

Dungeon Diver: Stealing A Monster's Power

Chapter 651

All of my perception around the city focuses solely on the scouts that seemingly appeared out of thin air.

Some of them touch down in random areas of the city while others fly far away to the other side of the massive mountaintop to other districts.

There are even some nearby that fly to the top of tall towers, but the only three guards I focus on are the ones coming straight my way.

A faint noise emanates from the orange core, and I channel all of my perception toward him as he flies.

The image of him holding a silver transmission device in his right hand is clear, and his voice rings out in a steady, monotone manner.

"Yes, Redgrave, I'm checking in on the unidentified subject now. Based on the recordings, he appears to be an intruder from outside of central. But there is no ID coming back on our facial recognition. I'll be arriving in a few seconds."

There's a click, and a familiar angry voice responds.

"It doesn't matter. Your focus should be elsewhere. Kill the intruder and anyone he is with. Don't spend a moment more on it. If they're from outside, then good riddance; if they're a rogue that got rid of their tracker to make a statement, then kill him and make an example of it. Destroy the bodies and leave no witnesses. No loose ends."

There's another click, and the orange core puts the tablet away.

He's getting extremely close now, and a plan begins to form while I watch the old man who pulled me out from the bar fall to his knees. His heartbeat slows to a stop by the time his forehead hits the pavement.

I don't know exactly how he was killed, but from the name I heard on that transmission tablet moments ago, I know a convincing display will be necessary to satisfy their wishes.

Instead of using stealth and slipping away from the orange core's sight, I do the opposite and raise my mana control to that of a low B-Grade hunter.

Once they're within range, a few blocks away, I turn in their direction and activate my master of illusion buff, mixed with my echo skill.

As I step to the side of the empty street and activate stealth with my main body, a perfect lifelike afterimage of myself is left behind.

The three divine core holders don't slow down at all.

The orange core activates wind magic tethered with divine threads, and less than a second later, releases an attack as they dip down into the street even closer.

The slash slices through my mirage, and the two red cores following close behind drop divine energy-imbued balls of fire to incinerate the corpse of the old man and the illusion.

The three of them hover mid-air after gliding upward for a few seconds, overlooking the city, and the orange core pulls out his transmission tablet again with a straight unbothered face.

"The job is done. I will continue preparing for the reassessment of the Dark Continent in less than two days. We will not return without data on that corrupted information of the yellow core beneath the Crimson City this time. If you need anything else before your arrival in just over four days, please do relay the message."

There's a pause, and no response for a moment, but finally, the same man responds.

"Thank you. There actually is one more thing I'd like to ask of you: report back to the supply base. I need you and a team to help Angelica investigate a trade deal gone wrong down in Ashmore. There was quite the incident that took place less than an hour ago, and Beckman wants a second opinion from an outside source."

"Certainly, I'm on my way," the orange core replies and begins to fly away back in the direction he came from, with the two red cores following.

I lean up against the side wall of a building for a few seconds, staring at the black ash left behind, with a small amount of red and orange divine threads disintegrating into the atmosphere as they leave.

All of the red and orange cores throughout the city and neighboring central regions finish up their missions around the same time, and simultaneously, I feel all of the wells of gravity throughout the city migrate back to the center of the mountain, in the densest part of the central headquarters, about 40 kilometers north of where I am.

Dozens of citizens disappear just as the old man did, being deleted from this world above the flames for various infractions without any warning or chance to refute them.

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Moments later, they all fade away from my senses, disappearing into various black buildings with shielding made from the same material as the floating rectangles above the city.

My mind wanders as I walk the streets alone, with my stealth skill completely activated this time, watching the flashing lights and people all around me go by.

Many streets pass as I recount the words spoken over the transmission tablet and compare them to what I know of the big three, and the new information graciously given by the old man that was killed and burned to ash before my eyes.

The reality of the true strength of the leaders of this city finally dawns on me... or, to put it more honestly, the leaders of this entire world. The power they possess is far beyond my wildest expectations.

The fact that the flames below the city have been burning for decades, long enough for the old man and most of the population to believe the world outside was no longer livable, means the man who put them there has far more power than merely this small fiery barrier.

That being said, there are two others... Elara and Beckman. I can imagine what the fire user is like from his tone of voice, and get a vague understanding of the massive scale of Redgrave's power, but the other two are supposedly just as strong, and their abilities are even more mysterious.

As I walk many blocks through the city, passing tens of thousands of people, and looking up at the hundreds of skyscrapers with endless floors, it makes the big three seem like gods.

It's like Raven said; they've been in power for centuries, yellow cores even before the system existed on this world... They have truly thought of every possibility and have even scoped out the entire Eight Great Regions and the Dark Continent, and believe we are no threat at all.

Based on my findings here, it's true.

In most circumstances in the past, I have my power hidden, or at least the gap is not so massive... So, the confidence of my enemies to not take me out early is usually working against them.

However, seeing the result of their power and influence for myself, they may be right not to bother crushing the ants when they're not even strong enough to bite back.

The society they created atop this mountain decades ago has been a long-lasting metaphor for the end of the world they seek to create.

The orange core said he'd be back to survey the Crimson City in under two days... and that the big three were coming to challenge the throne in four...

I have just enough vision to watch the entire world burn, yet nowhere near enough power to stop it from happening.

As I let out a long sigh and look up into the starry night sky, more of Raven's words come to mind.

It was what she said about the fact that when I battled her, I didn't hold back at all. I had no fear of losing despite being at a disadvantage the entire time. All I wanted to do was continue the fight, and find an edge for the fun of it.

The thrill of the fight itself, and the prize of getting stronger at the end of it, was all that mattered.

Like following the thread of my swordsmanship skill, without knowing where it's leading, but understanding and knowing that it will lead to a fatal blow.

Now, I am at a critical point. The very world as I know it is at stake. My new regions, freedom to grow and live as I please, and to put it bluntly; my control over my own life is on the line.

Though, it isn't just my life on the line. To get what I want, I'll be aiming to save the entire human race from living in a society entrapped by the fear of the world around them burning.

It is a nearly impossible feat with the resources available to me now... but, this just means I have to look deeper, think more tactically, and train harder than ever before. I just have to find the hint of a thread to victory and follow it.

There are two immediate ways I can think of to become stronger.

The first is to absorb more yellow divine threads. Most, if not all, of the yellow fragments in the world have been consumed, and the ones that aren't are in the hands of the very enemies I need to become stronger to defeat.

The only source I can think of now is the endless roaring fire around the city. They could be harvested for their pure divine energy; however, attempting this so close would be the riskiest plan of all.

The second option I have is bringing more links of loyalty into my rising emperor's domain.

Pulling the stats and mana control from the crimson army to push myself out from the divine flames faster did make a noticeable difference.

While I have a steady growth rate of a few hundred new links per day coming into the crimson dome, I'm going to need to up that by a magnitude of thousands in order to compare to the power pure divine energy grants.

However, with the new connection I've made with the Eight Great Regions, and my control over every sector in the Dark Continent, my access to potential links of loyalty does reach the necessary threshold to pull something like this off.

Ember may have valuable input on this matter, but until he awakens, I need to do everything I can to gain an edge myself.

As these thoughts race through my mind, one of the many dungeon hubs in Central City comes into view, with hunters forming a line in front of it and a single guard on duty.

The temporary feeling of absolute authority looming above me starts to weaken in my mind, and I can't help but grin as I've just found the beginning of my thread that will lead to the necks of the big three.

In full stealth mode, I walk between all of the late-night hunters in line, and slip through the automated doors and silver ID scanners to walk into the closest dungeon portal I can find.

Moments later, I dungeon walk right back to the island of Palmyra, not bothering to keep my stealth ability activated.

I walk through the secured hallways right past security, and out the front door to float up and above this massive palm jutting out from the sea, full of citizens.

My perception fills the entire island and down deep into the sea below, where massive Qi reserves rest all around the wrist of this Originator Artifact.

On the finger island where I assassinated the king and queen, I sense my double, Marcus, Bri, and Rodrigo all talking to each other as I instructed.

However, as I look down at this island, I decide this will be a great start for my expansion.

I open a link between the four of them and myself.

"I have new urgent information. There's been a change of plans."

Chapter 652

I airstep over to the meeting taking place in the mansion that still bears the rubble and blood of the king and queen on the main hall's floor.

My double has already received a detailed update from Bri and Rodrigo about the progress in the 8 Great Regions and their restructuring of the contracts and trade routes.

However, as I arrive, I have fresh news to share.

"We're going to be creating many more crimson domes... This is how we're going to do it, and this is what I need from you."

Marcus, the Red Core A-Class hunter, trembles in silence throughout my entire explanation to Bri and Rodrigo. As they nod and take out teleport crystals, I speak one last time to the overseers of the 8 Great Regions.

"Very good. The plan here on Palmyra stays exactly the same. I'll have it ready for you with tens of thousands of loyal citizens once you return. There are roughly 70,000 on this island; my guess is more than half will submit. The ones that don't will be free to go wherever they wish once this is all over, but for now they're staying here. I know this is a lot all at once, but we have four days left to prepare for what could potentially be the Second Great War."

They disappear in a flash of white light, back to the Apex Region, to prepare the citizens in each major city to hear the Flame Emperor speak on a nationwide tour as the trade routes are established.

It wasn't my initial plan to personally show up to each site, but this will be the most organic and efficient way to group many citizens together and give an opportunity to form links of loyalty with me in exchange for varying trade benefits.

Meanwhile, I turn to the Red Core and pull out the drinks I bought at the bar, levitating them over to his trembling hands.

"I know I could have done things more subtly, but this is just the way things are now. Take a drink, calm down, and decide if you want to follow me or not... It would be helpful to have an inside man here on the island."

He stands in silence, still wide-eyed and confused about what exactly is going on, but he takes a deep breath and downs the three shots I levitate in front of him. Search the [NôvelFire\(.\)net website](#) to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

I speak up again as he looks me in the eyes.

"So, now for you to follow through on your part. I need everyone on this island to meet outside in the streets, looking up at the sky, in approximately one hour. I'll be notifying them that their contracts are all voided. The entire island of Palmyra will be free, and I have a new employment opportunity for them"

The Red Core's rapid heartbeat slows back to normal, and his hands stop shaking as I begin to explain what I'm about to do.

He nods and replies in a relaxed manner, while I feel a link of loyalty form between us.

"I'll do it. I'll help you free this island. I'd rather serve you, even if the odds are stacked against us."

I grin while sharing self regeneration with him to rid the alcohol from his system as it's already done its job, then reply through our newly formed telepathy link, "Good. Have transmissions sent out to each of the dungeon hubs and hunters' housing, and have them ready to meet their new leader. Notify me through this link when it's done"

He replies with a gaze full of commitment, awe, and newfound confidence as even his fatigue is healed by the new skills passive perks.

"Yes, Sir. I'm on it."

After this, I leave the mansion and float down toward the sea.

As the Red Core sends pings to all the contracted hunters that he usually controls and sends orders to for the king and queen, I plunge into the depths of the sea.

A dense barrier of mana shields my body, keeping the saltwater from touching my skin. I'm not going to be down here for long, so a single deep breath of air is enough to last the full hour if I need it.

My creation of the shielding around me is more so for the intense pressures of the sea, which collapse around me as I dive kilometers underwater.

It's similar in pressure to the massive shifts in gravity that divine energy exerts on me, creating hundreds of times more pressure at the bottom of the ocean than above sea level in the open air.

It is pitch black down here, but my Qi senses are all I need, as I'm taking this opportunity to collect valuable resources surrounding the palm.

Monk's words repeat in my mind from the first time I ever came in contact with these naturally growing Qi crystals beneath Valor City.

If I absorb their essence too fast, draining the crystals completely dry, they will never recharge to their current state. The same goes for detaching them from the black stone base they grow from.

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The massive haul I've found here is thousands of times more crystals than I have back in the Dark Continent.

The conditions down here would make it quite literally impossible for anyone below the rank of a Yellow Core to survive the pressure.

Monk's process of collecting trace amounts of Qi from living crystals is also a delicate one, requiring long amounts of time and equipment in stable environments.

With the pressure, currents, and total darkness down here, I see no practical manner in which he'd be able to safely and efficiently farm this material.

The crystals jut out from the bases of this originator artifact, and when I approach, two thoughts come to mind.

Harvesting everything here could give thousands of citizens back in the Dark Continent a one-time boost, allowing them to awaken Qi, elevating them above many of their mana-wielding peers.

However, I could also use it all for myself.

Increasing the strength of my Soul Energy in general does make me far stronger, but it's not as significant a jump as strengthening my Divine Core.

Taking advantage of the Qi at my disposal and adding as many people as possible to my Rising Emperor's domain at once would begin to make a noticeable difference.

No one thing will magically bring me to the overwhelming strength level of the big three, but many small things do add up and bring me closer. Until I find the final missing clue to this puzzle, I need to grow in every avenue possible and continue searching while following the faint outline of a thread.

Still, with a small hope for a potential future Qi farm in mind, I pull out my Flame Emperor's blade, tether it with divine energy, and slice a square around the crystal cluster in front of me.

I can't sense anything coming off the massive black stone artifact.

Other than the small areas surrounding the Qi clusters, saturated with white flowing Qi, the rest of the massive hand is only visible to me through my eyes.

If I didn't sense the mana, Qi, and tiny trace amounts of divine energy in the air, I wouldn't even know this enormous structure was in the sea.

It only fills a negative space in my mind, devoid of all energy.

So, as the energy from my blade slices through the stone to carve out a chunk, hoping to preserve the natural regeneration process of the Qi crystals, I feel another phenomenon take place.

Trace amounts of divine energy that make contact with my sword are sucked into the massive artifact, disappearing from my senses moments later.

It feels just like the growing seeds I picked up from the Divine Construct.

While this massive palm reaching into the sky is not as violent or hungry as the greedy black seeds, I definitely felt it tug at my True Core, taking a few small threads from the remnants of my attack.

The cluster of Qi falls to the ocean floor beside the wall and pulses, while the seemingly fluid-like aura of Qi within the attached section of the artifact contracts back into the bright white gem.

Without any external pressure or movement from me, once the Qi floods back into the crystal cluster and becomes fully saturated, it simply falls off the black fragment of the artifact, showing that it will no longer grow.

'Well... there's no way to save them, it looks like I have no choice,' I think to myself while letting the white crystal cluster of Qi fall into my item storage, keeping one small gem behind to fall into my open palm.

I allow the pure, dense Qi to flood into my body, restoring and even oversaturating my soul energy core, yet the crystal isn't even halfway drained.

The process I used to create the crimson dome, draining all my soul energy into it and using a limited amount of Qi pills to restore it over weeks, comes to mind. It not only strengthened the defenses of the crimson city but also increased my Qi control

significantly each time. I could fully drain my soul energy and restore it multiple times with a single crystal.

This appears to be the equivalent of hundreds of Qi pills, and as I let my perception do a count, I note over a thousand clusters around the palm, each holding dozens of gems.

Once my attention comes back to the next cluster, I witness the small portion of originator stone I've carved out begin to heal before my eyes.

The dim light of my aura is all that illuminates the phenomena of the black stone regenerating very quickly, without any energy output or readings coming off of it.

In less than a minute, the surface of the artifact looks untouched, as if I never sliced through it, and as if there was never Qi attached to it at all.

The portion of stone that was carved away loses its dark black coloring, turning grey, then white, then dissolving away into the sea. It reminds me of the time the green divine serpent crashed into the forest of black trees, and they too dissolved away, only leaving behind their cores.

I'm curious, but there is nothing more for me to process, as no energy readings were present during this odd event. So, I move onto the next cluster and repeat the process.

Over the next hour, I swim from cluster to cluster, slowly carving out dense pockets of crystals, and watching the black rock regenerate as if it's living, while above me there is a lot of movement on the island of Palmyra.

Tens of thousands of workers are being called in early from their shifts in the dungeons, and those sleeping are being woken up and told their quotas for the new day are not yet processed and that there's an announcement they all must hear.

Every slash through the water adds dozens of white crystals to my storage, but simultaneously drains tiny trace amounts of divine energy from my core.

By the time I'm halfway around the base of the wrist, I've lost about one yellow fragment's worth of divine threads.

It isn't much in the grand scheme of things, as from this island alone I've netted thousands of fragments to my core, but it is odd.

I begin trying to observe the flow of divine energy closer and closer with every slash, trying to figure out how its healing, or get some hint of where the lost energy is going. It's not until I hear a telepathic voice in my head from the Red Core kilometers above me that I finally discover something.

"Sir, Flame Emperor. The Kingdom of Palmyra is almost ready for your speech. It should not take more than ten minutes to retrieve the final stragglers that are finishing up their boss room battles in the dungeon farms."

While Marcus speaks in my inner ear, I slice through another portion of the massive black artifact to separate an abnormally large cluster of Qi, and in return, a massive shift in water pressure changes all around me.

My eyes widen, despite being in pitch-black darkness kilometers under the sea, as my senses finally pick up on something while massive amounts of seawater start flooding into the hole I've opened up.

The sensation of a very strange divine energy source becomes visible in my mind's eye, and the threads that escape my blade from this last strike flow toward it, following the inside wall of this massive structure, deep underground, many kilometers below the ocean floor.

The inside of this massive stone sculpture is hollow... and I've just created a temporary entrance.

Chapter 653

I don't even take the time to watch the portion of the artifact I sliced off dissolve; I just let the cluster of crystals fall into my item storage and swim forward with the extremely fast-flowing water under enormous pressure.

The jet of water floods inside the artifact, dispersing down into the hollow shell of the statue plunging into total darkness below the ocean floor.

It is hot and humid, but I airstep away from the water stream and hover in mid-air, deciding to take a breath while sending out a pulse of perception to get a reading on my surroundings.

The inside of this structure is filled with stale air.

I send a message through my telepathy link to Marcus through the small hole in the side of the artifact's wrist just as it completely heals itself.

"Understood, I've run into a small detour... this may take a moment."

The hole letting in massive amounts of ocean water seals itself, and the raining salt water all falls into the darkness below.

I can't see anything at all, but instead of sensing nothing as I did from the outside, now I can sense the energy particles in the air trapped within this massive structure and feel its exact shape.

I'm floating within the wrist, which leads upward to create the enormous hand that stretches up and out of the ocean, with the infrastructure of an enormous city built atop it.

However, down below, the rest of the arm is here.

It even leads to a shoulder, and that shoulder connects to a neck, torso, and three other limbs.

The impossibly large artifact appears to be lodged hundreds of kilometers below the planet's crust, and the deeper down I sense, the denser the air becomes filled with Qi.

There is no mana present within this structure other than the small amount that radiates off my body.

However, the further I push my senses into the depths of the artifact's darkness, I do feel the flash of divine energy again.

It comes and goes, giving off extremely strange readings.

One moment it's invisible, and another, it's creating a gravity well with the intensity of a True Core; other times, it's hardly the strength of a newly awakened red.

I don't sense any intelligent life, but every time my perception touches the odd divine energy reading down below, I get the intuitive feeling that it is looking back at me.

Overcome with curiosity, I float further down into the darkness, following the flow of denser Qi and divine energy.

I slowly make my way down the entire arm, deep below the ocean floor, and find that a large amount of water that fell in through the hole I made has pooled in the lower tricep of the bent right arm that reaches out of the sea.

As I pass it and move through the shoulder joint, steam rises up, adding to the humidity as the water down here instantly boils from the heat and pressure.

I'm flying many kilometers in a matter of a few minutes, but in this state of total darkness, it almost feels like I'm not moving at all, just pushing myself through endless hot air while following a mental map.

Despite this, I eventually end up right below the head, staring down at the void that leads to the statue's midsection and legs below.

This is where the heat, pressure, and Qi density are the strongest. However, my attention now shifts upward because beneath the statue's head, where its neck would be, there is a narrow hole, roughly 100 meters wide at its entrance, but as it goes further up to meet the head of the structure, it gets far more narrow.

This is where the strange, inaccurate divine energy readings come from.

I airstep upward into the narrowing passageway. Qi is abundant, but strange divine artifacts are much harder to come by.

Touching this structure on the outside doesn't drain any divine threads, and there was definitely no way for me to perceive it from just putting out a scan.

While cutting through the black stone is very difficult, I'm sure it would be possible for almost any order member with a True Core to do the same.

Either this artifact is completely new and was only activated by the small amount of divine energy it took from me, or it's been collecting energy from the atmosphere for millennia, overlooked, with no one ever caring to examine it closely or attempt to look inside.

As I float upward and the narrow passage through the neck becomes smaller, I hope for the latter, and I believe it may be true. The dim glow of my True Core's aura lights up the walls around me, and the illegible Originator text I've seen before in the Saint's recordings appears all over this place.

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I have no way of interpreting it, so I simply follow the source of the odd blinking and changing gravity well readings until the narrow passage squeezes so tight that it's barely 3 meters wide.

It comes to a halt near the base where the jaw is on this massive statue, and instead of going straight up, there is a rectangular hallway with ascending stairs at the top of the upward funnel to the head.

I float down onto it and begin to walk up the path, illuminating more and more Originator text on the walls.

The passage is dark, hot, and cramped, with thousands and thousands of etchings all over the walls.

My echoing footsteps are heard only by me as I continue upward, the cramped stairway spiraling higher, creating a circular spiral leading into the skull of the statue.

I activate my All Seeing Eye, not holding my True Core's power back at all, trying to see everything there is to see in these halls, but nothing comes back.

All I get in return is the same dull fluctuating signal at the top of the statue's skull and the minor tugging at my core that siphons small, negligible amounts of divine threads from my aura as I continue upward.

The yellow light coming off of me is so bright that it seeps into the walls, making each of the bold etchings in the black stone vibrant and reflective, searing every ancient letter into my mind with each step. There is nowhere else for my perception to go, so all of it concentrates on these unreadable words.

As the minutes pass and I walk higher up, many of the letters become recognizable, as they're repeating over and over in my head.

It's basic pattern recognition, but with millions of characters being scanned and imprinted on my mind, I can begin to guess which characters will come next without even understanding what they mean.

By the time I reach the top of the enormous spiraling staircase, my mind is split between wondering what I'll find at the top and whether I'll be able to understand Originator text if I stay here long enough...

Just like when I entered this rising hallway, there is a single rectangular door to walk through when I exit it.

I find myself in another massive, wide-open dark room, hundreds of meters tall and wide, with even more Originator text printed all over the walls.

As my True Core's aura hits it, millions of letters shimmer yellow and white while I walk into the center of the room, gazing in awe at the main attraction here.

A floating yellow disk is visible in the center of the room, no larger than my palm.

It's a few centimeters thick at most, giving off a gravity well almost identical to my own.

The moment I blink, the disk shifts its form, shimmering white, then turning completely black and forming into a perfect cube.

No divine light comes off of it, and the gravity well present moments ago is no more. There is a faint amount of Qi still inside the black artifact.

I take another step forward, and it shifts again, growing in size and turning red, transforming into an elongated sphere.

As it turns, the coloring shifts to orange, then yellow, bending and stretching to become a long cylinder until its edges meet to create a spinning donut shape in the air.

Its gravity grows stronger as it becomes brighter yellow, and the hole in its center shrinks until it disappears and becomes a disk again.

It collapses into a small pyramid, completely black devoid of energy, then shifts to red, repeating a seemingly random yet similar cycle again and again.

I'm mesmerized by the phenomena and get extremely close to the floating object in the center of the room.

So close that the edges of my purple barrier begin to interact with the aura it creates when it's at its peak.

This, combined with my own perception reading millions of now-recognizable ancient Originator texts, causes a strange shift to occur in my mind.

For a moment, at the peak of the artifact's cycle when it reaches the strength of a True Core, I feel as if its emotions are rippling through my barrier, and a moment of clarity washes over me.

My eyes widen as I step closer again, and as the cycle repeats, the clarity hits me even harder this time.

"It... makes sense..." I whisper to myself as the words in my mind start to shift and come together in fractured, barely readable states.

Every time the cycle resets, the understanding I grasp fades from me as well, but I'm able to mutter out words each time it happens and look back on my memories.

"They have left..."

"Not enough light on this world for all to ascend..."

"I will die here, but one day, I believe another wave will come."

I take steps closer to the oscillating artifact, and each time, I feel the tug on my core grow stronger.

"Left behind treasures for future generations..."

"The race will begin again, whether it is for light, or for ruling of the physical world."

"If you have found my tomb, please hear my words. I wish to follow you through the doors."

At these last words, I can't tell if I'm reading them off the walls anymore or hearing the words of the artifact itself.

I'm so close to it now that if I were to put out a hand, I could touch it.

It doesn't feel alive at all, but the afterimage, like an echo of desire, still emanates from it.

The moment I stop repeating its words and allow my aura to retract to ponder them more carefully, the artifact changes its movement patterns again.

Almost as if it is tired or scared I'll leave, the object stops mid-cycle while it's bright orange, shifts back into a black cube, but continues to slowly rotate a few meters off the floor.

No more divine energy radiates through the room, and it becomes eerily silent.

I stare at the palm-sized black cube. Curiosity is flowing through every cell of my body and becoming stronger with every rotation.

Almost a full minute passes, and nothing changes. No more divine light permeates from the artifact, and my knowledge of the runes and text all around me is cut off. However, the artifact's message is clear, and I know what I have to do if I want to learn more.

I take a deep breath, and slowly reach out my right hand until my index finger makes contact with the cube.

It stops rotating and again, a gentle soft pull on my core activates, and small amounts of divine threads are siphoned out.

A ripple of yellow light becomes visible over the cube, and it disperses all over the room, lighting up all of the text with a bright divine glow.

Simultaneously, a voice echoes in my head. It doesn't sound human, more like a wild animal mixed with metal scraping against metal, but in a gentle rhythmic pattern. I'm certain it's some kind of ancient dialect, or means of communicating, because my telepathy skill and purple barrier translate its meaning.

"Another wave has come; my hypothesis was true. This world is rich with light once again."

Chapter 654

The text covering the walls, floor, and ceiling continues to glow bright yellow even after the room falls back into silence while the ancient voice echoes through my mind.

I think carefully about the voice's words. It speaks in vague terms, but with its emotions streaming through me and a rough translation coursing through my mind with the full power of my true core backing it, many connections with past conversations—with Pluto the demon, the saint, Raven, Celia, and even Ember—all surface in my mind.

This wave it speaks of must be referring to the phenomena of the system connecting to this world.

Its repetition of the word **light** must mean some kind of power source, but I'm unsure if it's referring to divine energy, or mana, or something entirely different.

Though, the fact that it talks of there not being enough light for everyone to leave the physical world sounds extremely similar to the ascension of a demon lord.

Not wanting to ask too many questions at once, I respond out loud with a simple, open-ended question to see what kind of being I'm dealing with right now.

"Who—or... what... are you...?"

My index finger stays touching the artifact, and small amounts of threads continue to drain out of me, but in return, my mind perceives exactly where the threads are going.

They ripple through the walls of this room, spreading through the statue's skull, and moving throughout the enormous being lodged into the ocean's floor.

Its voice echoes back into my mind, this time sounding more coherent and natural rather than the animalistic metallic rhythmic noise from before.

"I am Atom."

This name echoes through my mind as I feel my own memories being sifted through, while I, too, see a fast-moving slideshow of this same statue, completely white, standing atop an ancient world, watching beams of light all over the globe flash and disappear.

I watch clouds fly by, and the yellow sun rotate above the sky hundreds, then thousands, and millions of times before I lose count.

The only thing I can see is the white statue's color fading, turning slightly darker, and the worlds around it shifting and changing.

As millennia pass, trees and wildlife build up sediment, and the feet of the statue are slowly covered in dirt. The plants and beings that grow around the statue often show stronger-than-average abilities, accidentally absorbing the trace amounts of white energy that seeped off the massive artifact.

On many other points around the globe, similar artifacts give off the same energy, and religions are born praising the larger-than-life giant that watched over them all.

As years pass, powers grow and fall, but no intelligent life ever matches the heights of what the Originators built.

The shifting of continents, volcanic activity, and heavy rainfall create an age of massive oceans on this world, covering the statue up to its knees.

The oceans freeze over, melt, evaporate, and more life grows in the dry plains around a dormant statue that watched an ancient race leave this planet for the stars millions of years ago.

The coloring of the statue begins to turn even darker—gray, in fact—and the speed at which the sun rises and falls moves too fast to comprehend and the memories become fuzzier.

Countless ice ages, floods, species, and world-ruling races rise and fall, and each time the statue grows darker, and the planet devours it slowly in more ways than one.

All that remains is the jet-black hand reaching out of the sea, with yet again, a society of the planet's ruling race congregating around it while the statue watches time sweep by.

The ancient voice echoes in my head again, this time, sounding not ancient at all. I can't even tell the difference between it and the base language I speak...

"Atom... At least, that is what I was called before I died. You are the first to visit my tomb; it seems your people call us Originators."

My eyes widen at its words, and the voice continues to answer the second half of my question.

"What am I...? I don't know. I am the echo of what is left behind from a civilization that has moved on long ago..."

My eyes look around at all of the glowing runes and texts all over the walls. It feels as if they're vibrating and trying to come off the stone. I reply, my heartbeat quickening, filled with excitement.

"So the Originators are real... Who were those that left this world through the beacons of light in those memories you showed? What do the words around us referring to light mean? And the doors... Everyone keeps talking about these doors. What do you know...?"

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I feel more threads leave my finger, and the words all over the room pulse and vibrate even more as the voice responds.

"I am dead. I have been dead for so long, I do not even know how I died. What you are asking of me is like asking if you can remember what food your mother ate on a specific date while you were still inside the womb. You have seen all I know, this is the first time I've opened my eyes in centuries. I know more about you than I do of myself..."

Its reply is not what I wanted to hear, but as I sift through the memories it shared with me, they flash by in spurts and have no true depth to them at all.

In truth, the white statue was already dead as it says, reaching up toward the sky as these memories began.

It continues speaking to me, and at the same time, the room shakes and vibrates more intensely than ever before, and I feel as though I can see through the being's eyes... but all I see is darkness.

"I do understand the texts my ancestors left me, and your memories of this world have led me to create meaning for many things previously unknown. These beacons in the depths of my mind were in fact the chosen ones, many texts here speak of their attempts at leaving this mortal realm to continue their journeys..."

The room tilts to the side, and I can feel the ocean crust cracking beneath and above me. However, it is not through my own senses; it comes from the statue's.

It continues, and I don't dare take my finger off the black cube. I need to know more, and I fear that if my connection is lost, I may never get it back again.

"This light and the wave printed all over these walls refer to the dominant energy source on the world we stand on. What your people know of as Qi was a far different power long ago; it was as abundant in this world as mana is now. The fact that you were even strong enough to access my tomb means another source was created, and the divine ones' game is being played again..."

Another violent tilt of the room follows its words, and the yellow words on the walls become so bright, it feels as though they're tearing off and falling toward me.

I reply with a question.

"So divine energy was here long ago too? It was an energy source before Qi? Or... whatever it was called when the wave came in your time?"

The yellow text of millions of characters begins coming off the walls, floor, and ceiling entirely, all closing in on the center of the room.

Simultaneously, the gravity in the room rises, and I feel as if I'm moving upward.

Moments later, as if two eyes are opening on the statue's face, I'm able to see the outside world, and what is happening begins to become clear.

The hand holding Palmyra above the ocean rises even higher, and an enormous bulge in the ocean's surface grows beneath the black palm.

It continues to bulge while the arm reaches out from the sea, pushing the island high into the clouds until a black head with enormous yellow glowing eyes emerges from the dark surface of the sea.

I hear a reply while watching the impossibly large statue push itself out of the planet's hard rock crust as if it's malleable sand.

"The power of the divine has always existed. It is the fabric of reality, but lesser energy sources are necessary for mortals to begin their journey and climb. These lesser sources are not as absolute in the grand scheme of time, but they are necessary to reset the mortals' worlds and allow for motion to continue taking place. Even gods die, they too must be replaced."

The entire black statue ripples yellow as it rises from the sea, creating massive tsunamis that head toward the coasts thousands of kilometers away.

At the same time, far away, the sun begins to rise, shedding a sliver of light upon the magnificent event taking place far out in the middle of the ocean.

The yellow ripples cover the entire black statue, then bounce back after covering its entire body to make their way back toward the head.

Once they do, all of the yellow energy settles in its skull, adding to the bright runes surrounding me, and making them all collapse in faster.

Its words echo through my mind again.

"Finally, the great wave has come again, and those who pass the trials shall walk through the doors. I have rested long enough; this world has finally awakened, and I shall fulfill my duty to make sure it is not forgotten as it was before. Promise me, if you ascend, you will not leave this world behind."

As its words echo in my head, a phrase of text collapsing in jumps out at me, reading, *This will be another forgotten world once we leave. Atom, I have trust in you to not make the same mistakes we have.*

Then, again, I remember The Saint saying something similar too, telling me he would help me if I don't forget my humanity.

I give the same response back, as the only reason I'm here, fighting, searching, building, and growing, is to make sure everything I have here is protected.

"Of course. I will always do everything in my power to protect what is mine."

The cube changes colors, turning red and morphing its shape to begin that repetitive cycle, and my finger sinks into the moving liquid.

It replies while shifting to orange.

"Good. All my years after death have not been in vain. The right one has finally found me."

The yellow runes collapse in and collide with my finger at the same time the artifact reaches the end of its cycle, and they all collapse into a single point, shining the brightest yellow-white I've ever seen.

All of the yellow divine light vibrates through me, then bounces back, emulating the same pattern that rippled through the massive statue when this whole process started.

Once it hits the black cube again, it disappears into it, and it pops off its invisible pillar where it was floating in place before, and even floats away from my finger.

It glows red and starts to shift to start its cycle again, but this time it rotates around me like I'm its center of gravity.

I try to reach out to touch it again, and once I do, it reacts by bouncing off my finger and orbiting in the complete opposite direction while continuing its cycle.

Instead of going for it again, my gaze is focused elsewhere.

First, on the smooth blank walls and floor all around me, as all of the text was consumed by the artifact. Second, I try to put out a perception pulse because my vision

through the eyes of this massive statue ceased the second the runes and text collapsed.

Once I get readings back from my energy pulse, and get a feel for how things are in the outside world, the situation becomes more clear.

Previously, I wasn't able to sense a thing outside the statue's inner walls.

However, now, I can easily send pulses through thousands of cracks all over its surface.

The black outer shell becomes brittle, and shows the same signs as the pieces of black stone that were cut off from it earlier; turning gray, then white, then disintegrating into thin air.

The entire statue begins to dissolve away beneath my feet, and in a matter of seconds, I begin to smell the ocean air again.

The feeling of weightlessness takes over.

Above, I see a scene that reminds me of the time Ember and I had to dodge a falling island full of trees within the divine construct.

This time, it happens to be a massive city filled with over 70,000 residents, and below, is the dark depths of the violent crashing endless ocean. Search the [website](#) to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

Chapter 655

Everything that's occurred in the last few minutes rushes through my mind as I watch the stone statue disappear and the massive cluster of housing and residents fall toward me.

The words of the artifact, and the memories it shared, are eye-opening, but after leaving its tomb, I'm even more confused about its origins and cryptic texts than when I entered. Even after viewing the millions of millennia of fuzzy memories it showed me, they all lacked detail, and none were from before the artifact's death.

For all I know, this object was never alive... or it could be falsely calling itself an originator after seeing my memories and telling me exactly what I want to hear.

While I sense no malice, as I fall toward the sea and watch the black cube rotate around me in a lifeless state after putting me in this mess, I can't help but wonder what exactly this odd, sentient artifact really is.

Despite these questions, there is a real voice that echoes in my head, full of fear and worry.

"S-Sir Flame Emperor—what has happened? We've been waiting for you—Is this all part of your plan? Is the island of Palmyra destined to sink into the sea... Have you asked everyone to stare into the sky only to show them their deaths are near... Is—"

I roll my eyes and allow my true core's aura to leak out while forming a plan and replying.

"No, Marcus. I just ran into some unforeseen trouble... Hold onto something, I'll fix this."

I stare up at the enormous size of the falling city housing 70 thousand residents and believe it might be possible to use mana manipulation tethered with my divine energy to carry them all and fly somewhere to safety. But I'm sure being at such close range with such immense power would kill many and destroy most, if not all, of their personal possessions on the island.

First impressions are everything, and I'm unsure how well destroying everything they own and killing most of them will work in my favor when asking them to swear loyalty to me.

So, instead of airstepping up to catch the island, I plunge downward, activating my plunderer skill to begin draining the atmosphere of any and all ambient mana while flying headfirst back toward the massive hole in the ocean where the black statue used to stand.

Enormous waves crash in, and city-sized whirlpools form as the empty space is filled by the vast endless sea.

While violent waves crash against each other, kilometers high, as the water displacement equalizes, I plunge headfirst into the sea and head down to take advantage of the enormous hole in the ocean floor.

If there was once an island here, I can make it again.

Once I'm deep enough underwater, I let the true power of my divine core loose and activate ice magic with it, while expanding my greater form to become larger than it ever has before.

A shockwave of light blue ice, mixed with yellow divine threads, pulses through the ocean, and everywhere within a 50-kilometer radius below the sea freezes in a matter of seconds.

All of the water that filled the space deep below the planet's crust freezes solid, tethered with divine threads so strong, even the overwhelming heat that boiled seawater before can't melt this ice.

I propel myself upward while the ocean above the floor freezes, and as I leave the surface, all that's left behind is light blue waves and whirlpools frozen in place as I set my sights on the island that still falls my way.

I activate telekinesis from a long distance away and create dozens of sports-field-sized mana barriers below the bottoms of the largest chunks of floating islands and large buildings.

At first, I use as much of my aura as I can, and the entire collection of falling structures lurches and cracks, making it seem like massive earthquakes are taking place for the citizens that watch as the sun continues to rise, and the clouds move upward while they fall down.

There are screams, panic, and some hunters with higher mana control levels attempting to jump off the island, but Marcus keeps a majority of them in line and orders the other B-Class hunters on the island to make sure everyone holds on and trusts that it is under control.

Meanwhile, I use every drop of mana in the atmosphere for dozens of kilometers, and in turn, the island above me starts to slow its fall.

It definitely doesn't come to a halt, as there are hundreds of buildings, and a mind-boggling amount of imported dirt and stone. However, instead of a catastrophe where everyone dies and the infrastructure hits the violent waves at terminal velocity, I've created a far safer result.

As the island slows, I'm able to use less divine energy, and more pure mana control and soul energy to keep the island's slow rate of descent, and this in turn allows me to be much closer to it as it meets the icy ocean surface.

Being closer means far less mana has to be used, by the time it makes contact with the artificial icy island I've created, it's falling at less than 1 kmph.

Even so, there's a city-wide thud that makes an echo ripple throughout the ocean to compete with the endless waves.

While most of the residents are still confused, shocked, angered, and scared, the fact that there's miraculously been a safe landing leads to a citywide cheer and claps as they're all just happy to be alive.

The sun finally rises all the way above the horizon as well.

High up in the sky above the island, light debris continues to fall, reflecting light. Even the light blue dungeon portals glow in the sky above, as they are geo-locked to a position in space and do not fall with gravity like normal matter.

I take advantage of the positive moment and fly to the center of the city where many still stand, with Marcus floating above the densest part of them.

Without any warning, I increase my mana control output and appearance, to look just like the Flame Emperor I've used many times before back in the Crimson City, and activate my screech skill to project my voice for all on the island to hear.

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"Your rulers are dead, and I am here to set you free. You may call me the Flame Emperor."

I burst into a vibrant and beautiful red, orange, and yellow display of flames while projecting my appearance to become massive in the sky using my master of illusion buff.

As I feel all eyes on the island turn toward me, I speak up again.

"Some of you are here by choice to pay off debts, some of you are here because you were tricked into bad contracts, and others are here entirely against their wills. I do not know the nature of all your circumstances, but I am here to give you an offer to void all of your contracts and grant you a second chance at life."

My larger-than-life imagery looks down on the island, flickering with flames so large and realistic, while the events that just took place can't be explained with the rational mind to many on this island other than as the work of a god.

Many fall to their knees and pray, while others are frozen in shock. A small few still run for their lives, attempting to leave the island, but only find that the outer ring where the dirt and rock ends only leads to frozen waves.

I speak again after everyone here has come to believe what they are seeing is truly reality.

"There is a nation to the east under my rule. It is far away from Central. I promise you all a life free of the shackles that the king and queen have put on you here. If there are loved ones back in Central, I vow to bring them to you all with no strings attached. The only thing I ask of you is your trust. A second great war is coming, and the world is going to have to choose sides. You do not have to fight for me, nor work for me, or anything like your past leaders have asked. I just want your loyalty, and goodwill."

After this line, I feel a few links start to form between myself and random citizens all over the island atop the iceberg.

Conversation in the city begins to spark up, so I keep quiet while sentiment spreads naturally among them.

"I think we should do it. We're finally saved!"

"Can we really trust this man of flames? What if he works for Central too and he just bought the island and this is his flashy way of taking ownership?"

"Even if that's the case... what choice do we have... wouldn't it be best to accept his terms and hope for the best? The worst case is we're just back where we started..."

"True, I guess there's a reason to have hope again."

"I believe him! I swear my loyalty to you, Flame Emperor!"

Some are skeptical, but the longer I let them talk amongst themselves, the more many on this island realize there is no reason for them to say no at all. It is a win-win scenario, and this thought process spreads like wildfire.

While a few hundred trickle in at first just out of fear that I'll punish those that don't instantly submit, and a few thousand after a few seconds as they see me as a real god, the more rational and skeptical hunters on this island take their time to think over my words.

However, as the minutes pass, thousands and thousands more link with me, and I feel my option to borrow and grant power grow more every second that passes.

Once over 10 thousand links are visible on my interface, I expect a notification to ring in my ear, just as it did when I hit 5, 100, and 1000 members in my rising emperor's domain, but it never comes.

I think to myself that maybe I've hit the end of the line for upgrades to this buff, but I was really hoping for another one...

My gaze becomes filled with status screens and geo-points as the number rises more and more, past 20 thousand links, then 30 thousand, and it continues to rise.

As residents get down on one knee, following the actions of others all around, my aura continues to permeate through them and show intensity. The entire kingdom of Palmyra acknowledges me as their savior and new ruler.

I speak again as the links begin to slow after 40 thousand, as over half of the island has sworn their loyalty.

"Very good. I will have helpers from the mainland sent over here very soon. Transport to new cities to the east will be given, and care packages with money, food, and unlimited dungeon access in a whole new region will be provided to those of you that have sworn your loyalty."

I pause, and the links pick up again, as even more people are intrigued that were previously on edge.

"Those of you who do not wish to believe my words will have to stay here for 4 days or longer. Extra food, water, and resources will be provided, but rogues of unknown origin or loyalty will not be permitted in my nation. Those of you that wish to return to Central, or wish for me to reunite you with loved ones, you will also need to wait until the results of the war are settled."

Even more links form, and more talk erupts through the citizens all over the city.

A familiar sounding ding echoes through my inner ear while I say a final statement.

"Marcus will keep you all company until my subordinates return. I know you all have many questions; they will be answered in time. I thank you all for putting your trust in me, and guarantee it will not be in vain. Continue your farming if you wish, or head back to your quarters to rest. There are no longer quotas, deadlines, or higher-ups to fear your life from disappointing... If you wish to fight with me in this upcoming war, tell a Crimson Army soldier that you wish to join when they stop by."

I smile and make my massive face in the sky disappear, then share my screech skill with the red core I've left in charge so his voice can project through the entire city as well.

I send him a telepathy message while pulling a teleport crystal from my storage.

"Bri and Rodrigo will be on their way back soon with my double and more of my stronger recruits to make transportation easier and bring the supplies I've promised. I know I've tossed you into this position, but I'll make it worth it in the end for you."

A few seconds pass, and I get a response.

"It is already worth it. You're doing a good thing here, I've always wanted to be free of that king and queen too, I just never believed it was possible. I won't let you down."

I crush the teleport crystal in my hand and blip back to the bunker beneath the Crimson City.

With four orange cores collecting large amounts of yellow divine threads all around me, I finally open up my status interface once I'm here to see what the notifications said before.

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

[60822/50000 Links of Loyalty Created]

[New Perk Unlocked: Rising Emperor's Authority]

Info:

The caster may appoint 5 generals to share the Rising Emperor's power.

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

The maximum amount borrowed or shared per general is 1%. All generals acting together may control 5%.

When not in use, the Rising Emperor may use all 5% of this untapped power. The Rising Emperor has total authority and can override the generals' power sharing even if they are activated.

The caster may only borrow or share exclusively; both actions cannot be performed simultaneously.

Members affected by this perk are not required to be within range of the Rising Emperor's Domain.

This additional buff stacks with the [Power Holder] perk and [Ruler's Gaze] perk if used simultaneously.

I come to the conclusion that not only did the number of subordinates in my interface rise by 20 times, now the total amount of stats and mana control I can borrow or grant has risen from 15% to 20%.

Five percent of which can be controlled by five generals of my choosing. This means to gain additional power, it doesn't have to come directly from me; they too can benefit from the Rising Emperor's domain as well as grant their own power to whoever they're fighting with.

As the possibilities of what this new perk can do rush through my mind, another phenomenon hits my senses.

Ember's mind is far more active than it was just yesterday within the isolation pod, and I can sense his core through the mana-imbued metal casing with ease.

It's much larger than it was before, as it's cycling the yellow divine threads through the room just as it did for the orange threads previously.

Instead of just making the circulation in the room faster and more efficient for my teammates, this time, Ember's core is retaining a large amount of the yellow threads with every rotation.

It is clear his healing and rest process from overusing his immortal core has come to an end. Now, he is using this perfect environment to train; it appears as though he is attempting to awaken his True Core.

Chapter 656

As my gaze remains fixed on the silver contraption at the back of the room, where Ember is contained, I feel the mind inside the pod shift. In response, the link within my rising Emperor's Domain activates, bypassing the need for direct contact through my aura to enable telepathic messages.

"You've been quite busy since the B-Class exams. Our power has grown a substantial amount... While our stats and mana control are linked through our system pact, divine energy cannot be created nor destroyed. I must awaken my True Core alone, using an old technique I created."

There's a brief pause—less than half a second—before a pulse of weak divine energy ripples through the room. Ember's voice then vibrates through my mind at a rapid pace.

"You found yourself an amplifier too... how interesting."

I raise an eyebrow, replying through the link while my peripheral vision tracks the black cube slowly rotating around me.

"What is an amplifier?"

There's a much longer pause before Ember replies again.

"It is difficult to explain in these circumstances. I must keep my mind and body focused on compressing my core without harming your teammates or crippling my own core with too many movements before it's complete..."

Another pause, even longer than the first, follows before Ember continues.

"I have a few hundred yellow fragments of my own from the construct. I will add them to the room's cycle; it should be enough for me to finish in less than a month within this pod, which will be three days on the outside."

Our link grows silent for a moment before he speaks again.

"An amplifier is the result of an originator's failed ascension. This was before the era of demons and the system, and the ascension process was different. It is the echo of a dead soul that holds onto the mortal realm with a desire too strong to be broken by death alone. They cannot think, lie, act, or grow more than they already know, but often share incredible powers with those who share a common desire."

Ember's cryptic description doesn't tell me much more than I could have guessed, but the fact that he says they cannot lie makes me less hesitant to leave the cube floating around me. The mention of a different process of ascension raises an eyebrow.

I remember, in the statue's memories, beams of light all over the world, and its description of those beings ascending, though it didn't know how it died or have any memories before its death.

I reply quickly, "How do I use it? Or activate its powers?"

After no reply for a few more seconds, I assume Ember has fallen into his final state of concentration. I leave him with a final message.

"Well... the faster you awaken your core the better. The throne is opening its doors in four days."

As I turn around and pull out a teleport crystal, a final reply echoes through our link, slower this time.

"One day for us to train together will be more than enough. Focus on what you can do in the present. All amplifiers are unique. It will most likely take an absurd amount of divine energy to activate; it was a True Core holder in its past life, after all. I must focus now. See you soon."

Our link goes quiet, and I look around the room at my teammates, still cycling the divine energy in the air around them. They, too, are in total concentration.

I peer into their cores to see how far along they've come and notice that Maria has the most saturated core of all. At this rate, she'll complete her breakthrough even before Ember wakes up. Abby appears to be in a similar state, lagging by about 30%, but she maintains a constant ring of restoration below everyone in the bunker. Fisher and Lydia are absorbing far fewer yellow threads than I expected. At this rate, they won't awaken their yellow cores within four days. The natural talent barrier shows itself again.

At this thought, my perception expands through the city, across the dark continent, and further to Raven's nation and the eight great regions. They are the most powerful beings in all these lands, aside from a few exceptional order members who have been training since before we were even born. The only reason they seem lacking is that they're in a room full of true monsters.

I smirk, whispering to myself while crushing my teleport crystal, "Good work, you four. Stay at it. I'll return soon."

Disappearing in a flash of light, I think about how, once they awaken, I'll appoint them as my generals within my rising Emperor's Domain. The purple name tag of Arie floats in the back of my mind, as he is still deep within the abyss. I'd like to appoint him too.

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However, these thoughts soon fade as more important work comes to mind. I materialize in the lobby of the Apex Region's Association headquarters and sift through my memories of my doubles, I realize Bri and Rodrigo have already begun mapping out the best locations to start my tour to strengthen the numbers within my rising Emperor's Domain.

I smile, connecting with them and my nearby double, and get to work.

—

Over the next two days, everything goes exactly as planned.

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Many residents of Palmyra migrate to a new settlement actively being built in the mountainous region where Sebastian, the True Core Order member, once stayed. With the help of mass teleportation crystal travel, this is done quickly. Some stay behind to wait the war out, but the majority wants to come to the mainland. With over sixty thousand people flooding into the area, the population quadruples. My doubles bring in large amounts of raw mana from the artificial mountains, seeding the air with enough ambient mana for faster natural MP recovery.

With this influx, trade routes connect many smaller native villages along the lakes' outer edges. Upon contact, I distribute resources, give a unifying speech, and project a larger-

than-life illusion of the Flame Emperor to every village, gaining another 7,441 links of loyalty.

This is just the start.

As new roads connecting the Dark Continent and the eight great regions are built, I map out and plan to visit every village along these paths. I convey that the eight great regions and the Dark Continent will soon face a great war and need their support.

Knowledgeable merchants and hand selected Crimson Army members accompany me on my tours. When I move to the next scheduled location, they stay behind to explain details to those wanting more information about the coming events.

During the two days that pass, I visit 143 small villages throughout the Dark Continent and the eight great regions. Settlements with 1,000-20,000 citizens receive gifts of magic items and fresh food not available in certain regions, drawing crowds. I offer better housing, unlimited dungeon access, and free training from high-level hunters. I promise to connect them with trade routes that will boost local economies, even if they don't join me. In return, I only ask for their trust and loyalty; over 50% form links of loyalty with me on average, and my influence spreads.

Rumors begin circulating in nearby villages that I'll visit them next.

With merchants and army members accompanying me, I need a quick way back to the Crimson City. I create two public teleport platforms outside the Crimson Dome. Groups of trusted guides escort those curious to see this Crimson City I speak of.

Large-scale housing projects within the Crimson Dome are paying off, with thousands more entering, seeking opportunities.

At night, with no more cities to visit as most citizens sleep, I take time to train. I assist my double in transferring pure mana from the artificial mountains into my labyrinth. The higher floors have slow respawn rates, with 5 to 10 monsters per floor and up to 30 minute reset counters. Even so, each monster up here grants hundreds of billions to even trillions of MCP. So, I dungeon walk to all floors above the 80th to constantly farm large amounts of mana control.

After two nights of this, the labyrinth reaches 106 floors. The highest level monster I face is level 7599.

During my off time while waiting for monsters to respawn in the dead of night, I do a few side projects.

The first is siphoning a massive amount of the collected Qi from the sea floor into the Crimson Dome.

I find there isn't enough to make it larger, nor is there enough to create more. My initial plans of surrounding every major city in domes of their own seems a little too far fetched. I decide to make my home base stronger instead.

The Crimson Dome's Soul energy density increases by over 20x. I do not imbue any divine energy into it, as the aura would be very harmful to normal hunters. However, with this increased strength I'm confident most yellow cores would have trouble breaking through it even if they worked all day.

While resting and healing from the fatigue of draining my entire Soul energy Core multiple times, I do attempt to talk to the jet-black cube that now constantly rotates around me.

It never responds like it did before...

I even fly out in the dead zone areas of the desert and attempt to unleash the full power of my True Core to trigger some kind of activation.

All it does is continue to spin around me, and rotate in the opposite direction every time I touch it.

When my stealth skill is activated, it disappears too, and when I try to scan it, its as if the artifact isnt even there.

It is constantly on the back of my mind while I continue my tours, fulfilling the first stage of my plan. I have no more leads to new sources of divine power on this world, so as the sun rises, I prepare for the next major boost in potential strength I can get, mentally mapping the large-scale events scheduled in Solara, Valor City, and every capital city in the eight great regions today.

The first citywide event I have scheduled is in Vice City. It will have a dual purpose, notifying all of the contracted hunters of their leader's replacement, and being the first major city in the world that the Flame Emperor chooses to spread dominance through.

A few of the smaller surrounding cities were visited yesterday, so I'm positive whispers have spread already.

I stare down at my Rising Emperor's domain interface while hovering over the crimson city watching the links of loyalty rise slowly past half a million as word continues to spread and people prepare for their days.

The awakened I've formed links with in the smaller villages is low, under [Lv. 30] on average. So, the amount of stats I've gained access to in the last few days from over half a million links is about equal to the amount I gained from 60 thousand strong hunters on palmyra.

Still, it is a massive amount. My total stats that I can pull from has grown by over 40x since I began this venture on Palmyra, and this isn't even the final stage of my plan.

Today, I'm going mainstream with my goals.

The entirety of the Dark Continent and 8 Great Regions will soon hear my name.

As I close my status, preparing to check on Ember and my teammates' progress before I set off on my biggest tour yet, I feel a familiar sixteen wells of gravity hit my senses. The scouts from Central have returned, and from what I gathered while eavesdropping, they won't leave until they accurately assess Ember's core and return the data to the big three.

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Chapter 657

As the 16 scouts close in on my location, I think about how easy it would be to kill them all before they even take their next breaths. With only two days left until the abyss completely recedes and I have to face their leaders anyway, expediting the process and antagonizing them to come to the Dark Continent early would be the worst move I can make right now.

I crush a teleport crystal and find myself back inside the shielded bunker below the city, letting out a unique aura once I'm inside.

I imbue strong true core divine threads into my mana while activating my master of illusion buff, creating an identical image of what they scanned the last time they were here.

It now appears like there is nothing more powerful than newly awakened orange cores among us—other than Ember. I make my own presence nonexistent, concealing my core behind my purple barrier and using stealth to disappear. However, I change the perceived image of Ember's core to be identical to the bronze dragon I faced when I first met Raven.

It's an easy feat, as the pure yellow divine energy inside it now is equivalent in thread contents to that bronze dragon; the only oddity is that it's still expanding in size and hasn't collapsed yet. Ember's yellow core is twice the size mine was when I collapsed it. His has golden and silver strands of divine energy that keep it stable while simultaneously forcing it from collapsing while he stacks more yellow threads inside.

I believe if the scouts get a proper reading on whatever is taking place here now, it will be even more suspicious than if I simply changed the scene to portray Ember as an already awakened True Core.

After seeing Redgrave's divine flames for myself, I'm confident that even this high level of power will not make them bat an eye. At the same time, it will quell their suspicions from the faulty reading before.

—

I stay still, holding my breath while the scouts perform their scans.

It takes less than ten minutes once they arrive, and moments later they fly off to the west as if nothing happened, satisfied with the new data.

Once they're completely out of my senses, I release my buffs and skills, letting out a sigh.

Then, as if waiting for my experiment to finish, I feel a light pulse of energy coming from Maria's core to my right side. Her eyes open, glowing bright yellow yet still piercing blue underneath. [Search the Nôvel\(F\)ire.net website](#) to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

She looks around the room, meets my gaze, and stands up with a grin. I can't help but point out the obvious with a smile of my own.

"You've consolidated your yellow core... congrats."

She looks down at her hands, then around the room, observing the others.

Abby is on the verge of awakening her yellow core, well past halfway there, while Fisher and Lydia have about ten percent of the necessary threads cycling through their bright orange cores.

She looks up at me again and replies, "I have. But this power... it's too much. If even this isn't enough, then whatever battle we're preparing for will split this world in two..."

The corners of my lips turn up, but behind my smile, I agree with her. Whatever happens in the next few days will permanently change this entire world. I reply with a nod.

"Indeed."

Over the next few minutes, I give Maria a brief explanation of everything that has transpired since she began consolidating her red core days ago—from my initial fight

with Raven to my new knowledge of the throne and the originators from both The Saint and my encounter with the unique artifact on Palmyra.

This all leads to the description of the strength of Redgrave's divine flames around Central and what little I know of the Big Three, other than them being powerful rulers of this world who know of us, yet still believe we are mere ants.

I tell her of my own efforts to grow stronger, first with divine energy from the true cores I defeat, and now by creating links of loyalty throughout the lands I control.

Everyone else in the room overhears our conversation, but their minds are focused on healing and consolidating divine threads.

Maria's eyes widen the more I talk, not with fear, but with awe.

My story of the past coming to an end is perfectly timed with a voice in my head from Bri, telling me it's time to visit the Vice Region. I let Maria in on the link the moment I hear it.

"Your double created a teleport platform to the capital last night. I believe you have the crystal necessary to come. Rodrigo has gathered all contracted hunters in the region, and many citizens in the capital have gathered in Vice City expecting an urgent emergency announcement. Are you ready?"

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I pull out a white teleport gem and reply, shifting my appearance to the flaming masked man gaining influence through smaller cities, now about to make a grand public appearance.

Maria grabs onto my arm, and reflexively, my purple barrier morphs around her to contain her yellow aura.

She speaks up, "I'm coming too. I want to watch... There isn't much energy left here. The others only have so much to consolidate their yellows, and Ember needs enough excess to establish his true core. It would be best for me to get used to my new power in the outside world with the time we have left."

I crush my teleport crystal, sharing my conceal skill with Maria.

—

Many Crimson Army members, merchants, and extra help to control the crowds now and inform those who have questions once my speech here today is done. They have been handpicked by Bri, and a small group of Crimson Army Elites along with Bri and

Rodrigo wait for me in Vice City Association's headquarters, now taken over from the inside by loyal followers.

When the flash of white light within the top floor's penthouse suite that was once the Regional Director's subsidies, two figures emerge.

One is a familiar face, myself as the Flame Emperor. However, the second wears a glowing bright blue mask that appears to freeze the air around it.

The illusion of ice freezing even the ground she walks on frightens those who look too long, and her flowing blue and white dress compliments my red and black flaming suit perfectly.

We walk forward toward the full glass window overlooking all of Vice City as the sun rises, and I see hundreds of thousands of people standing in the streets below. Millions more surround the outer districts connected to the main city, but they're not in my direct line of sight.

Bri's voice echoes behind me.

"The stage is yours."

I raise a hand, using mana manipulation, earth magic, and telekinesis to pull off the windowpane before me.

As it falls into my item storage, I walk to the edge of the building with Maria by my side. She lets go of my hand while I take a step and float upward.

"Good luck, Jay."

In the same moment, I activate my master of illusion buff, screech, and release an aura of intimidation that ripples through the entire city.

My presence today is hundreds of times larger than it was above Palmyra, and it does its job perfectly; before I even say a word, it feels as if the entire region has gone silent, and all eyes are on me.

"Good morning, citizens of the Vice Region. You may call me The Flame Emperor. Your Regional Director has stepped down, and as I now rule the Dark Continent and the Eight Great Regions, it's safe to say, I am your leader."

I send a small ping of telepathy to Maria, and she jumps from the penthouse floor to float beside me in the air.

I update the massive illusion in the sky to show her next to me before speaking again.

"A second great war is coming, and I need your support to save this world."

I let my aura grow stronger, shaking the entire city, keeping meticulous track of the hunters I'm pressuring to ensure none pass out but understand I'm serious and unfathomably strong.

Simultaneously, I fill the sky behind the image of Maria and myself with images of strong beings.

First, I show images of all my teammates, including Fisher, Lydia, Abby, Ember, Arie and Luna, each wearing masks that mirror their magic abilities.

Among them, I place Rodrigo's face and other popular B-Class hunters in the Vice Region, strategically chosen by Bri, who are local stars in the news to build trust with the public.

Behind them, I mentally map the figures of everyone in the Crimson Army, and behind them, everyone residing in the Crimson City.

Bri sends many messages through a transmission tablet, notifying hunter's below to release pure mana throughout the streets, increasing the density in the air to give everyone a rush. Simultaneously, item boxes filled with magic gear and gifts rain down on the streets.

I speak again, raising my aura's pressure further.

"Just like 50 years ago, there will be another struggle for power on this world, as dungeons, magic, and power divide us all. I will not lie like your past leaders and pretend to tell you the full story, but there are powers far greater than the monsters you fight in dungeons. I am one of those powers, and wish to be a symbol of hope and absolute strength for those of you that will not be on the front lines in the coming days."

I let my aura out even more, making it clear that my power is beyond anyone's comprehension here before I speak again.

"I'm sure many of you have heard the rumors from surrounding towns. Others may have visited my growing empire in the Dark Continent. There are many knowledgeable hunters here that will answer all your questions once I leave. For now, know that our walls have been broken, and we are a single nation, only strong if we are one. Swear your loyalty to me, and I vow that not a single innocent citizen throughout the Crimson Empire will be killed in this second Great War."

More pure mana fills the air, and I feel links of loyalty beginning to form.

I make my massive illusion fill the sky, projecting the image of every link of loyalty I've created so far, showing over half a million individuals above.

With each new link that forms, a new face appears in the sky before the Crimson Army.

I align the illusions with the locations of new links, so those in the crowd can see when their fellow hunters, merchants, and citizens form bonds.

"Fight beside me if you wish, take advantage of our powerful hunters to train, meet our influential craftsmen for unique items, and even gain new skills. Swearing your loyalty to me today will change history."

For those who form links, I share temporary skills on their status screens, all at the mythic rank, while easing my immense, domineering aura, allowing the crowd to think more clearly.

While I haven't shared enough information for the average citizen to fully understand what is going on, there is enough mob mentality in place with pure mana to soothe the senses, and the depiction of a fiery god in the sky to sway enough minds to get the ball rolling.

As I go silent, the streets erupt with noise.

With hundreds of thousands looking up at me from the city below, and over a million able to see my illusion and hear my words throughout Vice City and its surrounding districts, someone quickly realizes they have a new skill, and word spreads fast.

Status screens open all around the capital, and the number of loyalty links grows faster and faster.

Cheers and roars of excitement fill the streets, and to top it all off, I temporarily share a portion of my mana control with every newly joined link to amplify their reactions and spread my influence faster while the initial hype is still effective.

Floating beside Maria in the sky, I watch as the links of loyalty in my Rising Emperor's Domain skyrocket.

It takes less than two minutes before my total links surpass one million.

A notification rings in my ears as another perk unlocks. My eyes widen as I begin to read what the [Rising Emperor's Dominance] perk grants me while the links of loyalty continue to rise.

Chapter 658

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

[1002098/1000000 Links of Loyalty Created]

[New Perk Unlocked: Rising Emperor's Dominance]

Info:

All links of loyalty under the allegiance of the Rising Emperor will now be granted permanent Daily Use Tiered buffs, and a custom interface with the Rising Emperor as its admin. [i](Expand for more info)

The caster may borrow 10% of all Base Stat Points and Mana Control efficiency from Party Members under the allegiance of the Rising Emperor. In addition, 10% of the caster's Base Stat Points and Mana Control may be temporarily distributed to any Party Members under the allegiance of the Rising Emperor.

The caster may only borrow or share exclusively; both actions cannot be performed simultaneously.

Members affected by this perk are not required to be within range of the Rising Emperor's Domain.

This additional buff stacks with the [Authority] perk, [Power Holder] perk, and [Ruler's Gaze] perk if used simultaneously.

The first thing my eyes lock onto is the fact that I've received another 10% stats and mana control to share and borrow.

This brings the total amount I control up to 30% and makes me wonder if there is even a limit to how high this will go in the future...

The average links being created in the city today aren't much higher than the surrounding villages, as most people in this world never make it past the E-Class rating.

However, this is the second strongest city in both the 8 great regions and the Dark Continent by pure volume of hunters alone. There are thousands of D and C grade

hunters, along with dozens of B grade hunters that greatly skew the numbers, even with the hundreds of thousands of newly awakened.

On average, the links here are around [Lv. 60].

This half a million hunters have granted me access to a similar amount of stats as the entire island of Palmyra and surrounding villages combined.

Raising the amount of stats I have available to me up by 80x of what I had less than 3 days ago.

This is only the first of many cities I have on my tour list today, but it is one of the biggest.

My smile grows as my eyes track to another feature in this new milestone unlock.

It is a description of the daily tiered buffs now available to all loyal hunters.

[Buff Timer: 1 hour]

[Cooldown: 24 hours]

Level 1-100: +100 All Base Stats

Level 101-500: +250 All Base Stats

Level 501-1000: +500 All Base Stats

Level 1001-10000: +1000 All Base Stats

[i](Expand for more Tiers)

*This stat buff affects the user's base stats, allowing all percentage-based gear worn to significantly raise in efficiency for a limited time. These increased stats cannot be borrowed through the Rising Emperor's Domain Interface; only the user's original base stats are available.

Considering my Absorption skill is the only skill I have that allows me to permanently upgrade my base stats by stealing from strong opponents, this is an enormous buff for the average hunter.

Most gain 1.5-2.5 stat points per level up, making this boost in base stats near 50% for most tiers. That's the equivalent of giving every single link of loyalty a Greater Demon's Core that directly affects base stats that they can use for an hour a day.

My attention shifts to the custom interface feature next, and I'm equally shocked by the 5 empty skill slots available for each and every link within my interface.

I can select all, or edit them individually, and I'm able to add 5 skills to share with each and every link of loyalty, but above these 5 slots, there is a single greyed-out slot where the active skill can be moved up into.

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Quickly, I add swordsmanship, body hardening, extreme strength, extreme speed, and self-regeneration—all at the mythic grade level—into these slots.

Now, without me actively granting individuals skills, they can select one of these 5 at any time to add to their status without directly communicating with me.

While there are surely better options suited for individual members, on a broad scale for millions to instantly have available to them, simple is better.

By the time I look back up from my interface at the active crowd down below, my links of loyalty have already hit 1,042,877. They're still rising extremely quickly, and after this region-wide notification and availability of a new permanent timed buff for people to activate, and the option to add a temporary skill at the [Mythic Grade] level, excitement only roars more.

I whisper under my breath, more so talking to myself, but for Maria to hear as well while we bask in the glory of the capital city of the region our journey started in.

"This was far more successful than I thought it'd be. Jumping from a few thousand links up to over a million in a short few days has definitely given us some more options... but I'm not convinced it's enough yet. It's time to wrap this up and do it again for all the other great regions and Dark Continent Sectors."

I smile under my mask, and project my voice out to the crowd one last time.

"Again, thank you all. The time is near where I shall fight for your freedom in this new world. I hope my words, and the gifts of power I grant, are enough to earn your loyalty. Everything comes with a price. There will be times that you feel me borrowing your power, and other times where I grant additional power to you all. You are always free to sever the link, and to those that have not created one yet, all you must do is think of the face you see in the sky, and allow your body and mind to trust in the Flame Emperor."

There is a final rush of pure mana expelled into the atmosphere, and in turn, another surge of tens of thousands of links being formed.

I nod and take Maria's hand, and we both float back into the open window of the Vice City's Association headquarters.

Bri stands there to greet us, clapping, and her assistant holds up a containment case with more teleport crystals leading to the other cities scattered across this dual nation.

"Fabulous speech, are you ready to do it all over again?"

As we touch down and walk over, I take a deep breath and take the crystal to crush it in my hand.

—

Over the next 5 hours, we put on many more performances all throughout this side of the world.

The next great speech takes place in the Apex Region, bringing another 1,287,090 links of loyalty in less than an hour into my interface. Their average level distribution is slightly higher than the Vice Region, around [Lv. 83], as the bulk of contracted hunters here are C and B class elites, skewing the data.

The Veridian Region, now run by Nat, the new Regional Director, adds 828,324 more links, coming in third, but the average here is lower, but not weak, coming in at [Lv. 56], slightly below the Vice Region.

My visit to the Bedrock Region is one of the most exciting events, as Regional Director Maylack sent out transmissions all over the region to many of the mining towns who stopped their work from all of the surrounding mountains and come to listen to my speech, netting another 735,260 links at an average of [Lv. 48].

The Silca and Raya Regions congregate together with Dane's help, bringing in 404,889 links at an average [Lv. 39].

The Talton and Phantom regions are not populated enough for my time and effort for a grand speech in their regions.

Once I come back to the Dark Continent, Lith and Chester work together with the large businesses and Rodrigo uses his old connects within the Association to notify and get all of Solara's surrounding towns in Sector 4 to hear my speech, bringing in another 504,072 links at an average [Lv. 61].

Lastly, I visit Valor City and hold another performance above the mountain for those within the walls, but also for all of the many surrounding trade towns that are full of

merchants, forming 233,199 more links at an average [Lv. 28]. Even the elite fighters don't skew the stats up enough from the massive amount of low levels that make their living from trade and not hunting.

However, every little bit counts.

In every city I leave, more and more loyal followers from the past speeches and Crimson City are brought along, hand-picked by Bri to answer questions, and control the crowds.

The more tours I do, the more word spreads.

Every new city I fly to, there are already more and more people linked to my domain even before the speeches begin.

Word is being spread of the stat buff and availability of mythic grade skills through trade channels, local news, and personal transmission tablets.

Widespread excitement floods through the nation that once held uncertainty of why the walls were being torn down.

This too, is paired with the undertones of fear, as this message is being shared with the common knowledge that another great war is near...

—

Once I finish my final speech in Valor City, Bri deploys the last of her recruited workers, and I thank her, telling her to go rest back in the Crimson City.

"Your efforts have been immense. I couldn't have done this so smoothly and efficiently today without you."

She heads back to Sector 2 in a flash of light, and this leaves Maria and myself alone in Sector 1 as the crowds begin to disperse and go on with the rest of their day.

I check my Rising Emperor's Domain interface to see my links surpass 5,000,000.

However, even now, I feel more and more links forming all over the 8 Great Regions and Dark Continent as word of mouth spreads.

I managed to give large-scale talks in the major cities, but this hardly reached more than 10% of everyone in this nation. It would be physically impossible to reach everyone and give the same grand display; however, I've made my mark in the epicenter of each region.

This is clear as thousands of links continue to be created every minute all over this side of the globe.

I turn to Maria and open my [Authority] perk that I received once I hit 50,000 Links just 2 days ago, then speak up while appointing her as the first General.

"Check your status. I've granted you a new power..."

I look around, then mentally map the dead zone of Sector 2 where I had my fight with Raven last week, then speak again.

"I want you to take the full 1% of stats and mana control from every one of my links so we can go to a place far away from here and spar. This will be important data to see the difference in strength between divine energy and pure mana based stats. It will be a good chance for you to get used to your new power as well... Maybe you'll be strong enough to face a True Core even before you compress yours."

Chapter 659

We fly away from Valor City, finding the nearest rogue dungeon, and I dungeon walk us to another rogue dungeon near the border of Sector 2 and Raven's territory.

The massive crater in the desert, stretching hundreds of kilometers wide and deep, comes into view as we fly over.

My aura is controlled behind my barrier, but Maria's radiates out around her for a few hundred meters even in her resting state as we continue to fly away from all civilization.

Once we're far enough away, in the center of the crater, I speak up.

"This is far enough. Let's see what you can do."

Maria nods, allowing her shared conceal skill to dissipate while pulling out her silver blood-bonded sword.

As she activates her Superior Ice Summoning and releases her aura by going into attack mode, she points her sword forward at me and replies.

"I'm testing my raw power first, to see what my natural strength has grown to. Then we can increase from there."

I nod and put my hands up in a defensive stance.

"Good idea. Don't hold back."

The instant these words leave my mouth, a pulse of cold yellow energy fills the air, and she ice-walks forward faster than I've ever witnessed her move before.

In response, I grin and raise a hand to block the incoming sword vibrating with dense yellow threads and royal blue soul energy.

The air around her body bends, and I feel gravity become stronger as she comes near, but I'm able to defend against her strike with ease.

I catch the sword without changing my expression, but the shockwave it produces sends ripples of energy off into the open desert, making an echoing cracking noise in the silence.

Maria expected this result and uses her free hand to power up a close-range attack while simultaneously activating her greater form.

Her aura increases in intensity multiple times, while the yellow threads of divine light surging from her core tether with the Royal Blue Ice Goddess form that expands, sending a growing icy fist toward me.

With ease again, I block this incoming strike with my other hand while releasing the growing greater form of her sword.

Another echoing crack reverberates throughout the endless crater below, and our sparring match begins.

—

I don't fight back, only blocking her blows at the last moment before impact so she can get used to this immense increase in power.

At first, her attacks are rather slow, but with a power increase like this, I don't blame her cautious style.

While she was able to farm in the labyrinth for a few hours with Abby as an orange core, those mana manifestations are nowhere near powerful enough for her to go all out.

The last real battle Maria has been in was when the A-Class hunters attacked the Crimson City, and even then, her opponent hardly put up a fight.

She's grown hundreds of times stronger since then, and with every strike I block, I can feel her confidence growing and her endless base of power and battle instincts getting used to the divine threads tethering with her movements and Soul Energy.

Dozens of exchanges, echoing and sending out blue and yellow waves of light, turn into hundreds.

Down below in the dark crater, the floor becomes coated with ice as her larger-than-life greater form goes all out.

Every few minutes, I release consolidated mana from the artificial mountains into the air, so she can continue to absorb it all to battle at full strength. My past battle with Raven stripped this air dry of natural mana. Doing so reminds me how rigid and unnatural my own movements were before facing the bronze dragon and her when I first awakened my True Core.

The jump from never fighting with divine energy to now going all out with a yellow core must feel the same.

I had a full month to practice and get used to it in the divine construct. Plus, an intense battle with Raven to get used to my power at full throttle. So now that I am here with Maria in a similar situation, I want to give her the same opportunity to grow.

"I think you're warmed up enough. Get ready, I'm going on the offensive."

Maria's greater form holds its blade with both hands now, preparing for whatever I have to throw at her.

I grin and activate my mana manipulation skill along with one of my True Core's traits to create the manifestation of three monsters that come to mind. The first is a replica of a dragon, while another looks like a similar-sized serpent, and the last is an enormous cyclops holding a club the size of her greater form's sword.

"The dragon for battle iq and a well rounded opponent, the serpent to test your agility and speed, and the cyclops will have absurdly high defenses and raw strength. I want you to kill each one five times."

In the next moment, I imbue yellow divine threads into each of the mana manifestations, each at the strength of a yellow-cored lizard that I faced inside the divine construct.

They all pulse with yellow light, creating gravity fields of their own, and move forward as I fly back, and Maria jumps into the mock fight.

In less than a second, each of my manifestations is easily sliced through.

I grin, "That's one." Then, I increase the threads I imbue into each manifestation to double that of the strongest yellow-cored lizard I faced.

Another two seconds pass, and the dragon's fake divine flames are easily deflected and sliced in two, while the serpent attacking her from behind is shattered to pieces with the follow-through strike.

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As Maria turns to block the incoming club of the massive cyclops manifestation, finally, there is a moment of resistance when their weapons meet.

An echoing clang ripples through the empty desert, but once Maria's concentration of divine threads from the other two previous attackers floods back into her sword, the club cracks and is overpowered by her as well.

The cyclops is frozen and shattered in a single strike.

"That's two..." I yell out while regenerating the manifestations and upping their thread count again by an even more exponential degree, now similar to the core density of Angelica, the weakest member of the Order I managed to see for a few minutes in central headquarters.

The aura in the air shifts as three wells of gravity far stronger than before make dents in reality around us, and I can feel Maria's mood shift as well.

Her eyes focus on the serpent first, as it is the fastest and is coming straight her way.

Another echoing crack ripples through the air as Maria's blade collides with the serpent's fangs.

I watch her core pulse multiple times as they're locked in place in the air, digging deep to push out more and more blue soul energy, and her yellow thread squeezes it tighter and tighter to create a stronger reality-bending attack.

The serpent is cut clean through as her greater form twists its body in the air to dodge the incoming flames of the dragon.

Then, an ice-step through the sky leads to their clash, strategically soaring further away from the cyclops.

A few exchanges take place this time, as it isn't an instant kill, but with every collision of sword and divine flames, I see the same phenomena taking place where Maria's divine core and Soul Energy core pulse in unison.

At first, it looks like she's consciously doing so, but as she kills the dragon and faces the cyclops, doing it all over again with dozens of exchanges, I watch it become more of a second nature instinctive move.

For split seconds, at the apex of her attacks, it's like she's amplifying her attack power and divine thread count by multiple times out of thin air.

If I wasn't seeing it with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it...

I activate my all-seeing eye to look at it closer, but before I do, she makes her final strike on the cyclops, finishing this round and yelling out loud to me in a focused, battle-hungry tone.

"That's three. Bring on the next one!"

This time, when I regenerate the mana manifestations, I pool enough divine energy into each of them to make them of equal strength as Mr. Freeman. This is a strength that, when I first awakened my yellow, even after training in the construct, I wasn't able to defeat.

As the gravity wells form, and the aura in this large battlefield in the air shifts again, it seems clear that Maria most likely won't be able to handle them either.

Even so, I want to see how far she gets, so I send the serpent her way with the strength of a mid-tier yellow core.

The same phenomena occur milliseconds before they collide, and it feels as though raw strength is summoned from seemingly nowhere, rippling through her sword and colliding with the snake's fangs.

It sends shockwaves throughout the desert that may actually ripple far enough into the Dark Continent that some small villages feel it if their perception is high enough.

I hold the dragon and cyclops back as Maria goes all out, sending dozens of attacks per second at the snake, despite me not holding back at all.

I made this manifestation to have the weakest attacks, however, I did give it the fastest reflexes and attack speed; yet the ice goddess' eyes track it with exact precision, and every time it appears as though I'll have to end the fight early, the pulse from her cores allows her just enough time to swing her sword to block or strike back.

It takes over five minutes for her to slowly chip away at the serpent's artificial defenses and freeze the mana within the manifestation solid, but to my amazement, it shatters, and she's the victor in the end.

To simulate a real battle, I don't give her any time to rest, and send in the dragon next.

Its pure speed isn't as quick, but its attack power is much stronger and more violent, while its defenses are almost twice as strong as the serpent.

More and more pulses of light ripple through the air, but after ten whole minutes and 200 exchanges, the dragon manifestation doesn't break, and I can tell Maria is starting to become fatigued as well.

I was half expecting this mysterious pulsing phenomena in Maria's cores to continue to grow in power, allowing her to grow at an infinite rate; however, it has seemed to find its match.

The Ice Goddess is in a flow state of sorts, miraculously fighting a being tens of times stronger than herself, but it is clear this is her maximum output.

There are cracks in its armored dragon scales, and if this fight went on for another 20 minutes, I believe she could come out on top, but she would definitely not be unscathed by the end of it.

This is a spar, not a war. I want to save going all out for when it is absolutely necessary, and we have a lot more training to do today as well.

I freeze the dragon in mid-air, halting it from attacking while sending a message through her telepathy link with me.

She shatters the dragon into icy shards while it goes through.

"That's enough. We found your max... You can handle fighting multiple low-level yellow cores with ease, and mid-level yellow cores one-on-one if you go all out, but that isn't going to be enough. Activate the [Authority] Perk on my Rising Emperor's Domain, it's time you use all of the resources available to you."

Maria looks straight at me in her Ice Goddess form, a little disappointed that she couldn't finish that battle naturally since I cut it short, but she understands that it was building up unnecessary fatigue when we're just testing her abilities.

Plus, ripples of excitement coming off her body can't be hidden when she opens up her status to select the new option I've granted her.

I watch her select 1% of all stats and mana control on 5,224,890 links of loyalty, and witness the base stats in her status screen all grow by millions in a matter of seconds.

Her full set of blood-bonded gear multiplies these new base stats by thousands, and her stats read numbers far higher than anything mine ever did, even while taking 15%, because back then, I only had a few thousand links to pull from.

Still, with my experience inside Redgrave's divine flames, despite using this borrowed power, I'm unsure how much it will really help.

Divine energy is far more powerful than pure mana-based stats alone, however I believe without a strong base of stats and mana control divine energy in a weak hunter would be rather pointless.

For example, multiplying the raw power of an unawakened human by any amount wouldn't be very effective. Then again, this is still just a theory, I haven't tried it yet.

The only divine energy holders I've seen have high stats and mana or qi controls already.

It tethers to the user's system and becomes stronger the more threads one obtains, but I'm unsure how much of this absurd power comes from stats and how much comes from the Divine Energy.

Just like when I first awakened Qi and Soul Energy, I learned that enough pure mana can overpower this greater energy form.

Another example would be when Maria and Abby defeated red cores when they weren't awakened, but that feels like far less of a jump than a newly awakened yellow compared to the full power of a True Core.

I'm about to see what difference an immense boost in stats really has.

A bright blue explosion of light erupts from Maria's greater form the instant her stats increase by an absurd degree.

With my all-seeing eye active, I watch the yellow threads in her core chase the newly granted energy output, tethering to this increased mana control and aura, while she flies forward to attack the cyclops on standby.

I smirk and get it ready for battle, holding up its club to take the attack head-on.

This manifestation's threads are far denser and based on defense than the other two. Slowly whittling away at this beast is what would work best, as its speed and agility are lacking.

However, when Maria's sword collides with the club, there is no resistance at all...

It phases through like air, freezing the mana present instantly and slicing the mid-level yellow core in half with no effort at all.

As it dissolves, she turns toward me with yellow threads still catching up to turn her Blue Ice Goddess' greater form yellow, and I can feel immense power, excitement, and eagerness to have a real fight exploding from her aura.

Then, I send a message through her telepathy link again.

"Alright, one more round..."

I summon the serpent back into existence and give it the True Core Strength of the bronze dragon I faced above this very crater.

Then, I imbue the True Core Strength of Raven herself into the dragon's form.

Lastly, instead of summoning the cyclops again, I stand behind the two manifestations I send toward Maria and let out the full power of my own core, taking down the purple barrier's suppression, and pulling out my Flame Emperor's Sword.

Chapter 660

My aura makes the air for dozens of kilometers heavy, causing all the ice from Maria's previous attacks to shatter, melt, and boil into steam at the bottom of the crater.

I'm still hovering at the same height above this desolate land as the last time I was here, but since then, I've absorbed a True Core, two Mid-Level Yellow Cores, and roughly three thousand additional raw yellow fragments.

Also, I've leveled up, fully healed my body through hibernation, and increased my base energy control multiple times by siphoning raw mana into the labyrinth, as well as farming trillions of MCP from mobs on floors 80-106. To top it off, I recently filled and drained my soul energy core countless times to strengthen the Crimson Dome.

The crater's floor shatters and deepens multiple kilometers under the sheer pressure of my aura's presence.

As I lift my sword and command the manifestations in front of me to charge forward, my curiosity grows with every moment that passes.

Despite the overwhelming pressure, Maria's movements remain steady, and her Ice Goddess' blade collides with the serpent clone I created, its divine thread density equal to the bronze earth dragon I faced as my first True Core opponent.

When her sword clashes with the serpent's fangs, they are locked in place for a matter of seconds.

An overwhelming wave of pure royal blue soul energy explodes from Maria's form, while the serpent bends gravity and tightens its threads to hold on, pushing back against the strike.

Neither side is backing down. My eyes widen as, at first glance, their powers appear equal, showing that it really is possible to overpower a True Core with high stats alone. However, my All-Seeing Eye tells a different story once I fully comprehend the situation.

There is a glaring difference between the two forces that collide.

The serpent's power is far denser and purer, making its yellow energy silky and nearly white. The separation between the mana present in its form is almost indiscernible from the energy itself.

Maria, on the other hand, is now far brighter blue than she was moments ago. A surging wave of mana control and raw power ripples out of her, but the yellow threads reinforcing her form remain just that—threads. The separation between mana and divine energy is clear.

The two forces are working together to strengthen her attacks, but her Soul Energy is the dominant force behind them.

Her Soul Energy core pulses, just like I saw in her previous battle, but it is far denser with pure mana than before. The yellow divine core pulses at the same time, but it is being overpowered by the mana in her Ice Goddess Form. She becomes an even deeper blue, tearing through the serpent in a single strike.

An eerie aura follows, making my real body reflexively shiver as if she's using an intimidation skill.

Looking into her core with my full perception during that attack was no different from staring into an endless abyss with greedy invisible hands trying to pull me in.

The crescent of soul energy that follows her strike heads toward me, but I snap out of my daze before it hits, airstepping to the side while yelling through our link.

"Good. Again, this one's much stronger!"

Then, I command the manifestation of a dragon to flap its wings and dive toward her, its divine energy density matching the power of Raven, what I'd consider a mid-level True Core.

Divine flames burst from its mouth, and a replicated dragon's roar echoes through the air as the Ice Goddess dodges the attack to get a better angle for a counterstrike.

This time, she doesn't hold back, swinging with her full strength and allowing her Soul Energy core to pulse again mid-swing as it collides with the dragon's front claws.

The eerie ripple attacks my psyche, even though I'm on the sidelines, as I can't help but stare into the royal blue darkness in her chest.

The gravitational waves that erupted from their clash feel just as strong as the ones that awakened the throne just days ago.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been unlawfully taken from Royal Road. Please report it.

This is the first of many.

They appear evenly matched, bouncing off each other dozens of times as their exchanges grow faster and faster.

My mind quickly adjusts to the intimidating soul energy aura, allowing me to manipulate my manifestation with greater speed and precision, while at the same time, Maria grows even more in tune with this new level of power—tens of times greater than she was just moments ago.

After five minutes, and hundreds of exchanges, I feel her intuition and movement surpass the baseline I set for the dragon, and I can't help but smile as she slowly chips away at its manifested armor.

I can tell she's becoming fatigued, and the amount of mana being drained from the air is absurd—millions of MP per second—but I don't want to cut this fight short when she's in such a perfect flow state.

I remain silent, watching as her Soul Energy Core and Divine Core pulse in unison, her strikes becoming more lethal.

Another ten minutes pass, and over a thousand exchanges, a final slash to the side defeats the dragon manifestation, and her fierce icy blue eyes lock onto me next.

During her battle, I've been doing some rough mental calculations. Her base stats have risen by almost 350x, and in turn, her overall power has jumped from handling a mid-level yellow core to matching a mid-level True Core.

The leap may be even greater, as she's still adjusting to her enhanced movements.

As I sever ties with the dragon's remains and erupt with divine flames myself, I wonder if using 30x the stats she has gained will be enough for me to face the big three.

The possibilities of this discovery seem limitless.

I fly forward and clash with the Ice Goddess' form, blocking the 20-meter-long blade of Soul Energy with my sword without activating my greater form.

The strongest pulse from her cores ripples through her entire body, and I don't hold back either.

This is by far the most powerful exchange of pure strength I've ever experienced, the gravity waves from this strike can be felt even to some strong C-Class and above citizens in the Crimson City, and back in Raven's territory.

For a few seconds, I can't push my blade forward any further; there's an unbreakable wall of massive mana based power before me.

The energy readings from her greater form continue to rise, pushing to overpower me with every drop of energy she can absorb from the Royal Blue Abyss.

Maria's mana consumption spikes from millions to billions per second, draining all the MP in the vicinity, fueling the dark blue wall of light.

However, just like during her fight with the mid-level yellow core, she hits a natural limit.

I sense it—the point where she needs time and more energy to build up for another pulse, and the raw strength of her attack wavers for a moment.

I grin and send her a message through our link.

"Not bad... but it looks like we've found your limit."

Then I follow through with my swing, unleashing the full power of my True Core, enhanced by all my active buffs, and overpower her strike in this exchange.

The Ice Goddess' form is sent flying backward, her overwhelming aura of intimidation wavering for a split second as she regains her balance in the air. She sends her own message through the link.

"For now... I think I can break through further, though. Let's go again, I just need another round to—"

Before she finishes, we clash once more, but everything she wanted to say has already been communicated through her strike.

Hundreds of world-shaking ripples shatter the desert below even more as our battle dance in the sky commences.

The waves from my blade are hot and filled with silky True Core threads, while Maria's are icy cold, overwhelmingly dense with pure Soul Energy.

I avoid going for any vital shots, don't activate my greater form, and limit my movement speed and True Core usage to about 80-90% of its full power as we continue sparring.

Maria goes all out, testing the true limits of her new strength, growing more attuned to the power at her fingertips.

—

To the south, in the Volcanic Region, Raven sits in a black room made of originator stone similar to the central headquarters buildings, deep within a dormant volcano where she can train and cultivate in peace.

The quality of shielding isn't as high as the world capital's resources, as some divine threads seep through, and she can still vaguely sense the outside world, but as long as weak hunters stay at least a kilometer away, it's safe enough and sufficient for her needs.

Now, as she quietly consumes the yellow divine fragments she earned from bringing the white dragon back to the deceased True Core Sebastian, odd gravity waves reach her senses.

At first, it feels like nothing—just low-level yellow cores sparring out in the desert, likely the Saint and other newly awakened yellows from the Flame Emperor's team, preparing for war.

But a few minutes later, the ripples seeping through the walls of her private room grow far stronger, reaching levels similar to her own True Core's power.

To her knowledge, only one person besides herself and the big three could possibly wield this kind of power.

Without hesitation, Raven's hazel eyes open, glowing bright yellow, and she activates her divine stealth skill, leaving her quarters to see what's going on for herself...

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To the north, beneath the Crimson City, Ember feels the faint gravity waves coming from the desert as well.

Inside his isolation pod, his human form sits in the lotus position with his eyes closed and a serious expression, while his long red hair sways from the pressure coming off his core, now over 2.5 times the size a normal yellow core on the verge of collapse should be.

The corner of the dragon's lips curls up, mimicking the toothy grin of his battle form, and he whispers to himself.

"It's about time I get out of here. You're going to need a lot more power than that."

Then, the golden and silver threads in Ember's core stop holding back the energy from collapsing. They begin tightening and squeezing the dense yellow ball of light, as his final stage of core compression begins.