

Dungeon Diver: Stealing A Monster's Power

- Chapter 638

Chapter 638

"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." search the website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

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.

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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."

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Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, deep in the heart of the Association's Central Headquarters, a muscular man with bright red hair and a matching beard walks in circles in a large golden room.

His footsteps are light, almost like skips, and the air around him is full of silky yellow-white Divine Energy.

The room is hundreds of meters wide and dozens of meters high, yet it is extremely plain inside.

There is a single entrance and exit point, and on the other side of the room, there is a golden throne with a staircase leading up to it.

At its base, many tables and chairs lie empty, as though many speeches for a very important crowd have been spoken here in the past.

But now, the man walks in circles with a devious smile on his face at the opposite side of the room.

He mutters to himself as he thinks of grand plans, occasionally showing his mental breakthroughs in the form of massive displays of bright yellow flames emanating from his palms, tethered to their core with dense divine energy. Yet, once they hit the room's golden walls, the flames dissipate in an instant.

Even when the divine fireballs are thrown in seemingly random directions, headed toward the throne and stairs at the back of the room, they too are absorbed by the golden material, and the flames never disrupt the solid state of the room.

Deep below this golden coating, dense black stone lines the entire room and even makes up all of the artifacts within this tyrant's palace.

Not even the strongest flames of a True Core have any effect on the unique S-Grade shielding.

The man stops his pacing and pulls out an obsidian black cube with three bright yellow crystals on its face. He presses one of them, which burns the brightest.

"Shall I send out the scouts and prepare for a base to be built in the Dark Continent? The time is near..."

He smiles while pulling his finger from the crystal but holds the device in his palm as he continues to walk around the empty golden hall, leaving nothing but the light crackle of bright yellow flames that cover his body and the sound of his footsteps to fill the silence of the great room.

A few minutes go by, and the red-haired man gets back into a rhythmic display of walking in circles and thinking before another click sounds on the transmission device.

In a room coated in a dazzling silver lacquer, of a similar size to the last, there is another throne at its back with an identical staircase leading up to it.

However, everything below the first few steps is submerged in a super-cooled liquid that flows like water but has the white coloring and temperature of ice. Divine threads surge through the material, and they only manage to stay inside and not radiate out to the outside world because of the same dense black stone that lines this room.

Atop the throne, swirling the pool of divine energy beneath her, a woman sits with white hair buzz cut extremely short, and a muscular build that still holds the mystique of feminine curves. She wears nothing but a skin-tight glossy black material that covers portions of her body. It wriggles and moves to randomly expose areas of her striated muscles, feeding off the True Core's excess divine power.

It appears to be alive, made of originator stone, draining her divine core's essence as it wraps around her chest, legs, and shoulder to cover her vitals like armor.

The woman's white eyes stare at the black device on the arm of her throne that blares out the sound of the red-haired man's question.

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She lets out a sigh and raises a finger in the air, and the immense pool of white liquid ice swirls faster and faster at the base of the room until it all flows back into her finger, disappearing as if it was never there.

Her eyes pulse bright white a few times, then she answers the call.

"Redgrave. This world will be ours. There is no reason for us to rush the process now, especially as the Abyss has not yet revealed the number of doors that will open."

The white-eyed woman stands from her throne and looks at the shut door at the back of her room. Then, stretches her arms and puts on a smile as she realizes Redgrave isn't serious about his words and plays along.

"Then again, after Mr. Freeman's death, the 8 Great Regions must be in chaos by now. Maybe if we showed up now and cleared out those settlers with our presence alone, it would be doing them a favor."

The black tendrils of originator artifact that slither around her muscular body pulse with a yellow light, matching the excitement that builds up in her core, but a well-spoken, calm, and collected voice echoes through the transmission device, making her wandering thoughts cease.

"Both of you must have patience. There is a 9.93% chance that arriving five days early to the throne will result in an unnecessary fight breaking out among us. I advise we wait approximately 126 hours before arriving to limit our chances of fighting below 0.1%."

In a plain room, less than a quarter the size of the silver or gold, with nothing but a simple table and chair at its back facing the door, a man with pale skin, a jet-black suit, and thin-framed glasses sits.

The room itself is lined with the same unbreakable black shielding, yet the man inside doesn't test its limits. He has refused to coat it with an aesthetic wall covering like the other two as it is not necessary for its efficiency.

He stares down at a complicated system interface while pressing the small yellow crystal on the transmission device again.

"In addition to this fact, there are approximately 61.89 million citizens that reside in the 8 Great Regions and Dark Continent combined. If we arrive too early, our workers for the new world will be injured or even killed. We must conceal our presence until the doors reveal themselves."

He takes his finger off the device and goes back to staring at a fast-moving blue text interface in the dark black room.

Redgrave's flames fill his room again as he makes his voice sound impatient, but he smiles ear to ear, caring little about waiting a few more days.

"Come on, Beckman, what's a few million lives matter if we've already brokered half the new world away in your deal with the Demons."

Elara speaks up next, almost instantly after Redgrave's remark, as she begins walking down the steps of her throne to stretch her legs.

"It's been decades since you made that deal anyway, Beckman. I'm in the mood for a good fight. What if we just battle them for control? All three of us have become far stronger since that meeting. What's the worst that could happen if we broke the contract?"

She grins too, riling the meticulous man up for a bit of fun.

He replies after tapping away at his system interface in his dark lair for about a full minute before replying.

"It is our best course of action to honor the deal. Even now, if all three of us in our current forms were to face the Demon we met years ago, there would only be a 21.75% chance of our victory, and that would incur a minimum of one casualty between the three of us. It is not the optimal path to take moving forward. If we—"

Redgrave yells back through the transmission device, cutting him off from rambling endless numbers.

"Yeah, yeah—this again, I know. It was a joke. A joke, Beckman!"

Elara's chuckle sounds out through the transmission device before she adds to the conversation further.

"Thank you for your analysis, Beckman. I too was just having a bit of fun. There is no reason to stray from our deal. I won't leave the shelter until you believe the time is right... Though, one thing still makes me think. What do you make of the incident between Raven and Sebastian? Are we missing anything? Did she really kill the threat that ended Mr. Freeman?"

There's a long pause through the whole channel, but the man finally looks up from his dashboard and replies.

"There is a 95.68% chance that Raven has allowed them to live and aligned herself with the threat she was tasked to eliminate. Her death after the initial clash was certain—cause of death would be divine energy poisoning, without a doubt. Considering the resources available, she could not have survived without help. There is a 0.04% chance the threat she let survive would be strong enough to injure any of us if that is the display of their total power."

The man taps away at his interface, and numbers continue to pile up before his unchanging gaze.

After another moment of silence, the man speaks again.

"Redgrave, sending out a few scouts would be a great use of resources. Have a survey of the 8 Great Regions, The Dark Continent, and Raven's base conducted. If this Flame Emperor is a bigger threat than we initially anticipated, it would be best to nip things in the bud, even if the chances are minuscule. Anything that changes the odds of our ideal outcome must be eliminated."

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As multiple A-Class scouts are tasked with stealth missions across the world to survey the lands of three nations they believe to be in turmoil, the meeting in Monk's temple beneath Valor City continues.

While a quick history lesson on the old man's origins and his thoughts on the global economy shifting from education, natural resources, and real estate to dungeon diving and energy gathering is interesting, I'm more focused on the urgent future.

"These trials you speak of—tell me more. Why is everyone so certain these doors will open? I've done countless scans on the abyss, yet I can never sense anything within. Was there something I missed before it all awakened?"

I turn to Raven, then back to the old man.

"And the big three as well. I want to know everything about them. They'll be our biggest adversaries moving forward, correct?"

The old man smiles and glances toward the room's exit.

"To answer your questions about the trials and the abyss, I think it's best to explain further once we leave this temple. I can't use my mana equipment to show you the necessary data in here. As for the big three..."

He turns to Raven, and she responds to my second question.

"I know I haven't told you much, but that's because it's all I know. I've only met each of them a handful of times in my decades with the Order. I can give you physical descriptions and list the powers I'm aware of, but they stay in their fortresses, in central, to contain their power from the outside world. Even as a True Core, the few minutes I've spent in their presence made it feel like my mind and body were about to split in two. They're on another level..."

I mull over her words as we conclude the meeting and leave the underground fortress together.

Raven provides vague descriptions of the Big Three. She is most detailed about Redgrave's, as during her early days with the association, once she gained enough trust to become an A-Class hunter, he was the one who gave her private training in the great central labyrinth, helping her surpass level 10,000.

Other than Raven herself, the only three hunters on the planet above that rank are the big three.

Elara is another member she has encountered only a few times, but her aura alone made it impossible for Raven to remain nearby for more than a few seconds at a time.

Any region Elara touches turns to ice.

The Saint interjects, recalling that back when he was active in the Order, before Raven joined, Elara possessed a Type-C originator artifact used during battle. He mentions it was potent for both offense and defense, but he's only seen crystal footage of this feat, which is now archived after the first great war.

Neither the Saint nor Raven have much to share on Beckman. They describe him similarly: tall, pale, handsome, and unlike the others, he doesn't emit a powerful aura. Despite this, both felt in mortal danger every second they spent in his presence, though it was purely instinctual. There were no physical signs to justify the feeling.

Their insights give me mental images of the enemies at the top, but no clear strategy to face them, other than getting stronger for the inevitable clash.

My doubles are hard at work across many nations, ensuring my plan to rise in strength happens as soon as possible. I see real-time memories of pure mana being farmed from the artificial mountains in the west and brought into the Crimson City labyrinth.

In the few hours since it started, quadrillions of MP have been transported, as there are no other humans nearby for my doubles to hold back on, already elevating the labyrinth by a full floor.

A mental map of the island of Palmyra also forms in my mind as the day progresses. Even the finger islands are being surveyed, along with the locations of storage houses. By the time night falls, I'm confident a silent assassination of their dual tyrant leaders will be an easy feat, without anyone realizing what has been done.

I grin as we walk out of the temple as a group of three.

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The two orange-cored disciples remain in one of the training rooms while the three of us depart.

The Saint is far better than them at creating a thick layer of pure white Qi around his body, preventing any aura from leaking out as we pass by weaker humans.

Raven, on the other hand, needs to maintain physical contact with me to hold the purple barrier in place as we leave.

I share my concealment skill with her as we step out into the platinum district. I send a telepathic message to Lith, assuring him not to worry about the silent alarms that are triggered as we float upward and out of Valor City, heading toward the abyss

The Saint reaches into an item box, now reactivated in mana-rich air, and pulls out a recording crystal that was previously dormant.

"To answer your question about how and why we're certain the doors will open, this is why."

The crystal shows an old recording of a large black slab of stone in a dark room. Surrounding it are dozens of humans with bright red, orange, and yellow cores in their chests.

The video rotates around the slab, revealing illegible writing carved into it in an unknown language. The rotating stops at a diagram depicting a large tower with archways opening at its base.

More diagrams of oddly shaped creatures standing before the doors are etched into the stone.

The recording zooms in on a depiction of one of the doors opening, with a creature stepping inside.

The image freezes for a few seconds, then cuts to a new scene of ancient writing—impossible to read.

The Saint allows the video to continue, showing different stone slabs and artifacts, with far fewer people in these recordings, as there are only texts, no images.

He ends the video prematurely and puts the crystal away, speaking again.

"There was once a large collection of artifacts open to anyone within an alliance with Order members. Their trusted guards could visit, and researchers and recorders were welcome to study and contribute to the common knowledge of the originator's texts."

He gazes off into the mountainous landscape of Sector 1 as we fly toward the abyss.

"This too was taken away from the public eye, reserved for the big three to study once the Demons planted the throne, discovered by the central scouting unit not long after. All I have left to study are my personal artifacts, occasional outings to the demonic realm when rift keys are found, and the limited recordings from earlier explorations."

I respond.

"So this is how you know of the doors, but what of the trials?"

The Saint nods as the endless darkness of the abyss comes into view, even as I suppress all my senses and aura to avoid disrupting life in the nearby villages.

"One of the oldest translated texts, above these visual depictions, states that for the throne of a world to be claimed, its strongest champions must pass through the doors together. A trial of the body, a trial of the mind, and a trial of the soul must be passed before one can challenge the other champions..."

He pauses, thinking, then continues.

"There's another well-studied text, it was discovered in another region of the world. It roughly translates to: 'The one who walks through the final door will be the champion that never stops climbing. The steps to the other side do not end. Only one who does not wish to pass through shall never die...' or something like that."

The old man pulls out his recording crystal again, scrolling through the tapes before showing a piece of stone with incoherent carvings. He flips it toward me, and the three of us look down at it as he continues.

"My theory is that these texts speak of different events, but they're all connected. Over the years, I've come to believe that the Demons have replicated originator technology, imbuing it with their power source, and spread their reign from world to world by creating events for their Arch Demons to compete and upgrade their cores in a final trial for a world."

I raise an eyebrow at the Saint's words. Everything he says makes sense, but it all connects from different angles.

The first new piece of information I've gathered today is that the pillar I see in the distance will be opening to accept challengers. This aligns with what Ember, The Lich King, Celia, and even Raven have told me so far.

However, the second line in the Saint's description sounds odd. The talk of immortality in these ancient texts doesn't quite fit with the facts I've heard from the true immortals or those closer to the source.

Celia described reaching immortality as a universe-bending event, one she spent her 800 years trying to master. Simply claiming a world doesn't seem like such an event if her own creation of the divine construct wasn't enough to satisfy this metric.

Ember's old descriptions of this feat to an immortal core also seem far off. His only mention of the throne awakening was that it was a challenge for Arch Demons to become lords.

So, I fixate on this fact, thinking the Saint's knowledge will be the most accurate here.

"I believe it's a challenge for the Arch Demons as well... I've spoken to a few, and they're all keen on climbing the ranks, bringing mana back to their realm, and I've heard the throne is their opportunity to rank up and become Demon Lords."

The old man's eyes gleam with understanding, and I follow up with a question.

"How strong was the Demon who came to plant the throne? You said even the big three in central likely made a deal with them, as they weren't fit to face them in their current forms. What did you mean by that? Were they stronger than us? Was it a green core?"

The Saint's eyes widen even further as we reach the edge of the Abyss in Sector 1, far from any villages or trade routes. I allow more of my perception and aura to leak out.

As soon as he begins to answer, more land falls under my perception, and I sense multiple gravity wells far in the distance closing in on my territory. They don't seem strong, but they're certainly divine core holders, and I've never encountered these individuals before.

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The Saint replies while my divine perception continues to seep out and locate 16 individual gravity wells of red and orange core hunters approaching.

"A demon with a green core? No... no. The one I witnessed plant the throne was a True Core Yellow, yet his aura was overwhelming even thousands of kilometers away... It was like witnessing a being that was not meant to be on this mortal plane. You do have quite the interesting theory, though. A green core is definitely something I've considered in my studies before. I too at one time believed there was a clear-cut way to rise above the True Yellow, but over the years I've come to have my doubts."

My gaze shifts back to him with a confused look, as I assumed with all of his knowledge of the Originators, Demons, and the system itself, my question about this green core would be nothing but a common-sense assumption.

He continues and makes me think about the rarity of the purple ring on my finger further.

"Just because I do not believe a green core exists, doesn't mean there is no other way to ascend."

He pulls out another recording crystal and shows me more tablets of writing I cannot comprehend. These particular recordings look far crisper and more recent; however, the tablets of stone themselves look much older and more ancient than the first set of recordings he showed.

"This is a piece from my personal collection, a tablet I found myself long before the system arrived on this world. It roughly translates: 'Those who are common, but wish to one day walk amongst the gods must let go of the body and walk between your world and the fabric of reality.'"

He shuts off the recording, and my mind is split between a few things.

The first thing is that it seems this man and his cult-like following of studying this ancient text have found their own way of preserving the mind, energy cores, and soul while substituting Qi in place of the physical body, tethering it all together with divine energy, as his interpretation of the text.

However, I have eyewitness proof that Qi is not necessary to achieve this feat. I've seen the green serpent, cyan and dark blue knights, and even Celia herself within her construct in pure energy forms.

Though, the interpretation of walking between this world and the fabric of reality does make me wonder if this has some reason as to why there are no physical beings above this rank in this world. The Divine Construct was in fact a separate space in a pocket dimension of its own...

Lastly, the age of the stone compared to the others makes me speculate the legitimacy of the writing even further. It was made here when mana was not rich on this world.

Yes, the Saint and other order members have had access to Qi and divine energy before the system arrived; but I still wonder if the Originators themselves used divine energy in its current form to reach this feat. Or, if they had solely Qi and the Saint's interpretation is correct and all of the newfound knowledge of divine threads today is misconstrued...

With many clashing thoughts racing through my mind, I choose not to jump to conclusions.

The last time I checked on my teammates beneath the Crimson City, Ember's consciousness was stirring. Once he wakes, all of my unanswered theories will have a truly knowledgeable source to combat them.

For now, I set these theories aside and reply with the most important news.

"We're being surrounded. Eleven red cores, and five orange. Half are approaching from the west to arrive in the 8 Great Regions, while the others come from the south, soon to be intercepting your Region, Raven."

I turn to both of them, and by the shocked looks on their faces, neither of them sensed these faraway sources or expected my response to be this at all.

Raven is the first to respond.

"They've sent scouts. This is definitely a spying expedition from Central."

Her tone is serious, but I don't feel any fluctuations in her energy levels or eagerness to fight.

The Saint, on the other hand, becomes rather startled once he hears Raven's words.

"We must leave..."

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His gaze meets the black tower in the distance, then he looks back toward Valor City where we came from.

I take a moment to think, then nod, and look back at Raven, understanding her cool and calm reaction now.

"You believe they're already well aware of our alliance?"

She nods.

"Yes, in their eyes, I should be dead right now. They likely know your strength already from the energy fluctuations broadcast to them during our fight through our transmission link. Them sending scouts is just a standard procedure most likely. They're going to check on the progress of the throne's awakening, the state of the nations nearby, and will most likely want a report on both of us to confirm their beliefs of our alliance. If we hide, it may do worse than just allowing them to see us working together."

I reply, coming up with a new plan.

"Then they aren't aware of my growth afterward, killing Sebastian, the string user..."

She shakes her head.

"Most likely not, but the scouts that arrive will have ways of accurately detecting divine energy fluctuations. They often come to my region to spy on my progress. This means they will get an accurate scan of your teammates as well."

The Saint interjects.

"We can conceal them all within the temple if we move fast enough."

I grin.

"No. That will not be necessary... Don't worry, this is very good. Raven, return to your region and conduct business as usual until they leave. I will not halt progress on expansion of the trade routes into the Dead Zone toward your region. If they already know we're working together, we must hide in plain sight. Make sure they get an accurate reading of your current unchanged strength level. Saint, stay concealed in the temple. I will be staying here, in the Dark Continent, out in the open for them to see. I don't want a single one of them injured or killed."

Raven replies.

"Understood."

Then sends another message through our telepathy link.

"I'll stay in contact with you here."

She takes her hand off my shoulder and disappears while I feel her geolocation rocketing off to the south to make it to her home volcanic region before the scouts arrive.

The Saint gives me a smile and reaches into his item box to pull out a handful of recording crystals.

"These are copies of the most influential texts. You may find hidden meaning in them that I do not. If you wish to talk more, please do visit the temple. I'm sorry our meeting was cut so short, and that I did not approach you earlier."

I smile back.

"You've arrived at the perfect time. I thank you for your insight and perspective on the awakening of the throne. I have a far greater understanding now than I did just yesterday. I'll continue my exploration alone, this silver light you speak of interests me. I want to see it for myself."

Then, I accept the blue recording crystals as the Saint bows in midair, then hurries off back toward Valor City in a flash of white and yellow light.

I turn back toward the abyss now, and once both of them are out of range, allow my true core's aura of divine thread to finally seep out from the purple barrier that holds it back.

However, instead of showing my full power, I hold back over two-thirds of it. Since my battle with Raven, I've recovered greatly while using hibernation, gained an immense amount of mana control, and most importantly, drained the True Core energy from Sebastian.

I want to give these spies a good taste of my power, but not the full amount.

As this version of my aura seeps outward, I hover forward, following the slow contraction of the dark demonic energy that creates a massive zone of black mist in the center of the Dark Continent.

Still, even with my aura of perception reaching out over 2,500 kilometers in all directions, it can hardly reach even a few meters into the darkness of the abyss.

Many months ago when I first saw this mass of darkness, and fought the weaker monsters that dwelled in its outer borders, I never imagined the scale of what truly lurks in its depths.

Even now, there is an air of mystery about what it will reveal once all of the darkness drains away to reveal the doors.

I open up my Rising Emperor's Domain interface while I hover above the darkness, moving closer to the center, and scroll down to Arie and Luna's names.

Their geopoints are still disconnected, last seen at the entrance point near Sector 4, outside of Solara.

However, some of their vitals do update every once in a while when I check back in.

They are all dark purple, unlike the light blue text that everyone else has.

It is just another routine check, however, at the bottom of both Luna and Arie's status today, a new buff is present on both of them. I can't help but plunge my full focus into it while the 16 scouts from Central all arrive in the 8 Great Regions, and Raven's Nation.

Luna's is the first to catch my attention, as it reads [Demonic Essence of The Ascended Chimera]. I click in to read more details, but nothing shows.

At the bottom of Arie's status, a new item reads [Demonic Essence of The Ascended Scorpion].

There are no stat boosts or interesting detailed reports on his item either, however both of these additions to their status' glow much brighter than the other items, skills, or

buffs. I don't know what exactly they do, but I can feel the power surging through my interface.

It's an intensity that makes me believe they have walked down a different path than me, but have managed to grow on their own terms these past few months. I can't help but smile as I look down into the depths of the abyss.

The feeling this bright purple glow gives off feels similar to that of the Saint traveling with me, yet also shares many similarities to that of an Arch Demon.

It makes me happy to know they've been progressing, but far more curious to know what secrets Arie and Luna have uncovered in their months within the Abyss in search of their home.

I think back to all of the old stories Arie told me about his village, and Qi exposure, meditating on originator stone at a young age before he even awakened a skill. They now hold far more weight in my mind knowing that this too must be connected to the massive black tower I drift closer to in the center of the abyss.

Chapter 642

[~3 Hours Later]

Sixteen Divine Cored Hunters arrive back at the central headquarters of the Association.

One of the orange cores is a young man who wields wind magic, dressed in green metallic association-branded armor.

He uses a transmission tablet and a spatial magic-imbued item box linked to all 15 of the other scouts to collect their findings from the extensive scan of the 8 Great Regions, Dark Continent, and Raven's volcanic base they've conducted.

Once all of the information is collected, he makes his way into a private S-Grade shielded room with many similarities to the Big Three's, though there are no special decorations and the thick outer layers are not as densely fortified, as it is made specifically for meetings between the red and orange cored guards.

After sifting through the information and noting down the key points of today's mission, he opens up a private line with his employer.

"Redgrave, I have the survey report ready for you as requested."

A click is heard on the other end, and the fire user's voice channels through.

"Send over the haul to Beckman, and provide me a summary. The others are on this line."

The wind user nods, activating the spatial magic enchantment on his item box, sending it directly to its creator in the dark confines of his bunker.

Once there's a click back, the orange core speaks up again.

"Done. Now, for a summary; you were correct in believing two True Cores have created a partnership. It appears Raven is in excellent condition, with a core capacity 10.22% greater than our last assessment of her three months ago. The reasoning behind this rapid jump seems to be the use of a unique healing magic used by her new allies. We have not pinpointed exactly what skill or item was used just yet."

There's a pause between both of them, and once the orange core assesses that Redgrave has nothing to add, he continues.

"In addition to this, it seems the assumption that the 8 Great Regions would fall into chaos with their leader being assassinated is not entirely correct. It seems the assistant of Mr. Freeman, an A-Class hunter named Rodrigo, and his biological sister, a former Black Market trader, have taken control of the region and kept the nation under control, sending out orders and fulfilling necessary protocol during the surges after the throne's awakening."

There's another pause, but the red-haired True Core responds with a question back.

"How is that possible? I remember permitting two other divine core awakenings in that nation; they are far more powerful than that assistant. Were the top A-Class hunters all assassinated by the Flame Emperor as well?"

"No, Sir. They are alive and well, following orders from the two new overseers of the 8 Great Regions for reasons we couldn't assess in a simple area scan. There is reason to believe the Flame Emperor has ties with them, as large-scale construction projects are taking place with Association workers, 8 Great Region citizens, and Dark Continent citizens all together. They are tearing down the wall that separates the Dark Continent from the outside world and making a trade route to connect the nations. We have surveillance of expansion to the west and south as well; they are moving into Sebastian's old territory and filling the dead zone of Sector 2 in the direction of Raven's territory."

Another long pause occurs before Redgrave replies.

"This is all within expectations. Once the world is ours, it's better we already have functioning societies and a well-connected grouping of nations to inherit rather than nations at war and chaos among citizens... Let the ants play."

A laugh echoes through the channel before Redgrave speaks again.

"What of the Flame Emperor himself, what is this man like? And his divine power level? I want an accurate reading of him and those close to him. What are we truly dealing with?"

There's another silent moment of anticipation as the orange-cored guard sifts through his notes and replies.

"Yes, we did in fact get an accurate scan of him. He was hovering above the abyss when we did so, using his full power to attempt to move closer to the throne..."

Redgrave's full attention is captured now, and even Elara's voice reaches the secure line.

"He was trying to approach the throne? Now? Is he crazy?... I'm starting to like this guy..."

Instead of mindlessly swirling the pool of white energy in her room, Elara smiles and her eyes lock on the transmission tablet as the orange core responds.

"Yes, it's true. The Flame Emperor's True Core strength looks to be about even with Raven's. It was approximately 5% higher when we conducted the scan, so the prediction of Beckman's battle calculations was spot on. He barely won their fight and decided to save Raven's life afterward. During our time there, the man sensed our approach within the Dark Continent, but did not retaliate and let us conduct a thorough survey without any questions or resistance."

There's a pause, and no one speaks on the line, wanting to hear more, so the scout continues.

"He managed to make it deep into the abyss. Hundreds of kilometers even. Our highest-level orange core scouts tried to follow, but the pressure became far too immense. Many who had to return reported the sensation of a silver flash of light in their vision, and no recollection of the events that led them to retreat from approaching the tower. It seems the Flame Emperor himself witnessed this too, as at one point he stopped his flight closer to the tower and turned around a few minutes later. We're unsure if he faced the same mental effects, but we do have reports of him flying back toward his primary base, the Crimson City. We have detailed readings of five other divine cores in the vicinity: four orange and one yellow."

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Beckman's yellow crystal glows bright next, and all that comes through the receiver is the sound of tapping as he sifts through the recording crystals and complex data from unique spatial magic readings within his room. He finally replies after a few seconds.

"The four orange cores are nothing to worry about. Two of them are far stronger than average, but they are not much stronger than a newly awakened yellow core... The current yellow core within that city, however... all of the readings we've received are corrupted. I cannot analyze the data properly... The pressure it emits on the environment is not nearly as extreme as the Flame Emperor's, so it is unlikely they are a True Core... but..."

More tapping and sifting sounds come through the receiver for a few more seconds.

"This is fine. Redgrave put it nicely, the ants may build in their sandbox if they wish. The tsunami that approaches will wipe them out no matter how tall the castles they build become."

Elara laughs and responds.

"How poetic of you, maybe there is some emotion under that tough outer shell after all."

His tapping continues for another few seconds, and he replies in a stale response.

"You know I have emotions, I merely find them limiting while using my analysis perk."

The tapping continues for another few seconds before he speaks again.

"With all of their forces combined, the odds they injure even one of us is still below 0.1%. However, I must know all of the data before we make our own approach to the Dark Continent. This unregistered yellow core with corrupted data is troubling. We shall send out another group of scouts to survey the area in 60 hours and 24 minutes. We do not want to spook the residents too much, but I want an accurate reading of this anomaly in your next outing."

A sigh comes out of Elara's crystal, then it clicks off.

The orange core immediately responds afterward.

"Yes, Sir, I'll relay the message and schedule another outing. Is there anything else you need from me?"

Beckman's line clicks off, as he feels there's no need to answer.

Redgrave speaks last.

"Alan, that is all that we needed. The Flame Emperor is no match for us, thank you for confirming what we already knew."

He laughs to himself, then the final line on the private link between the big three is cut completely.

The scout then leaves the S-Grade shielded room and goes on with his duties for the day, preparing the other divine guards for their next mission.

—

Back in the Dark Continent, I sit on top of the guildhall with all of my divine aura retracted within my purple barrier.

The sun is showing signs of setting in the next few hours, and I continue to replay the events of today in my head while hundreds of citizens walk through the inner city going about their days without a care in the world.

My memories are fairly blurry, as the last crystal clear image I have is sensing the presence of new powerful buffs on Luna and Arie's status, then I set off to do an analysis on the throne. However, the sensations I felt were relayed to my doubles in real time... So I can look back on a perfect depiction of what's occurred as many times as I wish.

—

[A Stitch Body Double of Memories, ~3 Hours Ago]

As I hover above the darkness, I think about diving in to see what lurks below. However, logically I come to the conclusion that there was no reason to dive into the dark depths of the abyss, as training with demonic monsters right now would only set me on a path that is not congruent with my goal.

What I decided to do was attempt to examine the black tower at a much closer proximity to see if what The Saint said about the throne containing silver divine energy was true.

The upgrade of my All-Seeing Eye skill has given me a peek into the very fabric of the universe when I imbue my True Core's full power into it, however, I'm unable to get an in-depth look at the tower from hundreds of kilometers away.

As I approach the tower, however, an eerie pressure fills the air.

If I were to relate it to anything, it would be similar to the pressure I felt when coming face to face with the green serpent for the first time within the divine construct.

However, there is no physical change in the atmosphere. I just feel the gravity itself getting heavier the closer I fly, and to an exponential degree.

Once I'm less than 100 kilometers from the tower, it's hard to breathe, and every airstep forward is moderately painful; it feels like the air is a heavy liquid. Though, visually it doesn't change at all.

I power through, getting about 30 km deeper into the odd gravity-rich air, but the intensity becomes hundreds of times greater.

I'm positive no one below the status of a True Core could survive this close to the tower, yet there are still about 70 kilometers of distance to travel...

Even so, I use the $\frac{1}{3}$ of my power that I've decided to allow the central government's scouts to witness, and send a pulse of perception into the throne using all of my buffs and my All-Seeing Eye to attempt to peer into the tower.

However, all I see in return is a glimpse of what's beyond the outer black layer, and that is an infinite wall of pure silver divine threads...

It's as if the material that made up the Lich King's core is layering the entire tower.

I perceive the entire outer layer, but it is impossible to see through.

Every millisecond I leave my perception activated, my mind screams at me to look away.

The longer I try to peer within, the brighter the silver threads become in my vision.

Less than a full second passes before I have to deactivate all of my perception buffs, and I reflexively turn around and fly away back to a less dense and dangerous area of the abyss with a pounding headache.

The further I get away from the tower, the more my mind tries to forget what it saw, but I keep the fragmented memories intact by sharing them with my doubles. It is no different of a feeling than staring into Ember's or the Lich King's core... just far more intense and menacing, like it has a mind of its own.

I feel the presence of the scouts as I make my way back to the city and think about what I've seen while monitoring the real-time memories of my doubles for the next 3 hours or so.

—

While I continue to ponder the events of examining the tower, memories of the double that is farming mana from the artificial mountains and siphoning them into the Crimson City labyrinth is one I'm very focused on.

I grin and turn my sights toward the canyon of dungeons, then begin to float toward it.

The labyrinth has reached 99 floors.

There's only one more before it has reached its max, and the demon inside will want to bring the mana back to its realm.

This is not what I want to happen right now... As I still need this labyrinth to train. I have my suspicions it can grow further, as mention of a larger labyrinth in Central was brought up by Raven many times before.

I'd like to see if I can broker a deal with this demon, and in the process, get more information from an outside source like itself on this mysterious throne that allows its race to rank up From Arch Demons to Demon Lords.

Chapter 643

I enter the canyon of dungeons and make my way down to the labyrinth.

There are hundreds of hunters farming in the dungeons all around, and dozens of Crimson Army hunters training on the mid-level floors of the labyrinth.

I dungeon walk all the way to the top, to the 99th floor, materializing with all of my mana and divine energy suppressed when I arrive in the final boss room.

I see a [Lv. 6908] Arch Demon, and a dark maroon-colored earth dragon sharing the same level, guarding this final floor.

Before they can even sense my presence, I send a wave of telepathy into the demon's psyche.

"Pluto, that was your name, wasn't it...? I've returned to renegotiate our deal, as the outside world is changing far faster than expected."

The three-meter-tall demon with red skin, curving black horns, and sharp white eyes turns its head to meet mine.

"The Flame Emperor, you've returned... I must admit, I didn't believe this labyrinth would grow so quickly. It usually takes decades, sometimes even centuries, for a labyrinth to mature."

Its eyes sharpen.

"But don't think your swiftness has changed the terms of our deal. I have a higher power I must obey in the Demonic Realm. Even if you are a peak-tier Arch Demon, I cannot swear my loyalty to you."

I step forward and take a look toward the earth dragon as Pluto jumps on top of it, and they both fly over to stand right before me.

I think back to our meeting long before I knew the true powers of this world. I, too, had no reason to believe I'd be reaching the upper floors of this labyrinth so fast when I first made a deal with this demon.

My eyes trail upward to read the system text in the boss room.

[Floors Available: 99/100]

[Mana Necessary to create next Floor: [0.0 Quintillion / 14.9 Quintillion]]

When I first made the deal, it took days for my doubles to farm just a few trillion MP. Now, the staggering amount necessary to level up the final floor from 99 to 100 could be completed by my double in just a few hours, considering all of the excess mana available in the artificial mountains.

I respond to the demon as he jumps off his dragon and meets me eye to eye less than five meters away.

"Our deal... It was that I'd let you return to the Demonic Realm to deliver the mana I've worked so hard to farm... and in return, once you have your freedom, you'd make a link of loyalty with me... and also, I'd give you a skill of your choosing. Was that it?"

I look up at the ceiling, rolling my eyes, not seeing much upside in this deal anymore.

The Arch Demon replies.

"You also assured me I would one day meet a Demon Lord in person, one that claims the throne of this world years down the line when that time comes."

I smirk.

"Well, as I said, times have changed. That throne is awakening in the next few days... and in order for this world to not be claimed by my adversaries, I'm going to need to change the terms of our deal."

I look up at the system text, then back down at the demon.

"There's a way to continue growing the floors, correct? Capping at level 7000 isn't going to cut it. I'm going to need a far stronger army than that. And..."

The demon's eyes widen as he responds.

"Already? The throne is awakening now? How is this possible? And—no—we cannot risk creating an extended labyrinth. We would have to grow it another 100 floors before I'd have the chance to return to my—"

I cut him off, letting some of my aura leak out from my purple barrier, instantly making him choke on his words and fall to his knees behind his dragon.

"Maybe I phrased things poorly. This isn't an offer, it is a demand. We'll be upgrading this labyrinth, or I'll drain every last drop of mana and create a new one with a demon that wants to cooperate."

Every few milliseconds that pass, I let the pressure from my aura rise by an increasing amount, making the floor crack and the entire boss room shake, while a small amount of my true core's essence leaks out from my barrier.

All of the bones of the demon and dragon are shattered, and their skin is melted and peeled off, pushing them both deep into the ground of the dungeon floor until I see their HP bars drop below 1%.

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Once they do, I retract all of the pressure back into my barrier and put on an obviously fake smile while levitating, opening, and pouring regeneration potions into their mouths.

A few seconds pass while green glowing light brings them back from the brink of death, and the demon crawls out from the hole in the boss room floor, now with a face showing far more fear and understanding.

"Y-You... You're an Ascended Arch Demon... That yellow power... How—"

I cut him off again, not knowing what he's rambling on about, but satisfied that he's understood my point.

"The reason I cannot let this mana be siphoned back to the Demonic Realm is because I will be the one who claims the throne."

The Arch Demon's eyes widen at my words, and I can feel many emotions conflicting in the creature's mind.

Its odd attraction of loyalty to another being far away starts to fade, and more admiration and awe toward me begins to grow. However, far more fear, unease, and distrust also permeate from the demon too.

I nod and speak again before these negative emotions grow further.

"I'll honor every part of our last deal. I will grant you a skill right now, anything of your choosing. Whether that's a human-only ability, an elemental power, or one of dungeon monsters, I will find it. Once this labyrinth reaches 200 floors, if you still wish to leave, I will honor it. And if you give me the chance, the demon lord you meet will be me."

I inwardly grin to myself while the admiration grows and the fear and distrust fade away, and the demon responds.

"You can truly grant elemental skills...? This is impossible, no demons can wield the elements of natural mana-born beings."

I activate all of my elemental skills, making shimmering balls of light of each of them rotate around in circles.

"Of course, anything you wish, and at the superior grade."

As these words leave my mouth, an idea hits me, and I have one of my body doubles leave their job creating dungeons to come fulfill a task of mine.

Instantly, one dungeon walks in to meet me here, and I share skill orbs that contain every elemental skill that I own that is stuck at [Extreme Grade].

It disappears in a blip, tasked to force-feed them to monsters that have enough proficiency points in this labyrinth on the high floors to use upgrade crystals, then kill them on the spot. Notifications of all of my extreme elemental skills upgrading to superior grade fill my inner ear.

The demon looks back at his dragon, then to me, and replies while these notifications fill my ears.

"An earth element, like my bonded dragon. This is what I want."

I nod, sending a telepathy wave to my double, who is farming on all of the higher-grade floors in this labyrinth, collecting rare loot while it continues to upgrade my elemental skills.

"Very well. I'll need some of your blood, and the dragon's too."

I can tell the demon is hesitant but is more so scared to say no after all that's happened in the last few minutes.

My double returns after waiting for the dead monsters to drop their loot, I collect a few liters of each of their blood.

Once my double returns and drops piles of high A-Grade loot, and a Superior Grade Earth element skill orb, I thank it, and it blips away, back to creating dungeons far out in the dead zone of Sector 2.

With a thin grin and in a nonchalant manner, I toss the skill orb to the demon and begin bonding the high-grade loot with millions of MP worth of mana crystals in my storage, along with high B and low A-Grade earth element stones to create blood-bonded armor, weapons, and enchanted gear for both the demon and the dragon.

They both stare in awe, as it looks as though I'm merely touching each of the raw loot materials, surrounding them in a flash of white light, and seconds later they give off intense auras of power, stacked with full stat buffs and percentages ranging from 300-500%+, with the ability to grow far more once the user goes through battle.

Once done, I look up at the demon and cross my arms.

"Swallow that skill orb, and the skill you desire will add onto your status. Plus, all of this gear will make you tens of times stronger in an instant. Do this, and we have a deal—the labyrinth shall surpass 100 floors today."

The Arch Demon is still in a state of shock and stares down at the blue orb with earth magic swirling in its center.

It takes a deep breath, then swallows the newly crafted item. Its body is enveloped in a bright white and blue glow.

Moments later, the superior earth summoning skill appears on its status, and if what it said is true, this is the first Arch Demon to wield elemental magic.

The demon places its hands out and summons large balls of dense and pure earth in its palms, then begins to laugh out loud.

"Incredible... The legends were true. There really are Ascended ones capable of manipulating the system itself..."

It equips the blood-bonded gear I've given to it, and the earth dragon equips the items I've crafted for it too, momentarily shrinking down into the human form of a demonic figure with dark brown skin and jet-black horns.

It makes me wonder if the ranked-up form of a dragon is dependent on the race of the being it's bonded with, but I don't pry, because I want to take advantage of this moment to ask something else.

"Now that you've accepted my gifts, our deal is set in stone. Though, I do have one last question for you. You called me an Ascended demon, because of my divine core... and now believe I'm strong enough to challenge the throne. Please, do explain what you mean by this..."

The dragon expands back into its dragon form, and the blood-bonded armor expands with it. The demon stops floating about testing his new powers and raises an eyebrow, then looks as if he's remembering something.

"Oh—that's right, you're a rogue... This makes me even more curious about your background. I thought only Arch Demon descendants and loyal contracted Beasts from the 5 Kingdoms were capable of becoming Ascended ones."

He pauses, waiting to see if I react to his words, then continues to explain while floating back down to the boss room floor.

"The path to becoming an ascended is a well kept secret. I am not high enough rank to know it. The only way for a demon to ever dream of walking this path is to bring back an offering to one of the 5 great families—that being the collected mana from a labyrinth on a mana-based world. This of course doesn't mean you will be chosen, but it is the most common way to become accepted into their ranks. It is a lifelong mission for all fledgling demons and greater demons to make it this far. Even the outer Ascended ranks, the Red Core Demonic Knights—these Arch Demon's would normally be powerful enough to rule most mana-based worlds. However, I was not aware a True Yellow Ascended like yourself was already here to claim it."

I'm at a loss for words at the demon's explanation, as he says it all with a straight face like it is common knowledge.

I slowly nod and respond while reaching into my item storage to pull out one of the red divine fragments I managed to steal from Sebastian.

"These Red Core Demonic Knights you speak of, and the power structure of demons within these 5 great families... Tell me more..."

Chapter 644

The Arch Demon looks at me, filled with curiosity once again.

"You really know nothing of the inner workings of the Demonic Realm? How far away from the capital were you born?"

I don't react to the question, and lift the red shimmering fragment of divine energy in front of the demon's face. Search the NovelFire.net website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

It stares into the beautiful glowing crystal full of vibrating divine threads, but judging by its expression, it has no idea what it is.

Eventually, the Demon responds.

"What... is that?"

My gaze tightens, and I let the fragment fall back into my item storage, but I notice the silent earth dragon behind the demon, its eyes widening, and a spike of surprise and quickened heartbeat make me believe it knows exactly what I just showed.

"Never mind. Just tell me about these Red Core Demonic Knights."

After a moment of silence, as I don't feel the need to respond, the demon continues to speak.

"Well... if you don't know about the knights, then you're truly a demon lost from society. You must have been raised far out in the Rift Lands..."

The Demon scratches his head in confusion, then looks up at the ceiling, as if trying to structure his thoughts.

"Well... I guess we can just start at the beginning. If you're a demon born in the capital, the only way to survive, grow, and earn your keep is by joining the army, diving into rifts that lead to mana-rich worlds. Sure, you could challenge the native demonic monsters of the realm to grow stronger, but they won't level up your mana-based system, which is more valuable for demons that want to apply for Labyrinth contracts."

I raise an eyebrow.

"Labyrinth contracts?"

The Demon smiles.

"Yes, just like the contract we made when you summoned me here. I had to train and level up for quite a long time before coming to this world. If I'd accepted a contract as a level one demon, the first human to challenge this construct would have killed me before I had a chance to fight back... It's an unspoken law that demons should at least rise from Fledgling to Greater before even considering applying for Labyrinth contracts. Many wait until they become Arch Demons even..."

A word sticks out to me, so I ask another question.

"You said construct... The Labyrinth is a construct?"

"Of course. It's merely another function of the system. They cost mana and activation stones to create, in the same proportions as a dungeon would. They are mana-based pocket worlds created for energy collection. All of the monsters inside are nothing more than rented avatars. Demons and dragons are the only ones truly putting their lives on the line here. Though, we get the highest potential reward at the end of it."

I open my mouth, but no words come out while I process his words.

The Demon continues.

"Like I said before, once a demon manages to pass the first test, growing a labyrinth to its mature state, they're able to bring the siphoned mana back to the demonic realm and offer it to one of the five great families of their choosing. That, or they can roam the world they've completed their contract in as a free and powerful Arch Demon..."

He pauses, then smiles.

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"There is no greater height an Arch Demon can climb than joining the personal army of one of the five Great Families... This is why I'm continuously confused by your claim that you're not a part of any of them... The prestige that comes with even joining the outer ranks as subordinates of the Red Core Demonic Knights is enough to live like a king and set up your family with generational wealth and power."

I nod, as the Demonic Realms hierarchy is beginning to make sense in my mind.

"How many Red Core Knights are there, and what do they do exactly? Are the families at war? Are there forces in the demonic realm that attack often? Or...?"

Pluto thinks to himself.

"In the capital, there hasn't been conflict for thousands of years. The demonic beasts that roam our realm are no match for the Red Core Demonic Knights. Ascended Arch Demons are truly on another level than all other demons and beasts... I—"

He looks at me timidly for a moment.

"—I'm sure you already knew this, being one yourself... I've never actually met one in person, other than a few glances at the Vermillion Family's public ceremonies when I was a Fledgling. I did get a glimpse of their 116th Red Core squad. It was led by a single Orange Core Commander, truly a magnificent sight. I could feel the demonic realm bending to their will with every step they took, even dozens of kilometers away."

These words seal the deal in my mind. The 'Ascended Demons' he speaks of are definitely divine core holders. By the sound of it, considering a single family has squads of these red cores that are numbered into the hundreds, there are truly an unfathomable amount of them in the demonic realm.

It makes me both uneasy and excited in the same breath.

Pluto continues to speak.

"Above the Orange Core Commanders, there are Yellow Generals, but I've never seen one with my own eyes. My family is not well-connected to any of the five Great Families, so this is really the true extent of my knowledge..."

I reply with another question.

"What about the family leaders? Who leads these Yellow Generals? You said there are other Demon Lords once when we first met... Where are they? Will they be coming to claim this throne too?"

The Demon shakes his head.

"I already told you I don't know much more... The families keep many things secret other than sprinkling hints among the public on how to join their ranks, giving us the tools to farm mana for the family of our choosing. More will be explained the higher we climb."

I become rather disappointed by his response, but it does make sense. Considering the day I met him, he only had a few hundred levels and was a very newly awakened Arch Demon. It's rather absurd for me to believe he knows everything about his home kingdom's inner workings.

It would be like asking a random new dungeon farmer in the Crimson City about the powers of the inner circle or how The Flame Emperor got so strong. Many of them don't

even know I exist; they're merely linked through a small thread of loyalty they subconsciously gave into, allowing them to enter through the Crimson Dome.

I click my tongue and nod.

"Understandable... What you've provided is already a great help—"

To my surprise, the earth dragon speaks up through a three-way telepathy link, allowing me to hear its slow, deep voice for the first time.

"You will not have to worry about other Demon Lords challenging the throne. Once an Ascended Arch Demon claims a world of their own, they never return to this realm. Many call them Green Core Lords. They are able to give orders through the five noble houses' thrones, but not even the Yellow Generals have seen the other Lords in the flesh."

My eyes widen at the dragon's words, as even more pieces of this massive puzzle fit together. I reply with another question.

"Where do dragons fit into all of this...? How do you know this knowledge? Last time I visited, you were still in your egg."

My gaze tightens as I search for a divine core hiding within this creature to make sense of its knowledge, but there is nothing—it is made purely of mana.

The slow reply through the telepathy link reaches my ears a few moments later.

"It is a complicated explanation. For context you must understand that Demons and dragons have always been intertwined within the system; dragons being the transcendent force of nature that is a catalyst for events to occur. Think of us as the final building block that holds the very fabric of these large system-based structures together. Without mana, we would not exist. Without bonding with a dragon, demons could not create labyrinths. The same goes for claiming the throne. One could have all of the building blocks to create a masterpiece, but without the glue, it is merely worthless material."

I try to understand his words, but it is a bit too abstract. I reply with a questioning gaze.

"How does that give you the knowledge of the past, if you were born here and never left this boss room...?"

I see the earth dragon grin for the first time as he responds.

"Dragons are all born with innate knowledge and shared memories of their ancestors... We are a collective, forever bonded with our Demonic Energy wielding counterparts. The amount of knowledge from other dragon's past lives that is shared is unlocked and

sent into our conscious minds more as we grow and become strong enough to add to the pool. We all share and grow the knowledge of the system together. That is, except for the Fallen One..."

Chapter 645

I immediately reply, as I've heard many monsters in the past refer to Ember using this name, but none have given me a clear answer.

"The Fallen One... Who are they..?—or what—have they done?"

The earth dragon's dark black eyes stare into mine, holding many secrets behind them, yet full of curiosity still.

"It sounds like you have heard of the legend too. There are only fractured memories from the pool of this being. A dragon that came before us all... Or at least far enough back before the collective was created. It is said that this one reached the heights above every dragon that has ever lived. Beyond the status of a mere green-cored lord, even beyond what some call the immortal core. The Fallen One made it to the source... Or at least, that is the only reasonable explanation."

The dragon pauses for a moment, and I feel its heartbeat speed up again, even faster.

"Well—We do not know this for sure. I am speculating from old legends traveling by word of mouth through generations of dragons. Maybe those of a higher rank than myself have personal experiences with the Fallen One. All collective memories of that being have been eroded from our minds. I can feel the presence of where they used to be, but if I try to look too deep, all that is in its place is a blinding golden light."

I let out a sigh, as yet again, I've learned a bit more but still hit another dead end right before learning of this secret that is dangled before me time and time again.

However, the knowledge they have shared has been more than satisfying.

I now know how demons are linked to this world, as a means of siphoning mana back to their home realm.

The fact that no one in the Order, or humans that study Originator relics, have heard of or seen any green core beings now makes far more sense as well.

These thrones must be part of the process in which a True Core ascends... which is why Demon Lords never return back to this world. As I've found in all of the beings in Celia's construct, the physical body fades away once one ascends.

Then again, it makes me wonder... What if my experiences with green divine energy twice before, mutating my cells, makes me different?

I mentally sift through my storage, finding the minuscule single-digit amount of green fruits left, and decide now is not the time to test anything dangerous. If I really want to do so, I need far more time and more green divine energy.

Right now, I come up with a different plan, as memories of the outside world from my body doubles tell me the sun is starting to set on the horizon.

I can't help but grin while I look the demon and dragon in the eyes.

"Would both of you like to become Red Core Demonic Knights in my army?"

Pluto's eyes widen as he replies.

"W-What do you mean? You have the ability to conduct an ascension ceremony?"

The earth dragon grins, and I just nod.

"Yes, I have the means to turn you both into red-cored ascended. I just want a few things in return."

Pluto takes a step forward and nods.

"What is it?"

Stolen from Royal Road, this story should be reported if encountered on Amazon.

I let a small amount of my divine essence out from my barrier again, enough to make them know I'm serious, but not enough to actually injure them this time.

"I want you both to swear loyalty to me, The Flame Emperor. Once you've ascended yourselves, I want you to bring me to the capital of the Demonic Realm."

My eyes glimmer, and the pure emotion of excitement and anticipation permeates off me while both the Demon and Dragon bow their heads.

The Dragon speaks first.

"A fair trade. If my second half agrees, I will be happy to serve you until the day I die. It would be an honor to follow the will of a True Core Ascended."

The Demon follows up.

"This was my dream all along, to even join an ascended rank. I cannot pass up the offer to become one. I, Pluto, swear my undying loyalty to the Flame Emperor. Your will is mine."

Two new links of loyalty form in my rising emperor's domain interface, and in return, I pull out a large pile of red divine fragments from my storage, and let them fall in front of both of their heads as they slowly raise them.

I share my self-regeneration skill with both of them and spend the next few minutes explaining the process of awakening their divine cores.

With my arms crossed, standing a good distance away, I watch both of them consume their first fragment and erupt with red threads of reality-bending divine power.

It takes a few minutes to die down to a manageable level, and for their bodies to begin the healing process. But once they do, both realize that with my assistance, this path is not a figment of their imaginations anymore; it is an inevitable outcome if they follow my instructions.

At the same time, one of my body doubles drops off a large amount of mana in the form of pure pink concentrated crystals on the floor below us, and the system counter on the ceiling of the boss room moves up by about 5%, signifying a few hundred quadrillion MP have been added.

I speak up proudly through our strengthened telepathy link now.

"Very good. We shall be in contact through this link from now on. Continue your awakening process; I have more business to attend to."

Both of them reply with nods as they're deep in concentration while gathering red threads at the back of the boss room.

I dungeon-walk away to join the Crimson Army members training on floors 50–55 of the labyrinth, facing monsters between levels 2000 and 2500, and share my absorption skill with each of them.

While they are all making great progress on their own, using my skill to gain much-needed MCP after every kill will strengthen them even faster.

—

A few hours pass as I help the army climb the floors of the labyrinth with a small percentage of my own mana control to boost their strength, surpassing floor 70, making months' worth of progress in a single afternoon.

The dozens of brave hunters that fought by my side in the battle against the Lich King months ago, and just recently protected the Crimson Dome and citizens from the Association's attacks, have multiplied their strength once again. Each and every one of them surpasses level 5000, and gain hundreds of billions of MCP.

Both making the power of my allies far stronger, but also creating an even larger pool of stats and mana control I can pull from using my rising emperor's domain in the future.

—

While watching them train, the live memories of my body doubles pass by and I periodically check on the demon and dragon at the top of the labyrinth. Eventually, two very impactful events occur.

The first being that the double collecting the mana from the artificial mountains finally farms enough mana to complete the final 100th floor. I sacrifice another 100 fragments of luminite, and there is a three-way agreement forged within the inner workings of the labyrinth's interface to not collapse it and make room for 100 more floors.

Now when I stare up at the ceiling, a new text box appears.

[Floors Available: 100/200]

[Mana Necessary to create next Floor: [0.0 Quintillion / 30.2 Quintillion]]

My double goes back to work siphoning mana from the immense supply in the mountains to the west.

At the current rate it's working, it will still take many hours per floor to grow it further, and the process will only get longer, but the second event that is fresh in my mind takes precedence over my immediate brainpower and main body's attention.

I activate my stealth skill, and use my mythic-grade body double's perk to switch places with the double many thousands of kilometers away.

It is the dead of night on the island of Palmyra, and I find myself standing in the center of the largest of the Finger Islands.

My double has finished its surveillance duties and now knows exactly how this society runs. Their facilities and working cycles have all been logged, and the daily routines of the divine cores and higher ups are noted as well.

There is no reason to hold back anymore.

I slowly walk toward the mansion that houses two Yellow Cored Order members. It is time to begin the next stage of the plan I devised with Raven. There is not much time left, and I must become strong enough to face the Big Three.

Chapter 646

The entire island of Palmyra is quiet.

Contracted hunters are deep within the mana-shielded structures down below me on the palm, farming away to fulfill their quotas.

A few high-level guards line the streets near the center of the cities, and on the finger islands, there are quite a few C and B-Class hunters awake, spending their leisure time inside the facilities.

However, on the largest finger island, the thumb, where I currently stand, there are only three other individuals present.

There are two strong yellow-cored individuals inside the large mansion at the back of the estate, and behind me, landing just as I arrive here, the red-cored A-Class hunter arrives carrying multiple containment cases full of item boxes from the long period of farming collected from the main island below.

He walks straight past me without noticing a thing, as I'm using stealth, and the doors of the large mansion open wide.

As he walks in, I slip in right behind as the high A-Grade shielded doors close behind him.

The young A-Class hunter's voice echoes through the entrance hall.

"Mr. Alfred and Ms. Fiona, the daily quotas have been met. We are scheduled to have a meeting with the District of Ashmore in 15 minutes."

There is some pain in his words, and as he walks further in, I watch his steps become slower.

Two figures stand at the back of the large entrance room, in front of an enormous curved bookcase that fills the entire back wall of the entrance hall.

There are art pieces on the walls and a few interesting statues, but it is rather bland.

The doors near the back of the room that lead to elevators and walkways to the main estate make me believe this is just the front hall they show to visitors. I can sense secret rooms and corridors behind this artificial main hall.

Though, my mind doesn't harp on that fact for long, it is more focused on the dense yellow divine threads permeating from their bodies.

The pressure is strong, and it seems to be suppressed a bit by their mana shielding, not to kill their A-Class red-cored guest; however, with my own eyes and advanced perception, I find that they're roughly the same strength as Mr. Freeman was.

Their cores aren't as damaged as the old Apex Region's director. They look slightly younger, but trying to guess a person's age when divine energy is involved is nearly impossible based on looks alone.

The man, presumably Mr. Alfred, is slightly stronger, standing with a well-groomed mustache, slicked-back hair, and sharp black-and-white professional attire. He is [Lv. 9901] and holds a superior wind magic skill.

He speaks up first and motions for the young man to come closer.

"Very good. We shall leave soon..."

He pauses and twists the ends of his mustache before asking another question.

"Do we have any updates on that new shipment? There were a few accidents this week with the surges, and we need to replace a few faulty units."

The red core stops after taking a few steps forward and bows his head before answering.

"Yes, sir, we had new contracts processed from central. There will be 400 new workers-I mean units... with 10-year contracts soon to replace the defects."

He nods a few times.

"I only ordered 350, but extra will do... Very good, thank you."

He turns to the woman beside him, who is slightly overweight, wearing a deep purple-colored dress and bright red lipstick. She is [Lv. 9785] and holds a superior water magic skill.

Ms. Fiona speaks up in a condescending and arrogant tone.

"Those 50 were for me. Have them shipped straight to the outer quarters on the estate. My last order died far too quickly."

She grins and looks at the young red core, and I feel his heartbeat rise far higher than before.

Alfred seems used to these antics, rolling his eyes and shrugging it off while speaking up again.

"Let me see the progress report and teleport crystals. Tensions are getting high in central ever since the incident with Raven and that rogue nation to the east. I want to make sure everything is in line not to get on Redgrave's bad side..."

The red-cored hunter places the two silver containment cases full of item boxes and a pair of teleport crystals down on the floor in front of them. Then, takes a few steps back while they approach, their aura spreading through the room, making the red core sweat.

Stolen novel; please report.

Alfred uses a small amount of wind magic to lift the delivered goods up to eye level, while the woman in the bright purple dress begins to fantasize about what kind of experiments she's going to do to the innocent hunters that will be shipped in soon.

The frightened red core just stands at the back of the room with a wide-eyed expression, and I decide there is no better time than now to finish what I came here to do.

Without any warning, I move forward in full stealth mode. I use my new True Core's ability combined with my mana manipulation skill to create an ultra-thin thread of pure divine energy and send it straight toward both of their necks.

Alfred holds a silver tablet filled with detailed check in logs and loot collection numbers up to eye level. My cut is so clean and finely executed that once it makes it all the way through, he doesn't even notice and continues to read through today's farming notes.

Fiona continues to blab on about how she hates going to the District of Ashmore, as its way too close to Central Headquarters, and how she's looking forward to taking a long hot bath when they get back. My thin thread of death slicing through her vocal cords doesn't even affect the words coming out of her mouth.

In the next moment, I deactivate my stealth skill but still hide my presence beneath my purple barrier, standing right behind the two of them.

The only person who can see me is the red-cored hunter, and his eyes widen even more as they lock with mine, and crimson liquid starts to drip from both of the Order Members' necks.

Two loud thuds echo through the entrance hall as their heads slide off their bodies and stain the floor beneath them with blood.

[Level Up] x313

[Level Up] x298

Notifications ring in my ears as my level reaches 7951. I absorb a few dozen trillion MCP and thrust my hands into the lifeless bodies of the man and woman to crush their yellow cores and absorb every last yellow thread in this room.

It adds to my total True Core's base by a little over 10%. Their combined essence is similar to about a third of what I absorbed after killing the bronze Earth Dragon Raven was riding in our battle.

As their bodies hit the floor, I use telekinesis to lift the containment cases full of teleport crystals and item boxes up in the air to land right into my hands so they don't get bloodied.

A few seconds later, the room falls silent, devoid of any energy other than the red aura permeating off of the now-shaking A-Class hunter.

"W-Who... How... No... What are you...? What- what just happened?"

He stammers out while I shift through the item boxes out of curiosity and activate the perk of my Superior-grade mana manipulation skill and True Core's ability.

Shimmering white and yellow threads come off my body and into the decapitated King and Queen of this island, turning their bodies into stone and pulling them upright while reattaching their heads.

I place concealment cloaks and amulets onto both of them, just as I did with the Lich King during the B-Class exams, while imbuing just enough divine energy into both of them to make it seem like they're still alive and well.

I reply to the pale A-Class hunter with a smile.

"Who am I? If the next hour goes the way I want it to, you will have the luxury of finding out. And what happened? Nothing at all."

I shrug and turn to the large bookshelf behind me.

While taking a step forward, I drop the containment cases on a clean portion of floor, then tap on my wrist while speaking up again.

"Wipe that startled look off your face. We have an important meeting in the District of Ashmore in less than 15 minutes."

While his eyes continue to widen, trying to process what's happening, I charge up a ball of pure mana and divine energy and launch it at the back wall filled with books, aiming for the near S-Grade shielding behind it.

There's a moment of slight resistance, but my attack breaks through, revealing exactly what I was looking for.

Large chests and advanced containment capsules, just like Sebastian had in the private rooms of his mansion.

These are far better guarded, as I don't believe anyone but a True Core could have broken through the walls of this hidden room with such ease, but that only spikes my curiosity more. There has to be something of immense value in here, none of the other secret rooms are so well protected.

I walk in and begin looking through every nook and cranny of this room I can access while the red core behind me collapses onto the floor in shock, unable to believe what just happened.

It's hard to tell if he's happy about it or not; all I feel coming off him is pure shock and fear.

Nonetheless, my search through the treasure and junk continues.

All kinds of rare loot from unique dungeons are kept here, as well as high-grade armor ranging from B-Grade up to even some gear that pushes 300-400% stat buffs.

I let it all fall into my item storage, as I'm sure it will be of value, but this isn't what I'm looking for...

"Where's the stash... I know you have it." I whisper under my breath while clearing out every single chest, item box, and containment case I can find.

Over two full minutes pass before I finally find a small black box inside an average-looking containment case.

Inside, a single spatial magic pouch rests.

"Jackpot..." I can't help but say as just under 3000 yellow divine fragments are found inside.

I take another full minute to double-check the whole room, and even do another scan of the mansion to look for other secret hiding chambers, but no other divine fragments are found.

At first, it surprises me that no red or orange fragments are here like in Sebastian's house, but as I think about it, what could they even use them for?

The insane madman most likely hoarded them for sentimental and nostalgic value, while this King and Queen most likely used these fragments to become stronger over the years and try to reach higher heights.

While it only took me a few hundred yellow fragments to condense my True Core, that isn't the normal case for others. I used many unorthodox means to increase the absorption efficiency and speed of the process.

For others, they won't even absorb single-digit percents of a fragment's full potential per consumption. Their healing capabilities are nowhere near as advanced as mine either.

I grin and sit down in the center of the trashed room, pouring out the contents of the entire 2981 yellow fragment stash.

Then, I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and plunge both hands into the glowing yellow pile while activating my innate True Core's talent.

My body glows bright yellow, and I feel the familiar heat surging through me while every single last fragment's energy flows through my bloodstream and condenses inside my True Core.

I let out a satisfying sigh while I stand back up a few minutes later, feeling over 50% stronger yet again. These fragments alone raise my True Core's base by over four times as much as absorbing the King and Queen's essence combined.

Then, I walk back into the main entrance hall of the mansion. The containment cases and red cored hunter are both lying on the ground with the deceased King and Queen standing over him.

"Get up, we have a meeting to attend."

Chapter 647

The A-Class hunter is still shaking with wide eyes, but over the last few minutes, he's come to terms with the reality in front of him.

He pushes himself up off the floor and stays as outwardly calm as possible while the dead king and queen stand on either side of me.

I speak up again while doing a quick scan of his status.

"How much time do we have...? And what can I call you?"

The [Lv. 2944] mage with two skills, Mythic Grade Dagger mastery and Extreme Grade Lightning Summoning, responds while pulling a silver tablet from his item box.

"Roughly two minutes...-and M-Marcus. You can call me Marcus."

I nod slowly.

"Good... Marcus. This is just enough time for you to tell me everything I need to know about the District of Ashmore. I'll be attending the meeting with you all. Is it another order member we'll be meeting there?"

The red-cored hunter responds in a shaky tone.

"The District of Ashmore is one of the main trading checkpoints in the outer ring of central headquarters. It's well secured... With emergency protocols much more dangerous than what we have here. Even the True Core's do business in Ashmore."

I cross my arms and listen to his lengthy descriptions of how the fortress works and what you can and cannot do. My curiosity grows, but he ends his description quickly as we don't have much more time to waste, and I'll be able to understand most of it when I arrive at first glance.

"We won't be there for long, it's just a simple drop-off of goods and pickup for new quotas, -And yes, of course, there will be another Order member present, Angelica runs the place- but how would you know of the Order... if... You're not one..."

He gulps mid-sentence as a wave of fresh terror washes over him.

"Wait... Have I said something I shouldn't have? This- isn't a test, is it...?"

He looks at the truly lifelike puppets of the king and queen, questioning if what he saw was all an act.

"Y- You're not one of the big three in disguise- Are you? -there's no one else that could have-"

I let out a small amount of pure mana control without any divine threads, and it's enough to stop him from talking further as I shake my head.

"No, this is no test. They're really dead. I am not allied with the Order..."

The hunter is pale, silent, and still questioning everything around him.

I just let out a sigh, as it doesn't look like I'll be getting any more information out of him in this state.

Then, I throw him the two teleport crystals and containment cases.

"Act as naturally as you can, we're going for a trip. You can ask all the questions you want when we're back."

The moment he catches the shimmering white crystal, I activate stealth and move to make contact with the young man's shoulder while bringing the king and queen in closer as well.

Marcus takes a deep breath in and out, silently praying to himself while closing his eyes and crushing the gem. A bright white light flashes, and the largest of the finger islands is left devoid of any divine cores moments later.

—

Thousands of kilometers away, a flash of white light appears on a teleport platform in the center of an empty circular room.

Marcus, the two lifelike statues, and I materialize onto the bright white floor, and I take in a very confusing sight and barrage of readings to my senses.

Everything around me seems to be made of very pure yellow divine energy...

The bright white floor below the teleport crystal is tethered with it, and the clear dome overhead that is about 10 meters high shimmers with yellow threads as well.

The room we stand in has two silver doors on each side, and they lead to thin hallways, though even the halls are made of the same white flooring and clear glass-like transparent material overhead to make them look like miniature tunnels. In both directions, more of these white and clear domes are connected, making a structure of connected and isolated rooms all over this fortress.

There are hundreds of them in all directions.

It feels immensely strong, far stronger than the near S-Grade shielding I broke through minutes ago, however, my main attention is more focused on what's outside the odd bubble structures.

The ground they rest on outside looks to be made of dark grey ash, and coming up from the grounds are endless yellow flickering flames.

The fires roar for dozens of kilometers in all directions, enveloping the countless domes, and roaring without any sign of going out.

This narrative has been purloined without the author's approval. Report any appearances on Amazon.

They flicker and roar kilometers up into the sky.

I'm unable to sense anything through the thick divine energy imbued flames. With my stealth mode activated and my greater form not turned on, my perception may be limited, but I can clearly sense that whatever or whoever created these flames is far stronger than myself...

On the outer edges of the domes, where the white and yellow divine energy meets the flames, steam rises up through the air like fire and ice are meeting and canceling each other out.

While I examine the structure in awe, Marcus stands upright and still, with sweat trickling down his temples.

Next to him, the dead animated statue of Alfred carries both of the containment cases, and I have Fiona give an uninterested and disgusted look as she stares ahead.

The silver door they all face clicks open, and two women walk through into the dome.

One is an orange core and the other is a yellow. They look almost identical, with dark brown hair cut short at the shoulders, and bright white eyes.

The only difference is the yellow core is a few centimeters taller, and is [Lv.8519], while the shorter orange core is [Lv. 4405]. They both have superior wind magic skills.

I wonder if this is even the Order member in front of me, as I was expecting a fire or ice user, and the yellow core doesn't even have half as many divine threads in her core as the king or queen I killed.

Marcus bows toward the taller woman and speaks up, answering my suspicions.

"Angelica, we've completed our quotas, I hope all is well for you here in Ashmore."

He grits his teeth at the end of his words, as the intense yellow divine core pressure in the room is getting to him, but he side-eyes toward the containment cases despite the pain.

I channel wind magic through my invisible divine threads and into the statue holding the cases.

It appears as if Alfred is letting them levitate over to the two women.

When his hands are free, I use my [Master of Illusion] buff and Mana Manipulation to control his body to twist his mustache and respond.

"It is all accounted for."

Then, I make Fiona scoff and add to the act.

"This place makes my skin crawl... Can we get this over with quickly?"

The orange-colored woman catches the containment cases and looks through the logs quickly while tapping on a silver tablet of her own, making notes of all the new inventory and making sure the new quotas are updated.

In the meantime, Angelica responds with a professional smile.

"You'll be on your way shortly, don't you worry Ms. Fiona..."

There's a pause as her assistant continues to shuffle through the item boxes, and she speaks again to fill in the silence while looking up toward the ceiling's dome in an oddly specific direction.

"I do hope this shipment makes Redgrave happy. With all of the Order members being picked off, and that announcement earlier today about the Flame Emperor in the Dark Continent, I'm almost glad I'm stuck here under the abyss of flames..."

Marcus reflexively gulps, as another rush of understanding hits him, and I believe he's connected the dots to understand who I am.

The woman catches onto his nerves as well, but I have Alfred speak up to keep the mood in the room constant.

"Yes, yes. Being so far out in the ocean, we're away from all the trouble as well. Stronger members than us were taken down just before the throne showed itself, what a shame."

Alfred's head shakes, and he twists his mustache again while the orange-cored girl finishes up her task with the containment cases and sends them flying back our way.

Alfred accepts them, but a phenomenon occurs that makes my heart skip a beat...

The yellow core, Angelica, nods a few times to be professional, then speaks up while reaching into her item box to pull out a silver transmission tablet.

"Very good, I'll be sending a message to central that your quotas have been met. The shipment for your contracted hunters should be processed very soon as well."

As she puts on her fake professional smile, I see yellow crystals glowing on the front side of her tablet that she's pulling out, and realize there will be quite the issue if I don't do anything in the next few milliseconds.

I've seen a tablet like this before, it was the one Raven used to talk to the other Order members, and I vividly remember each lit crystal representing the Order members that were alive and well, able to respond on the other line.

There were two crystals that were dull when I saw Raven's, signifying Sebastian and Mr. Freeman's demise. However, those should be the only ones...

If she pulls it out right now, she'll see that the two she's talking with are no longer alive.

This also means... all of the other Order members will be notified of the king and queen's death the next time they check these tablets.

This was all within the outline of my plan, but I didn't realize it would start so soon...

I make the split-second decision to cause a scene right here to expedite things.

If the King and Queen are meant to be dead, there's more than one way this can occur. The first being a rogue force from the dark continent, but the other would be another Order member that made contact with them within the timeframe that their lights went out.

I grin beneath my stealth veil, and have Alfred push the silver containment cases and teleport crystal toward Marcus in a quick, fluid motion.

In the same instance, I use water magic to make it seem as if Fiona is sending out two high-pressure jets of divine energy imbued water from both of her index fingers.

One flies straight toward the silver device in Angelica's hand, and the other toward the teleport crystal that flies at Marcus.

In a flash of white and yellow light, the A-Class hunter is transported away back to the island of Palmyra; and the silver tablet that is about to be exposed is destroyed and fractured into hundreds of metal and crystal pieces.

The Order member's eyes widen in surprise, and I have Fiona blurt out a believable line in the same arrogant, condescending tone that she was using back in the mansion.

"You know what? You're right, this world is changing hands, and who cares if a few Order members go missing! I always hated this place!"

I make her yell out in a loud, annoying laugh while filling the room with more yellow threads of divine light.

In the same moment, the orange-cored hunter that has been silent this whole time turns and presses a tablet of her own, opening up the door they came from with impressive reaction speed.

The yellow core doesn't even question what is going on and makes a wall of wind in front of them with divine threads and wind magic strong enough to make me believe she's going all out.

I have Alfred and Fiona send attacks of wind and water at the wall she's made to pierce through her defenses and hit the wind mage in non-vital areas, hoping that she'll attack back, but no attacks come, she just yells out loud while jumping backward.

"Activate the emergency systems! Call central and have Redgrave notified of this betrayal at once! All fatal attacks between Order members are not permitted! The rulers of Palmyra are well aware of emergency procedure here, they have just failed their assassination attempt... This is well within my pact rights to activate protocol."

My smile grows as the silver door is shut, and from behind it, the outline of the slightly injured wind mage pulling a large red lever is clear to see.

I contort the King and Queen's expressions to be scared and confused. While, in reality they are already dead, and this woman's actions are helping me stage the perfect cover up.

In the same moment, the center of the clear dome cracks open evenly and begins to come apart slowly and mechanically. The bright yellow flames outside start to flood in.

Chapter 648

Just a few dozen meters away, the orange and yellow-cored hunters watch the scene before them unfold.

They're secured behind the heavy silver door in the transparent hallway.

I have a few fractions of a second where I can easily pull out a teleport crystal and make my escape; however, the instant the top of the dome cracks open, my perception is able to seep out much further than before.

I'm able to see past the endless abyss of flames around us.

Every moment that passes, and the dome above opens more, my gaze is able to surge further.

This is exactly what Marcus told me would happen when he described the common protocol for violent deals gone bad, and said even True Cores cannot survive the flames.

My initial hopes were that I would be able to stage an attack and that the wind mage would strike back, allowing me to stage them being struck in vital points and use another teleport crystal to run away and make it seem as if they died from this.

In the confusion of it all, I could have even killed this last yellow core and absorbed even more essence.

However, the order member here was a bit weaker than I predicted.

Not only would there be no witness to report this staged betrayal, killing her now would barely grant me a 1-2% gain of my Core's base.

This far more extreme option makes for a more convincing story, and with it, I'm able to leave this dome. Crushing a crystal to leave right now would be a waste of this opportunity.

The fact that we're near Central Headquarters makes me want to take a bit of a risk just to get a glimpse at what Central is really like.

The yellow flames rush into the dome, and simultaneously my perception does, in fact, spread out far enough to get a fuzzy picture in my mind of where Central Headquarters is.

The city is enormous, made of hundreds of skyscrapers at sizes that look like they can house entire cities like Solara or even Vice City itself in a single structure.

I can't get a clear view, only the outlines, as the thick divine flames all around me make for an impenetrable veil.

I can feel that this abyss of flames is a few kilometers high, and a few dozen kilometers wide. However, its length goes on for hundreds of kilometers in both directions, curving to make a massive moat around a mountain that reaches up into the sky.

There are huge cliffs burned with flames all around this Central City, and atop it mana control waves of millions of individual status screens blare through my senses. This isn't even counting the massive buildings that I'm unable to sense through in my current position. I estimate there are tens of millions of people in this massive central headquarters Civilization alone.

—

My focus shifts back to the scene in front of me instead of wandering away to the outside world as the dome fully opens and the divine flames rush in.

I brace myself, activating all of my buffs, and creating a defensive layer of divine energy-infused Soul Energy shielding all around my body while activating my greater form and compacting its energy to compress around me.

My stealth skill is still active, but the immense energy I'm letting off can't be fully contained. The only reason the order member behind the clear protective barrier can't see me is because of the [Master of Illusion] buff I'm keeping on to manipulate the perception of reality around me.

I jump upward headfirst into the fire while it completely floods the dome.

My connection with the King and Queen's corpses is severed, and their bodies are burned to ash and dust in milliseconds.

The teleportation platform in the ground shatters from the thrust of my jump, yet the white divine energy-imbued floor below it is untouched...

Simultaneously, I feel a hot pressure envelop my entire body.

Less than a second passes before I feel the true intensity of the flames begin to tear through my defenses with ease.

When I first arrived here and tried to feel the icy dome's strength, and the average strength of these flames, I knew they were strong, but now that I'm plunging into them, I realize they're much more powerful than I expected...

As soon as I leave the dome and am covered in yellow fire, I deactivate my stealth skill so I can go all out...

I pull out my fire and dark magic blades to take full advantage of their stat buffs, but as another half a second passes, and my defense aura grows even stronger, I feel the walls of flames pressing in on me even further.

The heat waves rush through me, and the gravity pushing me down as I try to fly upward feels very reminiscent of the time I was trying to push through the skies within the divine construct toward the green divine serpent.

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Whoever made these flames is a True Core user... and the gap between our level of divine power is only becoming clear to me now.

This isn't even a concentrated attack. It is a security system spread out thin, and constantly consuming energy. Yet, a small concentrated portion of it is giving me this much trouble.

I grit my teeth and push upward, as the further I go up, the more the towers within the city atop the mountain come into my mental view. Search the [NôveIFire\(.\)net](#) website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

I can teleport away any time I wish, but this may be my only instant teleportation ticket into Central Headquarters at such close proximity I can get.

Another half a second passes, and I'm just over a third of the way through the flames.

However, the dense hot flames tear all the way through my Soul Energy shielding tethered with the full strength of my True Core.

I pull up a mental interface of my Rising Emperor's Domain, yet I'm too far away from the Dark Continent to get the full stat boosts I want. My aura is being suppressed by these flames, so no one falls within the radius allowing me to take 10%. However, after reaching 1000 links of loyalty, I unlocked a perk that allows me to receive 5% extra no matter how far away I am.

I activate it and pull tens of thousands of stat points and a few dozen trillion MCP from the Crimson Army, my teammates, and many of the normal citizens I have access to.

The mana control does not add much to me at all, but the rise in stats is similar to the full amount I received during my battle with Raven and the Bronze Earth Dragon, filling my body with newfound speed, strength, and endurance.

The additional training I put the Crimson Army through has made quite the difference, but it is still nowhere near enough to make these divine flames' damage negligible.

My rise through the flames becomes much faster, but the pressure of the divine energy all around me is hardly suppressed at all.

It feels as if the breath is being squeezed out of me every moment I stay beneath these yellow flames, and the reality of the Big Three's true strength creeps into my mind.

My blood-bonded armor begins to burn and melt while even my skin starts to become charred by the flames that roar around me.

It feels like if I let up for even a moment, they'll all seep into my body and mind, turning me to ash just like the King and Queen I left behind.

My purple ring glows bright, and I've only seen it do this one time before.

It was when I faced Mr. Freeman before I had my True Core awakened when he attempted to use a mental attack on me tens of times stronger than I was able to handle, but my purple divine barrier managed to suppress the brunt of the blow.

The same thing is happening now, and it only makes me push off the air harder with every step, using all my strength to finally escape through the top of the roaring fiery abyss with heavy breaths and far more fatigue than I expected.

"I'm still not strong enough!" I yell to myself as the pressure starts to go away, and the extreme heat dies down, while the abyss of endless yellow fire gets further away and I continue my upward momentum into the night sky.

The moment the hot burns and immense pressure cease, I reactivate my stealth skill and the purple ring around my finger stops glowing as well.

While taking a deep breath, I deactivate my Rising Emperor's Domain's stat and mana control borrowing perk and stare up at the massive city that I approach.

The mountain is truly massive.

I could tell it was over 200 km wide and over 30 km tall while using my perception from below the flames, but seeing it with my own two eyes is a different experience.

Paired with the realization that the being that created those flames below me makes my True Core look like a dimly lit candle, the futuristic skyscrapers that pierce the clouds above look magnificent.

This is where the rulers of the world have created their city.

They have been in control for centuries, growing in power before the system even existed here for humans.

My eyes widen with awe and respect, granting me a new perspective on why Raven, the Saint, and all of the other Order members fear the Big Three so much.

The massive yellow ring of fire below the mountain sends off so much heat and light, that it almost looks like it's daytime below the mountain.

Then, even above, the city lights coming off the tens of thousands of windows on each tower, bright street lights that line the roads that are busy with cars and people even now in the dead of night, it looks as if this is a bright shining light of day that never goes out.

With my enhanced perception, I hear and see millions of conversations taking place. Food, products, and services are being bought and sold. Some of the magical nature, selling gear for new hunters and buying loot from the hundreds of dungeon hubs all over the city. Others are unawakened businessmen and women with normal families going about their daily lives.

There's music blaring at every street corner, and every citizen has their own transmission tablet blinking and giving off sounds of their own.

There are massive parks full of wildlife that are as large as entire cities back in the 8 Great Regions, and dungeon hubs full of E,D,C, and B-Class portals that make the canyon of dungeons back in the Crimson City look very average.

Huge warehouses, factories, and office buildings are scattered throughout the massive civilization, sustaining many pockets of culture that stretch hundreds of kilometers.

It's like a world of its own.

The vast amount of information to take in right now after such a brutal event is extremely overstimulating. I just stop and stare, floating over the sea of flames for almost a full minute to take it all in.

My head slowly rises into the sky, looking up into the clouds to watch the skyscrapers fade away as they rise so tall.

Though, my all-seeing eye does see further and catches something very odd slowly spinning around the city in a circle about 100 kilometers above even the highest tower.

There are three large rectangular boxes, about the size of sports fields.

No matter how hard I look at them, no readings come back.

Even the energy that keeps them suspended above the massive city, endlessly rotating, is a mystery to me.

Though, I do come to the conclusion that they are definitely made of the same black originator stone that the island of Palmyra is made of, and the tower in the center of the Dark Continent.

The moment I realize this, my stealth-imbued aura of perception retracts, as it is probably best not to tamper with things I don't understand in the presence of forces greater than my own.

As I float upward, close to the burnt walls of the mountain, leading to the outskirts of the massive civilization, I send a mental message to one of my body doubles. It is tasked to go back to the island of palmyra to make sure Marcus doesn't leak anything that has happened today, and begin taking control of the kingdom with Bri and Rodrigo's help.

In the meantime, I use self regeneration tethered with divine energy to slowly heal my burns and the damaged armor while changing my mana control output and physical appearance to look like an unsuspecting citizen of this massive city.

I need to learn more about my enemies. Although I haven't even met them, I'm now certain The Big Three are more powerful than I ever imagined.

Chapter 649

A planet tens of times larger than the human world rotates around a massive red star. It is the only planet with life within this solar system, however it houses enough life to count for hundreds of planets.

Endless varying landscapes rise and fall from natural disasters, civilizations are born, and cultures thrive to grow and go to war on every corner of this world.

Some regions are devoid of life for tens of thousands of kilometers, while others are full of monsters wielding dark black and purple energy.

Some form intelligent societies that grow and prosper, taking advantage of the rifts that appear leading to mana-dense worlds; while others endlessly roam to kill each other and eat their next meal, relying solely on animalistic instincts.

The soil and plants of this world are tinted black and red from the energy given off by the wildlife and stars in the system.

There aren't many creatures that ever travel far enough around this globe to meet other civilizations.

Even the most powerful beings on this world can travel for a lifetime and not make it back to where they've started.

This is why it is known not as a world, but for its inhabitants that are intelligent enough to speak a language; it is known as the Demonic Realm.

In one of the northernmost regions of this Realm, five enormous black towers stand looking down at the most powerful known Demon Society. The Demons are the Superior Race on this massive planet and have been for hundreds of thousands of years.

Far below these towers, which are known to be owned by the five great families, the massive black castles and training facilities for the families' armies look down at the city below as well.

They are all made of the same dark black material that the towers are made of, making it impossible for even the strongest Arch Demons who have returned from mana-rich worlds to see inside.

The only way they will even get a shot at glory is to make an offering during one of the ceremonies when a great family decides to have recruitment rituals.

For a normal citizen, this is merely a dream that rests above their great city for tens of thousands of Demonic Generations.

Surrounding the five pillars that watch over the realm, millions of Fledgling and Greater Demons are being brought up from their youths.

Expeditions into the surrounding riftlands to farm resources from Demonic Beasts, collect Originator artifacts, and take the leap into newfound rifts to mana-based worlds happen every day.

—

However, a very unique event is happening at the base of one of the towers owned by the Vermillion Family.

Within a large black hall, completely isolated from the rest of the realm, a single Ascended Arch Demon with a True Core burning bright yellow-white in its chest approaches the base of the tower slowly with its hand outreached. Search the nôvel_Fire.net website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

Its heart rate rises with every slow step it takes forward, and a line of six yellow-cored Demon Generals line the back wall at attention, staring straight ahead as their leader places his hand on what appears to be a closed arching doorway.

The room is silent for a few moments, but the True Core's energy from the demon that touches the tower is being siphoned out at an alarming rate.

It stands tall, with a confident expression on its face, while the arching outer crack of the door slowly begins to light up with a bright yellow light.

It becomes brighter and brighter, then shifts in color, turning light green as the intensity of the divine energy makes a major shift.

The True Core releases his hand from the door and takes a step back, grinning ear to ear while the green light glows brighter within him, without having to sacrifice any more of his own power.

A pulse of green energy comes out from the cracks of the door, and the gravity in the room increases tenfold, forcing all of the yellow generals to fall to one knee in an instant.

It pulses again, even stronger, releasing even more pressure, and even the True Core bows his head and falls to a knee as well.

He speaks in a tone as if he's addressing a god.

"Lord Vermillion. I come to give you a report on our family's weekly progress. There have been seventeen new offerings, totaling 329 Quintillion Mana Points worth of new resources farmed. After our screening process, nine of these new arch demons have been appointed to the 216th and 217th Red Core squads to begin their training beneath the Demonic Knights."

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The True Cored Demon goes into great detail about the promotion ceremony of two of the Red Cored Demonic Knights still being in process, as new Orange Cored Commanders are needed for the growing numbers of squads.

Then he gives a rundown on all of the Originator Stone mining operations being conducted out in the riftlands, and the off-planet missions being conducted by a few private Yellow General Squads.

However, there is no reply or reaction from the green outline of the glowing doors until the Demon reports an unexpected piece of news.

"There is a planet that you've told us to keep tabs on. It is a human-based world, specifically planet M3-99051. A rare world that had an abnormally high amount of Originator Artifacts present, but its mana availability was not very impressive. I was tasked to plant a throne here as per your request, and it appears to have been awakened a few years early."

The Demon bows his head as another pulse of green threads erupts out from the edges of the door, followed by a deep voice so loud and powerful that everyone's minds focus solely on its words. The separation of the telepathic channel being tethered with divine energy, and true sound around them, is blurred.

"It is early indeed... That world was the one with three humans holding near-saturated True Cores..."

The Demon's bowed head is pushed down even further by the intense gravity, so much so that it touches the dark black floor.

"Yes, that is correct, Lord."

There's a pause as the pressure in the room grows even greater, and the older guards in the back of the room begin to pass out and fall completely limp.

"Very well. The contract made with that world fifty years ago in their time is still active. They shall yield 100% of their Originator Artifacts, 95% of their mana resources and over 75% of their population to the Demon that claims the throne. In return, they won't attempt to fatally injure you in the final battle. Though, I have found humans not to be very long-term focused creatures. They will most likely breach the pact, and I advise you to not hold back and exterminate anyone you must to claim this world."

The Demon's eyes widen as he realizes what the Demon Lord's words mean.

"Ascended Drako Vermillion, True Core Royal Descendant of the Vermillion Family; you now have the right to claim this throne in our family name, to add to the collection growing our empire. Take the necessary resources required to build a thriving civilization on this world. Your 337 years of service have been appreciated greatly; you may now become a Demon Lord."

The moment the words finish, the intensity in the room vanishes, and the green light around the arching doorway ceases.

Drako keeps his head against the floor for a few more seconds before raising it with a proud and determined look on his face, then turning to face the yellow-cored generals at the back of the room.

"You heard the Lord. I need each of you to round up your orange-cored commanders and have them bring their red-cored demonic knights to meet me here in seventy-two

hours, ready to venture to a new world. That will be about eighteen full squads. More than enough to take over a human world with 3rd Tier mana availability."

With a smile across the Demon's face, he opens the back door of the black contact room they all stand in and makes their way back to the main palace.

One of the yellow generals walks closer to him, and the other five follow at a distance.

The True Core gives him an order while they walk back to his private quarters.

"This honorable day has finally come. I'm off to notify the other eleven Royal Descendants of my Lord Ascension; they will need to have a new Royal fill my spot. There hasn't been a ceremony like this in over a hundred years."

The yellow-cored general bows as they split paths and replies.

"Indeed it is, Captain. Or—soon to be Lord. I look forward to serving you in your new world. I shall make sure all of the necessary troops are ready within three days as requested."

The yellow general walks off down a long hall, while the True Core opens a new door and uses a black tablet powered by dark purple demonic energy, linking all of the Vermillion Family's True Core Royal Descendants together to notify them of the news.

—

Meanwhile, back on the human world, within three floating originator artifacts high above a mountain that holds almost 25% of the world's population, three True Cores speak to each other with mixed emotions.

Redgrave laughs loudly to himself as he hears the news of two more Order Members lashing out at Angelica in a trade deal gone wrong, bragging to the other two members through their closed circuit.

"Looks like my flames still work! I set them up over two decades ago, and they're still burning with enough heat to fry that sorry excuse for a King and Queen to a crisp before they could even react."

He laughs loudly and energetically throws more yellow flames around the room as he dances to pass the time.

Elara replies.

"Hey, I set up those domes years before your flames were even there. This only means your flames are weaker than my ice if there haven't been any complaints about them breaking since the start."

Redgrave knows Elara is just poking him to fight back, but he's itching for some fun considering the throne awakening is so close.

"Ahh! You know I could go down there right now and re-light them! I've grown almost twice as strong since I lit those flames, I bet I could melt your domes in a minute if I—"

Beckman cuts off their antics.

"Enough, you two!"

Over the last few minutes, he has been studying the instant deaths of the King and Queen, making calculations in his system interface while listening to the recording of the call from Angelica on repeat.

"Something is not right... There is a few minute lag between their death and this call... and quite frankly, Redgrave, I believe your flames should have killed them much faster than the time it took for them to die. It took approximately 0.21 seconds too long..."

More taps and clicks come from Beckman's tablet, and Elara and Redgrave seem interested for a moment but go back to mindlessly bickering to pass the time while Beckman continues to tap away and look for more inconsistencies.

—

While all of this occurs, I float all the way up the scorched mountain cliffs of central headquarters and finally glide down into the bustling streets.

I feel a heavy mana-based surveillance system activate in the city, similar to that of Valor City's tech, but I hop into a dark alley and reverse my stealth skill to now reveal my identical appearance to any other average citizen roaming the streets in the dead of night.

I'll most likely leave before anyone double-checks the footage and sees a random middle-aged drunken man walk out from a dark alley where no other people were previously.

For now, I walk into a local bar district filled with people, flashing lights, dancing, and loud blaring music to see if I can eavesdrop and talk to some people, getting a feel for how this city operates from the locals.

Chapter 650

The streets are lit with neon lights, and different songs are playing on every corner.

Bars, restaurants, and late-night entertainment of anything one desires line the streets, with towering skyscrapers high above stacking hundreds of floors into the air.

I follow the flow of people to fit in, making my way into one of the largest nightclubs in this small portion of the city.

Rhythmic beats compete with the loud noises of laughter, cheers, clapping, and dancing, while I'm hit with a heavy air pressure shift of pure mana as I walk through the doors.

It's easily five times as dense with mana in here, making for an exhilarating rush for the average citizen once they're inside.

Tables filled with bright-colored drinks, bottles on fire, and private dancers fill my vision as I walk through the crowds of people, using my inspect skill to follow the trail of money and power as best I can.

Most of the people in this club are over level 100, meaning they most likely earn far more than the average citizen dungeon diving. However, the main floor is filled with level 100-250 hunters and some well-dressed unawakened businessmen. All of the C-Grade and above migrate toward the back of the club, where the private rooms are.

I approach and see a woman in tight clothing with shots of drinks and bright neon-glowing pills walking around, offering samples to all the parties entering the private lounge area.

Many hunters take them down in a single gulp, as well as the unlabeled pills, and their eyes dilate, their smiles growing as they move through the privately sectioned-off portion of the club.

A few slots in line ahead of me, a man refuses the offering, flashing a silver card in front of the woman, but she shakes her head, refusing him entry unless he takes the drink and drugs.

They get into an argument, and two B-Class guards come out from the private room a few seconds later to escort the man out with ease.

When it's my turn in line, I just smile politely, taking the drink and pill, activating my master of illusions buff to make it appear as if I've followed her orders. In reality, they simply vanish into my storage, untouched.

She allows me to walk through once my grin grows, and I head straight into the private lounges, where the music is far less loud, and the guests are more well-dressed and influential.

I walk to the private bar, keeping a permanent smile on my face and a slight sway to my steps to play the part.

There are still flashing neon lights back here, and the room is pumped with even denser mana than the main floor. The young women serving drinks walk slowly, taking time to chat with each client, and no one is swiping their silver cards after each order—they only pay when they decide to leave or enter the private rooms at the far back of this exclusive lounge.

I take a seat between two parties. One is a man just over level 400, on the beginning stages of awakening his mana control. He's buying drinks for the many women around him, some awakened, others not.

The party to my right is a group of three men. Two are just over level 250, while the one in the middle is unawakened but clearly a businessman. They're all around the same age, mid-30s, most likely grew up together and chose different career paths.

As I sit down, a young woman with piercing green eyes asks what I'd like the moment I settle in.

Pausing with a wide smile, I order a few shots of their most expensive liquor and a mixed drink to go with it.

The blonde-haired woman pours my drinks, and I feel the gaze of an old man on the other side of the bar. I brush it off, surveying the room and eavesdropping on nearby conversations.

The elite hunter with the women around him talks about other clubs in the area and where they should go later tonight, while the group to my right discusses their latest dungeon farming expeditions. The man in a suit between them talks about a large trade deal of mana crystals he secured at a bank run by the Association on the other side of the city.

Everyone else at the bar talks about their day-to-day life; it doesn't seem like they're in secret slave labor or are forced into anything sinister, contrary to what I'd imagined about this city at first glance.

Some people swipe their silver cards as they leave, and I notice there's a 19% Central City tax. But for luxury living like this, such a steep tax on goods and services isn't too surprising.

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I expand my area of perception further, listening to everyone in the more packed areas of the club. Oddly, they all seem to be here to have a good time—it's surprisingly normal.

My next thoughts are to check out the dungeon hubs or risk looking into those three black boxes in the sky again.

The woman finishes pouring my drinks, and I happily accept them, pulling the same trick with my master of illusion buff, pretending to down the shots and slowly sip the mixed drink. I reach into an item box at my waist, pulling out a gold coin.

"That will be all for me tonight. I might as well close my tab—"

As I place the coin on the counter, I feel the gaze of the old man across the bar on me once more.

He's sitting alone, not speaking to anyone, but as his eyes meet the gold coin, they widen, and he briskly gets up, heading over to me.

I think nothing of it, addressing the woman with a polite tone.

"I don't have my card on me today; this should more than cover my drinks."

The young woman picks up the gold coin with a puzzled look, examining it closely before smiling and setting it back in front of me.

"It's an interesting artifact, sir, but you and I both know Central Credits are the only accepted payment here."

I open my mouth to object, but the old man steps in, flashing his silver card, speaking in a tense, worried voice.

"My grandson sure is a jokester, isn't he? Here, drinks on me tonight. I think it's time we head home, don't you?"

His gaze is locked on the gold coin, and he whispers in my ear.

"You're a real outsider, aren't you? I didn't know it was possible to leave or enter this city anymore... come with me if you want to live."

I pull the coin from the counter, accepting that my gut instincts were right, this place is too good to be true.

The woman laughs, playing along with the old man's excuse, and scans his card. We leave the lounge in a hurry, with him leading the way.

As we make our way through the loud noise and dancing of the main club room, he yells in my ear through the blaring music.

"There's a manual surveillance check done every hour on the hour. Either you know exactly what you're getting yourself into, or this is the first place you've come, and you have no idea how much danger you're in." Search the website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

We step out onto the street, and he takes a sharp left turn away from the crowded main road. Reflexively, I put up a hush barrier around us, strong enough to keep out the ears of even the strongest A-Class hunters with awakened divine cores. Its aura is masked by my stealth skill.

The world around us fades into muffled sounds, and the old man realizes what I've done as I reply.

"I am a foreigner, yes. But what's the issue with that? Outsiders can't pay with gold?"

His eyes widen further, and he takes a few more steps down a quieter street lined with shops that only operate in the daytime before he answers.

"How did you survive—and what's it like out there? Is it true? Did the world really burn when the Demons took over after the war?"

My mouth opens, but I'm at a loss, attempting to process his questions.

He doesn't wait for me to answer, continuing down the street.

"No one leaves Central because... well, there's no other place in the world to go..."

He glances at my item box, where I pulled my coin from earlier.

"I haven't seen a currency like that since the Great War, and it's been... well, I don't even know how long. But please, tell me—how did you survive in a world plagued with eternal flames?"

I stop, widening my aura of perception. I listen to the surface level conversations of everyone nearby, even in neighboring districts and distant cities.

At first glance, he seems crazy, but as I sift through millions of conversations, not one mentions traveling outside Central City.

To everyone here, this is the entire world. It's cut off from any other civilization.

Now, as I gaze at the flaming moat surrounding the elevated mountain in my mind's eye, it does seem as if the world beyond has been scorched, and this is the last remaining sanctuary.

Mass manipulation, endless propaganda, strict regulation, and growth of a society built entirely for the Association's control. The possibilities here for those in power seem almost limitless when every citizen believes they are the chosen survivors of a world-ending disaster.

I slowly respond, "Do you really want to know? The truth may be worse than you think."

The old man stops, a wide smile on his face. I sense only anticipation and the long-held curiosity of someone who has waited decades for answers.

"Yes. I must know the truth. I lived a life before the war, and another after. I have no family or friends left, and not many years remain. Whatever reality lies outside of Central, knowing it would finally bring me peace."

His eyes sparkle as I reply.

"Well then, of course there's a vast world beyond the flames..."

We continue down the street as I describe the world I've explored. He listens intently, growing more nostalgic with every detail.

Whether it's the drinks and drugs he consumed earlier, his steps grow slower, and his mental state weakens the further we move from the bar. It's as if he's longed for this moment his entire life, savoring a sense of bliss.

But our conversation is abruptly interrupted by a flashing light on his wristwatch, soon mirrored by blinking signals on every street corner.

I sense a ripple through the mana surveillance network, and the old man stops, turning to bow before me.

"Well, this is the end for me, I fear. Please, don't feel guilty. I have finally found peace thanks to you. The world I once knew really does live on."

I'm puzzled, but his words begin to make sense as he raises his head.

The man's eyes, nose, and mouth are bleeding; but he keeps a wide smile and gives out the emotions of nothing but happiness.

Simultaneously, out of nowhere, intense gravity wells manifest throughout the city. Numerous red cores come into my senses and dart through the city in various directions, followed by B and A-Class guards with strong mana control.

This is the manual surveillance check the old man warned about, and it's more serious than I anticipated.

Heading straight toward us is a familiar orange-cored guard—the same one who led the scouting expedition through the Dark Continent and Crimson City not long ago.

He approaches at high speed, with two red cores behind him.

I weigh my options, calculating how I want to handle this situation in the few seconds I have before potential chaos breaks loose.