

## D. Diver 631

### Chapter 631

I walk down a small curving path within a well-maintained park on the edge of the city.

It's dimly lit, leading to a portion of housing that looks like hundreds of people live in, near one of the local markets. Like most cities, the outer edges are less crowded than the center, where massive apartment complexes, towering association-run businesses, and the main dungeon hub sit.

I keep my stealth skill fully activated, and Raven does too, walking next to me and communicating telepathically as we move into the more populated areas of town.

"Tell me more about this island... I'll be the one taking control of it soon, after all."

As we walk further into the large city, it's a little eerie how clean and orderly everything is. The housing communities are identical, and even the level of hunters asleep inside are nearly the exact same, all sectioned off to certain districts.

There is about one guard awake, slowly surveying every block for every 100 residents, and the average level of these residents increases more and more as we get to the center of the city.

They all range from level 100 up to roughly 450. Most of the B and A-rank hunters are on the finger islands.

Raven's response to my question makes everything on this island make so much more sense but disgusts me all the same.

"It's as close to slavery as you can get. Over 70,000 residents all trapped on an island kilometers above sea with the closest bit of land nearly a thousand kilometers away. They may get to live somewhat normal lives, but the Kingdom of Palmyra is one of the highest-grossing raw dungeon loot exporters in the world. I've visited a few times over the decades; they often use raw luminite and pure mana farmed from central to trigger the creation of unique dungeons. In exchange for free housing and stable pay, long hours of dungeon farming are a mandatory weekly quota for residents."

I raise an eyebrow at Raven's mention of luminite, as I've never heard anyone speak of it other than Bri in my past. It appears the fluke of an experiment I tried out in the forest bordering Vice City to accidentally create dungeons has been replicated by the Association before.

There's no reason to pry further, so I raise a different question as we approach the center of the city with the taller skyscrapers, well-lit streets, yet still no one outside other than the occasional guard.

"So what? Like an extended contract with the association? They're allowed back to the mainland with enough money to live off for the rest of their lives once their duties are paid? Or—"

While the vibes this place gives off aren't savory, I want to give it the benefit of the doubt before doing a full investigation. Allies with morals that align with my own never hurt, but Raven's reply confirms the fact floating around in my subconscious.

"More like work or die. Sure, there's many contracts in place, but the terms are always extended for the most minor infractions. A single missed farming quota, failure to secure breaks in a timely manner. The King and Queen rule this place to profit, nothing more. Residents are hunted down by

the high-ranking guards if they ever try to escape before their terms are up, and those that by a miracle manage to fulfill their contracts often have accidents on the way back home..."

Raven pauses, and I shake my head while replying.

"I bet it's quite the lucrative system... but it could be done with a little bit more humanity in mind."

I roll my eyes and turn my gaze to the thumb of the island far off in the distance that houses two dense yellow wells of energy and a single red one standing guard on the estate.

"The ruthless leaders are always the ones that manage to stay in power. At least I won't have to forcefully take over a kingdom run by saints."

I smirk while looking back down the empty street we walk on toward a very concentrated area of dungeons.

There's a guard out front, and a silver sign above the facility's entrance that reads [Palmyra Dungeon Gate Entrance E-004].

I sense quite a few of the entrance gates around the city. When letting my senses seep deep into the facilities with the densest mana shielding, I find the presence of many well-guarded dungeons in very symmetrical lines.

Some are on ground level, while others are stacked inside mana-shielded towers.

This entire island is a dungeon farming facility run by tyrants.

Raven and I both wait nearby the entrance of the gate for about half an hour until a guard from inside the facility comes out and swaps places with the guard outside the door, allowing us to slip inside unnoticed.

During the time we waited, my senses seeped deep down and around the island, trying to figure out what this massive hand we stand on is.

I'm positive it's an originator artifact, or at least somewhat connected to the throne. However, the deeper my senses reach down into the depths of the ocean below, the more of a dead end I face.

With my visual senses, it's easy for me to see the entire black statue-like hand. And even with my mana senses, I can tell where the artifact is just by perceiving the dead space where a lack of mana lands.

However, once I try to perceive down into the planet's crust below the ocean, everything melds together, and I can't tell what is lodged beneath the dirt and rocks below more than a few dozen kilometers. Especially while trying to conceal my power, it's impossible.

The only thing of value I find before we make our way into the dungeon hub here is a small reading of raw Qi deep in the ocean floor. It's growing and forming around the base of the wrist of the black-hand statue, in proportions magnitudes above any amount farmed below Valor City.

As we walk inside the facility, we keep close behind the guard swapping shift places and make it past many layers of security with ease.

Automatic doors working with video surveillance and keycards open up, and we easily make it through three layers of security before one of the rows of E-Class Dungeons comes into my line of sight behind a thick mana-imbued glass wall.

The guard that unknowingly caused a major security breach greets a fellow guard on the way by this floor, and his friend opens up the clear glass door to give us direct access to the rows of dozens of dungeons.

As they complain about their night shifts almost being over, Raven and I slip into one of the nearest dungeons.

To my surprise, when we materialize on the other side, landing on the rocky floor of a mountainous forest dungeon, I feel the presence of dozens of hunters inside. While no one is out in the streets, it seems all of these dungeons are completely filled to the brim with hunters farming them to maximize the spawn rates of every single monster.

No one in here is above level 150, so they wouldn't be able to know what they're sensing even if both of us showed our full presence. I message Raven through our link while walking toward her general direction and putting out a hand, lifting my stealth skill so I'm visible again.

"Hold on, we're getting out of here. I've gained everything I need to move this portion of the plan forward."

A hand materializes out of thin air and grabs mine, and Raven fully appears in my vision once my purple barrier comes in contact with her. I activate my dungeon walker skill and bring us to the first floor of the Apex Region's labyrinth.

Within my body doubles instantly transmitted memories; I see that the sun here has already begun to rise, and the meeting with all of the regional directors and hunters is about to begin.

"Alright, this is going to take me about an hour. You can watch if you'd like; you may find it entertaining. If not, we can meet back up afterward to move onto the next phase."

I grin while using my concealment skill and master of illusion buff to completely change my appearance from its natural state into the illusion of the Sun God that Mr. Freeman used to show everyone that approached him.

Raven's eyes widen, and she grins while replying out loud.

"I think I'll stick around. There's nothing to do back in my territory anyway. Daily training of the hunters beneath me and maintenance of the facilities will be taken care of until I return. Plus, I don't think announcing our partnership publicly will benefit either of us just yet."

"Agreed."

I nod as she disappears from my senses, and I walk forward out of the labyrinth into the 20th floor, making my way over to the elevator.

On my walk over, I send telepathic transmissions to Bri and Rodrigo to notify them that I've arrived and the meeting can begin soon.

As I board the elevator, I send out three more transmissions to my doubles.

One of them is with Bri and Rodrigo now, greeting me at the door as I arrive on the 19th floor.

With nothing but a simple nod, we swap places. I walk into the 19th floor to prepare for our meeting, and my double heads back to the labyrinth to dungeon walk back to the Kingdom of Palmyra on a very specific mission.

I want to observe the daily life of all guards, hunters, and higher-ups throughout the main island. While my double can't sense Qi or divine energy, that isn't necessary for evading people's senses and taking meticulous notes.

The other two transmissions lead to my doubles that have recently finished the swapping of mana from the labyrinths. The Apex Region's labyrinth has been brought down to 60 floors, capping out at level 3000 as requested, and the labyrinth in the Crimson City has been brought up to floor 96, capping out at roughly level 6600 monsters.

The cost for creating new floors at this level is so high that even absorbing the entire 60 floors of the labyrinth wouldn't even add a single floor to this one at 96.

I task one of the doubles to head back to the Crimson City and retrieve some of the luminite in storage. I want many new dungeons formed in the dead zones of the dark continent and also to begin filling up the new forest region to the northwest with more dungeons as well.

These new dungeons will make for great seeds of cities, preparing for new expansion and civilizations to be built in these desolate portions of the world.

I task the second double with venturing out into the artificial mountains even further west. I want to condense as much of that raw mana as I can, bringing it into its physical form, and try to bring my labyrinth up to level 100.

If I do this favor, maybe the demon that runs it will have some insight on the recent world events that have me questioning how this impending war will carry out.

## Chapter 632

I go over the notes with Bri and Rodrigo one more time, updating them on the new progress of the doubles I just sent out to expand the kingdom further west of the 8 Great Regions and south of the Dark Continent.

Once transmissions of large amounts of hunters arriving in the empty entrance hall begin to reach Rodrigo's tablet, orders are sent out for E and D class workers in the Apex base. They are to greet the parties from each region that arrive and escort them to the elevator.

Five to ten at a time, Regional Directors, B and A class hunters are all escorted down to the 18th floor of the facility, the A-Class training rooms.

It's the only room large enough and secure enough to hold this kind of meeting.

As the sun slowly rises, everyone that was invited arrives, and I decide to make my way toward the elevator with Bri and Rodrigo behind me, with Raven watching from an invisible point of view.

I take a deep breath in and out, and wait for the elevator to open with a ding on the 18th floor.

The chatter and small talk in the room go completely silent as I walk out onto the dense mana-shielded floor to see over 200 hunters waiting for me to speak.

All three of our footsteps echo through the silent room as we walk forward.

The crowds of powerful hunters are split into 8 separate groupings. Each region sticks together, and the sizes vary a lot. The Apex, Veridian, and Vice Region groupings are far larger than the others, who have less than 10 in each of them. Smallest of all, the Talton Region's only two people who showed up are Marcie and their leader I met once before when delivering goods.

There are a few other very familiar faces among the groups as I survey the crowd and walk closer until stopping about 10 meters in front of everyone. The old and new A-Class hunters stand in front of the Apex Region's crowd, while the Regional Directors stand in front of the other groupings. I see Dane beside the woman that runs the Silca Region, and even spot Nat next to the Veridian Region's leader.

Then, I release a wave of intimidation in addition to my Heavy Hand skill.

With very fine-tuned precision, I make sure to alter the gravity at which my Heavy Hand pushes down on people depending on the amount of mana control they're letting out of their bodies.

The instant I do, everyone in the room is hit with a wave of energy that frightens them to the core, and I'm the center of their full attention roughly two seconds later once I release this wave and allow everyone to breathe.

"I welcome you all to the Apex Region. As some of you know, I've been battling a very intense energy poisoning illness for many years. It has made me irritable, unreasonable, and paranoid... for this reason, I have kept the 8 Great Regions constrained to only benefit myself..."

There are mixed reactions that ripple through the crowds of people, as this is not the opener they expected.

Some hide their physical reactions very well, but I can sense each and every one of their emotions as clear as day while I continue.

"I've brought you all here today to tell you I've found a cure, and moving forward I will have far more energy to build our nation into an even more powerful kingdom. We will be doing a major restructuring of funds, contracts, leadership positions, and most importantly, the closely guarded rank of A-Class is going to be lifted. All of you in this room today have the opportunity to rank up a second time if you wish after our meeting is over."

The general skepticism and unease from my first statement completely fades when the final words leave my mouth.

I can tell there are many hunters that have been held back at level 990-999 among the Apex Region hunters who have many questions but are afraid to speak up and ask because of the surge of energy I let out when I entered the room. So, I continue and explain further.

"You will no longer be held back from growing stronger due to policy constraints and fear of rogue hunters overpowering regions. I believe we should all grow together, so I will be making the Apex Region's labyrinth below us on the 20th floor available to all B-Class and above hunters."

I smile beneath my disguise, as this forces out whispers among some of the hunters, and confirmation that I'm not scolding them makes for more whispers and conversations to pile up. I allow it to go on for about 20 seconds before I speak again and they all hush instantly.

"I'm sure you all recognize Rodrigo, an A-Class hunter that has been very helpful in all of your regional hunter exams..."

He takes a step forward, and almost everyone in the crowd nods as he looks up from his silver tablet and smiles. Then, Bri walks forward too on my other side, and I continue before any additional questions can be shared.

"This is Ms. Briana. All questions about signing up for time slots in the labyrinth can be issued through them once our meeting is done. These two are the new voices of reason among the 8 Great Regions, the Overseers."

I pause for a moment so everyone can get a good look at them, then add onto my point.

"In addition to breaking the level 1000 restriction, we're going to change the funding structure among the 8 Great Regions. There is no longer a set amount granted depending on your region's hunter power and results in the B-Class exams. We'll be allocating resources far more aggressively to build up the infrastructure in every Region equally. This entire nation needs to become a well-oiled machine. We are a collective of businesses, and I want us all to grow..."

I pause again but wait even longer because I want conversation to spark among the people on this point.

There is growing hope and curiosity flowing out of all the smaller Region's Directors, and many of the B-Class hunters that surround them as guards and surely work within the financial departments of these Regions.

I've seen the annual reports briefly when looking over Bri's calculations, and the Apex Region pretty much neglects every Region's requests for any funding that isn't the Veridian or Vice.

While it is logical in the short-term growth of the Vice Region's profit, and growth of business relationships between the Regions that are doing well, it doesn't spark any new economy or drive for innovation in the less powerful regions.

The Silca, Raya, Phantom, Talton, and Bedrock regions hardly get any support; and in return, they don't grow much and stay stagnant. Most of the industry in these regions rely on locals to support each other, or the non-magic world backbone of industry like agriculture, farming, and mining raw materials to keep them afloat.

It is a cycle that will continue repeating itself unless something is changed. I can easily bring in trillions of MP to make larger dungeon hubs in all of their cities, and with access to the Apex Region's treasury, and Dark Continent resources, I don't mind reinvesting a large amount of my profits for the benefit of millions of citizens' trust and approval later down the line for making their lives better.

This is a fact that is understood among the powerful, and I can see the glint in the eyes of hunters that grinded from nothing to something in backwater regions looking at me with hope.

However, the angry glares of the Vice and Veridian Directors tell a different story.

They aren't voicing their opinions yet, but my goal is to rile them up a bit more, so I continue.

"I want you to all feel safe asking for anything you want. If it will grow your region, and make it a safer and more prosperous place for all involved, then there is no request too expensive or labor-intensive to ask. We can negotiate terms, and money and labor will be provided for the good of our nation."

I nod and inwardly smile more as the separation of emotions in the crowd grows to be more extreme. Those that have exploited hunters using the corrupt system for years can't believe the sight of their house of cards crumbling in front of them, while those that made it here through blood, sweat, and tears are finally getting a chance to rise further.

"With that being said, if there are individuals with unsavory contracts anyone has been forced or unknowingly signed into, they may all be voided or restructured with no questions asked. The numbers just have to work out for both of us. Please, contact any workers here at headquarters and they will direct you straight to the overseers at any time and things will be sorted quickly. We will be needing more long and short-term contracts for guard duty and dungeon exploration, as we're expanding the 8 Great Regions to the west and southeast soon."

Many of the weaker B-Class hunters in the crowds that don't have a direct say in their region's business dealings perk up at this fact, and I continue.

"That's right. I've acquired new land to the west. A vast forest region full of dungeons. There will be trade routes built, dungeons that need exploring, and Association bases that will need to be manned once settlements are grown out to the western expansion project. This will be available to all hunters, E grade and above; so when you venture back to your home regions just know that high-paying Nationwide contracts will be available to anyone that needs work."

The breaking point is near, as everyone here knows that southeast of the 8 great regions is the Dark Continent.

"Yes, as many of you have pieced together, we are expanding into the Dark Continent. The walls that separate our nation from those that have been exiled will be broken down. Trade routes will be built, and we will be adding 4 new Regions to our empire. This is the final task that I wanted to bring up today: the fact that I have made a partnership with the ruler of the Dark Continent. The Flame Emperor will be a major trade partner moving forward. I've brokered quite the beneficial deal between us, and without the powers there, none of the extra funding and availability of resources would be possible. My cure, our expansion, and all of the growth moving forward is thanks to them."

The room spikes with emotions in two completely opposite directions.

Bri and Rodrigo keep straight faces as an eruption of conversation breaks out.

Two of the loudest voices come from the front of the crowd: the old man that runs the Veridian Region and Brutus from the Vice Region.

The old man from the Veridian Region raises his fist, which still carries the ring that used to glow golden from the Sun God's light, but no longer does.

"I knew it! You've abandoned us! Our borrowed power was taken away and now you've completely forgotten the terms of our agreement! You're not fit to be our ruler!"

Brutus' voice echoes out next.

"You have certainly changed. This is not the ideal nation we have been running together for years. Bleeding expenses to help failing regions is not a profitable move—"

Their words are drowned out by the positive conversations of the hunters from other regions, full of hope.

"We can finally renegotiate our contracts, this is a miracle!"

"Eleven years I've been stuck at level 999, can you believe it? Mr. Freeman is finally letting us grow..."

"We can finally apply for funding to rebuild Silca's lakeside dungeon hub, after the surges this past year it's in pretty rough shape..."

"I don't know what happened between him and the Flame Emperor after the exams, but I don't care. This is great! Finally, this nation is going to see some growth in places that aren't just the directors' pockets."

"The Flame Emperor is helping us? Maybe the Dark Continent isn't as bad as the news makes it out to be."

More and more chains of conversation enter my consciousness, and the general sentiment is positive.

The only ones still on edge about the proposed plans are the A-Class hunters from the Apex Region. To them, they've already paid their dues and climbed the ranks; now I'm just giving out what they worked so hard to do for free.

This is in line with how I believed the reaction would play out, but they're smart enough not to cause a scene.

Rodrigo has already found a solution for this, as I plan to make them an elite royal guard with higher prestige than the newer recruits to keep their egos soaring high.

However, the two angry old men that run the Veridian and Vice Regions yelling negatively through the crowd I have far different plans for.

"That's enough." I speak while letting out a wave of targeted intimidation just strong enough to make everyone shiver.

I turn my golden glowing gaze toward the Veridian Region's Director, then use telekinesis to lift him off the ground and forward to stand in front of me.

His face drains to white as I speak up.

"You're right. I have abandoned you."

I turn to everyone else and speak again.

"I would like to publicly apologize for all the wrongs the Apex Region has done over the years. Moving forward, I hope that we can see ourselves as one nation, not one that is divided through hatred, power, and profits."

I turn back to the old man and nod.

"It's odd how only two Regions have anything bad to say about my new expansion plan. The two Regions that exploited and profited off the others for personal gain alone for decades."

My gaze moves away from his and over to the Vice Region's director, Brutus.

I give him an extra strong wave of intimidation that brings him to his knees, then look back at the Veridian Region's director.

"How about this? A new Veridian Regional Director Election sounds like a great idea. I say you have an anonymous Association-Wide vote when you return back to the Veridian Region today. I'm sure there are many candidates that would love to fill that position."



I turn to the crowd of hunters behind him and point.

"Natalie Sterling. A very strong and honorable fighter and healer from the B-Class exams this year. I want you to run the election and make sure everything is fair and just. I can have associates sent over to help if you wish."

There's silence in the room as the director's face pales even more, then Nat musters out a strong-willed reply with a grin on her face.

"Yes, Sir!"

"Good." I reply while using telekinesis to push the old director back to where he started, but now when I set him down he slumps on his knees in a defeated state.

My gaze turns back to Brutus, and after that treatment, he doesn't say a word, but resentment and anger swirl around in his aura.

I lift a finger and motion for him to walk my way. "Follow me."

He gulps, then doesn't move for a few seconds, but eventually starts to come toward me.

At the same moment, I turn around and begin walking toward the exit elevator.

I use my Rising Emperor's Domain interface to grant Rodrigo and Bri 5% of my mana control and base stats each, just to make sure they're the strongest one's in the room, then speak up.

"That is all from me. We will have one of these meetings every 2 weeks from now on. Any further questions, scheduling, or contract negotiations, talk with the new 8 Great Region's Overseers. I have a contract of my own to negotiate."

I slowly walk back to the elevator as the scared Vice Region's Director follows. In the back of my mind, I can still sense Raven's geotag following me as well.

In silence, the elevator door dings open and the three of us walk inside. About half a dozen E-Grade workers step out to help with the paperwork incoming that Rodrigo requested during my speech.

A flood of questions fills the room for Bri and Rodrigo to answer, and the door closes shut behind us.

I put one hand on the Director's shoulder, and feel Raven's hand materialize out of nothing to touch my side. Then, I pull a teleport crystal out from my storage and crush it to bring us to the Crimson City.

This meeting with the Vice Region's Director will be much more productive with a few more familiar faces in the room.

Chapter 633

As white light envelops all three of us, I create a barrier of pure mana shielding around the Vice Region's director.

If not, the pressure of dense orange divine energy filling the underground bunker in the Crimson City would have shredded him to bits in a matter of milliseconds.

An additional upside to this barrier is that with this man's lack of strong mana control, it will be impossible for him to see or sense through it, essentially bringing him into my fortress blind until I decide he should be able to see.

When we finally materialize, the sight before me is fascinating.

To my right, I instantly sense two fully formed orange cores inside Maria and Abby. On the other side, Lydia and Fisher hold two red cores, almost fully saturated and on the verge of transitioning to orange.

The room is densely packed with swirling divine threads. From my experience in the past, when I was trying to compress my own divine energy, once they're ejected from the cultivator's body, the threads usually stay stagnant or dissolve into the air. But something different is happening...

As the orange shimmering threads are consumed by my four teammates, small amounts of energy stay contained in their bodies, and a large portion is ejected. However, at the back of the room, the faint consciousness of Ember lingers inside the isolation pod that continues to dilate time inside of it by over ten times the normal speed.

As divine energy seeps in at a slow rate, it is expelled at a far faster rate, though in slightly lesser quantity.

It's like Ember is subconsciously processing the divine energy and taking a small tax, but in doing so, allowing the momentum to keep pushing it around the room, creating a whirlpool effect rushing through all four of them and adding additional threads to their bodies.

The enhanced shielding I created is doing its job perfectly, allowing for the divine energy cycled out from each of them to stay in the room and forcefully continue to cycle through them, compounding the effects of each fragment consumed.

Alone, this would be quite detrimental to the advancement process. The body can only handle processing so much divine energy at a time.

However, with Abby's constant use of her mythic-grade [Restore] skill, and [Area of Total Restoration] buff everything can be expedited. Now, with all of these unique healing traits enhanced by the power of a fully awakened orange core, everyone in the room is being constantly healed physically, mentally, and held together with extremely strong divine restoration threads.

What took Ember and me nearly a week to accomplish while fighting orange-cored insects in the construct has taken my teammates under two days.

I assume it would have taken even less time if they'd started inside this bunker, but when the process began, I was more worried about getting strong enough to take on the Apex Region's Director than anything else.

Now... I've taken over the entire Nation and have quite the special gift to surprise my teammates with.

The first to sense our presence as we enter is Maria, as she's not actively trying to awaken her core, nor is she focused on healing the others like Abby.

Her blue eyes pierce through the plumes of orange divine threads and meet with mine as I power down my illusion magic, but keep a tight oval-shaped bubble of dense mana around the director.

A telepathy link between us opens as a wave of perception ripples through the group.

"Welcome back, Jay—Wait—That's... The Vice Region's... No way..."

I smirk as Abby's eyes open, and she does the same scan of the room before speaking through our link as well.

"It's him... What—what are you planning to do now...?"

Lydia's eyes open next as she senses a change in the constant flow of divine threads. Her gaze darts around the room to make sense of everything. She doesn't say a word and makes her own assumptions, but Fisher yells out loud, breaking the silence once he realizes who I've brought back.

"It's that damn Regional Director that scre—"

I send a four-way wave of telepathy to all of them during his outburst, explaining the situation briefly and giving them a reason as to why I didn't kill him the moment I had a chance

Even Fisher stops his heated statement and can't hold back a grin, nodding as he agrees with my plan.

"I mean—Mr. Freeman—long time no see. How can we assist you today?"

All four of them stand from their seated positions and take a small break from cultivating.

Abby and Maria deserve a break from cultivating for almost two days straight, and from the looks of it, Fisher and Lydia could use a moment to rest, as their cores are about two-thirds of the way completed. At this rate, it will still take almost half a day to finish up.

It is still incredibly fast, but their natural innate talent is making itself known again, just like how it took a little longer for both of them to awaken their soul energy.

A muffled voice from Brutus comes out from beneath the dense mana shielding.

"Who—Who's there? Where have you brought me, Director?"

My smile grows wider as everyone in the room uses a high-grade concealment artifact to change their appearances. I shift mine slightly too, making myself look like a less animated version of Mr. Freeman without the glowing golden eyes to keep the facade alive for Brutus, and we all walk toward the spiral staircase exit.

My four teammates walk in front of me, and I release a small amount of my True Core's aura, contained by my superior-grade mana manipulation, to push and contain the direction of all the excess divine threads around us back down into the room.

Every thread that comes in contact with me is instantly absorbed into my core, though it is such a minimal amount, at a divine frequency one tier below my core, that I don't even feel the energy change.

This is more to protect the citizens that live above us, not to let a catastrophic wave of divine threads flood out of the bunker as the exit hatch is opened.

Raven's geopoint slips out into the guildhall in the back of my consciousness as she curiously comes along for the ride.

As we walk out and it's closed again, I'm not worried about keeping Ember guarded while he rests now. No one is making it through that dense cloud of divine threads below us, and there is a faint flicker of his active mind coming out from the isolation pod. My intuition tells me if he really needed to wake up right now, he could.

The sun is a bit higher over the horizon here, but it is still early in the morning as the five of us walk through the guildhall and I carry the Vice Region's director using telekinesis.

He speaks again as the sounds of the crowded guildhall hit his senses.

"Where are we? I—I didn't mean to offend you... What I said before was not my true feelings. You know we've been great partners for a long time. Wha—Whatever you say, I'll be behind it 100%, you know this."

I don't reply but slowly let his mana barrier dissolve, allowing his feet to touch the ground as we walk out one of the doors of the guildhall onto the main road.

Once he can finally see, he doesn't say a word as he takes in the environment of a prospering city, now with over 2,200 citizens and thousands more outside of the crimson dome.

People line the streets, buying and selling gear that isn't traded in the guildhall. Restaurants and cafés are finishing up the morning crowd and transitioning to lunch, while residents make their way to and from the canyon of dungeons on the far edge of town.

Brutus turns his head all around, trying to figure out what's happening, even looking at the four unknown strangers surrounding him, and his boss. He speaks again.

"What—Where—"

I speak in the same tone as Mr. Freeman.

"This is the Crimson City, the home of the Flame Emperor. Since, as you said, you are my most long-lasting, trustworthy business partner over the years, I thought it would only be right to give you the first tour of our new partnered nation."

I feel a rush of relief emanate from the old man as he responds, and watch his posture straightening up.

"Oh—Yes. Of course, so that's it."

A smile resurfaces on the old director's face as we continue through the crowded city streets.

Despite the Qi barriers in place around my teammates, and their best attempts at fully concealing their mana control and loose divine threads, some of their immense aura leaks out.

I'm able to overlap this aura with my own, absorbing enough of it to prevent it from being fatal to others in the streets. Still, there is a constant aura of intensity and power rippling out from us.

Many here in the city know that the Inner Circle and the Flame Emperor never reveal their true identities, so those walking the same street as us make way, separating from the crowd as they correctly assume who is coming through.

Brutus notices this reaction as we make our way to an outer edge of the city.

"Who are our escorts today? And—if I'm here, does this mean we're going to be meeting with the Flame Emperor?"

I nod as we come to the edge of the crimson dome, creating a small opening in the pure soul energy for Brutus to walk through.

"Yes, indeed, today you will be meeting the Flame Emperor. Right now, you have the pleasure of meeting the Inner Circle of trusted allies, the four strongest fighters on the dark continent. They are the force that easily defended and mortally injured our A-Class hunters when we wrongfully attacked them after the exams."

Brutus' face turns white again as he realizes the strength of the guards around him, but he doesn't show fear in his voice.

"So you've come to an agreement after that scuffle. Very good."

He nods as we all make it outside the dome, and I close the city's defense.

"Yes, and we'll be having another meeting right away. I don't want any prying ears to be listening in, so it's best we make our way to a more private place."

We all float into the air, and I bring the director with us, leaving the bustling city behind and now getting an aerial view of the dozens of trade routes that branch away from the Crimson City in all directions to the neighboring towns and sectors.

Brutus speaks up again as it fades from view, and we start to float far into the desert.

"Quite the interesting infrastructure here. I recognize a lot of these supplies from the Vice Region... and Solara... and even Valor City. Do you have any idea where this Flame Emperor came from? I've sent plenty of teams out to the Dark Continent over the years to secure personal assets, but never heard of such a force out here until he started making himself known these past few months."

I smile as we get further and further from the city, then send a wave of telepathy through all of my teammates in the sky. We all simultaneously deactivate our concealment skills and artifacts as I reply.

"Yes, I do know quite a bit about his origins. It's a funny story, actually. I'm sure all of us would be happy to fill you in on what you're missing."

Chapter 634

The five of us shift our appearances as we float in a circle around the Vice Region's director.

It's a clear morning on the Dark Continent, with barely a cloud in the sky. With my advanced perception, I have a crystal-clear view of the entire Crimson City to my left and the slowly retracting abyss leading to an enormous black tower to my right.

The director is held up by my telekinesis, but his face contorts in confusion as we've all come to a stop.

The complete change in appearance from the man he knew as Mr. Freeman, and the distortion of the four guards sent here to greet him, only adds to his questions about the situation.

"What's all this about? Did I say something wrong? Is the Flame Emperor's origin a taboo subject? Am I not supposed to know?"

I shrug, looking the man in the eyes, then slowly spin him around in a circle so that he can get a good look at each of us while I continue to speak.

"No, of course you haven't said anything wrong. Out of any of the Regional Directors, I think you actually know more than even Mr. Freeman himself."

I can feel his heart rate speeding up as he takes in the new appearances of everyone, feeling the increase in pressure, realizing something is wrong here but not understanding what it is just yet. All he manages to reply once a full rotation brings him back to me is one line.

"You're... not Mr. Freeman?"

His face has returned to its pale state, as he's now positive something is terribly wrong, but I reply in a slow and calming tone, completely ignoring his last question.

"The Flame Emperor's origins? That is quite a long story... One that starts far back in the Vice Region, actually, if you look back far enough..."

I sigh, then grin and continue.

"However, I think it's best we start at a point that we can connect on. Earlier this year, there were some terrible surges that came out from the abyss and struck the Dark Continent pretty hard, especially in Sector 4. In fact, there was a labyrinth on the verge of collapse in Solara. Are you aware of this event?"

Brutus' mind wanders back in time, but as his face grows more pale and his heartbeat pounds out from his chest, all he can muster are a few more words.

"I—uh—yes, I do remember this..."

He gulps loudly as I use telekinesis to turn him slowly around in a circle again to get a good look at each of us for a second time.

"I don't know if you recall, there was a team of four new elites and a duo of seasoned elites tasked to handle this mission for you, yet betrayed on a whim for nothing more than a little business transaction with the current Sector 4 leader."

His face pales more, and sweat starts to trickle down his forehead as his eyes meet with each of ours, and he finally begins to recognize who is in front of him.

After multiple rank-ups, thousands of levels, trillions of mana control gained, and even multiple tiers of divine cores earned, all of us look far older, stronger, and more mature than we did the last time we met face-to-face.

I add to the point, looking off into the abyss, then back toward the director as he finishes his spin to look at me again, so I can set my point in stone.

"It's a shame only five of us could make it to our reunion. I'm sure Arie will meet you in some shape or form one day."

I let out a chuckle as I turn, unable to hold back my delight in seeing the psyche of this man crack once he hears me say one of my teammate's names.

He coughs, trying to murmur something out, but no words escape his lips.

The man shivers and shakes, while more sweat trickles down his temples, and I enjoy every second of this moment.

"It's me, Jay, the Flame Emperor."

With one hand, I create a small ball of black flames, and with the other, open a spatial magic portal to let the burnt remains of Mr. Freeman float out beside me.

"If it wasn't for you, I never would have had the extra push to become stronger. Exiled to the Dark Continent, forced to fake my own death, with the only path available to me being to rise through the ranks of the black markets rather than follow the simple rules of the Eight Great Regions..."

His pupils dilate, and he looks at my flames, then the charred bones and half-melted, barely recognizable gear that the Apex Region's director used to wear, and finally back into my eyes.

Stolen story; please report.

"This is all thanks to you. I took over each sector one by one and gained control of the trade industry on this continent. It was my only way to make connections with the powers back on the mainland, and eventually find my way into the Apex Region and kill your boss when he least expected it. I've got to say, without you, the downfall of the Eight Great Regions wouldn't have been possible."

I don't fully mean the words I say, but there is an underlying truth to it.

If I was never cut off from the association when I was, there's no telling where I would have ended up.

Back then, I was still naive to the world and the simple hierarchies of power and control that shape our everyday lives. It really was a blessing in disguise that I was thrown away from the structure that almost chained me to the Eight Great Regions, but it still feels awfully good to get revenge on the one who wronged me.

I extinguish the flames in my right hand and let Mr. Freeman's remains fall back into my storage, then rotate Brutus again in his shocked state.

Fisher is to my left, and he's the first to speak up next, with a similarly arrogant look on his face.

"Not so tough now, are ya, Mr. Director? I moved on to better things, but if Jay brings me an old enemy to vent my pent-up stress after a long day of work, who am I to refuse the chance to rub it in your face? Over four years of loyal work, and all you did was throw me away like a worthless tool..."

He shakes his head in disgust.

"Jay does have a point. If I wasn't thrown out to die, I probably wouldn't even be a B-Class hunter yet. Crazy how life works, isn't it?"

The director looks as if his soul has left his body as he stutters out a few words.

"N-No... You were all dead—there's no way—"

Lydia sends a kick flying into the director's stomach before he can finish his words.

He spits up an immense amount of blood and falls into a coughing fit.

Even though the kick used hardly a hundredth of her full power, just making physical contact with the man leaves divine threads in his blood-bonded armor and flesh that ripple through his body and instantly begin eating away at him.

The white-haired ice mage curses at the old man with an angry tone I've never heard from her before.

Abby creates a restoration circle beneath the old man to keep him from dying in the next few seconds, and this only gives Lydia more punches and kicks to let out her frustration.

For almost a full minute, the man is repeatedly beaten within an inch of his life and healed back to normal.

It's quite grotesque, but out of all of us, Lydia suffered the worst from the director's actions. She was captured and tortured for days, yet never gave up any information about us and believed wholeheartedly we would come to rescue her. She never even brought it up, or blamed anyone afterward.

It's only right I keep the director floating, and we all watch with straight faces as blood splatters through the air.

As all the life in the director's eyes fades away, and he's nothing but a husk of his former self from just minutes ago, Lydia finally lets out a sigh, and Fisher summons water magic for her to wash the blood from her fists and boots.

"That is all... I'm satisfied. It was nice meeting you again, Brutus. This will be our last encounter."

I continue turning him in mid-air, straightening his bowed head and slumped shoulders to look Abby in the eyes next.

She shrugs too and shakes her head.

"You know... At first I was mad at you, really mad. In my eyes, the Association was honorable, helping new hunters become strong and protecting citizens of the world from the monsters that escaped from dungeons. The day you let us die in the Dark Continent is the day I realized you're nothing more than a cog in a bigger system. This is all business to you, and every other higher-up in the Association is the same. Humans are just your tools to get tasks done. We're numbers and nothing more, so that's how I'll treat you now. It's a shame your territory is being taken over, but it's just business, right?"

She smirks, then nods to me to continue the rotation.

Maria's sharp blue eyes pierce through the director.

Deep down within her gaze, the carefree, bubbly, oblivious Maria is still present, but it's clear that countless battles and the betrayal that put her own life and those she cared about on the line has played a major role in shaping her new reality. It was one of the catalysts that allowed her to begin reaching into this endless pit of power she's been granted, and become ruthless.

"I wanted to show up to the Vice Region's headquarters and freeze that entire building to ice... Many times I considered it, but Jay always has a plan so I waited it out... I knew this time would come. A man who sacrifices his subordinates with no rhyme or reason, not even warning us that our mission was dangerous, selling us out for a partnership with Sector 4 just to make a little extra profit..."

She shakes her head, and her eyes glow blue while orange divine threads circulate around her body, ready for use.



She looks toward me, and I nod.

"I have no further questions for this man. All I wanted to do was show him how far we've come, and how big of a mistake he really made. I think Abby said it best: this is merely business. You decided to kill and replace us on a whim, so I guess we're just doing the same."

I smile, and we all activate our elemental magic to summon identical manifestations of handheld spears imbued with our soul energy.

Mine is dark red, Fisher's is cyan, Lydia's is white, Abby's is green, and Maria's is royal blue.

Simultaneously, we throw our spears forward, aimed at the man's heart. Some fly toward his chest, while others fly toward his back, but they're all aimed to kill.

The sky is lit up with colors as the five spears move toward their target.

Simultaneously, Abby activates her area of restoration and restore skill, and imbues her divine threads deep inside the skill and buff. Maria also activates her ice age buff and uses her royal blue soul energy to create a wave of ice, all imbued with divine threads as well.

The two waves of magic freeze the entire moment in time.

The director is hit in the heart by five spears, yelling out in pain as he realizes the world-ending error he's made. Yet, he's frozen solid milliseconds before he's killed. The man's mind and body are being constantly restored, while in constant pain on the edge of darkness, not allowing him to feel the bliss of death.

His yells cease as he's trapped inside the eternal prison of ice glowing with orange, blue, and green light.

All of us stare ahead at the scene and have a moment of silence, appreciating how far we've come.

Chapter 635

The sun continues to rise, and I proudly let my aura gently seep through my growing lands.

Business as usual goes on all throughout the Dark Continent, and a surprising weight of relief is lifted off my shoulders.

The Crimson City is growing faster than ever before, forming many new links of loyalty every few minutes during this morning rush hour, and the new connection to the 8 Great Regions will only make this growth skyrocket further.

The Abyss is retracting at a slow and steady rate, while simultaneously, my doubles are creating new dungeons to make new areas of dead land viable for new settlements to be built, making expansion more natural and appetizing for citizens.

My last remaining double is scouting out the island of Palmyra, watching a new shift of hunters coming out of their identical housing in a structured military fashion while the hunters on duty hand in their night's worth of loot.

The patterns and procedures are all being noted down, and after another cycle, my double will begin to look at the Finger Islands.

—

I share this moment of accomplishment with my teammates only for a matter of minutes before I break the silence.

"Well, good riddance. I'll need to extract some information from him in the future, but this is a fitting fate for him now."

My attention turns to the direction of the prison far out in the desert that was created to store and interrogate members of the association after the attack on the Crimson Dome, so I speak up again.

"I know just where to keep him until then."

I pull the block of ice imbued with soul energy and divine threads closer to me, then reach into my storage to pull out an item box and toss it to Maria on my right.

"That's for your next core progression. The yellow core. There should be enough inside there for all of you to make it to the next stage. Compressing them into true cores will be a far different issue..."

I turn the conversation back to business and explain exactly what's happened since I left them in an emergency state, and the shockwaves, surges, and Abyss are explained as best I can.

I let them in on the details of Mr. Freeman being a member of a society that rules this world, and that others like him, even stronger, are coming to battle for whatever is making itself known inside the Abyss.

Many questions are asked back, but I still don't have much information at all to share. I'm in the dark almost as much as all of them.

I fill them in on the expansion plans I've worked out with Rodrigo and Bri, then bring up the fact that I've made an alliance with the nation to our south; however, I leave out the small detail about Raven being close by right now.

We just had quite the moment, tying up the loose end by defeating the Director that screwed us all over. I feel it's best to introduce her on better terms; once the tinge of betrayal isn't fresh in our minds, and once everyone here is a bit stronger as well.

While my teammates are, in fact, the strongest hunters in all of the Dark Continent and 8 Great Regions, mere red and orange cores aren't going to be able to stack up against the overwhelming might of a True Core.

It's hard to even conceptualize to them right now that if I let down my protective barriers, they wouldn't be able to survive my aura alone...

I think to myself about possible tactics to expedite the process of awakening a True Core, like the time I used Green Divine fruits to speed up the process by thousands of times.

It usually takes decades, or even over a century to grow to the state I managed in a few weeks. Replicating the process with different tools won't be easy...

While the circulation of divine threads inside the bunker does expedite the process by 3-4x, it is nowhere near enough efficiency to bring them near my level of power within the mere days we have left until the other members of the order said they would arrive on the Dark Continent.

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

My head spins thinking of ideas, while Abby and Maria come up with a creative way to continue training while they wait for Lydia and Fisher to awaken their orange cores.

I nod once I'm done thinking and their planning comes to a close.

"Good. Get ready for another war... I don't know when or how strong you'll have to become, but that never held us back before. Train hard and plan for the worst."

I share my body double skill with Fisher and Lydia while giving my Absorption skill to Abby and Maria.

Fisher and Lydia will have to use constant Restoration potions made from Abby's skill, and the healing process will be a bit slower than if she was in the room with them; however, the small lag in progress will be beneficial.

During this time, they'll be able to farm levels in the labyrinth with their doubles, and Abby and Maria don't have to halt their progression either. They will be farming both levels and Mana Control on the highest floors until they're all ready to begin the Yellow Core awakening process.

Flashes of white light leave me floating above the desert alone with the Director trapped in a block of ice before me.

I turn and bring him back to the prison far from the city.

—

Once I touch down in front of the facility and greet the Crimson Army guards I left on duty before, I give them new instructions.

"We will be releasing the current prisoners, and adding a single one that you will continue to watch. There's been a change in ownership of the nation they came from."

Before, the only reason I was keeping them all here was because they followed orders from Mr. Freeman to attack the Crimson City.

While I resent them for it, and they should be thinking for themselves, some of them were incapable of that fact; under the elusive mind control of that man's ranked up buff.

"Line them up all outside the prison once I leave. They will receive new temporary contracts tasked to 15 to 45 days of labor to help us expand our borders. They will be paid out a standard rate once their contracts are complete and seen as free men if they wish to go separate ways. That is, as long as they don't act up during this probation time. I'll have a man sent here soon to pick them up."

One of my doubles creating dungeons in the Sector 2 deadzone is seeing all of this play out in real-time and knows that I'm talking to it specifically, so it comes flying this way while the guards separate and let me walk inside the prison while carrying a massive compacted ball of floating ice containing a single prisoner.

As I walk through the rows of cells, I use telekinesis and mana manipulation to take off their restraints and open the cell doors that hold them. I let the small pieces of black originator stone fall into my item storage.

Then, use a [Heavy Hand] to increase the gravity in the room while I speak up.

"You're all going to be free soon. I have a single job to be done, then you may all go back to the Apex Region in peace."

Many of the prisoners wince under the pressure, but as I lift it, many become interested in my words as they've been starved of stimulation for a few days.

"I know this attack you all took part in was not the result of a direct choice from all of you. Some didn't have the correct information, and others were under the influence of subtle mind control. I'd like to give you all a second chance, and I'm only doing so because luckily no one was killed during your stunt. The Dark Continent and 8 Great Regions have made a trade alliance, so you will work together with citizens here and show that we can get along... The process will take a few weeks, maybe a month, and in the end of it, you can all go back to your comfy suites in the Apex Region Headquarters for all I care. Understood?"

I increase the gravity one more time, then let the pressure go as I make it to the end of the hall with the Vice Region's director floating before me.

"You either agree, or you stay in here with him."

At this, everyone in the prison leaves their cells and walks out to be pushed into a long line at the entrance of the prison, waiting for my double to arrive and get them started on the half-Dark Continent, half-8 Great Regions team of workers that will take down the wall that separates our nations.

I plan to have many news outlets get a hold of this sight to get the word of the merging of nations out in a more natural way than just the Association workers leaking it to their friends and family.

The doors to the prison shut, and all that's left is the Director frozen solid, staring straight ahead in constant pain, shock, and dread.

I let out a sigh while using my soul energy, mana manipulation, and small amounts of divine threads to seep into the floors and walls of this prison to reinforce its strength; then let the Director down with a thud.

"Enjoy your stay, it's going to be quite a while..."

I stare forward at him for a few more seconds, then turn around and crush all of the lights on the way out with telekinesis to make the prison go dark, and the only glow comes from the back wall where the frozen man rests in eternal solitude.

While I open the door to leave, three new wells of gravity tickle my senses far away. One seems strong enough to be a yellow core, while the others are a similar strength to Abby and Maria.

It's coming from Valor City, but this is close enough for me to use my enemy detection.

Once I take a step out the prison's front door and send a pulse to get a scan; for some reason, these three beings don't have any normal stats or levels and don't appear on my system interface at all.

The only energy sources within them I sense are Divine Energy and Qi.

Chapter 636

The signal I'm receiving from the direction of Valor City is weak, but I'm positive there are three divine-cored beings there, just concealed by something...

Something is blocking me from seeing exactly where they are, and most importantly, blocking me from seeing them as being connected to the system itself.

My curiosity is piqued, and I walk straight out the door and hover upward as it closes, leaving the man and woman from the Crimson Army to keep the former prisoners in line while my double makes its way over to handle these hunters.

I get a local telepathy transmission from Raven as we float higher into the sky.

"You have more divine-cored friends than I thought. They're strong, and by the looks of it, very loyal because of a long history of growing together."

I turn my head toward Sector 1 and reply.

"If you're talking about the four you just saw, yes, we built this empire together. I thank you for staying concealed while we shared a moment. There are a few others you have yet to meet. However, the three you sense to the north... I've never sensed them before."

My gaze tightens, and I pull a teleport crystal from my storage that leads to the Galeheart Tower.

As we fly high out of sight from the hunters below, my double arrives, and I crush the white crystal while Raven's hand materializes to touch my shoulder and come for the ride.

The blinding white flash of light fades, and I find myself back in the mana-shielded lobby I've been to many times before, with familiar lobby men greeting me the moment I arrive.

"Welcome back Sir, it has been a while. Lith has been waiting for your return to bring you good news!"

I raise an eyebrow at the greeting as Raven disappears faster than the B-Class-rated guards are capable of seeing, then reply.

"Is that so...? Lith is here now? What is this good news?"

Simultaneously, I let out a deeper scan of the city now that I'm here to see what's really going on, and the readings I get back are quite confusing.

As I watch dozens of status screens and vitals within my Rising Emperor's Domain interface light up within the tower I'm standing in, the lobby man continues.

"I'll send him down right away. It's about those arena fighters you brought in after the battle with the Dark One. A visitor came by today and healed them all back to perfect health."

My curiosity grows as my enemy detection link shows me visuals of all of the members he speaks of, up and active, either training in private facilities within the tower, reading in the libraries, or eating in the dining halls.

They're all full of energy and life, when not too long ago, they were barely opening their eyes for an hour a day.

The methods Monk was using were working slow and steady, and with the increase in available Qi he was able to farm while I was away at the B-Class exams, I assumed the healing process to get a little bit faster, but a full recovery this quickly was not within my expectations.

My senses permeate further throughout the city as the lobby man contacts Lith, and the sensor on the elevator lights up to show it's in use.

I instantly pinpoint the source of the three divine cores; they're underground, inside the blackstone pyramid.

I can't sense fully inside, as the many layers of dense Qi and hard black stone that reject taking in any energy make up the entire fortress, but I'm positive there is divine energy coming from it.

It doesn't feel hostile, and my best guess is that this miraculous recovery of all of the arena fighters is definitely connected to this source of energy and the guest the lobby man mentioned. However, before I can think too much on the fact, the elevator opens and Lith walks out with a smile across his face.

"Jay! Welcome back! What a coincidence you've shown up the day everyone was healed."

I tighten my gaze even more as he approaches and reply.

"I don't think this is a coincidence at all... Who healed the injured fighters...? And how? We tried everything. Even Abby's magic didn't bring them back."

Lith motions for me to come closer and join him in the elevator while he responds.

"It was a friend of Monk. He brought him along for the daily healing procedures. I never would have let anyone in without your permission, but the old man Monk called his master was healed by the visitor too, and—"

I nod and become even more curious as I enter the elevator.

This explains a few more things to me. The fact that I only sense Qi and no mana in these beings, and the link to Monk and his master now makes sense as to why Lith would comply and let this mysterious visitor into the facilities.

"Good. You did nothing wrong. If they're a friend of Monk's, then they're a friend of mine. I want to meet with them right away."

I enter the elevator, and Lith presses the button to bring us to the ground floor. I talk again as it dings open.

"Oh—and nice to see you again. I hope business is booming here in Sector 1? Bri handles the accounting reports. I remember the numbers were rising, but I don't know exactly by how much."

Lith pridefully leads me out into the desolate streets of the center of Valor City, leading myself and Raven in stealth mode toward the platinum walls.

"Yes, revenue in Valor City is up by over double this month versus last. The new trade routes built connecting us to Sector 4 and Sector 2, including all the smaller villages in between, have brought an absurd amount of foot traffic."

He smiles to himself as I send out another pulse of perception now that we're outside.

"Even the lower trade cities, where more common products are sold, are benefiting greatly, as many traders and even tourists are coming over from Solara. At this rate, we'll need to expand the city soon."

I smile back as we are let into the platinum district by Lith's Royal Guards.

"Of course, say the word and I'll have as many builders here to begin whatever projects are necessary. We've just merged with the 8 Great Regions, after all. This traffic is just the start. I think

a few dungeon hubs available to the public would make this place stand out even more. It'd stimulate the economy even further."

Lith's eyes widen, surprised at my claim that the nations have merged, but he adapts to the new idea quickly and responds with other building and trading possibilities. He is originally from the 8 Great Regions after all and merely moved out here for fewer regulations and more opportunity to grow.

Over the decades of trading experience, he's most likely adapted to all kinds of mayhem, so this is no different.

By the time Monk's black pyramid comes into view, we've strategized and decided on a nationwide public auction business that he'd like to make known and travel from region to region, selling rare loot to the elites and businessmen of every new nation I create and expand to.

He helps me, I help him. I own this entire dual nation, so every bronze spent, no matter where it is, will be taxed. Every business expansion, large or small, works out in my favor. Whatever Lith wants to do is fine by me.

I have far bigger things to worry about right now.

We stop in front of the rectangular opening of the black stone pyramid that I know so well. However, now, with the small amount of knowledge I have about this odd black stone material that makes it up, the entire structure is far more eerie to me.

The fact that an entire booming city and economy was built around it, but the ones that live inside continue in their ways and don't conform with the ongoing world around them, makes me wonder if it's a deliberate reflection of the fact that Qi was always here, even before the mana and dungeons transformed this world.

While my mind wanders, footsteps walk down the dark black hall. Yet, thanks to my Rising Emperor's Domain interface, it's no surprise who shows their face once they walk out.

It's Monk, wearing his signature orange robe, and showing me a thin smile matched with a calm white aura.

He bows before me, and Monk speaks up once his eyes meet mine again.

"You've come back, and just in time. I take it this means you've sensed his return."

I don't exactly know what to say back for a moment but nod and reply.

"Sure, I don't know what I've sensed... and if they're a friend of yours, consider them a friend of mine. I just know whoever is in your temple right now is extremely powerful, and I'd like to meet them and learn how exactly they healed all of our allies..."

Monk turns around and starts to walk into the dark black entrance hall.

"Of course, a meeting is already planned. He's been waiting for you, after all."

I follow close behind, however, Monk's next words make my eyes widen, and so many more questions spin through my mind.

"There was a message he wanted to tell you before you walked in, it's that Raven is welcome to join the meeting as well."

I don't directly reply to Monk's statement, as I know the strength of the people that are here, and am quite positive there is no way they can sense Raven.

"Great, I'd like to meet them right away."

Then, I say goodbye to Lith, sending him a mental wave of telepathy, linking him with another one of my doubles and Bri thousands of kilometers away in a three-way channel to continue discussing the business idea we came up with on my way over.

He turns away with a smile while I follow Monk into his temple without commenting on the fact that whoever is here knows of Raven, and was expecting my arrival as well.

As we walk into the black stone hallway, I feel the familiar sensation of my system and access to mana-based skills waver in and out of use. However, unlike the many times in the past when, once I got far enough inside, my system would go completely dark, the divine energy tethering to my being sets up a natural barrier between myself and the stone I walk on.

I can feel it is not purely a sensory manifestation either, as Monk's attributes are all greyed out in my senses because he's touching the stone.

Raven, who walks behind me completely in stealth mode, is also still connected to the system.

It is a mystery to me if this is because of my purple barrier, my true core's strength to overpower the stone, some mutation in my abilities, or something completely different.

The only thing that is at the forefront of my mind escapes my lips while Monk presses his hand against the closed entrance door at the end of the hall.

"Who exactly is it that I'm meeting...?"

As the door opens after it blinks bright white with Qi, and Monk leads us down the stairs into the main entrance hall of the temple, he responds.

"Our founder has returned. The Saint. The one closest to the truth of the Originators, he who taught us the ancient Qi manipulation techniques."

I raise an eyebrow at his words and reply back as we walk through the mildly crowded dining hall.

"Yes, I heard your leader was healed by the visitor as well... but who is he?"

Monk smiles as we turn a corner and begin walking down a familiar hall lined with doorways of training rooms, where he awakened my Qi and where I trained many long hours with him, Abby, and Maria during the time Valor City was still under the control of the Dark One.

"Yes, he was healed. But my master is not the founder; he is only the local master of this temple. It is quite an honor to see him in the flesh. Today was my first time seeing him. Many thought he was just another myth to keep us hopeful for the future, just like the Originators themselves; but I always had faith, and he is real..."

Now my curiosity grows even stronger.

Whoever these divine core individuals are, they are connected to this temple, and their appearance here and now is surely correlated with the appearance of the black tower and the abyss retracting.

However, the last key piece of information isn't quite making sense. It's the mention of Raven's name...



We walk further down the hall, and my perception of the three gravity wells gets closer, yet it's still incredibly dampened by all of the dead space of the black walls, ceilings, and floors around me.

Monk finally stops in front of a door, sends a pulse of Qi into it to let it click open, then steps back and motions for me to walk through.

I walk inside, and the training room looks exactly like any other.

The large portion of open sparring space is empty, and the air is dense with Qi.

However, to my left, in the area full of weapons, crates of materials, and a table to sit at in the resting area, I see an old man sitting behind it and two younger warriors at opposite ends sitting by his sides.

Their bodies are completely covered in extremely dense white barriers of Qi, and from deep within, I sense the faint glow of divine light seeping out from both of them, but not enough to emit a powerful aura on their surroundings.

The old man's gaze locks with mine as I enter the room and the door behind me shuts.

We don't say any words to each other for a few seconds, and I send out more and more pulses of perception at him to try and figure out what I'm looking at.

The longer I stare, the less it makes sense.

If my eyes weren't looking at the three men before me, I wouldn't have believed they were here.

My system interface doesn't even pick up levels or any greyed-out readings at all, it's like they're unawakened... without a drop of mana in their bodies.

Yet, the deeper I look into their beings, the odder it gets. They don't even seem to have bodies at all. Every fiber of their flesh and blood comes back to my mental readings as pure Qi, tethered with Divine Energy floating out from their cores.

It's similar to the technique that I've watched Monk and his master perform before; however, this is no greater form or system ability animating in front of me—it seems to be their actual bodies... or more like, lack of bodies...

I stop my slow walk toward them once I'm just a few meters in front of the table and nod with my arms crossed.

"I hear you were already expecting me, so... there's no need for a subtle introduction. Who are you and why are you here?"

The old man doesn't move his gaze from mine. However, the two orange-cored men look me up and down curiously with an air of innocence around them.

He replies, and his tone is extremely soft, higher-pitched, and calming; not exactly what I expected to hear.

"My people refer to me as The Saint, but that is merely a title, as your people call you The Flame Emperor."

He pauses, and finally takes his gaze away from mine and looks around the room.

"Is she here? Raven. I watched your battle very closely; it was quite a magnificent exchange."

My eyes widen, but the old man continues to speak.

"Even if she hasn't made it here today, I'm glad she was able to fight again. I haven't seen her be so free-spirited in battle since the day she joined the Order..."

He smiles and looks up at the ceiling as if he's remembering something.

"I left the public eye many years ago, but it seemed like the light of hope was already beaten out of her. I'm glad someone relit that flame, allowing her to take a new path, and just as the throne showed itself again. Great timing indeed."

I open my mouth to speak and raise a finger, but no words come out.

He's just confirmed so many of my suspicions in less than a minute that there are hardly any more questions to ask...

After a pause, I'm finally about to speak, but to my surprise, Raven materializes out of thin air beside me and beats me to it.

"It's you... The Order member that went dark just a couple of years after I joined.... How did you know I was here?"

The moment she appears, an immense wave of yellow threads fills the room, and begins tearing through the thick Qi defenses of the three men before us.

Raven isn't even in attack mode, or releasing an exceptional amount of her aura, but I can tell if she's in such close proximity for many seconds longer they will be in fatal danger.

I reflexively grab her wrist and mimic the purple barrier-sharing technique I used on the Lich King when I wanted to mask his identity.

The intensity in the room immediately stops heightening once every spare thread is pushed back into her body by the purple barrier, yet there is already a large amount still contaminating the air.

It's making the orange cores lightheaded, and a look of worry mixed with interest comes across the yellow-cored old man's face as I perform my next task.

Activating the innate properties of my true core's absorption technique, and the new ability I managed to steal from the man of threads in the dark forest, tendrils of pure divine energy wrapped in dense mana come out from my body and fill the room to soak up all of the excess threads in a matter of seconds.

The room falls silent once the crisis is averted, and the old man smiles as he replies.

"Incredible... even now, touching the Type-A Originator stone, you're able to use mana with such ease."

His wandering eyes come back to Raven, then he speaks again.

"And Raven—it was merely an assumption that you would arrive. You have nothing to fear, I could not sense your presence."

She takes a deep breath, and I feel her heartbeat slow back down as she gets out of an attack stance and stands up straight.

"Well... then, good. I guess there wouldn't be a threat from you anyway. Our pact still stands... However, why have you returned? To take your chance at the throne too? Or have the big three sent you here to spy on us...? Or—"

He cuts her off with a chuckle.

"I'm not even connected to the system, it would be impossible for me to walk through the doors. My dreams of claiming the throne were lost long ago, and my disdain for the big three has not wavered. I'm not your enemy or competition, just a helping hand to offer information to an ally in the next great war that is soon to begin."

I take a step forward, now with all of the pieces of this puzzle starting to come together in my head.

"What information is so important that you've shown yourself now, after many decades of hiding? - And what is it that you want in return?"

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"What is it that I have to offer?"

The old man thinks to himself for a moment, then speaks again.

"I could offer many things. Our ancient techniques, allowing one to let go of their physical body and even separate from the system itself; however, you have awakened your true core and have begun to walk down a far different path. Learning our way would only be a hindrance to your progression."

He smiles.

"What I can offer you is new information. I've studied this world and awaited this day for over three centuries. My natural end is near, and I feel it is my duty to pass on knowledge to a candidate for the throne I believe will serve this world's future the best."

He chuckles to himself while looking back up at the ceiling.

"And what is it that I want? Nothing is free in this world anymore, isn't that right...?"

He sighs, and the two younger men by his sides, who look not much older than myself, still stare at me with eyes of awe.

"All I want is to make sure this world stays in the hands of the humans. That we do not become merely a number, forgotten in the cosmic scale of the system's great game. Could I at least have your word that you will never forget your humanity?"

I raise an eyebrow, and after a pause, reply.

"That's an easy enough request. I'll accept... What do you mean by the system's great game...? And before—you said you couldn't challenge the throne even if you wanted to because you're not connected to the system... How is this so?"

The old man's eyes tighten their gaze, and the corner of his lips turn upward.

"Right down to business, that does seem to be your style."

I nod and await his next words.

"It is true, I am not connected to the system as some of my disciples, and a majority of this world, are. This is because I started my progression down this path long before this world linked to the source. I tempered my body and mind using a power source that is actively being forgotten by this universe—Qi."

I open my mouth to ask more, but the old man continues his speech before I do.

"It is the remnant of an old system that has long been forgotten and eroded away into nothing but a pure and strange energy source left behind. Who made it? Who controlled it? Why is it everywhere—in our soil, air, and imbued in undetectable artifacts scattered among this world? There is no definitive answer to these questions..."

He stares me in the eyes.

"Just as in a million years, a new race born on a planet far away may begin their exploration of the stars and find thick mana shielding that has decayed for millennia here. There is no correct translation for the ancient texts, just as many scientists and craftsmen today debate the correct or most efficient use of mana to create potions and gear."

He lets out a sigh and looks back up at the ceiling.

"So know this: what I tell you are my personal predictions and observations. Reality has a way of shifting its gaze when great forces interact with it."

His words resonate deeply with other conversations I've had with Ember, Celia, and many others, but I've never heard anyone contextualize it quite like this.

The old man is saying that Qi wasn't always in this form, and there's no way for us to know the true secrets of what it was, as they're lost in time. An ancient technology, belonging to a long extinct race that most likely spread its power throughout many stars and worlds...

It is awe-inspiring, but at the same time makes me shiver as an understanding washes over me, and I reply.

"So mana... the system itself... it is the manifestation of a new powerful entity spreading its power from this so-called source. This is why you're calling it a game?"

I think back to my limited conversations with demons at the top of labyrinths, and their obsession with bringing pure mana from this world back to theirs, and the formation of dungeons, systematically growing and giving gifts of loot to hunters that allow them to grow stronger while draining them of mana when they use their skills within.

So many more things are starting to make sense, but at the same time, this opens up more and more holes of knowledge and possibilities that make my head spin.

The old man replies.

"That is quite a good theory—that mana is a tool for a larger entity to control every planet it touches. However, it is not the only source of power that is prevalent and spreading. If anything, demonic energy is the prominent energy in the local system. Just like mana, it too can be mixed with Qi to create a powerful Soul Energy. I was not aware of this fact until thirty years after the system connected to this world, and a Demon arrived to plant the throne."

Celia spoke of a similar thing happening on many other worlds, as demons would find a target, plant a seed, and slowly consume the world's energy until it was ready to awaken and be claimed.

However, Raven's eyes widen at this statement, as apparently this is very new knowledge to her.

She interjects.

"A Demon planted the throne? And you saw it? Do the other council members know of this fact?"

The Saint looks at Raven beside me and thinks for a moment before speaking again.

"I don't know if they're aware of this fact, but considering their control over the labyrinths in Central, I can only assume they know far more about the demons than we do. If anything, they may know it is futile for them to face the demons in their current forms and have brokered a deal long ago to sacrifice this world in exchange for survival. It is one of the major reasons I wish to help the Flame Emperor now. I've watched many kingdoms rise and fall. His has been the fastest and most promising, and it is where I wish to make my final bet on humanity."

I'm the one to interject next.

"Are you saying there are demons on this world who wield divine energy as well? Stronger than True Cores?"

He nods and turns to me.

"On this world? I'm not so sure. But waiting for their time to arrive once the throne awakens? I'm certain of it. The throne itself is a Type-C Originator artifact, it holds divine power, so it would make sense if they too wield this power."

I reply, remembering at the start of our conversation when he mentioned something similar to this as well...

"What is a Type-C Originator artifact...? And earlier you mentioned that it was impressive for me to be using mana while in contact with this temple? What does this all mean?"

Both of the orange-cored men sitting on the opposite ends of the table lean in as they're incredibly interested once I bring this question up. The Saint smiles at their curiosity and replies.

"A great question, we've been studying this phenomenon very closely the last few years. I'll give my disciples a chance to speak. Please, tell our guests our recent findings."

As the old man stops talking, the two men to his sides both perk up, and the one to his right speaks in a clear and confident tone.

"Type-A originator stone is what we are standing in right now, the most prominent type of ancient material found on this world. It stores Qi, can be used to craft interesting structures and perform simple tasks like the moving doors in this fortress; and most interesting of all, it completely negates pure mana and shuts off the system itself when physical contact is made."

The Saint nods and turns to his other disciple, and he speaks in a younger-sounding voice, excited to add to the conversation.

"Type-B originator artifacts are far more rare. We only found small traces of it while inside a Demonic Rift one time... It works almost the opposite as Type-A, storing pure Qi in the same capacity, but negating the use of demonic energy entirely."

The old man nods and finishes the explanations.

"Type-C is what we call any originator artifacts that react with divine energy in any way. Every time we've come in contact with them, we have never had a single study match results. It is rather unpredictable, no two Type-C artifacts are the same. Some absorb divine threads, others act as a barrier, some are unaffected, while others grow or shrink, some serve a purpose and become complex machines, or even become living entities once exposed. The strength of the divine energy certainly plays a role in the reaction as well—red, orange, yellow, there is always a different result. The only true definition I can give for this is strange."

As he describes this artifact type, my mind wanders back to the black seeds I found within Celia's construct, and the fact that they only reacted to my divine energy. The definition of "strange" is very fitting...

I don't reply just yet, and let the old man finish.

"The throne itself is one of these Type-C artifacts. Over the years, I've tried to study it many times, but something always makes me forget what I've learned or why I've even forgotten it. The closer to the throne I travel each time, the more bewildered I become once I leave. The only notes I've ever managed to take down were from the day I watched the demon place it on this world. It was that despite the throne's black appearance, deep within it, the energy it stored was made of a shimmering silver light."

The room goes silent as everyone is momentarily stumped by this conclusion, but my thoughts race.

Divine silver light... I've only encountered a similar description twice before.

Once within the silver shimmering core of the Lich King, and also within Ember's core; though his had a blend of golden and silver threads.

Divine Beasts are involved in this whole awakening as well...

I finally speak after a long pause.

"In that case, I think we should enter the Abyss and conduct a few more tests. I'd like to examine this throne myself before it awakens and more dangerous powers arrive."

The old man nods, then rises from his seat.

"As I hoped and expected, this will be a great opportunity. I'd also like to share my unique predictions of the trials you will face when the doors open. You will need every advantage you can get."