

D. Diver 551

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Pulses of water and healing magic flash behind me as I take Nat's buffs down from their max to zero while giving her self-regeneration to instantly heal her fatigue.

Rodrigo's voice yells out to the arena as the flame residue dissipates.

"That's it! The winner of the entire 4th Stage tournament is Natalie Sterling of the Apex Region. You've now earned yourself a seat on the Association's B-Class board, automatically receiving a B-Class hunter's ID, and have the choice of a long-term contract with any Region of your choosing!"

Slow claps begin to sound from the audience of Directors.

I grin while watching the Bedrock Region's director point at the leaderboard and celebrate while the claps from his section echo the loudest.

The last moments of the battle happened so fast, it was almost impossible to see.

Even the 40 or so applicants in the second viewing area are particularly confused when the fire and lightning residue clears.

They all begin to clap slowly too.

The other Directors and their guests are still discussing the Flame Emperor's power, and many have more faith that there is something mystical behind it and it's not just a powerful artifact.

However, in the top 20 viewing area, there is a far different reaction. All of the hunters present are either partially paralyzed by the lightning residue that ricocheted off my attack, or they're stunned by the fact that two hunters just mutilated the top-rated Apex Region's hunter without thinking twice.

Many of them yell at Ember and me with anger in their voices.

"Why would you do that?"

"What's wrong with you? A cheap shot like that when he was disoriented from losing the match.... Nice way to kick a man when he's down."

"Just because you lost to his artifact doesn't give you the right to make such a brutal assault when he's unguarded."

I shrug off the insults and watch Nat make her victory lap around the ring.

None of the Apex guards have anything negative to say to me or Ember. Neither Callum nor Mack, the battle healer, say a word to us either. They're the only ones that understand we just saved all of them from being at the mercy of whatever that orange gem would have produced from Trax.

Nat's respawn item begins to flash and blink, then she is also teleported into the viewing area with all of the other top 20 finishers.

Rodrigo continues to speak to the crowd.

"Thank you all for coming out this evening. I know your travels out to the Apex Region were rather abrupt, but I believe the show tonight was well worth it!"

More chatter comes to the crowd as the arena is cleaned up of the leftover residue and Rodrigo floats down into the ring to speak directly to the Directors.

"Our winner will have time to decide which contract to draw up once the exams are over."

He points toward the box of 40 or so applicants across the ring.

"These fighters, however, have already been disqualified from reaching B-Class status this year. All of their contact information has been provided before this event, their test scores and marking from the first three trials have also been provided for your leisurely study as well. Please do reach out, and know that all short-term contracts that are done outside of one's home region below one year long will have their payouts doubled by the Apex Region. The friendly trade of resources between the eight great regions is recommended and rewarded!"

He smiles and turns to the viewing area where us, the rest of the applicants, watch.

"As for the top 20, the filing and offers of these new contracts must wait. We will be moving onto stage five, the final event of these exams!"

The entire area begins to close in on itself while Rodrigo floats up in the air out of its center and the blue dome protecting it disappears.

All of the directors that are seated on the outer edges move closer to the middle of the ring while the large box of applicants that failed the exams floats down toward the center of the ring.

It opens up once the arena has shrunk enough and all of the applicants come out in four single-file lines led by Apex Region Guards.

They reunite with their home regions and are met with mixtures of responses.

Many of the lesser regions like Raya, Silca, and Bedrock are rather uplifting and give their failed recruits a pat on the back to do better next time. However, the Vice, Veridian, and Phantom Regions give cold, unwelcoming reactions to their failed applicants.

The few Apex Region hunters that failed disappear behind the guards that lead them and wait for instruction.

The Talton Region Leader looks straight at our top 20 viewing area, while the glass front of it begins to be blocked by a layer of mana shielding to make the whole room solid.

I watch Rodrigo fly over, and hear a light thud on top of the box while the sensation of floating comes over me and the entire room starts to shift and move.

Rodrigo's voice resonates in all of our ears as a new leaderboard of the top 20 ranking is projected onto the ceiling and his face right next to it.

"Congratulations, you've made it to the final stage. You all did incredible in the tournament, and I'm sure no matter what happens from here on out, you will all be offered very good contracts for your time with us. In order to get proper results for the last trial, we will be giving you all a suite to rest in for 12 hours and a personal high-grade healer to negate your fatigue. The only hint I can give you now is that you will all be participating in this final stage simultaneously, so make sure to keep your remaining allies in mind moving forward."

As the cube floats up through the sky, the outlines of doors form on all of the walls numbered 1-20 and Rodrigo's voice calls out again.

"Due to the events taking place inside the viewing area, we need to immediately split you up into safe rooms and review the footage. No one is at fault, this is only standard safety protocol."

Despite these words, everyone in the rooms stares at Ember and me.

The only notable applicants other than the Apex applicants and Guards that don't are Dane, who was standing next to us the whole time and has blind trust in me, Nat, who is still in partial disbelief of what just happened in the last few hours, and Marcie, who smirks with her arms crossed, enjoying the scene caused in the room, not caring enough to pick sides.

The Phantom Region Applicant that made it into the top 20 watches me curiously from the back of the room too. He doesn't speak or move, and the ominous black mist of his ranked up buff has been active since such a commotion started.

This all changes once the feeling of soaring through the air in this room speeds up and we're all transported far away from the arena. Many applicants hold onto the wall as the room shifts and creaks.

The outlines of all of the doors fully form, and a few seconds later there is a sensation of landing and the room coming to a halt.

All 20 of the doors click and swing open to provide hallways twisting off in opposite directions.

I turn to look at Ember and speak through our link.

"Well... The orange gem is intact. I feel it in my storage, but it still isn't releasing any energy. I'll be able to study it once we finish this fifth stage."

His eyes track around the room while I walk over to the door labeled [1], then he replies.

"Good. Don't take it out of suspended animation until we're away from this exam site. It could easily disrupt the barrier I created just by making contact with it for too long. I know we had to act fast to subjugate that mage, but it may have been overkill. From Rodrigo's hint, my guess is it's going to be some kind of battle royale. My advice, we do the bare minimum to stay in the top 12 during stage five while helping your allies just barely get by too, then leave before they question our abilities any further."

His eyes still wander around the room while applicants walk through their doors.

Trax is carried into door number [2] by the wind magic of the Apex Guard while the emotionless healer walks beside him continuing to pulse white magic into his face and side.

I nod at him, then reply while we walk into separate rooms.

"We're almost there. I just want a single chance to be in the room across from those golden eyes. I want to see how strong the Apex Region's Director really is."

All 20 doors shut and the room is emptied, leaving just two of the guards behind inside.

I walk down the narrow hallway behind door [1] and find myself inside another suite with a lounge area with chairs, couches, a bed, bathroom, wall of B-Class gear, and a mountain of perfectly preserved food in transparent containment cases.

A 12-hour clock ticks down on the ceiling, and a door closes behind me, cutting off the exit to the hallway.

There are multiple messages stating that I should stock up on food, water, and as many items as I need for the next stage, but no actual clues as to what the stage will be show up.

I let out a sigh and jump onto the couch at the back of the lounge and begin to meditate and slowly take in the mana that comes off the shielding from the walls flowing through the air.

About two hours pass before the healer woman comes in after knocking.

She doesn't comment on the situation from before at all, and offers to heal me many times before my rude refusals are enough to make her leave.

Over the next ten hours, I shut my eyes and think.

While most hunters are in dire need of these resting times and healing opportunities, it is rather boring to me.

I fake being asleep and think about the possibilities of what this next round may be like. Ember's guess of some kind of battle royale seems likely, but I doubt there won't be some kind of twist to it.

The presence of the golden eyes I felt, power level of the two A-Class hunters, and mystery of the orange stone floating in my item storage rise to the surface above any worries I have for the fifth stage.

I can't quite understand why and how Divine Energy has anything to do with these exams, and the comment from Trax much earlier about the Director's obsession with healers and a special ability don't stop surfacing in my mind either.

Once the timer hits zero and the door opens, leading me back down the winding hall, I'm still not a single step closer to making a connection between any of this new info.

If anything, I'm even more confused.

I don't bother taking any food or gear from the piles and displays on the wall.

The door labeled [1] opens up back to the room where we all left from, and once I walk inside, there's quite the surprise waiting for me.

Lining the walls, all of the other hunter applicants line up just like I am, rejuvenated and fully geared up.

In the center of the room now, there is a small white circular table with a large cyan gem on top of it. It appears to be a sphere at first glance, but there are so many sides where light comes into it, the gem must have 30 or 40 edges.

It doesn't give off any energy at all, and given today's events, I have a good guess as to why.

Both of the A-Class hunters that intervened in the fight earlier stand behind the bright blue stone on guard. They stare forward with blank expressions on their faces while waiting for all of the doors to shut behind us and for all applicants to arrive.

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More applicants come out from their resting rooms, and the doors close, sealing the rooms behind them one by one.

The last door to open and reveal its hunter is the one right next to me labeled [2].

Trax comes walking out with a slow stride.

His right arm and side are fully healed and regrown; however, there's a large white scar on the side of his face.

He glares at me as he walks out, crackling with electricity, trying to show the entire room that the attack wasn't the end of our disagreements.

I stare at his face with an unsettled expression, not because I'm scared of his measly aura, but because I wasn't expecting my attack to leave such a permanent mark.

It appears even this soft heal skill at legendary grade and near the A-Class rating has its limits in healing delicate portions of the body. I'm so used to using mythic-grade self-regeneration and relying on Abby's restoration skill that I didn't realize it wouldn't be able to be mended.

It's clear everyone else in the room knew this beforehand, and their anger from hours before makes much more sense to me now.

Even so, I shrug and turn to the center of the room.

He deserves worse; I was being generous not going for the kill shot when I had the chance.

The scarred lightning user grunts and looks away from me, staring forward at the two A-Class hunters standing behind the light blue stone.

On this note, the ceiling lights up to show the rankings and Rodrigo's image talking to us.

"I hope you all had a peaceful rest and have stocked up on all the items necessary for this final stage of the exams."

Small circles open up in the floor below each applicant, and a silver tablet rises from the floor on thin white tables.

"Here, to compete in the 5th stage, we require each of you to sign a contract ensuring that any artifacts you manage to obtain in our next trial are property of the Apex Region. There are no exceptions; if you do not agree to a full body and item box search before and after this stage is complete, you may leave now and consider your hopes for a B-Class ID terminated."

He smiles and pauses.

"That is, except for our 1st place finisher in the last event. You may leave now if you wish and accept your B-Class ID without partaking in the final event."

Nat's eyebrows raise from across the room, and instantly a link between us opens.

While Rodrigo pauses again and many applicants begin reading the contract on silver tablets in front of them, we discuss whether or not she should take part in this stage. Something tells me leaving her alone, unable to tap into the Flame Emperor's power right now, isn't the safest bet. Both of us agree that entering this next stage of the exams so we can stick together is a better plan.

I look down at the contract after this too, flipping through the digital pages and signing the hunter Ray Anderson's name in each spot where it's necessary. Most of the text is just allowing access to our item boxes and penalties that will occur if we try to smuggle out any materials gained from this stage after this portion of the exams.

If there is this much prep beforehand, I assume the exam site will be heavily surveilled too. I wasn't planning on taking any of their worthless C and B Grade items before, but now they've piqued my interest. If there is any way or good reason for me to breach this contract in the future, I'm doing it without batting an eye. The name I'm signing isn't even mine.

Once everyone finishes up, Rodrigo continues talking.

"As many of you may have suspected, this final stage will be in a large open-air simulation zone. All applicants will be present at once and competing against each other."

Eyes start to dart across the room as people scope out their enemies and potential allies.

"Taking out your fellow applicants won't score you any points. The only way to win this event is to collect the artifacts that you've just signed agreements for."

Rodrigo takes out a blue recording crystal and plays a moving holographic image.

It is a bit odd seeing a video within a video, but he points at the recording as it plays to describe certain images shown of three different colored stones on a table.

"The red stones are worth 1 point, the orange are worth 10, and the yellows are 100. If you manage to find anything else; it will be judged by our A-Class hunters and given unique ratings. Any artifacts not matching those shown in this recording will be awarded 1000 points minimum."

Discussion murmurs throughout the room, questioning what the stones are, and some applicants that were watching the tournament closely enough recognize the resemblance of these stones to the red one that Trax ate in his match against me.

Rodrigo continues as the chatter grows.

"These stones will not produce any energy. They are merely tools used to power our simulation."

At this, as the whispers and tension in the room grow even more, the two A-Class hunters behind the large blue gem place their hands into item boxes by their sides and pull out small red gems of their own.

Trax's eyes widen, and I even see Callum and the battle healer instantly react.

They're in the dark on this matter as much as I am.

Ember's eyes track the gems as they enter both of the guards' mouths, whose levels surpass both of ours.

I get into a ready fighting stance and prepare for the worst.

However, when their eyes light up red, they don't lose control like the lightning user did down in the ring during the last stage.

They both turn toward each other, nod once, then place their hands down on the blue stone.

The red light is siphoned out of their bodies and into the crystal, making their eyes return to their normal state almost instantly after.

Nothing happens for a few seconds, but everyone in the room stops talking so Rodrigo continues while he has our attention.

"As I said, there is nothing to worry about. They are worthless stones that power the simulation machine. Think of this as a vast dungeon to hunt inside. Many monsters will spawn, and the further away from your starting region you venture outward, the stronger these manifestations will be."

He shows a thin smile, but it doesn't look as genuine as the ones he usually shows.

At the same time, the blue gem in the center of the room starts to pulse with a light blue, almost cyan tint.

As the light gets brighter and brighter, the A-Class Guards take a step back, and a wide tear in space begins to form and grow at a slow and steady rate.

No energy at all can be felt, and the only thing I can visually relate it to is the Demonic Rift that brought me to the Demonic Realm for game-like trials or the Void Creeper Rift I stepped through with my body double that teleported me into a very strange fortress filled with an army of Titans being controlled by their King.

An invisible wave that feels like heavy pressure crashes against my Divine Limiter, and I hear bells ringing in my ears while the thin layer that keeps my mana control at bay violently ripples.

I take deep breaths and concentrate much harder to keep it at bay, but the waves of invisible gravity keep crashing into me from within wherever this rift leads to.

Rodrigo's voice continues as the rift grows in size to about 3 meters high.

"The simulation gate will be open for 28 days. You may use any artifacts you wish, any hidden powers, and may even kill your opponents to take their loot to steal their points."

At this last remark, the chatter in the room starts again, but Rodrigo shuts it down quickly.

"Nothing you see inside the gate is real. A respawn item like in the last round isn't necessary. If you die, you will find yourself back in this room. However, the artifacts we're looking for can only be brought back through the gate manually. If you die, they will not teleport back with you."

One of the A-Class guards walks forward toward the rift and motions like he's about to jump through, but his hand hits the bright blue energy barrier as if there is an invisible wall blocking him.

"Our A-Class helper took the same test as you in this same simulation years ago. It is programmed to only let each user enter and leave once. So know, once you manually leave or die inside, your trial is over. Your current rankings are where you all start, but points gathered during this final portion of the exams are weighted far more heavily than any other stage. Given a high enough point gap, the 20th ranked applicant has the potential to reach 1st place."

He walks back to stand next to the other hunter, and an eruption of questions from applicants fills the room.

Many more bounce around in my head too.

His insistence on this being a simulation sounds less and less true the more he talks, and the use of two red divine fragments to trigger the activation of this large blue device doesn't help mask that point.

Whatever Rodrigo is saying, it feels like it's being forced out of him through a script.

He takes a few minutes to answer everyone's questions and concerns, but they're all met with general responses that don't add anything of substance to the matter.

To add to all of my confusion, the look on Ember's face after the rift appeared isn't of concern like any of the other appearances of divine energy so far; his eyes are practically sparkling at the sight of it.

Even worse, this trial is meant to last 28 days, which by now is far beyond the natural decay point that the mana control and soul energy suppression items Ember made for us will last.

The only words I get out of him through our link between him analyzing the blue gem and staring through the rift are, "We should go through. Divine rifts like this one are too rare to pass up. What he's saying is correct, the fact that it was opened in such close proximity to us means we'll never get a chance to jump through it again even if we wanted."

The heavy waves of gravity that pour out of it, threatening to release my mana control's full power, only grow stronger the longer we wait in this room.

Rodrigo's explanations finally stop, and he speaks to all of us again.

"There will be no supervision within the simulation. Your efforts will only be judged on the amount of artifacts you bring back. There is nothing more to be explained any further. Please, line up in front of the rift in your ranking order and present your item boxes to be searched and documented before the trial begins."

At this, everyone in the room starts to shift, and a final reply comes out of Rodrigo.

"Good luck, hunters. I look forward to seeing 12 of you again in 28 days once our B-Class graduation ceremony begins."

Every step I take closer to the rift, the waves of pressure that ripple against my barrier become stronger and stronger.

The conversations in the room fade away as I concentrate fully on aligning myself, keeping my limiter at bay, and handing over my fake item box to the A-Class guards to search.

All they find inside are a few C and B-Grade items and a dozen or so MP potions I brought along as decoy items, and both of the guards don't react at all. They just log down exactly what's inside on silver tablets before giving it back to me.

One of them does a probing scan with a large amount of dense aura and also notes down no abnormalities in my gear being worn, showing that they're all low B-Grade at best thanks to my conceal skill.

Then, the other hands back my item box and motions for me to walk through.

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Every step I take closer to the light blue tear in space before me sends more high-pressure waves of gravity against my concealment barrier.

It makes me focus more and more of my physical and mental capacity on keeping the limiter stable, drowning everything out in the room.

The chatter of applicants behind me goes completely mute, even the two A-class guards by my sides fade out of my senses, and all I focus on is walking forward.

My foot hits the blue space, and it falls through as if there is nothing there.

My next step follows, and my full body falls through the rift.

Instead of the hard mana-shielded floor, my foot hits rock covered in moss and dirt.

My head comes through, and I take a deep breath of the cool, crisp air, feeling a large gust of wind hit my face.

As I walk further away from the rift, the waves of gravity start to cease, and reality around me hits my senses again.

A loud whistling sound hits my ears, and I turn my head to find myself on a cliff's edge.

Down below me, large white clouds drift by.

Looking off into the distance, even with all of my advanced perception upgrades, looking out into the horizon almost a full 70 km, there is nothing but open air and rolling clouds with a light blue sky backdrop.

To both my left and right, I see the cliff's edge go on further than I can see as well.

I'm on a triangular peninsula of land in the sky, with the bright blue rift at the very tip of it, and the only direction I can travel is further inland.

From the point where I stand, the land stretches outward for a few hundred meters before I see the dirt and moss grow much greener and lush trees, pools of crystal clear water, rock formations, and all kinds of shrubbery grow. Looking even further in the distance, even bright colored fruits grow on some of the trees.

Other than the whistling wind below me, everything is silent.

Some high-sailing clouds in the distance move over the edges of the land, but they clear away and dip back down beneath the cliff as it looks like the morning sun is revealing more and more land the more I internalize everything.

I take more steps forward and begin analyzing the air and my surroundings with my buffs and skills now.

The air is far less dense with mana than any environment I've ever been in. It feels like there's even less than being out in the isolated desert of the Dark Continent.

There are still small particles to absorb here and there, but it isn't enough to sustain me for any long-term battles like dungeons or the simulation rooms I practiced in earlier.

I'll have to use mana crystals and MP potions to re-up my MP bar occasionally.

My aura of enemy detection and all-seeing eye spreads out through the wilderness, making scans of anything moving or made of mana for many kilometers through the trees and clouds, and what I get back as readings is unclear.

There are small pockets of mana that my enemy detection picks up as living organisms, but there is no level nor visuals to support it. I only get rough location readings and relative strength levels based on how much mana control they're putting out.

I'm not too concerned, as the readings I detect have the mana control strength of a barely ranked-up hunter; but in using so many detection perks at once another realization hits me.

My Rising Emperor's Domain is deactivated.

I can't sense any of my links of loyalty at all, nor can I see their geo-locations.

I pull up the menu in a hurry, but this doesn't help my confusion at all either, as everything is still there, showing my teammates and citizens of the Crimson Cities' names, vitals, and level, but they're all greyed out and frozen in the positions they were when I was back in the exam site.

While looking down, scrolling through all of the inactive options, one of the masses of mana in the nearby forest shifts from its normal path and begins running my way.

It isn't fast, but it breaks me from my concentration on my status, and I pull my daggers from my item storage to get ready for a fight. The readings are not strong, but whatever this may be I'm not going to underestimate it.

My daggers are charged up, and static electricity courses through my body while my perception is focused on the single point of mass coming my way.

The bushes move, then a few tree branches above shake, and a jet-black jaguar comes running out covered in a white aura of wind magic.

Its sharp eyes stare me down as it doesn't hesitate to send half a dozen wind blades my way.

They're slow and weak, at least compared to the fights I was in during the tournament; however, I still use the speed and power I used to face Trax in the final round just in case there's energy in this monster I can't sense.

I dodge every one of its wind blades and send two lightning crescents back its way at speeds impossible to dodge.

The yellow crescents slice it to pieces in an instant, and its remains fall to the rocky floor in front of the forest.

A blue text box pops up above it.

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 52,596

[YES][NO]

It's not much at all, but it's more than the 0 I was expecting. The minimum 0.1% absorption rate of my skill activated.

Despite there being no level rating above this monster, it still has mana control to spare. This means it isn't a body double or mere hologram of manifested mana like the monsters in the simulations prior to this one.

My gaze tightens as I walk closer to the creature, and the waves of gravity, just like I felt near the barrier, begin to ripple off its corpse.

They're nowhere near as strong as the waves from the rift; I'm even able to touch the jaguar with my boot once I'm close enough, and it doesn't take much concentration to keep my limiter active.

I accept the MCP, and the status screen disappears. I'm even able to plunder the mana left in its body to bring my MP bar back up to full.

After about a minute, the remains start to dissolve away into the air. The waves of gravity don't stop until it's fully disappeared.

For a fraction of a second, it looks like a small clear crystal has dropped to the ground. However, it doesn't give off any readings, and dissolves into the air as well before I can get a closer look.

I was fully expecting one of those red gems to drop, but nothing is left behind. I'm left standing alone as the wind whistles, staring into the trees.

At the same time, I feel a new presence on my enemy detection radar with a level spawn in behind me and see Trax wander out with the same look of wonder I did just a few minutes earlier.

After he begins to piece together where he is, he immediately senses me, but I yell out first.

"We can either get this over with right now, or we can go our separate ways and battle it out once we have some artifacts to actually fight over..."

I point my daggers at him once he pulls out his sword and steps closer, glaring at me but not replying.

"What's it going to be? Your choice."

He keeps walking closer, eyeing me up and down, so I let a surge of lightning out to show that my ranked up buff is activated and I mean what I said.

Then, the lightning mage looks back toward the rift, then at me, and lets out a grunt through his gritted teeth while putting his sword down by his side.

"You're right... It would be a waste to fight now... I'll find you once you've farmed artifacts for me."

Then, he runs off into the woods with his feet covered in static.

I smirk and power down my lightning but continue to watch him on my enemy detection skill as he ventures off into the forest alone.

Every few minutes, more applicants come out, and I wait by the treeline.

Most of the Apex Region hunters confront me just like Trax did, but instead of instigating a fight and taking them out, I point them off in the direction their leader ran off to.

The other Vice and Veridian applicants that made it into the top 20 don't bother talking to me, they just run off into the forest and avoid eye contact.

Once Ember makes his way through the rift, he slowly walks over to me while his eyes wander the woods and look high up into the sky above us.

As soon as his reading pops up in my enemy detection skill, his vitals and geo-location reappear and update in my Rising Emperor's domain too.

His first words to me through our link once he gets near are, "This isn't what I was expecting... This is quite an old rift, it seems the Association has been forcefully keeping it open for a while. We're not in the Divine Realm, but we're not too far away from it either."

His gaze keeps looking up into the blue sky above us, but there's nothing up there to see.

I reply.

"Then where are we...? Is this another world? Like the Demonic Realm, or wherever that Void Creeper's Rift brought us to? My ranked-up buff isn't registering anyone's presence but yours."

Ember nods.

"Something like that. It makes sense that you wouldn't be able to contact anything outside this realm... I doubt teleportation crystals will work here either."

His eyes lock onto something far away in the trees.

"Don't worry, what Rodrigo said is true... no matter what happens in here, we'll be right back where we left once this realm rejects us. If we make it far enough in, we won't have to worry about our concealment barriers decaying either."

"Okay, but that still doesn't answer any of my questions. What is this place? Where are we really...?"

Ember grins, but his mind still looks preoccupied and his eyes are glossed over as he scans the horizon.

"To be honest, I'm not sure. It's a construct made by a Divine Beast. Kind of like a simulation, but really it's the half-finished creation of an entire Realm. I've never seen an artificial one this massive. I'm in the dark about the rules of this place, so you can ask as many questions as you want and the best I can answer with would be guesses. Every construct has its unique limits set by its creator. I just know we need to head that way to reach its center..."

More people start coming out of the rift one by one.

Nat walks over next, and her vitals and stats come rushing into my consciousness, then even Marcie wanders by soon after.

A few minutes after she does, another jaguar attacks, and she's able to defend and defeat it with ease. This one wields water magic instead of wind, and Marcie is equally as disappointed when nothing drops from its remains.

Ember speaks through our link once he sees my expression while looking at the dissolving monster.

"Monsters down here won't have what we're looking for."

He points off into the forest, but his finger is angled upward.

"If we want to find any of those so-called artifacts, we'll have to venture out in that direction and find stronger monsters with fully developed cores."

I nod and watch the woods as every few minutes more black jaguars attack the new applicants that come through the rift and enter the forest.

The large black cats all wield different elements, but share the same sharp eyes.

Some use earth, others use fire, and I even watch one of them use light magic to make illusions of itself while attacking.

Yet, they all fall and drop nothing when they die all the same.

Finally, Dane comes out of the rift and meets us. His vitals and geolocation update in my mind as well.

I nod as he approaches, then use lightning magic beneath my feet to levitate upward to try and get a better vantage point while coming up with some basic ground rules and a strategy to rely on if we're going to take this on as a team.

My first instinct is to go on ahead with Ember and reap the rewards of this construct all for myself, but an even better idea comes to mind.

While having lower levels tag along may hold me back at first, it doesn't mean they'll be weak for long. If I'm able to gain MCP from killing these monsters, that means anyone with a link of loyalty can use my skill and become stronger very quickly as well.

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"We'll wait until everyone else enters the woods. I have something I want to test out before we go hunting."

Ember still stares off into the wilderness while Dane and Nat both patiently wait near him.

Marcie watches the rift far off in the distance with one hand on her spear and the other on her waist while she replies.

"Why wait? And what's in it for me to join up with all of you? Wouldn't splitting the loot five ways make us a lot slower than any of the other groups out there? Other than the apex Elites, I didn't see any teams over three members..."

I shrug, considering the fact that she is the only one here that hasn't formed a link of loyalty with me, and reply.

"Possibly. If you want to go out there alone, be my guest. I just think it'd be more beneficial to stick together. You saw just as well as I did how powerful that artifact was when Trax ate it during the tournament. These weaker monsters don't drop anything of substance either. It's clear that whatever we're looking for in this stage is going to be a lot stronger than you can handle alone..."

I look over at Nat, then back to the spear wielder.

"We have the power of the Flame Emperor on our side, after all. I'm sure if you joined us he'd be generous enough to share his power."

I smirk, and at the same time another random hunter comes out of the rift and makes his way into the woods alone.

Marcie doesn't seem amused by my comment, so I speak more while looking at everyone around me.

"I'm not kidding, each of us is closely linked to the Flame Emperor. If you join my team and trust me as your leader, you'll be granted the same power Nat showed in the ring."

I want to have Marcie as an ally, but she's never given me back the same sentiment. While I can rely on slowly building a relationship with the Talton Region from monthly trade deals, making a direct link through these exams seems like a much more efficient strategy.

She laughs at my remark and turns toward the forest.

"Yeah, right... Prove it or I'm leaving to hunt on my own right now."

I float down to meet her at eye level and think carefully about my next words.

Another hunter walks out of the rift and at the same time I open a telepathy link to Ember.

"There's really no surveillance in this place, right? Whatever I say won't be heard or seen by the Association."

He shakes his head and replies while staring at the sky.

"If they're not in the realm, they definitely can't interact with it. Whatever you're about to do or say can only be perceived from inside."

"Good."

I want to fill my teammates in somewhat, giving them the impression that I'm linked to the Flame Emperor in some way, but don't want to give out enough information to completely blow my cover. I can say and show a lot more considering the fact that the Association can't spy on me here, but I still want these new teammates to believe I'm Ray Anderson from the Bedrock Region for as long as possible.

I nod and activate my buff to give 5% of my stats and mana control to Nat, then 5% of both to Dane as well.

On cue, I weaken my limiter and raise the perceived amount of my mana control to match theirs and so does Ember.

It's a familiar feeling to Natalie, and once she feels the fire magic skill add to her status, she knows what to do.

The only one shocked at this revelation is Dane. His eyes widen as a massive amount of power flows into him unannounced and I send a wave of telepathy into his mind.

"You chose the right people to put your faith in. Ever since the simulation trials, you've been accepted as a follower of the Flame Emperor as well. Test out your borrowed power."

I smirk, and in unison, all four of us burst with flames and let out a sickeningly dense aura.

After 5 seconds, I power everyone down and return to normal too, assuming I've made my point.

I reply to Marcie out loud.

"I believe this is more than enough proof for you. In fact, you've even come in contact with followers of the Flame Emperor in the past as well. His reach spans further than you'd expect."

I put a finger in the air and let electricity stream out of it into a ball around my finger.

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

Using the advanced perks of my conceal skill, I move and shape the mana coming out of my hand into a perfect replication of Bri's face, then point to her armor and spear.

"Your high-grade items were crafted by a new Dark Continent leader, were they not?"

Marcie's eyes turn much sharper at this statement, and I make the image disappear while letting her reply.

"How do you know that? Who are you?"

I shrug.

"Even if I could explain it all to you plain and simple, I doubt it'd make a difference. Just know I'm an ally that wants to create a friendly relationship with as many regions as I can while partaking in these exams. Follow me as a leader, and you'll stay in the top 12, plus gain more power than you imagined possible."

Then, I turn toward the forest.

"I know your loyalty stands with your Regional Leader, but in order to share this power with you, you're going to need to at least temporarily put your trust in me."

Marcie stares at me, contemplating my words over and over in her head, then as I'm about to speak again, a final hunter comes out from the rift covered in a veil of darkness.

The Phantom Region hunter disappears the moment he enters the realm, then reappears a few meters ahead, and continues to blip in and out of existence until he reaches the forest and his readings completely vanish from my senses.

I turn my head back and continue what I was saying.

"That's the last one, we either head out together or go our separate ways. What's it going to be?"

She looks at me again, this time with a million questions flashing behind her eyes, but I slowly feel a connection growing just like Dane's did between the 3rd and 4th Stage.

There's a notification in my inner ear and I see all of her stats and vitals appear in my mind while her exact location shows she's standing right in front of me.

Then, she puts out her free hand and I shake it.

"At this point, I'd be stupid to say no. I'll join you, just for this last stage."

"Perfect. Now that we're all on the same page, let's see if my theory about this place stands true..."

I walk over to the edge of the forest and pull out a few items from my item storage through my fake item box.

While I shape high-grade shielding, a heap of mana crystals, and a pile of luminite inside a containment case into a circle, there are a few looks of awe but no one says a word.

After a few minutes pass and a bright flash of light follows, a brand-new teleportation platform and about 100 crystals to go with it come into existence in front of our eyes.

I stand back about 10 meters, then crush one of the white gems.

It flashes me away in a blinding white light and brings me onto the base of the platform instantly.

"Nice. That takes care of that problem."

In a matter of seconds, I pull out more shielding, and shape it into a dome around the platform with a small door opening. I imbue the structure with a mythic grade stealth attribute, then cover the entire structure in a layer of rock identical to the forest environment.

Not a drop of mana comes off of it, and it looks just like a normal boulder except for a tiny opening that faces directly toward a clump of nearby trees.

The looks of awe and disbelief grow, but I just turn to throw each of my teammates a few teleport crystals for themselves, then speak up.

"It's for if we venture too far into the simulation. Like Rodrigo said, the only way to get crystals out will be back through the rift. It'd be a waste to make it 14 days in and have to turn back. Now we don't have to worry about getting lost either."

They catch the crystals and I grant each of them about 0.5% of my mana control along with my absorption skill while turning to walk into the forest.

"Come on. We have some work to do, I'll explain what I can on the way. Ask any questions you want, I'll answer what I can."

They follow me into the dense forest, and we begin moving at a steady rate.

With the shared mana control I'm giving them, they can conserve much more mana and move through the terrain far more efficiently. However, I don't want to grant them so much that they're totally reliant on my power.

Every kill they make now adds about 250-500k MP to their total control. While my kills only give me 0.1%, my teammates are lower leveled than me so they reap far higher rewards. The system grants Nat 1% of their MCP because she's perceived as even lower level than these monsters while both Marcie and Dane get 0.5%.

From the range of my enemy detection readings, this forest is endless. There are millions of MCP waiting to be absorbed for them the further we travel.

A few questions are asked about this shared power, and the fact that I just made a teleport platform out of thin air is also a hot topic. Most of the questions come from Dane and Marcie, but even Nat has a few things to ask.

I avoid giving direct answers to most of them, as the feats I've just shown in front of them defy all logic taught by the Association and general information on what a single hunter is capable of. However, with some long winded answers, help from Ember, and the obvious avoidance of some explanations no matter how many times it's asked, they all come to the conclusion that this Flame Emperor tale I've been weaving is far more complicated than the surface makes it seem.

We're all here for different reasons, and the scenario we're in now benefits all of us, so after about an hour, no more questions come rolling in. We just continue to venture through the forest at a very quick rate and farm jaguars.

As hours pass, we do pass by a few other solo hunters and even squads, but I make sure to curve our path away from them to only interact with the monsters that spawn in these woods.

The jaguars are all the same strength, no matter how far into the woods we travel.

They grant us MCP, and every time they dissolve away, the same small waves of gravity hit my limiter and the outline of a clear crystal is present for a few fractions of a second before there's nothing left.

After about 6 hours, we stop for a break so those that need to can eat food and rest for a moment. I temporarily activate self regeneration on everyone too, so it can heal their fatigue once we start our travel inward again.

Another 6 hours pass, and the forest doesn't change.

The rocks look identical to the paths we took when we entered, and the trees are still lush green and filled with bright-colored fruits.

I can't even sense the area we left from anymore; it's far out of range.

We stop again for a food and potion break, and I take this time to push my senses to their limits, probing out far into the endless forest to see if there are any anomalies, stronger monsters, or unique structures in sight.

For a full minute, I continue pushing my range outward, even flying into the air to try and get a better vantage point.

It seems to really just be an endless flat jungle full of black jaguars as far as the eye can see.

I use my stealth skill to disappear in mid-air, then activate my second-ranked-up buff to use my greater form, boosting my senses even further and I finally see what I'm looking for...

There's an end to the forest in sight. We're over halfway through it, but my gaze tilts upward as I see what Ember was pointing to before.

Chapter 555

At the edge of the forest, an impossibly high mountain stretches up into the sky.

It is too wide for me to see its edges, so the structure just looks like a stone wall that tilts back at a hardly noticeable angle and fades up into the pale blueness of the realm above.

My enemy detection skill picks up on monsters that are stronger than the jaguars in the forest high above as well. They're ugly-looking scavenger birds, 5 to 10 meters in wingspan, slowly gliding through the sky in circles, waiting patiently while looking at the forest below. Some of the birds even higher up perch on various ledges with tired eyes and permanent scornful expressions on their faces.

I can't see every bird that I can sense with my enemy detection skill, but of the few that fly very high, a dim red glow radiates off some of them.

Their energy ratings don't differ from any of the others, and this makes me believe maybe we're closer to finding the source of these divine fragments than I thought.

Aside from the birds themselves, there is hardly any life on this endless mountain into the sky. There are small shrubs and old trees that grow on the wall of stone every few hundred meters, but they look as starved of nutrients as the monsters that perch near them.

My gaze continues to travel upward, and I use all of my buffs while continuously replenishing my MP bar with mana crystals, but I can't sense the top of the mountain.

Even so, there's nowhere else to move forward, so I know this is where we need to go next.

I deactivate my buffs and stealth skill, then float down to meet the others after they've had their rest.

Even in the last 12 hours, they've each grown significantly stronger, gaining tens of millions of MCP each, but it's not enough to make any noticeable impact yet. They're still heavily relying on the small mana control I'm sharing with them.

If we can make it to the mountain soon, that will expedite their growth process significantly.

"We're halfway there. I see a change in terrain coming up. Once we make it through these woods, we're finally going to fight some monsters that drop some loot. We're hours ahead of any other teams, so push through and we'll get first picks on the monsters in the new zone."

Everyone does as I say, but despite my constant use of self-regeneration on them after each of their battles, and even more food and rest breaks, it takes us 14 more hours to make it to the base of the mountain.

Natalie and Dane are visibly the most tired while Marcie's outward appearance holds up strong, but I can tell they're all exhausted from traveling through this rocky terrain and fighting hundreds of ranked-up monsters.

What I mentioned before still stands true.

At the rate we've been going, now that the upward tilted stone cliff into the sky is right in front of us, the closest team behind us is over 8 hours away.

Other solo hunters and parties have already stopped to take long breaks to sleep while their travel partners keep watch and alternate.

However, an odd phenomenon has shown itself over the 26 hours that pass: the bright blue sky and sunlight coming down on us from an unknown source continues to light up the day.

There have been small moments of shade as rogue clouds pass by, but for the entirety of the time we've been here, the day has never turned to night.

If this is just a simulation like everyone believes it to be, an endless day makes sense. However, another oddity I find makes me wonder about the physics of this construct even more. I'm not sure if anyone else has noticed, but the total number of monsters coming our way has greatly diminished the longer we're here in the forest.

We're at the front of the pack, so we get to face the monsters head-on; and it's less noticeable. The woods spread out further than I can even sense now to either side of us; so teams that take other paths won't be affected by our overhunting. However, once we kill these jaguars, replacements don't spawn in on a timer like they do in dungeons.

From the data I've gathered so far, either there is a finite amount of creatures that was predetermined when we entered this realm, or the respawn rate is far lower than that of dungeons.

Considering the trees and earth we stand on are real... and not created from pure mana like the dungeons themselves, I can't even fathom either option being sustainable. So, once we make this final stop at the base of the mountain I don't bother telling anyone my findings.

"Rest up. You all did well today. Emrie and I will stand guard for a few hours, then we'll start climbing the mountain before any other teams arrive."

A small camp is set up, and lots of items from the resting rooms before the exams are taken out to create a perfect sleeping environment for the three of them. Surprisingly, they fall asleep quickly in a matter of minutes, exhausted from the day, and I activate stealth again and use my greater form to enhance my senses to get another look at the mountain above me now at a much closer range.

The birds still fly in circles near the cliffside, and I can see more and more the higher I look up the mountain.

I still can't see its top, but I can definitely see the red glow many of them give off now without any doubt.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

I reappear back at our camp to be greeted by Ember with a link of telepathy the moment I deactivate my stealth skill and come back to the ground.

"We could be traveling much faster alone. This forest could have been cleared in just a few hours if we skipped the low-level fights and flew above it... not to mention their excessive need for sleep."

I nod, replying through the link while staring up the mountain.

"I agree. I want to set off alone just as much as you do. Once I train them to become stronger than any other hunters here, we can leave them to farm for points and keep all of the other applicants at bay. There's red energy coming off of the monsters on this mountain, I can't sense it, but I assume that's no coincidence."

Ember stares upward to match my gaze into the sky.

"Yes, we'll find monsters that have fully formed cores soon... The higher up this mountain goes, the denser the air is with Divine Energy. I couldn't see it before, but I sensed a very strong presence in the sky at the top of this mountain. I recommend we spend as little time as possible wasting away with this dead weight. As profitable as it may be to make these connections, our time in a realm like this isn't one to be taken for granted."

I grin.

"I know. We'll wake them up in 8 hours and continue. I don't plan on wasting our time here at all. Watch them sleep. Until then, I want to see what these monsters with fully formed cores can do."

Ember nods.

"Very well. Just don't make physical contact unless you want to prematurely decay your barrier. Long-range attacks are the safer option. Your mana alone should be more than enough to handle a fully awakened red core."

I jump up into the air again, activating stealth and rocketing up into the sky at speeds that far surpass anything I've used during this entire time within the realm.

In just a few minutes, I've already made my way 20 kilometers up the cliffside, and find myself coming toward one of the scavengers.

Its mana control readings are far stronger than the jaguars below, but I don't see any red energy coming off of this one, so I don't hold back to slice it in two with an upward slash while continuing my ascent.

The absorption popup I receive allows me to take in 112,366 MCP, meaning this creature had double the mana control of any jaguar down below me.

A full hour passes and I reach the height of about 150 kilometers off the ground, tearing through over a dozen more vultures in the sky and watching the MCP reading I absorb increase every time I get higher.

It isn't until this height I finally see one of the vultures with the mysterious red mist surrounding its chest.

Instead of slashing through it like all of the others in stealth mode, reducing it to a pile of burnt meat and feathers before it even knows what hits it, I stop to hover in mid-air about 100 meters in front of it, directly blocking its flight path.

Turning off my stealth skill, I blip into existence in front of the creature and its survival instincts kick in.

Instead of trying to intimidate me or create a direct attack, it flaps its wings and soars upward while letting out a shriek.

I didn't give any of the other birds on the way up a chance to attack, but this one lets out two crescents of wind magic with the flap of its wings as a distraction while changing direction.

The waves of mana are tinted red, and I watch as it comes closer and feel weak waves of gravity ripple against my limiter as I airstep out of the way.

It's slow, and nowhere near as intense as the red energy in Trax's attacks in the arena.

I let it swerve around the air to observe its following attacks too, and get the same feeling every time the light red, almost pink-colored crescent comes near.

By the fifth attack, the air blades get less and less colorful until they're just made of pure mana again and no red aura surrounds the bird at all.

"How interesting..."

I fly upward and kill it without hesitating at all and continue my ascent.

Even with my 0.1% absorption rate, the last one I killed brings in 199,706 MCP, meaning if any of the 3 new links of loyalty below me were to make this kill and receive a full 1%, they'd be gaining close to 2 million MCP per kill.

Just to make sure, I wait behind and use telekinesis to hold the bird's corpse to watch it disintegrate, but nothing more than the faint outline of a clear core remains for a brief instant before it's all completely gone.

Another two full hours pass, climbing an additional 200 meters, while burning through large amounts of mana crystals to maintain my speed upward, and I come face to face with many more of these birds with red coloring in their attacks.

The higher I fly, the more common they become.

I do many tests to evaluate their strength and abilities.

Without the red light, their power is similar to a strong level 600-700 hunter.

With the red light, their attack power and even speed increases to heights nearing level 800-900, but it is quickly extinguished once the energy within them is spent.

Just like the jaguars, their elements vary. While over 50% of them use wind magic, occasional birds send jets of water and balls of fire too.

I send long-range attacks at some to kill them before they use up this power, and wait to see what happens with them as well.

To my surprise, when they dissolve, the faint outline of a clear core remains for a few seconds in some of them, and the faint pink outline of energy trying to consolidate into a red crystal core is leftover floating in space.

I said I'd be back to meet Ember again in 8 hours, and I've burned through almost half of that time already, but with every scavenger creature I kill up here, the half-formed cores leftover stay in physical form much longer every time.

The last bird I kill grants me over a quarter million MCP, and the red light surrounding it nearly covers its whole body at the start of the battle.

I'm using full-powered attacks, so I still kill it in a single slash, but the remnants of a red core left behind stay in physical form for over 10 full seconds.

"Alright... I'm getting close..."

I decide to do one last push before turning back, activating my greater form and rocketing up the mountain at full speed to try and find a vantage point to aim for once I return to the others.

A full hour passes, and the flashes of red light I pass get brighter and brighter until a clumping of extremely dense mana control readings finally reaches the edge of my senses, which may be what I'm looking for.

I change my direction and diverge from my straight path to head right for the only anomaly on the mountain.

Once within range I slow my flight speed and take in the view of an enormous flaming bird.

Its wings stretch over 15 meters across, and bright red flames engulf its entire body.

Despite being the same species as the disgusting scavengers that cover this cliff, the bright fire that crackles on it and glowing crimson eyes of this monster are quite beautiful.

To my surprise, this monster isn't what caught my attention when I was doing my scan.

The high volume of mana control I sensed in my enemy detection skill earlier becomes clear when 5 far smaller birds with less bright red auras and varying elements show themselves circling around it in close proximity; feeding off the aura of dazzling red light.

Their mana controls are some of the highest I've seen on this mountain so far, however, the flaming bird at their center doesn't have a drop of mana in it at all.

Waves of pressure come rippling off it once it notices my arrival and lets out its echoing screech.

Rock falls from the nearby cliffside from the disruption, and the mana-less flames grow in size.

I stare in awe as I take in the beauty of a creature with a natural fully awakened red core.

At the echoing sound of the fiery bird's screech, the five circling vultures turn my way and don't hesitate to send red-tinted attacks directly at me.

I easily dodge them and twist through the air, sending crescents of mana into each of them, but make sure not to injure the magnificent bird behind them.

Even when pushing my senses out as far as they can go, I don't sense any anomalies like this one nearby, so I want the chance to study it before killing it or damaging it to the point where it can't use its power in an unaltered state.

Less than a full second passes, and I move through the air defeating its orbiters before coming face to face with the massive red bird right outside its aura's range.

Waves of gravity ripple against me, making the sound of a high-pitched bell vibrate in my ears while I collect the MCP from the fallen monsters surrounding it.

The crimson eyes of the monster lock onto me, and it flaps its wings while hovering in place, sending a dense wave of red light, similar in strength to that of the attacks Trax threw during our fight in the ring.

I smile and airstep out of the way, sending a moderately dense mana blade into the flames at an angle.

The collision disrupts the red slash, and another epicenter of gravity waves is formed, hitting my barrier with greater intensity.

"Yeah, long-range attacks it is...."

I airstep to the opposite side of the bird while it tracks me with glowing eyes and sends another wave of fire void of mana my way.

I perform the same motion, releasing a pure mana strike into the flames and disrupting the flow. This time, however, I change the strength of my attack to be slightly stronger.

The next wave it throws, I try a weaker release.

Over and over, I circle the bird at a distance right outside its red glowing aura and continue to deflect its attacks while using varying strengths of mana control to gauge how strong its energy really is.

Without it coming up on my senses, this is the only way to figure out its true strength.

After three full minutes pass, and almost fifty attacks, I finally come to the conclusion that its estimated strength is that of a 950-1000 hunter, on the verge of ranking up again.

Many of the lower level Vice and Veridian Region hunters in the woods below could not defeat this creature in a battle.

However, the possibility of a few of the Apex Elites taking this creature out wouldn't be too tough of a challenge. Even Trax, or Callum, using their ranked-up buff could probably finish it off alone.

Unlike the massive surge of intensity the lightning user showed in the ring when he ate one of these red stones, and also like all of the other birds I found on this mountain, after countless attacks this monster's red light doesn't dim at all.

It shines with the same beautiful crimson radiance as it did when our battle began.

"Alright, now let's see how you fare against one of my attacks back..."

I charge up a blade of mana, slightly stronger than the blades it's been throwing at me, and let it fly aimed straight at the bird's neck.

My suspicions are that it will have some kind of special defense, or there will be an eruption of gravity used to block this strike too heavy for me to handle at close range, so I jump backward after letting it go but am very surprised at the attack's results.

The blade of mana collides with the flames that surround the bird just like any of its other attacks.

Both energies are disrupted, but there is a portion of mana leftover that makes it through.

The blade hits the bird's feathers and flesh, then slices through with close to no resistance.

The tale has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the violation.

Once the blade of mana makes its way halfway through its neck, however, it is met with another similar unsensible strong force and they collide to release the remaining energy left in the attack, proving to be even more detrimental than my initial blow.

Its head and chest are stained with blood, leaving a gaping hole where my attack landed.

I don't sense a drop of mana in this bird, and it doesn't have any to use as defensive shielding; the crimson flames are truly the only bit of energy it has.

Its red eyes begin to flicker, then from the area my attack made its mark, the red flames surrounding its body start to decay and completely disappear.

In a matter of seconds, the absence of flames spreads from the wound and its entire body grows cold and lifeless.

At the same moment, its red aura surrounding it disappears as well, and the mighty bird begins to fall down the side of the endless mountain.

I stare confused for a few seconds, then airstep downward to follow its descent.

Once at eye level, I use telekinesis and hover with it right in front of me.

I still feel a very faint ripple of gravity coming my way now as I hold the creature's body, and am a bit disappointed when no absorption notification pops up; however, once the monster dissolves entirely, a small red gem is left behind.

The ripples against my barrier are coming from its direction, but I still feel nothing coming off the red fragment left behind.

"Well... I guess this is a start."

A spatial magic portal opens beneath the red gem and I let it fall through before turning to face the bottom of the mountain again.

It wasn't exactly what I was expecting, but at least I know what to prepare the others for.

I make my descent back down the mountain to meet up with Ember again to tell him my findings. I take the red core out from my storage and show it to him from a distance and he nods while giving a simple reply back.

"Good. If it only took you four hours to find a red core, that means we'll have enough time to make it to the top."

We wake the others up, and begin our ascent.

I don't hold back on sharing my mana control and status now, giving them each a third of the 10% available, and leading us up the endless cliffside as fast as possible while running into as many vultures as I can find on my enemy detection skill.

Just as I assumed when I made my flight up for scouting, they all receive a full 1% from these kills, and raise their total MCP by 1-2 million with every single sword slash.

Over the next eighteen hours, we manage to make it up about halfway the distance that I managed in four.

Even so, everyone on the party has risen hundreds of millions in natural MCP, and have grown noticeably stronger.

We stop for a food and rest break on a nearby ledge and I release the power from my buff, but the three of them still continue to glow with their own extremely heightened mana control auras.

Once we head off, floating higher and higher into the air of this endless mountain for another eighteen hours, we surpass the point I traveled to on my former travels up here, and Ember points to the sky and speaks aloud.

"Another red core, less than a hundred kilometers away. We're close to making it into another zone."

My teammates are nearing their limits. We've been traveling up this mountain for over a day and a half. I respond to Ember and motion for the others to come over while pointing to a nearby ledge with a single tree on it.

"How about we set up camp for them to sleep for another eight hours, and you take care of that red core nearby. I'll stay and watch, I think after one more training session once they wake up, they'll be able to fight one without me. You look around and see what you can find."

He nods, using fire beneath his steps to fly higher into the sky, not wasting any time.

"See you soon."

While the three applicants from the Apex, Silca, and Talton regions fall asleep almost instantly on the stone ledge of the mountain, I do a scan of my surroundings using my stealth skill and greater form to see what kind of progress we've really made.

There isn't a single other team within my range below us, we've traveled so many hundred kilometers into the sky at such intense speeds that not a single team has come close to catching up.

With my heightened senses now, I see exactly where Ember is headed, and the clump of mana looks exactly like the fiery bird I killed earlier, with many other scavengers around it, most likely trying to siphon its crimson energy.

As my mind wanders and the cool breeze up here whistles by, I sense more and more clumps of energy higher and higher up the mountain. I count over a dozen.

No more than an hour passes before the first one completely disappears once Ember's geolocation collides with it.

Then in the next hour, two more are gone.

After hour three, I sense another five vanish.

In the fourth hour, eight more vanish, then I feel Ember turn around and come flying back down.

He only takes two hours to make his way back down to meet me by my resting teammates with a wide smile across his face.

"I was right. The next zone isn't far..."

He points a finger in the air, and an invisible tear in space opens up similar to the time I watched him show me his divine ring.

This time, I feel an immense pressure come off of it and eight red stones fall out.

"Catch."

I open my spatial magic below them, but raise an eyebrow because that's half of what I remember sensing him kill.

As they all disappear into my storage, he takes a step back and speaks again.

"They'll be asleep for a few more hours, so we might as well start preparing now. If you want to become strong enough in time to face the higher zones, I suggest you follow my lead."

Another tear in space opens right above Ember's right hand and a single red stone comes out, hovering in place as he stares forward and waits for me to do the same.

Chapter 557

Ember grins.

"I'm going to need to borrow that self-regeneration skill of yours; this would be quite painful without it."

I activate my buff and give him access to this mythic-grade skill. Then the imagery of Trax losing control of his body and power flashes through my mind as I watch the red gem float above Ember's hand.

"Is this really safe to do here...?"

The gem slowly spins above his palm, and I feel small portions of his true mana control vibrate out from his barrier the closer it falls toward him.

"-And what about concealing our presence? If you're about to do what I think, won't this leave us without any way of hiding our true power once we return?"

The ripples get more intense, and waves of dense mana and even Ember's soul energy start to become visible to my senses as he brings the gem even closer while responding.

"Possibly. However, possibly not. Absorbing a single stone will decay our barriers, but we can conceal our mana control with Qi from your new friends."

He points to the three sleeping teammates on the cliffside nearby, then looks up toward the sky and continues.

"If we make it to the top of the construct, there's a good chance I can broker a deal with its creator to get us a better limiter. If not, we'll be strong enough to handle deceiving those A-Class hunters by the time we're done here. They're only red cores themselves."

I raise an eyebrow.

"Hey—this is a lot to drop on me all at once... Its creator? Whatever made this realm is still here...? And the A-Class Hunters at the Association can wield divine energy? Is that why they didn't practically explode from eating those stones?"

Ember smirks.

"Right... eating those fragments to power the rift wasn't necessary, it was just a show."

Ember's gaze wanders the sky again, then comes back down to meet mine.

"As for if the creator is still here... I don't know. The construct patterns are familiar, but they're very old. We'll have to climb higher. I can't see the top yet. If you'd like to take a glimpse into the divine realm, follow my lead. I can't answer all your questions by simply explaining them; you'll have to see the truth for yourself."

He grins and drops the red core into his mouth.

It disappears, and I feel dense waves of energy hit my barrier while the same crimson light I witnessed in the fiery bird glows in his eyes.

An aura grows around his body, just the same as the flaming scavenger bird's did.

The vitals on my Rising Emperor's Domain interface are pretty interesting to watch.

His health bar slowly trickles down, then his mana starts to fall after as the self-regeneration skill kicks in and heals him slowly.

The red aura around him continues to expand, and I watch with curiosity for a full minute before the light begins to subside and the red glow from his eyes fades.

We're left both floating in the sky just as we were before, but now his limiter is completely gone and shattered. The only thing left blocking his mana control is a new barrier of pure Qi.

Other than the usage of mana from the use of self-regeneration, he's completely fine and unaltered.

"Your turn."

While nothing seems to be wrong with him, the thought of breaking the limiter that kept those with soul energy awakened unaware of my power isn't a very logical move. The A-Class guards aren't what I'm worried about; it's more so about those yellow-golden eyes I felt peer down on me during my match, and the unknown of what else was inside the Apex Region's black box that I wasn't able to sense.

Ever since these divine fragments showed up, and especially since we entered this rift, Ember has been acting extremely strange.

He'd normally want to keep our presence completely hidden as well, but for whatever reason, the reward from using this energy right now highly outweighs the risks in his mind. I'm unsure what this reward may be, but It's clear there's only one way to find out.

I let out a sigh and let one of the red gems fall from my storage into my palm, letting extremely strong rippling waves of energy disrupt my limiter on contact. Then, I toss the crystal into my open mouth, swallow, and prepare for the worst.

For a split second, nothing happens.

Then, the sound of high-pitched bells ringing gets louder and louder in my ears while a strong wave-like pressure expands from my chest.

My vision turns completely red, and the limiter that rests millimeters over my skin starts to vibrate at faster and faster speeds until it shatters completely.

Every cell of my body begins to heat up, and it feels like my flesh is melting from the inside out from a million different individual sources. Immediately, I activate my self-regeneration skill on full blast to feel myself healing just as fast as I'm burning alive.

I try to look around, but my eyes see nothing but the vague outline of a mountain to my right and Ember's form to my left, watching with his arms crossed from a distance.

It may be painful, but none of my survival instincts scream at me to make it stop.

Surprisingly, every sign from my subconscious mind is telling me to stop regenerating myself altogether, but I don't give in to the odd thoughts.

Every second that passes turns my vision more red, but the outlines grow sharper.

After about half a minute, I become very used to the feeling of my whole body being burned constantly from the inside out and take a breath of air while trying to make sense of what's happening.

I activate my all-seeing eye and use my buffs to enhance my vision and perception.

With it, the burning sensation throughout my whole body increases by staggering degrees as well.

I feel the majority of the heat move toward my head and eyes as the crimson energy seeps into the very fabric of my all-seeing eye's skill and enhances it in ways I wasn't aware were even possible.

In an instant, I can see again with clarity beyond anything I've ever experienced before.

It's like I've always been blind but never knew it.

I stare down at my hands and see shimmering red threads moving through them, moving above and below my skin, eating away at my blood, muscles, and even bones while my skill rebuilds them.

The shimmering threads all lead back to my chest.

Inside, I see my heart, a small white sphere full of dense mana and Qi, two black demon cores, and now, sitting in the center of all of them, pumping out red fabrics of glistening energy, the faint pink outline of a translucent core, just like the jaguars and weaker scavenger birds had below me.

I can feel my heartbeat, blood flow, and see my own breath making small disruptions in the air.

My gaze turns upward, and I see Ember watching me with a grin.

Faint traces of the red lines flicker all throughout his being as well, and a small translucent core has begun to form in his chest too. However, in the center of his, there is a faint spark of gold and silver glimmering light that mine lacks.

The more I try to concentrate on this anomaly in his body, the harder it is to see. It's like my mind pushes my eyes away from it.

My gaze turns upward, and my eyes widen as I begin to see what Ember has been staring at this whole time...

The sky is made of what looks like an infinite amount of intricately woven purple threads.

They're all made of this same energy that rings with the pitch of a beautiful bell.

I turn my head side to side, and it's all I see.

All of the energy flowing from the deep purple strands leads back to a single source, and it's up in the sky. I can't tell exactly where or how high, but I know the source is up there...

For as far as my vision can go, more and more shimmering purple strands create the world I'm floating in.

I turn to the mountain next to me and my eyes widen more, as it too is made completely out of beautiful flowing purple strands of vibrating divine energy.

I float over to the wall with an outstretched hand to try and look deeper into the strands; however, the sound of bells in my ears begins to get softer the closer I get. At the same time, the thickness of the red strands in my arms and legs decreases, and the hot energy surrounding my eyes fades away.

The energy from the red stone slips away from me just as fast as it came, and my vision of the true world before me ceases too.

It's like a pair of dark sunglasses are forcefully pushed over my eyes at dusk, making it impossible to see the outlines of what I hardly even managed to conceptualize before.

My normal vision returns to me, leaving my hand to press against the stone wall of the mountain, and I can't make out the difference of this cliff to a normal rock I'd find out in the desert of Sector 2.

A shiver runs through my body, and I feel cold like I'm missing a part of myself. The only thing I can think of doing right now is immediately eating another red fragment to get the warm sensation I just felt back.

Just as I reach into my item storage to pull out another, Ember's voice brings me back to my senses.

Chapter 558

"Not yet. You're not ready for another one. Give it an hour or two."

I drop the red fragment back into my storage and speak back to him while staring at the rock wall in front of me that is no longer made up of millions of violet ethereal strands.

"What was that...? I— I could see it. Everything. I could see everything."

Ember turns toward me with a curious gaze.

"So you could see it? It must be that perception skill of yours, impressive. That saves me from doing a lot of explaining."

Both of us stare up toward the sky for a moment, but after a few seconds, I realize my body is still being torn apart from the inside by the leftover threads of red energy.

It's nowhere near as intense as it was when I first swallowed the gem, but it is still using up a large amount of mana for my self-regeneration skill to heal.

I sense that Ember's body is also going through the same violent breakdown and repair process too. He's plundering mana from a very large diameter around us in the air, as not much is needed to continue the healing process.

Over the next hour, the red threads within me completely fade away, and Ember explains a few things about the fragments that make far more sense to me now that I've eaten one myself.

The energy that we're absorbing doesn't usually exist in the form it's taking right now. The red gems are a crude manifestation of what pure Divine energy really is. This entire simulated world we stand in is a mere construct for challengers like myself to comprehend the complexity of this unique energy.

The red, orange, and yellow crystals that were shown in that recording before we entered this realm are all fragments of a single stream of energy, divided into visible and malleable parts for those that want to participate in this trial to absorb with more ease than the higher density raw energy itself.

Ember hints that there are more than just these three, but he isn't sure if a physical construct like this one will be able to create them. On top of that, we're both not sure how the monsters that roam this realm have made their way in here, but the more I think about it, the more likely it's all part of the creator's test.

After another hour goes by, the burning completely stops, however it does feel as if I've just had an all-out battle for the last two hours.

While I only consumed tens of thousands of MP to heal myself, it almost feels like I've exhausted hundreds of millions worth of MP in attacks and constant buffs.

"Is it going to be this energy exhausting every time?"

Ember nods and grins.

"Oh, it'll only get worse. However, just like when you began to learn Qi, harnessing a higher level of control with any energy type always increases the effectiveness of the others. I wasn't kidding when I said those two A-class hunters won't even be close to our strength level once we're done here."

He stares up in the air and lets out a sigh.

"That reminds me, I believe I figured out why that Director is so obsessed with healers... It all factors into why he's having the strongest hunters from the 8 great regions farm fragments for him in a rift that can only be entered once per challenger..."

He turns back to me, and gears start shifting in my mind.

I remember back to the time Trax was healed in the tournament area by the healer tank, and they seemingly switched conditions in an instant, bringing him back to as good as new.

Then, I reply.

"He's collecting healers to help him absorb the fragments from this rift..."

Ember shrugs.

"That would make sense. Considering how long this rift has been open, it seems to be working quite well for him... But I don't know for how much longer."

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

My head turns toward the cliff as at these words I begin to see my teammates waking up.

However, I still reply with a question.

"Not for long? What do you mean?"

Ember looks up toward the sky again.

"Well, there's always a time limit on these sorts of things..."

He looks over to the cliff where I looked as well, watching the three applicants wake up one by one and continues to respond.

"Let's just say, I have a hunch the Director is sick. He's looking for a cure. From what I can tell, this rift has been forcefully kept open since the great war. There are traces of challengers to this trial that trace back even far before that. If he wasn't desperate, I doubt he'd have allowed us to enter this place at all."

If what Ember is saying here is true, the motives of the Apex Region's Director are beginning to make more sense.

However, there are so many things left out in Ember's explanation that learning these things only make me feel like I know less than when I started.

While the thought of the Director being a wielder of Divine energy may be a concern, there is one bigger than it that I want to ask Ember. The question of who or what is capable of creating a test like this, and if they're here; do we really want to meet them?

A familiar white-haired healer's voice interrupts my thoughts.

"Hey Ray! Emrie! We're ready to continue the climb!" Nat yells in a cheerful tone while Dane rubs his eyes and wakes up on the other side of the cliff.

Marcie grips her spear tight and gives me a nod too while they place all their sleeping gear back into item storage.

With a smile, Ember and I slowly float over to them and I reply.

"Yeah, we're ready too."

Ember shakes his head.

"About 2 minutes, then we'll be ready."

He pulls another red fragment from thin air, then looks at me and nods.

"For optimal absorption, we'll be eating one every 1 to 2 hours, there's no point in hiding it now. It would be a waste to wait any longer."

He throws the gem in his mouth, then everyone on the cliffside flinches when his eyes glow crimson.

I let out a sigh and do the same, letting the world around me turn into purple ethereal strands once again.

My vision turns red too.

This time, I know what to expect going into it and it's a much more enjoyable and controlled experience.

I don't waste the first 30 seconds trying to comprehend that every cell of my body is being burned from the inside out. This time, I immediately activate my all-seeing eye and turn to look at the cliff wall.

The three applicants near the cliff look like very foreign material.

There are thin purple threads that flow through them, but it's in no greater density than the air itself.

I can see through their clothes, skin, muscles, bones, deep into their mana cores, and right through them without even having to try.

All of the layers of reality are shown to me at once, and in this instant, I can process everything I see equally as fast like it is just normal sight.

Their figures are interesting for a moment, but my attention changes to where I left off last time very quickly.

The cliff wall.

Glistening threads of purple light make up its surface, and when I place my hand against the wall, the millions of red shimmering threads that make up my hand begin to vibrate and ring with their own high-pitched frequencies.

Individual tendrils of the energies mix and weave together, while others just drift by each other.

When looked at as a whole however, the two main masses of purple and red energy slightly repel each other more and more the closer the gap between them gets.

It appears as if my palm is pressing against the purple wall, but there is an ever-narrowing gap that I cannot seem to close.

I'm mesmerized by this phenomenon, staring into the void between my hand and the cliff until the ringing bells fade away and reality flashes back to me, robbing my eyes of their true sight.

The flooding feeling of warmth leaving my body, and the yearning to be whole again hits me even harder than last time, but I just ramp up the effects of my self-regeneration skill and bear through it.

I take a few deep breaths, then turn back to my teammates. I see them staring back at me with wide eyes and shocked expressions.

Marcie is the first to speak up.

"You already farmed some of the stones while we slept... It seems they have other uses than just getting points."

Nat is especially shocked, as it looks like she knows a little more about these than the others.

"How- How did you do that? I've only seen the Apex Hunters manage to take one of those without collapsing from exhaustion..."

Then Dane smiles ear to ear.

"What does it do? Can I try...?"

Ember smirks while flying over and shaking his head while pulling out a fragment from thin air.

"If you eat one of these right now, I guarantee you'll be burned to a crisp from the inside out and explode into millions of pieces before you even know what's going on. Even if you decide not to, it's better not to hold onto them with your bare hands for too long."

His eyes widen and his outreached hand quickly retracts.

"R-Really...?"

I roll my eyes and chuckle, then think about the physical toll on my body the fragment takes even with these constant healing skills activated I'm using even now to recover.

"Yeah, probably. But he could have phrased it better."

Then, shake my head and point upward.

"Anyway, come on, let's go. It'll probably take us another day to get up to the altitude where you can farm them yourselves. None of you are strong enough for these stones, don't even think about eating one. Even once we make it up there, these are points for the exam stage, don't try to absorb them."

I start to float upward, speeding up my ascent to set a pace.

Ember follows and shrugs, putting the fragment back into his invisible storage.

"Yeah... right, that's basically what I said too."

Chapter 559

We continue climbing the massive mountain together.

The monsters up this high make gaining hundreds of millions of MCP fairly easy for my teammates over the next 24 hours.

Their controls rise to the point where they begin needing far less food and rest.

In just a few days, I've managed to bring them from barely passing the B-Class exams alone to rivaling the mana control of the Apex Region's elite applicants.

At this point, they're all thoroughly convinced that there is something not quite right about us, the two random applicants from the Bedrock Region.

While most applicants from this region should have barely made it into the top 30, we're effortlessly carrying them through the exams. Neither of us have eaten, slept, or shown any signs of fatigue in the days we've been together.

On top of that, Ember and I absorb all of the red fragments in our possession. He even leaves our group to go up and farm more while I stay in range of the three teammates to keep their absorption skill activated.

Occasional questions are asked, but they soon realize whatever is going on here is not something I plan on explaining to them any time soon.

Our ascent upward gets faster and faster the more they grow, and they accept the silent partnership and the decades worth of power gifted to them in just a matter of days.

While each of them surpasses 1 billion MCP in their natural mana control, I consume 13 more fragments, bringing my total up to 15. Every time I do, the crystallization of a crimson gem in my chest gets brighter and brighter.

On top of that, more and more threads of red energy are left behind trailing from the core every time I stop.

I have to continuously regenerate my flesh at more extreme rates as the burning sensation never really goes away now.

Just as Ember said before, it only gets worse.

The more the crystal clear core saturates with red threads, the hotter and more constant this burning becomes.

It gets to the point where even after the initial surge of energy passes, I'm able to imbue small portions of red essence into my skills and enhance their innate qualities.

I test out throwing mana blades at a few monsters as we travel upward and let the red energy flow into them.

I still don't sense them being different in any way... It just feels as if the building blocks of the mana and Qi being used in the techniques I'm activating are far more consolidated. The structure of the attacks is more rooted in reality.

Tendrils of the red threads spread throughout the crescents of mana; imbuing themselves deep into the attacks and spreading through the air they're traveling through as well.

It gives off the visual feedback of the attack being stronger, however, the same exact amount of mana is being used. The more I look at these attacks that I throw, it's like reality itself is bending and weaving itself throughout the energy released to make a deeper impact on the objects it hits.

My mind bends to try and comprehend the phenomenon.

No extra energy is being used, it's just that the presence of these red threads makes the mass and air around the attacks more susceptible to getting hit.

It makes the most sense in the minute or so of clarity that I get when absorbing a fragment, but floods away and leaves me in my thoughts afterward wondering how it works.

Every time I use the divine power, portions of the red threads leave my body, and I visualize the birds I faced earlier with cores that haven't fully formed yet either. They would run out of the red energy surrounding them if they used it up completely.

Despite this, I still test out other skills than just my attacks every once in a while.

This includes my enemy detection and all-seeing eye in my greater form.

Doing so, I can perceive the top of the mountain and the beginning of a new zone that Ember mentioned earlier.

In addition to this, I can directly see the presence of other dense red cores when I use the threads of energy to boost my vision. They don't appear in my mind as energy, more like other ripples or disturbances in space.

Eventually, we come across another awakened bird as a team.

Ember and I stand back this time and let Nat, Dane, and Marcie handle it alone.

I even deactivate my shared stats and mana control buff to see how they'll fare with their own power alone.

The red core awakened I find for them has the remnants of a wind magic element, showing flowing red energy around its wind and sending blades of blood-red wind at all of us from a distance.

The six wandering scavenger birds that stay nearby are quickly taken out by Dane and his pure white wind attacks.

Marcie is by far still the strongest out of the three of them, and most confident in close-range combat.

She's able to weave in and out of the falling birds attacked by Dane, taking control of the real enemy, facing off against it in close-range attacks, blocking and attacking with her spear.

She uses pink walls of manifested mana to disrupt and extinguish any attacks her spear is unable to fend off.

Dane joins in after, sending in a barrage of long-range attacks once the red-cored monster is occupied by its immediate threat, the spear wielder.

Nat still stays behind, watching from afar with daggers in her hands with sharp eyes. Without the fire skill I've been sharing with her, it seems she'd be hesitant to jump into battle especially with the bright red aura that reaches far out from the creature they're fighting.

In less than a minute, the team takes out the monster, but both Dane and Marcie who were very up close and personal to the bird and its attacks have tendrils of red energy coursing through their veins as well.

Dane has far less, as he wasn't near the denser parts of the bird's aura, however, Marcie has far more.

Her armor was even hit point blank with the attacks a few times.

While they protected her from the brunt of the blow, I can see with my enhanced vision their bodies being broken down just the same as mine is now, just at a much slower rate.

Marcie follows the falling bird's corpse and collects its red core and throws it into her item box.

Nat floats over to Dane first, then Marcie once she returns, and heals them as she would after most battles, and I witness an interesting energy exchange take place.

As her white aura envelops their bodies, I watch the red energy that infects their bodies flow toward Nat and creep into her body instead.

They both seem very rejuvenated while Nat becomes exhausted and filled with the burning sensation herself.

I don't say a word or do anything yet while I watch Nat heal herself. The red threads fade slowly, but they don't go away entirely. Most move toward her chest and begin the process of making a very small pink translucent core.

Ember witnesses this too and speaks to me through our link.

"She's strong enough now to the point where it will be fine. If she's not directly ingesting the stones I doubt even a full month of this would be enough to accidentally spark a core formation. I recommend leaving her with some self-regeneration potions though."

I nod and do exactly that, giving Nat enough potions for a small army to store in her item box before we continue upward.

Another 12 hours pass before we finally make it to the new zone split I sensed before.

During this final stretch up the mountain, Ember and I absorb seven more fragments each, and I don't activate any more unnecessary skills while using the energy to make sure the bulk of it gets saturated into my now very brightly glowing red outline of a core inside my chest.

It practically lights up my entire body red, Ember too, I'm positive it's on the verge of changing into something very interesting.

My teammates have farmed a total of nine red cores and agreed to split them evenly among each other while Ember has periodically gone off to farm extras that aren't in our flight path.

Every hour or so he comes back with dozens of excess fragments for me to store away.

"We'll probably never need this much, but it never hurts to be safe." He says while eating another gem and adding to his red glowing aura.

I eat another one too as what looks like the top of the mountain comes into my line of sight.

Less than an hour passes before it comes into everyone's view, and we pick up the pace even further, flying higher and faster into the sky until we reach it.

Once all five of us pass the cliff's final edge, the view on the other side isn't at all what I would have expected...

Marcie is the first to say it out loud.

"An ocean...? Up here...?"

Rolling waves are all we can see.

The mountain acts like a dam, holding back an endless pool of water stretching out into the distance again.

It doesn't only go out wide, it is deep as well. The mountain's slope is just as steep as it was on the other side. However, there is a slight curve to it. It may not be visible to the naked eye, but with my enhanced vision, especially with the red divine threads coursing through it, I can see this endless sea is sitting inside the top of this stone mass.

The mountain is wide, so even this is just an educated guess, in my vision it just curves off to our left and right into the endless void of sky.

There's a small bit of land between the endless sky and endless sea, about 50 to 100 meters of it, varying in some places where the waves of the sea crash harder.

Small shrubs and trees grow on this long curved piece of land.

We all float down onto it to take a break, and Ember speaks through our link once we land.

"Our best course of action now is to finish absorbing these stones, then leave your teammates here while we take on the next zone. Without a consolidated red core, it would be nearly impossible to bring their mana control to heights to the point where they could take on monsters that can wield orange cores."

I relay the message to my teammates while they set up their base camp.

I create another teleport platform here too, covering it with a stealth barrier and earth magic, while handing out teleport crystals and keeping some for myself.

During this process, a few fully awakened red core birds find us at the top of the mountain, and I watch them take it out with ease and return.

I speak up while crossing my arms and standing with Ember at the edge of the endless sea.

"I've given you all enough power to handle anything that comes your way at this altitude. On top of that, you all have quite the head start against any other teams that make their way this far. I can only think of two, the Apex Region's elites, and some of the higher skilled Vice and Veridian applicants. Do as you wish with them when the time comes. If for any reason you can't handle fighting them, use the two teleport platforms I made for you to retreat and come back up here if needed."

Marcie nods, looking at me with her arms crossed and a satisfied look on her face.

"Sounds good to me. We'll keep anyone from passing this line if they approach."

Then, she turns to look back toward the sky, but says one more thing.

"Oh- and thanks. I'm glad I trusted you. I haven't trusted anyone in a long time. I'll have to show you around the Talton Region when this is all over. I think I can convince my leader to let you come by."

Dane replies next.

"You're leaving right now? When will you be back? Before the 28-day limit is over, right?"

I shrug, and Ember replies before I can get a word in, holding a red fragment in between them.

"We'll be leaving once we awaken our red cores. It won't be too much longer at this rate."

Ember turns and starts walking over to the water's edge, sits down and sends me a wave of telepathy telling me to join him once I'm done so we can finally finish this up.

I nod.

"We'll meet you all once the trial is done. The hard part is already over. You're strong enough to pass this exam on your own now. That was the whole goal here, right? Make it to the top 12? Make the Silca Region proud?"

He smiles.

"Right, yeah."

He pauses, but looks at me with a face full of confidence after thinking over my words.

"I'll collect more fragments than anyone else. I'll show you around the Silca Region once this is all over too."

I smile and nod back.

"Good."

I turn to Nat, and reach into my item storage to pull out a small blue orb and toss it to her.

Inside, an extreme grade fire summoning skill lays dormant.

"If you want that fire skill to stay permanent, eat that. You seem to have a much more aggressive fighting style when you have access to the skill. It might come in handy."

She catches it, looks at the small orb for a few seconds then nods, placing the orb into her item box.

"Thank you. I'll use it if I need it. I thought this would take years, maybe longer, maybe even never. Winning the tournament in stage 4 lets me go back to the Veridian Region right after these exams are finished."

"Yes, and I'm very interested in what matters you'll have a say in when you get a place on that B-Class board as well."

I smile and turn around to go join Ember, but continue speaking making eye contact with everyone.

"Even so, it's not over just yet. Keep training while you can and stay nearby. I have a feeling you're going to need all the power you can get once the other teams arrive this high up. You could still lose your points if they take them from you. It's better safe than sorry, right?"

Each of them nods and scatters off to find more enemies nearby to absorb their MCP while I walk over to Ember and sit down.

He looks toward me and eats another red fragment, then closes his eyes as crimson threads fill his body.

"Let's finish this and move on. Your journey here has just begun as well."

I take a deep breath and do the same, staring off into the endless sea while more threads of ethereal light saturate my core.

Chapter 560

One after another, I consume the red cores that Ember farmed for us and allow the red threads of energy to surge through my body, consolidating into a crystalline form in my chest.

The burning and tearing sensation consuming my being only intensifies. It feels as if every cell of my body has been destroyed and regrown countless times.

Hours pass, and the time between every red core consumed gets shorter each time.

While the red threads of light don't harm my physical body any less, every new fragment that I consume lets less and less of its essence escape.

The red aura that hardly enveloped my entire body on our way up the mountain has now transformed and grown into a large and vibrant crimson aura.

I'm unsure how many hours have really passed, but after about half a day's worth of time sitting on this shore in front of the endless ocean, my memories begin to fade as it feels like the only thing I'm concentrated on is absorbing the next red fragment.

Ember's red aura grows in radiance too, not too far away from me on the shore, and in the very distant portion of my mind, I feel the presence of the three teammates that came with me up this mountain, killing monsters and growing stronger.

I close my eyes and concentrate, but I can still see the world around me in perfect clarity.

The purple ethereal threads that weave the mountain into existence below me constantly give off a light ringing sound as the vibrations of the crimson light in my core get more and more intense. It fades away every time the energy from a fragment is consumed, but the whispers of intensity stay behind for longer and longer each time.

Eventually, the ringing gets louder and faster, and after dozens of fragments, I begin to lose count of how many I've consumed.

Ember's voice echoes in my mind as we increase the rate of absorption even further.

"We're almost there. No matter how you feel, don't stop healing your body. We're on the verge of awakening a red core."

I do as he says.

Even though every time I consume a red stone, there is an indescribable feeling to let its hot rush of clarity take over, I cling on to my body and heal it constantly, using hundreds of thousands of MP in the process.

Eventually, I come to a tipping point, and yell out into the endless ocean as I feel my mind waking from a slumber I didn't know I was trapped in. My dazed state after consuming fragments doesn't come like it usually does, and the feeling of clarity for the few seconds that I absorb a fragment stays with me indefinitely this time around.

I open my eyes and find myself floating above the shore by just a few centimeters, and a wide red aura of billions of red threads seeps out of my chest and wraps around the air surrounding me by about 20 to 30 meters in diameter.

My perception skills are working at full blast, but I don't sense any of the red light seeping away from my body.

It doesn't even feel like energy at all.

It just feels as if anything these red threads touch, I understand and have a far greater control over the reality near me.

I feel my heartbeat, I hear my every breath, the blood in my veins trickling throughout my body, and the constant crunching of my bones and muscles still being broken down and reformed by my skill.

The self-regeneration process is aided by the red threads permeating from my core, however, this is still a conscious effort.

For whatever reason, access to this power wants the limits of my physical body to be destroyed, but I don't plan on letting that happen. For now, it isn't much of a hassle to keep this skill activated like a passive buff, by now I've grown used to it.

I reach into my item storage and pull out my daggers, then send a few crescents of red lighting off across the ocean.

The mana output is exactly the same as it's always been, the attacks just feel far denser and weigh down on the fabric of this construct, making them many times more deadly than they would be without the red ethereal light coursing through them.

I send off dozens of attacks, in awe of the fact that the red aura around me doesn't dim at all.

A radiant red core glows in my chest, made up of what seems like an infinite amount of crimson threads.

Wherever I float in the air, it's like a weight of immovable mass bends the world around me.

Ember's voice finally breaks me from my enamored state.

"Congratulations. You've successfully awakened your red core. You can perceive and manipulate the most crude form of divine energy. How does it feel?"

I raise my gaze to Ember, he floats before me with a radiant red core as well.

The fabric of reality within this construct bends around his aura just the same.

My perception skill is still heightened to its highest degree, and our auras overlap, giving me a glimpse into his core once again. It is nearly identical to mine, having what seems like infinite threads of red light within it, however, I see the golden and silver sparks in its center for a fraction of a second before my gaze and mind are pushed away.

I nod and turn to the endless ocean and respond.

"It feels incredible. Like my eyes are finally open... The world around me bends to my wishes, it's like nothing I've ever felt..."

He smiles and points out into the great sea.

"Good. So you've grasped the basics. Let's climb higher so I can teach you how to properly use this power."

I turn back to the shore, opening a telepathy link with my teammates that are a few kilometers away hunting beasts to send them a quick and final farewell, then respond to Ember.

"Let's go."

Without waiting any longer, we both fly off together across the ocean, angling upward toward the direction in which all of the purple threads shimmer and flow.

Without having to hold back, we soar upward with speed far surpassing anything shown earlier in this construct.

Distance that took us days to cross before is now traveled over in mere hours.

Heavy wind currents try to push travelers around in the sky, but both of us slice through these obstacles with radiant red auras, bending through the construct while leaving traces of red threads behind in our wake.

We pass hundreds of lost scavenger birds in the skies, and they only grow stronger and stronger the higher up we travel.

Some of them possess powerful attacks rivaling that of a 1500-1600 hunter, similar to the strength shown by Trax when he consumed a red core and unleashed its raw fury.

These birds aimlessly travel the skies, and we hunt them down with ease, collecting storages full to the brim with red cores.

Ember never consumes any, and I ask why, as many of them glow bright with power.

He shrugs and responds with "You can eat them if you want, but at this stage in our progression, anything less than an orange core won't do much."

Out of curiosity, I eat a few as we travel higher, but just as he said, after hitting the tipping point on the shore earlier, any extra red essence does nothing but flow right through me. I get a small surge of clarity, and my aura grows just slightly, but it fades away and is left behind in the wind less than a minute later.

I've hit some kind of natural limit.

After about ten tries, I let out a sigh and stop attempting to absorb fragments, giving him a late reply while slicing through a slowly circling scavenger bird. "You were right... I guess they don't do much..."

At the same time, I pull the orange core from my storage that I managed to obtain from the last event back in the Apex Region.

"How about this?"

Ember slices through another bird of his own, about half a kilometer away and turns to me using our mind link to reply.

"You're probably ready. I'd advise against trying it in the sky. We should at least find somewhere solid to sit and rest before attempting one of those."

His gaze turns upward, and I feel his aura pulse outward to scan the surroundings.

I momentarily slow my momentum to take a moment and do the same, looking far off into the sky above the ocean and finally see something interesting.

I whisper under my breath, "Chains... So many chains..."

Reaching up high into the sky, I see countless heavy chains.

They're covered in vines and rust, all falling down into the endless sky we've flown up through for hours.

The wind currents make them sway back and forth, rattling in the air.

Some are pulled tight, while others are loose and dip down to curve for endless kilometers.

I can't see the bottoms of the chains as we're too far up, but I can only assume they plunge into the depths of the sea below.

I also cannot see the tops either. They stretch up into the sky, fading away out of my senses.

These impossibly large metal structures are also made up of purple ethereal strands. Whatever they are, they're native to this construct.

In the faint outer sense of my mind, I see pockets of orange light jumping from chain to chain, grabbing onto the vines, and using them to climb higher up into the sky.