

## **D. Diver 601**

### Chapter 601

The dark room moves just like the smaller cube I was in before.

I take a few steps forward and pull a black chair from the opposite side of the table and sit down, doing as the Director asked. The three new A-Class hunters take seats near me as well. Their golden collars glow brightly.

The feeling of being guided along a magical railway continues as the room speeds up, leading us in a direction unknown to me. It feels like we're heading north, but it's hard to tell without exposing my true mana control to break through the high-grade mana shielding we're surrounded with in this room.

We all sit in silence for about half a minute before the Director speaks again while pressing a button beneath his table.

"To save time while we make our way to the headquarters, I might as well begin the tour here."

A portion of the wall to the right of me begins to shift in color, like a video is about to play.

However, soon I realize that the flashing white light I see is hundreds of panels of mana shielding flying by as we ride on a thin silver rail made of a metallic alloy I can't identify.

Square-shaped holes in the ground fly by in the view, revealing orange-red dirt patches just like what I saw when I got here. However, we're headed off in the opposite direction, leaving the exam site. We also rise higher into the air to follow the silver rail upward. A few other twisting railways are visible far off in the distance as well, with other cubes being transported on them.

The Director speaks up as my eyes are glued to the transparent side wall display with genuine awe.

"As you can see, our testing site is being slowly dismantled. We'll be reusing these resources for other projects in the future."

I nod slowly and watch the ground get further away and the patches of dirt grow more abundant.

Crews of hunters become visible, tearing the mana shielding away, loading them into item boxes, and bringing them back in the same direction we're headed on other silver railways.

The new A-Class hunters sit quietly while nurses finish healing up the Director.

I finally speak up once the room we're sat in stops rising in elevation, and it feels like we're just moving in one direction about 2 kilometers above the ground.

"I've never been in a transportation machine quite like this..."

The abundance of mana shielding on the ground fades more and more, leaving just orange dirt on the horizon. It looks like we've made it out of the exam test site, and the trees, colorful flowers, and grass that grow out here tell me that there wasn't any mana shielding covering this land before. We've made it to the natural land of the Apex Region.

The Director responds once endless rolling hills come into view.

"Yes, teleport crystals are usually saved for long-distance travel. We much prefer to rely on the rail system here. There are 28 routes that cover the entirety of the Apex Region. If you wish to take the

tour of the entire Region later, I'm sure this can be arranged, but for now, I'll just be taking you directly to the heart of the Region."

This book was originally published on Royal Road. Check it out there for the real experience.

I nod as I see the other railways bend off in other directions the further away from the exam testing site we get; some of them even dip down to make stops within the rolling hills.

I see small settlements that house a few hundred people each. They all have very well-built symmetric homes, shops, and roads.

It looks like it has a futuristic Apex Region touch to it, built with white and silver high-grade materials in very symmetric patterns. I see a few guards watching from the far edges of the settlements.

Just like any other region, it seems there are just normal citizens going about their normal lives out here.

Roads connect these smaller towns to bigger ones that look like they could house thousands as we venture deeper into the Apex Region a few hundred kilometers further over the next few minutes.

Large apartment complexes, town squares, and communities prosper out in these open plains, and they're well connected to farmland and all of the other cities for trade. It is all incredibly well maintained, with more Elite hunters guarding the cities and keeping watch.

There is definitely very high surveillance in these cities, but they look incredibly orderly and clean.

I don't exactly know what I was expecting, but seeing normal life in this Region kind of surprises me.

We pass about five cities with populations I'd estimate to all be close to the entirety of the Crimson City.

The deeper we venture into this Region, the more crowded it becomes with roads, buildings, and people. Something odd I didn't pick up on are small silver boxes that are scattered all throughout the rolling hills.

There were only a few surrounding the smaller cities, so I didn't think much of it, but now that there are hundreds of them scattered everywhere; in the cities and out in the open plains, I speak up with a confused expression on my face.

"What are all those silver boxes?"

I would do a scan for myself, as they look very familiar to mana shielded cubes I saw long ago in Sector 4; but the Director answers my question while rippling out an aura filled with pride.

"Those are all dungeon portals. The closer we get to headquarters, the more abundant they will become. A lot of our C and B-Class hunters do training out here. Near the larger cities, some of the dungeons get pretty strong."

He chuckles to himself while the railway zips across the sky and more cities pass by, clumping closer and closer together until the entire ground is covered in homes, shops, and roads filled with people.

The buildings get taller and more luxurious, and the streets all begin to converge toward a single tall hill in the distance. It rises up almost a full kilometer in the sky, making a perfect backdrop for the city large enough to house a hundred thousand citizens.

The silver railway curves downward, and our descent begins.

We get closer and closer to the ground, and I see a few other silver rails next to us all falling toward a single point; the massive grassy hill.

Our speed doesn't slow as we zip between the taller towers in the city, and the Director doesn't seem to be too concerned about the fact that we're about to collide with this massive mound of dirt either.

So, I sit back and wait for impact.

The mana shielded box hits the side of the massive grassy hill, but I don't feel it shake or slow at all.

We just phase through the mountain into what looks like a hidden fortress.

The veil of green grass ripples as I look back at the city we're leaving behind, and we dip down into a base deep within the heart of the Apex Region.

The side of the grassy mound was all an illusion, hiding the headquarters entrance in plain sight.

Mana shielding far thicker than the box we're in covers the inner walls of the hill as the railway plummets down deep underground.

Bright lights flash by as the sheets of mana shielding blink rapidly from the speed; but they start to flash far less once our velocity slows.

The room shakes quite a bit as it finally comes to a stop, and at the same time, the transparent window turns back to opaque shielding.

A door at the back of the room opens up, and Mr. Freeman speaks.

"Welcome to the Apex Region's Association Headquarters."

Everyone in the room stands up, even the Director while his nurses help him on each arm. So, I do too.

The golden-eyed man walks all the way around the table, and his shadowy figure shows that just a pair of glowing eyes covered in dark robes are walking through the room. I know that his real appearance looks different, but using his [Master of Illusions] buff, this mysterious form is all anyone can see.

"Please, follow me and I will give you a tour of the facilities."

He walks out the open door with his nurses and three new A-class hunters close behind, and I follow, holding in my grin as my enemy leads me right into the heart of his hidden fortress.

Chapter 602

A confident woman's voice echoes from the door as a narrow white entrance hallway comes into view.

"Welcome back, Mr. Freeman. That was a quick trip, as expected."

A woman with tightly tied back blond hair, clad in a black and green association-branded combat suit, greets us at the end of the short hall.

She's holding a silver tablet, and I watch each of the new A-Class hunters reach into their item boxes to pull out their IDs. I do the same.

Mr. Freeman gives the woman a nod as he walks by her without saying a word, flanked by his two nurses. The three A-Class hunters, however, stop in front of the woman to scan their IDs.

She taps on her tablet after each of them scans, and they follow the Director out of the narrow hall.

The woman flashes me a bright smile as she scans my ID just like the others.

"Ray Anderson, uncontracted B-Class Hunter. It looks like this is your first time in the Apex Region. I hope you enjoy your stay at headquarters."

I put my ID back in my item box and nod as I walk past her.

"Thanks, I—"

My words are cut short as the entrance hall opens up into a massive room.

It isn't the sheer size of the room, the intense mana shielding, the half dozen 10-meter-wide chandeliers, or the massive exquisite art pieces on display all over the walls and ceiling. What stops me mid-sentence and halts my steps is the enormous 30-meter-long statue in the center of the hall.

A white dragon stands on its back legs, wings outstretched as if about to take flight.

Each of its scales is semi-reflective, giving thousands of small sparkling visuals of all the priceless art that fills the hall.

Its teeth are sharp, and its eyes look as if the beast is still alive, though there isn't a drop of energy left in this creature.

It's impossible to tell if it's a petrified monster turned into a trophy or a carefully crafted masterpiece.

I can't help but stare, deciding to believe it's the latter, whispering to myself.

"What a lifelike piece of art... it looks so real... incredible..."

The Director overhears me as we walk by the reflective statue's right leg across the long entrance of mana-shielded flooring and responds.

"Indeed, it is the prize of my collection here. It's quite the conversation starter for new guests. You say it is lifelike? Have you ever seen a dragon in the flesh?"

I think of a reply as we walk around its back, following the curling white tail to the back of the room where two winding staircases lead downward.

As I reply, a few hunters approach from the left side, but they're levels are that of low C-Class hunters, so I don't think much of it.

"No, no... I haven't seen a real dragon before, but it is everything I ever thought one would look like."

We continue walking toward the tip of the dragon's beautiful tail, met by open doors between the stairs. An elevator with hand-carved designs and more exquisite art on its walls comes into view behind the opened doors, along with a number panel from 1 to 20 labeled inside small white buttons.

As we all step into the spacious room, the Director replies.

"Well, that is a good thing. If you said yes, I would have to change my art piece to something different. I can't have new guests be unimpressed by my prized piece."

He laughs to himself while the doors close, and he presses the number 5.

Another group of C-Class hunters walks up the left stairway, and a group of B-Class hunters arrives from another entrance point just as we begin to descend downward. This place is bustling with workers and hunters. They may all be in Apex Region uniforms, but it doesn't seem like this base is a well-kept secret; it appears to be open to the public.

The elevator slides downward, taking us deeper into the base until I hear a ding and watch the doors open again.

The sound of bells ringing, loud music, incredible-smelling food, laughter, and bright colorful lights comes into view.

An endless hall of restaurants, shops, and table games fills my senses. I think back to the pre-trial room in the exams, and this looks just like it, only tens of times bigger.

My eyes widen as the Director speaks up.

"This is floor 5, the entertainment floor. It may look familiar to you, but rest assured, none of these games are rigged like the exams. I thought we might as well start off the tour with something to catch your attention. Floors 1 through 4 are mostly desk work and accounting jobs, keeping track of the citizens and hunters in our Region."

He chuckles to himself.

"Hunters are only allowed here during non-working hours, and only 20% of your salary is permitted to be wagered each month. We make sure everyone is responsible with their funds."

Mr. Freeman hits the number 10 button on the elevator, and we descend further until it opens again.

This floor looks much different, more in line with what I was expecting from this facility.

There are dozens of sectioned-off mana-shielded rooms with timers above each of their doors.

Some rooms are covered in opaque silver or white shielding material, while others are clear like glass, allowing me to see C and B-Class hunters sparring with weapons and elemental skills.

Everyone here wears the same green and black combat suits as the woman upstairs who greeted us.

The Director speaks up again as I stare forward.

"This is where many of our C and new B-Class hunters practice training. The sim suits worn are graded up to roughly level 1200 attacks. You wouldn't be able to go all out, especially with that buff of yours, but this is a very valuable resource for many Apex Region Hunters to go all out without any consequences."

I nod, remembering back to long ago when I first visited Vice City and tried a similar technology, but the suits were only graded up to B-Class attacks.

"Very interesting. I'd love to try them out another time."

The door closes again, and the Director brings us down to the 15th floor.

It is far more private and looks rather luxurious. All I see is a red carpet and black doors numbered 1-100 until they go out of sight, labeled with golden text.

The Director explains this floor too.

"Everything from floor 11 to 16 consists of private suites and private magic gear shops only available to contracted hunters. You will be given unlimited access to your own suite upon signing a contract. Of course, the A-Class suites on floor 16 are far more luxurious than the B and C-Class suites you see here. We can tour these later if you wish."

The door closes once again, and we're brought down to floor 17.

It appears to be some kind of market with booths and shops, but there are no customers at all. It just looks like workers are sorting and crafting all kinds of dungeon loot. There are E and D-grade items, but some of the stalls have C and B-grade loot and gear as well.

The Director's commentary echoes in my ear as I continue to scan the rows of workers.

"This is where all of the farmed resources from our thousands of dungeons within the Vice Region are sorted and crafted into usable materials. Many hunters sell them to the association-owned vendors around the capital city, and they're all brought here 24 hours a day to be processed. Far in the back, we have a few legendary grade craftsmen, if you'd like anything unique crafted with materials you've farmed; don't be afraid to ask. It is a service available to all B-Class and above hunters."

He murmurs under his breath as the door closes again. "If it wasn't for that damn Flame Emperor screwing up my trade deals, we would be making far more profit..."

The trip down to the next two floors takes longer than usual, as the next floor seems very tall.

I smile inwardly at his frustration as the door opens to the 18th floor, revealing what looks like another training facility. The ceilings are easily 50 meters high, making the long wait to get here make more sense.

This one is only split into two massive rooms. One of them is empty, while the other is in use by four golden-collared figures that I recognize.

Rodrigo stands at the back of the massive mana-shielded room with a silver clipboard in hand next to the long blond-haired woman healer. They talk to each other while attentively watching the two A-Class hunters with red divine cores spar at what looks like full power, but only using mana and not the aid of their borrowed soul energy or divine cores.

The three A-Class hunters take a step forward as the door opens, and the Director speaks.

"This is your stop. Continue your training, and thank you very much for waiting for our guest to arrive and bringing him to me."

They step out and make their way toward the other massive empty training room as Mr. Freeman continues.

"This is the A-Class training facility. Soon, I believe this will be more appealing to you. These two rooms were put in place by a team from the central branch of the Association quite a while back. They're graded to withstand up to level 5000 attacks, believe it or not."

An aura of satisfaction and pride ripples off him as the door closes once again, and we descend further.

It's just me, the Director, and his two nurses when the bell rings, and we hit the 19th floor.

This floor isn't as impressive as the last. It just has a few sectioned-off rooms, public lounges, saunas, restaurants, and bars. There is very slow and calming music playing, and no customers at all, but many attentive employees are on duty.

It must be a private lounge for the A-Class hunters to use once they're finished with hard training sessions.

To my surprise, both of the nurses walk forward once the door fully opens, and Mr. Freeman speaks to them.

"This will only take a few minutes. I prefer to show our guest the final floor alone."

They both walk forward, then turn around and give him a small bow as the door closes and the elevator descends one last time.

I speak up and question him.

"This is the final floor? What's so special about it?"

The Director stands in silence for a moment, and I feel the air pressure in this small elevator ripple with heat and small amounts of yellow divine threads while he restrains himself and replies.

"This is the heart of not only the Apex Region but the 8 Great Regions' branch as a whole. The resource I am about to show you is what has granted me the ability to grow my power and is what has kept this nation in line for decades..."

Silence fills the elevator as it descends further and further, almost triple the time it took to get down to the 18th floor. The Director continues.

"There is only one other Region that has a similar resource, the Vice Region, but it is not nearly as plentiful as what I'm about to show you."

The air pressure grows even thicker, and I begin to feel soul energy building up in the Director's chest.

Then, the door lets out a ding and slides open.

Behind it, an underground cave made of dark black stone with ceilings over 100 meters high comes into view.

I let a weak observation aura out, and immediately I feel the presence of what the Director speaks of.

A massive green spinning portal rests at the back of the cave. The mana density and pressure it releases are so intense, it makes the Labyrinth in Vice City and even the one back in the canyon of dungeons seem minuscule.

The air is so thick with mana, it feels like I'm back inside the Titan's Domain down here. It's both alluring and suffocating at the same time.

I start to take a step forward, but another pressure hits my senses from my side as Mr. Freeman pulls a familiar blue cube from his item storage and pushes it my way, floating through the air with a contract open on it, showing the A-Class Hunter recruitment option in bright blue text.

"If you would like to enter the Labyrinth and begin your training, we need to come to an agreement on our terms. What do you say? Will today be the day you become an A-Class hunter?"

His eyes glow golden, and more yellow threads begin to seep out of his core.

I see tendrils of soul energy begin to rise from his back just like the first time he tried to use his buff [The Sun God's Curse Mark] on me.

It seems he's set all of this up in order to get me alone down here and give me no choice. However, he doesn't know this is exactly what I wanted too.

I continue my step forward closer to the Labyrinth. In the same movement, I catch the blue contract cube with my left hand, and my heart rate starts to speed up with excitement.

## Chapter 603

I keep walking forward, pretending not to notice a thing.

The elevator door behind us closes, and I start to show more interest in the massive cave-like room we're in, while moving toward the back of it, over 100 meters away.

The golden tendrils emanating from the Director's back begin to reinforce themselves with countless threads of yellow divine energy as I raise a question.

"So this is where your Labyrinth is... and you say it's where you and all the A-Class hunters have managed to grow in power?"

The Director follows right behind me, emitting a growing pressure in the air that would easily knock out a normal ranked-up hunter by now, while he replies.

"Yes, yes it is. This is where you'll find monsters above level 1000 to train with. There's no dungeon within the whole 8 great Regions with monsters stronger than we have here. The association keeps them on lockdown so no dangerous individuals can reach the rank of A-Class on their own. This 20th floor may look like a natural cave, but it has been reinforced by the higher-ups in the central branch of the Association as well. Even if this entire labyrinth had a violent break right now, no monsters could make it to the surface."

I do some quick calculations, assuming the Director trained inside this Labyrinth to grow his level above 9000; whatever mana-dense black material that reinforces these cave walls must be considered S-Grade Shielding. I grin beneath my concealment barrier as I continue to walk forward, and the pressure coming off the Director grows so dense that most double-ranked-up hunters would fall to their knees.

A wave of golden light creeps up behind me as the Director continues to speak.



"So... what's it going to be? Will you sign the counter-contract I've provided you and make this process go over easy? Or are we going to have to do this the hard way?"

More and more threads flood from his core as the Director channels all of his soul energy into thick tendrils of golden light curving up over his head and down toward me, poised to make a move.

The pressure in the room reaches levels that should make even a normal level 2000 hunter become lightheaded, but I don't bat an eye.

I just stare down at the new contract the Director sent me on the blue crystal device and shake my head.

"These terms still don't suit me. I guess we will have to do this the hard way."

I let out a sigh and place the blue cube into my item box while coming to a halt in the center of the dark room.

The only light sources are the golden glow from the Director behind me and the bright green light from the Labyrinth portal in front of me.

As the pressure increases even more, becoming equivalent to the yellow-cored lizards I faced inside the construct, it's clear that no hunter without divine energy should still be standing.

The Director realizes something is not right... His voice echoes through the room.

"What is the meaning of this? Are you a Divine Core Holder? Have you tried to deceive me? The Sun God..."

At his words, I turn to face him with a sharp look in my eyes, showing that his small display of power doesn't affect me at all.

He does what any wild beast caught off guard would do and stops holding back. The Director of the Apex Region fully accepts that there is an opponent worth releasing his full power against all at once.

An aura of fear and anger ripples out from the Director, but it is still layered with underlying confidence in his abilities from his decades of battle experience.

The golden tendrils that erupt from him lunge forward, all aimed straight for my heart while more and more yellow threads of divine energy flow out of his core.

Mr. Freeman yells out while the pressure in the room reaches heights beyond any enemy I've ever faced before.

"Ray—No—That is merely a facade... Whoever you are, it doesn't matter. You will submit to my undeniable power. You will not deceive me and continue to walk free in this world."

The entire dome-shaped room lights up with yellow divine energy, and my eyes track each of the yellow-gold tendrils of energy that rocket my way.

It is truly an impressive sight to see and feel.

The gravity in this room increases by over 100 times, and the concentrated power in all of the soul energy attacks rocketing my way are strong enough to decimate entire urban cities if they were aimed at a target outside of this room.

I've never felt such pent-up rage, concentrated power, and pure selfish conviction from an enemy at any other time in my life. It feels like the Director is using his near century of battle experience and concentrating it all on a single barrage of attacks without holding back.

Just days ago, if this power was pushed upon me, I'd have no other instinct than to run away, not looking back at all.

However, it feels like an orb of heat is bursting out of my chest with excitement and anticipation.

I stare the Director in the eyes while deactivating my concealment skill and divine limiter.

A bright wave of yellow and white light bursts from my eyes and chest while I pull two blades out from my item storage.

The Flame Emperor's Sword erupts into flames, held tight in my right hand, while the Dark Emperor's Blade permeates a black aura, gripped in my left.

Silky smooth bright yellow divine energy flows from my core in such a dense state it looks like liquid as it tethers itself deep into both of my blood-bonded weapons.

My full body erupts into Dark Red Soul Energy, and it too becomes intertwined with my new bright yellow Divine Power.

The shockwave from my reveal makes the entire underground cave shake, and the countless tendrils of golden energy piercing through the air coming my way are all shattered into dust and devoured by my aura the moment they come in contact.

The pressure in the room increases multiple times over, but instead of pressing down on me, I concentrate it back on the Director who was so confident just fractions of a second ago.

The blast sends him flying backward instantly, slamming against the side wall of the underground cave, and I keep constant pressure pushing him up against the wall as I twirl my swords in the air and slowly walk toward him, looking like a flaming demonic entity.

"Is this really what you wanted? You've forced my hand. I was considering becoming a member of the association again to keep an eye on you all while maintaining my disguise. If you had just accepted my offer of making me a Regional Director, none of this would have had to happen."

My slow footsteps echo through the brightly lit cave as I walk closer.

The Director's [Master of Illusions] buff wears off from the immense pressure I'm pushing on him, and the tall mysterious man with vibrant golden eyes disappears to reveal his true form as bright as day.

An old, sickly man with deteriorating flesh is pressed up against the black mana-shielded wall. His overinflated core still spins, cycling the decades' worth of yellow divine energy within it; and his eyes are still stern, focused on me despite his troubled state.

He whispers out a reply.

"H-How—A True Core—No...why? Are you from the Central Branch? What have I done wrong...?"

He grits his teeth while his flesh continues to fade away, and I reply while walking closer and closer, shaking my head.

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

"What have you done wrong? Many things. A man like you has sat atop this world for decades. I'm surprised you haven't learned your lesson until now. A man that tries to build a kingdom only through fear and being undeniably stronger than his subordinates is destined to fail when a ruler stronger than him challenges the throne."

With every step I take toward him, my aura gets closer and denser, speeding up his body's decay as it can't handle the pure silky threads that constantly circulate through me and out into the atmosphere.

I'm not even in my greater form, and none of my buffs or skills are even activated. I'm completely overpowering this yellow-cored being with my presence alone.

I stop about 10 meters away so he can still hear me, and so I don't obliterate him out of existence by accident. He's the one that musters a long-winded reply to my words, muttering to himself and coughing between words as his organs begin to dissolve under the pressure of my aura.

"You must be from Central—a young, naive one they managed to awaken and sent over to replace me—that's it... isn't it? A shame... This was all for the greater good. So what if I used my power to keep everyone in line? That's what you all do anyways, a bunch of hypocrites you are. So much for preserving honor among the Council. Rule number three was to never kill or order a hit on any of the 10 Powerhouse Nation's Leaders... This is because of my failed mission into the Dark Continent, isn't it? This is the exception to the rule? Is this a private attack or a unanimous decision from the other 9? This is all that Flame Emperor's fault... I had a plan to take him out, I really did!"

A wave of anger and disgust washes out of him as I try to make sense of his words.

The Director still doesn't know who I am. He believes I'm a plant from another nation. He's spewing words about a Council of leaders, and other true cores, but it's clear he doesn't have much time left.

I let out a sigh and shake my head.

"The greater good? How can you call your reign of tyranny all for the greater good when you're not doing good every step along the way? Some citizens in the 8 Great Regions may have a better life because of you, sure, but what about all of the men and women exiled to the Dark Continent? What about the countless hunters silenced and killed by higher-ups' orders when they grow too fast for your liking? What about the talented hunters you force to wear your golden collars and bend their minds to not even understand their own thoughts inside their heads? What about draining the lifeforce from countless healers just to preserve your own? This is what you call building a kingdom for the greater good?"

My aura grows in density as I let my Soul Energy flames grow larger and larger, flickering and raising the room temperature by hundreds of degrees every second that passes.

"And no, I'm not from the Central Branch. I'm The Flame Emperor. So yes, technically I am still the one that has ruined all your plans. You may believe I am evil, and that's okay. My enemies may hate me for various reasons, but your kingdom is better off in the hands of a leader like myself who has followers that not only benefit from serving me, but choose to fight by my side with their own free will."

I grow into my greater form as I feel the Director's will and unbreakable confidence finally begin to dissolve at the same rate as the rest of his flesh.

The golden eyes that stared down at every single citizen in the 8 Great Regions finally realize that his decades of reign have come to an end. He is unable to even pry himself off the wall, and there is no one capable of saving him.

The manifestation of my greater form holding two impossibly large swords towers over him. One erupts with flames so bright, the room is completely enveloped in its light, and the other is so dark and ominous as it drains the thick air of all of the remaining mana that leaks out from the Labyrinth and S-Grade shielding.

I let a final wave of telepathy rush into the depths of this man's fading psyche.

"I win, and it was nowhere near the challenge I was seeking. For a self proclaimed god, you were quite a disappointing fight..."

Then, I thrust both of my greater form's swords into his chest and pierce right through his divine core, shattering it into pieces, and plunging both blades deep into the black wall behind him.

There's an eruption of mana from the S-Grade shielding breaking apart and a rush of energy streaming into myself as the Director's body explodes into pieces with his core. I hear hundreds of notifications go off in my inner ear and feel all of the yellow divine threads from the Director's shattered core seep out of his scattered remains. The yellow energy flows through by aura and is channeled into both of my swords, down my arms, and right into my own true core, capturing 100% of his divine power without missing a single thread.

Power surges through me as the entire room shakes and ripples with energy, and I feel my own abilities grow by an extremely noticeable amount in mere fractions of a second.

The notifications keep ringing over and over in my mind.

[Level Up] x1159

[Use Absorption]

Stat: Mental Strength

Points: 3955

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 10,394,789,834,001

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Combat Magic [Superior Light Summoning]

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Buff: Master of Illusion [Hidden Ability]

[YES][NO]

I choose [YES] to every notification, then pull both blades out of the wall and let the remains of the Director fall onto the ground.

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Post Chapter Status Update:

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[Status Open]

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Name: Jay Soju

Level: 4246

Hp: 21235/21235

Mp: 21235/21235

Strength: 19011 [+61025] [+85740] [+92013] [+77565] [+61025] [+142963] [+117108 ] [+92203]  
[+172050] [+9506] [+19011] [+87831] [+47528] [+47528] [+76044]

Total Strength: 1,208,151

Speed: 15339 [+52153] [+46170] [+87279] [+62737] [+52459] [+90653] [+76542 ] [+108447]  
[+61970] [+103078] [+7670] [+15339] [+83751] [+38348] [+38348] [+61356]

Total Speed: 1,001,639

Agility: 15453 [+52231] [+50068] [+79892] [+63666] [+50222] [+90400] [+78038] [+127333]  
[+63666] [+92563] [+7727] [+15453] [+74947] [+38633] [+61812]

Total Agility: 962,104

Defense: 12142 [+35819] [+59253] [+46868] [+45775] [+39219] [+61196] [+84265] [+60467]  
[+71638] [+6071] [+12142] [+55732] [+48568]

Total Defense: 639,155

Mental Strength: 22864 [+93285] [+90313] [+91456] [+89170] [+88026] [+146558] [+132383]  
[+206005] [+106775] [+164164] [+11432] [+22864] [+118893] [+57160] [+57160] [+91456]

Total Mental Strength: 1,589,964

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Skills:

Absorption [Mythic Grade]

Swordsmanship [Mythic Grade]

Combat Magic [Extreme Fire Summoning]

Inspect [Mythic Grade]

Enemy Detection [Mythic Grade]

Body Hardening [Mythic Grade]

Self Regeneration [Mythic Grade]  
Spatial Magic [Item Storage]  
Plunderer [Mythic Grade]  
Telekinesis [Mythic Grade]  
Appraisal [Mythic Grade]  
Conceal [Mythic Grade]  
Berserker [Mythic Grade]  
Dungeon Walker [Legendary Grade]  
Intimidation [Mythic Grade]  
Dagger Mastery [Mythic Grade]  
Stealth [Mythic Grade]  
Bloodlust [Mythic Grade]  
Equivalent Exchange  
Combat Magic [Extreme Wind Summoning]  
All-Seeing Eye  
Extreme Strength [Mythic Grade]  
Dual Wielding [Mythic Grade]  
Telepathy [Legendary Grade]  
Final Breath [Mythic Grade]  
Combat Magic [Extreme Earth Summoning]  
Combat Magic [Extreme Mana Manipulation]  
Life Steal [Mythic Grade]  
Hibernation [Special Grade]  
Combat Magic [Advanced Demonic Energy Manipulation]  
Combat Magic [Extreme Ice Summoning]  
Body Double [Legendary Grade]  
Lie Detector [Legendary Grade]  
Hush [Mythic Grade]  
Craftsmanship [Mythic Grade]  
Extreme Speed [Mythic Grade]  
Combat Magic [Extreme Water Summoning]  
Screech [Mythic Grade]

Phantom Step [Mythic Grade]  
Flare [Mythic Grade]  
Confusion [Mythic Grade]  
Blast [Mythic Grade]  
Bind [Legendary Grade]  
Bloodweaver [Legendary Grade]  
Poison Mist [Mythic Grade]  
Iron Fist [Mythic Grade]  
Extreme Stamina [Mythic Grade]  
Combat Magic [Extreme Lightning Summoning]  
Combat Magic [Superior Dark Summoning]  
Blink [Mythic Grade]  
Cocoon [Mythic Grade]  
Imbuement [Mythic Grade]  
Barrier Creation [Mythic Grade]  
Flight [Mythic Grade]  
Area Buff [Mythic Grade]  
Mind Palace [Mythic Grade]  
Astral Spears [Mythic Grade]  
Flash Step [Mythic Grade]  
Call of The Void [Mythic Grade]  
Crystal Creation [Mythic Grade]  
Heavy Hand [Mythic Grade]  
Combat Magic [Superior Light Summoning]

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Items Equipped: [15 Slots Available Post 2nd Rank Up][Current Items Equipped]

Platinum Ring of Visual Manipulation [Blood Bonded] [+408% Mental Strength][+340% Speed]  
[+338% Agility][+321% Strength][+295% Defense][+137% Perception][Illusion Attribute]

The Behemoth's Platinum Amulet [Blood Bonded] [+488% Defense][+451% Strength][+395%  
Mental Strength][+324% Agility][+301% Speed][Hardening Attribute]

Enchanted Boots of Extreme Speed [Blood Bonded] [+569% Speed][+517% Agility][+484%  
Strength][+400% Mental Strength][+386% Defense][Wind Attribute]

Enchanted Ice Serpent's Pendant [Blood Bonded] [+412% Agility] [+409% Speed][+408% Strength][+390% Mental Strength][+383% Magic Resistance][+381% Ice Magic Resistance] [+377% Defense][Ice Attribute]

Platinum Ring of The Blue Ogre King [Blood Bonded] [+385% Mental Strength] [+342% Speed] [+325% Agility][+323% Defense][+321% Strength]

The Flame Emperor's Sword [Blood Bonded][Advanced Fire Aspect][+752% Strength][+641% Mental Strength][+504% Defense][+591% Speed][+585% Agility]

Berserker King's Armor Set [Blood Bonded] [+694% Defense][+616% Strength][+579% Mental Strength][+505% Agility][+499% Speed][Hardening Attribute][Earth Attribute]

Cloak of Total Darkness[+901% Mental Strength][+824% Agility][+707% Speed][+360% Perception][Blood Bonded][Hidden Passive Ability][Concealment Attribute][Dark Attribute]

Enchanted Lightweight Gauntlets [Blood Bonded][+498% Defense][+485% Strength][+467% Mental Strength][+412% Agility][+404% Speed][Hardening Attribute][Earth Attribute][Fire Attribute]

The Dark Emperor's Blade [+905% Strength][+718% Mental Strength][+672% Speed][+599% Agility][+590% Defense][Blood Bonded][Dark Attribute][Hidden Ability]

Greater Demon's Core [+50% All Stats]

Arch Demon's Core [+100% All Stats]

Ring of the Divine [Hidden Ability]

Celia's Purple Core [Living Ring Artifact] [Divine Limiter][Hidden Ability]

Final Slot[15th]:[Interchangeable]

[Storm King's Dagger Set][Blood Bonded][+546% Speed][+520% Mental Strength][+485% Agility][+462% Strength][+459% Defense][Lightning Attribute][Wind Attribute]

Midnight Dagger

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#### Skill Buffs:

[Berserker] +250% Strength + Mental Strength

[BloodLust] +250% Speed + Agility + Mental Strength , +100% Perception

[Extreme Strength] +250% Strength

[Extreme Speed] +250% Speed

[Final Breath] ~ +400% All Stats (Exact % will vary, conditions & circumstances apply)

#### Permanent Buffs:

Rising Emperor's Domain[Hidden Ability][Passive]

Rising Emperor's Greater Form[Hidden Ability][Active]

Master of Illusion [Hidden Ability]



## Chapter 604

All over the globe, nine silver devices ping simultaneously.

Some are locked away in item boxes and magical storage vaults, while others are worn around strong hunters' wrists and necks like ornaments.

Every one of them sends the same signal: a flashing yellow light among nine other lights that glow brightly.

Some of the lights are a dim yellow, just like the one that is blinking, while others vary in brightness. Some are so bright they almost shimmer white.

The dull yellow light that blinks flickers and fades away, signifying that one of the ten members of this mysterious group of leaders has perished from this world.

The first leader to witness this phenomenon is a woman with long black hair, flying high over a dangerous volcanic region on the back of a monstrous earth dragon.

She looks down at the small device, rubbing her pointer finger over the dull, clear crystal that once glowed with yellow luminosity, and curses under her breath.

"That idiot... Picking a fight with an opponent he clearly couldn't defeat..."

She presses one of the strongest glowing crystals on the device next. It glows bright yellow-white, matching the color of her core and the dragon she flies on, and she speaks again.

"It seems the old man, Mr. Freeman, met his end. I take it none of you were incompetent enough to break our ceasefire pact?"

She clicks her tongue and takes her finger off the glowing crystals as her dragon flaps its wings, and they soar further throughout the volcanic lands.

Everything is silent for a few seconds, other than the flow of lava and eruptions a few kilometers below her.

However, this moment of silence is broken by a yell back through the device as one of the other strongly lit lights shimmers and projects the clear audio of a grumpy man.

"Raven? Is that you? Who are you calling old? He was hardly a day past seventy; I'm almost twice his age and have more fight in me than he ever did. He must have died in a desperate attempt to ascend to a True Core before his body failed him."

The voice stops coming through, and the woman stares down at the device with a grin on her face, amused that the old man took offense to her words.

She's about to press her own button to respond, but one of the other strong yellow-white crystals flickers, signifying that its recipient has pressed it on the other end.

She waits patiently for five seconds, but no voice comes out, and the crystal returns to its resting state, implying the person on the other end decided not to say a word.

Raven presses her button and speaks back to the man who actually answered her call with a snarky tone, ignoring the lurker that didn't speak.

"Nice to hear your voice too, Mr. Redgrave. I hope Central Headquarters is treating you well. Your guess on how the Eight Great Regions' branch leader died would have been my assumption too. However, there is a growing power in the Dark Continent that I presume ended the Director. All my sources tell me he goes by the title of The Flame Emperor."

She chuckles to herself while keeping her finger on the crystal for a few extra seconds for all to hear, then changes her direction in the air, slowly starting to turn toward the north, anticipating the angry yell back through the silver device from the man on the other side.

"Well... Then this changes everything. Mr. Freeman may have been stubborn and suffering from a slower cultivation rate, but he wasn't weak. Whoever this rogue force is, they must be taken out. While we have no rules stating that a fallen council member of The Order must be avenged, I would hate to let a force like this continue to grow and potentially harm one of our remaining nine members before the fight for the throne."

He is silent for a few seconds but adds a remark.

"You are the closest True Core to the Eight Great Regions, so I hope you will get it done. If not, I will make sure this is dealt with myself in due time. After all, if he is not slain, many may question my title as the Strongest Fire Wielder in the world."

His crystal reverts back to its natural state again, and Raven keeps flying through the sky on her dragon in silence, thinking over the man's words.

What he says is true. The council members of The Order all signed a pact to never kill or cripple each other until the throne to claim this world awakened.

Rogue forces are no one's responsibility to take care of, but over the decades, they have been silently given the unspoken task to the Nation Leader closest to the threat.

It isn't frowned upon to ignore growing powers, but if that power were to attack another member of The Order when they could have been nipped in the bud, beings in this world that seek immortality are not ones to forget and often hold a grudge.

These thoughts race through the black-haired woman's mind as the same crystal that entered the conversation and silently eavesdropped shimmers again, showing that they're ready to speak.

The same silence comes out for ten full seconds before the faint sound of a heavy breath transmits through.

Raven soars through the air and activates her stealth ability, making herself and her dragon disappear in the sky as she rockets over black military base buildings.

Over a full minute passes with a few more heavy breaths before the person on the other end of the line finally speaks in an eccentric style. His words are offbeat and go up and down in varying tones, making it hard to understand what the voice is really thinking.

"Oh please don't kill him. I want you to capture him alive and bring him to me. He will be the muse I need to finally complete my collection. -And bring me back my white dragon while you're in the Apex Region. There's no reason for a dead man to keep such fine art. Two hundred yellow fragments, that is what I'll pay for your help."

The crystal clicks off, and Raven rolls her eyes while pressing her crystal and letting out a sigh for everyone on the line to hear.

"Don't get your hopes up. I'm on my way over to survey the area now. Until I find out what really happened, I'm not promising anything to either of you. If anyone else is still listening, don't bother contacting me, I'm going dark. I'll only open up this line again if I have something important to share once my survey is complete."

She lifts her finger from the device and throws it away into an item box on her waist, then her speed to the north increases.

—

Meanwhile, underground in the Apex Region, I power down my greater form and stop my True Core's full aura from fully activating and shattering all of the shielding in this base to bits.

My blades have already cut through a portion of the black walls, releasing large amounts of mana. If I cut just five meters deeper, there would be a crack that shatters all the way through, and my aura would most likely accidentally kill everyone in this entire city.

I power down and let all the remains and shattered gear from the deceased Director's body fall into my item storage, then put away my swords into the white spatial magic too.

The heat and pressure in the room cool down as I retract my aura back into my purple limiter, but that doesn't cancel out the fact that new divine energy is rushing through my core.

Whenever I killed yellow-cored lizards inside the construct, their energy was never instantly consumed like this. It's unclear to me if this is normal for True Cores or a unique property of mine alone.

Either way, everything about this situation excites me and floods my senses with endorphins. I let out a long exhale of satisfaction and happiness as the reality of what just happened rushes through me.

The fact that really sinks in is that I just killed the strongest man in all of the Eight Great Regions and Dark Continent combined.

There is no one who can stop me from taking over all of the trade routes and Association-run businesses right now.

I activate my mythic-grade concealment, new superior light magic, and new buff master of illusion all together to pulse outward with a very strange aura.

Nothing physically changes, but the light particles in the air are altered and twisted, making for an interesting display of power.

It feels and looks very similar to Bri's ranked-up buff, allowing her to create a small pocket of space that looks and feels like any illusion she desires.

However, I'm far more powerful than that and have even more skills and buffs at my disposal. I bend the perception of myself to look, sound, and feel just like the man I killed.

An aura matching his confidence, greed, and selfishness permeates from me, and if I walked up to myself just minutes ago with this same disguise on, I'm unsure if I could tell the difference...

I smile wide beneath my disguise of golden glowing eyes, unnaturally tall stature, and dark shadowy robes as I walk toward the green spinning labyrinth portal that still emanates mana after this violent exchange.

The shielding near the labyrinth portal bends under its weight, and my curiosity for how high this labyrinth's floors climb simmer in the back of my mind.

However, once I step through and make sure my dungeon walker skill logs and saves the location of the first floor, I turn back around and leave.

A body double can do that work once I return with good news, for right in this moment, I still have lots of work to do in the Apex Region before I can leave.

I flash step across the room and enter the elevator, pressing the 18th floor button to bring myself to the A-Class training rooms next.

It's been less than a minute since the Director died, but his slaves that have been chained down with golden collars for years must finally be realizing their thoughts have not been their own.

As the door opens with a ding, and I peer into the two training rooms with my Sun God Disguise fully activated, I see many eyes turn toward me.

Flashbacks of the golden-collared prisoners crying and screaming with mixed emotions once I freed them back in the Dark Continent repeat in my mind as I take in the scene before me.

The newest three A-Class hunters that greeted me today at the Apex Region are very confused, standing in a triangle in the middle of their training room.

At the opposite side of the floor, the woman healer who always looked uninterested in everything around her, dead tired and bored of the world, is crying with joy on the mana-shielded ground.

The wind and fire users who are A-Class hunters both stare at me with angry stances, their red cores fully activated, making the high A-Grade mana shielding in the room quiver.

However, I'm not worried or necessarily interested in any of them.

My gaze locks onto Rodrigo's as he feels his neck and looks toward me, coming to the realization that maybe the man behind these golden eyes isn't the same one that left this room moments ago.

## Chapter 605

Despite locking eyes with Rodrigo, the voices that yell the loudest throughout the room are the fire and wind users who radiate bright red divine energy.

"What is the meaning of this? My life has been a lie! My mind—I—" The wind user shouts out, now fully missing his hand and leg due to the lack of borrowed golden soul energy available to him.

"I gave over a decade to this damn Association, and still, you continuously manipulated all of us! Why are you even letting us in on your secret now? Why not just kill us?" The fire user, missing both of his arms, shouts out while red divine energy grows around him.

He looks over to the other side of the 18th floor to the newest recruits from the B-Class exams.

"Are those our replacements? Is this how it ends? Are we just being discarded after losing one battle in the Dark Continent? Is this—"

I don't let him speak any further, activating my skill [Heavy Hand] and exerting a force of pure mana alone to easily overpower both of the high-level A-Class hunters' divine auras.

In just fractions of a second, both of the men are pressed chest and face-first against the training room floor as I walk forward and let the elevator close behind me.

All eyes are on me, the manifestation of the unbeatable sun god who has taken over the 8 Great Regions and ruled for decades with no mercy for his enemies or even his own people who served beneath him.

The sounds of bones cracking under the gravity of my mana from the two strongest A-Class hunters on this continent are more than enough deterrent for anyone else in the room to speak up as I walk up to both of them and stare down at the floor where they're pressed for a full 10 seconds.

I finally speak up in a static monotone voice.

"There will be some changes made in this branch of the Association soon. You have been loyal hunters, so I wanted to show you the truth."

I keep the pressure pushing down on them steady, but reach into my item storage and pull out two mythic-grade self-regeneration potions and gently place them on the floor in front of both of them using telekinesis.

"Drink these and continue your training."

I turn to everyone else in the room.

"That goes for all of you. Just because you know the truth doesn't mean I can't track you down to any Region or Continent you try to flee to. Business continues as usual until I say so. If there are any complaints, you can talk to me directly and see how that ends for you."

I let the pressure of my [Heavy Hand] skill fade, and the two A-Class hunters slowly get up and examine the potions while I make a hand motion toward Rodrigo, who still stares at me with confusion in his gaze.

"You, come with me. I need a meeting with you alone."

He quickly nods and follows as I leave the awestruck room to get back in the elevator.

As Rodrigo walks in and the doors begin to close after I press floor 19, the sight of the two A-Class hunters' limbs growing back is the last thing we see while riding down to the lounge floor below us in silence.

He doesn't say a word, for fear of being wrong about his assumptions, and I admire him for staying safe and not jumping to conclusions because it's what I would do in the same situation.

Once the door opens again and I walk forward into the lounge area, I'm greeted by the two nurses with glowing white hands approaching me, ready to heal the director, but I shake my head.

"No, thank you. Please, take the rest of the day off, you two. I have some important meetings to attend to."

Their eyes widen with surprise as I motion for them to take the elevator upstairs, wondering if this is some kind of test, but once Rodrigo and I walk past them and toward one of the high-grade mana-shielded private rooms, they realize I'm being serious.

As the private room's door clicks open and we walk inside, both of the nurses power down their soft healing skills and ride the elevator upstairs with relief written all over their faces.

I walk into the center of the dimly lit mana shielded lounge room, filled with mana-dense air, a full bar, artwork, and exquisite black furniture.

Rodrigo closes the door behind us, and I put up a mythic-grade hush barrier mixed with a layer of my [Master of Illusion] buff to create a veil of audio and visual blockage that no one on this entire continent could break through. It is a necessary precaution just in case there are secret monitoring devices in here.

Then, I let my appearance revert back to its completely natural state.

"Nice to finally meet you face to face without that collar on. I hope this is a good enough thank you for getting me into the B-Class exams."

I grin, cross my arms, and sit back on the comfortable couch behind me while I watch the state of shock, happiness, and utter awe ripple through Rodrigo.

His eyes are wide, and his thoughts are racing at a thousand beats per second.

The only thing he manages to muster out is, "Jay? It's you... You really did it? The Director—he's?"

I nod and cut him off while pointing to a seat across the room.

"He's dead. The 8 Great Regions are now under new rule. Please, take a seat. We have a lot to talk about."

Still, a state of shock and disbelief is plastered on the face of the brother of my trade partner.

Not long ago, he warned me not to even look at Mr. Freeman the wrong way. I could tell he only got us into the exams as a personal favor to Bri.

The fact that I passed, managed to not fall under the director's curse, and in the end, killed the Apex Region's Director. This result is the furthest thing from his initial expectations.

I continue as he's frozen with his mouth open and speechless.

"You are the only one in the Association who knows, and I hope to keep it that way. There is already widespread respect and order held by the Apex Region's name alone. Even if that is temporarily fear-driven, it's best to keep it going. Announcing that the leader of all Directors has been killed by a rogue force from the Dark Continent will only spread panic..."

This plan has already been implemented and proven to work once, back in Valor City.

After defeating the Lich King, the entire city could have been informed that their Dark Guards and mysterious leader is no more, but it is better to keep the citizens happy and in a routine they're accustomed to.

Breaking unconventional news to hundreds of thousands of people can result in unpredictable outcomes. It's best to exploit a system that is already in place, slowly changing it to my liking over time rather than attempting anything drastic and rushed.

This realization creeps into Rodrigo's mind as I sit back and breathe in the mana-dense air, enjoying the silence and patiently waiting for a response from the baffled A-Class hunter.

"That... makes sense... I have no idea how you managed this..."

He touches his neck, pausing for a moment before continuing.

"But it's really done... No more mindlessly following orders, filing paperwork for hours every day, answering to the other Directors like a dog, and proctoring exams year after year. I'm finally free..."

He smiles and looks me in the eyes, accepting this reality.

Then, he taps his finger on his knee nervously, realizing something.

"Well... not yet. Just because you can fool a few A-Class hunters here doesn't mean you're out of the woods yet."

I raise an eyebrow.

"What do you mean?"

He stands up and pulls a silver tablet from his item box.

"Mr. Freeman used to do deals with a few other nations occasionally, other strong powers that had a similar yellow-golden energy as his own... And not to mention, dealing with the Regional Directors within this Nation. The Director was a busy man, believe it or not, he is the glue that holds these 8 Regions together."

Rodrigo begins pacing around the room, tapping on his tablet while nodding, smiling, and continuing to speak.

"Lucky for you, I was his mindless right-hand man for nearly a decade... I don't think he ever expected I'd be free of his curse, and quite frankly, neither did I. However, if there's anyone that has the insight to keep this nation running... it would be me."

My eyes light up with excitement, as Rodrigo says the words I was thinking to myself without even having to say them out loud.

Over the next 45 minutes, Rodrigo and I talk back and forth, devising a plan together to keep the 8 Great Regions running as usual, expanding it even further into the Dark Continent to merge the two nations, and how to properly deal with the ongoing trade agreements, Regional Directors, and Association-run businesses.

With his knowledge of the land and inner workings of this Nation, and my power to replace the Sun God's presence while simultaneously backing it with enough power to truly become this nation's leader; all of the puzzle pieces to my plan fall into place.

Everything being outlined now is being written down, and I plan to have it analyzed by my teammates and close business partners.

I stand up from my seat and pull two transport crystals out from my item storage, tossing one to Rodrigo.

"This is a good start. I'm glad I came to you first. However, I'm sure there's a whole lot more on your mind than just my own personal goals of expanding my empire. How about we go for a trip and get a second opinion? When's the last time you talked to your sister?"

Chapter 606

Both of the teleport crystals are crushed in our fists, and we're brought to the Crimson City.

My double greets us beneath the guildhall, keeping guard over the last remaining isolation pod that's healing Ember.

"Back so soon?" He locks eyes with Rodrigo, then looks back at me before continuing. "It appears everything went exactly as expected. He didn't take the deal?"

I smirk and reply while leading Rodrigo to the stairway upstairs. "No, he didn't. I'm the one making the deals now."

Once we reach the ground floor, another normal day in the Crimson City guildhall is playing out. Dozens of hunters are walking in and out, buying, selling, and commissioning gear and magical loot. All of the workers greet us as we make our way to the second floor, and as we walk through the tables of craftsmen leading to Bri's office, I motion for Rodrigo to knock on the closed door at the back of the room.

There are three knocks and a moment of silence before the door opens and Bri locks eyes with Rodrigo.

It feels as if the world has stopped in time as I watch from the back of the room with my arms crossed and a thin grin. Memories of my first time meeting Bri, when she crafted my Flame Emperor's sword, feel like a lifetime ago.

It was right before my C-Class exams, where I met Rodrigo as a proctor and got a taste of what real power in this world of hunters was like.

Back then, I knew there was an odd tension between a sister being a black market merchant and a brother working as an A-Class Hunter for one of the strongest nations in the world. However, I never expected the roots of their problems to run so deep or for everything to come full circle and be resolved like this.

Both of their eyes widen as Rodrigo's lips move to say, "I'm free."

The siblings jump forward to hug each other tight and begin to cry, making a scene that has all heads in the room turning their way. They don't even notice the eyes on them, and the room doesn't dare break up this moment.

I only entered their lives less than a year ago; there must be decades of sour memories dealing with the Association that I have no knowledge of. It makes me happy to see Bri smile with such genuine joy. She's usually very focused on business; I've never seen this side of her before.

I don't want to ruin their moment, so I, too, stay silent like all the other workers in the room until they finally release their grip after a full minute passes.

Still, it doesn't seem like the right time to go over my own personal goals when this is most likely the first time they've had a candid conversation since childhood. The plans I made with Rodrigo beneath the Apex Region can wait.

I nod and let a weak wave of telepathy hit both of them.

"I'm happy I could keep my word and bring you two together again. Enjoy each other's presence. Please, take as much time as you want."



Then, without waiting for a response, I walk back down the guildhall stairs to the main hall with a smile on my face while they hug again.

I walk out the front door, doing a full scan of the city and surrounding desert moments later. A wave of telepathy reaches the body double that is keeping watch over the city, and it deactivates itself. I respawn a new one right in front of me that has the updated memories of today's events, and it flies off in the direction of the canyon of dungeons to explore the Apex Region's labyrinth and create dungeon walker points for me on every floor.

While it goes off to do that, I fly outside the Crimson Dome and make my way far out into the desert to meet with the Lich King and my four teammates, who sit in a circle of Abby's Restoration magic while slowly refining orange divine energy.

They're extremely focused on not being torn to shreds by the violent threads. I remember the orange fragments were far more violent and painful than the red ones back when I consumed them in the construct.

The only one who greets me upon my return is the Lich King.

"Quite the quick return. Do you bring good news or bad news?"

I let out a sigh and touch down on the desert ground beside him, taking in the view of four orange-red auras bending reality before us.

"Well, the bad news is I'll be losing a very useful shadow summon, but the good news is the Director has been taken care of. Thanks to your help in awakening my True Core, I am now the secret underground leader of the Eight Great Regions."

These words make the eyes of all four of my teammates open with surprise. Even though they were peacefully cultivating, such a crazy statement broke them out of their trance-like state.

I smile and raise both of my hands in the air, opening up my item storage and allowing all of the trapped Soul Energy that I absorbed from the Lich King when I killed him to escape from eternal suspended animation and be free into the universe again.

"I'm a man of my word, so, if it is your wish to die, I'll grant it now."

It takes well over half a minute for the copious fumes of Soul Energy to dissolve into the air, and the Lich King responds.

"It is my wish to die. I will wake up in another 50 years on a planet far from here, in a growing world once it is newly connected to the system. I will have to try my luck in a new era, so I do wish you success here on this human world. Maybe we will meet again one day. However, we are even, so don't expect any more favors. This galaxy is at war; in the grand scheme of things, I am still your enemy."

I let out a chuckle while activating my Dark Magic, creating a jet-black summoning circle beneath him, and begin deactivating the ritual to let his remains truly disappear.

As the circle grows and his shadow form ripples, he points to my hand, specifically the silver [Ring of The Divine] on my finger next to Celia's Purple Ring Artifact.

"That is part of my being as well. I'm sorry to say, you won't be able to keep it as a prize. Maybe one day, you'll receive one to truly call your own."

I sense a final curious and amused aura coming from the Lich King as the ritual continues to reverse. The resentment and ominous feeling he had when I showed no signs of ever letting him go are gone, but I still believe his words that he views me as an enemy.

If we meet again in 50 years' time, I have no doubt he'll try to attack me with just as much killing intent as he did when we first met, his Dark army against my Crimson Troops.

I can't help but smile as the shadows cover his being, then disappear into black fading mist in the light breeze, and his mana control, presence, and status leave my senses.

At the same time, the silver ring on my finger fades away too.

I was hoping that it would be useful to me one day, allowing me to be summoned in place of the Lich King by accident, but it seems I can't cheat my way to becoming a Divine Beast. Like his final words to me said, I'll have to get one for myself.

The desert is filled with silence, and I turn to admire my teammates continuing their divine energy cultivation.

After the initial shock of them overhearing that I killed the Apex Region's Director, most of them closed their eyes again, but Maria's eyes remain wide. I open a telepathy channel with all five of us in it, and she sends a message through to me for all to hear.

"So what does this mean for the Dark Continent? Will the exiles be allowed back into the Eight Great Nations? If you make the rules, this entire abandoned nation could be connected to many more resources and grow faster to help hundreds of thousands here to live in better conditions."

I nod and respond.

"Slowly, yes. The nations will merge, but the assimilation needs to be natural. Citizens still have preconceived resentment for Dark Continent exiles; we'll need to change public perception over time. Growing the Flame Emperor's name and disguising the merge as a trade deal with the Crimson City will be the first stage of my plan."

Maria smirks and nods, closing her eyes again to keep her heart rate and breathing steady while the orange threads tear her body apart over and over again.

Abby's right eye opens halfway and meets mine as she musters out a short message while maintaining her own regeneration and simultaneously healing everyone here.

"What about the other nations? I don't doubt your abilities to conceal yourself and impersonate the Director, but they must have fail-safes in place in case something like this were to happen. All it takes is one person to notice; what will be the plan then? Are you prepared to take on the entire world?"

As I think of a response to her words, in the far edges of my perception, I feel an oddity far to the south.

It's in the direction of the volcanic region that I sensed vaguely when I first awakened my True Core.

It's hard to make out exactly what it is—the distance is too far—but it feels like two large masses of gravity are flying through the air at incredible speed. My intuition is telling me the possibility that Abby just pointed out may be coming true faster than I imagined it would.

I turn my head in the direction of the odd presence that pressures the back of my mind, but I don't activate my full perception skills and buffs because I'm too close to my teammates and the Crimson City to risk letting out that much power.

Instead, I calmly look back toward Abby, who posed the question, and nod.

"You're right. We'll have to prepare for that possibility if it comes."

My head turns back toward the south, and a notification hits my inner ear.

[Skill Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Echo][Mythic Grade]

I raise an eyebrow at the fact that I just received a new skill out of nowhere, but then more notifications hit my inner ear seconds later.

They're all small MCP transfer notifications for just a few thousand MCP at a time.

I pull up the new skill description and find that it is similar to a mix between my body double skill and the Sun God's buff, Master of Illusion.

I'm able to create a lifelike image of myself that acts like a body double; however, it is nothing but an illusion. It cannot physically interact with the world around it, but it has far greater range than the [Master of Illusion] buff or my light magic.

I can't think of a good use for this skill right now, but a grin comes onto my face as these notifications tell me my body double has begun climbing the labyrinth in the Apex Region.

I levitate into the air while speaking up to the four teammates bending the sand with orange threads for hundreds of meters in all directions.

"We have unknown visitors from the south... but don't worry, I'll handle it. Continue your training; we might need to use this new power sooner than I thought."

Then, I fly away, headed south while small MCP gain notifications ring in my head repeatedly.

The sand below me zips by as I gain altitude and I focus on the vague pressure pulsing in the back of my perception.

No readings show up in my status or skills, but the heavy gravity in the back of my mind keeps getting closer. The eerie feeling that two beings with immense power are coming my way won't shake from my psyche.

I finally get a few dozen kilometers away from my teammates, high in the air, far enough that I'm comfortable letting more of my aura leak out from my purple limiter, and even activate my greater form to improve the range of my perception to get a better view of what exactly is coming my way at such incredible speed.

As the wisps of divine energy flow out of my True Core and tether to my buff to create a bright yellow greater form of me as I fly through the air, a ripple of divine perception soars out to the south, and I see the volcanic region that I vaguely felt before in so much more detail.

With my level rising by over 1000 after defeating the Director, and the steep climb in Divine Threads in my core after consuming every last drop of his power that he cultivated over the

decades, I'm able to feel the difference in power even from just this morning when I awakened my True Core.

An endless landscape of black mountains, flowing lava, erupting volcanoes, and thousands of dungeons are scattered around the land.

In this pulse of surveillance, I watch as there are dozens of dungeons breaking, and the air quality in this region is almost two times as dense with mana as the Dark Continent is.

These are the first things my mind notices, but very quickly after, my aura meets the two gravity fields rocketing my way, and my eyes widen with surprise once I see a clear image of what's flying toward me.

An enormous bronze dragon flaps its wings, flying through the air high above active volcanoes.

The sun glistens against its scales, and the monstrous creature's pointed tail gracefully flows back and forth behind it.

The creature's status shows a Superior Earth Summoning skill, and a [Lv. 9722] in bright blue text that burns into the back of my mind.

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The fact that there is a living dragon outside of a Labyrinth isn't what shocks me most; it's the fact that in the center of its chest as it flaps its wings, a bright white and yellow True Core bends space around it, showing me that this is exactly what I sensed with my intuition a few minutes ago.

Its level is not much higher than the Apex Region Director's was, but their Divine Core's Strength is worlds apart.

This is a true monster, that old man was a sorry excuse of a Divine Energy Wielder.

The pulse of aura continues past the point I was trying to examine, and it just reveals to me how vast the volcanic region really is.

Even using a focused pulse of enemy detection, I still can't see the edges of this seemingly endless nation of volcanoes, dungeons, and small pockets of military bases tucked away within the mountains.

Another ring echoes in my inner ear that isn't a normal MCP addition, and my concentration from the sonar I just sent out is broken.

[Skill Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Metal Creation][Mythic Grade]

As I continue to fly forward toward the elegant dragon coming my way, I read the skill's description to find it is similar to the barrier and crystal creation skills I obtained while in the exams. It allows me to create a unique metallic material and decide its hardness based on how much mana I imbue while activating the skill.

While I'm happy about the progress, one odd thing resurfaces in my mind and irks me quite a bit.

Before I sent out the pulse of surveillance, I could have sworn there were two dense masses of gravity.

While having to confront another True Core may be dangerous enough, the fact that there may be another one that is capable of escaping my senses makes me even more curious and confused about this whole scenario.

If I don't confront this mysterious dragon out here, its travel course directly collides with the Crimson City.

This means if this foreign entity is looking for conflict, meeting them far away from anyone that can get hurt is the smartest thing to do even if it puts me at a slight disadvantage.

I'm not particularly fond of jumping into the fight blind, without any information on what my opponent is capable of, but I might not have a choice here.

All these thoughts speed through my mind as I rocket through the air, finally getting up to speeds that match the dragon coming my way.

Every minute or so, another MCP notification rings in my inner ear.

My double seems to be dungeon walking through entire floors, ignoring normal mobs, and only killing the bosses to make it up to the next.

The teleportation magic at the end of a boss fight is the only limitation that it is working with; if it wasn't for this small time delay on each floor, I'm sure my double would be at the top by now.

My heartbeat speeds up, and all I can focus on is my crystal clear view of the bronze dragon's True Core still over 2000 kilometers away.

Its calm eyes stare forward, like it's watching me fly too.

There is no killing intent coming off of this mythical creature, but the mundane look in its eyes, making this seem like a simple and menial task, gives me chills.

Each minute that passes, we get closer and closer; the mountain range that splits the endless sandy desert of Sector 2 and the mysterious volcanic nation draws closer to each of us.

The MCP gains that echo in my mind begin to increase in value. It started at just thousands per notification when I was still on the ground. Then, less than 15 minutes ago, each notification granted me millions, meaning my double definitely made it to floors where the monsters he's fighting are ranked up. Now, over a billion MCP is being added to my status after every ding.

Once less than 1000 kilometers remain between myself and the dragon soaring my way, another ding of a skill being added to my status rings in my ear.

[Skill Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Spirit Anchor][Mythic Grade]

While the name intrigues me, my eyes are laser-focused on the bronze behemoth soaring my way.

Even the hundreds of billions of MCP hitting my mana control pool don't distract me as I pull out the same two swords I killed the Sun God with just hours ago.

Minutes pass and my mind becomes completely clear and focused as my speed continues to increase, preparing for any scenario to play out.

My red and black blades become soaked with yellow divine energy as both of us come within 500 kilometers of each other.

The mountain range that separates our nations is completely visible to my unaided eyes now, and stretches off endlessly to my left and right.

I've soared so far away from civilization that no towns or living beings have even touched my perception in over 1000 kilometers.

There is no water at all out in this portion of the desert. Where in the outer portions of Sector 2 and 4, some dry patches still have small shrubbery and occasional desert wildlife to support small villages, this wasteland has none.

I'm so far out in the dead zone of the Dark Continent's Desert, it's hard to tell if human eyes have ever seen these rolling dunes before.

My heart begins to beat out of my chest, but the anticipation and excitement only turn into adrenaline as the moment comes near.

There is less than 200 kilometers between myself and the only other True Core I've ever known to exist in this world.

[Level Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Level Up] x11

The tension in the air is so immense, I hardly register the fact that my double has managed to make it to floors in the Apex Region's labyrinth that are starting to level me up.

I can physically feel the weight of the bronze dragon, as it makes the mountains below it bend with gravitational pressure.

Even though we're both flying dozens of kilometers above the ground, avalanches and minor earthquakes form as I watch a bright yellow silky aura flow out from the Dragon's core just like mine.

Its entire body becomes covered in the bright divine energy.

Whether it's a reaction to me unsheathing my swords and activating my divine energy on full display, or if this was the creature's initial decision to challenge me to a fight; there is no backing out now.

In the next few seconds, it is inevitable that we will clash.

The seconds before the collision are the most intense.

The entire flight over has been slightly nerve-wracking, but now that I am about to collide with a bronze earth dragon that is 5,000 levels above me, with a True Core of similar strength to my own, the reality of my predicament sinks in.

The air becomes thick as our silky white-yellow auras intertwine from over 20 kilometers away, exerting pressure on each other even before we physically meet.

I can feel dense gravity waves emanating from this beast.

They are far more concentrated, refined, and powerful than the malformed yellow core I fought this morning two continents away.

The scope of the power I'm facing nears that of what I felt when meeting the green divine serpent in the sky.

This is a monstrous force. It is a being at its prime and has refined its power to create a glistening core so mighty its beauty is awe-inspiring.

The difference between my interaction with the green serpent and the bronze dragon before me now is that the power that violently cycles within my own chest, waiting to be released, feels as though it can match the incredible force approaching me.

There may be a god-like entity attacking me now, but as I lift my blades above my head, I feel as though we are equals.

My entire greater form grows in size and becomes far brighter as I allow my purple limiter to let every drop of mana control and divine threads through.

All of my stat-boosting buffs activate, and I channel the maximum amount of Soul Energy into my blades.

Both myself and the dragon collide at hundreds of kilometers per hour, not holding anything back.

I swing both blades across my body, aiming straight for the creature's neck while preparing to make an immediate counter or dodge, not counting anything out. I know nothing about my opponent, so I'm leaving nothing up to chance.

As I swing my blades downward, the world around me blurs into darkness, and all I see is the bronze dragon glowing with its yellow light.

Its eyes stare into mine, and its expression doesn't change at all from the confident yet bored look it showed when I caught it on my sonar thousands of kilometers away.

It opens its mouth to show its sharp teeth and readies its talons, coating itself in mana shielding enhanced by its silky yellow divine energy.

I'm ready to react to whatever attack it throws at me, but the only thing that happens is a single small hexagon of yellow light forms in the path of my blades.

I don't sense any Mana or Qi interwoven in the thick yellow manifestation that looks like a massive floating dragon scale.

If it weren't for my natural senses and looking at the hexagon with my own two eyes, I wouldn't even believe it was there.

Nonetheless, my blades make contact with it, just meters away from the monster's neck, and the loudest, most intense noise I've ever heard echoes through the mountains and endless dunes of rolling sand.

It's as if two entire worlds collide in the sky.

Both of my swords halt in mid-air as they sink into the pure manifestation of Divine Energy.

Out from its sides, a portion of the force put forward from both of us colliding at full speed erupts outward. The gravity waves are so intense, that the mountains over 20 kilometers below us are shattered to dust and gravel just from being in our presence.

More and more waves of energy ripple off the collision point while we are both stopped in mid-air, pushing forward with all of our strength.

A deep vibrating sound echoes out from the waves of gravity and gets more and more intense as a ball of yellow and white light forms between us at the collision point.

It becomes more and more saturated as all of my power flows through my blades and the hexagon of pure divine threads summoned by the dragon gets denser and denser.

No matter how much I press into this field of gravity, it feels as though it's constantly pushing back with exactly the same amount of force.

There is no actual mass or base energy powering it. The sight of pure divine threads being manipulated on their own is fascinating, but I can't quite comprehend what is giving me so much trouble.

It's like a reversed magnet; the harder I push down on it, the harder it repels me with equal force.

However, I'm pushing so hard that I get the feeling that I'm near its breaking point.

Our Divine Cores are extremely similar in strength. The only edge this dragon really has on me is its natural levels, size, and strength.

With just a little more power, I feel like the weight of my blades could push through, but giving it my all right now, it feels more like they're sinking into a pad of rubber, and the moment I stop giving this attack everything I have, I'm going to be propelled backward.

However, I can't hold on at this maximum intensity much longer.

The pressure, heat, violent sounds, and light from our clash becomes absurd; like a second sun in the sky waiting to burst. The bronze dragon takes advantage of this moment to make its second move.

From within the depths of its open mouth, another pressure starts to form. There's dense Soul Energy that begins to form a bronze light, tethering with more and more divine threads from its core, growing very quickly.

With my swords both locked right in front of its face, the attack it's about to release will be aimed right at me.

I can't push any harder, as I'm using every drop of strength I have to push against this barrier. It feels as if the moment I let go, all of my force will be released back at me, but if I stay here continuing my attempt to break through, I'll be hit dead-on by its secondary attack.

The only thing I can do is attempt to get out of the way, so that's what I do.

I lock eyes with the dragon one more time, then instead of continuing my follow-through with my swings, I take a deep breath and pull back my blades, crossing them in front of my chest in a single movement, and feel exactly what I imagined would come.



All of the force that I pressed down on two fine single points is released back on me, creating a blinding blast of light so bright and powerful, I'm instantly sent flying backward even faster than the speed I came soaring in.

Placing my swords in front of me, and activating my barrier creation mixed with divine energy-enhanced Soul Energy Shielding, is enough to block the incoming energy, and only be pushed back by its pure mass and momentum.

Instead of being released in a single point, the energy is dispersed outward more evenly making the portion of threads that will collide with me weaker than the focused point of my strike. The massive release comes out in the shape of a half-sphere, erupting forward out from the hexagon.

Its direct path is aimed toward me, but large portions of the released energy expand quickly and aim down toward the already crumbled mountain range below us.

I'm using all of my strength in my new fly skill and air magic to change my flight path because out from the impossibly large explosion of divine energy, a beam of bronze-colored Soul Energy comes blasting out from the dragon's mouth headed my way.

As it rockets toward me, yellow threads continue to tether through it and strengthen it.

After flying backward tens of kilometers in a matter of seconds, I change my trajectory to begin curving out of the way.

The bronze blast turned yellow-white misses me by just a few hundred meters as I finally stop my backward momentum and stay floating.

With the reality-bending aura that leaks off this beam of energy, this few hundred meters of distance still feels like a near miss.

My breath is heavy, my adrenaline is pumping, and the dragon that deflected my most powerful strike with ease is now flapping its wings and speeding up again, coming my way while another one of its bronze beams charges up in its mouth.

I take a few fractions of a second to ready my weapons and take in the aftermath of this initial exchange.

The entire mountain range below me is gone...

A crater in the desert so deep and so wide was just created by our clash, that all I see below me is darkness.

Just from the shockwaves and energy released from a single strike, hundreds of kilometers of open desert have been compressed, evaporated, and completely destroyed.

[Level Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Level Up] x49

My small moment of dead silence while taking in the view is interrupted by another level-up transferred from my body double, showing that it is still climbing the labyrinth's floors.

This jolting moment of clarity after the notification gives me an idea... but it will only work if I can draw this battle out a little longer while conserving my stamina.

I grip my swords tighter, and channel the same amount of soul energy, enhanced by my True Core's bright yellow light, and look at the dragon that approaches me with its same unbothered eyes.

This monster's biggest mistake was showing me its abilities and letting me live past the first strike.

I grin, reactivate all of my buffs, and fly forward to take this dragon on a second time.

Chapter 609

The second collision goes almost exactly as expected.

Our speed on impact isn't as fast, so my strike is less powerful, but I'm more focused on keeping this dragon entertained while I figure out how to gain slightly more power and fully understand what this yellow hexagon ability is.

The fact that there is no mana or qi inside the manifestation makes me believe this is some kind of unique trait that this being awakened with its True Core.

The Lich King said all True Cores have unique attributes awakened, and I see no barrier magic or any sign of this yellow creation on the creature's status, even now with my mythic-grade appraisal and inspect skills.

I'm able to see every detail of its status, down to the amount of HP remaining, and even its individual stat points.

It only has one buff on its status: [Earth Dragon's Roar].

While I know Ember received the ability to transform into a human after his second rank-up, this ability doesn't show on his status. The only one that does is the fire ability he awakened in his first rank-up.

I'm unsure what this monster's buff is, and if it is activated right now or not... It may very well be the bronze-colored beam that flows from its mouth after every exchange, but this could just be its innate ability. Before I start pulling out some of my own tricks, I want to know more about my opponent first.

Even though a clear path to victory seems to be ahead, I'm not dropping my guard.

Colliding with its Divine deflective barrier a second time is much easier to navigate because I know what to expect.

I aim for its torso instead of its neck and use the energy sent back from the blast strategically to dodge its incoming claws and second beam of Energy.

I'm only sent flying a few kilometers backward this time and hear the ringing of level-up notifications in my ear while I curve out of the way and prepare for another exchange.

We collide again less than a minute later, and I attack another random portion of its midsection to confirm this bright yellow hexagon can really materialize anywhere the dragon pleases.

It doesn't decrease in power either; the density of the gravity wall and the speed at which it's summoned stay exactly the same. This is what I expected, as my levels and mana control are slowly increasing, and I believe I can defeat this monster all on my own, even without the help of my stat-sharing perk from my Rising Emperor's Domain.

The only thing that bugs me is the fact that its unmoving, bored eyes never change.

I'm right on the outer edge of the barrier where I can make use of this buff to its full potential. When within range of my aura, I'm capable of taking 10% of all my subordinates' stats and mana control, plus, after reaching 1,000 citizens and unlocking a new perk, I can obtain an additional 5% of both from anywhere in the world.

While activating this right now would diminish the power gap instantly, doing so would alert the entire Crimson City that we are under attack by an opponent that needs more power than I, their leader, currently have.

Coming off the recent events of the Association's attack last week, I'll only cross this line if it is necessary and the enemy before me truly has intentions to do us harm.

As I clash in my fourth exchange, I realize that in the back of my mind, I'm secretly enjoying having to fight an opponent slightly stronger than me.

Every fight for the last few months since I've defeated the Lich King has been somewhat boring. Training in the growing labyrinth has only granted me levels from defeating weak mana manifestations, and even battling divine-cored monsters in the construct during the exams had no real stakes. There was always the thought in the back of my mind that if I lost, I'd be teleported out just like everyone else.

Even the strongest man in all of the 8 Great Regions fell to my aura alone.

It wasn't a challenge, but this dragon that appeared before me is a worthy opponent, one I can take down myself and finally allow me to push the boundaries of what my True Core can do.

I grin wide, giving in to the rush of true battle while more level-up notifications ring in my ear, and we clash for a fifth time.

The impossibly large flashes of yellow and white light fill the sky with residue from our attacks.

Both of us have mythic-grade plunderer skills enhanced by True Cores that absorb every particle of pure mana in the atmosphere as we zip around the sky.

The seconds pass, and my grin and excitement for this fight only grow more and more.

By our tenth exchange, we fall into a rhythm of battle where both of us understand each other's styles but neither of us want to test anything out that is too risky in case the other is holding back a secret technique. So, the battle rages on. The gravity waves become so immense and the violent rippling down into the earth below us, making the crater deeper and wider with every single clash.

This content has been misappropriated from Royal Road; report any instances of this story if found elsewhere.

My level surpassed 5,000 by our twentieth collision, and the stat point gains, and now trillions of MCP gains, are starting to become noticeable.

My heart is racing, and both my swords glide through the air like they're dancing.

This exchange of power is decimating deserts and mountains for hundreds of kilometers beyond repair, but it doesn't matter to me at all.

The only thing that does is making sure my next strike is stronger than the last.

Not only is my strength actually rising, but my body is becoming far more accustomed to the immense power.

When before it felt like I was a dam overflowing with unbelievable foreign strength, now, I'm finally able to contextualize this power and make full use of this core.

I'm getting sharper and learning how to make the silky energy flow to create denser points of gravity within my own blade to push down through the hexagons of light much deeper each time.

Instead of just activating my Divine Energy, and letting it seep into my normal attacks; I'm beginning to take control of the energy itself, and actually create far more deadly and concentrated strikes.

The dragon stays stoic, blocking everything I throw at it, and logically maneuvering attacks back to counter.

Still, there is no malice, and I'm unsure if the only reason it is fighting is because I made the first move and this is pure self defense.

Whatever the case may be, there's no turning back now, and I'm still improving my technique with every single strike I send. Whoever, or whatever this being may be, I may not get another chance to battle a force this strong, so I need to make the most of it.

Another 20 full exchanges go by, and I gain even more levels.

[Level Up] x451

The dragon begins to take a more offensive and aggressive stance once it realizes my attacks are coming at it faster and harder than before.

This works for a few minutes, pushing me back about 100 kilometers just by attacking and diving in faster to gain the advantage each exchange we have.

However, this series of events only fuels me more.

The fact that I'm getting pushed back, closer to the population I need to protect, makes me want to improve even faster.

I'm in total concentration for another 20 exchanges, and my level rises even higher, and a familiar skill gets upgraded mixed in with the strings of notifications.

[Level Up] x507

[Hibernation][Mythic Grade]

It's a skill I received in another Labyrinth a while back, and couldn't find any dungeon monsters to upgrade it. It puts a smile on my face, making me wonder if some of the other unique skills I managed to absorb in other labyrinths will be found in the future, and I continue the battle.

I'm still being pushed back, but my attacks are even stronger and propel me further, another 200 kilometers closer to the Crimson City; however, there's a turning point that displays the weight of my newfound power.

I put my everything into a dual blade slash, fully expecting it to be like all the others—coming so close to breaking the barrier, then getting blasted backward dozens of kilometers by my own energy.

However, that paper-thin line of the strongest gravity at the center of the hexagon that has been holding me back all this time finally breaks.

Mid-slash, another rush of levels and MCP flood my body, bringing me to [Lv. 5991], and the satisfaction I gain from watching the yellow manifestation of pure divine threads break and shatter into millions of pieces makes the countless failures well worth it in this fight.

It is the first time I feel any emotion or see any reaction from the bronze dragon.

A small ripple of genuine surprise comes from the creature's psyche, as for the first time in this entire battle I'm the one that is on the offensive. However, the unbothered eyes and baseline of uncaring confidence is still the dragon's overarching emotion.

It only has fractions of a second to try to react, and it can't twist out of the way in time.

Two waves of Dark Red Soul Energy coursing with yellow divine light collide with the dragon's side.

Instead of myself being pushed backward after every exchange, finally, my energy attacks make contact with the dragon's right side, exploding into an immense energy blast against its natural defenses and sending the mythical creature rocketing through the air as I follow through with both of my blades.

The bulk of the attack was absorbed by the yellow hexagon, but I did it. My blades made it through.

I fly forward with killing intent in my eyes and a clear path to victory ahead.

The next 5 exchanges go much differently than the last.

I'm in total control of this battle now, managing to channel more and more energy into my strikes.

The unbreakable gravity shield that erupted back on me every time I tried to break it at the start of our battle is now unable to handle my attacks at all.

Every time we collide, there is still a pause in the air as our auras clash, but my blades sink through and release violent energy attacks on this dragon every time.

I aim directly for the chest and neck now, but every time the hexagon is still there, taking the brunt of the blow.

The remaining force that actually hits the dragon never makes it past its natural defenses, so I still haven't drawn blood.

However, as I push the monster back the full 300 kilometers that it pushed me, I learn something new about this True Core Barrier that I didn't know before.

With more confidence after each attack, I begin testing out more abilities. I send telekinesis-powered ice spears, fireballs, stone bullets, and even various mental attacks the dragon's way before, during, and after the barrier is broken.

The breakthrough I come to is during one series of attacks where I send off a very concentrated spear of ice its way right after breaking its barrier.

While it can handle taking the mental attacks without fear, it attempts to block the physical attacks with its shimmering yellow hexagon, but there is a small amount of lag in between the breaking point of its ability and the time necessary to create another one.

My concentrated attack of ice magic tethered with divine energy hits the dragon's right leg, actually making contact with its scales for a fraction of a second before the barrier is able to form again and propel the rest of the attack away.

The attack itself wasn't strong enough to actually cause injury, but it's given me enough insight to call this exchange the dragon's fatal move.

While the creation of the barrier itself is too fast for me to outwit this monster in a battle of pure speed and dexterity alone, if I'm capable of letting off a full-force attack just moments after the dragon's defensive move is shattered, I believe I have a chance at victory.

The only thing I'm still concerned about is the dragon's unwavering confidence, and the fact that the second force of gravity I vividly remember sensing on the way over here has not shown their face yet.

[Level Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Level Up] x84

Another notification rings in my inner ear, breaking me past level 6000, and I charge up my blades while diving back in for another clash.

Chapter 610

More and more level-up notifications ring in my ear as I push the dragon back even further.

Every time I land a full-powered hit with both my swords, I'm able to shatter the barrier and send this beast flying back.

The only problem is, I don't have enough time to throw the same powered attack at it right after the barrier is destroyed.

My Soul Energy needs to be re-channeled into my swords to create another slash, and the telekinesis-powered elemental attacks are nothing but a minor nuisance to the dragon. It doesn't even try blocking them anymore because they don't make it through its natural defenses.

The only attack that can really cause damage is the one that takes its full energy to break down its defenses.

As the clashes go on, we're both fully aware of this dichotomy.

It's not fast or powerful enough to catch me with one of its beams or its talons, and I'm not strong enough to break its barrier and have enough force to do actual damage to it before it can create another one.

However, we are both aware that I am getting stronger after every collision.

This sparks a new plan, and I begin conducting some new tests.

Instead of evenly distributing everything I have into two blades, I start to divide my power and test out swinging one sword first. My plan is to follow through with a second fully charged blade once the barrier gives way and go in for the kill shot with an attack that was not weakened by the impact against this immovable yellow hexagon.

While my first few attempts fail, sending me flying backward from not having enough power in just one blade, I quickly get the hang of it and settle into a routine while my levels and MCP rise after each attempt.

Attacking with just one blade is far more unstable, and I'm sent flying backward in less predictable directions, but it feels just the same as when I was attacking with two.

Every exchange gets me closer and closer to breaking through.

An odd unplanned phenomenon occurs after my level hits [Lv. 6371].

Instead of the usual time lag in between floors, many notifications hit my ears over the next full minute.

They rotate on and off with MCP gains of over 10 trillion each, making as noticeable gains as defeating the Director himself each time. The levels, on the other hand, only rise 1-2 after each kill.

As I clash with the dragon 3 more times, dozens of notifications ring in my ears, and I realize what's happening.

My double has decided the floor it is on is worth its time to farm MCP from.

While it would be pointless farming MCP in the millions, or even billions, the monsters on whatever floor it's on now are granting close to 1% increases in my mana control every few seconds.

My levels may not be moving fast, but my overall strength sure is.

Over the next 10 exchanges, it may look like I'm losing, as I'm getting flung even further away after each attack and tightly gripping a sword full of unused soul energy each time; but the reason for this is because my attacks are getting even stronger.

My double makes it to the next floor in the labyrinth after a slight pause in level ups, then the constant stream of notifications comes back.

I'm brought up to [Lv. 6495] over an additional 10 exchanges, and I receive dozens of MCP boosts ranging from 15 to 20 Trillion each.

My mana control surges, and my focus tightens on a single goal.

After one final boost of energy, I can feel that this strike will finish the battle.

I soar through the air, trailed by silky Soul energy and yellow Divine light.

My Dark Emperor's blade collides with the Earth Dragon's reflective barrier, and we pause in the air once again for multiple seconds, pushing back on each other with immense force.

This time, however, my dark blade finally bursts through.

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My gaze is only locked on one thing, the bright yellow-white core cycling energy in the monster's chest.

Following through with the swing with my right as the barrier shatters into millions of threads, I swing my Flame Emperor's sword with everything I have, and am certain this battle is over. The kill shot is playing out just as I planned before my eyes.

Still, the Bronze Dragon's eyes don't change. It isn't even surprised like the first time I broke its defenses.

The monster before me seemingly accepts its fate, with no fear or battle instincts to run away on its mind.

The only thing I sense is a small amount of sadness... but not for itself.

The monster is sad for me...

As my blade pierces its natural Soul Energy and Divine shielding defenses and collides with the creature's bare scales, this is when a ripple of fear surges through my own body.

In the center of my back, aimed right for my own core, I feel two thin silver blades pierce through my Greater Form's defenses like there is nothing stopping them.

I didn't sense anything coming, and even now, as the blades tear through my shielding and blood bonded armor, then touch my skin. The only thing I sense is burning hot yellow threads vibrating through glossy silver blades belonging to another True Core holder.

Even now, as the blades pierce my flesh, I can only perceive a small amount of them. My senses can't even detect who is on the other side of this attack.

They're either so much more powerful than me, that a simple cloaking spell is enough to hide their presence from me, or it's a True Core ability that specifically works to hide their appearance.

My best guess in the moment, is that it's both...

I don't have enough time to dodge this attack, and neither do I have the strength to counter it.

As my blade sinks into the dragon's chest before me, it feels like I'm in the same exact situation as it is...

My mind is racing, but I don't have enough time to get myself out of this, and a last-moment decision to activate my skill [Mind Palace] surges through my subconscious.

As the silver blades dig deeper into my flesh, closing in on my yellow core and the other toward my heart; my entire world splits into two different moving realities.

One is a fuzzy image of the tips of two silver blades materializing out of thin air into my back while I strike a bronze dragon, while the other half of my brain stands up from a white marble throne to walk forward into an organized library of my memories.

In the moment, I was only thinking in survival mode, but now I'm able to see the entire situation from an outsider's far more objective lens.

The fact that the dragon I was facing was so calm the entire battle, even though I was slowly gaining the edge, now makes far more sense.

If I had been too strong for it at the start, whoever this mysterious sword wielder is would have taken me head-on without giving me a chance to fight its dragon.

While not going all out from the start, using my subordinate's stats to take the dragon out in a single blow has put me in this predicament to begin with; it actually may have been a blessing in disguise.



I wouldn't have gained the insight necessary to take on this monster, learning how to properly use the full potential of my True Core's power, and also wouldn't have gained over 1000 levels and hundreds of trillions of MCP in the process.

My mind moves faster here...

As the last time I tested it, less than a second went by in the real world while 3 to 4 hours went by inside my mind palace.

My body is unable to move to reflect my thoughts here, as it would be impossible for my physical muscles and bones to catch up to my brain's speed.

However, the system itself can still process commands from within my mind.

I pull up my Rising Emperor's Domain Interface, and scroll through the lists of users while slowly walking up and down the aisles of bookshelves strategically pressing only the names of hunters that are in the Crimson Army, and my teammates that are cultivating orange cores far out in the desert.

I count out everyone on my list that is currently not at max HP or MP, as I don't know if they are at the climax of their own battles. Less than a dozen total are in scenarios like this, so I see it as a better choice to leave them out than to regret it and tarnish my reputation later. Draining 15% of their total stats and mana control in an instant could possibly be their demise as well.

My initial reasoning for not activating the buff was that I didn't want to spread panic, but as I think longer as I walk down the aisles, I come to the conclusion that if I don't make it out of this situation and these two forces get to the city, there will be far more panic than just a city-wide sudden temporary power drain.

The average level 10-200 citizen may not give me a lot of stats on their own, but in numbers, every bit of strength I can get right now counts. There are over 1500 of them contributing far more stats than my teammates and Army Recruits combined.

After just a few minutes of meticulously scrolling through my lists of citizens one by one, counting out about 50 more who look as though they're in dungeons in the middle of fights too, I scroll over to the main interface and choose accept on everyone that can spare the energy.

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[Power Holder: Activated]

[10% Power Share: Receive]

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[Ruler's Gaze: Long-Range Perk: Activated]

[5% Power Share: Receive]

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[Select Party Members: Group Selected]

[Select Stat Points: Group Selected]

[Select Mana Control: Group Selected]

[Temporary Buffs Added!]

[+67,937] Strength

[+65,984] Speed

[+70,044] Agility

[+66,350] Defense

[+75,869] Mental Strength

[+1,329,220,901,545] Mana Control

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I grin while looking at the base stats gains, bringing my own up by over 3-5x. The mana control is negligible, but this rise in base stat power will be an absurd increase that I'm excited to feel.

The screen disappears, and I watch the stats leave my subordinates and add to my own status.

Outside, in the real world, an imperceivable amount of time has passed.

The stats and MCP have transferred, but it will still take time for the other half of my split consciousness to react once this Mind Palace skill is deactivated.

Now, before this happens, I have to figure out the best way to avoid getting killed by the two silver blades about to pierce my chest.