

D. Diver 571

Chapter 571

I stare up at the large green glowing fruit for a few minutes in awe as vitality streams back into me.

A large aura of vibrant green tendrils of divine energy flows off the fruit itself and begins seeping into the atmosphere.

Only now can I visualize how much of that green aura I really absorbed while falling through the sky.

I hear movement in the trees above as some of the yellow-cored lizards hiding high in the trees start to move downward toward my vicinity.

At the same time, buzzing in the trees and nearby islands also signifies the fact that hundreds of insects are flying my way, attracted to this energy-rich divine fruit.

While they all creep, jump, and fly through the trees toward me, I stand to my feet feeling both immensely sore head to toe, but also oddly rejuvenated and refreshed.

Those few hours of sleep I had while falling were the first shuteye I've had in weeks. Even though I was battling for my life during that rest, it still invigorates me and makes me feel as though I'm even stronger than I was before challenging that serpent in the sky to notice me.

I expand my perception as dozens of creatures close in, and pick up quite a few readings that are rather shocking to see.

The first and most noticeable is the fact that high above the construct where the curious eyes of the overseer used to watch, there is now nothing but endless open sky.

It's gone. Meaning, whatever Ember managed to do with his mysterious silver and golden energy combined with the attack I threw definitely got this beast's attention.

Even after it's left, there is still a thick green aura left in its place that blocks any lower life forms from crossing its threshold in the sky.

I grin with excitement, as it was not all in vain.

The second thing I notice is that when the lizards and insects that creep toward me collide with the glowing green aura of divine threads coming off the newly grown fruit, they're completely unaffected.

The creatures' bodies react just like mine, showing the threads of shimmering green light phase through them like they're trying to touch holograms.

I easily jump upward and pull out my blade to cut through them all in single slashes.

Now, not even using my greater form, my aura feels so much more refined and capable of weaving itself into my fire magic and soul energy.

I'm unsure if it's just the fact that I've had some quality rest, or if filtering that green divine energy increased my energy control output to an alarming degree.

As the corpses of hundreds of insects and dozens of lizards pile around the glowing green fruit, I come to the conclusion that it's most likely a bit of both.

The longer I stay here, the more creatures become attracted to the green aura protruding from the fruit.

It's like moths all coming toward a lone flame. All I have to do is sit back and wait for more prey to arrive.

While testing out my new heightened reflexes, energy output, and easy use of my fully awakened yellow core, hours pass and hundreds of fragments are farmed.

Some of the corpses fall and make contact with the trees, having them absorb their energy while I'm busy fighting other monsters.

Many yellow and orange fruits begin to form on the branches nearby too. It only creates more chain reactions of the beacon of energy getting larger and more monsters coming by to try and get their fill.

Their fragments all pile up in a circle and I collect them into my item storage occasionally.

It isn't until a few hours in that I realize a third and most important difference.

Every time I get within range of the green fruit's aura, instead of the divine threads passing through me like a hologram or disappearing from existence; they're absorbed into my body just like red, orange, and yellow threads.

It's a very minimal amount, so there isn't much more pain than pinpricks, and the rate at which it slows my regeneration speed is negligible.

I only really notice after a while when it builds up enough for me to have to press my hand against the trunk of the same tree to rid myself of these dangerous fibers.

The infinite darkness of the void happily takes my green threads from me, and seconds later starts to devour even my yellow divine energy too; but I tear my hand away from the tree before it goes too far.

The green fruit slightly grows, and a tiny yellow fruit starts to form on a new branch nearby.

My mind races at what the meaning of all this can be.

My body has definitely changed.

For some reason after withstanding that hiss and total body destruction from the serpent's aura, I'm now able to physically touch these green threads.

None of the other yellow-cored creatures in the forest can do the same.

The thought that rises to the height of my mind is that my Absorption skill weaving itself with divine energy during a near-death experience has allowed me to alter my being, adapting to the environment in order to mutate and survive.

Another option could just be the fact that I was saturated with such a high purity of divine energy up close to a higher life form.

The last thought that comes to mind is the serpent's hiss and image it imprinted on my psyche wasn't just a result of stress in the situation, but an actual technique created to allow my core or mind to now process its energy.

None of my theories are provable or more likely than the others, for now they're just random thoughts in my mind as I stare up at the sky.

Even if I'm able to use this energy now, I'm not prepared to give up my physical body in order to wield it.

Still, given the opportunity I have now, it would be in my best interest to collect as much of this energy as I can for a later date once I'm able to control it.

I smirk and cut the green fruit from the branch to let it fall into my item storage.

In a swift upward motion, I open more storage portals while sending yellow wind blades all through the nearby forest to collect all of the remaining fruits and fragments ready for harvest.

Then, I fly high into the sky on a single mission.

I soar past the tops of the trees, and back into the thick green aura of divine threads.

Immediately, I activate plunderer and absorption just as I did before while keeping my self-regeneration skill at full blast while airstepping further and further into the dense aura left behind by the mighty serpent.

I don't fly quite as high this time.

The bone-crushing pressure isn't necessary to follow out the procedure I'm attempting. All I really need is to be present inside dense pockets of green divine energy to let it seep into my body just as it did before.

In just a few minutes, as I'm actively allowing and forcing this energy into myself, I start to watch my skin, muscles, and bones fade away just like they did before.

The portions that are unable to regenerate back are left with just a bright green aura version of my body.

It feels extremely hot, and the pinpricks evolve into scorching pain just like before.

This time however, I'm in control.

Once it gets to be too much, I start my descent down, airstepping out of the denser portion of aura and back down toward the black tree.

It isn't as slow as free falling, but it still takes quite a while to make my way back down to the tip of the tallest tree.

I take a deep breath, then grab onto the highest branch, letting it absorb all of the extra accumulated green threads.

Just like before, they're ripped from my body and I'm able to regenerate my flesh once again.

The same wave of exhaustion yet rejuvenation hits me as I watch another massive green glowing fruit form from an extremely fast-growing black branch.

It rockets upward over 20 meters higher into the air in less than a minute.

I cut the fully formed fruit from its branch and let it fall into my inventory.

As I fly back upward toward the cloud of divine energy again, its fluttering glossy leaves look like they're waving a thank you to me as they continue to grow.

Over the next three days, I repeat this process over and over.

I saturate my body with as many green threads as I possibly can before the pain becomes too unbearable and they don't get too critically close to my core, then airstep down to let the hungry tree take the energy out of my body with ease.

It grows dozens of meters higher every time I come back, and in exchange, I receive another enormous energy-packed glowing fruit.

I collect over 60 green fruits in total.

Every time I go through the process of nearly turning into an energy form and having its threads torn out of me; it feels as if I'm doing billions of MP worth of mana control training.

I'm covered with sweat once every process is done, and the fatigue that comes with it builds up more and more overtime.

At the same time, my connection with divine energy gets greater and greater, making my efficiency at wielding the yellow energy intertwined with my skills grow significantly as well.

I feel multiple times more efficient than I did when I first awakened my core. Possibly even at a magnitude of 10.

With all this constant training, my body and mind does tire; but it's just another day of work for me.

I only have a few days left in this construct, so every hour that I put in counts.

I'll rest once I'm done farming at maximum efficiency.

As my eyes threaten to close and all I want to do is lie down and sleep, this motto continues to repeat in my head while I let another green fruit fall into my item storage.

Once I airstep upward to make my way toward the sky again, following the same routine, I feel a massive shift in the air pressure.

It feels as if the temperature in the entire construct rises a few degrees.

A long ringing sound begins to vibrate through the air, and from the outer reaches of my perception, I notice an impossibly fast orb of cyan-colored light rushing my way.

I don't even get a full heartbeat to process everything, and try to move out of the way before the light blue flash of light grows larger and larger then is right in front of me.

It's a massive orb of light blue energy, the exact same color as the cyan crystal that opened the rift into this construct.

Before I can even blink, the orb splits in half, opening itself up and then closing again around me.

The orb itself is maybe 30 meters in diameter, and its walls are no more than a meter thick. The moment it shuts around me, it stops moving entirely.

Inside, the air feels exactly the same as it did moments ago outside, unaffected by the blue divine energy making contact with it other than some visual ripples in space.

The light blue energy pulses once, then starts to float upward slowly.

To my utter surprise, I move upward with it as well.

I'm not airstepping to change my direction, and it doesn't even feel like I'm moving at all.

To all my senses other than sight, it feels as if I'm stationary, just floating naturally in the sky.

However, the island of black trees below me is getting further away, so I'm positive I'm moving...

As my eyes dart around the orb and I activate my greater form to get even more enhanced perception buffs, I try to find a weakness to this contraption, or at the very least figure out what exactly is going on.

Less than three seconds later, the eyes of the green serpent appear high above in the sky.

It slithers downward, getting larger and larger every second that passes.

On its back, there are two cyan-colored armored knights with long shields and spears.

They're impossibly massive as well, dozens of kilometers tall, effortlessly riding the serpent downward, emotionlessly staring forward as they plummet toward me.

I can visually see their light blue auras being condensed around their bodies, and the green serpent brings its own cloud of divine threads down with it too as it hisses loudly again, and it doesn't stop its descent toward me.

Another few seconds pass, and I float upward high enough that it appears I'm going to be right above the serpent's flight path, but it looks like it doesn't have any plan to stop or change direction.

The massive snake's head passes below me, less than 10 kilometers away, and a dense wave of its green divine threads fills the air.

I'm too shocked at everything going on around me to even be scared of the pressure that I'd be under if I were to come in contact with these threads.

I just gently continue to float upward, and the green threads are pushed away by the cyan barrier that surrounds me on all sides.

My eyes do widen as the two knights on the serpent's back raise their spears and their blue aura connects with the orb I'm held floating in, and my momentum changes to bring me along for the ride like a tractor beam.

The serpent's nose crashes head first into the base of the highest floating island in the sky as if it didn't even notice it was there.

Like a speck of dirt being hit by an airplane, it's obliterated instantly.

Rock fractures into dust, its chain falls down into the depths of the endless sky, and countless black obsidian trees are uprooted and scattered through the air.

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Seconds later, there's another loud crash and explosion as the serpent's downward momentum hits another island's base.

Then, another, and another.

Before my eyes, a path of destruction is created through the sky.

Some of the islands begin to crack and disintegrate even before the monster hits them. The sheer overwhelming pressure of its green aura obliterates everything in sight.

I'm held high in the sky in a blue orb of light, like a tiny lightning bug shimmering between the city-sized cyan-colored armored guards on the serpent's back.

It doesn't even seem real.

The serpent's flight path starts to turn upward, but it takes the destruction of over ten more islands before we begin to angle up into the sky again.

Its impossibly long body follows its head, but the downward momentum still takes out a few more entire islands while it turns completely.

As the thousands of black trees fall into the endless sky below, I see them all begin to change in color.

The moment they're hit, none of them break or even sway under the pressure. They're all as rigid as stone.

However, once they're in freefall, each island appears to have a small black glossy orb at their centers connected to the chains that connect to the sea below.

As their mass is disrupted, and these small cores fall with the broken chains, many of the black trees, whose roots were seemingly siphoning life from these cores, start to have altered appearances when they're separated from the source.

The trees turn grey, then white. When they collide in the air, they break apart like fragile glass and are blown away in the wind just like the fragments of rock from the islands.

The only thing that stays in a perfectly solid state as it falls away and out of my perception is one black glossy orb per island.

My best guess, looking at the sight before me, is that each forest was really just a single organism growing from one central core. However, at these high speeds and in this chaotic atmosphere, I can't exactly discern what's going on.

Ember's words about how taking one of these trees out of the construct would be a profitable idea come to mind.

I attempt to activate my spatial magic at long range to let one fall into my storage, but I can't seem to activate any magic outside of the blue dome I'm trapped in.

They're most likely all falling into the sea below, so if I have the chance, I can go swimming to find them eventually... However, the more I think about the likelihood of this happening, the reality of this situation really sinks in.

The serpent's head points to the sky and we move upward at impossible speeds, leaving the obliterated islands behind and out of my vision in seconds.

All there is is endless sky around me.

I see the top of the snake's head and two guards holding me captive as I'm rocketed toward the top of the construct.

It's possible to guess how fast I'm moving at first, as the fragments of the island are still in my vision, but once we make it high enough into the sky where they're gone, all I can see when I look behind me is the tail and body of the serpent wriggling in the air to push us upward.

Again, it feels as if I'm stationary inside this orb, but I'm certain we're still moving upward.

As much as I try to spread my perception aura outward, nothing leaves this 30m spherical cage.

I downgrade into my base human form and let out a sigh, lying back in mid-air, and let the higher lifeforms take me for a ride.

Their power is too immense to even attempt anything.

Merely being within ten kilometers of the green serpent brought me close to death even while using every skill and hidden ability I had available to me.

Considering the common trend, these blue guards must be the core above green, far stronger than this serpent.

If I have no chance of even breathing the same air as a green core, attempting to escape or challenge two cyan knights whose transparent energy bodies are larger than the floating islands will be impossible.

If they wanted me dead, it would have happened before I even knew they were trying.

Wherever these beings are taking me, it's exactly what Ember most likely had in mind for letting out an attack like this, so I'll see where it leads.

I let out a sigh, placing my feet up on a small manifested bit of yellow divine energy while I put my hands behind my head to relax while floating higher and higher into the sky.

The fatigue from farming green divine energy has built up to a staggering amount over the last few days.

I'm able to go upward of a month without sleep, but the intensity of the activities I've put myself through and the calm of this ride upward into the sky make my eyes close.

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I try to keep myself from sleeping for the first hour of the ride up, but nothing at all changes in the atmosphere.

The only thing around me is open sky and a thick aura of green divine energy tendrils from the snake that are thwarted by the cyan guard's contraption.

I feel no change in speed, air pressure, or even intensity of the green or light blue aura around me.

Eventually, my eyes shut and I fall asleep while being carried high into the unknown.

I sleep for a few hours, fully rejuvenating my body and mind, however, when I wake up, I'm met with the exact same endless sky above and below me.

The density of the green tendrils in the air has increased slightly, but not enough to make any difference other than a slight visual green tint in the air outside of my orb.

I continue to sit back and watch as the day goes by.

My mind wanders, thinking about the black orbs that fell out of the islands, but also a slight problem I'm going to have once I actually do make it out of this place.

Ember is out of commission in my item storage at the moment, meaning the hunter Emrie Carter isn't exactly going to be able to greet the association once we return.

All three of my body doubles are already active and out of range to communicate, so I can't create another to replace him.

On top of that, my limiter is completely shattered. It has been for weeks, ever since I started to absorb divine threads.

My mana control, Soul Energy, and now Yellow core are completely visible to anyone with enough perception to see it.

If that isn't enough problems for me to deal with, I still fly into the endless sky with emotionless higher life form energy beings as my captors with no explanation. Over sixteen more hours pass riding upward into the endless sky before anything changes at all.

The green aura in the air gets thicker and thicker, until it begins to mix with light cyan threads of energy.

I'm finally able to gauge that we actually are moving as the sky turns lighter and lighter blue.

My eyes widen once I begin to see the energy become so dense in the air that it gradually infects the serpent that we're riding on.

Its ethereal green body starts to receive cyan threads, creating pathways into the center of its skull.

Once the pathways become far too dense for it to handle, the serpent's head abruptly drops down and its body follows.

At this maneuver, both of the cyan knights move in unison, manifesting platforms of dense reality-bending energy beneath their feet and marching upward at the same exact rate we were moving before.

It looks as if they're carrying me up an invisible staircase in the sky.

Before I can conceptualize everything, the green serpent has already turned back and fallen into the depths of the green sky where it can survive in peace.

Meanwhile, the air within my blue sphere is unchanged.

More hours pass as all of the green divine energy fades away completely, making the atmosphere entirely comprised of cyan strands.

Their rhythmic footsteps through the air are silent, but they're eerily consistent and almost machine-like.

More hours pass, and the same phenomenon occurs, the air around us starts to change colors again.

From a light cyan to a dark blue.

The moment the dark blue threads start seeping through the cyan orb I'm trapped in, the guards stop their upward march.

Both of them glow brightly, and their spears' auras grow larger and larger, making the blue ball around me grow a much thicker barrier.

A few minutes pass as they siphon more and more of their energy into the ball, then eventually the dark blue threads stop seeping through.

One of the guards keeps me floating above its spear while the other leaves us, continuing its march upward into the dark blue abyss of even denser divine energy.

We wait, and I stare up into the nothingness waiting for the knight to return.

It takes over an hour for any movement to appear again, and what I see hurtling my way isn't what I expected to see.

The hand of a dark blue giant, with fingers larger than the guard that accompanies me, stretches out from the darkness above.

Its dark blue tendrils of energy threaten to tear open holes in this construct as it reaches downward, and it finally gets close enough for me to see the rest of its hand, and part of its forearm, but its head is too far up in the sky for me to see. Not even its elbow or shoulder is visible as they're hundreds, possibly thousands of kilometers away.

The cyan knight steps back, leaving me floating in empty space as the giant's dark blue hand comes down toward me.

It appears to be moving in slow motion in the sky, but in reality, it's moving extremely quick and this is a difference in perspective. I already learned my lesson in underestimating massive falling objects when I was almost crushed by one of the islands before awakening my orange and yellow core.

Seconds pass, but it feels like an eternity.

A massive orb of dark blue energy starts to form around the giant's hand, creating a sphere hundreds of kilometers thick.

Once it moves downward, the hand moves beneath me, and the massive blue sphere fully forms once I'm inside to create another airtight seal.

Before my eyes, the dark blue energy in the dome eats away at all of the cyan aura inside it.

The blue threads even eat away at the cyan ball I'm still floating in.

It dissolves in seconds, dissipating into the air, and the dark blue threads all move back toward the outer barrier of the sphere completely avoiding me.

By the time the sphere inside the giant's palm moves upward, the inside is completely cleared out, it's as clear and divine energy-free as the real world outside in here.

Again, as I'm thrust upward by the giant's hand, I don't feel like I'm moving at all. The only way I can tell is the fact that the cyan knight below me disappears like a tiny light that flashes out, and I'm plunged into the darkness of the thick blue aura above.

I know I'm moving far faster than the serpent's ride and the two cyan guards by a lot now, however, I can't see past the forearm of this giant, so it's nearly impossible to tell how exactly I'm even moving.

To me, it just looks like this massive arm is raising me into the sky and its main body isn't even moving.

In less than a minute, the atmosphere outside of the sphere on the giant's hand drastically changes.

It gets darker and darker, and I can tell the air pressure and heat outside are at limits unfathomable for my mortal mind and body to comprehend.

Whatever this creature is, and wherever I'm going, is not somewhere many, or possibly any people have gone before.

Just as these thoughts come to mind, there's another abrupt change.

The dark blue aura of the atmosphere completely ceases.

It's visible below me now, and it looks like I've just been thrust through a dark cloud line.

The giant's hand lifts me upward, and at the same time, I watch the top of the dark blue dome fade away.

There aren't any blue threads up here at all.

The sky is completely void of divine energy, all I see is a single speck of purple in the center of my vision as I stare above.

The purple dot grows and grows the more the hand rises from the dark blue sea of threads below, and the dome around me completely dissipates.

My eyes open wide once my perception skills can finally stretch outward and see where I really am.

The purple light before me connects to the outer edge of this construct, it's what I saw a glimpse of when I first awakened my sight with the red cores.

I whisper to myself while I'm thrust further and further upward by the giant's hand.

"This is it. They've brought me to the top... but why?"

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The further I'm pushed upward, the more purple tendrils of divine energy I see flowing out from a single point.

It all flows from it, seamlessly creating the edges of this massive sky that angles downward to form the dome-shaped world I'm currently floating in.

My eyes widen as the purple light gets brighter and brighter, then the blue hand of the giant finally stops moving upward.

The air is cool up here, and clouds are being blown around in slow circles by a light breeze.

The wind whistles softly, but there is no other sound at all.

I just stare up in awe for a full minute before finally taking a few deep breaths and taking an airstep upward away from the enormous base of the giant's blue hand that still protrudes from the endless dark blue void.

As I airstep, yellow threads from my divine energy are left behind in the open air, but they fade away and fall into the deep blue darkness below as I continue upward.

My gaze is locked on the purple shimmering dot in the sky that gets larger and larger.

It takes a few minutes before the bottom of what looks like a semi-transparent crystal circular platform comes into view.

I'm looking at it from the bottom and can tell that whatever is making this bright purple glow is above it and shining its light over its edges.

I'm expecting the platform to get larger and larger the more I airstep upward, just like everything else recently, and end up being enormous beyond my comprehension. However, this isn't the case.

Once I arrive high enough in the air, I see the floating glass-like structure's other side.

It's flat, glossy, and reflective just like its bottom. To my surprise, floating above it in its center is a bright purple stone.

It has glossy edges and gives off an ethereal feeling unlike anything I've felt this past month.

It feels magnitudes more powerful and omniscient than the enormous blue giant below me, but also gives off the feeling of being frail and helpless at the same time.

My mind bends trying to figure out if I were to touch it, would I die instantly from coming in contact with god-like power, or would it shatter into pieces like a delicate plate of porcelain.

It slowly spins, sending out a steady rate of purple shimmering tendrils upward to connect and create the outer limits of this entire realm.

I witness reality being weaved into existence before me by countless bright strands of light.

My eyes stay open in awe, and I float about 100 meters away from the platform for minutes, taking in the glory of it all.

I'm completely entranced in the light until an unfamiliar woman's voice echoes through my mind.

"Welcome. It is my honor to have you here. I would have never predicted a human would be soul bonded with the Fallen One."

Her voice is soothing; it feels as if every word that enters my mind warms my body and unconsciously makes me smile.

However, despite the warmth entering my body and mind, my gaze stays sharp, and I realize that I'm being brought closer to the crystal platform in the sky.

I attempt to airstep away to keep my distance, but it is the same immovable force that brings me closer, exactly the same as I felt within the cyan and blue transport orbs on my way up.

In a matter of seconds, I'm brought down to stand on the outer edge of the circular platform in the sky, now up close and personal with the enormous purple stone that rotates and continues to weave reality in front of my eyes.

I take a deep breath, thinking of all the questions racing through my mind, but only muster out a simple reply.

"Who- Or what are you? Why did you bring me here?"

I look over my shoulders, but my gaze gravitates back to the beautiful purple gem before me.

A few seconds pass, but the woman's voice echoes through my mind again.

"You may call me Celia. I know humans like to put a name to things they talk to..."

The purple gem glows brightly, and more strands than usual start to flow from it and reach out in my direction.

They all form together and make contact on the glossy mirrored ground about 5 meters in front of me to create the energy form of a beautiful woman.

The energy form is roughly my height, with long flowing purple hair, perfectly proportioned curves, and a beautifully graceful walk as she comes closer.

The form has no face, but I can subconsciously tell that she's smiling at me due to her body language and indescribable aura.

Her voice rings out again, however this time a mouth forms on the faceless woman of energy and I hear it speak to me out loud. It's somehow even more soothing on the ears.

"To answer why you're here, I can show you... I was woken up from my slumber, which is not an easy feat. I was getting worried I'd die alone, but it seems the gods are gracious. I'll at least have some company."

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Her mouth disappears, and her energy form pulses with a light glow. She lifts both her arms in the air to let out countless purple threads all around us to create a small dome.

She steps forward and her featureless face moves very close to mine.

I can see energy coming off her body as she circles me a few times, then stops right by my side, giving off a happy and excited emotional aura.

I try to open my mouth to reply again, but I stop the moment I see the purple threads shifting and changing into lifelike images of very familiar figures and events.

I see images flashing by of myself weeks ago entering this construct through the cyan colored rift at the edge of the forest.

Days of training my teammates to become strong enough to fend for themselves flash by in seconds next.

Countless battles against orange cored insects, then yellow cored lizards show up after this. Ember and I using our full power to awaken our own cores and explore the countless islands in the sky are shown in full detail.

At the same time, many other images of other applicants flash by simultaneously, showing their ventures through the construct.

Dozens of perspectives are being shown to me at once, but I can accurately perceive them all at the same time while the soothing energy of this woman flows around me.

I watch the Vice and Veridian Region teams work hard to make it up the first mountain for weeks, but do eventually make it high enough to farm red cores from the scavenger birds when they work together as teams.

Many of the lone applicants aren't as lucky.

Some are killed by red cores awakened, dissolving and getting sent back to the outside world.

However, one applicant stands out. The Phantom Region's single hunter, he uses the same stealth technique to lurk in the shadows on ledges with tree and shrubbery cover. It is a very time-consuming strategy, and he only has advantages against birds that are near the cliffside, but his hunting methods work well and he's able to farm the red cores.

The imagery of the Apex Region's team making it up the mountain are some of the most interesting ones yet. There is a team of three that works together I keep my eye on, most likely to limit the amount of fragments they have to share.

They're able to take on the red cores just as easily as the teammates I left behind at the ocean's shore.

I even see flashes of scenes of the two squads meeting each other and having a standoff at the top of the mountain near where I left my teammates to farm on their own.

The images of Trax yelling and bursting into lightning, Nat eating the skill orb I left for her and bursting into flames are incredible to watch.

The battle healer and water mage are the two that jump into the fight alongside them. Dane takes on Callum in a water versus wind duel, while Marcie has a rematch with the battle healer.

So many flashes of magic and destruction fill the mountainside, blasting holes in the ocean's shore and sending massive boulders of rock down the side of the endless cliff.

It takes over a full minute for it all to be over.

Dane holds the water wielder tight in a prison of wind. Marcie pins the battle healer down with her spear by his neck and her boot on his chest.

Lastly, Trax and Nat are both breathing heavily and the environment around them is burnt and covered in static residue.

They're arguably evenly matched, and both have fight left in them, but it's clear the Apex leaders' strongest teammates have been defeated and he's in a tight position.

Marcie's voice rings out from the chaos as she doesn't hesitate to pierce the battle healer's throat when he refuses to surrender.

"Let's finish this up and get back to work. We're sending these Apex Region weaklings back to the association with nothing, just what they deserve."

She smirks while Dane finishes off Callum with a barrage of wind blades too, removing him from the construct in seconds.

The two of them begin to walk over in the direction of Nat while she attempts to make some kind of agreement to go their separate ways. They haven't come to their final decision yet, but an all out fight it could go either way and both are aware of this.

If Trax goes all out against the three of them, there will certainly be some casualties, it's just unknown which side it will be.

Calling it a draw, and continuing to collect fragments will give everyone a chance to prosper in the long run.

However, this doesn't put out the flame of anger that erupts in Trax's eyes.

He pulls a red core from his item box and swallows it without hesitation and yells.

"None of you are worthy! I said it from the start! Where are those two Bedrock Region scum? I still need to give them a piece of my mind! I'll never make a deal with lesser regions. Veridian, Bedrock, Talton, Silca; all of you... you need to know your place!"

His eyes burst with the red divine threads from the core he consumed, and dangerously massive crimson bolts of lightning erupt from his body.

Nat yells at the others to stay back as she dodges one of the bolts by a hair.

Dane and Marcie stay back like she says, but it appears this is just an attempt at self-sacrifice to let them live.

Another dark red bolt of lightning comes out of Trax's body coupled with a ravenous yell, headed straight toward Nat.

My eyes open wide looking at the recording when I see that she also eats one of the red fragments to counteract this direct hit that she has no chance of dodging.

I still feel Nat safe and sound in my Rising Emperor's domain, and from what I can tell this battle happened over a week ago... She must have won... but I'm eager to find out how.

An immaculate ball of fire erupts from Nat's body, all strengthened by millions of crimson Divine threads just like Trax.

Unlike him, her eyes are still sharp moments after eating the gem.

The constant exposure to the energy while healing her teammates has given her body more resistance to the strands.

The battle of raw uncontrollable lightning power against refined and focused flames begins and ends almost instantly.

Nat repeatedly slashes through Trax's defenses and dodges the rogue bolts of electricity.

The entire battlefield they stand on bends of reality altering force, but in a few seconds the victor is clear.

Trax is sent flying off the cliffside coughing on his own blood as the effects of the gem wear off while Nat stands silently to watch.

Her fragment's power wears off soon after too, and she collapses to the ground while drinking self-regeneration potions to try and speed up the healing.

A grin is plastered on my face as the recording speeds up more and the following days of rest and recovery follow as they continue to farm fragments nearby and are unbothered by any other teams.

Even while more images of other teams and applicants fighting rush across the screens made of purple divine threads, my mind still focuses and makes a mental note of exactly where Trax fell off that cliff.

I'm certain he wasn't killed by Nat's final move. On top of that, I didn't see any other images of Trax after the fact. I'm going to make it a mission to search that cliffside if I ever make it down there to make sure the job is done.

More and more time passes on the recordings, then finally the images of Ember and I pushing as high as we can into the sky through the green serpent's aura appear in full view.

We fly higher and higher until the point where I vividly remember Ember outlining a plan that we will follow out.

He flaps his wings to move in front of me, and my gaze is locked on this screen as I'll finally get to see what his attack actually did.

The woman's hands gracefully move in the air to move purple threads and disperse every playing video feed except for the one I'm watching closely.

It shows a bright golden and silver light in Ember's chest shimmer violently and expand. Watching it after the fact, all of the odd mental effects that kept my gaze away from the mysterious energy are not activated. Now, I'm able to see this all play out exactly as it happened.

Chapter 574

The shimmering gold and silver light grows larger from Ember's chest and begins to cover his entire body.

There is a pulse of light that completely envelops him and spreads out like a shockwave around us.

In the moment, Ember's dragon form looks like it is made of pure, indescribably bright, and powerful divine energy.

Even looking at it through a screen that is replaying the events, something deep in the back of my mind tells me these shimmering threads are somehow at a level that far exceeds even the purple energy that has created this entire construct.

Once the threads hit their maximum luminosity, they begin to contract back. I watch all of the threads vibrate and consolidate near Ember's neck, getting brighter and brighter until they compact into a single point within his mouth.

His black glossy scales are completely void of divine energy the moment he lets out the small ball of energy from his mouth, and it's propelled forward to create a fantastic shimmering beam of light that cuts through the green threads like they're floating dust particles and a high-powered air jet is shooting through it.

The gold and silver pillar of light bursts through the aura, disintegrating everything in its path, clearing out a tunnel in the sky for me to follow.

Immediately after the beam is shot out, Ember reverts to his human form, and I jump upward to catch him in my storage.

The next images of me letting out my own attack at the green serpent are not shown on the screen; however, they aren't necessary; I vividly remember it doing no damage at all...

Instead, the video follows the golden and silver beam upward through the green layer in the sky.

It phases through the tip of the serpent's nose and doesn't slow down at all.

It appears as if the beam is even traveling faster the higher into the air it climbs.

In a matter of seconds, the shimmering energy pierces into the cyan-colored layer of sky, then breaks into the dark blue sky just as quickly.

The next image that appears before me is the ethereal beam colliding with a slowly spinning dark purple gem at the top of the construct.

The gem is the same size as the one I'm nearby now, but it looks dull and almost black in color. The purple threads that slowly stream off it are not moving at the rate I'm witnessing them move now.

It collides with the purple crystal, makes it pulse with golden and silver light, then disappears into the air like nothing was ever there.

The moment it disappears, the crystal pulses with a purple glow that almost fills the entire screen with its luminosity, erupting with purple threads for a full minute straight before calming down.

Afterward, once the light clears, it shows its bright purple glow just like how I see it now; vibrant and full of energy.

Then, the purple energy being beside me cuts the video off right there, retracting her dome of threads around me, but continues to slowly walk near me with a featureless face.

Her mouth forms, and she talks again.

"So now you know why I've brought you here. A human Soul Bonded with a Divine Beast, and on top of that, one that is notorious in our history."

Her mouth smiles, then disappears, and I feel the same emotional aura of excitement being pushed out from her as her graceful walk around the glass-like platform continues.

I reply.

"What do you mean our history?"

Her earlier words from when I first made contact with the purple gem replay in my mind and I speak up again with another question before she can even reply.

"Who is this fallen one you spoke of? Explain this to me in simpler terms, I don't know who you are, and I have no knowledge of Divine Energy outside of what I've learned over the last few weeks..."

The woman stops her graceful walk and tilts her head, pausing for a moment before giving off the aura of curiosity and child-like joy before smiling again and walking forward.

"How interesting... Again, you surprise me. If the true Divine wish to keep their secrets hidden, then I do not have the authority to tell their past. I haven't seen the outside world in over two centuries, so times may have changed.."

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A light aura of her sadness washes over me, and the energy form starts to circle me again, but this doesn't keep me from replying to stay on track.

"I know he's one of these so-called Divine Beasts, you don't have to keep that identity from me."

I pause, but my mind races and becomes slightly impatient at her not exactly answering my question.

"Honestly- That's the least of my concerns. Who are you, what is this place, and why did you decide to bring me here only after seeing I'm soul bonded with a divine beast...?"

Her sour mood vanishes, and the curious and joyful aura returns while she replies.

"Well, that is simple... I already told you who I am, Celia is my name. While I may not be human, I hope this form puts you at ease. I only want to be of help to you. For explaining what this place is? That is a much more difficult question. In essence, everything you see here is me; but it is far more complicated. I can start at the beginning if you wish, it will take quite a bit of explaining."

I nod, looking around the glass platform in the sky.

"Please, all we have is time."

Her graceful movements stop as she looks directly at me with a face made of countless purple threads.

"Time. It may be all that you have, but I for one am lacking this commodity."

She spins around in a graceful twirl and slowly raises her delicate arms in the air.

"This place, it was my attempt at triggering something called a universal shift. There is no other way to awaken an immortal core, studying the past awakening is pointless. One must create, destroy, or alter something to this universe that is so grand and unique it leaves an everlasting impact that cannot be put back to its original state. If this is achieved, the system itself dubs you worthy of ascending and watching the impact you've made on the universe to ripple for eternity."

Sorrow fills the space where her aura seeps outward for a few seconds as we both stand in silence.

Then, she speaks again.

"Demons, Monsters, Pure Mana Beings, there used to be many kinds of creatures that would wander into my construct. It was once meant to be a world of its own where all beings from any world could come to have a peaceful break from reality, train, do business, or whatever their heart desired. I amassed the peak of what I knew of as power, 8 centuries building up my core to reach the apex of the known worlds; the purple core."

Her aura now is mixed with feelings and emotions that I can't quite fully conceptualize. There is fear, boredom, joy, happiness, greed, terror, unconditional love, and boundless happiness all swirling around me together as one.

"It is said one that awakens a purple core can live upward of a thousand years. Once I lived a life worth living, there was only one thing left to do. Leave a mark on history. I achieved my goals, experienced it all, and even lost everything there is multiple times to build it back up again; however the lasting memory of myself in the worlds I traveled always fades with time. When I realized the end of my life was really near, I decided to create this world in the hopes of impacting the very system, the fabric of reality that strings all living things together enough to grab its attention."

All of the emotions fade, and only a light sadness remains.

"I fused my mind, body, and soul into this pocket realm. Everything you see before you is me. If this creation is destroyed, I will be forgotten in time with it. However, it seems this destruction is already set in stone. The moment I realized this was 150 years into my construct's creation, half a century ago."

I raise an eyebrow, as this is roughly the time my world had its great war. The same time period in which Ember died in his past life.

She continues.

"This is when the first human entered my realm."

She smiles and curiosity and softness flows from her aura again.

"One of the only planets in our local system to not be blessed by the system for millennia. The human world, like all the others with systems awakened or not, had reserves of Qi. Those who harnessed it could strengthen their minds and bodies like every other lifeform, but like all great powers it was kept secret to only those small groups who held it. However, I couldn't quite believe it when I witnessed a human being using mana-based skills."

My mind is spinning at the words coming from her mouth. So many theories and ideas about other worlds, realms, Qi, and the system itself are being spoken out loud.

She doesn't stop at my wide-eyed reaction, and just continues.

"Once the first human walked through, no other species ever followed. My plentiful realm full of diversity, waned. Instead of receiving new visitors daily, and using this as a realm to interact and grow together; it became a resource mine for the greedy. More and more of my divine energy was stripped away. They came in floods, getting stronger by the day to pull all of the resources they could from the forests, oceans, and skies. My lifeforce was already diminishing, but this only sped up my end."

The sadness intensifies.

"It came to the point where I made my peace, that I was not meant to leave an imprint on the system's history. I lived the longest and brightest life a mortal could have. I accepted my end, changing the rules of the construct to only allow those who enter to be granted a limited time before they're rejected from the realm and unable to enter again. It would keep me alive just a little longer, and spread out the resources of my divine energy stores for generations to come."

She smiles, and the sadness fades to become curious again.

"The real world must be a very different place than I remember. Humans have become strong. One even reached the height of the yellow cores decades ago. That was just around the time where I decided to go into hibernation. He was a young man, a light magic user proficient in Qi."

The woman smiles and her featureless face comes close to mine.

"I went into eternal sleep shortly after. My assumption was that I would fade away, and in turn help humans strive to become a powerhouse of the local system. Maybe I wouldn't be remembered, but at least I would help a new lower race begin to grow."

I still stare back at her with a dazed expression, trying to process all of this while she speaks again.

"Then, just weeks ago, a Divine Beast entered my Realm for the first time in the history of its creation. I was woken up on my deathbed with a final unexpected chance to directly pull on the strings of fate. I've met you... If anything, I should be the one asking you questions. What is happening on the outside? Have the Demons succeeded yet in subjugating your world too?"

Chapter 575

The shimmering purple threads continue to flow out from the crystal and bring reality into existence all around me as I think about her last question.

"What do you mean? The Demons are trying to take over our world? All they do is guard labyrinths. If anything they're growing the economy of large cities and helping our world thrive... no?"

All of the times I've conversed with demons in the past flash through my mind.

They've all been hostile and human-hating, but I just assumed that was because I was invading their fortresses and trying to kill them. It's only natural they'd try to kill me in return.

Even recently, with the labyrinth that I managed to create myself, the demon that spawned in was ready to make a deal with me. I whisper aloud as I remember our agreement.

"Well... he was adamant about bringing the captured mana back to the Demonic Realm.."

As I'm deep in thought, the purple energy form starts to walk around me again, and the familiar aura of curiosity spreads out as she interjects.

"So they're only on the initial farming phase? Dungeons and Labyrinths spawn, but they haven't taken control of enough of your world's mana to spark a stronghold yet, have they?"

I raise an eyebrow and turn my head to lock my eyes on her form as she continues to dance around.

Her words of a stronghold make the image of the abyss in the center of the Dark Continent flash in my mind. Ember's explanation of dungeons, labyrinths, and this phenomenon are similar; however, the fact that he's a dragon, and a divine beast may give him a strong bias on the matter.

"You mean a Demon Lord's Throne awakening? Is this what you mean by a stronghold? If so, there's definitely one forming..."

She nods slowly, and the emotions of shock, dread, and a small amount of hope trickle out of her.

"Yes, that is one of the names they go by. It's because they often only form in the Demonic Realm. Mostly used as a competition for worthy Arch Demons of the new generations to compete to become new Regional Lords..."

She pauses.

"Of course, they still expend lots of energy to create. Usually, the formation of a Demon Lord's throne will use a large amount of an entire world's energy. Demons are notorious for siphoning energy from young worlds to power their own throne awakenings, especially those that are newly connected to the system."

She gets very close to my face again.

"It is uncommon for them to trigger a throne awakening on other worlds. There is always a series of trials, once the throne is ready, anyone can challenge it. They're risking a lot of energy to spark one anywhere other than their realm or worlds they've already conquered, even if they're confident in

their victory. There must be a reason why they want a stronghold on your human world rather than using this power to strengthen their own."

An aura of deep thought, distress, confusion, then boredom flood out of the woman before she turns away to start gracefully walking back toward the purple crystal.

To my surprise, the gem pulses and becomes a shade darker than it was moments ago.

She turns and speaks again.

"The fallen one granted me a wonderful gift, enough energy to converse with you here, but not nearly enough to say everything I want... It takes enough power for me to hold this construct together on autopilot, having intelligent conversation won't last much longer. I only wish I could stop history from repeating itself."

I take a step forward and she does the same, but her right arm dissolves into millions of tiny threads.

They collide with my forehead as she speaks again.

"It will be easier if I just show you..."

My vision and perception of the world around me cease the moment the strands touch my forehead, and it feels as if I'm spectating the perspective of someone else, floating high above a planet in deep space.

Half of the planet is filled with green and blue, while the other half is completely black. There is a dreadful aura of Demonic Energy spreading quickly all over the globe before my eyes.

The perspective I'm viewing from shifts left and right to see multiple other glowing green and cyan-colored entities hovering high in the sky, then turns back to the planet as it's completely enveloped.

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The perspective speeds up, and it looks as though years are passing, traveling through space, passing other planets covered in black Demonic Energy.

The lifeforms travel further and further away to find unaltered planets in faraway systems spinning around stars, but the timelapse I'm watching speeds up more and more.

Hundreds of years pass as planets without life are completely ignored. Weaker planets are drained of mana very quickly and obliterated into dust, and those that have intelligent life, use mana, and are so-called awakened by the system are soon met with the same force that took over the first planet I witnessed.

One by one, the planets and entire local solar systems are either sucked dry of mana and obliterated, or if their mana signatures are strong enough, the planets are taken over with the dark energy. It always starts from a single point, and spreads out in a series of pulses that feel eerily similar to surges and the abyss spreading in the desert of the Dark Continent.

Hundreds of years pass and I watch the entities run from these planets over and over again.

Some of them change their forms and colors, moving from green to cyan, to dark blue, and eventually purple.

Some of them leave the group of travelers, while other times new beings join.

The final memories I see are this being flying far away, further than ever before in any of the past world destructions. Every local solar system she passes, the being drops a large cyan-colored orb down to every planet.

Even those infected by the Demonic Energy, every planet gets an orb. Even those without any mana present on them at all.

She continues flying out into the endless empty vastness of space, then everything goes black before I can see what happens next.

I take a gasp of fresh air as my eyes open and purple tendrils of energy retract from my forehead.

It feels like I woke up from a very real dream. All of the images shown before me feel as though I witnessed them myself, but are also a bit foggy and foreign.

I see the purple woman standing before me, now about $\frac{3}{4}$ the size she was before she showed me what I can only assume to be glimpses into her memories. The large floating gem is even darker behind her, and less and less tendrils of energy stream off of it.

She speaks in the same soothing tone.

"The process continues, history always repeats itself. They have infected your world, and what's to come is inevitable. As you now see, no matter how far one runs, if there is mana to devour, the demons will follow. They may spare your world and allow you all to live under their rule, or they may drain your mana and destroy all hopes of becoming a powerful race to oppose them."

She looks up at me.

"However, I have been asleep for decades. The presence of a Divine Beast, and a powerful human who can challenge the throne may be what creates a change. There have been rare events where worlds fight back in order to battle the Demons. Sometimes other races even challenge the throne to claim energy rich planets as their own when the Arch Demon generations are weaker than usual."

The woman shrinks again and a rush of a tired aura ripples through me as the gem gets darker again.

"I don't have much time left... If you would allow me to search your memories, I can grant you what you need the most with my remaining power. I cannot promise much, but if I can help a human that is bonded with the fallen one; I'll be directly leaving my mark on history as intended. In my last breath, I will have achieved my final goal."

Her mouth disappears, and the energy figure looks even more transparent than it was moments ago.

I nod and begin to reply.

"Yes, if this is your wish—"

The second I agree, I feel the purple threads hit my forehead again, and a rush of the woman's emotions instantly transmit through me. Almost instantly, she removes the strands and steps back with a smile.

"What a simple world... and what an interesting race... and—what a greedy government... I understand now how my rift in this world was monopolized and cut off from the other worlds. You aren't on good terms with them either, yet you decide to stay so close to your enemies... Again, what an interesting situation."

A flutter of excitement and curiosity vibrates through the atmosphere as she looks toward me.

"I've decided I will finally collapse my realm. I will help you and your familiar Ember to be victorious in your upcoming battles."

I raise my hands and reply in a worried tone.

"Hey—collapsing the realm—what do you mean by that? I'm still inside this you know!"

An amused aura spreads out from her still fading and shrinking form.

"I know. It won't be instantaneous. The collapse will take enough time for you to use your teleport crystals and leave. I will convert my remaining life force into a powerful artifact that will contain the remains of my living soul. While I won't be fully conscious, I will still be technically extending my life. It is quite selfish of me to continue on living, but it will help you in both your short-term predicament of concealing your power, and in time your long-term needs, I will help you again once it is time to challenge the throne."

A final aura of gratefulness mixed with a light bit of joy and sorrow flows through me as her energy form fades completely away.

The threads of purple light that were connected to her all fall back into the dark purple gem in the center of the crystal platform, and I'm left all alone in silence.

The only thing up here to keep me company is the whistle of the wind.

A slow and steady flow of purple threads continues to come out of the top of the gem to create the dome-like walls of the construct, but they start to slow down too.

In less than half a minute, the threads begin to stop flowing entirely.

The purple stone floats down to touch the reflective surface of the platform and stops spinning too.

It pulses brightly one time, then compacts in on itself as if it's compressing its energy and forming into a tight ball.

Without even realizing it, I'm moved closer to the shrinking crystal and it is also moving closer to me.

It flashes bright, covering my entire vision, and I feel something hot touch one of my fingers.

In the next moment, the flash ceases, and a new bright purple ring appears on my finger.

Its purple divine threads start to creep down my arm, and at the same time I look up toward the central point of the construct's dome top, and it begins to fade away.

Without the constant stream of purple energy to continue weaving reality, there is nothing at all behind it.

I stare off into infinite darkness where I see the construct starting to fade away. It spreads quickly, all from the central point, a large circle of darkness begins to descend down on me from above.

Chapter 576

I pull a teleport crystal from my item storage and crush it in my fist.

The cloud of divine energy below me is impossible for me to pass through, so this is the fastest and only way down I can foresee.

A flash of light envelops my whole being seconds before the void of nothingness makes the very platform I stood on a moment ago disappear like it never existed.

My assumption is if I'm caught up in this too, I'll dissolve away and return to the real world outside of this construct; however, there are multiple reasons why I don't want to test this theory out for myself.

The first is in the case that it may not act the same now that the construct is disappearing for good. Being caught up in the dissolving mass isn't something I want to test out the end result of. Secondly, I want to leave through the rift itself to meet the association as a normal applicant and not cause any extra unnecessary suspicion. Lastly, I still have many things I want to do inside before it fades away completely.

As my body materializes down by the ocean shore at the top of the mountain where I left my teammates, I immediately locate them with my Rising Emperor's Domain.

They're all less than 50km away farming red cores on the cliffsides like it is just another day.

I let out an immense wave of telepathy that's enhanced by the yellow threads of divine energy surging through my body.

It calls for them all to come back to the platform, and that I have an urgent update for them.

At the same time, the purple threads that were creeping up my hand from the ring before now cover my shoulder, and are making their way over my chest.

They feel warm, but I'm certain they aren't harmful, and the energy isn't bonding with me or deteriorating my flesh like the green energy did before.

After a few seconds, I see my teammates making their way back toward me in my enemy detection skill and their geolocations.

None of them are in range to respond to me with telepathy, but they definitely heard my message.

While their points converge on me, the purple threads cover my chest, surround my core, and then start spreading all over my head and down toward the rest of my body too.

It feels like a warm skin-tight blanket is being wrapped around me.

It seeps into my eyes, covers my arms and legs, then pulses in a light purple hue before completely vanishing.

The bright glowing ring on my finger changes from a blinding attention-catching item to dark purple, similar to the massive crystal's original dormant color, almost black and not eye-catching at all on my finger.

The artifact has bonded with me and activated.

I feel the same high-pitched ringing sound that I did when Ember's limiter was placed on me, but instead of having to control my output manually, this limiter feels as if it's completely intertwined with my being and instincts.

Purple threads cover my body in a thick layer; however, they're completely invisible.

I look down at my chest, and even to me, it looks as if my divine core is completely gone.

I raise an eyebrow because it feels like I'm still able to use my yellow threads of energy at full power, and even turn to the ocean while pulling out my sword to test the theory.

In a single slash, I let out a yellow wave of energy, and my entire being pulses bright yellow, exposing the presence of my core for a split second while I let out the attack.

The moment I stop and put my sword away, the appearance of me being unawakened and powerless comes back.

I try the same exact thing for my mana control aura output, as well as soul energy and raw Qi as well.

I'm extremely glad I trained with Ember for days before coming to this exam to learn what certain mana control levels feel like, because the purple-cored limiter I'm wearing acts in a similar fashion.

Whatever skills or powers I actively am showing during an active attack are shown in their full glory. However, when I'm standing at rest, the artifact acts as a cloaking device almost. An invisible veil that suppresses all energy coming off of it to the eyes of an outsider.

It takes me almost a full minute to get the hang of things before I see Nat, Dane, and Marcie all flying my way after hearing my message.

The air magic user and spear-wielding tank look and carry themselves almost exactly the same as I left them before.

Both of their mana controls have far surpassed a billion, making them at the peak of the B-Class hunters. At the rate they've been farming these past few weeks, each of them should have hundreds of red fragments.

They're completely clean of divine energy, as it's clear Nat has been healing them and taking the threads that invade their bodies.

Coming up the rear in their flight path, I see the white-haired healer covered in a bright red aura of threads from cleansing them after their last kill.

She activates her healing magic, drinks a regeneration potion, then uses her daggers to channel the excess energy and eject it with a few flaming crescents into the sky.

All three of them drift down to meet me on the shore with a whole new aura of confidence about them.

I speak up once they hit the ground.

"To sum things up, I made it to the top and claimed this construct's ultimate prize. It's about to collapse in on itself, and I think it's best we don't wait for that to happen."

All of their eyes open wide while I look up at the sky, then back down at them.

"So, it's time to wrap things up. I don't know if we have seconds, minutes, or hours left; but it's best not to leave things to chance."

I turn to the ocean, thinking about the black orbs that fell from the islands in the sky days ago when the green serpent destroyed the floating obsidian forests.

Nat speaks up to break my train of thought.

"What about you? Are you coming with us? -And where's Emrie?"

I nod, but still look out into the ocean.

"Yeah- I'll be following right after you. Emrie... is on his way too. I just need to check one last thing."

Marcie nods.

"Very well, don't have to tell me twice."

Then, takes a crystal out from her item storage.

Dane does the same, nodding with a smile and letting the teleport crystal hover above his hand with wind magic.

"We've farmed more than enough to win this thing. We already wiped out our only competition."

I smile, then turn to the teleport platform about 50 meters away and point a hand toward it.

"Good."

Without warning, I let a fireball out from my palm wrapped in yellow threads of divine energy and it obliterates every bit of evidence I created one in the first place, leaving a round crater in its place.

All three of their eyes widen as they realize what kind of energy I just used, but none of them say a word about it.

"I'll be destroying the one near the rift before I leave too. Just in case this construct spits out any foreign matter, I don't want any evidence left behind. That means I need your extra teleport crystals too. It's better if the Apex Region doesn't find out I have access to these items when they search you."

I turn back and each of them gives me any extra teleport crystals they have remaining, leaving only one that leads back to the remaining platform.

"We'll speak again after the B-Class awards ceremony. I'm in quite the hurry right now."

They say a quick goodbye, slightly confused at my sudden words and appearance; but there's too many things to explain and not enough time to do so. It's better they just leave and I can give a proper explanation once reality around me isn't disappearing at an unknown rate.

The three of them crush their crystals and I launch myself off deep into the sea.

My yellow footsteps are left behind in the air, and my yellow core pulses giving off light every time I take a step, but I feel invisible in between strides.

While covering dozens of kilometers and putting out a wide perception aura, I really get to learn the capabilities of my new limiter to an even deeper level.

I find that after the initial pulse of my perception aura's activation, I can still perceive things far away while being under the full stealth of my limiter.

Using self-regeneration, or any of my stat-boosting buffs that stay inside my body can also be used at their full power without even a drop of mana, qi, or divine threads from leaking through.

The only downside I face is when I continuously test out my attacks the bright yellow glow of divine energy leaks out. Even if I don't use my full power, anyone that is knowledgeable enough and has high enough perception can see that there is something suspicious happening here. Not just anyone can awaken a yellow core.

Every airstep I take pushes me further into the open ocean, hundreds of kilometers fly by, and over an hour of travel time passes before I have another breakthrough.

After using the limiter so much on autopilot, I begin to feel the layers of purple threads wrapped around and through me ripple and ring ever so slightly every time they allow energy to seep through.

Over time I begin to dissect the different feelings that allow each energy to pass through and begin to both consciously and subconsciously control the output with far better consistency.

It gets to the point where I can have the limiter completely cover the core of my choosing, and dampen that power if I please.

Instead of throwing a yellow fireball from my fist that's strengthened by countless yellow threads, making its weight on reality almost ten times as dense; I'm also able to release an unaltered dark red fireball from my fist as well.

It's far weaker than my full power, but the yellow divine threads are just held behind the invisible barrier and processed through my body instead of being combined with the attacks.

This takes quite a lot of practice, but while continuing my search of the seemingly endless open ocean; it's the most productive thing to do.

I practice doing this with my perception aura too, activating my greater form and testing its capabilities with the limiter; using divine energy to search far and wide while also making sure I can still use a pure mana perception aura and also one of Soul Energy too.

Hours pass, and every airstep I take makes me feel like the danger from above is getting closer and closer.

At the same time, I feel as if I've completely mastered the limiter gifted by the creator of this construct.

With all this time passing and no change in the environment, it feels as if I'll never get a reading or find what I'm looking for. I even think about turning back and using a teleport crystal to leave and follow the others.

However, two equally eerie phenomena hit my senses at exactly the same time. They make me realize I can't turn back now when I'm so close to getting what I came for.

The first is a very familiar one, however on a far larger scale.

The disintegration of reality flows into my senses from above, as a total lack of mass and space is shown to me in my enemy detection and all-seeing eye skill.

Where there was endless empty sky before, now a black void descends from above.

It is massive, getting larger and larger with every second that passes, like the top of the dome-shaped world I'm living in is melting away.

What's remaining is an endless black void, but that is just what my brain fills in to conceptualize the fact that there is in fact nothing remaining. We're already in a constructed world outside of space itself, there is only the absence of mass and energy beyond this collapsing reality.

I should crush a crystal right now to leave, but far out in the ocean, I also see a dense black forest floating on the calm waves. From their newly grown branches, countless red fruits grow and shimmer while scavenger birds fly around them in circles and perch on their slowly growing branches that reach back up toward the sky.

Chapter 577

I fly closer to the floating forest as the dark void falling down on me expands and descends at a constant rate.

While it appears at the far edges of my perception, hundreds of kilometers in the air, it's still rapidly descending, and my assumption is I only have a few more minutes to find a way to transport the trees with me before they're engulfed in the void of nothingness too and I lose my chance.

With soul energy and yellow divine threads powering my footsteps through the air, I make my single focus the small clump of obsidian trees.

Many thoughts race through my mind about how they'll react to my spatial magic. I compile multiple tests in an order in which I'll follow them, just in case the seeds at their cores are harder to capture than I initially anticipated.

The next few minutes go by in a blur.

I push myself and make it to the floating forest just in time as the endless void is less than a dozen kilometers overhead.

With under a minute to perform my tests, I use my heightened senses to open up various spatial magic portals to test things out.

Some of the trees have grown as high as 100m into the air from where their seeds float in the water, while others have just begun to sprout and haven't even grown as tall as my greater form.

I target the smaller trees first.

Every time my aura of yellow divine energy or even leftover threads from my footsteps comes in contact with any of the trees, they immediately pull them in and reach for the sky.

Surprisingly, not a single purple thread leaves my ring. They all stay tightly intertwined with me.

I test out a few soul energy-imbued skills, as well as pure Qi and pure mana, and I find something very interesting.

The dark black obsidian trees don't react to these tests at all.

It's as if two equally strengthened solid non-magical objects are hitting each other when I try some offensive attacks out of curiosity.

The mana and Qi bounce off the tree unaltered, and the trees are always left without a dent or even a scratch.

Following this test, I let one of the smallest saplings fall into my item storage, and it freezes inside in a state of suspended animation just like a normal piece of wood.

Whatever these organisms are, they only react to divine energy.

As the black sky falls closer and closer, I decide I can figure out exactly how they work another time. For now, it's best I get as many samples as I can for future tests.

I completely suppress all of my divine threads behind my limiter and begin opening up spatial magic portals left and right to allow over a dozen black obsidian seeds to fall into my item storage.

By the time the last one within my senses falls into my possession, I don't waste any more time to wait around. I crush another teleport crystal in my fist to bring me away from the ocean and all the way down the enormous mountain back at the very start of the construct.

Immediately, I look up to the sky to make sure I traveled far enough away and let out a relieved sigh when I see the sky above me is still blue, so I have a little bit of time left before the construct dissolves down to this point too.

I re-activate my divine energy-infused aura and allow it to spread throughout the entire forest below the mountain.

When I first entered this place, I couldn't even perceive half of this black jaguar-infested forest; now I can see every rock and tree inside it with perfect clarity all the way to the cliffside.

Considering the speed at which the void was descending above before, I most likely still have less than half an hour in these woods before this entire construct disappears.

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

Far off in the center of the forest, I get an enemy detection reading of a lightning mage slowly making his way through the thick trees.

I smirk while blasting off with divine energy-powered airsteps in its direction.

In the surrounding woods, and up the cliffside, there are a few other stragglers from the Vice and Veridian regions still farming, because technically there are still a few days left in this 28 day long event. However, no one could have foreseen what's happening to the construct now.

I ignore them all and blip through the air with a single focus in mind.

I clear over a hundred kilometers into the center of the forest, and once I finally get within range of my target, the sky above turns dark again.

I dive down into the trees and don't even try to keep myself hidden or my intentions subtle as I come crashing down into the rocky forest to create a massive crater in front of the still badly injured hunter being torn apart by red divine threads from the inside. He's clearly going through the withdrawal symptoms from eating the red fragments without his body being ready.

Once the dust clears and I stand before him with my arms crossed, the apex hunter's eyes widen and he coughs up even more of his blood.

However, that doesn't stop him from charging his body with electricity and pulling a handful of red and orange fragments from his item box.

"It's- You! I knew I'd find you! The Bedrock Region will pay! All of you will pay! I can finally get my revenge! I'll show you once and for all the Apex Region is greater than all the other regions combined." He yells out with sleep-deprived eyes and a battle-crazed stare.

I let out a sigh as he brings the fragments to his lips.

My gaze moves to the sky as I still sense the void descending, and shake my head while whispering under my breath. "I gave you more than enough chances to change, this is truly just who you are... It's time for you to give up, Trax. This is getting sad."

I activate my mana manipulation skill, binding its malleable form with yellow divine energy and telekinesis to perfect the fine movements and shoot out an orb of energy toward the blood-stained hunter to knock the handful of fragments out of his grasp.

Next, the yellow orb of light expands and turns into many impossibly tough yellow ropes that wrap around the hunter's neck, arms, and legs. I lift him in the air, unable to move, with an angry and disgusted expression on his face while I push him up against a tree about 5 meters away.

He starts to yell out again, presumably an insult or degrading other regions for no good reason, but I shut him up by activating intimidation and confusion to blast his psyche with an attack that would knock out an enemy ten times his strength.

The hunter's eyes turn white, and he falls to the floor of the forest while I use plunderer and lifesteal to bring both his MP and HP below 5%.

The moment they do, I get the mythic grade absorption notification that allows me to steal skills without killing the enemy, and I allow the red soul energy to wrap around his body without hesitating at all.

Seconds later, a skill orb with extreme grade lightning summoning falls into my storage.

I think about whether or not I should kill him here and send him back to the association asleep like this, or let the mysterious void envelop him.

Either way, there's a risk that he'll tell this story, and my meticulously crafted hunter identity will be linked to someone who can take skills from people's status. While it wouldn't be the end of the world, it would be a waste of time and effort for putting up this facade for so long.

My mind races while the endless void continues to descend.

Then, a perfect idea comes to mind.

I pull out an item from my storage that I crafted by accident when I was first playing with the limits of my mythic grade plunderer skill, then read its description.

[Enchanted Lizardman's Claw Pendant][+55% Mental Strength][Plunderer Attribute][Cursed]

[Cursed Item Created!] The holder of this item will lose 1% of their remaining MP every minute. If the item holder hits 10% of their original max MP with this cursed item still on their person, even if MP is restored and the item is removed, the item effects will not leave the user's status.

I rename the pendant to [Unknown Item][Cursed] and in my mythic grade craftsman skills editor interface, I completely scramble all of its descriptions with question marks and random jumbled letters.

Next, I use telekinesis to place the cursed item around Trax's neck, and it appears on his status instantly, and the slow MP drain activates automatically.

Without any indicators of what exactly this item does, it at least covers my tracks and the disappearance of his skill can be attributed to an incurable curse rather than someone's skill.

I pull my blade from my item storage and shove it through the unconscious hunter's chest the next moment, and show a satisfying smile as he disappears and leaves the construct. This arrogant hunter will never wield lightning magic again, and will certainly not live up to the standards of being the chosen one of this year's top Apex Region B-Class applicants.

"Glad that's over..." I murmur to myself while staring up at the sky, putting away my sword and crushing a teleport crystal to come back to the edge of the forest with the cyan blue rift within my sight.

I walk over, letting out a divine energy-imbued fireball behind me to destroy the last remaining teleport platform, then stop about 20 meters in front of the rift that leads back to the association.

There's just one more problem I have to solve... If I walk through this rift without my partner Emrie Carter from the Bedrock Region, there are going to be quite a lot of questions I'm unable to answer.

Chapter 578

The sky darkens as I sit in front of the rift and close my eyes, reaching into the far corners of my mind to think of possible ideas.

After a few seconds, I get up and begin testing everything I've thought of.

I open my status and scroll through, trying to activate my body double skill many times, but nothing happens because all three of my doubles are still alive and well back in the real world.

I even attempt to create lifelike manifestations of Emrie out of earth magic, pure mana, and even try water magic, but none of them portray levels, and it's very difficult to make a voice come out of an inanimate object.

The black sky continues to descend, not caring for my lack of time, which only makes me speed up my scrolling and pushes me to think of even more out-of-the-box ideas.

Then, in a final moment of desperation, scrolling through everything I have, one skill pops out at me, and I open it up to read its description.

Combat Magic [Superior Dark Summoning]

Info: Dark Magic allows the caster to summon darkness. It is the absence of light. Or, the absence of magic itself. If Dark Magic clashes with any pure mana-based attack, it will negate the opponent's attack proportional to the amount of MP the enemy is exerting.

An [Advanced Grade] hidden ability: The MP necessary to negate attacks thrown by elemental skills by the opponent only need to exert 25% of the attack's MP to negate it.

An [Extreme Grade] hidden ability: Portals of shadows can be created within the caster's mana control aura and can allow items or portions of the caster's body to phase through it as long as they stay touching the caster.

A [Superior Grade] hidden ability: A single opponent killed by the caster may be resurrected in the form of shadows. The remains of this opponent must be sacrificed to the shadows, and only one contract may be created at a time. Once a new contract is created, the old one will disappear. The shadow soldier will be reborn at the level it was killed, but may gain exp to level up and increase its mana control naturally. Its experience points will be split evenly with the caster while it is walking in the world of the living. This resurrected form is capable of expressing free will, but their link to the world of the living can be severed by the caster at any time. If the shadow summon is killed, its level and mana control will decrease by 10% once it is summoned again.

Grade: Superior

[Upgrade]

I haven't used this skill at all, other than passively the few times I tested out the sword I made out of the Lich King's Dark Stone and Scythe.

The Superior Grade hidden ability is the one that catches my attention.

I recall the Lich King creating a summoned soldier in our battle. It may have been obliterated by me in a single strike, but it did, in fact, have a level, and according to this, the shadow summon has free will but only at the whims of its master.

One of the terms of using this perk is that I have to sacrifice the remains of the enemy to create a summon.

There are only two corpses in my item storage available to me right now. The first is the corpse of the mountain king, the monster from the Vice City labyrinth. I don't know much about it, and if it still has ties or deep-rooted loyalty to the Association. I didn't even hear it speak out loud at all during our battle.

Most importantly, I still need to let its body dissolve inside the Labyrinth in order to trigger the transfer magic for the next floor. I can't risk severing my access to such a great farming resource, so this isn't a viable option for me.

The second corpse I have available is the bones of the Lich King that I've been keeping locked away in my storage.

It has no ties with the Association and is an intelligent creature that can speak. While it may have resentment toward me personally, I get the feeling there will be a far higher chance of my success with this monster than trying anything else.

Divine Beast or not, I defeated this monster when I was far weaker than I am now. This fact, combined with the shadow contract allowing me to make the summon disappear at any moment, makes me feel even more confident in this decision.

If not this, then I'm going to be jumping through this rift without an explanation for my lost ally.

While I could make up a lie of Emrie's demise within the construct, coming back with a copy of him will be far more profitable for me in the long run if I can pull it off.

With the dark sky descending upon me, I calculate there is less than two minutes remaining before this entire pocket world is completely gone.

With a sigh, I open up my item storage and let the massive bone remains of the Lich King that I've been holding onto for so long out to form a pile on the floor. The absorption notification to allow me to claim the monster's buff [Curse of The Lich King] is still available on its remains, but I've made up my mind not to accept that ability.

I place my open palm on the floor while activating my Dark Magic and concentrating on the shadow summoning ritual.

A pulse of pure dark energy ejects from my palm and opens a massive black circle on the ground.

It looks almost as dark as the sky above, but I don't compare the two and just concentrate on what's happening in front of me.

The bones of the massive skeleton fall into the darkness that I've created, and I hear a ding sound in my head and a status screen appears in my consciousness.

Shadow Summon: Lich King

[Lv. 3642]

A list of all of its stats shows up in my mind's eye too, and I curiously read them all as an enormous black skeleton rises from the circular shadow I've created.

The only difference between it and the Lich King I faced on the battlefield in the Dark Continent is the fact that it has no Scythe, no Cloak, no Soul Energy, no Demon Cores, and no Dark Magic at all.

It does still hold two buffs:

[Curse of The Lich King][0/2500]

[Greater Form of The Dark God]

It seems as though it has no one under its curse now, and it is still able to stay in this massive Dark Form.

At the center of its chest, I see a small silver core of threads shimmering and spinning in circles at a fast rate, but a similar mental block hits me to the same extent as when I peered into Ember's core in the past.

This time, however, I'm able to stare at it for almost a full tenth of a second and analyze it, realizing it doesn't have the golden threads that Ember's does.

As interesting as it is, my mind is still pushed away from it subconsciously, and I focus on the task at hand, scanning its stats and abilities more.

Below this, at the bottom of its status, I see another small screen labeled [Modes]

[Dormant] - Default

[Command]

[Battle]

[Free Reign]

The Default mode is set on dormant. The massive black summoning circle beneath the skyscraper-sized skeleton shrinks and disappears leaving the rocky ground un-altered beneath it. The black skeleton continues staring forward as if it's still frozen in time.

It's in a dormant state right now, and I don't know what will happen if I change it to the other modes, so I just yell out to it to see if it will follow my orders.

"Deactivate your Greater Form Buff! I need you to shrink down to my size!"

The black skeleton just stares off at attention, unmoving and unthinking as the void above continues to rapidly fall faster.

It's less than 50 kilometers away now, and I'm sure there's under a minute left before it envelops the rift and everything on this cliffside.

I grit my teeth, and think carefully while scanning over the possibilities.

The next mode available is [Command] it will most likely allow me to give it orders, and do exactly as I command.

The mode beneath it is [Battle]. My instincts tell me this will put the summon into high alert and fend off or attack anything in its surroundings.

Just looking at the last option, [Free Reign] makes me shiver for a moment. This one is self explanatory, and I don't plan on allowing this mode to be activated any time soon.

The massive black skeletons' overwhelming aura seeps out of its body even in this dormant state. I can feel its evil nature glaring down at me even while its mind and control is locked away behind the shadow summoning ritual. The stench of death still permeates out from it, and its mana control would easily knock out any hunters below the double ranked up status just from being this close to it.

After coming to a quick decision, I yell out again.

"Switch Modes. Command mode!"

The interface at the bottom of its status shifts.

[Dormant]

[Command] - Selected

[Battle]

[Free Reign]

I yell out again for it to deactivate its buff and shrink back down to my size.

The moment the command leaves my lips, the mindless shadow form of the skeleton does exactly that.

It stands at attention, and my mind races for even more ideas.

The sky gets darker and darker, and the endless light source that was lighting up this construct before dims.

The entire forest turns dark, and it feels like it's turning to night, simultaneously pressuring me to work faster as the seconds tick by.

I dig through my storage and pull out an old black cloak, a minotaur's horn, item box, and handfuls of mana crystals to get to work.

I begin imbuing my newly upgraded legendary grade conceal skill into the cloak to specialize it for visual effects, while I make the minotaur horn into a pendant solely worn to alter one's status. At the same time, I throw a few red divine fragments into an item box for him to wear around his waist.

At the same time, I create 3D lifelike images of the hunter Emrie Carter that Ember was impersonating before and speak to the paralyzed Lich King before me to give it another command.

"Use this gear, and impersonate the hunter before you. Change your appearance to match his."

My gaze looks up at the sky, then back to the Lich while I use conceal to change my own form and begin talking in Emrie's voice to give my next command.

"This is how you must speak. Use this voice, and no others. I need you to become this identity. Your name is Emrie Carter until I tell you otherwise. We're on an infiltration mission, there will be no room for errors. Do as I command, read the room, and follow my lead."

My heart beats more and more while the Lich does as I say, taking the newly created cloak, putting it on to shift the black shadow-filled skeletal form it has into a lifelike image of the bedrock region's hunter.

He ties the item box around his waist, and then words come out of his lips.

"Of course, master, this is an easy feat."

The orange-haired fire wielder looks me straight in the eyes, and I wouldn't be able to tell the difference if it wasn't for the overwhelming mana control aura pouring off him, as well as the fact that his status shows all of his original information.

I send a telepathy message into the Lich King's psyche next.

"I'll be able to communicate faster this way, can you hear me?"

"Yes." Is all I get as a response before I begin showing the Divine Beast puppet how to alter his status to match the bedrock Region Hunter's was.

I feel a ripple of dark disdain pour off of the summon, but Emrie's face still keeps its smiling impression.

With the high pressure of this situation, I can't tell if I'm hallucinating this, or if the monster's emotions are really leaking out from behind this skill.

Less than 15 seconds remain while I try to solve the final problem before me.

The Lich has unimaginably high mana control, enough to rival the A-Class hunters in strength if he walked in there like this.

Another order blurts out through our link before I can think of the possible consequences.

"I need you to make a limiter. You're a Divine Beast, you can do that right? Something that will hide your mana control... It only needs to be for a small amount of time. Just enough to keep up appearances once we walk through that rift."

I turn toward the Lich, and it doesn't respond for a moment while putting its hands in the air in front of its face to focus on something.

The moment it does, I realize what an absurd request that was. The limiter that Ember made for me took him almost a year inside an isolation pod to fully heal from. However, the quick response isn't one that I fully expected.

"In this shadow form, my body cannot tire, so it can be done. I can create a limiter that will last one hour, but my Immortal Core will be dormant for quite a while afterward."

As the sky continues to disappear, a bright silver light forms between the creature's hands.

My heart beats faster and faster as reality shrinks around us, and the silver light glows brighter.

Ten seconds pass before the light finally hits its maximum luminosity, lighting up the darkened world around us far brighter than the cyan rift.

It disperses in a flash, and I instantly feel the overwhelming dreadful aura of the Lich King vanish.

Without thinking any longer, I grab the replica of Emrie Carter by the shoulder and start running toward the rift.

"That will do! Limit your output to that of a level 600 hunter, do this for me, and maybe I'll reconsider leaving you in suspended animation for eternity once we're done here."

Again, I feel a faint aura of envy and darkness pulse out from the Lich while it calibrates its output to a level 600 hunter. However, during the shift, I feel an odd aura that feels like one of minor respect, like the Lich is giving me a mental handshake for my last remark.

Everything is happening so fast, so I don't dwell on the minor changes around me and push through. I'm more focused on the feeling of extreme relief that washes through me realizing that with just seconds to spare I really managed to pull it off. I claimed everything I could from this construct, and the Association won't be even suspicious in the slightest.

I load my own item box up that will be searched by the Association with a single item. It's one that I believe will simultaneously make it seem like I never made it up the cliffside and up past the ocean at all, but will also score me enough points to keep my number-one ranking.

We both jump through the rift as reality collapses and disappears into the endless void behind us.

Bright cyan light fills my vision, and the ringing of bells chimes in my ears, then my feet fall onto the hard mana shielding of the Apex Region's test site, right back in the same square room I started in almost a month ago.

Over two dozen people fill the room, but my mind is elsewhere as I try to make sense of the hundreds of unexpected system notifications that barrage my psyche.

—

[Level Transfer]

[Level Up] x816

[MCP Transfer]

[+19,743,387,910,550 MCP]

[Skill Transfer]

[Imbuement][Mythic Grade]

[Barrier Creation][Mythic Grade]

[Flight][Mythic Grade]

[Area Buff][Mythic Grade]

[Mind Palace][Mythic Grade]

[Astral Spears][Mythic Grade]

[Flash Step][Mythic Grade]

[Call of The Void][Mythic Grade]

[Crystal Creation][Mythic Grade]

[Heavy Hand][Mythic Grade]

[Additional Stat Transfer]

[+6,118 Strength]

[+4,004 Mental Strength]

[+1,992 Speed]

[+1,901 Agility]

[+1,885 Defense]

[Additional PP Transfer]

[+105 PP]

[Congratulations! Rising Emperor's Domain Milestone Reached!]

[1589/1000 Links of Loyalty Created]

[New Perk Unlocked: Ruler's Gaze]

Chapter 579

The room comes into focus around me, and I can't help but stare at my status screen in my mind's eye as all of these notifications go off like blaring alarms in my head.

My body doubles have been farming this entire time I've been inside the construct, and for whatever reason, all access to my system has been cut off until now when I've returned.

A massive surge of power flows into me as my base stats nearly double in an instant from all of the extra stat points awarded, and my mana control goes through the roof as I'm awarded trillions of MCP.

My level skyrockets to 3087, and 10 new mythic-grade skills are added to my status.

It's an overwhelming amount of power to receive all at once.

Even so, my gaze is still steady, and I automatically adjust my mana control output through my limiter to not cause any extra suspicion.

I take a deep breath and take a mental picture of my surroundings as I walk out from the cyan rift with the Lich King in disguise by my side.

The first thing I notice is every single one of the hunters that I left behind to be swallowed by the void is in this room now, breathing heavily all in a circle near the walls.

It seems they were transported back here, so my efforts in creating a copy of Emrie as a cover-up were not in vain.

The second thing I notice is Trax still unconscious on the floor while the high-level B-Class healer woman tries to bring him back.

It's clear that his health has been restored just from being brought out of the construct, but his MP is falling, and his skill is still missing. He's unconsciously shaking from the withdrawals of the red fragments even though surprisingly I don't sense a single red thread inside his body now.

Being ejected from the realm rather than leaving the normal way must give different results.

I come to this conclusion not only because my core and limiter are still in perfect shape, but because I see my three teammates at the opposite side of the room, as they left hours before me.

The three of them are already treated and healed, but there are faint red threads still lingering in their bodies.

My gaze lifts up to the ceiling next as I see the live rankings showing only 8 people with points on the board.

There is Nat, Marcie, and Dane all taking up the top three spots with 284, 261, and 240 stones respectively from their hauls.

Below them, there are the two water wielders from the Vice Region that I remember making gear for; they have 71 and 66 points.

Next on the list is the Phantom Region's single contestant, and he has 50 points.

Below this, there are 2 unknown applicants from the Veridian Region that were not even in the top 12 before this 5th stage started. Both of them have 1 single point on the board.

My best guess is they used up all of their energy and resources to defeat 2 red cores and left the construct far before the time was up.

I know exactly what happened with my teammates, but I don't see the Vice Region hunters nor the Phantom Region's lone applicant remaining either.

They must have also left the construct very early for their own reasons.

While it may have been perceived as a disadvantage at the time, leaving others to continue farming, it actually worked out in their favor.

Every other name on the list is greyed out.

They were all eliminated early on from dying inside the domain, including all of the Apex Region's applicants. Everyone else that was still farming and trying to get points up until the last minute was eliminated by the descending void, and just like Trax's red threads, all matter that was farmed inside the construct disappeared.

After hearing Celia's story about the time limits put on her pocket world, making greedy humans suffer a loss of their hard work farming her energy now makes perfect sense.

I smirk inwardly to myself as the entire blue rift starts to disappear behind me.

By the time I take a second deep breath, the divine portal is gone.

It shrinks back into the spherical cyan stone on the center table of the room, and before everyone's eyes, the artifact shatters into pieces then the shards fade from blue to white before quickly disintegrating into dust.

There are gasps that fill the room, and the two A-Rank guards move to surround myself and the disguised Lich.

One of them speaks out loud. "Hands up! Make yourself available for search, we will calculate your points."

It's the fire user.

He steps in front of Emrie, and as he does I notice both of the hunter's arms are missing. He's using a similar technique to when I've seen monsters lose limbs mid-battle, creating golden soul energy manifestations of his arms so that he can continue his duties. On the cutoff points right below his shoulders, it appears to be glowing with residue from a very familiar royal blue soul energy.

The wounded areas are covered up well by his gear and a dense layer of the Sun God's Soul Energy, but my eyes can see far more than the average hunter right now...

A million theories run through my mind, and my curiosity only grows as the wind user approaches me from the opposite side and he's missing a hand and a leg. The same technique of golden soul energy is used to allow the man to walk. Near his wounds, there is another familiar energy signature, bright green soul energy residue seeps from his wounds that cannot be healed.

He speaks up to me too, "Arms up, allow me to search you now, Hunter Ray Anderson."

I do as he says, and the manifestation of Emrie does the same by my side.

The two A-Ranked guards pull our item boxes from our waists, and begin to look inside.

My mind wanders elsewhere, thinking of Maria and Abby, as it's as clear as day that the soul energy residue on these guards belongs to them.

Immediately, I check my Rising Emperor's Domain interface and see that their geolocations are still deep inside the dark continent, however a brand new interface is blinking in front of my eyes next to each of their live status screens.

[Contact]

I mentally pause for a moment, then remember the last notification that popped up when the hundreds of notifications hit my psyche moments ago.

I quickly take a look at the details of my new [Ruler's Gaze] perk.

[New Perk Unlocked: Ruler's Gaze]

Info: The caster can create a communication channel with any subordinate under their rule with an active link of loyalty. While a communication link is created, the caster can see through the eyes of their subordinate in real time.

The caster may borrow 5% of all Base Stat Points and Mana Control efficiency from all subordinates under the allegiance of the Rising Emperor. In addition, 5% of the caster's Base Stat Points and Mana Control may be temporarily distributed to any subordinate under the allegiance of the Rising Emperor.

The caster may only borrow or share exclusively; both actions cannot be performed simultaneously. Members affected by this perk are not required to be within range of the Rising Emperor's Domain. This additional buff stacks with the [Power Holder] perk if used simultaneously.

The fire-wielding guard pours out the contents of the item box Emrie Carter had, and counts out 11 red divine fragments, lighting up his name on the leaderboard right below the Phantom Region's slot.

The A-Class hunter places the fragments in a containment case with the Association's logo on it.

It pains me to even see this small amount of energy go to waste and put into the hands of the Association, I could have just given the 1 or 2 stones instead and it would have given the same effect.

Even so, the activities in this room are pushed to the back of my mind as I press [Contact] on both Abby and Maria's names.

Instantly, I feel a 3-way communication channel form.

It feels similar to telepathy, but the moment I say "Hello? Maria? Abby? It's Jay... can you hear me?" I realize the link is far more crisp and directly transferring information into the receivers' psyche than a delicate telepathy channel.

Maria's voice is the first one I hear back. "Yes! Jay- Where are you? I don't sense your presence-"

She's cut off by Abby next "Hello? Yes- I can hear you- what is this?"

It feels like we're all standing in a small room and our echoing voices are in each other's heads as I reply.

"I'm still at the Hunter's exams... In the Apex Region. I unlocked a new ability of long-range communication... Based on the wounds on these A-Class hunters, it seems you've been busy too..."

Maria's voice echoes out right after this.

"You're with them? You know the Association tried to attack us while you were gone! They were spouting flame Emperor this, Flame Emperor that! You didn't anger them? Or expose yourself, did you?"

I pause for a moment, but reply honestly.

"I didn't expose myself, no. They have no idea I'm here. My disguise is perfect. However, the Flame Emperor may have angered some parties here... It seems they really have eyes out in the Dark Continent..."

I want to ask them about everything that happened, but it would be a lot faster if my body doubles catch me up on the details.

Next to both of their names, now I see a new button labeled [Spectate].

I speak up again while pondering whether or not to press it.

"Considering you two are alive and well, I take it you fended them off with ease? How's the city? I can see it's grown in population, but have no idea how it's doing. I never expected to be away for a whole month..."

Abby responds.

"We handled it, but I doubt they're going to take the losses we gave them lightly. You know A-Class hunters are a sign of military status for a country. If other nations hear of this news, there may be some powers outside of the Dark Continent and 8 Great Regions that will begin to dwell in these matters..."

I stare down at the [Spectate] button again, becoming immensely curious about how this battle between the Crimson City and A-Class hunters unfolded.

I get to the point while the item box around my waist is picked up by the A-Class wind user.

"I have another feature unlocked as well, it allows me to see through your eyes while our link here is activated. I'd like to see how the City is doing, and if you could fill in one of my body doubles that would be great. I can see through its memories exactly what happened."

Maria's voice rings out next without any hesitation.

"Use it on me first!"

Abby's voice echoes through the channel next.

"We're together at the moment, so I don't know how helpful a double view will be, but you can use it on me if you'd like too."

Out of curiosity, I press [Spectate] on both of their interfaces, but nothing happens.

-

Underground, beneath Valor City, as the two hunters are continuing to cultivate Qi in the mines beneath the center of the city, two blue text boxes pop up in front of their eyes.

[Accept Spectator]

-

As both of them click accept, my mind feels as if it's being split into three pieces.

All of my senses become scrambled, and I get an incredibly dizzy feeling.

I feel like I'm living three lives at once.

In one of my visions, I see the A-Class wind user sifting through my item box with his remaining good hand.

Then, in the other two, I see Abby and Maria both sitting on the ground in the Qi crystal room, but I see them from the other's perspective.

It's not only sight, I can perceive the Qi floating through the air and walls around them from the mana and Qi senses of both of their auras. Even smell, touch, and fine tuned hearing is transmitted through the spectator link.

I watch them both stand up and pull teleport crystals out of their item boxes, then Abby speaks up through the link.

"Did it work?"

I want to hold my head and shut off the link from how bizarre this is, but I reply instantly.

"Yes."

Then both of their visual fields and senses are filled with blinding white transfer magic.

The hunters walk up out of the basement of the guildhall, through the incredibly crowded but orderly lobby, and out into the streets of the Crimson City. There are so many new faces, I hardly recognize 1 in every 5 people.

I get two points of views down opposite directions in the streets as they look both ways, then fly into the air to look down on the growing city. The longer I watch their perspectives, the more I get used to the odd sensation of living 3 simultaneous lives in my head at once. I can't interact with the world from their eyes, but I can sense their actions and talk with them in real-time through a link.

Once we're high enough in the air, I notice that there have been many more major construction projects that happened while I was gone.

The entire center city is finished and thriving with local business and the streets are filled with both normal citizens and groups of hunters. Another large area of apartment buildings and grocery stores has been made near the new shops where one of the last remaining empty lots in the inner city was left unused before.

Outside of the Crimson dome, the outer city has grown almost 5 times as large too. It is full of smaller restaurants, hotels, and trading posts available to travelers who have not sworn their loyalty to gain access to the inner city.

Trade routes have been built off in every direction reaching deep into the desert to link to all the nearby towns and linking us to the other major Sectors in the Dark Continent.

I enjoy the view and think of all the possibilities for a thriving future as Abby and Maria pinpoint my surveillance double doing its rounds flying high in the sky.

They wave each other down, then Maria explains what's happening in simple and quick terms.

The double sends out a burst of telepathy to one of the other doubles in the area nearby to take over surveillance as it flies into the sky higher away from the two hunters' eyes to deactivate itself

The second it does, a month's worth of memories start flashing through my mind and everything starts to make sense.

At the same time, back in the Apex Region, the A-Class guard pulls a bright red fruit out of my item box and all the attention in the room turns toward me.

Chapter 580

The memories of the entire month of surveillance over the Crimson City come rushing back to me.

Just after my main body left for the exams, another order of materials was picked up by my double in Vice City.

All of the new apartments, grocery stores, businesses, streets, and installations to the outer city that I witnessed through the eyes of Maria and Abby become far clearer to me.

The trade routes that stretch out of Sector 2 now connect to many villages in Sectors 3 and 1, and the construction is still in progress to wrap all the way around the Dark Continent to reach Sector 4.

To fill the new grocery stores, the Sector 3 trade deals have progressed nicely. Fresh fruits, vegetables, and livestock are being transported from the various farming towns.

Now instead of sending body doubles to the 8 Great Regions to import food, over 80% of the produce can be purchased from the source.

The remaining necessities are still sourced from Solara and Vice City's bulk supermarkets.

As the roads are being built off far into the Dark Continent, more and more people are visiting the town, and dozens of people are forming links of loyalty every day to enter the inner city to gain access to the dungeons as well as find jobs to live a better life than out in the poverty of the smaller villages.

One of my doubles has been hard at work farming element stones from the 39th floor, imbuing them with mythic-grade plunderer, and collapsing rogue dungeons far away from villages all throughout the entire continent.

Hundreds more luminite fragments have been farmed and placed into a containment case thanks to Bri, and they're kept in storage beneath the guildhall.

Using the farmed mana, the Labyrinth grows at a steady rate.

With a double working on building up its floors as its sole task 24/7, the number of floors begins to rise very quickly.

In just a week, my double manages to grow the labyrinth up to 40 floors.

Instead of only having one monster per floor like the setup in Vice City, my labyrinth is programmed differently. There is only a boss room at the top; all of the other floors spawn monsters regularly like normal dungeons.

This means once the floors above 40 are created, full training areas with double-ranked-up creatures begin to spawn in one after another.

The following week brings the labyrinth up to floor 50, and my doubles find a clear difference in patterns on these new floors.

After the 40th floor, the level of monsters rises at a much faster rate than the floors below.

The 41st is full of double-ranked-up Elite Ice Golems all between level 1075 and 1110, while in the 42nd, there are massive winged bat-like creatures that fly high above black mountains ranging from level 1200 to 1240.

Every floor that follows above this follows the same pattern, rising by roughly 100 levels.

The 50th floor has monsters that surpass level 2000, and as the memories of all these events rush through my mind, I come to the logical conclusion that for my own level to reach what it has, the floors must have hit 60 or higher by the end of the month.

Each time more mana is added to the labyrinth, some floors tend to spawn mutants and the levels fluctuate slightly, but each time the next floor is added they settle down and come back to a stable state.

The specific body double that I'm watching now takes a different shift, but it does communicate with one of my doubles that helps train the army of recruits.

They all begin training in the Labyrinth under close supervision. No one other than close allies and members of the Crimson Army are permitted to enter the Labyrinth, and a body double must be present at all times.

While none of them can increase the MCP at rapid rates without my absorption skill, they do have enough prior training and power to face off against some of these high-level monsters. No creatures in the labyrinth have soul energy or Qi; they're just plain mana manifestations.

By the end of the third week of my leave to go to the exams, everyone in the army has trained up to levels 1300-1500 and have become even more formidable warriors.

I catch a few glimpses of Fisher, Lydia, Abby, and Maria all training in the Labyrinth as well every time I come back to check on the town; however, I don't see exactly how much they've progressed just yet in their long months of Qi training. This is because this body double has been out on a very specific alternate mission for a bulk of the memories I receive in the following weeks.

Support creative writers by reading their stories on Royal Road, not stolen versions.

It heads off, deep into Sector 3 where the dungeon break happened when I made my initial dealings with the head farmer.

Using this point of access, my double spreads out to locate every single dungeon in the entire sector, looking for new skills and unique monsters to gain powers from.

There are a few found here, but the bulk of the 10 new mythic-grade skills come from my next week of explorations in the Talton Region's jungle.

Thanks to the leader graciously allowing me to see one of their dungeons, I have an access point to their region and use stealth to explore their entire dungeon network out there as well.

There is one final bit of good news that my double witnesses once I make it back to the Crimson City again after this mission.

I do my weekly check-in on Lith and Monk in Valor City.

Over the last three weeks, they have begun their methods of Qi rejuvenation on all of the past Valor City Arena fighters that were inflicted by the curse of the Lich King.

Just like Monk's master, every single one of them starts to have small bursts of energy throughout the day that increase in length after every session.

With my main body's leave from the city, the extra Qi pills that I was using to build the Soul Energy barrier around the Crimson City are all put to great use; many of the fighters are able to get out of their beds and walk about like normal for almost an hour a day now.

Even if they're all full of energy now, their status screens are still completely wiped clean.

My main body is the only one capable of extracting skill orbs because it is a function of mixing my mythic-grade absorption perk with soul energy.

The plan is to give them the option of joining the Crimson Army once they're healed, and offer them elemental skills once they're ready.

However, long-term exposure to large quantities of Qi during their treatments administered by Monk has awakened their pathways to use this energy as well.

Many of the fighters practice cultivating and channeling their Qi in their limited time while they're awake. These are elite fighters from all over the Dark Continent after all; it's not like they're going to give up their aspirations to become strong warriors just because of a single defeat like this.

At this point, as my double makes it back to the Crimson City to take another week-long shift of surveillance after a successful mission of skill farming this past week; I come back to see a sight I wasn't exactly expecting.

I watch through the memories of my double as it walks out from the bunker below the guildhall, greeting all of the new staff working to buy, sell, and keep track of resources farmed from the canyon of dungeons.

The order quantities from the Great Regions and Dark Continent Sectors have skyrocketed, but thankfully, so has the population of links of loyalty in the city. The population just recently passed 1000.

With this in mind, every day is usually a cheerful one in the city, but once I walk outside of the guildhall into the streets beneath the Crimson Dome, I instantly feel an ominous aura ripple through the air.

It feels as if gravity waves are permeating through the atmosphere from a single point.

My enemy detection skill does a scan of my surroundings, and my urgency on the matter increases when I sense dozens of skilled fighters above level 900 outside the dome in a very symmetrical battle formation.

Occasionally, there are some interesting and strong hunters that stop by, but their readings rarely pass level 500. None have ever been this high, and the fact that they're all element users with identical armor and weapons can't be a coincidence either.

An organization is here, and I need to figure out why...

I fly up to the top of the dome to near the source of the odd energy, and one of my other doubles waves me down to point out the problem.

There are two figures also floating in the air outside of the Crimson City's protection barrier.

The instant I see them, I scan their stats as well, and can hardly believe the ratings I'm seeing.

They are definitely the leaders of whatever group has shown up.

One of them is a level 2759 wind magic user, and the other is even stronger at level 2840 with a fire magic skill on his status.

Their gear percentage buffs are astronomically high, similar to my own, and they both have a very odd red light rippling out from their eyes and chest.

Looking back at my memories now, I can tell this is the power of a red divine core glowing in both of their chests, however to my body double; the undetectable red light that glows around their whole being is a total mystery to me.

The status buff of [The Sun God's Curse Mark] is present on both of their status screens too, so my assumption in the moment is that it is another soul energy ability I'm incapable of seeing in this lesser form that my body doubles have only being able to sense mana-based skills.

Whatever the case is, I go into full alert mode and instruct the other double via telepathy to go to Valor City to bring all of our available fighting power here immediately.

It disappears in a flash of white light using a transport crystal to bring itself to the Galeheart tower and to go find Abby and Maria cultivating in the Qi mines.

My perspective stays behind and stares the two men down that float in the sky above the barrier.

I'm certain in my current form I'd stand no chance, so I just speak up to stall.

"State your business. Who are you, and why have you come to the Crimson City?"

As these words leave my lips, my gaze lands on the logo that rests on both of their shoulders. Even so, the reply out of the fire user still makes my eyes widen and my heart skip a beat.

"We're here to take back control of this continent. We knew there was a new force growing after the disappearance of many Sector Leaders, and a new figurehead of the Dark Continent's underground trade business, but we can only tolerate so much. You should have kept your head down and not stuck your hand in places it doesn't belong. Your assistance for certain applicants in the B-Class Exams has tipped the perceived power balance in an unfavorable manner..."

Both of the men above me raise a single hand in the air, then point it toward me.

Waves of red light start to glow in their fists, and what feels like heavy gravity waves starts to flow out of them through the barrier even though they haven't even sent out an attack.

At the same moment, two flashes of green and blue light come from far below me in the Crimson City.

The men that stand above the barrier speak up again as the flashes of light approach.

"We are A-Class hunters representing the 8 Great Region's branch of the Association. We do not need to do this the hard way. Surrender ownership of your city to us now, and we do not have to kill you all to set a precedent for what happens when a rogue force interferes with Association matters."