't capable of dealing any real damage to its body, but now it's getting serious.

Its spear tip collides with my Greater Form's sword, and the energies that collide make a shockwave of energy that spreads through what's left of the melted sand all around us.

It pushes forward, staring at me with its emotionless gaze while my shadow manifested form's twisting face emotionlessly stares back at it.

We don't move for a full second, both stuck in place pushing our power against the other with equal force. Eventually, the force builds up too great, and we're both propelled backward.

The bottoms of my mana manifested boots grip the glass shards, rocks, and sand of the desert, activating wind magic to keep myself upright and facing forward. The horned creature digs its feet into the ground too, staring ahead and staying on guard.

I decide to speak up for the first time in our fight, replying to its earlier nonsense with my [Screech] skill to project my voice across the battlefield.

"Looks like you're just as weak as this puny human, even borrowing power from your lord. I thought you said you could defeat me while keeping the Dark One's soul energy dormant, what happened to that resolve?"

Its grip tightens, and it lunges forward again.

"There will be no one left to witness this scene. The Dark One has ordered me to dispose of you, and I shall do it by any means necessary now."

It thrusts its spear straight at the center of my head, and I swing up my sword to block.

We bounce from each other in an energy-filled clash again, but the monster jumps back in at me without missing a beat.

Over and over, switching positions like a machine; it aims for my heart, head, and back. However, I endure and stay focused.

Once I've figured out its attack pattern, I begin launching counters of my own.

Its two weaknesses I know of are lightning to stun it, and Qi to actually damage it.

I alternate between the two whenever I get the chance. I shock it time and time again whenever it gets near, and manage to land a few hits with my Greater Form's blade imbued with Qi, but it doesn't seem to mind these minor attacks.

It takes my sword slashes head-on, hardly trying to dodge, mostly just continuing to thrust its spear forward to aim for my vitals with unyielding accuracy and vigor.

I land over 15 solid hits, and shock it senseless with lightning over 20 times, but it keeps coming back for more not changing its strategy at all nor slowing its movements in the slightest.

Then, just as I get comfortable with its rhythmic attacks, and start to prepare for getting into position to send off another one of my major strikes; something changes. Its attack pattern shifts, and its spear tilts downward mid-strike.

It doesn't aim for my chest, but rather thrusts its spear into my upper thigh.

In doing so, it leaves its head wide open and I cut it clean off, even landing a second slash as I pull my sword back to cut through its torso and slice it into 3 pieces.

However, as I lunge back and it reforms, I feel a cold sensation creeping up my right leg.

Even though it stabbed right through my Greater Form's body, the damage from the attack still carries over to my real body inside the Greater form.

I feel my right quad muscles tightening up, and it becomes harder to step forward. My skin and muscles are quickly turning into the silvery icy mass just like it did before when it attacked me in mid-air in my base form.

Right now, I have no time to amputate and reform my entire limb, so I'm going to have to think of something else fast.

The Dark Guard flies forward at me again, now aiming for my heart and I barely block its incoming blow. We both fly back and it attacks my head, then back, then resets to do everything again as I continuously block its strikes.

Meanwhile, the silver ice spreads deeper into my leg.

Only one possible solution comes to mind.

I activate my mana manipulation skill, and create a barrier of pink energy beneath the infected area of skin. Without hesitation for even a fraction of a second, I tear away a chunk of my leg and propel it away from me, then use self-regeneration to stop the bleeding and restore my ripped-up muscles.

A bloody shard of flesh that hardens into a frozen crystal of silver metal shatters as it hits the desert floor beside me.

At the same time, I block another barrage of the ruthless monster's attacks.

We go on for almost a full minute, tearing up the desert, creating paths of glass and craters deep enough to build small settlements inside.

Hundreds of sword-on-spear collisions go by, over a million MP worth of mana crystals are absorbed from my item storage, and virtually no progress has been made on my end.

I land plenty of blows after powerful lightning strikes, but it heals instantly and it seemingly doesn't affect it whatsoever. Every few dozen attacks, it manages to hit my arm or leg with its spear as well.

I'm able to discard the damaged areas, but unlike this monstrosity, I have a limit to how long and hard I can fight. Eventually, I will get fatigued from using such massive amounts of mana and Qi, especially in this Greater Form.

It knows this very well, and is just waiting patiently for me to meet my end.

I attempt to send body doubles out to the dungeons, as if Ember were here, he'd be able to help me face this creature two on one. However, my doubles' weak basic forms with no qi or excess mana to drain continuously get killed before they can even escape 50 meters away from us.

It knows I'm using my copies to send for help and won't allow for it.

Ember and my other doubles are still deep within the dungeons farming mana, so sensing anything in the outside world is beyond their capabilities.

I have to do this on my own... and I need to figure out a way to kill this monster right now.

As these thoughts race through my mind, the visual of the outer edge of the town comes into my immediate field of view.

The moment I see it, I realize that our battle has stretched many kilometers through the open desert already, and if we continue to fight like this, over a hundred innocent people will be caught in range of the excess energy from our attacks.

As I try to guide the horned monster away, blocking its strikes and attempting to guide its next attack in a different direction, it jumps back and doesn't attack me again as it usually does. In just two simple moves, it's already caught on.

My eyes widen and my heart skips a beat as it opens its mouth to speak again.

"You know another weakness humans have that I just can't stand? It's the one that makes you all truly the dumbest of them all..."

I grit my teeth as the monster's orange eyes shift toward the town in the distance, and I know exactly what it'll say next before it even leaves its silver lips.

"It's the fact that you do not value self-preservation before everything else. If an opponent is stronger than you, why don't you run or submit? If the odds are against you, why do you choose to roll the dice just for the chance of glory?"

It points its spear forward, turning its head toward the town then back to me.

"And why... would you risk your own life to protect those that are weaker than you? If they cannot fight off enemies themselves, they are better off dead."

It turns its entire body and jumps in the air, flying off toward the town in a silver and orange flash of light. It yells back to me as I jump in the air using wind magic to follow.

"I'll give you a choice. It's a simple choice that every human like yourself chooses incorrectly. Let's see how you fare."

It flies high up into the air at a 45-degree angle, making a direct course to end up a kilometer above the center of the desert town right next to where the residential housing is.

If it is planning what I think it is, all I can do is use every power within my means to stop it.

The closer to the town we get, the closer I get to catching up to the silver-orange streak in the sky, but our speed stats are nearly identical in our advanced forms. Even using lightning to shock its system hardly slows it down any more than it slows me to let out a charge.

All I'm able to do is try to catch up and think of a plan before it's too late.

Once it reaches its destination above the town, it comes to a halt, and I slice it in two right there in the sky.

However, it doesn't react at all. It just reforms its body and points its spear down at the ground.

"My final destination is below us. The Dark One has informed me that you have grown a liking to this town and its citizens. Along with that, your teammates that I had the pleasure of watching in the arena are down there too. You're the strongest fighter here, aren't you? It'd be a shame if I brought them into the fight, wouldn't it? How would they fare against my power?"

Its eyes glow orange and it points down at the town below us again.

"Your final decision must be made here and now. Submit to the power of the Dark One. Become a Dark Guard and be on the side of the army that rules the mortal world. Or, die failing to protect those below in a meaningless human struggle."

I channel Qi into my blade without thinking twice about its options.

As it rambled on about its great power, I came up with a last-ditch strategy that has a high potential of working.

A grin forms on my face while lunging forward, and our sword and spear collide in the open air again.

I allow the figure to thrust my sword down, and push me directly down toward the small town.

It dives toward me, sending off more ruthless attacks as we fall toward the people that have sworn their loyalty to me.

Our even-sided duel continues as we both rocket toward the ground.

Attacks of lightning and Qi blades slice it to pieces, and frozen metal shards of skin and flesh of my own are ejected to the sides. However, this time, the monster knows it is destined to win as soon as we hit the ground.

Its movements speed up, and it takes riskier spear strikes as it has nothing to lose.

"Victory is mine, it has been since the beginning. You have thrown away your life for nothing. It is a shame, you would have been a great asset to the Dark One."

We cross the halfway point. Now, we are less than 500 meters in the air.

From the town below, it looks as if a massive ball of fire is raining down from the sky.

I can sense everyone, especially in my Greater Form.

It is possible to see Abby in the guild hall, a large distortion of Qi with all my teammates below her, and roughly 140 residents all scattered within the housing area enjoying their first full day of freedom.

I whisper under my breath, "Not close enough yet..."

In the same moment, I send out an urgent message in a wave of telepathy to Abby and she hears my call immediately.

A burst of green light comes out of the guild hall, and many people in the streets begin to notice the second sun falling from the sky.

They begin to group together, and a massive circle of restoration erupts from Abby down below as she groups everyone together in the town square.

I continue to fend off the silver monster in the sky, but the waves of energy continue to blast off in many directions.

It speaks again as we both are sent flying faster downward after a powerful burst, now less than 200 meters above the ground.

"It's over... Look at that, they've all even come to watch your demise and end their own lives in the process. How pitiful."

It sends another heavy spear strike down at me, pushing me to fall faster while it is sent flying upward.

I fall within 100 meters of the town square while the Dark Guard hovers at almost 250 above the ground.

It charges up the point of its spear, and yells out while dive bombing toward me with the same emotionless gaze.

"Time to finish this."

I activate my newest perk from my Rising Emperor's Domain called [Power Holder] and reply.

"I agree. Let's finish this."

[Power Holder: Activated]

[10% Power Share: Receive]

[Select Party Members: ALL]

[Select Stat Points: ALL]

[Select Mana Control: ALL]

[Temporary Buffs Added!]

[+3,982] Strength

[+2,902] Speed

[+3,470] Agility

[+3,005] Defense

[+4,402] Mental Strength

[+3,568,290,446] Mana Control

An incredible surge of power floods in from below me, as I feel over 140 individual streams of dense mana instantly seep into my body.

All of my enchanted gear adapts to my new nearly doubled base stats, and my energy control improves by adding billions of MP worth of control to my efficiency. On top of that, the Greater Form I'm wielding applies these stats even more.

I take a deep breath and feel power surge through me like nothing I've ever felt.

I can see everything, feel everything, it's like I've temporarily ranked up again...

While enjoying this moment of bliss, I don't lose sight of the task at hand. I activate my lightning magic with every ounce of mana and strength I have left in me, shooting bright yellow and white tendrils of electricity out of me from all angles. They all close in on a single point high in the sky.

My enhanced perception watches the monster's silver skin vibrate and stir while I charge up my sword with every bit of Qi I can channel.

The horned beast falls down as I use wind magic to stop my fall less than 70 meters above the surface.

As we collide, dense waves of flames cloak the sword as I release it up at the paralyzed Dark Guard with genuine fear in its eyes for the first time.

The sky lights up with an incredible ball of fire, electricity, soul energy, and Qi.

Over 90% of the creature is destroyed instantaneously, incinerated on the spot. I allow for my lightning attack to be released from my body again, and use my enhanced perception to track its remaining fragments down and burn them away while I continuously restore my MP and Qi.

The tiny silver bits attempt to grow and reform, but the continuous shocks of electricity keep the fragments stunned in the sky until I can slice through each and every one.

I don't stop slashing away at them, plundering more mana from my storage and swallowing more Qi until I hear a series of notifications sound in my ear.

[Level Up] x138

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 389,550,246MP

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Stat: 1,921 Strength

[YES][NO]

A wave of satisfaction and relief washes over me as I reach level 1140 and press yes to absorb its strength and MCP.

I deactivate my Greater Form, and release the stat points and mana control I stole away from the townspeople below me, but my All-seeing Eye picks up on two high-level mana readings still in the sky.

One of them is the silver diamond-shaped spearhead that was on the tip of the Dark Guard's weapon, and the other is a large brown bird with a number 6 burning beneath its wing. It is flying away from the city in the direction of Sector 1.

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I airstep upward to appraise the silver diamond spear tip falling through the air before opening a spatial magic portal to let it fall into my item storage.

[Metal Fragment of Infinite Regeneration][+338% Strength][+290% Mental Strength][+277% Defense][Hidden Ability]

In the same upward movement, I pinpoint the 6th ranked dark guard way off in the distance flying away from me at high speeds.

I don't hesitate to blast off and follow it through the sky at an even faster rate using all of my buffs and wind magic skill.

I'm able to catch up to it in a matter of minutes, but the amount of mana I used to rocket through the sky this far would be highly inefficient for high-speed travel over long distances. It is much more efficient at flying than I am.

However, this doesn't matter as I swing my Qi-infused sword two times and slice off both of its wings at their bases.

The creature doesn't react until it's too late, erupting into a sea of orange soul energy while I stand on its back with my blade pointed at its neck.

We both plummet toward the desert floor. Its severed wings spin away into the wind by our sides as I open a telepathy link with the creature.

"Don't try anything stupid, your life is in my hands now."

As it feels my Qi-infused sword start to melt through the back of its neck, the violent orange crescents of wind that was forming all around us disappear and it responds.

"Impossible... you defeated number 2...? That is... just not possible."

I shove the blade deeper into its neck again as we fall through the thin cloud line and the golden desert sand becomes visible below us.

"Well, I'm here now and your partner isn't here to save you again. So, it is in fact possible. I killed number 2."

I twist my blade and continue talking.

"Now, you're going to tell me a few things, and in return I'll set you free. How about that?"

It lets out a painful screech after my blade rips through its feathers and muscles, colliding with its upper spine. However, the bird doesn't respond.

"I take this vow of silence as a wish for death..."

I channel more Qi into the blade, and it begins burning more flesh.

"Very well..."

The desert floor gets closer as I ride the wingless bird at an increasing speed toward the ground. I thrust my sword forward to kill it here and now, but it replies through our link.

"WAIT! I'll tell you what you need? What do you want? You'll really set me free? A-And my wings what about my wings- I-"

I smirk and stop my forward thrust, pulling my sword back right before where I could have severed its head from its spine.

"Sure, you'll get your wings back. Tell me what other guards are on their way, and what other forces can I expect to face coming here in the near future. I want time frame estimates, power levels in comparison to yourself and that 2nd ranked dark guard. Then most importantly, where can I find The Dark One?"

I feel fear shiver through the bird's body, and a moment of hesitation in its reply come after my questions, so I stab the sword back in its neck.

"Answer me before we hit the ground."

It replies the moment it feels my blade's tip hit its spine again.

"I-Alright- I'll tell you what I know! I promise I'll tell you everything, just-"

"Go on."

"Number 2 is the Dark One's trusted exterminator. There is no job it cannot complete and no human it cannot kill... Only the 1st Ranked Guard is Stronger, but no one knows its strength other than the Dark One. I'm the fastest flyer, so number 2 and I were sent out to eliminate all double-ranked up threats before the other units arrived for cleanup. That's all I know"

I thrust the blade in harder, cracking its bones, and hear it let out a shriek of pain.

If you stumble upon this narrative on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from Royal Road. Please report it.

The ground is getting closer, we don't have much more time until impact.

"What's cleanup...? Explain. No vague details."

"The remaining Dark Guards will lead the cleanup. They're coming by foot with the Dark One's Army of Wraiths and Ghouls. It should take a week or two for everyone to arrive, but some Dark Guards may be faster than the main forces. They'll loot this town dry and take over Sector 2, just as planned from the very beginning."

I shove my blade even deeper, causing the bird to cough blood out of its mouth, and I hear an audible crack in its bones.

"The Dark One. Where can I find your leader?"

It doesn't respond.

All I hear is the whistling wind by our side and watch the sandy dunes grow larger below us.

"Where can I find the Dark One?"

Still, no response comes back.

"Last chance..."

"None of the Dark Guards know. You will not find the Dark One, it will find you."

As these words enter my inner ear, I thrust my sword all the way through its neck, and we make impact with the sand below.

[Level Up] x23

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 145,262,900MP

[YES][NO]

I reach level 1163 and absorb its MCP as a large crater is formed in the desert and most of its body is incinerated by the force of the fall.

"There, you're free."

As the dust cloud settles, I let out a sigh and pick up the only remaining piece of its body, examining it with my appraisal skill.

[Desert Hawk's Beak][+281% Speed][+222% Agility][Wind Attribute]

The large beak that glows white with miniature swirls of wind magic falls into my item storage while the two wings I severed from its body fall into the crater beside me.

I airstep up through the dusty cloud it creates and murmur under my breath.

"There are your wings back too, a deal's a deal. Now we're even."

I self-regenerate my full body to try and restore some of the built-up fatigue from my fight against the 2nd ranked guard, but it feels like something only sleep or Abby's Full Restores can fix.

Once I make it back to the town, my Flame Emperor's disguise goes back up, and I float toward the center of town to directly confront the issue at hand.

Using telepathy, I let Abby know I'm coming, and update her on the outcome of both battles.

She may understand, but the citizens of this town that was established just this morning may have very mixed opinions after seeing an energy attack that could have killed all of them instantaneously just barely get deflected less than 100 meters above their heads.

To my surprise, not a single one of them has disconnected from my Rising Emperor's Domain System, so it seems like they all still see me as their leader. However, it's best to come clean and tell them exactly what is happening to keep this trust in the future.

As I make it over the center of town, then stand on top of the guild hall just like I did earlier. Many heads turn to the sky where I stand, and I see a mixed use of stares of awe, religious bliss, confusion, and even excitement fill the crowd.

Abby floats up to the roof behind me, and I begin to give a speech.

"As all of you have seen, our town is under attack. This is a very important detail I did not reveal when you all swore loyalty to me. We are at war with the underground leader of Sector 1. Their army is on the way, and it will be sending many other opponents like the one you just witnessed me fend off."

I stand in silence for a moment to let the crowd soak in this information, then speak up again.

"Considering these new events, if you wish to leave the city and receive a trip back to Sector 4, I will be more than happy to arrange this travel. However, just know that putting your trust in me aided my victory in this last battle. I'm sure many of you felt slightly weaker before my clash in the sky, but now are back to your normal selves, am I right?"

Chatter from the crowd begins to grow. Many people confirm that they did feel weaker, like their power was being drained. I speak up again before too many opinions can be shared.

"I know most of you are not warriors or hunters, and wish to live a simple life in this village. This is a lot to take in after months of forced labor, and on your first day of freedom. If this simple life is all you desire, that is more than enough to help my future city thrive. Do not feel pressured by my words to do something that is not in your nature. However, if you wish to become more... If you wish to become strong and fight by my side, I can lead you to a path of immeasurable strength."

After these words leave my lips, I activate my Rising Emperor's Domain again, and use it to share my power rather than take it.

[Power Holder: Activated]

[10% Power Share: Contribute]

[Select Party Members: ALL]

[Select Stat Points: ALL]

[Select Mana Control: ALL]

The contributed stat points are nothing special, as 10% of my stats are evenly split between all 140 townspeople. This boosts everyone's base power by a few points on each stat.

However, the mana control is where the difference is made.

Tens of millions of MP worth of mana control are granted to each and every person below me.

This is enough to begin sensing mana in a very different way than normal hunters, its around the range of mana control a hunter between level 300 and 400 would achieve when they're destined to become an Elite.

An incredible surge of energy is felt in every one of the people below, and they all are hit with a simultaneous burst of euphoria from receiving this power.

Many of the hunters in the crowd activate their skills and can't believe the new efficiency they've been granted.

Elderly and simple merchants move around with far greater agility and ease.

The small group of new religious believers all get down on their knees and begin bowing at the gift from their god they've just received.

I allow everyone to react to the power in their own way, and allow them to talk amongst themselves for almost a full minute, then speak again.

"My ability has the power to grant my followers gifts in times of need, and in return, I'm able to receive your power if necessary in battle as well."

I deactivate my buff, letting the power come back to me and leave everyone in their unaltered normal states.

"So, knowing this information now, decide what you will do. The first option is to get a ride back to Sector 4. The second option is to stay and live a simple quiet life in this city. Lastly, the option I am extending to those of you that are ready to take the leap, you may join me and become the first members of The Flame Emperor's Army."

Chapter 476

The group below me begins to shift and talk amongst themselves.

A few speak up and ask specific questions about things from general city growth in the future, to the reason why I'm fighting Sector 1, and finally how I'll be able to train them and grant them power if they wish.

One by one, I explain in further detail our situation.

The majority of people already knew there was a war going on just from the way I conduct myself, and the demonstration of power against the gang leaders previously. Before they even agreed to serve me, many felt the mana shockwaves of my battle against the Colossal and already assumed the worst.

Considering this, not a single person decides to sever our link and take my offer to leave back to Sector 4.

That doesn't mean they all have combat abilities and wish to fight though.

Over two thirds of the crowd chooses to stay and not fight. They're hoping to become business owners, simple workers for those businesses, or even artists living a simple life in the city.

I direct all of them to consult Maurice's builder team, and work over the details in the guild hall with Abby once this meeting is over.

My words to the architect are heard by everyone as they disappear into the octagonal empty hall.

"That's right, I put in the order for your building materials and should have them delivered by tonight. Anyone that has special housing needs, or would like to establish a business, tonight will be the soft deadline to get these things submitted. A large construction project will begin tomorrow."

Once they all go inside, there are 37 individuals that stay standing in the square.

I do a scan through all of them, and find these are certainly the strongest ones here. Almost everyone in this group is over level 150, and a majority of them have useful basic combat skills like Dagger Arts, Swordsmanship, Body Hardening, and various stat buffing skills.

Of these brave recruits, 3 in particular stand out the most to me.

I point into the crowd.

"You three, step forward."

My gaze locks with each of theirs as I point to them individually and they step forward.

"State your names and abilities."

A short bulky blond-haired man steps forward first.

"The name is Francis, I wield earth magic."

Next, a thin dark-featured young man with a handsome face steps up next.

"I'm Andy. I have a wind magic skill awakened."

Then lastly, a woman with orange hair, freckles, athletic build, and sharp eyes speaks up.

"The name's Rachel. I control fire."

As they begin to realize why I singled them out, I use my body double skill to split into two parts.

There are some wide eyes from the crowd, but no one reacts too much as my copy steps forward and talks.

"If you would like to get stronger, I'll be providing you all with gear, resources, ability training, and power leveling indefinitely in the dungeons just outside town. Split into 3 groups behind one of these element users. These will be your team leaders. Of course, everything will be overseen by me, but we will begin training right away."

Everyone does as my double says, and gets into groups behind each element user and they all follow to a nearby warehouse for gear to be sorted out and for my double to change up the teams a bit.

My goal is to get them all up to level 250 to 300 using their own skills and abilities with my double giving guidance. Then, I will take over and train them myself allowing them to absorb mana control once they've built up a good enough base of fighting talent.

With my inspect and appraisal skill, I'll be able to give them all the perfect gear and match them up with opponents that will push them to their limits together.

The reasoning behind having the only 3 element wielders be perceived as leaders early on is because they will naturally be able to gain mana control faster. In time they will become stronger than the hunters by their sides. It's best to put them in this position now rather than later.

Once I see them off, and my double takes them to the nearby warehouse, I'm left alone in the center of the square.

I let out a sigh and airstep high above the town to look down on it from the sky.

The sun will be setting soon, but I still have quite a bit of time to use up before that happens.

I could check on Ember and my doubles to see how their progress on element stone farming is going, but to be honest even if they were ready for another pod, I don't think it would be a good idea for me to go inside for isolated cultivation just yet.

There are still a lot of things to do that can only be done by me, and if any of the Dark Guards come by now, I'm certain my teammates aren't capable of stopping even the weakest of them in their current form.

Ember can fend for himself, but even in his current state, I question if he could have beaten the 2nd Ranked Dark Guard on his own. It would probably be possible, but it's not a risk I'm willing to leave up to chance.

I whisper under my breath, "That settles it. I'll stay on guard and protect this place myself until everyone is strong enough."

As these thoughts race through my mind, the slow-moving wind passes by high up in the sky and I decide to open up my item storage to see if I can craft any items worth filling my open item slots.

I sift through everything and examine their stats very carefully, seeing what options my craftsmanship dashboard gives me when I set certain items next to each other.

"This is it... My old daggers didn't hold up too well against a double ranked up monster, so I think it's about time I make an upgraded set."

A smile shows across my face as I decide on what Item I'll make first by merging 3 items from A-Ranked Monsters together into 1, along with enough blood to bond with the creation and tens of thousands of MP in crystals to be the energy for the craft.

[Extreme Grade][Lightning Stone]

[Wolf Guardian's Fang][+265% Mental Strength][+258 Speed][Lightning Attribute]

[Desert Hawk's Beak][+281% Speed][+222% Agility][Wind Attribute]

->

[Storm King's Dagger Set][Blood Bonded][+312% Speed][+299% Mental Strength][+276% Agility][+250% Strength][+250% Defense][Lightning Attribute][Wind Attribute]

After an intense burst of light, a pair of long curved white blades with yellow static rippling from them emerge from the craft. They have the same merging perk as my other daggers, allowing me to use them as a single blade or a pair as I wish.

As soon as I hold them, a rush of buffs flows through me, and I test them out in the sky, throwing enormous blades of sharp wind charged with intense waves of electricity through the air.

Satisfied with this craft, I place them into my storage after a few more slashes.

I'll have to test them out on a real opponent to see their true capabilities later. While they don't have the destructive power that fire magic brings, the deadliness of the wind blades and usefulness of the lightning's stun may put these daggers on par with my Flame Emperor's Sword.

It makes me excited to upgrade my main weapon in the future too once I find a genuine A-Ranked Fire material to merge with it or replace its base.

With my weapons now upgraded, I turn to try to make something a bit unique, and soon discover the possibilities of a very unique crafting option for a defensive item.

"Now this... is what I was looking for."

[Shard of The Colossal] [+266% Strength][+210% Defense][+200% Mental Strength]

[Metal Fragment of Infinite Regeneration][+338% Strength][+290% Mental Strength][+277% Defense][Hidden Ability]

->

[Infinite Essence of Regeneration][Blood Bonded][+365% Strength][+329% Defense][+312% Mental Strength][+300% Speed][+300% Agility][Hidden Ability]

I use another 8 ounces of blood, and this craft takes over double the mana crystals that the last one did. Once the flash of crafting light is finished, a tiny orb of liquid silver-colored metal is left in its place.

I look at it closely; seeing the appraisal reading on it and wondering how exactly I'll be able to equip this item.

The moment I picture it as a ring in my mind and push my finger forward, the silver ball shape shifts into a ring and floats onto my finger.

Out of pure reflex from touching this silver material in the past, I get ready to cut my own hand off if it begins to freeze and turn to metal. However, seeing as it's blood bonded and my own item now, thankfully it doesn't.

I still raise an eyebrow at the fact that it didn't turn into a ring the moment after the craft was finished. The slow rate of transformation is quite odd.

"With a name like that, I'd assume it'd be a crystal consumable, or maybe a necklace or something..."

As I speak these words aloud to myself, and picture what it would have been in my mind, the silver ring around my finger shifts and grows, forming into a large silver crystal. Then, moments later into a necklace with a shimmering string with a pendant on the end.

As it floats above the palm of my hand, I begin to understand what this item really is...

I picture the silver liquid transforming into a shield, then a spear, then a sword, and finally an enormous wall that mimics my mana shielding.

I'm even able to expand the silver moldable liquid into a dome that completely covers my entire body and expands outward tens of meters to grow larger and larger.

It can instantly transform into whatever I desire. My guess is that it will have very adverse effects if an enemy touches this liquid silver material, just like when I was fighting the being it came from... The infinite possibilities run through my mind as I continue to shape shift the material into whatever I wish, but won't have any clear data until I test it out against an actual opponent.

The only downside I'm able to find now is that it uses up a lot of mana to expand and regenerate.

Once the sun begins to actually set, I revert the silver back into its ring form and place it on an empty finger.

"Alright, that's enough fun. It's almost time for me to get back to The Vice Region and pick up those building supplies."

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As the sun fully sets, I go to the canyon of dungeons and teleport back to the labyrinth to update Ember and my double on the news.

Afterward, one of my doubles that was farming the labyrinth takes the post of surveillance on the town while Ember and my final double continue their dungeon collapsing.

I receive a single small flake of luminite straight into my storage and a confirmation that my double is holding enough containment stones to charge another pod up to nearly 50x right now. I take this information to mind while teleporting back to a dungeon inside the Vice City dungeon hub, then change my appearance back to a D-Grade hunter and walk through town.

Once I pick up this order, I'll bring this news back to my teammates.

As soon as I walk through the front door of the office building, a commotion fills my ears.

Multiple businessmen talk to each other with concerned tones.

"Did you hear? There was a dungeon break that broke through the protective barriers of the Hub's shielding protection?"

"Impossible. No monster has ever broken through; it's supposed to be A-Grade rated. No monsters are even that strong."

"It's true! Not too far away either, they're investigating and mending the shielding right now down the street."

"It was really that close by? I heard not a single monster even got out. The Association must have deployed their strongest team to take care of it before the city was in danger."

I don't mind their chatter, because if I'm not mistaken, I'm the monster they're talking about. Breaking through the ground and protective barrier of the dungeon hub wasn't the stealthiest move I could have pulled while leaving earlier. However, it was definitely worth it. I made it back to Sector 2 just in time.

It really doesn't matter to me how much chaos I cause here; I merely see this city as a playground to be used for my wants and needs. The more work I cause for the Vice Region's branch of the Association the better. I hope they dig around this mystery for as long as they can. They won't find a thing.

As soon as I get to the desk at the back of the room, the receptionist from before greets me with a smile. He speaks up even before I do.

"Back so soon? It's almost like you disappeared into thin air; how can I help you, sir?"

"Well, I believe my order is ready to pick up; I paid your father upstairs for an express delivery."

He rings the bell again and tells the older woman named Tracey working there to go upstairs and relay the news.

She comes back down a few minutes later with a clipboard in hand and a large set of keys with a smile on her face. Then, looks at me and motions for me to follow.

"Right this way, I'll bring you to the warehouse where we've sourced all your goods."

We walk out the front door together and I begin to follow her through the dimly lit streets and into the warehouse district.

Her heels click on the hard sidewalk and her fingers tap a pen on the clipboard, completely out of rhythm with her steps.

On top of that, many sounds fill the streets. There are metal and wood factories still processing materials at full capacity, workers leaving as they get off their shifts, and some new workers arriving for their night shifts to start.

After walking through the lively area, we finally arrive at a massive warehouse district and stop at the side of a wide building that stretches further than many sports fields put together.

Once she clicks one of the keys in place, and a small door opens to let us inside, what I see is rather shocking. Just the sheer amount of stacked materials up to the ceiling of a multiple-story building, and further than the normal eye can see, is more building materials than I've ever seen in my life.

"This is all yours. This is what 6 platinum bars gets you after all. Are you going to need the warehouse number to assign pickup units, or would you like to use some of our trucks? After midnight, we'll have to charge you daily for taking up the warehouse space here."

My gaze is still glued to the thousands of trees worth of wood, steel beams in stacked piles large enough to build the entire warehouse we're standing in again, and the brick and cement that could build sidewalks and roads large enough for the entire distance we walked on our way here.

I whisper under my breath, "Maurice really isn't messing around... that's good to see."

Then, reply to the woman.

"I have enough item boxes to pack it all up myself. Just leave me here; I'll get it cleared out within the next few hours."

She looks at me with a dazed stare, only seeing the one item box around my waist that isn't even real. It's a manifestation of my conceal skill doing its work.

I can tell she wants to question how I could possibly fit all of this into a D-Grade item box, but she bites her lip and turns to leave.

"Very well. The boss told me you were a unique customer. I will let you be; it was a pleasure doing business with you, and your privacy will be granted as wished. We hope to do business with you again in the future."

The door clicks behind her as I'm left alone in the warehouse.

I activate my all-seeing eye to confirm there are no magical recording devices in here. Then quickly and carefully put small blocks of stone using earth magic over the old-fashioned video cameras on every corner of the warehouse for my total privacy.

Once content that I'm not being watched, I activate my spatial magic skill and expand it outward in every direction as far as it can go.

I walk down the long warehouse length and all of the rows of material fall inside and remain in a state of suspended animation.

This is both extremely time and energy-efficient, but also a great test for my storage power.

I've never hit its limit.

However, once I get to the end of the warehouse and the last stack of pallets falls into my white portal, I find that today the limit will not be found.

It makes me consider that maybe there isn't even a limit to begin with.

After making the walk back through the completely empty warehouse, I use my earth magic again to let the stone from the cameras fall away and show them the little item box on my waist and a thumbs up to thoroughly confuse anyone watching the surveillance footage.

Then, walk out the door and make my way back to the dungeon hub, and soon fly back to the town that now sits under the completely dark night sky.

The first thing I do is try to find one of the abandoned warehouses out in the desert that is even close to the size of the one I just left, but none of them compare.

To make sure all of the materials are safe, secure, and accounted for; I use earth magic to create a stone replica of the warehouse I just left. It takes tens of thousands of MP to summon all of the stone material. To make sure it's lit during the day, I add large openings in the walls every 10 meters or so and fill them with the product of mixing sand and fire magic.

The windows aren't perfectly clear glass, but they'll let the light in somewhat once it's daytime.

Once it's complete, I open my storage and let all of the materials back down into this makeshift warehouse exactly how they were when I took them from storage.

"That's as good as it'll get; I'll leave the actual building to the professionals."

On my way back, I notify Maurice and his team via telepathy inside their rooms that the supplies have been delivered and tell them where to find them.

I don't expect them to start using them until morning, but a notification can't hurt.

Afterward, I walk into the guildhall and find Abby sitting in the middle room of the octagonal building.

She's lying back on a comfortable looking chair, half asleep. However, I feel her aura spreading out past the guildhall. It even fluctuates the moment I step inside, so I can tell she's still on guard; just resting up with the free time she has after a long few days. She perks up once I begin to speak.

"Mission accomplished. Ready to check on the others downstairs? I'm curious to see how much they've improved."

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I enter the middle room with Abby and open the hatch to the underground bunker with a single click.

A wave of visible dense Qi flows out, and I feel my body naturally absorb it once it hits my skin.

We both begin walking into the bunker down the spiral stairs, and I close the door above not to let any excess Qi come flowing out.

Down below, the sound of sparring takes place, and the humming rattle of an isolation pod fills my ears as well. It is vibrating and giving off a bit more noise than it did when I left it this morning, but it's not that far outside of my expectations, so my attention shifts to the teams of people sparring on the empty side of the room.

Fisher and Lydia's cores are filled with Qi, and they are doing very simple hand-to-hand combat training, matching each other's basic Qi blows.

Aerie is fighting Monk one-on-one. His core is dense with Qi as well, flowing through his body at a more intense rate than the others. It looks as if he's been training with this energy for far longer than just a day.

His exposure to Qi in the past has certainly made it easier to channel it now.

Then, at the back of the room in the lotus position, I see Luna.

Her eyes are wide open, and the blue energy is magnified now, mixing with the Qi in the room. Her core is dense with Qi as well, but its capacity isn't even close to a tenth of the others training. She's been awakened, but possibly not a combat type, so she's working on training her eyes in some way.

As Abby and I make it to the bottom step of the room, everyone stops sparring and turns our way.

I speak up.

"So, the awakening process went smoothly for all of you, it seems. That's good, but I think we're going to need to increase our rate of training even more."

I recount the events that occurred outside, and they all report feeling their energy fluctuate earlier in the day when I used my power holder perk. Along with this, I tell the team enough containment stones have been charged up to the point where another pod is ready. However, I'd like to see what state the pod Maria is in once it's finished before I use these resources to charge up my only remaining one on hand.

In addition to this, once I see how efficient these pods are at Qi gathering, I may send a double back to the Galeheart Tower to persuade Lith to give me some of the others he has on hand.

My gaze turns to Luna once my update is complete, and I see that she is still not connected to my Rising Emperors Domain system. Knowing this, I walk over and pose a question.

"Now what will you do? As you can tell from my story of the 2nd ranked Dark Guard, the powers we're against will only get more terrifying. You may have a past bond with Arie, but I know nothing about you. If you would like to stay here in the core of our operations, or fight with us, I need a confirmation of your loyalty to me as your leader. This is not a negotiation; it is a requirement. I don't have time or mental space for doubt."

She turns to Arie, and I open a three-way telepathy link between us.

He speaks to her through it, letting me listen in on the conversation.

"This will all be over soon, once I finish my training and do my duty in defeating the Dark One's army, we can go back to Sector 4 and search the Abyss. It is eating away at the back of my mind too, trust me, Luna."

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She responds through the link, turning to me with wide eyes.

"You know about what happened in Sector 4?"

I nod, but Arie interjects.

"He does, Jay has given me the power that will allow us to get deep enough into the Abyss to find our past. Without him, it would be impossible. Swear your loyalty and everything will work out. Please see him as one of our brothers and sisters from the village, I trust him with my life."

She smiles, and bows her head slightly.

"Very well, if it is Arie's wish, then I will follow you as a leader."

A new link is formed, and her geopot along with full status shows up in my mind's eye.

Still, a million questions about what they're so desperate to go back and look for enter my train of thought, but there are far more important urgent matters at hand here. So, I break our telepathy link and speak up to everyone else.

"We're going back to the Labyrinth. We're going to grind mana control absorption until Maria leaves her pod. We have just under 36 hours until her time is up. If we're lucky, we'll be able to level grind you all up to 1000 to push a forced rank up in the process."

I use spatial magic to allow the unused isolation pod to fall into my storage.

"We'll take turns using this in the labyrinth if you're in need of a break. My double will watch over the city and Maria while we're gone."

Without questioning my words, all of us leave the underground bunker and make our way to the canyon of dungeons.

I teleport them all to the 39th floor, share my absorption skill to everyone, and immediately assess their strengths after the Qi awakening they just went through.

Abby is the first to use the spare isolation pod while these tests commence; her power hasn't changed much, and the opponents on this floor were already one-shot kills the last time we were here. I place the pod near the back of the dungeon by the boss room, and Monk stays behind to guard the pod, as he hasn't improved much since our last session either.

Fisher and Lydia, on the other hand, have risen to a whole new level.

The last time we were on this floor, it took both of them fighting with their full strength and Red Hydra's buffs activated to subdue one of the high-level Elite Minotaurs.

Now, with Qi infused in their blades, they're able to slice the heads of these beasts off in single movements.

The monsters on this floor don't wield any Qi themselves, so it isn't the greatest indicator of how they'll fare against genuine soul energy, but it's a vast improvement to how they fought before.

Arie shows improvement too, at a rate much faster than I even believed to be possible.

He's capable of imbuing trace amounts of his core's Qi into the spirit arrows he manifests, sending out attacks of Qi similar to the strikes I learned to throw out of my sword after absorbing well over 150 Qi pills and months of training.

It's clear that his core capacity and strength of attacks are still far less deadly than my own, but the fact that he can already manifest physical Qi outside his body is a unique and very promising trait.

He's able to obliterate an Elite Minotaur's head in a single Qi-infused strike.

Luna watches all of this in shock, with a bright blue aura constantly surrounding her eyes. Her level, combat skills, and mana control are far too low to even think about challenging one of these beasts.

However, this will change after our training session is complete. Soon, she is about to be powerleveled higher than ever imagined. This is for the sole reason that I'm curious if she'll get an upgrade to that unique skill and blue aura around her eyes.

The three of them clear out all of the Minotaurs on this floor except for the Mutant. This is saved for my double and Ember once they return from doing their rounds creating another containment stone and farming the lower floors between 30 and 38.

We walk back over to where Monk guards the isolation pod, and the door opens letting Abby step out fully rested.

"Alright, it's time to start power leveling."

I put the isopod back in my storage, and we all walk through the spinning grey boss room portal.

Once a level 996 boss appears, we get to work.

It takes a few minutes for the room to reset each time, and only the person who deals the final blow gets to absorb the MCP, so we rotate who gets to fight each respawn.

The upside of this is that we all get to give pointers and test out new combat techniques on a near A-Rank monster that spawns in at level 993 to 997 over and over. Then, once each fight is done we all share the EXP.

Floor 40 is still on cooldown, and Floor 41 is impossible for us to challenge.

Given these facts, fighting this boss is the best possible source of mass MCP and EXP we can get.

Every kill lets the one who defeated it gain tens of millions of MCP, and each time we cycle back, the party gets far closer to reaching level 1000.

Although the amount of EXP gained per kill when a monster is a lower level than oneself is minimal, it isn't non-existent. It may take some serious grinding, but it is possible for everyone here to rank up from this boss room alone.

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After the first 4 hours pass, everyone matches the same level as the strongest boss that can possibly spawn, level 997.

Just about 500 million MCP is gained by each of them fighting. Luna does not have the combat ability to kill a minotaur, but she comes along for the ride and gets power-leveled through the roof.

She passes level 500 in just a few boss room runs and gains a new buff called [Eye of The Last Full Moon]. In addition to this, her available proficiency points are force-used during the rank-up process and her single skill [Moonlight's Gaze] is upgraded to Legendary Grade.

After another 5 hours pass, everyone reaches level 998, the fighters gain 600 million additional MCP each, and they begin taking rests in isopods at staggering intervals.

After 9 hours of staggered 1 hour breaks and nearly 1 billion additional MCP gained each, everyone on the team hits level 999.

I speak up once everyone is well-rested, staring at the boss room portal, waiting to enter again.

"We have 18 more hours until Maria awakens from her pod. Let's push through and rank up."

Roughly 15-16 hours later, after close to another 2 Billion MCP have been farmed, everyone in the boss room is overflowing with power just from this grinding session alone. Even without a rank-up, their mana control and Qi capacity has risen far over 2x in just a day and a half.

The first to hit level 1000 is Abby.

The next is Arie, then Monk. Following just two boss room runs later, Fisher and Lydia hit 1000 as well.

They all stand back and wait with bright [Rank Up] options floating in front of their status screens while I bring Luna back into the Bossroom a few more times before she gets the notification too.

All 6 of them stand in the middle of the grassland dungeon on the 39th floor as my double slaughters minotaurs with Ember in the background.

Simultaneously, they all press [Rank Up] and white light floods over their bodies.

A few minutes pass as I float in front of them, but none of the lights stop shining. I remember when I ranked up a second time, it took me a few hours to come to as well. However, I thought that was only because I was awakening a Greater Energy Form.

I think to myself for a while longer, then open my link with Ember once I sense him nearby with my double again.

"Hey, could you two come here for a minute? I have a special task I need done."

My copy and Ember both come over and I relay the news.

We brainstorm for a few more minutes about the time it would potentially take to get here from Sector 1 on foot, and the relative power my teammates have shown during this training session compared to the 7th, 6th, and 2nd ranked Dark Guards.

However, the conclusion we both agree on in the end is the same.

"They're strong, but not strong enough..."

I toss a teleport crystal to my double, and it transfers all of the containment stones it's farmed and charged over the last 2 days into my storage along with two more glistening shards of luminite.

I nod, "Thanks, you know what to do next. It's time to speed things up even more."

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

It disappears without a trace while Ember and I are left to watch my teammates rank up below me.

Every half an hour or so when the Elite Minotaurs here spawn back in, I subjugate them quickly, and even get to see Ember use a light red manifested soul energy sword to cut down a few minotaurs of his own.

All of the powers he was granted other than a human body are still a mystery to me; he drops some hints about them once we get back to the 6 people ranking up with collected firestones in my storage.

"You know, that second ranked Dark Guard sounded like he was a blast to fight. No excuses this time, I'll be ready for the next battle, I still have a few new finishing moves I need to try out."

I nod with my arms crossed.

"We'll all have plenty of opponents to go all out with soon. Save your energy."

Once my double blips back into the 39th floor, it's laughing while pulling out 5 brand new isolation pods from its storage.

"I did what you asked, but Lith was using one of them. I would have asked him before taking these, but his timer said 5 hours were left."

I place my open palm on my face but accept the 5 brand new isolation pods without hesitating, then transfer over the uncharged firestones I farmed back to my double.

"That's fine. Even if he said no, I would have taken them anyway. His life relies on these next few hours too. He can try to be angry with me after we deliver him the Dark One's head."

At these words, the 6 white lights below me begin to dim down, and three of them even stop glowing entirely.

The rank-up process seems to be finishing up now.

Ember and my double go back to collapse another dungeon with the newly farmed stones out in the desert while I watch everyone begin waking up and standing to their feet. They look down at their statuses with awe, and I too am impressed at the new mana control frequency coming off of most of them.

I point out into the dungeon as the Minotaurs respawn.

"Take a few minutes and test out your new ranked-up buffs; it will be good to get a feel for your new power before we move onto the 3rd and final stage of your training."

My eyes widen as I take in the magnificent sight of varying shades of blue, green, and bright white lights fill the dungeon and incinerate lvl970 monsters the instant they're touched by the energy blasts.

The body of a serpent, visual of a white ghost, roar of a tiger, eye of a god, arms of a demon, and form of a goddess fill my senses. It's hard to keep track of everything as I take in the magnificent view.

A corner of my lip turns up as they all deactivate their buffs and walk back to me.

"Good, you've awakened your ultimate weapons. Now let's sharpen these blades and get you ready for war."

I dungeon walk them back to the canyon, and we fly back to the town with ease.

Everyone's movements have become far more agile and confident. It's clear they're itching to use this new power, but as we make it to the center of the city and begin to descend, I put my flame emperor's disguise back up and speak.

"Patience. You still have a long way to go; you'll soon see what I mean."

We descend into the town as the morning sun rises, and a few new things become visible to me.

Full sections of the center square are completely rebuilt, and other sections are still being remodeled.

The section of housing where people were staying before in 1 to 2 story old homes have been turned into 4-6 story apartment buildings that have beautiful windows and balconies, and the front entrance has a square of its own that connects to a main road back to the guild hall.

On this road, I see a few small shops already open.

A pawn shop, tiny bakery, and a bar are the most prominent ones with people walking in and out; however, most of this road is still vacant and still being built.

Off in the distance by the megawarehouse I made the other night, I sense my surveillance double looking over 21 slaves under the elixir of suggestion carrying supplies. There is a team of architects directing them and giving orders while building up another apartment complex on the other side of town.

They're so far away, they don't even notice us arrive. However, I'm glad they're enjoying themselves and using the resources I've given them.

"Good... One less thing for me to think about, now, let's see how things are going underground."

All 7 of us walk into the guild hall and I open the hatch that leads downstairs.

Immediately, a loud humming and rattling sound erupts from the bunker, but it's followed by a dense wave of Qi that feels like a warm ocean wave is hitting my ankles.

There's so much coming out, it's almost a shame to watch it disperse into the atmosphere without trying to absorb some.

Everyone feels the same way, so we walk down the spiral stairs quickly and close the hatch behind us.

The isolation pod at the back of the room shakes and vibrates violently, but the timer on top says [00:05:21] so we stop and stare.

Abby speaks up after a few seconds pass.

"Just in time to see the great reveal."

We all slowly walk forward and watch the minutes and seconds tick down to [00:00:00].

Then, the curved metal door swings open.

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Long flowing blond hair and sharp royal blue eyes emerge from the white wave of Qi flooding out from inside the isolation pod as the door fully opens.

Maria steps forward and everyone is left in silence as we witness a pure outline of bright white Qi, twisting and swirling around her body.

Her skin looks smoother, her figure appears more mature, and her overall appearance looks as if she's entered into a new prime. She's glowing with power, truly an upgraded version of her past self.

Not a drop of mana makes its way through the barrier, and it's clear the use of this technique is second nature to her as she walks further out of the door and looks each of us up and down.

Her gaze stops on me, the only one with a Qi barrier like her own, and switches her serious stare to the hint of a smile I can see hiding her bubbly nature beneath it.

"Let's spar."

Simultaneously, the door of the isolation pod falls off its hinges and I see the inside of its shielding is cracked and discolored.

My eyes focus on it as I see the top portion that still stores a considerable amount of mana within it begin to leak faster and faster to the point where I question if it's going to explode on the spot.

It was showing signs of wear and tear just moments ago, but the full extent of its damages wasn't clear until the time dilation stabilized with the outside world and Maria stepped out from the pod.

I open my storage and allow it to fall into suspended animation before anything unpredictable happens, then respond to Maria.

"Of course, that was going to be my question to you regardless. I need to see how much more powerful you've become. Let me get some preparations for the others ready, then I'll give you the real fight you've been waiting for."

Maria keeps walking forward, looking down at her hands and observing the room with careful eyes.

I can tell just by the way she moves, her Qi and mana control have risen to astronomical heights in the last 2 days. For us outside, it has only been 48 hours, but to her, it has been over 3 months.

As she walks over to the exit, I turn back to the others who are still staring at her without saying a word. Then, take 5 of the 6 isolation pods in my storage out and place them in a line.

In a matter of seconds, I carefully use my craftsmanship dashboard integrated with the capsules' designs to equally charge each of them with the containment stones I have from the last 2 days of farming.

They all become charged up to dilations between 43x and 47x, and I turn back to the squad.

Next to them, I place food, water, sleeping gear, and miscellaneous supplies that were leftover from a few days ago when I went shopping for the townspeople.

"Everyone take a pod, except you."

I point to Luna.

"We need combat fighters to use these pods only, Qi is a limited resource."

I turn back to Arie, Abby, Monk, Fisher, and Lydia.

"The Qi is split unevenly between you all. I'm keeping what I have on me for my turn, but I trust that you'll distribute the amount you have on you between yourselves regarding who you believe will need it the most. Time is running out."

As I remember, Abby and Monk both have 300 pills each, while the other three have a few hundred between them. Split evenly, they'll have close to 200 each, but no matter how they distribute them I believe if they get half of the result Maria achieved they'll be ready enough for battle.

They distribute the pills and gather the supplies they want while I give a briefing on what to expect, how to gather Qi, and explain the basics on establishing a Qi barrier. Then, end my spiel with a simple line.

"You know what you need to do. 48 hours in the pod. Come out as sharpened weapons of war."

They each enter their pods and I nod to them goodbye and good luck.

Then, turn around to see Luna timidly standing next to Maria at the back of the room.

I speak up to Maria and point to the stairs.

"Let's go spar, I know just the place."

She begins walking up the stairs, and I follow.

Then, turn back as Luna is still waiting for a place to go and speak to her too.

"You're going to watch. I want to know what those eyes can really see."

She follows right after and we exit through the hatch to leave the 5 vibrating pods in the basement below us to venture out into the desert.

We fly about 10km away from the town, and I use telekinesis to carry Luna behind us.

Once we make it to an open part in the desert and touch down on the sand, I put my hands up in a fighting position and stare Maria in the eyes.

She stares back and shows the same smile from the bunker before while putting her hands up as well.

Neither of us activates any mana-based skills, but the flowing white barriers of energy around us get denser and denser the longer we stay in the ready position.

Luna steps far back a few hundred meters like we recommended, and activates her ranked up buff to manifest an enormous light blue transparent eye high in the sky. That gives us the cue to start.

Maria runs forward, and I do too.

The sound of Qi on Qi like crashing waves echo through the desert as our spar begins.

Fists smash against fists, forearms block kicks, punches are landed, Qi speeds up our reaction time and boosts our movement speed.

I feel as if I'm fighting a mirror, and it's clear to see that Maria feels the same way.

Dust flies up in the desert, creating twisters and miniature sandstorms wherever we move to.

Every punch, kick, and strike we throw gets faster and faster as we try to gauge each other's power with incremental increases in strength, but it only gets higher with neither of us stopping anytime soon.

My movement speed and strength that I'm using eventually surpasses the 7th ranked dark guard, the precision of my attacks nears the pinpoint accuracy of the lightning wolf on the 40th floor, and the sheer amount of punches and kicks I throw nearly replicates the storm of windblade attacks I was forced to encounter while facing the 6th ranked Dark Guard.

She's managing to keep up with everything I throw at her and even launch attacks of her own back with equal speed and force.

While doing so, she's managing to keep that same hint of a smile on her face. Maria is enjoying every second of this thoroughly.

I am too. It feels as if we're dancing to a song no one else but us knows the notes to, and its being written down and ingrained in our minds every new step we take.

While it is refreshing to fight a teammate of this caliber, it is also slightly terrifying to think about the fact that Maria isn't even ranked up yet. She went into that pod at level 994 before we all started level grinding, and her Qi control is already on par with the lower-ranked Dark Guards without using any mana at all...

I find what I believe to be her limit when I see a bead of sweat on her forehead, and a spark of ice magic activate in her eyes. I jump back and speak up before she can bring this spar to a potentially dangerous level.

"Good. That's enough. This is good progress. I think you're almost ready to fight the Dark One's Army."

The dust settles around us for a final time and the large glowing eye above us connected by a thin string of mana to Luna's back blinks and disappears into thin air.

I pull out my sword and point it out into the desolate desert.

"There is one last thing I'd like you to test out."

I channel a small amount of Qi into the blade and swing it across my body, allowing it to flow out of the sword and release a slash of pure white energy. Then, turn back to Maria.

"I doubt you had the chance to try an attack like that in the isopod, you may want to develop a longer range Qi attack of your own before we go to the Labyrinth and rank you up."

She reaches for her own sword in her item box on her waist, but a yell from Luna behind us turns our attention away from this topic.

Her yells can be heard from far away in the direction her eye's energy left from.

"There's something coming! I can see something coming our way! It's a knight... a black knight! That's all I could see... It's just a single Black Suit of Armor with a number 5 printed right on its chest."