

D. Diver 591

Chapter 591

We use teleport crystals to return to the Crimson City, and I'm led out into the desert, about 50 kilometers away.

There are no main trade roads connecting this far out, and the only major landmark here is the edge of the dark abyss on the horizon.

A large rectangular prison made of mana-manifested stone comes into view, far out in the middle of nowhere, with nothing but a single door on its front and two level 1400+ guards from the Crimson Army standing watch.

There's a large man with earth magic and body hardening who has high-grade armor crafted by Bri and an earth-imbued longsword that I made for him before I left.

The woman by his side uses air magic. Her bow was crafted by me too, and much of her other high-grade gear also appears to be crafted by Bri, making them up to par with her new level gains these last few weeks.

I feel the aura of my body double's surveillance, even 50 kilometers away, but we're greeted very respectfully once we arrive.

They show us two small bows as they open the front door for us, and the woman speaks.

"Welcome back, it is an honor to see the Flame Emperor's Inner Circle all together. "

At the same time, the man hands me a ring of keys holding over 40 in total.

I take them and lead our group of five into the dimly lit structure, finding it funny how she's given my teammates this name.

We're all supposedly deceased after our mission into the Dark Continent and wear items with high-grade concealment attributes, so our appearances are always changing.

There is an air of mystery around who we are and where we came from that many army members and even citizens of the city have begun to speculate on in their freetime.

It makes me think about my other teammates. Arie and Luna are still off on their venture into the Abyss in search of their old home that was swallowed by the darkness.

I haven't heard back from them in months, and out of curiosity, I bring their names up in my Rising Emperor's Domain interface to see if I can open a long-range transmission; but to my surprise, all of their information is tinted dark purple.

My gaze tightens even more when I try to make contact, but nothing goes through. Either there is interference, or they're unable to answer my calls. I can see their location, over a thousand kilometers away, deep in Sector 4; but the color of all their vitals and stats looks exactly the same purple shade as my Demonic Energy Manipulation skill's text when I view it inside my own status.

I trust them to make it back when they've discovered what they need to, so my attention turns to the rows of cells.

Dozens of high-level Association Hunters are here, locked behind bars.

The cells are all made of a very interesting pink crystalline structure. There are smooth walls, floors, and ceilings; but as we walk through the center of the building, seeing cells on either side of us, there are only small openings in the semi-transparent pink bars to see the captives behind them.

The center of the hall is lit by a few orbs of glass with [Flash] imbued mana crystals inside them.

It's clear one of my body doubles used my new [Crystal Creation] skill, and what looks like millions of MP worth of mana crystals to create indestructible cells inside this temporary prison.

To ensure safety, it seems all the captured B-class hunters have handcuffs made of the same pink crystal material, combined with a black bar of mana-blocking Qi.

It disrupts the connection to the system and doesn't allow them to use any mana or skills while in contact.

Far down at the end of the hall, I can sense the 10 cells with prisoners that have golden collars around their necks. They too have the handcuffs, but their cell reinforcement is multiple times denser than the others.

There are visible dents and small fractures in the cell from their constant use of borrowed Soul Energy to attempt escape, but after over a full week has passed, they have all given up trying to break out.

I smirk and whisper under my breath, "I guess I'll save the best for last."

Then, I turn back and use one of the pink crystal keys on a ring to open up a cell at random near the entrance of the prison.

I look at the young man with defeat in his eyes, then send a single divine energy-imbued mana bullet from my finger to shatter the cuffs on his wrists.

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His body is revitalized with energy in an instant, and I see a spark of hope in his gaze; but I quickly suppress it by activating [Heavy Hand] to increase the gravity inside this cell by over 20 times.

I turn to my teammates and speak up.

"This is probably going to take a while, so get comfortable."

They all look very interested in my process, and a round of nonchalant replies give me the go ahead to do whatever I want to the criminals that attacked them while I was away.

I turn back to the man on the floor and activate my lie detector skill and release a wave of intimidation that would make even a double ranked-up hunter shiver.

"What can you tell me... I want to know everything that happened the day of the attack. Who sent you, and what were your exact orders?"

One by one, I go to every cell and each and every one of them cracks.

With my lie detector skill at such close range, using direct questions, and with such a power gap between myself and the prisoners I'm interrogating, it's basically reading their minds.

I can hear their intrusive thoughts whenever I dip into a hot topic, and when I repeat their words in their heads, it only makes them think about it more.

It isn't perfect, but with the blatant ability to tell if these thoughts and the words they do speak out loud are in fact true or not, it's as close to perfect as I'll get.

I thought it would be a lot harder to get these grunts to speak, but after the screaming noises from their teammates and using small doses of regeneration potions to allow me to do what I have to with the more stubborn ones all over again, the information I need is all gathered.

One by one, I recreate the pink crystal cuffs around their wrists after fully healing them and attach the mana-blocking bricks to their skin.

I've gathered so far that on the day of the attack, the Apex Region was alerted to major dungeon breaks occurring in the Dark Continent.

The higher-ups briefed everyone on the elite attack squad that the source of these breaks was inside the Crimson City.

They all teleported to the teleport platform in Sector 1 right outside of Valor City. There is a small Association base of operations there and a much larger one in Solara. They made the flight over and were ordered to take down the barrier and kill the leader of the city named the Flame Emperor by any means necessary.

Many of the men I interrogate have been dungeon explorers and personal guards their whole lives in the Association; this is one of their first big missions, while others are veterans and have committed similar acts in the past.

Some cry and beg for forgiveness while I torture the information out of them, while others stay quiet, but I use my mind-reading perk to get details out of them too.

By the time I make it to the final 10 cells with the golden-collared hunters, it's clear that many of the hunters I've questioned were not well informed. They follow orders, keeping their heads down and doing whatever deeds the Association gives them.

Just because they had no idea this tale of dangerous breaks in the Dark Continent was a fabrication doesn't mean I won't punish them for their actions.

"Keep them all locked up; we'll assign them proper sentence dates and punishments in five days."

I grin while opening the lock to the first golden-collared B-Class Hunter's Cell.

While activating [Heavy Hand], [Intimidation], and [Lie Detector] again, I break the cuffs of a muscular middle-aged water wielder and start asking questions.

"You heard your friends break; it's time to talk."

Another hour or so passes, and as I make my way through each of these higher-tiered hunters, it's much harder to get information out of them.

Their minds don't wander, and no matter how bad the mental or physical pressure I push down on them, they still don't talk even when they're close to death.

It's like there is a mental barrier up that wasn't present in the others. My best guess is it has something to do with the Sun God's Curse Mark. Even with the system-blocking cuffs on, their soul energy necklaces still glow brightly around their necks.

I make my way back to the first golden-collared hunter I started with and murmur to myself.

"I guess it's time to take that collar off... I'm not going to get anywhere with you all acting like this. I've been wondering if it was even possible for me to do this, so you'll be my first test subject."

In the next moment, I concentrate on letting dark red Soul Energy pour out of my hands, covering the man's entire body that lies on the cell ground before me.

I vividly remember using my absorption skill's innate properties combined with Soul Energy after defeating the Lich King to cleanse those that were still infected by its curse.

As the fiery aura covers the man, and I concentrate on the golden energy that surrounds his neck and is bonded with his cells all throughout his brain, heart, blood, bones, and body, I focus and let the same process play out.

More and more Soul Energy pours out of my body; it feels similar to when I was imbuing the Crimson Barrier with everything in my core.

Getting rid of the Lich King's power was far simpler because he was already gone; trying to force this golden energy out is infinitely more difficult.

I feel my energy clashing with the golden light deep within the man's body, and a microscopic war of Soul Energy particles commences.

At first, it is a losing battle. I feel a tremendous power lurking deep inside the golden energy, and my heart feels tight just thinking of the time the Sun God himself attempted to assert pressure on my own core; however, we're thousands of kilometers away and all I'm doing is trying to overpower the borrowed soul energy within a hunter that hasn't even double ranked up yet.

The more Soul Energy I flood into his system, the more the intrinsic strength of the Soul Energy doesn't matter. I overpower the energy by raw volume alone, and to be on the safe side, I begin enhancing the weight of my own Soul Energy with Divine Threads once the golden light that poisons his flesh starts to be devoured.

This speeds things up drastically.

All of the golden light is ripped from his being and locked away in my item storage.

The process isn't the hardest thing I've ever done, but I am breathing heavily and covered in sweat by the time I'm sure every drop of Qi and Mana has left his body.

Once I'm sure, I take a step back and retract my Soul Energy completely.

The man looks almost as exhausted as I do once it's over, but words leave his lips once I relieve the pressure and watch the golden collar around his neck completely fade away.

"Impossible. You— You did it... I'm free... I'll—tell you everything, sir! Please, just hear me out! I never wanted to harm you or your people—"

As my body naturally regenerates and my fatigue is gone in seconds, I feel a new link of loyalty form from the B-Class hunter that just had a curse lifted from his status.

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His eyes are filled with hope, but his body still trembles with fear.

This man was captured by an unknown rising kingdom in the Dark Continent by a force that easily defeated two of their strongest A-Class hunters and dozens of elite B-Class hunters in seconds.

Now, he's face to face with me, a man who tortured information out of his allies for hours without any remorse.

Even if I freed him from his golden collar, it seems he's still unsure if he's now just being shackled to another tyrant.

All of his thoughts are racing around now, but I can read them as clear as day, like the odd mental block from before is gone.

I completely change my tone, smile, then deactivate my intimidation and gravity magic.

"Very good. Tell me everything you know about the Apex Region and the reason you attacked me, and I'll consider letting you live a free life away from me and the Association if you wish."

His eyes light up, and the words start flowing.

I stand above him and listen with my arms crossed, and every word that comes out of his mouth is followed by plumes of green mist from my lie detector skill telling me it's true.

After about 15 minutes of talking, I send a telepathy wave to Abby, asking her to fully restore him.

Then, I walk to the next cell and do it all over again.

One by one, I use Divine Energy enforced Soul Energy to break the bonds of the Sun God's Curse Mark on every one of the captives.

Two out of the ten resist my attack and grasp onto the Soul Energy that is connected to their being.

It feels very similar to the time when I used my Soul Energy for the first time to extract the Lich King's lingering Orange essence.

Unfortunately, the two that resist my help are burned to a crisp from the inside out due to the violent nature of my Soul Energy's flame aspect.

The eight that let the process transpire form links of loyalty the moment their curses are lifted, and one after another they spill every bit of knowledge about the attack and the association that they can.

Unlike the aftermath of the Lich King's Curse, these men and women aren't in coma-like states.

From what I've gathered after all of their explanations, the curse mark works as a mental collar, making them follow orders no matter what they are, and their minds don't understand that these actions are not their own thoughts.

While they go about the rest of their days and lives normally, once an order is given by the Sun God, they will follow it without question, like it is their own inner thoughts rationalizing them to do so.

The power makes me shiver every time the next hunter explains the same feeling.

Some of them are even breaking down crying and praising me, asking for forgiveness because they themselves didn't understand that it was happening until right now when the veil was lifted.

Even in their shocked state, each of them pieces together valuable information about the day of the attack.

I can visibly see it in my mind after all of the vivid explanations. My teammates listen closely and step in to ask questions too as they're extremely invested in these details.

The night before the attack, a dozen hunters all met inside the same dark room with the oval-shaped table and only one figure sitting behind it.

It was the 2 high-level A-Class fighters and the 10 B-Class Elites here with collars on.

Mr. Freeman gave them all a briefing, describing the actual details of the mission. Telling the best hunters in the Apex Region that there is a rising human threat in the Dark Continent who goes by the name of The Flame Emperor.

For the sake of peace and continued control over the Dark Continent's resources, each and every one of these golden-collared guards was ordered to take over the city, plunder the valuables, and kill anyone that continued staying loyal to this rogue force.

The common word amongst all of them is that those hunters without collars were never briefed on the reality of the event, only those who the Director had full control over knew the real dark plot behind this event.

They were meant to set up a new station here, take over the profitable dungeons, and put their own craftsmen in charge of continuing the trade deals.

Just like the un-collared hunters said before, most of this information was gathered by low-level spies that live in Solara and the outer cities within Sector 1.

They must just be intertwined with your everyday traders that come by the city.

It's how they knew about the dome, the Flame Emperor's name, the plentiful dungeons, and many other details about my land.

However, the Inner Circle, my high-powered teammates are not well known at all.

We don't show our power to the public, and none of them know our true faces or names.

Even the defeat of the Dark One that ruled over Valor City is only known in a very tight-knit community of original members of the City.

This attack against us from the Association is the first public display of the Crimson City's true power, and with thousands of eyes on the event, word will travel fast of the Flame Emperor's strength.

Satisfied with this description, I now understand the true motive behind the Director's attack. However, I want more information about the Association itself.

I continue to interrogate them more, asking questions about their training methods, secret facilities, and any extra information about Mr. Freeman that they know, but the results aren't exactly what I expected.

The Apex Region seems to have many different zones, and only certified personnel are allowed in each zone.

These B-Class Elites are only allowed to train in the B-Class dungeons, and the only way to find them is through a transportation system that is shrouded in mystery.

Just like when I was inside the moving mana shielded rooms during the exams, and it felt as though the cube I was standing in was moving from random location to random location on some kind of rail system; this is all these hunters know too.

They are as blind to the inner workings of the Association as me...

None of them have any idea what the yellow energy Mr. Freeman uses is, they just called it cursed energy, so trying to talk to them about Divine or Soul Energy turns out to be useless.

In the meantime, Abby restores them all to perfect health, I give them food and water from my storage, but after we're done here; I put their mana blocking cuffs back on and close the cells.

While I walk out with my teammates I swing the pink crystal ring of keys around my finger.

"They may have been forced to do what they did, but they still did it.... I need some more time to think about their futures. Their punishments will be decided in 5 days as well."

We walk out the front door to be greeted again by the man and woman. I toss them the keys back and smile.

"We're all done here, treat them nicely until I return. Seems they weren't as bad as we thought, and were very cooperative today."

I turn to my teammates once we get far enough away from the prison and feel the presence in my shadow stirring.

"How about we go spar out in the desert away from the city. I want to see how far you've come for myself; and there are a few training options I want to talk over with you to get your opinions on."

We all turn and fly even further away from the city, following the edge of the dark abyss as a guide and making our way another 100km away from any sign of trade routes or civilization.

Once we settle down in an open clearing, I speak up.

"Come at me with everything you've got. Let's see what you can do. Don't hold back, I can handle it."

Then I put my fists up in the air as the 4 glowing teammates around me pull out their weapons.

Fisher smirks, putting a similar fighting stance to Monk's up in the air and letting his manifested blue serpent Soul Energy flow out of him.. "You sure? I'll give you everything if that's really what you want!"

Lydia pulls out her katana, and it's glowing with white light. Her Soul Energy Tiger surrounds her body and the desert sand below starts to turn pristine white.

Abby glows green and spears start to circle around her while Maria pulls out her sword and a dense royal blue energy form erupts from her chest to grow ten times her size.

I allow my own Soul Energy to power my movements and strengthen it with yellow threads of Divine Energy.

I don't activate my greater form, and don't pull out any extra weapons to prove a point as they all come at me with everything they have.

The first attack I block with a simple open palm is Fisher's, catching his punch and using a wall of red soul energy covered in yellow threads around it to completely stop his manifestation of a serpent in its tracks, then making contact with his main body using a powerful blow with the same hand to send him flying backward.

From the other direction, Lydia's blade comes straight for my back.

I gracefully turn while in the motion of blocking Fisher's move and dodge her strike within millimeters, twisting around her body and landing the same open palm to her back sending her flying in the opposite direction.

Less than a tenth of a second later, I jump upward to avoid 6 bright green spears spinning in circles coming my way. Using flight to bounce through the sky with ease, feeling as though I'm as light as a feather while closing my distance between myself and Abby in the next instant.

Her eyes widen as I use the same simple open palm thrust at her chest while she's in her immortal form.

The Soul Energy from my attack shouldn't be able to harm her at all. In this moment, nothing should be able to.

However, the yellow threads that make my form heavier, more rooted in reality, are so strong that she's pushed backward from the blast.

The Soul Energy itself didn't do a thing, phasing through her and doing no damage at all, however the mass of my body covered in divine matter that is stronger than reality itself makes an impact with where her body should be and does physical damage.

I turn in mid air the moment my attack hits to see a massive ice goddess' blade coming down toward me.

Full of confidence, I push my hand up to stop it.

For a moment, I feel a truly bizarre weight pushing down on me, like the longer I wait to push back the heavier it will become.

My muscles strain for a moment, and I'm stuck standing in place for a few fractions of a second before I channel all of my soul energy and divine threads away from other portions of my body to push into my palm.

Now, I push back upward with enough force to push the ice blade away. Then, jump upward and plunge through her greater form with nothing but a Soul Energy Barrier strengthened with Divine threads to break through the attack and hit Maria's real body with the same blow I did to everyone else, easily overpowering her.

It may have been an error to hold back here at first, I did so not to hurt any of my teammates, but I used enough power to show there was an overwhelming difference.

I power down, standing in the middle of the four of them defeated on the ground around me.

While they weren't life-threatening blows, I still hit them hard enough to shock their systems and give them a taste of what Divine Energy can do.

I yell out for each of them to hear.

"Again! I want you to come at me with everything, aim to kill. If you think those A-Class hunters you fended off were strong, you have no idea what kind of monster we're dealing with. My power is minuscule compared to the Director that runs the 8 Great Regions. We have to get stronger."

I prepare to give them all regeneration potions or share my skill with them, because each of the blows I landed left yellow thread residue in their bodies.

However, a bright green Restoration Circle spreads out beneath Abby's feet, and it covers the entire battlefield.

Green energy surges into all 4 of them at once, and I watch the foreign yellow thread be torn out of their bodies similar to the soft heal technique that Nat used, but much faster and it's more efficient.

I smile and put my fists back up while the 4 of them come back at me with their weapons and Soul Energy on full power.

Colorful Blue, Green, White, Red, and Yellow lights all flash through the desert as the landscape is destroyed everywhere we spar.

About 30 minutes go by, and the fighting only gets more and more intense.

They slowly realize that I really meant it when I said they can come at me with everything they have. At first they were all hesitant to actually hurt me, but it soon becomes clear that the power gap between us has grown so much that they can really let loose and use everything they have.

This is the first time I believe any of them have been able to do an exercise like this.

Every time they break through and learn new techniques while battling all out, I up the intensity little by little to make sure they never win; having to think of new ways to fight back and continuously gain the upper hand.

In less than half an hour their fighting styles drastically improve, and they become far more confident in situations where decisions need to be made within tenths or even hundredths of a second.

While their basic combat training goes on, my mind is racing for more ideas on how we can all improve.

While I was thinking inside the [Mind Palace] everything seemed perfectly aligned and clear.

I had options to farm in the top floors of the labyrinth, to have us all gain a few trillion more MCP. It would definitely make each of us much stronger, but wouldn't bring us to levels that are magnitudes higher, which is where we need to be.

The level of a strength gap that they have below me right now is similar to the power gap I felt between the Director and myself.

I had thoughts of giving them my red, orange, and even yellow cores that I farmed to try and awaken cores like myself, but there are a few problems with that too.

The first is that there isn't enough time. It would take weeks for them to awaken up to the yellow core state in the best-case scenario.

The second is that even if they made it to a yellow core in time, we would still have the same issue. I'm recreating the battle right now that would happen if we fought against a stronger opponent of such immense strength.

It's like the swarms of orange-cored insects fighting against a yellow-cored lizard, no matter how I look at things; the power gap is far too high.

I can't tell if the Director's mana control is just that much higher than mine after decades of training, or if there is a second stage to the yellow core that I'm unaware of.

All I do know is that there is something that I'm missing, and I need to figure out what it is...

Another half hour passes, and we finally stop our sparring to take a break.

The realization that we all have a long way to go has fully washed over us, and even more ideas start to come out from them too as we rest and take a load off sitting in the sand as the sun continues to beat down on us overhead and the hungry abyss swirls in the distance.

My shadow becomes restless again once our spars are over, like it's trying to communicate with me.

I grin and look at each of my teammates while standing up and preparing to activate my dark magic.

"This may sound crazy at first, but hear me out. I know someone who may have the knowledge we need to get stronger..."

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A large black shadow of dark magic grows around me, and from its depths, the shadowy summon of the Lich King rises.

His concealment buffs are all dispelled, as there is no reason to hide. He looks like a pitch-black skeleton wearing the cloak and pendant I gifted him during the exams.

Without me using my limiter on him, and with his own divine limiter fully decayed, the ominous aura of evil energy permeates off of him.

All four of my teammates get back into their battle stances, and they look at my summon with hate in their eyes.

Maria is the first to yell out.

"It's the Dark One! ... but... it's Soul Energy..."

Abby steps closer and finishes her sentence.

"It's gone..."

All of them were both enraged and on edge at first, but once they watch the shadowy skeleton stare forward without moving for many seconds, they begin to understand that there is something not quite natural about all of this.

I speak up next, looking at the Lich King.

"I take it you have witnessed our sparring and have studied the Sun God's true power as well. Tell me if there is a way for all of us to get strong enough to face him in just five days..."

He turns to me and nods, speaking out loud in his original deep and static voice.

"There is a way to reach his level... but in five days, it may be impossible. It is hard to say if I could teach you as I am now."

The shadowy figure's head turns away from me again and stays still like a statue.

Surprisingly, Lydia speaks up next with an angered tone in her voice.

"How are you alive? Is there a way to revert all those innocent people that you cursed back from their debilitating state?"

The Lich King stares forward and doesn't react, almost like he hasn't heard anything.

I speak next, saying, "Answer her." and the black skeleton moves his head to the ice user and speaks.

"I have already died. There is currently no one under my curse. Whatever damage has been done cannot be solved by a simple fix."

Without a drop of emotion, he looks ahead again, and everyone is silent, wondering what is going on.

They look to me for answers, and I spend the next few minutes fully explaining my Dark Magic skill and how the shadow summon works.

After they all realize they're safe, they begin to power down their soul energy and put away their weapons, but I grin and shake my head.

"Don't power down just yet."

I then turn to the Lich King.

"These rigid replies don't feel very effective. You said it would be hard to teach us as you are now. However, if you were able to speak and act freely, would that increase the chances of our success?"

There is a pause, but the Lich King replies.

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"Yes. The likelihood of your survival in the upcoming week would increase if you allowed me free reign. My thoughts and actions would be far less limited."

In command mode, he is really only capable of mimicking my words and giving short, generic responses.

My lie detector skill does not sense any lies, and even though the Lich King's natural aura is full of dread and an ominous feeling, I don't feel any direct malice being sent out anymore.

Along with this, ever since the Lich King's barrier decayed, the small silver core in his chest hardly shimmers or spins at all. It appears to be a fully dormant core, leading me to believe his earlier words that he won't be able to use this immortal divine energy again for an extended amount of time, just like Ember after his massive usage inside the construct.

I nod and cross my arms, pulling up the summoning interface before my eyes and changing the mode from [Command] to [Free Reign].

"Fine, you may speak without a filter. Give us your thoughts."

The skeleton moves its body in a far less rigid manner, and it looks as though a breath of life has been granted to the shadowy figure.

It turns with ease, moving its skeletal hands upward and looks at each of us individually while turning in a circle before speaking in a far clearer, more concise, and intelligent manner.

"This is quite the interesting situation you've found yourself in."

He looks toward the abyss, then back down toward my ring, then his gaze tracks around everyone again before coming back to me.

"-But I'd expect nothing less from a mortal bonded with the Fallen One... Even if you are just a human."

He steps closer to me, and I reflexively cover my vitals with soul energy and divine threads, putting up my hands in a defensive stance.

However, the Lich King just laughs.

"My form cannot harm you, as I am your summon. Even if I could try, our power difference is magnitudes apart. It is like an ant trying to kill a tiger. There is no great comparison to our gap. I know you are fighting with this same scenario now..."

As he takes another step forward, I sense something coming our way at high speed in the desert. I put out a large wave of enemy detection to see what it is while the Lich King continues to speak, pointing out at the abyss.

"While your major concerns are most likely what will be challenging you for that throne, I can definitely lead you in the right direction on how to defeat the Sun God you wish to face in just five days."

The skeleton's aura gives off a wave of energy that feels excited, and at the same time, I realize the high-speed object coming my way is one of my body doubles. It looks as though it will arrive in a few minutes at this rate.

I reply.

"I just want to deal with what's in front of me. Tell me, is the Sun God just that much more battle experienced than I am after decades of training? Or is there another stage to the yellow core?"

The skeleton's face doesn't move at all when he talks, but I sense what must be a smile permeating from him as he replies.

"Your senses are very acute. However, to answer your question truthfully, it is a combination of both. The Light Magic user we faced does have many years of cultivation experience on you, but that is how he managed to compress his core. The strands he produces are almost ten times as dense and strong as yours, only because of long practice with a very difficult technique."

I nod and listen to the Lich King continue.

"It is the natural progression of any Divine Lifeform that wishes to become a Divine Beast in their future. Without consolidating your energy, your base of power will not be strong enough to compare to the higher life forms that ascended with a sturdy base. While the Sun God has not succeeded in finishing the process, he has made significant progress on this path and may very well complete it given another hundred years. It's what we call a True Core, rather than just an Awakened One."

My eyes widen when the timeframe is mentioned, and I reply.

"A hundred years? -I wanted a way to get to his level in five days..."

The Lich King doesn't seem very worried about this, and replies in a nonchalant manner.

"You managed to move from no core to yellow in a matter of weeks, and have the aid of a Purple Cored artifact."

He points to my finger.

"You grew from nothing but an above-average strength ranked-up hunter visiting Valor City to a monster that defeated me, the Dark One, a Divine Beast ruling the Dark Continent, in just a matter of weeks... If any mortal were capable of achieving this new feat, it would be you."

The Lich King looks toward the sky.

"It just seems it was not my era to rule. There is more talent on this world than I once believed. I must wait another half-century to pave my legacy on another planet once I am reincarnated again."

The Lich King chuckles, but I interject.

"Hey, I never said I'd let you die and go free, I said I'd consider it."

A pulse of wild and angry aura comes from the Lich King's body, but he conceals it instantly to bring his emotions in check once I cover my hands in dense Divine Energy again.

He steps back and bows his head slightly.

"Very well, let us make a deal then. If I help you compress your divine energy into a True Core and defeat the Sun God, will you in return, let me die?"

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I think about his offer and see only green mist coming off his aura from my lie detector skill.

Even so, the Lich King's calm demeanor and willingness to help me feels very out of character for a self proclaimed Dark God. Even if he is my summon, I want confirmation that whatever this True Core progression is, it is a safe direction to move toward.

The only person I'd trust to ask is Ember.

The last time I saw him, he was falling asleep while I opened my item storage beneath him.

While many days have passed in real time outside, in the depths of my storage, not a single fraction of a second has passed.

It may be possible to send a single message to him before he goes into full hibernation.

This seems like the best course of action now, rather than taking the Lich King's word at face value.

I stand in silence for a few seconds, thinking up a plan, then take a step back from my shadow summon.

"Possibly. Give me a moment to get a second opinion on the terms of your offer."

I walk away to be alone in the desert, then power up all my perception buffs, pulling out my sword and dagger to obtain as many stat boosts as I can, even triggering the activation of my greater form to push myself further.

I want to make sure my mind is running at the highest capacity possible because I don't know how much time to converse I'll really have.

I take a few deep breaths in and out, sensing the fractions of seconds passing in my improved perception. Then, I open up my item storage to allow Ember's body, in its human form, to fall out into the real world.

His eyes are closing, but I send a wave of telepathy into his mind the instant I see his body materialize and get to work.

In the simplest series of statements possible, I outline the turn of events that have transpired in the last few days.

It comes out in a jumbled bit of words through our link.

"Met purple construct creator, helped escape, faced yellow core director, too strong, need help from Lich King resurrected, is compressing core to True Core Safe? Help me confirm."

I try to explain further, but for every hundredth of a second he stays outside of my suspended animation, I feel him inching closer to a hibernation-like state.

I instantly share my skill [Mind Palace] with him, and a pulse of white light ripples over his body once it's activated.

To me, time is moving normally, but the moment Ember hits the desert floor, his mind has already organized my cryptic message and rationalized a response.

"True Core is the Optimal Path. Link me with Lich."

His words are calculated and cryptic too, making sure every millisecond counts. By his last words, our link is fading fast, but I instantly open up a channel with the Lich King standing close by.

Ember's next words come through with an intensity I've never felt from him before. His core pulses golden and silver, pushing out a last bit of power through his body to make his words clear.

"As a Supreme, I demand you, an Overseer, to teach my soul-bound the path to a True Core. Do not deceive me, or else I will make sure you disappear in the next Council Meeting."

By his second sentence, Ember's words start to fade as his mind and body shuts down. By the time he finishes saying 'meeting,' the three-way link goes silent, and Ember falls into a hibernation-like state on the desert floor.

I can feel mana being drained from the air as his body starts to glow red, and the golden and silver ore in his body spins slowly, looking similar to the dormant state of the Lich King's.

I power down my buffs and greater form, satisfied now that with Ember's wisdom backing the Lich King's words, this Dark Entity is not trying to deceive me after all.

I activate my item storage to allow Ember to fall inside again. The amount of mana he's absorbing from the atmosphere to heal is unsustainable; I sense even the mana from my body and my teammates being ripped away every second that I leave him out here.

If this time is anything like the last time he rested in the isolation pod beneath the guildhall after creating a divine limiter, it's going to take far longer than five days to heal him back to full health.

You could be reading stolen content. Head to the original site for the genuine story.

It's best I keep him safe within suspended animation until I can find a better place for him to recover.

I then walk back to the Lich King with my hand outstretched and a smile across my face.

"It seems this is the best path to take. Let us make the deal. You help me achieve a True Core and kill the Sun God, and I let you die in peace."

From my opposite hand, I open a spatial magic portal to let a small amount of the orange leftover Soul Energy that I absorbed from its body after killing it in our major battle.

After showing that I'm capable of letting its essence back into the universe and am willing to do so, the black skeleton's bony hand grasps mine and we both shake on it.

—

[Body Double POV ~ A few hours ago]

Back in the guildhall in the Crimson City, my body double has been working out a new business with Bri that will bring us an exceptional amount of new profit and increase the strength of those loyal to me.

Many new signs are placed up in the guildhall for new buying and selling offers.

Bri announces them for everyone to hear.

"Attention! Hunters, Merchants, and Citizens all around! We have a few new items that are going to be up for sale. As you are all loyal to the Flame Emperor, and are within the Crimson Dome, these will be sold to you at a discounted rate, and we have a very limited quantity of them..."

All attention in the guildhall turns to her, as many know her as the craftsman inside the Flame Emperor's Inner Circle. Not many people other than very strong fighters from the army ever get to meet her.

Whispers of what this new product could be start to spread, and in the few seconds that pass, rumors and speculation already start to arise.

Bri smiles while a few of the workers update their signs by their booths.

"We're going into the Skill Trading market. There is only a very limited stock, and these prices will not last for long. Ten gold a piece, and you can add a permanent skill to your status. We have Body Hardening, Swordsmanship, Team Buffs, Dagger Arts, and many other common hunter skills all at the legendary grade status. These could be considered a priceless item, sold off to the leaders of the 8 Great Nations, but after the horrific failed attack last week; the Flame Emperor has decided to cancel this option and give these treasures to you all at an affordable price."

Bri distributes about a hundred skill orbs to various booths while hunters surround them with gold in their hands.

While 10 gold is a lot of money, enough for a family of four to live off for a year or two easily, any knowledgeable hunter or citizen knows that a legendary skill, especially combat-related ones, can set up a hunter for life.

With the farming options available to everyone in Crimson City, giving out multiple platinum worth in payouts every day; anyone with a good enough skill can make this ten gold investment back in no time.

The idea of having even a temporary skill added to a status is unheard of; the option to pay a small price and have a legendary one added to their status permanently is a dream come true for those that have lived a life disappointed in their awakening.

One of these orbs could easily be sold at private auctions for hundreds of gold, but my goal is to grow the power of those loyal to me; not just make endless profit off of them.

Some merchants and workers are stuck with non-combat skills, and this is the break they finally get to become a monster hunter.

However, this is exactly the kind of person that is most likely down on their luck, a refugee from a poor surrounding city, that doesn't have enough gold to buy a skill at such a high price.

Bri and I talked this over too, and she speaks up again once the lines start to form to buy skills.

"If you cannot afford to buy a skill, but still are interested in obtaining one. We have a few options for you. The first, is to volunteer to join the Crimson Army. After being put through rigorous training with one of the captains, you will be given an extreme-grade elemental skill of your choosing. That is two levels above normal elemental skills, and you may choose between any you like; ice, water, fire, earth, and air are what we have available. Form a line here if this is the route you wish to take."

Bri points to one side of the guildhall and the room erupts into more commotion at these words, but Bri speaks above them all.

"The second option is if you have a skill unique to humans. Whether that be inspect, appraisal, craftsmanship, conceal, or any other unique abilities that are not found in monsters, we are willing to pay you up to 50 gold to purchase it. Free of charge, we will grant you a legendary combat skill in return as well. This too will be a limited-time offer, and this transaction must be scheduled for another date. So if you wish to sell your skill and obtain another, please form a line here and put your name on the list. You will be appraised and have a meeting scheduled later this week."

She points to the opposite side of the room, and far fewer people join this line. However, ideas of friends and merchants that wouldn't normally come to the guildhall pop into a few hunters' minds, and they run out to fetch them from their businesses or day-to-day life.

Bri speaks up one more time.

"You should know, once a skill orb is eaten, this is a permanent change to your status. Only one skill orb per status screen works, so think carefully about which skill you wish to take. This may be a limited-time sale, but there will be many more skills and options to pick from in the future. If you don't get the skill you wanted today, next week may have what you're looking for."

Satisfied with her sales pitch, she leaves back up the stairs to her office, and my double continues the conversation with her

as more and more people flock toward the center of the guildhall.

My double nods and smiles.

"Very good. This is exactly how I wanted people to react. I look forward to finally upgrading many of my human skills to mythic grade without having to kill anyone..."

Bri chuckles.

"Yeah, and I think word about this is going to spread further than just the 8 Great Regions. The cat is really out of the bag now, are you sure you want the world to know this secret?"

I just smirk back and start to walk down the guildhall steps away from Bri.

"Yeah, I'm ready now. I'll go check on the Army to make sure they can handle training up some new recruits, then I have to charge up that isolation pod for Ember and deliver it to my main body. He's pretty worn out after helping me during the B-Class Exams."

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I finish shaking the Lich King's hand and speak again.

"So where do we begin?"

The jet-black skeletal figure ponders for a moment, staring off into the direction of the black abyss on the horizon.

"In my first life, it took me many decades to compress my core..."

He turns back to me.

"I had a teacher, but on that world, Divine Energy was far more prevalent than it is here..."

He puts his arms up in the air like he's feeling it.

"There is hardly enough red threads in this entire desert to awaken a single core. This is a dry planet far from the source... However, if there are beings like the sun god in this world, that means there are most likely more who have grown by other means than natural energy in the atmosphere. We left that strange construct, and you seemed to have farmed threads from it. The only way you might awaken a True Core is if you have enough yellow fragments to do so."

I nod, opening up a spatial magic portal above my hand to let a single yellow gem float out above my hand.

"I farmed these for quite a while... I have a few hundred."

The Lich's gaze tightens, then he responds with a sigh.

"As I said before, the only technique I know is one that takes decades to complete. Much longer if resources are limited. As you know, with a fully saturated yellow core, every fragment you consume now will give you a temporary surge, but the excess threads will leave your body and expand into the atmosphere afterward."

He pauses, then puts his hands up in the air to create a bowl shape.

"What I'm trying to say is, True Cores form over time as tens of thousands of hours training and cultivating energy are stacked on top of each other."

Inside his hands, I see the [Concealment Attribute] of his cloak and pendant activating, and a large amount of mana being channeled through his arms into his hands.

With my enhanced perception, I can easily tell this is all a facade, but I watch the illusional recreation of yellow threads forming a core above his head for all to see.

It is no more than a hologram, but he's giving me a visual representation of what he's saying so I can follow along much easier.

The threads all form together to show a slowly rotating yellow core above his hands.

"This here is what your core looks like now. Fully saturated with enough yellow divine threads to stay stable and contained; enhancing all of your physical capabilities by rooting yourself in reality to a staggering degree."

The shade of the core changes from yellow to red.

"While real Divine Energy is merely the manifestation of the force our complex minds put out into this universe, our rational thoughts must see it in its most raw and simple state. This is where it all begins: the red core."

His words make me think very carefully. Ember said something similar to it in the past, stating that this energy is split in a very rudimentary way for mortals to comprehend.

Now, with the Lich King stating the same thing, I can't tell if it makes more sense to me or even less...

He continues before it fully sinks in.

"Awakening your red core allows you to exert dominance on the reality around you with roughly two to five times as much weight. It is mostly manifested to increase the user's speed, strength, perception, and basic movements. It is the perfect introduction stage into the world of the divine."

I nod along while the hovering gem in the Lich King's hand shifts to orange.

"The second stage, the orange core, is a stage that uses all of the perks of the red core and applies them to the being themselves. During this awakening, the user becomes far more in tune with their body and begins to comprehend the boundaries between self and the universe around them. It is possible to enhance one's defenses with this breakthrough an additional five to seven times above the red core stage. Basic movements and physical capacities may be increased two to three times again during this breakthrough."

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

While I watch the Lich King shift the orange core to yellow, I remember back to when I learned to create what felt like an unbreakable barrier around my body while awakening this orange core to take on the flocks of insects within the construct.

The core in the Lich King's hands glows yellow.

"In the state you've reached now, the yellow core, what some call the first step toward immortality, is the manifestation of mind, body, and soul all working in unison. Your perception, speed, defense, attack, energy control, and versatility with this awakening have all increased by at least tenfold above the capabilities of an orange core. You see and interact with the world far differently than others; beings that reach the stage of a yellow core are said to be conquerors, rulers of mortals."

I smile at his words as the yellow core reflects in my eyes.

Then, the manifestations of countless yellow threads start to come out of the Lich King's fingers and circle around the core as it speeds up its rotation.

It looks as if more energy is being pushed into the core, over and over again.

Every time a large amount is sucked in, the core pulses bright, giving off the illusion of strength, then ejecting the excess yellow threads while spinning even faster.

Over and over, more threads channel into the core, charging it up, and the excess is ejected.

It looks exactly like what I was doing while air-stepping high into the green fog of the serpent in the construct.

I used many yellow fragments to supercharge my core temporarily, but after a few seconds passed, the excess energy that couldn't stay contained in my fully saturated core was expelled.

The Lich King speaks again while the energy display continues.

"Yellow core awakened are the strongest tier of lifeforms a physical planet can hold. It's said that a yellow core's lifespan can reach up to 300 years if timed out correctly, and their battle scars don't run too deep."

He pauses, and we both watch the core spin faster and faster, doing energy cycles in and out many times a second now to show what it looks like in the passing of time.

"Over this lifetime, the yellow core will fight enemies in high-density divine zones, naturally soaking up the universal energy around them; or even better, consuming the cores of the armies they defeat."

The core spins faster and faster, making me use my full perception to witness the energy being consumed and ejected every few milliseconds. Small fractions of energy are left behind inside the core each time, even though over 99% of it is ejected back into the atmosphere.

While it is difficult to see this progress when looking at the energy ripples one by one, the difference becomes noticeable after hundreds, even thousands of events go by.

At first, the core grows in size, bit by bit as energy is left behind.

Thousands of revolutions go by, and one millimeter at a time, the core grows over three times its original size. This is when the Lich King speaks again.

"As you can see, after decades, possibly centuries of war and cultivation, a yellow core will retain small amounts of energy from all of the yellow threads that have made their way through it. Every time the yellow core is used, it becomes stronger, cementing the user's presence in the universe with more gravity after every monumental battle."

The enormous yellow core continues to grow, glowing bright above the Lich King's head, while I stare at it with wide eyes, and my teammates watch with awe-inspired expressions as well.

"The peak size of a yellow core like this can increase the weight on reality of the user by up to 20 times that of a newly awakened yellow core. From what I could see, the Sun God's core is well on its way to a state similar to this. You believe his divine energy is thicker and stronger than your own by ten times, it is because of his decades of experience, and residue from cultivating for so long."

There's a pause as the energy glows brighter and brighter, collecting yellow strands from the atmosphere and ejecting the excess faster than I can even perceive until all of a sudden it stops...

The core reaches what appears to be its critical mass, and it stops taking in new energy.

In the blink of an eye, I watch all of the manifestations of divine threads tug on each other, seemingly tightening into a circular knot.

It compresses, making its size shrink by almost a quarter instantly, then continues spinning slowly again while the threads squeeze and tug on each other more and more.

Seconds pass, then it happens again, the core compresses in on itself, shrinking to become half its size, creating a much more noticeable visual change than before.

It shines far brighter, and seeing the separation between threads gets harder and harder to see, like the threads are becoming a liquid or possibly even a solid orb; it's hard to tell.

However, it doesn't stop there. The threads squeeze and pull on each other more and more, compressing itself in half again, now leaving a core that shines even brighter but is even smaller than the initial core that we started with.

My eyes are glued to the orb as it tightens and shrinks down on itself two more times, seemingly crushing itself beneath its own weight until it stops at the size of a small marble glowing so bright I want to cover my eyes.

It floats above the Lich King's hands and just looks like a solid yellow ball of light. It is spinning so fast, with no imperfections, so it doesn't even look like it's turning in circles at all.

The Lich King then dismisses the incredible illusions in the air, and the light show fades away, leaving us out in the hot sunny desert as he continues his speech.

"As you can see, after enough time has passed, the True Core will compress under its own gravity and awaken itself. Once your energy is consolidated and pure, everyone's progression from this point is vastly different. Even now, I cannot predict the strength or unique properties your True Core will grant you."

I'm left speechless for a moment, quite blown away by the Lich King's presentation, but now I see the simplicity of it all.

While time seems to be the major factor that would streamline this process, the real goal here is to keep as many yellow divine threads in my core as possible.

The new possibilities and training methods to use all speed through my mind, and I respond with a grin.

"Perfect. Let's get to work then."

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As I turn to the real yellow divine fragment in my hand, the body double that was on its way here as this display from the Lich King unfolded sends a telepathic message as it arrives nearby.

"The last remaining isolation pod has been recharged up to a stable 10.5x dilation. Ember can begin his hibernation beneath the guildhall with my supervision right now."

It touches down, and I think about a response while it pulls the large cylindrical metal contraption out from its item storage.

As it sets it down, I walk over and open the front, typing into the control panel to give myself a 3-minute session, which would be the equivalent of just over half an hour inside the chamber.

"I want to test something quickly."

I take a step inside, then turn to my teammates and nod.

"Tell me what you see while I'm inside. I'm curious if this will work..."

Once the door closes and I'm left inside the small mana-shielded room, the air becomes thick with pure mana while the pod activates.

The thought of channeling divine energy inside a pod made only to hold mana seems like it might be too stressful on the structural integrity of this magic machinery. However, if there's a chance it will speed up the process, I have to give it a shot.

I sit down in the center and consume the small yellow gem that I had hovering above my hand while the Lich King gave his presentation. The same sensation as the last hundred times I did this rushes into my body.

Yellow threads flood out of the concentrated fragments and enter my core.

They swirl around and give me a surge of power for a few seconds before flowing out through my chest, arms, and legs on their way to leave my body like usual.

However, this is the first time I've consumed a fragment with the purple barrier that wraps around me, skin tight.

My first instinct naturally allows the excess threads that have already filtered through my core to flow out.

However, by the time most of the energy has left, I realize that it is only leaving because I allow it to.

I pull another fragment from my storage with different plans on my mind this time around.

The moment I swallow the next gem and its built-up energy starts circulating in my core, I concentrate hard on making the barrier made of semi-dormant purple threads to keep all of the filtered yellow threads from leaving my body.

A few seconds later, a wide grin creeps onto my face as the yellow threads circulate through my body and collide with the outer limits of my skin once they hit the purple barrier, keeping their momentum and pushing back toward my core.

A few minutes pass, and some of the excess energy does, in fact, filter back through my core, but at the same time, my flesh and body containing so many excess threads is ripped apart at a much faster rate. It is very painful, and pretty exhausting to activate my self-regeneration to maintain while concentrating on keeping it inside.

Even so, I've been through far worse, so I eat another fragment once the flow of the first excess energy starts to slow down.

There's another cycle that passes, and the purple barrier holds all of its energy inside my body, slowly circulating through my core again and again.

However, this energy starts to become stagnant too, just like the first.

I eat one more fragment, and the cycle continues yet again.

I find that keeping the energy inside my body and using new fragments to stimulate the leftover energy increases the efficiency by roughly two to three times at most.

After about 20 minutes pass, I sit in the center of the isolation pod with the excess divine threads of three fragments slowly circulating around my body, ever so slowly seeping into my core.

I don't have control over the threads that have been expelled from my core; the extra energy in my body now is only harmful, and there seems to be diminishing returns as every minute that passes, the speed of flow back into my core doesn't continue at the same rate unless I eat another fragment.

At the same time, the increased density of threads in my body is eating away at my flesh at even faster rates.

Self-regeneration is working as fast as it can, but the rate at which I'm getting fatigued doesn't seem to be worth it, considering I only have a limited amount of fragments in my storage.

Only a fraction of the threads even stayed in my saturated core, so even if I ate every single fragment in my storage right now, it may be a total waste of all the divine energy I have left to test with.

My core would grow slightly, but at this rate I wouldn't even get close to growing my core to the size of the directors. It would still take decades and tens of thousands of fragments to do so at this efficiency level. My goal is to surpass that by many times, and awaken a True Core. Something needs to change.

I think things over a little bit longer, considering eating another fragment to speed up the process again, but decide not to and take down my purple barrier to allow the trapped yellow threads to flow through.

It all slowly seeps out, and from what I can see, it all just flows right through the outer walls of the isolation pod.

While still deep in thought, the isolation pod opens up, and I'm met by curious gazes.

The whole pod is void of any leftover threads, and from what my teammates and the Lich King describe, there was yellow aura flowing through the walls of the pod the entire time I was inside.

I nod, open up my storage, then let Ember's sleeping body gently fall into the isolation pod where I just sat, and turn to my double.

"This pod won't be useful to me at all. Set this pod to 30 days our time, almost a year in isolated sleep. He may need more than that, so get ready to recharge the pod once the time is up. I want a double watching him all day and night beneath the guildhall. If I need to use it, I'll send Bri a message to have you transport it back. We'll be training out here for a while."

The double closes the pod after entering a few codes in the control panel, then lets the pod fall into its storage.

"Understood. Good luck with your training."

Then, it flies away to leave us in the empty desert.

I nod and think to myself.

While the extra time within an isolation pod would be helpful, losing pretty much all of the energy that I filter through makes all the time in the world useless.

I have had one breakthrough, the fact that I can hold the divine threads inside my body, but I need to think of a way to compress a higher percent of that energy into my core while not losing all of the excess into the atmosphere.

While I think about this, I open up my storage and pour out all of my red divine fragments and look to the Lich King and my teammates. Then, I share my self-regeneration skill with Maria and Fisher, as Lydia and Abby already have functioning healing skills.

"I need time to think. These are no use to me now, so use all of them if you wish. They should be enough to bring all of you to the red core stage."

My gaze turns to the Lich King.

"Guide them while I solve this problem on my own."

Each of them takes the red gems and puts them into item boxes while the Lich King begins to go off on a tangent about his first time awakening his red core, the optimal way to awaken, and the effects it has on the body and mind like an arrogant record player on repeat.

Satisfied with the fact that they will be able to achieve this on their own, I turn away and begin walking to a more isolated part of the desert.

I watch a cloud of red mist form around them as I walk further and further away, then sit in the sand until an idea comes to mind.

"This could work... Or become a disaster... I'm far enough from the city where I think it's worth a try..." I whisper to myself, then shrug and reach into my inventory to pull out four black seeds of the trees I managed to pull from the ocean inside the divine construct.

I place them in a diamond shape around me, then use my new skill [Barrier Creation] to create an invisible dome around me with a small tunnel that leads deep underground as an escape route.

Next, I pull out a fragment of yellow divine energy and consume it, letting the same process as before play out.

Instead of keeping all of the energy inside my barrier, I let it seep out through two artificially manufactured weak points in my purple limiter in the center of my palms. I don't just let these excess threads flow into the atmosphere and out of sight, I push them toward the black seeds that sit inside this barrier with me.

The instant the yellow threads touch the obsidian seeds, they all start to grow upward and create branches that mimic the outer shape of the dome.

At the end of the branches, four small yellow fruits dangle in front of me containing a large amount of the energy from the fragment I just expelled.

Some of the energy was lost, but it's far better than what I was dealing with before when all of the excess threads just dissolved out of the pod and into the empty desert..

I smirk and use small air blades wrapped in yellow threads to cut the four fruits down from their branches and eat them on the spot one after another.

Every time I eat a fruit, it cycles through my core, leaving trace amounts of its threads behind, and the expelled energy is collected and presented right back to me with a small tax taken from the trees.

I use my purple barrier to keep the yellow threads circulating through my body and back into my core while I consume the fruits one by one. Letting my core take in larger amounts of energy at smaller intervals seems to be even more efficient and less energy taxing on my body too.

I go through another two dozen cycles, of four fruits each, until its taxed away every bit of energy from the single fragment I started with. Over this half an hour of cycling, the black trees create a midnight-colored dome above me, catching every fiber of energy that is expelled from me now, no matter where it flows out of me.

I take down the top portion of the dome barrier and only leave it activated on the desert floor, making sure I have a way out of this obsidian death trap, but allowing the trees to grow high into the sky using the excess energy from me if they wish.

It is a symbiotic relationship.

The trees get to consume the energy I cycle through, and in return, one fragment becomes an additional 25 times more efficient.

I pull another fragment from my storage and stare at it, preparing to repeat the process. It is another step in the right direction, but my core hasn't even grown a measurable amount yet.

Thoughts continue racing through my mind as I try to picture new ways to improve the efficiency of this awakening even further. I need to speed up a process that should take decades or even centuries down to just a few days.

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While I continue to think, I eat another yellow fragment to continue the process.

Even though it's not quite perfect yet, it's still close to 100 times as efficient as just eating a gem in the open desert without the aid of the trees or my limiter.

Over the next hour or so, I repeat the process, cycling the energy from four more fragments.

It feels as though I've consumed hundreds of yellow cores, and finally, I sense a tiny noticeable difference in the size of my own core. It appears to have grown in size by a fraction of a millimeter in diameter.

While it's not much, and it would take tens of thousands of identical sessions to match the size of growth the Lich King's display showed me, I feel like I'm moving in the right direction.

Even so, I have just under 300 total yellow gems left in my storage. At this rate, consuming them all in this manner wouldn't get me anywhere close to the Sun God's level.

This dormant purple barrier and the obsidian trees are what set me apart from that Director in our cultivation processes.

Even so, I need something that will set us apart even further.

With the new realization from the construct's creator, telling me the abyss in the Dark Continent could potentially become the end of the world if I'm not the strongest one to conquer the trials once it awakens really puts things into a far greater perspective. On top of that, a being tens of times stronger than me, The Sun God, is actively sending their army to try and take me out. I need to get stronger by any means and not waste any resources.

I reach into my item storage and pull out a bright green fruit.

The words of the Lich King repeat in my mind, telling me that if I were to ascend to the next tier without awakening my true core, I wouldn't even compare to other higher lifeforms that have.

So, I don't plan on doing so, but there must be a use for all this energy I managed to farm.

I come up with an out-of-the-box idea that may only be possible for me, considering the mutation I went through when using absorption while farming this green energy from the serpent's aura.

I take a bite out of the massive fruit, then continue to eat the whole thing in a matter of seconds without thinking twice about my decision.

As the bright green divine strands flow through my body and instantly begin eating away at my flesh and bones, I concentrate fully on holding the purple barrier around my body strong.

The energy in each one of these green fruits is the amount of green threads I was able to withstand in my body to the point where I was on the edge of death each time I allowed the trees to tear the energy away from me.

Right now, it doesn't feel any different, but I have a theory that I want to test, and if it works, all this agony will be well worth it.

I eat a yellow fragment while my barrier still holds back all of the green threads to slowly flow within my body.

Portions of my arms, legs, chest, and even face are being burned away, and all that remains is a green holographic energy form while I sit calmly in the lotus position, healing myself as best as I can.

At the same time, my core starts to cycle through the new yellow energy I've introduced, but once it tries to eject the excess energy out, it hits a barrier of greater bright green energy.

The immense pressure of the green divine threads saturating and tearing apart my physical body is so much heavier and more dominant that it makes it nearly impossible for the excess yellow energy from the fragment I just consumed to leave my core.

Small ejections of yellow threads are forced out as my core is saturated to its limit, but the threads have nowhere to go and are forced to cycle right back inside from the pressure pushing down toward my core.

I want to yell out in pain as more and more of my flesh disintegrates away and is replaced with a pure green energy form, but I don't want to break my concentration.

Instead of just two to three cycles maximum like before, when the yellow threads stayed stagnant in my body; now they're being forced to cycle through my core hundreds of times.

After about 10 minutes pass, it gets to the point where I hardly have any physical flesh left on my body, and the pain and fatigue become overwhelming.

I release the seal on my purple barrier and reach out to touch the trunks of the trees by my sides.

There's a violent but satisfying outward rush of energy as the green threads are torn away from my body, and I can finally use self-regeneration to heal my flesh and bones.

I lay on the desert floor beneath my obsidian dome panting, covered in sweat while four large green fruits and a few miniature yellow ones form above my head.

It takes a few minutes before I can come completely to my senses and see what's happened.

Unlike the times before, when the expelled yellow threads were absorbed by the trees, this time nowhere near a full fragment was given back to me.

This isn't because the trees were greedy and took more, it's because in a single cycling process, I was able to increase the efficiency even further; absorbing over half of the yellow fragment's energy in just 10 minutes.

Instead of losing part of the divine energy to feeding the trees between every cycling process, I just managed to cut down my energy consumption by a monumental degree.

Before, over 99.9% of the energy from each fragment was lost into the atmosphere after each time it was expelled from my body. Even with the trees helping me contain the energy to cycle again, not even 1% of each fragment stayed in my core after the dozens of processes over a 2-3 hour period. The majority was still eaten up by the obsidian trees.

Now, in a single 10 minute period, over 50% of a fragment was cycled into my core and stayed.

This improvement is so large, it's hard to even quantify it.

"This changes everything..." I whisper under my breath.

My eyes practically sparkle as I cut down the green and yellow fruits to repeat the cycle again.

Over two hours, I manage to consume five yellow fragments in total.

I start each cycling session by saturating my body with as many green threads as I can, then consume as many yellow threads as I can afterward.

Thousands of cycles go by, recycling almost all of a fragment's energy in just two rounds. Hardly any of the yellow fragment's energy is being absorbed by the trees anymore; it's mostly all being cycled back into my core until it stays.

There is a satisfying hot burn in my chest, and my divine core has grown by a noticeable amount.

Its diameter has increased by a few millimeters, giving me confidence that this method of cultivation is exactly the method I need to use to push me far ahead of what should be physically possible for normal lower lifeforms.

In just mere hours, I managed to replicate the cycles that would take hundreds of training sessions and countless yellow fragments for a normal cultivator.

Most likely, all of this energy would be released into the atmosphere, not kept inside my core.

The only problem I fear facing now, is the fact that every time I release from a cycling period, the green threads are being consumed by the trees.

After just eight cycles, almost half of the green energy has been taken away. However, I've managed to incrementally increase the time that I can hold the green energy in my body. It's moved up from just above 10 minutes to my newest record of 17 minutes flat.

It feels like my control over the yellow threads has grown almost twice as strong since the moment I started this process. I can feel the threads swirling in my chest even now, eager to power my movements, but now isn't the time to test out my improved strength..

There's a long way to go.

I pull out another green fruit from my storage to make sure the pressure stays dense enough to push the next yellow fragment's power toward my core, and repeat the process again.

I've found a method that works, so I'm going to exploit it to its maximum potential.

I take a deep breath and prepare for a long and painful process.

24 hours pass.

I cycle through about 60 fragments, and use up all of the energy in 11 of my green fruits.

Over one hundred thousand cycles have made their way through my core, and the hot sensation in my chest has only grown more intense.

It feels like my core is burning bright with energy, and it's grown in size by multiple centimeters in diameter. It's almost grown by 50% in total size.

I'm able to withstand the green threads even longer, reaching upward of a full 30 minutes per session now. However, as the core grows in strength, more pressure is necessary to keep the denser yellow threads compressed.

I begin consuming two green fruits' worth of divine energy at a time.

Every single fragment I consume adds thousands of cycles of threads to the reality-bending reactor that is my core.

Even sitting here, calm and collected, the natural essence that surrounds me makes the air and ground vibrate and bend to the whims of my mind.

I can only guess what the new strength of my core has become, but there is no time for me to waste playing around until this process is complete.

Another 48 hours pass.

Roughly 150 more fragments are fully consumed, and 29 more green fruits are used.

I have to use the divine energy of three to four fruits at a time to keep the yellow threads contained now.

The core grows over a full 10 centimeters in diameter further, tripling in size, and giving off gravity waves so intense while just sitting here that the ground below me caves in after every cycle.

Hundreds of thousands of cycles go by, mimicking the act of passing decades, and I feel my core grow larger and larger in real-time just like the Lich King showed me three days ago.

Another 22 hours and 58 minutes pass...

71 additional fragments are consumed while 16 green fruits are used up.

My energy supplies are hitting their limits, leaving me with a few dozen yellow fragments remaining and a single-digit amount of green fruits left in my storage.

I've grown used to the horrible pain that the green threads give me, ripping my body to shreds, to the point where it feels like a natural state. I'm able to sit for over an hour straight with over five fruits' worth of threads in my body.

It feels like I've mutated even further, allowing me to temporarily stay in a limbo state between flesh and a pure divine energy form.

The yellow core in my chest circulates energy so fast, with hundreds of fragments compacted into it, it gives off a reality-crushing aura that makes me feel like I can rip this entire desert in half if I wanted to.

I feel powerful, but I also feel like this violent energy is not well contained. The core is growing too large and it needs to take a more stable form soon. It feels like it's about to reach its critical mass.

Chapter 598

I can feel the massive yellow core cycling energy in my chest reach a point where, in the last few sessions, it's been pushing the green threads back despite the immense pressure.

I'm prepared to go for another run, but my core finally hits its critical mass.

Not a single thread of divine energy can be pushed into it without an intense burning sensation rippling through my body.

An eerie sound, like massive metal structures creaking under thousands of tons of pressure, echoes out from my chest.

I take deep breaths and concentrate on healing my flesh from the last cycling session I just finished up, making sure to sit still and allow the process to unfold naturally.

The aura around my body affects the air and sand around me with such incredible force, it looks like I'm sitting on another world with gravity dozens of times greater than where I was days ago.

The hot sensation from my core expands, and I have to keep my entire conscious mind steady on containing this violent energy in my chest.

It feels like it's going to explode, but I use my purple barrier to keep the burning hot yellow threads inside my body.

Everything gets hotter and hotter, and without any extra energy added at all, the core in my chest expands even further.

The yellow threads glow so brightly, they make my whole body almost turn white in color.

The only thing on my mind is containing every bit of energy I have inside my body, and constantly regenerating my bones, blood, and muscles.

My heartbeat speeds up so fast it feels like it's matching the incredibly rapid cycling rate of my core as it expands to grow over two times in size once again.

Then, it happens.

The compression begins.

It feels like a heartbeat that ripples through my entire being, echoing throughout my mind and splitting a massive crack in the sand below me.

The entire universe feels like it's stopped in time, and I can't hear a thing. It's silent, and I have no frame of reference to the outside because I'm sitting inside an insulated dome of obsidian trees.

A full hour could have passed, or maybe it was just a fraction of a second...

But once it passes, all of the yellow threads in my body contract inward toward my core, spinning and weaving together to create a knot perfectly tied together by millions of divine strings.

My chest feels like the life is being squeezed out of me as it twists tighter and tighter, compressing the overinflated core.

All I see is white, and all I can do is stare into this bright void in my mind while allowing the process to continue.

Another echoing heartbeat ripples through my soul once the core shrinks back down to the size it was before it over inflated itself moments ago.

Then the same process repeats itself.

The millions of threads pull down on each other, glowing brighter and brighter the more they compress under each other's weight.

It's like they're collapsing under their own gravity, and every second that passes, the pressure they push down on each other only makes them want to tug tighter with more strength.

I can't fathom the threads ever stopping this chain reaction. It feels as if they'll compress themselves into a single point and disappear.

The soul-rattling heartbeat echoes through my psyche again, and another compression forces the core to glow brighter and brighter, and the distinction between each thread becomes harder to make out.

My mind goes blank as it happens over and over again.

Dozens of heartbeats and compressions echo through my mind and body, and the division becomes blurred between physical threads manifesting a sphere and what feels like pure liquid divine energy filling a shrinking orb in my chest.

I remember the visualization of this part of the process when the Lich King showed me, but it didn't look like it took this long and so many compressions to do it.

Either my core is different because of the extreme accelerated way I'm awakening it, or its manifestation of the event was simplified for teaching purposes.

All I know is, after what felt like an eternity in my mind passes, I finally feel a final heartbeat, and I'm able to feel my body again and take a deep gasp of air.

My eyes widen, and shine bright with yellow and white light as a shockwave ripples from my chest.

I look to the left, then right, then down at my hands, and in the same process get a clean visual of a marble-sized core in my chest.

The energy inside it cycles so fast it just looks like a clear crystal ball with silky wisps of yellow energy emanating from it.

I can hear and see my breath in the air, and without thinking much of it, I leave through the escape route below me out of the obsidian dome.

The sun is beating down on me as I float up through the hundreds of twisting black branches into the air effortlessly.

My [Flight] skill is activated, and silky white and yellow wisps of divine energy flow off of my entire body.

The energy is so dense that it takes hundreds of meters to flow away before it separates enough to appear in thread form and disperse into the atmosphere.

I float higher and higher into the air, looking down at the obsidian forest that has stretched out for about a full kilometer in diameter and over 5 kilometers high up into the sky.

It looks beautiful.

The glossy black leaves of the trees reflect the desert's sunlight, and the furthest edge of the obsidian forest reaches close to the edge of the Abyss.

The dozens of green fruits' worth of energy they consumed really nourished this forest far more than I initially expected.

I would be concerned, but we're over a hundred kilometers away from the Crimson City, and I have much more than just this on my mind.

I feel so much stronger that it almost doesn't feel real...

My enemy detection and natural perception skills activate, pulsing out a bright white and yellow light from my forehead. The overwhelming amount of information that flows into my mind forces a smile onto my face.

The first thing I notice is my teammates sparring in the desert with the Lich King watching; all four of them have fully awakened red cores.

The next thing I notice is the Crimson City, and many surrounding smaller villages I can perceive in full clarity.

This is already a major step up in my perception.

Before this awakening, I could sense the people in my city, but I couldn't see them with such fine detail and ease.

However, this is only the start.

My eyes widen the moment I see all of the Sector 3 farmlands down to each individual blade of grass and am able to perceive a deep scan of Valor City deep inside Sector 1.

The edge of my crystal-clear senses reaches into the outer edges of Sector 4. I can't see into the mainland of the 8 Great Regions far west of here just yet, but this massive jump in strength makes me believe that one day it will be possible.

The outer regions of the Abyss creep into my senses, showing crystal clear depictions of familiar creatures roaming in its darkness and even some new monstrous demonic creatures that make the sand worms seem harmless.

However, the further I try to scan into it, the more I realize this Abyss is even more mysterious than I thought. There is a dark black blind spot in its center that is completely invisible to me despite it being well within my perception's range.

Once I realize this, my mind wanders off to places I'm able to perceive.

I sense the mainland's borders to the west, and high up north, I sense fuzzy intuitive images of a very cold mountainous region. Below me, far to the south, I sense a dangerous volcanic region as well.

These unexplored areas never came onto my radar until just now. I make a mental note of it while I continue to admire my new power.

It's all baffling.

Thousands of kilometers of range just opened up to me in my perception, and my Rising Emperor's Domain has increased to match this upgrade, making the range in which I can share and take power and skills at maximum potential close to 2000 km.

I want to take out my sword, and even activate my greater form to try out some attacks using my full power, but it feels like doing so may put anyone near me in serious danger.

I'll have to travel out to an even more desolate area of desert than this; just a hundred or so kilometers away from the city doesn't feel like it will be enough. Residue from my attacks would surely harm innocent citizens.

Even now, as I slowly float down toward the desert floor away from the obsidian forest, the sand bends away from my feet, making me feel like I'm living on another plane of existence to the real world around me.

To make sure touching down on the desert is possible without destroying the landscape, I contract my perception aura and activate my purple limiter.

By the time my feet touch the ground, all of the divine energy from my new core is contained inside my body, and I make my way toward my teammates, making sure not to let any extra aura slip out.

My mind wanders back to the violent rejection my body and mind gave me when I tried to get close to the green serpent in the sky within the divine construct.

The reaction the ground gave me when I tried to land on it before felt similar, so releasing my full power, even if it's just my natural aura around my teammates, may be unbearable or even deadly.

Even if they've grown stronger, it's not a risk I'm willing to take right now. So, I airstep using only mana as I make my way over, keeping all of my Divine Energy locked away.

The Lich King's words of True Core awakenings all being different, and the possibility of them granting new abilities repeats in my mind as the 5 of them come into view.

There is only one day remaining until I'm scheduled to meet the Apex Region's Director to negotiate our contract, however the curiosity of what unique ability my True Core has granted me is all I can think about right now.

Chapter 599

The echoing cracks of Soul Energy attacks, strengthened by countless red threads of divine energy, ring throughout the desert as I approach my teammates training.

None of them have their main weapons out, and no ranked-up buffs are activated; they're all fighting in their base human forms.

Reality bends beneath the desert ground, and even the air between their fists colliding distorts slightly before they make contact. It makes me momentarily question whether we're still inside a construct like the one I just left.

The energy waves from their punches and kicks ripple with even more force than they did when using everything they had against me in our spars just four days ago.

Once I glide down to the ground, they all stop what they're doing.

"What were those trees? I can't sense any energy coming off of them..." Fisher asks.

Abby interjects next. "More importantly, I can't sense any energy coming off of you... Are you still wearing that limiter? Was it a success or not?"

Lydia and Maria both look at me with sharp gazes, trying to figure out what's happened, but neither of them speaks up, as the others have asked the most important questions.

I nod and smile while walking closer.

"It was a success... so much so, that I don't think it's safe to release my full power in your presence. And yes, those trees absorb Divine Energy, so I wouldn't get too close to them. I'm actually not sure how to even dispose of them now."

The second these words leave my mouth, the Lich King chimes in.

"Four days... you awakened a True Core in four days...."

There is no change in expression on the empty black skeletal face, but I feel a ripple of emotions come off of the shadow summon that tells me he's surprised, scared, and full of genuine disbelief.

I smirk, then give them all a rundown on how it was done.

Given the fact that I'm using a purple-cored artifact and that the use of my Soul Energy imbued with my absorption's natural properties triggered this mutation, allowing me to become more and more resistant to the Green Threads; there's a low possibility that anyone else in the world is capable of such a feat.

My teammates are all impressed, but none of them ever doubted I'd be able to pull it off, even though there was no clear method outlined beforehand.

It's just another training session for us, but the Lich King can't seem to grasp this fact.

The fearful and awe-filled emotions stream out of the shadowy figure as he responds after my story is complete.

"I... am starting to understand why a Supreme like the Fallen One chose to soul bond with you. Maybe the events of the past, when this planet was connected to the system, were not so random after all. I never understood why such a weak world so far away from the source was chosen..."

The Lich King keeps murmuring to himself for a few seconds, but I have other things to ask that have been on my mind since the moment I awakened.

"How do I find out what my unique True Core's trait will be? You mentioned everyone's is different, right? I don't see any mention of it in my system text, and usually these things feel intuitive... but I don't feel any different other than the immense jump in pure power."

The Lich King looks up and shakes himself out of his deep thoughts to respond.

"If you don't know yet, it means it isn't a passive ability. You'll need to be in the heart of battle to awaken your True Core's Strength, or possibly it will awaken once the battle is over. Every being is unique; it is similar to a Soul Energy awakening—you will gain a power that reflects your being. It could be a divine weapon, it could be a new form, it... really could be anything. Given the accelerated nature of your awakening, I truly have no guesses as to what your True Core's hidden ability could be..."

After his words, we stand in silence. It makes me even more curious to know what kind of power I possibly have locked up inside my new core. I already feel like a demigod walking on a world that can't handle my power.

Even my teammates, who are the next four strongest beings on the entire continent right now, feel as though we're leagues apart.

I don't even know what to think. It's a combination of the immense rise in power and the built-up fatigue that has riddled my body and mind from 96 hours straight of tearing apart my body and channeling decades' worth of divine energy into my core.

I let out a long sigh, then open up my item storage to let a pile of orange fragments fall to the desert floor.

"Understood. I have quite a big day tomorrow... I'm heading back to the Crimson City to rest. I need to prepare myself to face the Apex Region's Director. In the meantime, you all need to get stronger in case other forces come here when I'm gone. I sense strong powers from the north and south. I don't know if they're friends or foes, so it's best we prepare for the worst."

It's clear I have a lot on my mind and would explain in detail if I thought it was important, so none of them pry, accepting the gems into their item boxes, and the Lich King immediately begins to explain the optimal way to awaken the orange core, not missing a chance to brag about the time he too awakened his orange core in a past life.

Stolen content alert: this content belongs on Royal Road. Report any occurrences.

It is a little annoying, but I can't argue with the results.

The realistic depiction of the yellow core compression really did help me awaken, and the strength that ripples off of the four of them makes the red cores they faced just two weeks ago seem like ants beneath their feet.

The dense gravity that emanates from each of them feels strong enough that I believe they could take out the orange insects that jumped from the dangling chains inside the construct if they used their full power. They're progressing very quickly, I just hope it's fast enough.

—

I make it back to the Crimson City, and once I enter the guildhall, Bri greets me with a long list of names with skills and pricing next to each of them.

We speak through telepathy while she brings me upstairs to her office.

"I was wondering when you'd make it back. I hope your training went well. A double told me you would be away for a few days."

While I respond and look down at the list, she motions for a few of her workers to leave the room and go fetch some citizens whose names are on the bottom of the list in another section.

"Yes, my training went perfectly. I'm glad to see the skill orb debut went as planned."

We both walk into her office and go over the numbers.

She shows me that all of the basic legendary swordsmanship, body hardening, buffs, dagger mastery, and common combat skills all sold out within the hour.

In addition to this, over 150 citizens applied to join the Crimson army. My double vetted them with the help of some of the squad leaders, and basic training has started for over 100 of the new recruits in the canyon of dungeons.

If they pass, they'll all be awarded elemental skills of their choosing.

"Very good... In that case, I'll farm another batch of identical skill orbs before heading out on another mission. I shouldn't be gone long this time," I reply out loud as Bri continues.

"There is even more good news; our skill acquisition plan looks like it has worked as well—"

A knock at the door interrupts her, but she smiles and gets up from her seat to walk over and open the door.

"Perfect timing."

In walks a craftsman leading two young men, a middle-aged man, and a young woman. They each look like normal villagers in non-expensive clothing, most likely working at some of the local shops and living a normal life.

I do a scan of each of them, and it comes back [Lv. 13] [Lv. 22] [Lv. 6][Lv. 42] while the craftsman working for Bri speaks up while walking in front of them.

"These are the three that have skills on the list you were looking for; we are still searching for the others."

Bri nods and crosses her arms.

"Thank you, you're dismissed."

He bows, then leaves the room, closing the door behind him as I read the lower portions of their status.

[Inspect]

[Appraisal]

[Conceal]

[Hush]

Four skills show up in my mind's eye, and I crack a smile.

"So you're here to trade your skills in for something better? -and there was a 50 gold bonus, wasn't there?"

They all nod nervously while I reach into my manifestation of a fake item box, pull out handfuls of gold, and let them float in the air with telekinesis while I count them out.

Then, I set them all down in front of each of them and ask another question.

"What skills do you want in return?"

The first young man with Inspect wants a legendary swordsmanship skill, and the friend beside him with Appraisal wants the same thing. They worked as traveling traders all throughout the dark continent because of their good eyes for items, but they want in on the action and have been dying to go into the canyons of dungeons to farm but haven't worked up the courage until now to make it happen.

The middle-aged man with Conceal is in a similar boat as the two younger men. He's worked as a barhand, physical labor helper, and bookkeeper all his life, and his skill in its basic form has been useless to him. Changing up your status when you have nothing to hide isn't the best perk. I make an exception and agree to give him an extreme earth magic skill so he can join a construction crew and earn a stable living.

Finally, the younger woman with the Hush skill doesn't have much use for it either. She's new to the city and just wants the money to live comfortably here. The young woman can't decide on what skill to choose, so I just tell her she can come by anytime and choose one free of charge once she's made her decision.

"Perfect. All of you, stand still. This may hurt a bit, but I'll heal you right after it's finished."

I activate lifesteal, making sure my limiter brings my power down to incredibly low levels, and drain their HP until I'm able to use my Soul Energy and Absorption Attribute to cover their bodies with dark red energy and take out a skill orb from each of them.

In the same moment, I share my mythic-grade Self Regeneration skill with them, as they have links of loyalty with me; and the moment the orbs leave their bodies, they're brought back up to full health.

We're all left standing in the room while the four blue orbs float above my hand.

I nod with a smile and shake each of their hands, then turn to Bri.

"Please, make our guests comfortable while I go retrieve the skills they've asked for. On the house, I want each of them to receive a blood-bonded weapon, armor, or unique piece in addition to the 50 gold reward. They have helped me much more than they even know."

I leave the guildhall and head to the canyon of dungeons immediately after Bri agrees to keep them company, then get to work.

Once inside the dungeons, I begin dungeon-walking to dozens of C and B grade dungeons, collecting the basic legendary grade combat skill orbs that will be needed for the weekly sale Bri hyped up last time.

Then once this is done, I stop inside a C-class volcanic high orc dungeon and hold one by the neck to force a body hardening skill orb into its mouth.

These monsters usually only have swordsmanship, extreme strength, and occasionally advanced fire magic.

However, the moment it swallows the orb, a new skill, legendary body hardening, appears on its status. I smirk and cut it down while whispering to myself, "It really works..."

Then dungeon walk a few hundred meters away to the next closest monster and force-feed it the Inspect skill I received from the young man less than an hour ago.

It appears on its status, and I crush the monster's head half a second later.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Inspect

Upgrade: Mythic

[YES][NO]

I choose [YES] and dungeon walk to the next nearest High Orc with a wide grin to repeat the process.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Appraisal

Upgrade: Mythic

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Conceal

Upgrade: Mythic

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Hush

Upgrade: Mythic

[YES][NO]

Less than a minute later, four skills on my status fully upgrade to mythic grade. These are ones I was dreading having to use hard-earned Proficiency Points to raise this high, but I just found a much easier way.

There are still more human-only skills to find, so as my city grows more, I'll continue to hunt for them; however, this was a huge success in my eyes.

I crush a teleport crystal to make my way back to the guildhall and present the requested skills to the guests who stayed with Bri.

The three of them that do accept consume the orbs in front of me, and their statuses change before my eyes.

All four of them leave with item boxes to store their money, and have many words of thanks to say to both of us as they exit the door with scheduled appointments to create blood-bonded items later this week.

I pour out about a hundred more orbs on Bri's desk once they leave, then put up a new and improved hush barrier while I make my way toward the door.

"That should be enough to keep the hype going for next week's limited unit sale. I'm off to relax for the rest of the day; I have an important meeting in the morning."

Chapter 600

I spend the night in one of the newest hotels in the Crimson City.

My doubles helped recreate a small number of luxury rooms similar to the mana dense rejuvenation rooms found at the Moon Bar back in Valor City. With my new imbue skill, creating building materials and furniture that release controlled amounts of mana throughout these suites is an easy task.

I take a well-needed rest after my awakening and feel completely refreshed once the sun rises again.

—

I spend a few minutes in the morning staring out the glass window overlooking the city while a single white teleport crystal spins slowly above my hand.

"It's time..." I whisper to myself while I adjust my mana control output to match that of a strong ranked-up hunter and shift my appearance to fit the persona I used during the exams, Ray Anderson.

Next, I crush the white gem in my fist, and a bright flash of light fills the room as I'm teleported back to the Apex Region.

The endless white mana-shield floor materializes beneath my feet, and I find myself back in the same position I started in when I came to this exam site over a month ago.

If I sent out a pulse of aura with divine energy intertwined, I could easily mentally map this entire Region in a matter of seconds, but I don't want to blow my cover just yet.

To make things believable in case someone is watching, I just make lightning surround my body and let out a pulse of aura equivalent to a double-ranked-up hunter. I see where I am and find that the castle-like walls of the exam site are about 100 kilometers to the east.

I begin lightning-stepping in that direction immediately, however, can't help but notice large portions of mana shielding are missing. Massive kilometer wide sheets are gone, and only flat orange-red colored dirt is visible beneath it.

Unlike last time when I was here, there aren't any other living souls on this wide-open white plane, so I fly through the air in silence all the way to the tall gateways where a gold-collared wind user greeted me last time.

I assumed there would be someone here to welcome me back, but the gate is closed, and the air is silent.

It's like this whole place was abandoned.

I let out a sigh and float down to the smooth white ground, crossing my arms, wondering whether or not I should just go and venture off on my own; however, three figures show up in my enemy detection skill from deep within the fortress. I recognize the skills on their status screens, so I decide to stay in place.

Finding their approach fascinating, I wait patiently while they get closer and closer.

The tall gateway that I was let through to signify the exams starting last month opens up again, and three figures, all above level 1500, walk out.

It's the water mage, healer tank, and shadow user from the Phantom Region who stare forward at me with bored, expressionless stares.

They've all gained hundreds of levels in the last few days and made it well past their second rank-up. I'm surprised, but more so curious about how it was done. Their progression is very fast; the Director wasn't messing around when he said he needs to train up new Elites.

Callum, the water mage, steps forward and speaks to me first in a monotone voice.

"Follow us, the Director has been waiting for you to arrive."

They all turn around and begin walking through the artificial forest region I vividly remember from the exams. The lush green shrubbery and colorful wildlife in this artificial forest seem a lot less cared for than last time I was here.

Some patches of plants look like they haven't been watered in weeks, and some portions of the wildlife are completely gone; like large sections of it have been taken away.

It's similar to the chunks of endless white mana shielding that were missing outside this dying wildlife sanctuary.

The three of them silently march forward without saying a word as I follow, and the gate behind me closes.

I have a lot on my mind as we walk through the calming forest. I consider the fact that I have the ability to free them right now, but that would drastically ruin my stealth approach to this matter.

All there is to do is silently walk behind them until we make it to the entrance to the compound that led into the gambling lounge from the pretrials of the exam before.

Instead of the colorful lights, happy workers, and energetic music, all that is here now is an empty white room with a single door at the back.

We walk into the wide open hall that has multiple points of entry from the forest, but only one exit.

The door opens up once we get close, and inside, it is a small cube-shaped room just like all of the rooms we were in during the exams.

The three men walk in and turn toward me once they hit the back wall.

I follow, and the small door closes behind me.

The familiar moving sensation, like we're on some kind of magical railway, shakes the entire room as we're transported at high speeds in a direction completely unknown to me.

If I were in this position days ago, I would be incredibly paranoid, looking for an escape route.

However now, after feeling the Director's full power up close for myself and knowing that he is the boss that rules over everyone here; I am confident in my own abilities to overpower him and leave this place whenever I wish.

I'm here to find these hidden facilities that allowed these newly appointed B-Class hunters to reach level 1500+ in just a few days.

The amount of mana used to create hundreds of kilometers of mana shielding and high-tech mana-powered infrastructure like this transportation system must be farmed from somewhere, and I'm extremely eager to find out exactly where.

I keep my smile hidden behind my concealment enchantments, and a few minutes later, the cube-shaped room finally comes to a halt, and another door appears on the wall to open.

There is a huge contrast between the bright white room I'm in now and the darkness lit up by faint yellow and golden light.

The three men step away from the door and motion for me to enter.

Without any hesitation, I walk forward and am greeted by a familiar sight of golden eyes behind an oval table being tended to by a pair of nurses with healing abilities.

The Director's voice echoes through the room in a static tone.

"Five days... You really did wait all five days to return. I see Emrie has not come back with you. I take it that means you have both made your separate decisions. Your appearance back up here means you're ready to become an A-Class hunter, am I correct?"

His eyes glow brighter, and the aura of greed and anticipation floods out of him.

I respond in a calm voice as the three new A-Class hunters walk into the room behind me and the door shuts.

"I'm looking forward to coming to an agreement, but let's not forget about what I asked for. You'll make me the Director of the Vice Region if I agree to this deal, right?"

A loud laugh echoes through the room at my words, but I stare forward with my arms crossed and a serious expression still on my face.

"So young, with great ambitions. I'm sorry to say for now that is impossible, we'll need to come up with other terms. Running an entire Region is far more work than just being strong. Brutus is a man who runs the Vice Region with honor and integrity. You cannot merely rise the ranks because of a single victory during the exams. You must prove your loyalty and work ethic. He worked his way up the Association's chain of command, building business connections, loyal friends, and studying the inner workings of a successful society for decades. It is no small feat to be the face of the Association in the eight great regions."

While he brings up great points, stating that running an entire region's Association branch is not an easy job for the average hunter, his talk of upholding honor and integrity makes me want to laugh as hard as he did moments ago.

I hold it in and reply with a nod.

"Very well, we can discuss those terms later. For now, I'd like to see the training facilities you've promised will bring me to level 1000 so quickly. I'd like to know what exactly I'll be signing up for, maybe if it impresses me I'll be able to accept a negotiation for different terms."

The Director is silent for a few moments but nods and presses a button beneath his desk.

"That is fine. I will give you a tour of the Apex Region facilities if you wish, maybe you will gain some perspective and see what an honor it is to even be offered this opportunity. When we are done, I will have a word with you alone and we will negotiate a deal once and for all, understood?"

The pressure in the room momentarily rises as the yellow threads permeate out from his body just slightly.

He only stops when one of the nurses that tends to his side faints from the intensity.

As one of the other nurses heals her, the Director nods, and the entire room starts to shake.

"Let's leave this temporary exam site, and allow me to be a welcoming host to a future A-Class Hunter. I'll bring you back to the Association headquarters in the heart of the Apex Region."