

D. Diver 481

Chapter 481

I expand the range of my all-seeing eye and enemy detection once I hear Luna shouting. My range reaches out as far as the town nearly 10 km away on one side, but I can't sense anything in the opposite direction.

On full blast, I can feel the readings of rogue dungeons up to 50-70 km away if I push myself, but for some reason, I can't sense this Dark Guard that she's crying out about.

Maria is on alert too, and I feel her natural aura spread out a few kilometers, but the same confused expression shows on her face as she doesn't sense anything out of the ordinary either.

Luna makes it nearby us, and points far out in the desert in the direction of Sector 1.

"It's coming. Whatever it is, it's incredibly angry."

She keeps pointing in the same direction, but I'm positive there's nothing out there.

Still, the fact that she accurately described the 5th ranked Dark Guard's appearance and number placement makes me believe her vision is real.

I jump in the air, and Maria follows me upward. I use telekinesis to carry Luna again and we start drifting off in the direction she's pointed.

"Tell me if we're going the right way. We'll confront this guard before it makes it close to the town."

She nods, looking around with her eyes glowing with a light blue aura, but speaks up before activating her ranked-up buff again.

"I can't see it without my buff activated."

On her status now, I see Legendary Grade [Moonlight's Gaze], along with two buffs; [Eye of The Last Full Moon] and a new one that she received after hitting level 1000 called [Awakened Guardian's Eye].

The enormous blue eye emerges from her back and floats above us, staring off into the empty desert and I pose a question.

"Which buff is this? I can see you have two."

She doesn't reply for a moment, but points off in the desert.

"It's the Awakened Guardian's Eye. I can't see far enough with the other one, same with my skill; they work best at night."

I turn my head up to look at the eye and hear her voice call out from behind me again.

"About 300 kilometers. That's how far out it is by the way... At its current pace, it still would have taken all day to make it here... I might have overreacted."

I grin.

"No. That's exactly the reaction I wanted, don't worry about it. Is that the limit to your range? 300 kilometers?"

"Right now? I think so... I notified you the moment I saw it."

"Are there any other troops with it? Or is the guard all alone?"

She shakes her head.

"There's nothing else around it. It's just trudging through the desert alone... I don't know why..."

"Good. So with you on watch, we'll have plenty of time to prepare if any other troops do show up in the future. Keep using that eye and notify me if there are any changes in its behaviors or you see any more troops within range."

I let a handful of mana potions out of my items storage and let them float over to Luna while I increase the speed of my steps to catch up to Maria.

"Seems like it's the same guard you fought in Valor City. You ready for round 2? I think you can take it on with your power now."

Maria's eyes light up with Ice magic and the barrier of Qi surrounding her body reflexively gets more dense around her vital areas before she responds.

"Yes, I've been waiting to face that Guard since the moment I entered the isolation pod. What are the odds it'd come to greet me once I finished my training?"

She takes another step forward, leaving ice behind with each of her footsteps and small wisps of white Qi, speeding up her pace.

I increase mine as well to match hers and we soar through the desert sky for over an hour at top speeds before the Dark Guard comes within range of my all-seeing eye and enemy detection as well.

Just as Luna said, a suit of jet-black armor trudges through the sand with the number 5 printed on its chest.

The only difference I see in its appearance since the last time I saw it is a large [X] marking over the number 5 on its chest, almost like it has been scratched out.

Red-orange energy is leaking from the small cracks in the black armor, and as Luna also stated previously, its aura exudes rage and every step it takes amplifies its anger.

I point forward and lean to Maria.

"We're getting close. Get ready to fight soon. This is all you, I'll let you have the rematch you deserve."

Our pace slows a bit and we begin to descend down to the desert floor.

Maria pulls out her silver blade and imbues Qi into it while descending even faster than me.

Eventually, the Black Suit of Armor becomes visible on the horizon without using any of my skills, and Maria sees it too.

"Stay back and let me test out a few moves I couldn't try on you while sparring. This should be over in a few minutes."

I halt in midair a few hundred meters above the ground and cross my arms to watch as Maria touches down on the sand, making a crater of ice as she lands.

Luna floats behind me, catching up still while being dragged along by my telekinesis, then comes to a halt by my left side with her enormous blue eye still staring down from above.

I speak up.

"This should be an interesting fight, time to watch closely and learn a few things."

As the impact from Maria's landing with the sand sends ripples through the desert, the suit of armor finally speaks up in a loud angry yell that can be heard by everyone in the area.

"It's you! You! The one that ruined my reputation! You're the one that made the Dark One disown me after years of diligent service!"

The bright 5 etched into its chestplate glows red-orange, and the [X] scratched across it bleeds with this energy-filled light as well.

"The only way I'll be accepted back is if I kill you! The Ice Empress, the one that foiled my plans! I just wanted you to serve the Dark One and join the winning side. It is a shame you refused my offering in such a flashy manner. I should have killed you when I had the chance at the City Gate!"

Memories of the enormous crimson Ice crystal that destroyed the Arena in Valor City surface in my mind.

This was the finishing move Maria used while channeling all of her Red Hydra's remaining soul energy into a single attack to deflect the this Guard's attack and give our teammates enough time to escape.

By the way this guard is talking, it seems he's been exiled for failing to capture and turn Maria, Abby, and Monk into the Dark One's slaves.

Maria understands the situation as well and speaks up while pointing her silver sword forward, playing into the rage-filled knight's words.

"Well, this is your chance to prove yourself again. If you really are a loyal follower of the Dark One, then you won't lose to me a second time, will you?"

She allows a small portion of her mana control to leak out from her Qi barrier, giving the Black Knight the perception that her strength is still the same as it was the time they met just 2 days ago.

The Dark Guard's red glow beneath its armor grows brighter and brighter, until it forms two long energy blades in its hands just like it did in that underground training room before.

Its steps are powered by orange soul energy, but they're mixed with its own blood-red aura. The sand beneath its feet is melting with every step, turning into molten glass while it speeds up more and more, dead set on reaching Maria.

It yells. "That's right! The first time was a fluke! At your level, with nowhere to run, it will be impossible for you to fend me off again. This will be your end, I'll get my seat back at the Dark Guard's assembly right now!"

He lunges forward, swinging both of the red energy-manifested blades across his body to create the same crimson-colored slashes that were impossible for Maria to block last time she was faced with only one.

Instead of attempting to dodge like the Dark Guard predicted, Maria lunges forward too, saturating her blade with Qi, and taking the two Soul Energy attacks head-on with her glowing white sword.

A magnificent white and red collision of energy lights up the battlefield below me as Maria's blade slices through and obliterates both crimson energy slashes with a white crescent of Qi from her own blade in return.

It rockets across the desert floor aiming for the Dark Guard. Then, shatters the two red energy swords it wields when the attempt to block her incoming attack fails.

The crescent of white-hot Qi collides with the [5] printed on the Dark Guard's chest, cracking its armor to pieces before it even registers what hit it.

The entire battlefield appears to be moving in slow motion for everyone watching.

Luna's enormous eye is wide open, taking in every detail of the fight. I'm impressed by Maria's first Qi blade manifestation's power, and she's equally excited to unleash her full strength if the guard survives this blow.

As the black armor shatters and falls to the desert floor, it's impossible to see what's underneath. A blinding red light expands from within, blocking everyone's vision of the Dark Guard's true form. This flash of energy is followed by the roar of a monster that does not sound at all like the angry human yells we heard moments ago.

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My inspect skill picks up a reading as the black armor of the 5th Ranked Dark Guard falls away.

[Lv. 1572]

Its status is just like every other one of them, with no skills or items, but a [Curse of The Lich King] branded in orange lettering on its Buffs section.

The immense amount of heat that erupts from the broken armor and crimson glow leads me to believe that there is some kind of fire-wielding monster that is now emerging.

This will be the perfect opponent for Maria to test her new abilities on. Fire is her exact opposite element matchup. If anything, her weakness.

Just from her display moments ago, and my spar with her earlier, I know she has the strength to take this Guard on, but the real test will be seeing how she fares against actual combat with a genuine A-Ranked monster aiming to kill.

The monstrous roar echoes through our ears and the red humanoid form beneath the armor grows larger and larger in size until it reaches over 5 meters tall.

Its silhouette is bright red, but as it grows larger jagged rocks begin to stick out of its body.

Once it reaches just under 10 meters in height, dark black obsidian colored glossy stones have protruded all over it to create what looks to be a golem's form.

It has two glowing red-orange eyes that just look like circles, and a slit for a mouth that glows the same color of its deadly soul energy.

Another roar, that sounds like a static screech mixed with rocks crashing together erupts from its being as the red light in its eyes pulses.

Hairline fractures in its obsidian body show red energy swirling beneath its surface, and the monster's hands manifest long thick blades just like the ones it held in its human form, but over 5 times as large.

Blood red flames erupt from the golem creature's back and arms, spreading immense heat throughout the desert and melting the surrounding area of sand just for existing nearby.

It tilts its head down at Maria while she swallows a Qi pill from her item box to replenish her stores.

After her session in the isolation pod, it looks like she's used up most of the Qi gifted by Monk, but I count 9 more in the small silver tin left after the one that she just consumed.

Ice magic is activated and her Qi barrier is let down to reveal her true mana control to the Dark Guard.

Only portions of Qi are used around her heart, head, and blind spots while the rest is focused in her footsteps and channeled into the silver sword.

As the heat from the monster's release of power nears her, the melting of sand stops in its tracks and a wave of ice challenges it, freezing the desert floor in a circle that only increases in size the longer Maria activates her ice magic.

She points her blade toward the obsidian golem and releases a royal blue aura of her own that clashes with the monster's in the air. It's an energy made of mana, but my senses pick up trace amounts of Qi within it.

Whatever this power is, it's a step closer to awakening Soul Energy than anything I've ever managed to manifest before.

Two domes of lights hit each other from nearly 100 meters away as both of them declare battle on the other, then they both charge forward.

The golem's echoing footsteps show off its immense strength, and the constant flames and red glow that comes from it show its magic power is considerable as well.

Maria steps through the air with blue-tinted Qi increasing her movement speed, closing the gap between them much faster than expected.

Her sword glows the same light blue as she swings it through the air, leaving behind a trail in the sky that leaves a faint stain the air just like the Red Hydra's Buff.

She gets faster and faster as she gets closer, and jumps straight into the dual incoming blades of the golem without an ounce of fear in her movements.

Maria spins her body between the two blades, dodging their sharp crimson edges just by a hair on both sides.

In a single swing, the monster's right shoulder is sliced through.

An enormous blue slash line is visible on the monster's body as Maria continues to fly past her target unharmed.

As she touches down on the molten desert floor, it crystallizes into solid ice. Soon after, the loud thud of the black rock falling off of its body can be heard.

Maria doesn't take a moment to admire her work, lunging back around to release another light blue slash at the creature's left arm while she's standing in the blind spot behind it.

Another bright blue line is etched into the golem's opposite shoulder as she slices through it and Qi-steps higher into the air to get a better vantage point away from the monster to assess its real damage.

Another loud thud reaches her ears as the second arm of the monster falls to the floor, but her senses are put on high alert from an unexpected incoming attack.

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Maria swings her sword back to block two crimson blades coming her way from the Soul Energy Manifested arms that still carry swords where the physical obsidian body was cut off.

This reminds me of the technique the 7th Ranked Dark Guard used when I managed to cut off one of its limbs as well.

The technique is very similar, however, this monster's power seems to act a bit differently.

As the red and blue powers clash, the energy released into the atmosphere is nearly equal in strength.

Two of the monster's blades that harness all of its power are being repelled with an equal and opposite force as the Ice mage in the air follows through with her icy slash.

They stay in the same place, battling it out over a single exchange in mid-air for over a second.

Maria's eyes open wide as she sees a thin black line of rock forming in the center of both of the energy manifested arms that connect back to the golem's main body.

Every fraction of a second that passes, more and more of the monster's arms regenerate and reform into the old form it had just moments ago before Maria cut them off.

She pulses with a blue aura at the sight of this and shoves the crimson blades backward a few meters. This gives her enough leeway to dodge to the side as the momentum of the blades continues downward and slices through the air where she just was.

Taking advantage of this moment, she slices through both of the golem's legs, leaving a light blue line across its upper thighs.

When she touches down to the floor behind it, the expected reaction to this attack would be a moment where the creature stumbles or falls as it tries to regenerate its legs.

However, underneath the hard obsidian stone is a red energy form that moves on its own without the need for a physical body at all.

It turns around, leaving its severed legs behind, carrying its upper body on just a soul energy manifested lower half and swings its two crimson swords again right at Maria on the ground.

Although this wasn't what she expected, it was in the realm of possibilities.

Maria jumps out of the way again and analyzes the creature while its glowing red eyes track her movements too.

The impact of the red blades with the ground sends a shockwave of molten sand her way that towers over 3 meters high and grows in speed and power the more Soul energy is channeled into it from the monster's blades stuck into the desert.

She jumps in the air again, and the golem's legs begin to regrow just the same as its arms did, standing as small black sticks in the center while more black rock is summoned to fill the empty space.

The waves of molten sand die down once the monster takes its energy blades from the ground and starts sending out crescents of soul energy in the air for Maria to dodge.

Her Qi-aura gets much weaker while she soars through the air dodging these crimson slashes, but it isn't because she's getting weaker. Her attention has shifted from attack to one of pure analysis.

Every shot the creature throws at her adds to her ideas on what to do next, and I see her eyes channeling over 50% of the Qi that isn't protecting her vitals.

She's watching where the energy flows in this monster to try and figure out its weakness.

Clearly, taking off its limbs doesn't hurt it at all, and getting in close to try and land another attack without a proper plan is just taking an unnecessary risk if she doesn't know where to aim.

Out of curiosity, I copy the Qi-flow she's using, and channel a large portion of my available energy into my eyes to watch the golem meticulously throw slashes at her while she gracefully dodges through the air.

At first, all I can see is the silhouette of red-orange soul energy in the form of a massive human outline.

However, the longer I look, and the closer I focus on its release of slashes, the more I see there is a distinct direction of its energy flow.

The flow is so fast, and instantaneous, it's like a heart pumping blood at 1000 beats per second, but there is clearly a point where this power is coming from.

It is all coming from a central point deep inside its chest. Similar to golems I've faced before, this one has a core of its own, it is just hidden within layers and layers of dense soul energy to make itself look like a pure energy being.

As I come to this realization, a shift in Maria's movements makes me surmise she's come to the same conclusion.

Her movements in the air become faster, and her blade glows blue again.

Instead of going for the available openings on the monster's arms and legs that it allows her to take between every few dozen slashes, she bides her time and doesn't go for the easy shots.

After every attack, the monster's blades come back into position to protect its chest before anything else. This is exactly where Maria's gaze is locked onto as she continues flying circles around the golem waiting for it to slip up.

In return for its slashes, she sends her own blue ice attacks littered with Qi down toward the monster.

They are never aimed to hit it directly, but to freeze the battlefield below and limit its movements to a select few areas.

The more she throws, the larger the massive ice crystals form like obstacles in its way, and its attacks become more predictable to the trained eye.

Like a rat in a maze, every new ice structure guides the golem to an endpoint that I can see as clear as day.

Maria is setting up her finishing move, and the rage-filled golem that believes it's invincible to her slow-moving attacks can't see it coming at all...

After 3 more Qi pills, and nearly 100 dodged crimson slashes, the semicircle barrier of ice behind the golem is created, and it has nowhere else to backpedal to now.

Maria's sword charges brighter blue than ever before in this battle, and her body radiates with a light that I've only seen happen when she activates her ranked up buff.

The last time I saw her use this with the Red Hydra's power at a far lower skill level it decimated multiple layers of A-Grade shielding and destroyed the entire arena back in Valor City.

If she uses it now with her newfound strength, imbued with Qi as well, the result will be catastrophic...

A bright blue glow erupts off her as her aura expands to envelop the entire battlefield including the cornered beast below her.

Waves of cold ice magic freeze the entire area solid for over 200 meters in diameter.

It believed it had the upper hand the entire battle, as Maria made it seem she was running from its attacks in fear once she realized she couldn't hurt it.

The frozen ground shakes beneath the obsidian golem, getting louder and louder until Maria whispers the name of her ability.

"Ice Age..."

Enormous blue crystals of ice erupt from the ground towering over the 10m tall golem, expanding faster than it can think to move.

They drop the temperature of the desert air instantly and encapsulate the golem in a massive prison of ice.

At the same time, Maria dives in at it with her blade swinging across her body.

She slices through her own solid blue prison, shattering the towering structure to pieces the moment it's formed, disintegrating the monster's black stone body entirely. It only leaves behind the shocked red inner form and a singular black orb in the center of its being that desperately tries to reform the rest of its physical body.

However, it's far too late.

A bright blue flash of light, and a single dense Qi and ice infused slash slices the core in half.

Maria makes contact with the icy ground behind it, turning with glowing eyes and a charged sword ready for more, but ringing notifications in her head tell her the battle is already over.

Both sides of the core fall to the frozen desert and the red energy slowly dissipates into the air.

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Maria's level rises by 71, bringing her to level 1065 in an instant.

By the way she's looking at her status, it's clear there is a rank-up notification in front of her waiting to be accepted.

However, she recalls my description of the others' rank-up process that I told her about on our way out here and decides not to press [YES] just yet. She picks up both the fragments of the dormant black obsidian golem's core, and places them into her item storage. Two of the larger chunks have item readings on them that grant over 300% Mental Strength Buffs along with fire resistance.

I speculate what kind of armor, pendant, or possibly even a weapon these materials could make. However, it's Maria's kill, so she'll be the one to decide what to do with these core fragments in the future.

Her ice magic deactivates while putting back up her consistent Qi barrier. Then, she Qi-steps up in the air to greet Luna and me watching from high above.

I'm the first to speak.

"That was very impressive. I could tell you were strong while sparring, but your combination of Qi and Mana brought your abilities to a whole new level. It almost looked like Soul Energy..."

I think to myself about how Maria would have stacked up against the 2nd ranked Dark Guard if she were to battle it alone. On pure physical strength, that silver creature would have had her beat, but just based on pure magic power they may have been close to even.

The only guards that remain are the 3rd, 4th, and 1st. Based on this performance, after she ranked up there is no doubt in my mind the two remaining lower guards will not be an issue for her.

The only real looming threat is the 1st ranked Dark Guard and the Dark One itself.

As my mind races, Maria speaks up again.

"Yeah, it's a neat trick I managed to learn near the end of my session in the pod. Once my Qi control reached a high enough level, I was able to begin incorporating Mana directly into the flow. It works the other way around too. Instead of launching them as separate attacks, the two are slowly becoming one energy source."

She flips her open status toward me to show the [Rank Up] screen.

"Once I get to a safe place to Rank-Up, I'm almost positive they will become even more natural to wield together as one."

We turn back toward the town after Luna does another scan of the desert, confirming there are no other strong beings within 300 km of us. There are a few rogue dungeons and 2 small villages with populations below 50 each, but no sign of the Dark One's army.

"Looks like he really came alone..."

We head back to the town at fairly quick speeds, making it to the bunker in under 2 hours.

Maria sits on the opposite side of the room in the lotus position and presses rank up, glowing white while the 5 machines hum in the background, slowly leaking Qi and Mana.

I turn to Luna, then point to the crates of B Grade weapons and equipment by the back wall.

"Pick out 12 items. Make sure they have spread-out buffs to equally boost all your stats, and choose a weapon you're comfortable learning how to wield. You were over level 250 before the powerleveling session, so I assume you have some monster hunting experience."

She nods and walks over to the crates, putting on a few rings, necklaces, a light armor set, some boots, and picks out a pair of daggers with high speed, agility, and mental strength enchants on them.

Then, we leave the bunker together and I point to the canyon of dungeons.

"This way, it's time for you and a few others to increase your mana control. Let's see if that 300 km range is your skills' hard cap or if there are ways to raise it. There are a few others in the dungeons that need the exact same training as you."

We make it to the canyon, and I open up my dungeon walker skill to scan every dungeon I have access to until I find my double in a C-Grade dungeon training the 37 recruits from the other day.

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After putting up my flame emperor's disguise, Luna and I teleport there and I greet my body double with a stone bullet to the forehead, killing it instantly to receive the memories of the last 40 or so hours that I've been away.

The intricate details of the training this group has been through come rushing back to me. These are the people that volunteered to become the first soldiers in the Flame Emperor's army, and their commitment shows.

I've been giving them a constant supply of newly crafted Regeneration Potions which heals all of their injuries and drastically decreases their fatigue, allowing most of them to train pretty much nonstop since the start.

They have the best gear available to them, courtesy of the deceased Sector 2 Leader's warehouse stockpiles, and my A-Grade body double has been keeping a close eye on their every move; stepping in milliseconds before battles are going to end poorly, and giving pointers after every fight on how to better use their weapons and talents.

We progressively trained in harder and harder dungeons as everyone became more skilled.

Once used to the routine, none of them fear getting hurt at all anymore, and start improving at an exponential rate.

All 37 of them have made it to level 330-340.

The only limitation they're facing now is the lack of time spent honing their mana control; their actual combat skill has been refined. Luna has a similar problem. Her level has been artificially boosted, but her mana control is lagging far behind.

I use my enemy detection skill mixed with my rising Emperor's Domain [Find My Friend] perk to find everyone's geopoints through the dungeon, they're all pretty close by in groups being led by their leaders. Then, fly over to each of the groups and gather them together in a single spot.

They all look happy to be here. Some sweating, others breathing heavy, but most have smiles on their faces and are enjoying the grind.

I speak up once I have their attention while sharing my skill [All Seeing Eye] with everyone.

"Open your status screens and look at the new options that are now available by activating the skill I have shared with you."

Many of their eyes widen and they scroll through their status screens, clicking the [i] next to their skills and gear to read more information about them, and many see where I'm leading them next before I even speak up.

"There should be a section labeled PP, or proficiency points. You gain one of these every time you level up. To upgrade a skill from basic grade to special grade, it takes 50 points. To upgrade from special to legendary grade, it takes 250. If you are an element user, it takes 100 points to upgrade to an advanced version of your skill. I want you to all use these points and grow stronger. We will be starting your next stage of training very soon."

Looking down at my own status, I see [PP: 638] and do some math.

I still need 362 more points to hit 1000 to have enough to upgrade my absorption skill to [Mythic Grade]. Although I have enough to upgrade some of my basic grade skills to legendary, or my advanced grade elemental skills to extreme, it isn't worth doing when I weigh the perks that a mythic grade version of my absorption skill will grant.

After this, I close my status and look down at everyone in my new army.

It's full of legendary swordsmen and tanks, advanced elemental users, and support types with team buffs that exceed 50-70%.

Next, I switch the skill that I'll be sharing with them from [All Seeing Eye] to [Legendary Grade] [Absorption].

After this, I use my Rising Emperor's domain perk to share 10% of my mana control, distributed equally between all 37 of them, and Luna, making it 38. Instead of sharing this with all 140 of the people in my list like last time, this power is now going to less than of them. Meaning, their boost in strength is over 3 times greater than the last time this buff was used.

Meaning, I'm granting them tens of millions worth of mana control more than before.

Everyone is hit with another wave of euphoria, and their strength is increased to an absurd degree.

They all group together and I dungeon walk us to the 19th floor of the Vice City Labyrinth. Simultaneously, I place a body double on guard by the dungeon's entrance to make sure no hunters come up to disturb us.

Training at this low of a level is a lot different than the upper floors past 30. Below floor 20 is where the Association tends to actually farm and train. I sense a good amount of hunters on floor 10-13, and a few teams on floor 15 and 16, but it seems that no one is nearby so we have floor 19 all to ourselves.

A monster's screech fills the air as everyone stands on a black surface and a green-eyed, sword-wielding, mana-shielded berserker giant comes charging at the group of new recruits.

I don't instantly kill the monster, but let it run closer and closer, allowing everyone here to use their new mana senses and feel the actual strength of the disgusting creature approaching. Many activate their skills, ready their weapons, and wait for my commands.

I float above them all, not saying a word as it speeds up and eyes the crowd of humans that has come into its territory.

A level 405 berserker giant jumps in the air toward the 38 hunters and I create a large dome of mana shielding between them and the beast just 10 meters away from our group. The battle crazed sword wielder collides with it in mid-air.

Its blade shatters against the dense shielding and its body disintegrates and breaks apart, killing the monster on the spot for all of them to see.

I didn't even lift a finger, but the monster was defeated instantly.

"I've granted you a portion of my power for this stage of training. It's called mana control, the cumulative experience gained by processing mana through your body over time increases this power. We'll be working on a skill called mana shielding, and farming these creatures here with that skill I granted you earlier to increase your own base of mana control. By the time we're done here, you'll be able to do what I just did without using my shared power."

Chapter 484

Hours pass.

I have my body double periodically dungeon walk back to the town to check on the energy readings to see if Maria has woken up from her rank-up process, but no signs of her completing it have come back.

Meanwhile, my method of sharing mana control with these recruits to boost their abilities is working very well.

Some of them still don't have the speed and raw power to kill level 400 monsters with Elite Level mana control just yet, but when working as a team, many of them are able to take these Berserker Giants down.

They rotate who gets the final strike to absorb MCP evenly. The millions of MP worth of progress after each kill is equal to training with an elemental skill for days or even weeks on end at their level.

However, they're managing to get this mana control experience without even having elemental skills. Plus, the rest times and built-up fatigue that is needed after normal mana control training is not necessary either.

My body double as well as me in my real body are constantly watching the battles unfold to block any fatal strikes before they happen and monitor everyone's progress.

I even switch my shared skill from absorption to mana manipulation a few times in order to let some slower learners get a feel for what mana shielding should look and feel like when they do it naturally.

Over 4 and a half hours pass since we started.

Maria still has not woken up from her rank-up process, meaning she's been unconscious for over double as long as the others were.

In this time, all recruits of the Flame Emperor's Army have made it to levels 400-410, and can defeat Berserker Giants with ease while using the combination of my shared mana control and their own. By constantly absorbing the MCP of monsters higher level than their own using my unique skill, they have all managed to bring their own mana control bases up to that of an Elite at the Association. They just don't know it yet.

I'm sure if they went in as teams of 3-5, they would be able to take on the 20th Floor boss now.

However, pushing them all up to high floors right now is not my next plan of action.

I deactivate my power share with everyone so they can feel what their own non-artificially buffed strength feels like.

"The final stage of your preparations will commence now. You will all hone your skills and get used to your new level of power."

I leave my body double with them to fight the Berserker Giants one on one. Now it is time for them to come up with their own unique ways of wielding mana control while fighting. It's not all about teamwork and getting EXP, they'll begin maximizing their mana density and efficiency to kill while fighting solo.

As my double informs them of this, and begins to spread out to find newly spawned Berserkers to train with, I motion for Luna to come over to me and show me what she's learned so far.

We don't travel far until I find a monster for her to show her skills.

Her speed, strength, and defense are on much higher levels than these low-level monsters, given that she's ranked up twice already. However, her mana control has progressed just like everyone else's and I watch her make simple mana barriers while imbuing her blades with mana as well.

The Qi in her core from Monk awakening her the other day stays dormant, it may be able to be used once her natural energy control increases over time.

"Good. I'll go get the others that show promise and move onto a private training session."

I fly back over to the groups of people fighting under the watch of my double and pick out the three element users that wield Fire, Wind, and Earth.

"Rachel, Andy, Francis; come with me."

They follow my words and I immediately teleport them to the 30th floor near the outer edge of the mountainous forest section of the Wyvern's dungeon.

Everything in this dungeon is level 550 to 750. We've jumped up over 10 floors because I need to expedite their training.

An Earth Wyvern comes soaring down from the sky and I speak up, pointing at it.

"This is a ranked-up monster. Who is prepared to take it on first?"

They all stare at the creature summoning spears of earth around its body and dive bombing us at high speeds.

Only one of them steps up to my challenge without thinking twice.

It's the orange-haired woman named Rachel, she bursts into flames and points her sword coated in a thin layer of her own natural mana shielding at the monster that is clearly far superior to herself in pure strength and magic.

I share my absorption skill with her again, then activate my power-sharing perk as well, giving her exclusively 10% of my mana control.

As the ranked-up buff transfers it over, the flames around her grow larger while her mana control base is artificially boosted by far over a billion MP.

I take a step back and watch her swing her sword upward and slice the ranked-up Earth Wyvern in half before it touches the floor.

Her flames continue to expand, bursting out over 10 meters on all sides and glowing dark crimson, almost black.

Leveling notifications ring in her ears while she absorbs millions of MCP from a single kill.

The other team members standing by watch wide-eyed with excitement and awe, and our private training session begins.

One by one, I share this power with each of them so they can get their own kills and slowly work toward the center of the Wyvern Dungeon.

A full 2 hours pass of teleporting them around the ring to absorb hundreds of millions of MCP. The three squad leaders become much closer while fighting side by side, and Luna starts to talk with them a bit too.

Luna's mana control improves drastically, allowing her to contend with Wyverns without my help by the end of this training. The element users are capable of taking on the lower-level Wyverns by themselves too. I don't think they're capable of actually defeating the boss in this dungeon yet, not even as a team, but their progress has come very far.

All 3 of them manage to hit level 500 and rank up in no time.

The earth and wind users awaken ultimate abilities called [Fortress of Stone] and [Unbreakable Wind Prison] while the fire user awakens a unique offensive buff called [Fire Storm].

After I finally get them all just past level 600 so they can upgrade their elements to extreme grade, my body double blips in to tell me some news. Surprisingly, it isn't the double that was watching the other recruits train, it is the one that was farming and collapsing dungeons with Ember.

"It's Maria, she's waking up."

It blips away right after telling me.

At this, I wrap up our training and bring everyone back to the exit of the canyon of dungeons. They all begin walking back to the town on the pathway, and I leave Luna and the 3 squad leaders with my body double in charge of getting them food and necessary materials from a spare warehouse and to get some proper rest.

I fly over at max speed.

Surprisingly, I don't sense any mana or Qi coming from underground that isn't from the pods. However, I do sense two unexpected readings right outside the guildhall.

Once I get back, I see the double that warned me as well as Ember in his human form leaning up against the side of the octagonal building.

His long red hair flows in the light breeze before speaking up.

"I felt a Soul Energy awakening, so I decided to come and see the reveal myself. That is, as long as you're okay with your teammates seeing my true form. Soul Energy users are capable of seeing more than meets the eye."

He grins, and my heart starts to beat a bit faster while walking over to the bunker's hatch.

"That's fine. If they're strong enough to perceive you, they're ready to know the truth. If we'll be going all out in this war, it's better they find out sooner rather than later."

He responds again while we come to a halt above the door.

"Plus, we finished collapsing another dungeon, you have just enough containment stones to charge that last pod up for yourself if you wish."

I nod and open up the hatch.

"That's my plan. If you and Maria are strong enough to stand guard while I cultivate, I'll be entering the pod next."

Ember, my double, and I walk down into the waves of Qi and mana that flow out, I see Maria standing in the middle of the room looking down at her own body.

She slowly waves her hands around in the air and her eyes track their movements.

Ember stands beside me with his arms crossed and head continuously nodding while I try and use all of my perception skills to figure out what is going on.

Her hair is silkier, her skin is smoother, and it appears as if she's glowing with beauty. However, somehow she looks void of energy, just like the readings I get when I look at Ember. It's like a mana and Qi suppression technique is activated that makes it impossible for me to see any energy.

I do see a new buff on her status reading [Awakened Form of the Ice Goddess], but other than this, it's almost impossible for me to gauge her new strength. I speak up anyway.

"Welcome back. Over 6 hours awakening seems to have paid off. Your Qi mastery has reached a level I'm unable to detect..."

She nods while continuing to look at her own body with wide eyes. Her gaze doesn't move anywhere else for almost 30 seconds before looking up and replying.

"I have... This is—"

Her eyes halt on Ember and she stops speaking. She stares at him for equally as long, then turns to me.

"You're... Soul Bonded with a Dragon?"

Chapter 485

The words that escape her lips aren't exactly what I expected.

Ember did mention she'd be able to see his true form, but I assumed he meant in the heart of battle. Or that she'd be able to perceive that he is a soul energy user too.

I wasn't expecting her to see through his disguise the instant she awakened.

However, it was within the realm of possibilities so I calmly respond.

"I am."

She immediately replies.

"And that Red Hydra's energy reeks on you too, I hope you get rid of the rest of it soon."

Ember laughs and turns to me.

"See, I'm not the only one that thinks taking borrowed power is a bad idea. Especially from that old sorry excuse of a Divine Beast. He just wants to be a dragon so bad, but he never will."

Ember rolls his eyes, and I'm clearly unaware that they can even sense this buff although it's not even activated.

Maria steps forward, still wide-eyed while taking in her new environment, but gets straight to the point.

"If you were waiting for me to become strong enough to guard you while you cultivate, I've reached that point."

Ember nods and agrees.

"It is true. Maria is ready. We can guard the town while you're away."

At this, I take out the last isolation pod and my double and I begin charging it up with all of the remaining containment stones. During the process, it transfers over one more fragment of luminite into my storage, making there six in total now.

In return, I give the silver tablet that controls the walls and bunker hatch mechanisms to my double to hold onto while I'm inside. At this rate, my teammates will come out of their pods about 12 hours before me, so they need a way to exit the bunker.

Maria speaks while this is happening.

"How many of the Dark Guards have soul energy of their own awakened? I assume they are far superior to that 5th guard I faced earlier today."

I reply while setting a 48-hour timer on the pod in front of me with 48.121x dilation.

"Before I defeated the 2nd, it told me three of the Dark Guards have soul energy of their own, while many other servants only relied on the Dark One's power."

She nods.

"So, most likely the 3rd and 1st."

Ember pitches in.

"We can spar in the desert if you'd like some experience. This isn't my first time dealing with The Lich King after all, I can simulate the strength of its Dark Guards and give you some general Soul Energy pointers."

Maria turns to Ember, and for the first time, I see a physical manifestation of energy emerge from her.

A pure blue aura covers her hand and swirls around. In my senses, it feels like a seamless combination of mana and Qi; I can't separate the two, they flow perfectly together and feel as if they've dissolved into one energy.

It shows no source of where it's manifested from, swirling around her hand, then disappearing in the same manner back into her skin and away from my perception.

"That's a good idea, let's train."

I smile and step into the pod and turn to Ember.

"We're an open book, tell her everything she needs to know to become stronger. I'll meet you on the battlefield once my own awakening is complete."

The pod closes, and the room is left in silence for a moment, but my double speaks up to break the tension.

"Well, I mean, It's not like I'm gone, just my strongest version won't be available. Come on, I want to go watch you two spar."

I turn to Maria.

"Especially you, that new ranked up buff, I want to see what kind of form you awakened."

All of them leave to go upstairs while I begin my 3-month training process inside the isolation pod.

Immediately, I begin to start my cultivation process.

The last time I did this was before I was ranked up a second time, and this time around there is far more dense mana in the air than just in a titan's domain.

In the white-walled room of the titan's domain, a majority of the gained mana control came from plundering the walls and soaking in the energy from outside.

In this isolation pod, billions of MP are being held in a concentrated point while circulating through the air in a confined space.

There is a natural euphoric effect of these pods that makes me feel as if I'm floating in a cloud of energy and instantly relax. The fact that Ember and Maria are strong and capable enough to protect everyone while I'm here lets me forget about everything else and concentrate on this one task.

I sit down in the lotus position in the center of the pod, and it feels as if I'm floating in midair while I start taking out over 90% of my Qi pills to begin the oversaturation process.

Last time I did this, it was with less than 150 pills in a box almost the size of a small sports field.

Now, I'm using double the pills and in a space that isn't even large enough for me to take a full step in any direction.

After many hours of swallowing pills and letting the dense waves of white-hot Qi fill the pod, the extreme difference in density of energy that fills the air compared to the last time I attempted this process is astounding.

Just breathing in every few seconds and letting that Qi circulate through my body feels like hours worth of cultivation in the titan's domain goes by. I begin gathering Qi in the same way I left off last time, putting up a denser Qi barrier and circulating it all throughout my body while filtering in more and more new Qi.

Along with this, I continuously absorb the mana that leaks out from the top of the chamber. It lets me continuously activate my perception and stat increasing buffs that stimulate my mana control's growth.

The air around me feels like I'm bathing in a warm bath of pure energy, and every second I continue absorbing it, the stronger and more full of life I become. The rate at which my strength and power increases is on a level beyond that of anything I've felt before.

Days pass, and the constant flow of energy keeps me awake and energized throughout the whole process.

My mind is focused on one thing only, absorbing and processing all of the energy around me.

There is nothing else to think about but finishing the task at hand.

I prepare to ascend in my strength and ability over the next 3 months to heights I couldn't physically or mentally comprehend before entering this pod.

—

Meanwhile, in the outside world through the eyes of my body double; Ember and Maria begin to train while the sun sets.

The golden orange rays disappear over the horizon of rolling sand dunes while I watch a display of flowing blue Soul Energy freeze hundreds of meters of desert in a single slash of the sword. The block from Ember's light red manifested blades sends streaks of transparent flowing fire rocketing back in the opposite direction that disintegrates massive valleys of sand. Their exchanges create whole new landscapes in the wide open desert.

The two of them move so fast, it's almost impossible for my body double's eye to see.

Without the use of Qi in my current state, I'm unable to see the true power of these attacks other than their destructive aftermaths.

One thing is for sure, this is all just a practice match, because neither Ember nor Maria used their true forms. Both of them just stay as humans and have a friendly spar.

Irreversible damage has been done to the open desert, creating what looks like a 5 km wide and deep canyon into the ground after only 10 minutes of fighting.

Both of them come floating back to me once the sun has set with satisfied expressions and we slowly make our way back to the town. Maria is the first to speak.

"So, Ember, why didn't you go into an isolation pod too? Don't you want to grow stronger?"

He replies.

"Well, there's a short answer, and a long answer to that."

Maria shrugs.

"We have time."

I nod.

"Yeah, I'd like to know too."

"Well... It's a bit more complicated than you'd think actually."

He sighs and thinks to himself for a moment.

"Alright, let's start from the beginning."

Ember tells the story of how he woke up in the titan's domain, hatched anew from an egg from a dungeon I'd plundered a while back.

In creating a soul bond with me, a special kind of contract was formed after his rebirth.

All immortal divine beasts like himself retain the power they've gained from every one of their past lives. However, the total release of that power is generally affected by different things depending on their circumstances, planet they're reborn on, and the era they're reborn into.

Sometimes just gaining pure levels is enough to radically unlock their powers, other times it's dependent on the number of enemies they have to kill, and in some cases there is a new skill entirely they're reborn with that dictates how this new life will be completely different.

Ember's fate this life happened to be relying on me, the human that took him from his post as a labyrinth guardian.

He finishes his story up just as we've made it back to the town, turning to Maria.

"So, to sum it all up. In this life, as Jay grows stronger, I do too. Whether that is by level, energy control, or new power boosting skills. Our system level is linked, but the correlation of raw power is dependent solely on how strong Jay becomes. It doesn't matter if I enter that pod and gain more energy control or raw power myself. It will add to my cumulative base, but my availability to that power will only become more pronounced as Jay grows as well."

She responds.

"So what you're saying is maybe tomorrow once Jay has grown a bit stronger you can give me a real fight."

Ember laughs while we all touch down in front of the Guildhall.

"Most likely, yes. I can already feel my power growing. By tomorrow, you'll be able to use that ranked up form on me without holding back. However, it might be a better idea to save your strength for the real enemies."

"True, good point."

We check in on all facets of the town after this.

My double that was doing surveillance updates me on the news.

The construction team has finished their second small apartment complex and have moved onto the beginning processes of the mana-wired power systems, clean water processing for the underground streams, sewers, and tending to all of the personal small business requests from the townspeople.

Over half of the building supplies are already used up, but Maurice said that this next project should take longer than the first. He'll give me a detailed list once they need more supplies. Based on their progress so far, I'll gladly give them whatever materials they need to continue expansion.

My other double that has been managing the new army recruits comes back to me with Luna and reports that everyone is exhausted, but well-fed, and resting. They should all be up and ready for anything in the morning.

Luna has been doing routine checks with her ranked up buff of the town's surroundings, and after her increase in mana control, the range of her [Awakened Guardian's Eye] can now see up to 400km away during the day.

Along with that, now that the sun has gone down, she tests out her [Eye of The Last Full Moon] that shines bright in the sky. It is over 3 times as bright and large as her other buff, and the pupil looks just like a full moon. It can see nearly 600km in all directions from where she stands, and has far better in-depth detail on mana readings and visuals than her other.

With her periodically checking to see if there are any new movements from the direction of Sector 1, everyone feels very prepared, as we'll have hours of warning if they approach by foot.

My doubles, Luna, Maria, and Ember all watch above the town as the night passes, and the rising sun comes again.

Daily life in the town starts up as usual.

The construction projects continue, normal citizens trade goods, settle into their new housing, and make new friends and business partners. The members of the army set off to train with my double in the canyon for team leaders to get used to their new strength.

Along with this, the 3 elemental team leaders begin creating formations and battle strategies with the Elite level fighters that serve as troops under them. This allows them to work as a team and take out opponents on higher floors of the labyrinth that they're incapable of defeating alone.

Back in the town, the humming of Isolation pods in the bunker is muffled out by the laughter and normal daily lives of citizens settling into their new homes.

The sun makes its full cycle, and the silence and peacefulness of the beautiful sunny day puts all of us on edge.

Things are just too perfect.

The day feels so eerie that not even Maria and Ember want to waste their energy sparring. They just stand on guard above the town.

I don't blame them. The only thing I can think to do is continue counting down the hours and minutes before my teammates and real body awaken from their pods.

As the sun fully sets, and Luna's [Eye of The Last Full Moon] illuminates the night sky again, I can only think that all of this is the calm before the storm.

Chapter 486

The dead of night hits and we check on the Isolation pods while Luna stares out into the desert.

My teammates' pods say less than 4 hours remain, while my own pod is at just under 16.

The tension from the uneventful day is eating away at the back of everyone's minds. However, once we make our way back up to the surface during one of Luna's periodic scans of the open desert, she blurts out a startled remark to make all of our wildest suspicions come true.

"They're here...they're really here."

Her enormous eye blinks shut and disappears in the night sky and her face is visibly distraught.

I fly over to her with Ember and Maria nearby.

"What did you see? Describe it as best you can. Everything."

She stares up at the sky again with shock on her face.

"Hundreds of them... Maybe thousands... Or-"

The massive white eye in the sky with a full moon for its pupil manifests again, and she begins to describe what she can see.

"At least a thousand, yes, maybe more. They're all disgusting creatures—I've never seen anything like this. They look like white-skinned zombies... and floating skeletons with black robes... and... three more of those dark suits of armor..."

She gulps and looks at all of us while the eye in the sky disappears again.

"The Dark One's Army, It's Finally Here."

Her descriptions sound just like Ghouls, Wraiths, and the 3 Dark Guards that remain. The range at which her perception skills can see during the night is just about 600km, so I pose the next question.

"How fast are they moving? How much time do we have before they're here?"

Luna looks at the ground to concentrate and the bright white eye in the sky pulses.

"They're moving fast. Maybe 50 or 60 km per hour. They'll definitely be here before you make it out of your pod."

I nod and think to myself while Maria speaks up next.

"Well, why don't I go out there with Ember and take care of things. I'm sure the army of Ghouls and Wraiths won't be an issue for us. Even your body doubles without Qi may be able to fend them off fine. The only real opponents for us would be the three remaining Dark Guards."

I reply.

"You're right, that's a good option. It's what we'll have to do eventually. Confronting them before my 16-hour timer hits zero is inevitable, but waiting 4 more hours for the others to awaken is a more reasonable thing to do."

Ember nods.

"From what you told me about the 2nd ranked Dark Guard, and my past knowledge, the 1st-ranked Dark Guard will be well over level 2000. Not to mention the potential that the Lich King Itself is most likely observing its army in the shadows."

He turns to Maria.

"We may be able to fend it off the main forces right now, but we have no pure data to back things up yet. We need to stall them and send out a scout in the meantime."

I interject.

"On it. I might as well go and check things out under a stealth veil to get some info. I have 3 tries if they somehow manage to catch me anyway."

By this, I mean I have two other doubles left behind in this town, it would make the most sense for me to try and get valuable info on the approaching army while everyone stays safe here and the others wait to get out of their pods.

Everyone agrees, and I activate my skill to become invisible before flying off into the desert.

I'm able to push my speeds up far faster than the army is approaching and reach their location in less than an hour and a half.

Once the army comes into my senses, I perceive exactly what Luna described.

Under the darkness of night, all the naked eye can see is a wave of approaching orange energy. Using my inspect and appraisal skill, this energy has [Curse of The Lich King] stained on everyone's status, and the cloud of leftover soul energy that trails behind the charging army stretches even further off into the night.

Their levels, oddly enough, range from lower 100-200s up to 500-600s. At first, it confuses me, because I remember only seeing the top-tier ghouls in the fight arena, but as the army that stretches over 3 km wide approaches a small desert village, I understand where these weaker ghouls are coming from.

One of the Dark Guards in its suits of appraisal blocking armor drops an orange crystal in front of the tiny village as they approach, and the same effects that I witnessed beneath the fight ring a few days back commence.

Many people sleeping in their homes are hit with this wave of soul energy and their bodies are completely consumed by its power. I witness a gruesome event of people being burned alive and taken over by this orange energy, then see their bodies be rebuilt with the infinite regeneration process of the Ghouls.

Their status and individuality are wiped clean away and the curse mark shows in their buffs.

As the army tramples over the tiny village, those who were infected by that orange crystal join the charge as mindless monsters in the growing army.

Floating above the front-facing force of ghouls are skeletal wraiths just like the ones I faced in the arena and the ones that accompanied the 7th ranked Dark Guard when I first fought it. They're all between level 600 and 999.

Some of them give off very odd energy readings, but their status screens are completely wiped all the same. I count about a dozen.

Lastly, there are the 3 Dark Guards. Two of them float above the right and left flanks of the charging troops. One of these was the guard that dropped the orange stone. I can't see any clear indications of what ranks these guards are, but my best guess is that this is number 3 and 4.

I attempt to break through their gears privacy enchants multiple times, but from the safe distance away in the sky, it's impossible to break through. If I get any closer or push my mana control any further, it may break through my stealth skill and give up my location.

Visuals are all I can count on for now.

Far behind the entire approaching force, is a final Dark Guard that floats calmly in the sky leading the charge. I assume that this is the 1st ranked Dark Guard.

At this, I turn around and speed back to the town with all of the information I have to offer.

The sun begins to rise as I make it back to town. I hold off on giving everyone a full update because when we go down to the bunker, it's just about time for the clocks on my teammates' pods to hit [00:00:00].

When the doors open on their own, the same violent stabilization process happens and I make sure to let these pods fall into my item storage before they have the chance to expel any of this chaotic energy.

As each of them walks out, the room fills with mana and Qi again. I can't sense exactly how much each of them has grown, but the remarks from Ember and Maria tell me everything I need to know. Ember speaks first.

"One more awakened. One on the verge, another with a unique breakthrough, and two who are very strong."

Maria speaks next, looking Abby up and down with the same sparkling eyes that she looked at Ember with when she first awakened.

"You did it..."

Abby is looking at her new form and around the room in the same way Maria did two days ago. She can't keep her gaze off of her hands, and for some reason she's waving them around in the air like she's moving and invisible force.

Her hair is glossier and longer, her skin is smoother, and her build is even more graceful and athletic. I cannot sense the extent of her new power, but Ember and Maria are impressed, so that's a good sign.

Her eyes widen and her jaw drops once her gaze finally falls on Ember, and I can't help but to chuckle a bit. Ember promises to fill her in on the details of his true form after they leave this bunker and she accepts the absurdity rather quickly. Less than half a minute later, she begins to get a feel for her new Soul Energy awakening.

Abby makes her entire body glow in a bright green light for a few seconds before deactivating it. Her eyes stay glowing bright green for a few seconds after the light ceases, and I wonder what special properties she's gained.

The next to begin getting attention is Arie.

He looks taller, more handsome, and has smoother skin as well. Luna is the first to approach and speak to him.

"Arie... Your Qi barrier... It's intertwined with Mana and something else. It's like they're mixing together, what is this?"

He smiles and replies.

"It's the beginning of another breakthrough."

Ember adds to it.

"Indeed. It seems there's going to be more energy than just Qi and Mana intertwined in your breakthrough once it happens. What a peculiar reading."

He turns to all of us.

"Whatever it may be, I'm no longer the fighter I was when I entered that pod. That was a major power up."

He turns to Monk, then back to us.

"If you think my power ups are unique, look at Monks. That shielding is made of pure Qi, not a hint of mana is intertwined and its not by accident. It's like you ignored working on your mana control this whole time and only absorbed Qi."

He nods while staring forward with a very serious expression.

"That's right. I have perfected the first form of my old master's teachings. I am ready for battle."

Arie raises an eyebrow, but Ember's next words make everything a little more clear.

"It seems he's done exactly as you said. A unique kind of Qi awakening... One that ignores the help of Mana Control, and builds upon itself."

Ember's eyes squint, then he shrugs.

"An odd method, but I've read text of the Originators doing such a thing. I've never seen anyone actually try to achieve its final form."

He nods.

"You're on your way. Impressive start."

Monk breaks his serious expression and smiles while giving Ember a slight bow.

Then, Fisher and Lydia step forward next with confident expressions, admiring their physical changes and testing their Qi barriers against each other in the back of the training room.

From what I can tell, they haven't begun awakening their Soul Energy at all yet. However, their Qi barriers have reached the point where they have far surpassed their former states and can suppress their Mana to outsiders like my body double without a Qi sense.

I allow everyone to settle in for a few minutes, then speak up myself.

"I'm glad you all had a productive gathering process, but the Dark One's army is here."

My gaze turns to the pod with my main body in it, showing just under 12 hours remaining.

"It should arrive in town in less than 8 hours, so if we want to stop them before they get here you'll need to fight the forces that are arriving now on your own. What do you say we meet this army in the middle and test out all of your new abilities?"

I open the hatch to go up into the outside world after I get a unanimous round of nods.

"Great. Let me explain exactly what we're dealing with here."

As the sun fully rises, and the people of the town wake up for another beautiful bright and sunny day, I recount the exact events of my scouting mission to all of my teammates. The approaching forces loom far beyond the horizon as we all come together to formulate a plan.

Chapter 487

Just 20 minutes pass before we all agree on the plan of action, and begin floating over to the housing where the 37 members of the Flame Emperor's army are all waking up to get ready for another day of training.

They're all greeted by a telepathy message directed into their heads.

"Today is the day that your training will finally be tested. We have an army approaching, and need your help to wage war."

Less than 30 seconds after my message is sent, everyone shows up in the newly built city street in full armor, with weapons ready, and have item boxes stacked with potions.

My other double is nearby, and it joins our ranks. This makes two of us. The last double is staying behind with Luna to watch my main body in the guildhall and trigger the isolation pod's override function if necessary.

With her ranked up buff, she'll be able to get a clear visual of the battle even from here. Although her combat powers have improved a lot over the last few days, her abilities as a long range overseer are far more valuable in this battle considering the circumstances.

I give the newly trained recruits a short breakdown of the situation and assign them their roles on the task we're about to all carry out.

Each of my teammates introduces themselves, and all of the trained recruits show them respect for being one of the Top Fighters by the Flame Emperor's side.

We all fly up into the air in the direction of the approaching army. The three elemental squad leaders are able to match our movements by summoning mass while the other elite fighters are capable of summoning mana beneath their footsteps and speeding through the sky in their own way too.

Although we can't move as fast as we wish, all of us are capable of moving nearly twice as quick as the Dark One's army.

We'll manage to meet them in the middle, a few hundred kilometers away from the town.

Arie makes a quick stop near the edge of the abyss to farm demonic wolves while we begin our trek through the desert.

Fisher and Lydia float on guard on both sides of the Elites' army and get to know the elemental squad leaders.

Leading their whole charge is one of my body doubles.

Behind this group, Arie catches up with us and meets Abby and Monk behind the base of this triangular formation.

Maria and Ember step through the sky on visible platforms of soul energy beneath their feet following Arie, Monk, and Abby's white and green footsteps.

Then finally, at the rear, my other body double continuously does scans of the desert around us to stay on course and double-check the dangerous forces approaching.

A few hours pass as we make our way through the open desert.

Hundreds of kilometers of rolling sand dunes pass us by, along with small villages, a few rogue dungeons, and unique landscapes like large rock formations and valleys.

The further out we get, the more unique the terrain becomes.

Sector 1 is a mountainous region with forests and a colder climate than the hot desert near the center of the Dark Continent like where we're traveling from in sector 2. So, the closer we get, the more random greenery like small trees and shrubs become more common.

It isn't until we're less than 70 km away from the Dark One's army that their energy readings and status numbers start to appear in my mind's eye again.

I speak up to stop everyone from venturing any further as we approach the entrance between an enormous rock formation to our left side that stretches out a few kilometers into the desert. To our right, there is a deep ravine that looks like a series of enormous sinkholes have swallowed up a portion of the desert to make twisting caves in the rocky sandy ground.

It too, stretches out for many kilometers making a natural V-like formation that if the Dark One's army continues on their trajectory they will have to funnel through a small flat pathway about a kilometer wide between the two landmarks to continue their forward movement.

However, if we move forward now, we would be the ones trapping ourselves with a narrow pathway to escape behind us.

Of course, we can take to the sky and none of this matters, but the majority of the Dark One's troops are on the ground, so this is how I'd like to look at our army too. Forcing their troops to break their current formation and squeeze into a narrower path to fight seems like quite the geological advantage that I cannot pass up if it's right in front of me.

"Halt, everyone. We will wait here for their army to meet us."

Everyone stops in the sky, and the Elite level warriors float to the floor with their elemental squad leaders next to one of my doubles to rest from the fly over. Fisher and Lydia are by their left and right sides, staring off into the distance between the mountains and deep ravine.

The rest of us float in the sky and watch the cloud of orange mist begins to form on the horizon.

Soon after, the sound of thousands of rumbling feet, shaking the ground they walk on echoes off the side of the small mountain range and through the deep valley.

Everyone stares forward and begins powering up their skills, glowing in displays of blue, green, red, white, black, and white light all through the air and desert floor below.

They all stand their ground as the enemy forces come into our line of sight.

There's over 30% more Ghouls in their army than I scouted out before, meaning more towns were destroyed and assimilated by that crystal contraption. The orange trail of soul energy eating up the golden desert in their wake is even more vibrant now and I can see them without holding back my perception skills for the sake of hiding my location.

Everyone else sees them too and holds their ground as they approach closer and closer.

Over 5 minutes pass as they continue to charge forward.

Not a single one of their forces tries to go around the mountain or the valley, they all come straight at us.

I whisper under my breath. "As confident as ever..."

Another few minutes pass as their forces begin to bunch together more, squeezing their 3-4 km wide rectangular formation into a 1 km wide line that will fit between the natural land barriers.

As this happens, I see the two Black Suits of Armor that hover over the right and left flanks of the troops break their formation to hover over the high mountains and deep valley. They leave their troops below ungarded in the interest of gaining a better height advantage to match our stronger troops that stay in the sky.

I smile and speak up in a loud voice using my screech skill for everyone to hear.

"Begin phase one of our attack plan! Stall and destroy their main forces. Do not let a single one of them through this natural barrier between the mountains and the ravine. Protect us from the numbers below and we will do our job to confront the Dark Guards above!"

My double, Fisher, Lydia, and the 37 troops of the Flame Emperor's army run forward into the mouth of the battlefield leaving streaks of mana, various elements, and Qi behind them.

Fisher's full body glows bright blue, and he activates the new buff he obtained from ranking up a second time called [Divine Water Serpent's Blessing].

From almost a hundred meters away from the front line of attacking Ghouls, he swings his sword, and the mystical form of a 20m long Serpent erupts from his aura and flies from his blade.

Infused with mana and extreme grade water magic, the elegant attack cuts through the desert and collides with the glowing orange Ghouls.

It slices through dozens of them, overpowering the weaker troops' soul energy without even directly making contact with their bodies using Qi. Many white-skinned ghouls are killed in a single blow.

Simultaneously, Lydia activates her ranked-up buff called [Spiritual Roar of the Ice Warrior], combining it with her extreme ice magic and swinging her curved blade.

Her icy aura erupts from her sword and creates the enormous 10m tall manifestation of a White Tiger, letting out a roar that freezes the desert floor as it charges forward in a physical form of her mana blade and makes contact with another section of the Ghouls' front lines.

They're frozen entirely and shattered to dust as the overpowering wave of mana hits them, taking out over a dozen troops with the blow of her own.

Both of them charge right into the open paths that their destructive attacks have made, and the Elite level fighters follow close behind.

They're confronted with level 100-200 ghouls on the front lines. They're faster, stronger, and more skilled fighters than these low-level creatures. However, the soul energy powering their movements is a whole different energy source than mana. It works by different rules, making far lower leveled monsters a challenge against non-Qi users.

My double leads this charge, using mana blades of flames, ice, earth, lightning, water, and pure mana to show the effectiveness of completely overpowering these opponents.

While they would have no hope defeating level 600 or higher Ghouls without Qi, the majority of the troops are not that high level. All borrowed soul energy users have a limit to their power. Overwhelm them and make them use it up entirely, and the battle is as good as over.

Rachel is the first of the new recruits to show that this is possible, burning one of the ghouls to the ground in a series of slashes until it cannot get up again.

The other element squad leaders show the troops following that it's possible too, and everyone begins to slice away at the ghouls while Fisher and Lydia fire off deadly shots from their ranked-up skills to do the heavy lifting.

The more advanced Ghouls and approaching Wraiths will not be taken down by pure high-powered mana alone, but I'm confident Fisher and Lydia will be able to face that problem with their Qi when it comes. The goal now is to hold off the troops here inside of the V-formation to stall for time while the fighters above start their own battles.

Maria and Ember both stare off into the distance, both now covering their eyes in dense layers of red and blue Soul Energy.

They examine the Dark Guards that are ignoring their troops being obliterated below them and solely focus on the fighters up in the sky.

There's two loud explosions that ring through our ears, but we also see beautiful visuals of white and purple light in the sky.

The white light comes from the Dark Guard that sheds its armor above the mountainous landscape to our left. From here, it looks as if he's an old man in white robes. A pure white aura covers his body that matches his long flowing white beard.

His head is shaved bald, and he has a white number [4] on the palm of his left hand.

Monk immediately turns in this direction and speaks to us.

"That Dark Guard. He's mine. I will battle him."

In my body double's form, it isn't completely possible for me to gauge everyone's strengths, so I look to Ember and Maria for their opinion.

Ember nods.

"Yes, you can handle him. It will be tough, but this is a good match up. One I'm very interested to see."

The corner of his mouth turns up.

Then, Maria looks over to Abby and Arie, pointing toward the valley.

The bright purple light fades and a woman with long black flowing hair, purple skin, red lips, an extremely curvy figure, and the tattoo of a number [3] right between her neck and chest.

"You two can fight her. The same goes for that opponent. She will not be easy, but you can handle it."

We all turn to the final Dark Guard that has not shown its true form and stays back, many kilometers behind its troops, patiently waiting for the battle to commence.

I speak up while Monk, Arie, and Abby head off to confront the Dark Guards that have declared their positions above the battlefield.

"So... does that mean you'll be able to handle number 1?"

I point off in the distance, but there is no reply that comes back from either of them.

They both stare at the figure in the black armor that floats in the sky. It doesn't look like it's going to enter the fight any time soon, so I'm curious what they think of it.

Ember finally speaks.

"I'm not sure. Whatever that is... that isn't one person. There's more than one opponent in that armor..."

Maria nods, but doesn't reply for a few seconds, examining it again.

"You're right... Whatever that is, it's nothing like any of the other Dark Guards..."

Chapter 488

Monk and the Dark Guard that looks like an old man in white robes are the first to confront each other in the air above the mountains to our left side.

I can see the blue text hovering above the man's head in my inspect skill reading [Lv. 1602].

White energy seeps out from Monk's body to match the color of the aura surrounding the old man.

His own robes and skin turn bright white, and the two men in the sky look like they share the same power.

For some reason, neither of them has any mana readings coming off of them, but there's a thick visible aura that keeps both of them floating in the air. The next words that come out of Monk's mouth while he clasps his hands together and bows make me realize what exactly is going on here.

"Master... It seems you are alive even after defending our temple from the Dark One. I am disgusted at that monster's actions, but thankful I'll get another chance to show you what I've learned of your teachings."

A pulse of white energy comes off of Monk again, and the white light that surrounds him grows even further, seeping out from his core to create a ghost-like form of himself around his whole being.

It is nearly twice as large as his own body and surrounds him entirely, mimicking his movements exactly as he comes up from his bow and gets into the fighting position.

It looks like a more compact pure white version of my Rising Emperor's Greater Form.

At this, a pulse of white energy comes from the old man in the sky, and the same white aura comes out from his body to create a large white manifestation of himself; flowing long beard and all.

The old man bows, but doesn't speak at first. The only difference with the old man's transformation is that once he comes up from his bow, his eyes glow bright orange and streaks of the Lich King's Soul Energy bleed through into his pure white form.

He finally speaks up to Monk, but it sounds like his words are not easily mustered.

"My... mind and body are not- entirely my own. Your fate shall be tested in the strength you have gained. I... cannot- hold back. If you have not surpassed me, you will become a pawn of The Lich King... to play in the world's great game."

The orange soul energy continues to infect the pure white form that the old man manifested, and the two lunge forward at each other with straight faces and tight fists.

Both men collide and the crack of Qi on Qi echoes through the air, making the mountainous rock formations beneath them quiver. Many heads turn in their direction as two shock waves of white and orange light collide and erupt throughout the battlefield.

Then, again.

Over and over, their energy forms collide, matching fists and kicks back and forth while zipping through the sky.

Every time they do, larger shockwaves are released through the air and the orange energy that seeps into the old man's form flows faster and glows a deeper orange.

A blur of energy fills the sky while loose rocks from the top of the formations below them crumble away, making avalanches from the repetitive shockwaves.

It seems as if they're increasing the power of their blows after every attack, and their fighting style is identical. Neither of them is backing down, and they are both going on the full offensive.

Down below, near the edges of the rock formations, the falling stone crushes many ghouls as they attempt to charge forward.

The majority of them regenerate and climb out from the fallen rubble, but others are crushed by boulders so gigantic they cannot escape the death traps of stone. Screeches and cries come from these monsters that have fallen in the way of a Dark Guard's battle while many other fights begin to unfold nearby as well.

The Elite-level fighters in The Flame Emperor's Army fend off the hordes of Ghouls while the elemental squad leaders and my body double protect them from the stronger opponents that slip through the cracks.

Meanwhile, Lydia and Fisher fly into the air to confront the Wraiths that approach from the rear with black orbs of energy in their skeletal hands. I send them telepathic messages to let them know that the orange hearts of the wraiths are their weak points, and blue and white flashes of light fill the sky.

The ranked-up buff energy manifestations of a serpent and tiger collide with their first approaching [Lv. 881] Wraith, and it is pushed backward while the two orbs of compacted soul energy explode in the air.

The wraith still flies forward at the two sword wielders in the sky, forming two new energy orbs. However, its attack is cut short when two Qi-infused swords slice through its defenses using the explosion of soul energy in the sky as a smokescreen for their true intentions.

Fisher and Lydia kill the Wraith in a single dual strike. Its bones and shattered core fall to the battlefield to be trampled by more approaching Ghouls.

The two A-Ranked fighters scan their enemies and lock onto the 4 more nearby Wraiths over level 900 that witnessed their fellow monster be slaughtered in an instant.

They all fly higher in the sky with charged swords and black orbs of energy to continue their fight.

Near the right barrier of the V-shaped battlefield, three figures hover over the deep ravine.

The purple-skinned woman speaks up to Abby and Arie as they arrive before her to confront the 3rd ranked Dark Guard.

Her eyes show shimmers of orange soul energy, but the aura that surrounds her body is a deep purple color that matches her skin. My double's inspect skill picks up a [Lv. 1790] rating on her status. My instincts when looking at her make my stomach churn and skin crawl.

She's a beautiful woman, but even at this distance, I get the feeling that she's a very tricky and manipulative creature. I'm on guard even though I'm not even fighting her.

Arie speaks up first as they approach.

"Whatever you are... you creep me out..."

He activates his ranked-up buff called [Energy Form of the Ancient Archer] and six enormous arms made of swirling black energy erupt from his back. They're each many times larger than his normal arms, and the energy engulfs both of his actual arms and hands so he's able to finely control these manifestations. They tower over his body by nearly 4 meters.

Three on his right side all hold bows, and he turns his body to have them face the woman.

The top one is bright white, it is loaded with a Qi and mana infused spirit arrow. It is not quite Soul Energy, but on the verge of awakening.

The middle bow is jet black, and the energy arrow locked and loaded in this bow is made of pure demonic energy. It looks like the ball of energy Ember is able to manifest outside his body, however, it is in the shape of a long sharp arrow.

The final bow is shimmering gold. It is gripped tight by the bottom manifested hand, but there is no arrow loaded in it.

Two of the hands on Arie's left side pull back the spirit and demonic arrows, keeping them pointed at the woman.

She lets Arie power up while the purple energy around her grows denser, then replies in a calm manner.

"Six arms? Not bad... but I can do better."

She stares him in the eyes and gives a devious grin, then turns to Abby.

"It looks like the insects have finally come to play in my nest. It's time to feast."

The purple energy around her grows even denser, making it hard to see her physical features, but only the outlines of her figure in a cloud of Soul Energy.

Abby takes this initiative to put up a protective shielding of her own bright green Soul Energy around her body and manifest two spears of stone infused with Soul Energy in each of her hands, pointed at the Dark Guard.

Her new ranked-up buff is not activated, and as I watch from afar, I question when she'll use it and how exactly [Form of the Immortal Healer] works and what it looks like when in full use.

The instant she glows green, eight bright purple threads of Soul Energy are shot out from the Dark Guard's hidden veil.

Four of them head toward Arie and the other four straight at Abby.

Two arrows are shot out from Arie's manifested bows. The bright white arrow that collides with the first purple thread snaps it in two and breaks its forward momentum before it even makes it halfway to him.

The second black arrow makes contact with the thread and sends a shock wave down the entire attack.

The purple thread does not burst into sparks like a normal mana attack would when making contact with Demonic Energy. This is because its made of Soul Energy. However, it is engulfed in a wave of darkness and consumed entirely, disintegrating both the arrow and the thread it touched. Pure White Qi fades into the air after both the demonic energy and mana are dissolved away.

Arie's bows create brand new arrows once the two are released, and he spirit-steps upward while sending out two more attacks at the remaining threads that follow him like heat-seeking missiles.

Abby throws both of her stone spears forward, and they collide head-on with the endpoints of two of the purple threads. On impact, they're both split perfectly down the middle and shatter into energy in the air.

She steps forward, leaving a trail of green light behind her, getting in between the last two remaining purple threads and letting her forearms covered in Soul Energy collide with the attacks.

There's an enormous eruption of energy as the two forces collide, but in the end, the purple threads shatter just like the others.

Arie destroys the two that have followed him up into the air as well, and both of them close in on the woman beneath the purple mist.

Her voice rings out again with a smooth tone full of confidence.

"You two are strong food. I do like a good fight before a rewarding meal."

The purple fog pulses with energy and her outline beneath it shines white, then begins to deform. Arms begin to grow from her back, just as they did from Arie moments ago. Instead of stopping at 6, she manifests 8.

The extremities don't stop growing larger and unnaturally long. They gain more joints than a normal human's arm, at the same time, her human arms and legs begin to shrink away into the center of her body. Behind the mist, her entire body shifts and grows into a much larger creature.

The outline of a spider forms, and it continues to grow.

Its legs grow outward to over 5 meters in length each, but it doesn't stop there...

Both Arie and Abby jump back and defend while far denser threads of purple Soul Energy erupt from the fog along with the head and many eyes of an enormous arachnid monstrosity.

—

At the back of the battlefield, my double, Ember, and Maria continue to watch all of the main fights unfold.

The last Dark Guard does not move a muscle either, watching from a few kilometers away at the back of the army.

Back in the town, roughly 200 km away, Luna watches the battle using her ranked up buff and reports the updated events to my double that guards my main body.

Deep underground in the bunker where only 1 isolation pod remains, the rumbling and humming sounds are increasing with every minute that passes. Through the tiny cracks in the seal near the containment system at the top of the pod; small amounts of mana and Qi escape at a normal rate. However, there is also a faint dark red glow that leaks out, hinting that a unique awakening has begun.

Chapter 489

On the battlefield, the loud cracks and shockwaves of Qi and Soul energy between Monk and his old master echo throughout the sky.

Their rate of contact and intensity keeps rising, and they begin to land proper hits on each other too; it's not just blocking and equal force counter moves anymore.

Monk is the first to take a heavy blow to the side, sending him flying downward into a rock wall, shattering it to pieces as his Qi form destroys everything in its way. An entire rock structure crumbles beneath him as he jumps back up into the sky and continues the brawl.

Just seconds later, he lands an attack of his own, a kick to the chest that sends the old man in white robes flying down toward the ground in the opposite direction.

The same magnificent display unravels. An enormous 100-meter large cliffside is broken in two and crumbles away as the Qi-Master, covered in Soul Energy, is thrown through it. He gets to his feet and flies back up into the sky as well, and their relentless attacks continue.

Both of them are using the same technique I saw Monk use in the Arena many times before.

Every attack they throw is aiming to damage the other from the inside out. If the receiver of each blow does not have dense enough shielding up in the area they're being hit, the damage is immense.

Both fighters exchange blows again and again, sending each other flying onto more cliffside and rock formations, turning the small mountain range into an enormous pile of gravel.

Each of them knows the severity of the attacks being thrown, and knows that neither of them can survive more than a dozen or so hits from the other. It is just a matter of who can land these hits first, keeping their cool, and releasing enough power to match and overwhelm their opponent in the end.

It is a war of technique and pure energy capacity. It will be impossible for either of them to cheat the other; the strongest will win.

Meanwhile, the avalanches of fallen rubble that crush the Ghouls nearest to the mountain range are not slowing down at all.

Dozens of enemies are killed by residue from this violent brawl in the sky, but not as many as the Elites led by my Body Double and their elemental squad leaders.

The recruits have found their stride, protecting the exit of the V-shaped battlefield with everything they have. Over a hundred Ghouls have been killed by the Elites alone, and nearly a hundred more have been burned, sliced, or crushed by the Squad captains.

Another four Wraiths' orange hearts are crushed and their bones are scattered among the fallen ghouls in the battlefield below as Lydia and Fisher soar through the sky.

About ten Wraiths remain, and every one of them gravitates to the center of the sky to make a circle around the two A-Rank fighters with orbs of darkness in their hands. Enormous forms of a blue water serpent and an icy white tiger clash with these attacks, making Soul Energy and mana residue rain down onto the hordes of monsters below.

Fisher imbues his blade with Qi and lunges to the left.

Lydia does the same, gripping her curved weapon saturated with Qi, and lunges to the right.

They each curve around in large semicircles high in the sky, leaving white streaks of energy behind them and slicing through 5 hearts each before meeting each other on the far side of the ring.

The entire circle of Wraiths is decimated in seconds and their remains fall down to be trampled under the Dark One's army being slaughtered below.

The two A-Ranked fighters dive down, following the remains and start slashing through the mindless ghouls to make paths for the Elites that approach.

—

Above the ravine, the arachnid's legs stop growing once they reach roughly 10 meters each.

It stretches out in all directions over 20 meters in total, and its half a dozen eyes track Arie and Abby as they step through the air, dodging the thick purple threads that form out of the Soul Energy that surrounds the creature.

Each of the spider's long limbs manipulates a single thread at a time.

It looks similar to a technique I'm able to use when activating mana manipulation, forming pure energy into razor-sharp strings of thread. However, by the looks of it, this monstrous being had a unique skill similar to this and uses it like a spider would its web.

The long strings of Soul Energy thread continue to weave through the air in a seemingly random fashion, rocketing toward the archer and the healer while they use their offensive and defensive abilities to block.

In the creature's human form, it took only one arrow of any kind for Arie to disrupt the flow of these threads, but now, it takes him 2-3.

The spirit arrows change the direct course of the purple attacks and slow their forward momentum, but multiple shots need to be fired now before the threads actually snap or splinter.

The same goes for the demonic arrow; the top layer of the soul energy is dissolved, and the mana inside of that layer is eaten away, releasing pure Qi into the air. However, the inner core of even

denser purple energy remains. It takes multiple arrows to break it down to its thinner parts and destroy the actual attack.

Meanwhile, he still has to evade the other two threads with extremely fine and calculated precision.

Abby steps through the air with her gaze locked on the spider's many eyes.

The green Soul Energy surrounding her body grows denser and denser, and she takes the spider head-on without any fear.

Green and purple explosions release energy into the air as she punches through the threads with her fists alone.

It seems as if her attacks are much stronger than before because they are doing the same amount of damage to these new and improved threads as they did to the lower-powered ones in the Dark Guard's human form.

This is happening because, just like a Qi barrier or Mana shielding, Abby is focusing a majority of her offensive Soul Energy into her fists, feet, and eyes.

This is boosting her attack strength, agility, and perception.

She's able to easily evade and counteract the four purple tendrils of energy that continuously reform and attack her, but is forced to stay a distance away because the closer to the spider she gets, the faster and more precise the movements of these Soul Energy threads become.

She knows this, and Arie picks up on it too after destroying another two threads.

He's the only one capable of sending in long-range attacks. Continuously dodging and blocking from a distance will only tire the two of them out and make it harder to fight the longer the battle stretches on.

"I'll have to use it now then... There's no better time..." He whispers to himself while the third arm of his Ranked up buff moves toward the golden bow without an arrow.

He yells out to Abby.

"Cover me! I need a few seconds..."

Abby's fists glow even brighter green, and she sends off a large number of weak Soul Energy spears as distractions for the Spider's threads to move away from Arie and block Abby's incoming attack.

"On it!"

They shatter all of her spears, but shift the battle as Abby's speed nearly doubles while she gets closer and closer to the spider's body.

Her fists move so fast, clashing with 8 threads at a time, and they move in on her like a circular cage, trapping her inside like prey only able to block and disrupt a few threads at a time.

Every time one is destroyed, more form from the arachnid's limbs, and it appears she's really in a tough spot unable to escape.

However, she threw herself into this situation. It was clear that this would happen, and the stone-cold calculated expression on her face shows that she is still in control.

She yells back to Arie.

"Do it! I have a plan, don't worry about me!"

The golden bow glows, and on its string, four energies begin to form and spin together. There is pure mana, dense Qi, Demonic Energy, and the red essence of everything remaining from the Red Hydra's buff.

It begins to spark, vibrate, and hum as the energies have a hard time getting along, but an invisible force keeps them together.

Immense amounts of these energies, far stronger than the base-level arrows he shot previously, come together and form a swirling manifestation of an arrow, then a shell of golden light begins to cover it.

The arrow looks just like the bow and is buzzing loudly while violently shaking, yet staying in place and contained by the golden casing.

Arie pulls it back and aims right at the spider's head.

He releases the arrow, and it soars through the air.

At the same time, the eight threads that surround Abby collapse in on her, and there's an enormous flash of green light that erupts from inside the mass crushing prison of purple Soul Energy.

The spider lets out a screech that sounds like malicious joy, as it thinks it's crushed the girl to death. So, it moves two of its limbs covered in purple energy in the way of Arie's arrow to block the brunt of the blow.

On contact, the golden casing of the arrow melts away, and the release of pent-up vibrating energy rips through both of its limbs, tearing them off its body to only leave stubs behind.

This release does, however, change the trajectory of the attack and it misses the spider's head, but blows a large hole through its side, making flesh leak out while the spider's eyes open wide.

It screeches again. This time, full of agony and anger, rather than joy.

A static telepathic link opens between the arachnid and Arie as it yells at him.

"Food should know its place! I'm down to 6 arms because of you! We are not the same! We are not! Your friend is dead, and you are next! You've missed your one and only chance."

It begins to untighten its prison dome-like grip of its purple threads around the portion of sky where Abby once was, but the instant she does this, a bright green glow comes from the cracks.

All of the spider's eyes open even wider and it moves backward in the sky when it sees a glowing green body emerge.

It doesn't look like the green Soul Energy that surrounded Abby's body a moment ago; it looks as if the body itself is made of this energy, and there isn't a scratch on her...

Abby has activated her ranked-up buff, [Form of the Immortal Healer].

It just looks like her silhouette is floating in the sky, glowing light green, almost to the point where it looks white.

The arachnid sends its 6 remaining controllable threads flying her way, but Abby doesn't even try to dodge them.

The purple Soul Energy tendrils make contact with her body, and phase right through.

No damage is done at all.

Abby floats closer and closer to the spider, and it retreats down into the ravine while mercilessly attacking Abby with everything it's got.

Nothing works; it's like the creature is attacking a hologram that cannot be damaged.

She drives the monster down into the ravine and manifests a large green spear in her right hand, slowly bringing it above her head.

In the same moment, Arie follows downward from a distance, using this second distraction to charge up his golden bow again.

—

At the back of the battlefield, the last Dark Guard watches and waits.

Muffled tones come from within its armor, sounding like it is having a conversation with itself.

"This is not the direction the war should be going,"

"Shall we do something about it?"

"We can kill every last one of them right now, come on. Let me out."

"Patience is key. We can kill everyone that is fighting, this is true. However, our real opponents are watching the battles unfold just like us."

The Dark Guard points forward at Maria and Ember, then its voices continue to have a conversation with itself beneath the armor.

"They do look rather formidable."

"Come on, they're nowhere near our level. One of them feels like they just awakened before this battle. They have no experience in our realm."

"Yeah, I can kill them boss, let me at them."

"The woman's Soul Energy is very new, yes. However, her potential for power feels bottomless, I wouldn't underestimate her. Also, this Flame Emperor we were told about, we were not warned he was a dragon. Something about that one feels very odd. I will be the one to battle him."

They continue to argue about who gets to fight who, but eventually settle on opponents.

—

Across the battlefield, Maria and Ember continue to stare at the armor until it finally moves.

The right hand of the black knight reaches for its helmet and takes it off, letting it fall down to the chaos below.

Four green eyes on one face with orange number [1]'s marked in each of their pupils stare across the desert. It sends waves of natural intimidation for kilometers in every direction.

Each eye shows their own reading in my inspect skill.

[Lv. 2588]

[Lv. 2588]

[Lv. 2588]

[Lv. 2588]

Ember's whole body begins to glow with a light red aura, more intense than anything I witnessed him show off during the sparring session earlier.

At the same time, Maria becomes covered in a dense blue layer of Soul Energy too. The air around us drops in temperature drastically when she pulls out her sword.

Both of them analyze the opponent that just made themselves known and prepare to fight the strongest Dark Guard.

Chapter 490

The Dark Guard shreds the rest of its armor, revealing a dark grey-skinned man standing over 3 meters tall with considerable muscle mass, staring across the battlefield with four green eyes, each labeled with an orange glowing number [1].

Even underneath the black armor, this monster wears skin-tight silver plating on its chest, arms, and legs; but its bulging muscles and veins are hardly restrained by it.

A dangerous aura radiates through the air, and even without my inspect skill telling me there are four ratings on this being, it already feels like there is more than one monster containing the mind that is sending mental attacks our way.

Its entire body radiates a dark grey energy, and the silver armor left on it glows orange just like the numbers in its eyes.

The light around it grows brighter and brighter until it engulfs its whole body.

Meanwhile, Maria and Ember float upward. Ember speaks up, turning back to me.

"It will be a tough fight, but we can handle this. Your main body's power is growing steadily, I can feel my own power being gradually unlocked as it does. However, I cannot sense the Dark One's presence anywhere, I do not know when it will strike. We need you here before it does."

I nod, looking up to the sky where I know my double and Luna are watching, but I don't give them any signs to open my capsule yet. If Ember and Maria can handle this creature on their own, every extra minute they can hold it off is just under another hour my main body gets to gather power.

"Understood."

Ember pulses red, grins, and turns back toward the guard.

"You don't have to worry about me, I'll win."

Maria's Soul Energy grows denser and bluer around her too, and she looks back at me.

"We've got this."

I clasp my hands and nod back to her with a relaxed expression.

"I know. Show me what you've got."

In the same moment, I open up a telepathy channel for all three of us, so that we can easily communicate moving forward.

She smiles, and the Soul Energy around her glows even brighter when she turns her back to me.

Both of them speed forward in the sky toward the large mass of glowing soul energy where the Dark Guard stood moments ago.

It looks as if it's shifting and deforming.

The glow becomes much wider, and using my inspect skill, I can see that the [Lv. 2588] that hovers over each one of its eyes is getting further apart.

The glow becomes many times larger than its original form, but finally fades and reveals quite the sight behind when it disappears.

There are four men that look exactly the same as the guard that stood there before. Their skin is dark grey, their heads are bald, their muscles are bulging, and their silver armor still hums with an orange light around it.

However, there are two key differences in each of them.

The first is that each body only has one eye in the center of its forehead. They've separated into cyclops creatures, and all share the same energy output as their original body did moments ago.

The second difference is their weapons.

They each carry very unique artifacts that seem to be made of the same metallic material, and glowing orange with the Lich King's soul energy.

Far on the left, the first creature holds an enormous spiked club. Next to it, the cyclops to its side has metal fixtures on its hands that appear to be some kind of cannons.

To its side, the next monster has an enormous shield with a skull on the front.

Then finally, all the way to the right, the final grey-skinned creature carries a long elegant sword. He keeps by his side while scanning the battlefield with his single eye. This one gives off the most eerie aura.

All of them stare forward as Maria and Ember continue to approach.

Then, split off into two groups of two.

The Guard with the club and cannons both lunge off to the left side while the sword and shield move off to the right.

Maria speaks up through the telepathy link while turning to change her trajectory to the left.

"Looks like they've already begun."

Ember turns his body to the right and locks his gaze on the humanoid monsters with a shield and long sword.

"They have. Call if you're in a pinch."

"Same goes for you."

In blue and red streaks of light, they both rocket off toward the enemies that separate themselves over the war below.

Trails of grey and orange energy are left behind the four parts of the 1st ranked Dark Guard, and with the ice and fire trailing behind Maria and Ember, it looks like an enormous circle is being drawn in the sky.

Both of the points are destined to meet in the air, roughly a kilometer above the battles of the 3rd and 4th ranked Dark Guards.

The narrative has been illicitly obtained; should you discover it on Amazon, report the violation.

I watch from afar as their glows get brighter and they get closer.

Time feels as if it's slowing down while the incredible forces clash.

The dense Soul Energy around Maria's sword clashes directly against the enormous spiked club of the guard that leads the charge on her portion of the battle above the rocky mountains below.

Both of them stop in the air, many meters apart without physically touching, their Soul Energy auras battle it out in the sky.

Immense shockwaves ripple off the display. The blue waves of light spread ice wherever they make contact, and the orange waves ripple back, attempting to melt through energy and mass wherever it can.

Neither of them budge, as it seems their magic power is even.

After a full second of pushing back and forth, the spiked club begins to push its way through the blue light, even though ice crystals form all over it and begin to creep down the cyclops' wrists and arms, it still pushes forward, yelling out loud in a manic tone.

"You're mine! The newly awakened! She's all mine!"

Maria sees where this initial exchange is going if she doesn't step things up. Her magic power may be stronger in this base form, but this mutated monster most definitely has a brute strength advantage.

Her whole body begins to glow bright blue, almost white, as she starts to activate her first ranked-up buff [Ice Age].

However, the guard that comes flying in from behind shimmers in an orange light as bright beams of Soul Energy come rocketing out from its arms right where its hands should be.

"You're not getting an attack off that easy!"

As the hot orange lasers come flying her way, she shifts the focus of her ranked-up buff's energy attack and twists her body out of the way to avoid both of the lasers and the downward swing of the spiked club.

Using her advantage of speed and agility while still up close, she sends a slash of Ice imbued Soul energy at the monster's side.

It makes contact with its silver armor and upper left shoulder. There's a loud cracking sound as the blue energy damages the silver metal, and the dense ice attack freezes its entire left arm down from its shoulder to its hand.

The creature is forced to jump back and only hold its heavy club with its right hand while it loses feeling in its left side.

Another round of lasers are blasted toward Maria by the creature coming from the opposite direction. These beams of Soul Energy are far stronger than the energy that surrounded the club user, so she doesn't hesitate to dodge these, but still slips in a weaker energy slash right at the fragile arm before flying away.

She backs up and goes on the defensive while the attack hits and the monster's arm shatters into a million tiny pieces.

The Dark Guard with lasers on its hands sends another barrage of attacks for Maria to strategically dodge in the air while it yells at its battle partner.

"You idiot! It's going to take us forever to grow that mass back! Did you listen to anything the Boss said? Don't underestimate her!"

—

At the same time, Ember makes contact with the Dark Guard on his side of the battle hovering over the deep ravine.

He manifests a long sword made of light red energy and clashes with the enormous silver shield that creates a dome of orange soul energy around both it and the sword wielder behind it.

Ember channels more soul energy from his inner being into the manifested sword and it begins to make the barrier around the two guards vibrate and ripple.

Then, moments later a tear in the orange dome forms as Ember's Soul Energy begins to melt it away.

His manifested blade makes contact with the Guard's Shield, and the same effect follows.

The orange veil around the shield disappears into thin air and the metal of the shield itself begins to melt.

The Guard jumps backward and a large slash is left across the skull that was on the shield.

The dome of Soul Energy that protected the two guards dissipates as the one casting it retreats.

"As you believed boss, this one is not normal."

From behind, the Guard holding a long silver sword, that the shield holder calls boss, jumps forward and engages with Ember next.

Its [1] glows bright in its eye, and the orange energy around its own sword glows far brighter than any of the other guards on this battlefield.

Its blade clashes with Ember's red manifested sword to create an [X] and release vibrations of energy that shake the ground and disturb the air for many kilometers in every direction.

They look at each other face to face.

The green eye of the Dark Guard stares straight into Ember's emotionless Crimson gaze.

The guard's teeth are clenched tight as it pushes its blade forward with all of its strength, while the corner of Ember's lips stay permanently turned up.

He pushes back while analyzing this monster's strengths and weaknesses, waiting for it to make the next move so he can end this battle in the most efficient way possible.

Both parties are formidable, and have nearly equivalent physical strength, however Ember's confidence is his advantage. His true form is visible only to Soul Energy users that dare to look his way. He is like a force of nature that stares through the Dark Guard's Soul.

The Dark Guard speaks.

"So, you are the pest that has been chipping away at our forces and slowing down the advance of the Dark One. I will do everything in my power to make sure our ruler is the one who becomes the next Demon Lord."

There's a pause while shock waves continue to radiate through the air.

Ember's red sword glows brighter and brighter, to the point where it begins to melt away the dense soul energy surrounding this guard's sword.

His crimson eyes pulse and glow, showing anyone that looks into them the manifestation of a Black Fire Dragon made of energy beyond their comprehension. It is a window into the bottomless power that is trapped within him. Only drops are what leak out, that's the limited power he is using now.

The Dark Guard jumps backward at the sight, his natural instincts to run force his body to move without any decision from his conscious mind. Ember swings his sword across his body, releasing a blood-red slash and replies.

"The seat on that throne does not belong to the Lich King. I will make sure of that."

The energy rockets through the air, and with no time to dodge, the Dark Guard readies his sword while allowing his body to glow in a bright white light. Its sword grows longer, and its muscles start to shift and grow larger as well.

Simultaneously, from behind the white glowing silhouette of the evolving swordsman, the Dark Guard holding its shield comes from behind and puts up its dome of defenses again.

An orange barrier is manifested around both of them, and is held by the Guard with the shield.

The supercharged crimson slash makes contact with the outer edge of the barrier for a fraction of a second, but melts through even faster than the sword did before.

It crashes into the silver shield, and it's split in two instantly.

Next, the crimson slash makes contact with the chestplate of the armored guard, and it's sliced through like butter.

The Guard doesn't even get to react, the grey soul energy that surrounds its body doesn't stand a chance against this crimson strike either. It seems to be defying the natural logic of Soul Energy, becoming not only denser but also stronger as it soars through the air. It melts through and disintegrates everything it touches.

The creature is split in two, releasing enormous amounts of dark grey energy, killing it on the spot. The slash continues its path toward the white glowing and expanding guard behind it.

However, instead of staying on its straight and unmovable path, a long silver sword collides with the unstoppable strike, and deflects it with a single swing.

The red crescent flies off into the open desert at mind-numbing speeds and disappears while the white silhouette of the Boss of the Strongest Dark Guards grows into its greater form.

Back in the underground bunker, more and more dark red light seeps out from the cracks in the isolation pod.

A ringing notification sounds in my main body's inner ear from the level transfer perk of our Soul Bond. This is the experience gained from Ember killing the Shield User.

[Level Up] x219

This brings my main body's level to 1382.

This increase in power makes the red energy pulse and flow out at an even greater rate.

The entire underground bunker begins to fill with Qi and mana intertwined with each other, stained dark red.

The pod vibrates, and makes the shielding in the room hum and react to its energy output.

A very unique Soul Energy awakening is taking place inside.