

D. Diver 611

Chapter 611

I walk up and down the aisles, picturing the two silver blades aimed at my core and heart slowly piercing through my flesh.

The microseconds pass as the rush of new stat points adds to my base power. My speed and agility are what I have to rely on most for the plan I've devised next. I slowly make my way back to the white marble throne and replay the exact movements my body has to make in my mind a hundred times.

I want to make them feel more intuitive, like second nature, before turning around and sitting down on the white throne again.

Once I do, a single deep breath in and out is all it takes for my split consciousness to combine into one and force myself into action.

Power surges through my body, and I give up on trying to land the perfect shot on the Dragon's core.

The only thing I do right now is step off the air with as much force as I can with my right foot and twist my body with the newfound speed, strength, and agility coursing through me.

The movement I practiced in my mind hundreds of times while walking through the aisles is happening in real-time.

While the pleasure of receiving tens of thousands of base stat points feels immaculate, the sensation of silver blades tethered with Divine energy multiple times denser and more potent than my own tearing through my flesh definitely cancels this good feeling out.

This being may have denser Divine energy than me, but the amount of torque and speed generated by my spin launches me upward while the blades are still inside my body.

The critical moment passes, and my perception of the world around me speeds back up to let this exchange play out.

Both silver swords plunge through my torso and chest.

One slices right through my upper ribcage, missing the upper portion of my divine core by millimeters.

The other misses my heart and stabs right through the top of my upper pec and out through my left shoulder.

While this is one of the most painful attacks I've ever been hit with, I can't help but get a rush from the fact that my plan worked.

Some bones have been broken and muscles torn, but none of my vitals were hit directly, and I can still follow through with my right hand's downward slash against the dragon's open body.

It's not perfectly lined up after my stunt to save my own life, but I manage to release an attack that opens up a deep gash on the bronze dragon's side and tears its left wing in half.

As my blade digs into the monster's flesh, I can feel the silver blades twisting and attempting to move downward in my own.

The only thing I can do is take another step off the air with my left foot upward to outpace my invisible attacker and forcefully pull the blades out of my upper chest.

As I do this, soaring forward and pulling my own blades away from the dragon's mutilated wing, I feel its mixed emotions ripple through me as it makes contact with the outer layers of my purple barrier.

The sensation is so odd.

It isn't angry, or scared, or even battle-hungry.

The creature still seems sad for me, even now as I slice off part of its wing.

As it falls down into the dark crater made from our clashes in the desert before, I feel it wishing that I landed the shot.

The feeling seems very similar to that of the hunters from the Association when they realized they were being forced to do tasks they don't want to do.

However, I've been fighting this monster for almost half an hour. I've done every possible scan on it, and there's no sign of any buffs or slave artifacts. Even its divine energy is smooth and not tampered with.

It seems to be a free dragon, but the eerie feeling I get as it falls away into the dark crater below and I airstep upward, ripping the silver blades from my back with my speed, is that this elegant monster was wishing for me to put it out of its misery.

I don't dwell on the thought for too long, because the moment the blades rip out from my back, and blood gushes out, the shimmering silver weapons fade away from my perception.

Just like the rest of this mysterious being's body, when not in contact with Celia's purple core, I can't sense this being at all.

I do know that my speed and agility outmatch theirs thanks to my subordinate's borrowed stats, but my Divine energy-enhanced shielding was no match for its strength.

Even now, the holes in my body are having a hard time healing from the dense residue left over.

In response, my heartbeat speeds up, and so do my footsteps through the sky in my greater form.

I try to lead whatever is chasing me far away from the city.

More MCP transfer notifications ring in my inner ear from my body double farming as the yellow light of the dragon's core disappears into the darkness below me.

More and more thoughts run through my mind as I push my speed to the limits.

When I was inside my mind palace, I used all of my time to figure out how to escape a single strike.

It worked, but now I have to figure out how to defeat an opponent that is far more powerful than myself without even being able to see them coming.

I continue to fly in a single direction. If I make any turns or change in altitude, this could give the enemy following me a chance to cut me off and close the distance.

However, only two plans come to mind. One I'll try first, but based on the fact that this invisible force went in for the kill shot just moments ago, I'm already thinking of ways to attempt the second option and risk changing my flight path.

I grit my teeth and let out a wave of telepathy in all directions.

"Who are you? Why have you come here? What do you want from me? Maybe we can come to an agreement rather than trying to kill each other!"

As the pulse goes out, usually I can establish a link with someone if they're within range, but for some reason, the only link I form is with the dragon falling to the remains of the desert floor.

The force in the sky is invisible, not a trace is picked up even by my All-Seeing Eye enhanced by my True Core.

Even so, I try again. Multiple times actually. Sending out requests for this being's name, where they're from, and what they want.

While it's pointless in one regard, not getting any feedback from my enemy, I've also managed to heal up my wounds in this time and have prepared to test my second option.

I take a deep breath and make dense shielding around my vitals instead of charging my blades.

A counterattack against this opponent feels pointless; their swords would cut through mine like butter. It's best I focus on dodging getting hit in the vitals because it is inevitable that the silver blades will hit me again.

My mind's eye locks onto the dragon falling deeper and deeper into the darkness, and I make a sharp turn in the air to head toward it.

My heart beats even faster, and my breaths get heavier as my adrenaline pumps and fuels my footsteps forward.

I'm finally starting to understand what other monsters feel when I endlessly slaughter them in the dungeons with my stealth skills and limiter activated.

It is unnerving to face an invisible and superior opponent.

Nevertheless, I follow through on the only logical plan I have in mind.

If I can't kill the attacker, I'll kill their dragon. Odds are, there is some kind of soul bond in place. I don't know why else a dragon would be working with a human.

As my direction changes, I question if whatever I'm fighting is even human in the first place.

It wields two swords, so this is my first assumption.

However, it could be a demon, or another rogue dragon in human form, or an entirely new species of monster.

As my altitude drops and I do a full turn in the air, these racing questions soon cease as I feel the burning pressure of two silver blades cutting deep into my left side.

One aimed straight for my core again, and the other deep into my gut.

I wince at the burning pain, but I've been here before.

While the gut shot won't be pretty, it's not a fatal hit. I can let it pierce me without shifting my trajectory at all and heal it once I get away..

A direct hit to the core, on the other hand, will be impossible to recover from.

The only problem is, I don't have the near infinite amount of time as I did last time to perfect my movements to escape. I have the speed and agility to do so, I just have one try and can't mess this up.

In a state of extreme stress, I activate all of my mental attack skills: Intimidation, Confusion, and even Flash and Screech for more area distortion.

Every element in my arsenal activates, sending waves of fire, ice, water, earth, air, lightning, darkness, and light materializing in the air where the general body of the attacker should be.

I use flash step along with all of my buffs to move even faster forward, while activating Stealth to make my own appearance disappear from view.

My intuition tells me that if I can't see this monster, then there's a good chance even with my Divine Energy-enhanced stealth skill activated, it can still sense me; so I activate one of the newest skills I obtained while fighting the dragon less than an hour ago, Echo.

In my place, it recreates a perfect image of me that hasn't moved downward with enhanced speed.

The difference in placement may only be a few centimeters at most, but to avoid a fatal blow, that's all I need.

This violent eruption of skills is more of a flashbang to distract my enemy rather than do any damage, so I don't hold back—I have to make it count.

The immense burst of energy is all enhanced by Divine Energy, and it explodes like a bomb powerful enough to make the same crater I formed with the dragon over again in a single release.

The silver blades stay their course as I shift downward and narrowly escape death one more time.

The same hot sensation of a denser True Core than my own carving through my body with real killing intent makes a barrage on my psyche as I airstep forward with everything I have to tear the blades out from my flesh using my speed advantage once again.

I plunge downward into the darkness, aimed straight for the falling dragon, and am trailed by the silver blade user. Their presence fades from my senses completely the moment the weapons are torn from my body.

After a few full-powered air-steps down into the darkness, I can begin to replay the movements in my mind that I just pulled off. I was hoping I'd get to see some kind of outline or silhouette of the monster when my elemental attacks hit it from all sides, but it is still completely invisible...

I've tried everything, my mental and physical fatigue is building up, and that stunt I just pulled won't work for a second time. There's only one last hope for me now; it's the injured dragon falling through the darkness below me.

Chapter 612

It isn't flapping its remaining wing or using any magic to slow or change the direction of its fall.

The creature seems to have given up and is just permeating sadness as it falls into this artificial abyss.

My steps through the air are powerful, so the distance between us closes in less than a minute. However, half my mind is still in fear of the dual-wielding silver swordsman right behind me. Any lag in my downward momentum will leave me open for another attack that I can't defend.

My breathing slows, and I focus on what I have to do as all three of us plunge into the darkness at speeds exceeding anything I've ever flown before.

Every second that passes, multiple kilometers of downward motion through the crater pass.

I charge up both my swords with everything I have, pointing them forward at the dragon's core and making an all-out final push.

There's no more thinking involved; I just thrust my blades through the monster's chest.

A yellow hexagon of light is created still, as an instinctual response to stop my blades, but it's shattered instantly.

Both my swords pierce its scales and flesh, plunging deep into the bright yellow and white True Core full of Divine Light.

It cracks and explodes as my momentum continues downward through the gaping hole I create in the center of the dragon.

There's a massive burst of energy as the Earth Dragon is killed, and I feel extremely intense emotions rippling out of the monster's aura as I'm making direct contact with its flesh.

I can't tell if it's because of my mind reader perk attached to my lie detector skill, or that my telepathy link met this dragon before, or just my purple barrier relaying the message; but I'm positive that in death, this Dragon is thanking me, yet still filled with sadness.

As I burst out the other side of its body, bright trails of yellow divine threads arc and follow me deeper into the abyss, like they're attracted to my own core like a magnet.

Notifications ring in my ears, and I intuitively select yes to everything popping up in my mind's eye.

[Level Up] x517

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 49,327,920,002,556

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Stat: Defense

Points: 4515

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Combat Magic [Earth Summoning]

Upgrade: Superior

[YES][NO]

My level surges to 7012, I upgrade my earth magic, and I get a rush of new defense stats and mana control.

While it feels good, the far more noticeable thing happening to me is the same feeling I got when I killed the Director back in the Apex Region.

All of the flowing silky strands of Divine energy in its core follow me downward and tether into my greater form.

It all flows into me, through my swords, into my arms, through my body, and into my own core.

My core glows so much brighter, denser, and more potent than before; it feels as if there are two of them overlapping in my chest now.

Once the energy cycles through, it reestablishes with the rest of my limbs, skills, Soul Energy, and even mind. My next breath makes me feel like a whole new man, on a different level entirely than just seconds ago...

My perception of the world expands by over two times, allowing me to see all the way back to the Dark Continent, and even further, giving me a crystal-clear view of all eight of the Great Regions in a single shot.

There's an incredibly vast icy mountainous region above the dark continent, and not so far away now, I can see the entire volcanic region to the south in full view.

The imagery that bombards my mind and the immense surge in strength is both exhilarating and alarming.

This is only because I still can't see the silver swordsman chasing me.

If by killing the dragon, I killed their bonded partner, they would be dead now and falling through the air with me. I assume in this case, their cloaking ability would have deactivated.

That isn't the case... meaning they're still alive, and even with this incredible boost in power, I can't perceive them at all...

More thoughts race through my mind, trying to come up with ideas of what to do next as I plunge deeper into the crater, unsure if I'm still being followed by an assassin as their dragon's remains litter the sky above.

The bottom of the man-made abyss gets closer and closer, but from deep within my core, I feel a new intuitive feeling, like a new skill, or the silent activation of a passive buff coursing through my mind and body. My subconscious thoughts are being filled with a burning desire to use this new power trapped inside me.

There isn't much time left, and any turn to the left or right would open me up to a stealth attack just like the one I narrowly escaped when I made the decision to turn and attack the dragon.

So, I come to the conclusion that my only choice is plunging straight down.

There are a few escape route options on my mind. I could use a teleport crystal and leave the battle safely, or even use the perk of my dungeon walker skill to force teleport to any dungeon I wish, but

both of those options would only make this enemy more angry and most likely attack the Crimson City directly if I do.

It would only be delaying the inevitable, so I have to come up with a solution now.

My breathing slows, and my energy concentrates deeper and deeper in my swords as my True Core glows with hot yellow light.

My velocity downward continues to increase more and more, and in a matter of seconds, I'll be colliding with the bottom of this hole in the desert, and right on top of me; this mysterious swordsman will come in for the kill, seeking revenge.

With this in mind, I give in to the burning intuitive feeling in my core that wants me to activate an unknown power. Then, the corners of my lips slowly turn upward as I see what's being formed from my own pure divine energy in front of me.

All of the fear and confusion that filled my subconscious moments ago fade away, and only excitement and the thrill of battle surge through me now.

Moments before impact with the bottom of the crater, I turn my whole body around.

Instead of diving head and swords first into the ground, I brace my feet for impact, covered in layers upon layers of soul energy and divine threads.

My swords and torso twist upward toward the sky, and in the center of them, manifested out of pure silky yellow light, a glowing hexagon fully forms in front of my entire greater form.

My grin while creating this manifestation only grows more and more into a full smile as the bright yellow light floods the area and I watch two silver blades sink into the incredibly thick wall of gravity above my head.

I was right, this sword wielder isn't dead.

It feels as though time stops as my feet destroy layers and layers of bedrock below the desert, unable to hold the pressure being forced upon it.

However, the barrier above my head between both of my own weapons is holding steady.

The silver blades that come out from seemingly nowhere push down with all their strength, but I push back with over double the Divine Power I had before.

The blades sink deeper and deeper into the hexagon of light, making it over three-quarters of the way through.

Many times when I was fighting the dragon at the start of our battle, I made it this far through when I was about to shatter its defenses.

Although, when I wasn't strong enough to shatter through, the harder I hit, the more severe the blowback was.

As the blades stop sinking through, just before the back edge of the reflective barrier, they finally come to a slow stop.

A wave of relief and confidence flows through me, and at the same instance, I feel the silver blades begin to reverse their direction, slowly being pushed upward.

The slow reversed motion begins to speed up. Faster and faster, all of the force pushed down in this attack is reflected back, and a flash of yellow light erupts from the sides and front facing portion of the barrier as the silver swords pull completely out and disappear.

I can't sense the enemy, but the fact that they haven't made another counter attack makes me assume they have been caught up in the blast and reflected upward with the eruption of energy high up into the sky.

After this last resort move paying off, my mental and physical fatigue grows even worse. I've never exerted so much force and power in my entire life; every cell in my body is screaming at me to stop and recover.

However, the excitement from learning my own True Core's ability allows me to take the unique talents of other True Cores is fueling my urge to fight.

I jump upward, destroying dozens of kilometers more desert in a single step, yelling out loud for the entire battlefield to hear.

"Whoever you are, wherever you come from, show yourself! State your name and tell me why you've come here. Do this, and maybe I'll think about letting you live!"

A bright yellow surge of energy residue is left behind as I fly upward out from the crater in the desert, following the general direction of where I believe this silver sword user was flung.

Chapter 613

The energy surging through me settles into my muscles and bones, similar to earlier when I was learning how to properly use my true core in the battle against the dragon.

Every step upward through the air assimilates this new power into my being and makes my movements feel more natural.

After a short pause, notifications begin ringing in my inner ear again, showing an increase in the average number of MCP being farmed, telling me my double has raised floors once again.

Hundreds of trillions of MCP rush into me as I fly up through the scattered remains of the bronze earth dragon and out of the crater in the ground.

My mind replays the last exchange over and over as I scan for my enemy, visualizing the pure hexagon of divine energy I manifested, and thinking of the possibilities that are now in the future for me. The fact that a True Core is unique to everyone that awakens it means the more of them I fight, the more unique True Core abilities I'll gain.

No matter how many waves of perception I put out, I still can't sense the silver sword user.

Still, I fly higher into the sky, hoping they'll be the first to attack and show themselves.

I yell out as I reach the altitude I was fighting at before, into the endless open air where a desert once stood.

"Now what? I manage to block one of your attacks and you run away?"

My yell, powered by my mythic grade screech skill to travel hundreds of kilometers, echoes as my greater form glows yellow.

Then, my gaze turns in the direction of the Crimson City, considering the possibility that maybe that is exactly what this invisible being did.

They could have seen my ability to kill their dragon and grow from seemingly powerless in a matter of minutes to a killer capable of blocking their own attack with their dead ally's ability. From an outsider looking in, there could be a lot of things I'm still hiding or holding back.

My heart sinks, piecing together a logical path that I would take in the same position.

If they were ordered by someone to take me out after somehow being notified of the Apex Region Director's death, they would find my weakness and attack it.

Based on the three attacks I've felt from this invisible assassin, they don't hold back and aim straight for the kill every time...

My next echoing yell through the open air is even louder, reaching far out into the dead zone of the desert, in case this invisible sword user has already flown away and devised a plan.

"If you dare lay a finger on my City, I will level the entire Volcanic Region you came from! Every military base in these mountains will be burned to ash! I won't stop there, I'll split this world in tw—"

Mid-yell, I sense the silver blades pierce my purple limiter, and a grin forms on my face as I turn my body and strengthen my Soul Energy shielding, enhanced by divine threads in the area being attacked.

Even with these, the blades still sink through, but the eruption of energy slows the silver weapons enough for me to summon another reflective hexagon of yellow light in its place.

If not for this ability, I would have been stabbed deep.

With my new increase of power in my core, I could have dodged a fatal blow, but it still would have hurt.

Now, as another blast of divine light fills the sky, the silver blades disappear and their holder is flung back with it.

Relief washes over me, but total concentration does too.

While it's good news this enemy didn't head straight for the center of the Dark Continent, I still can only perceive them while they attack, so anything can happen.

My gaze stays in the same direction as the enemy was flung while the divine threads in the air disperse.

The longer I'm left in the silent sky, the more possibilities of where the invisible swordsman could be.

My breathing slows, and I keep all of my buffs constantly activated while sending out pulses of perception.

My plunderer skill is draining mana from the atmosphere, but needs to be supplemented by copious amounts of mana crystals that I let fall from my item storage from time to time.

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More mana has been used in the last hour than I've ever run through in what feels like a lifetime. My physical and mental state is not used to using such absurd power; the fatigue is building up, but I push on far past my limits.

More MCP transfer notifications ring in my mind, as it's the only thing other than the faint whistle of wind up in this silent sky.

The moment the notifications pause, indicating my double has reached another floor, I'm left in complete and total silence again.

This is when the blades come straight for the center of my chest.

I'm fully prepared this time and perform a perfect replication of the enhanced soul energy shielding to cover my vitals and break the initial impact of the blow, then another yellow hexagon of pure divine gravity to deflect the remaining attack before it even touches my skin.

Over the next 15 minutes, I'm attacked 11 more times.

Hundreds of trillions of MCP flood into my system, doubling my mana control again as I endlessly block these incoming blades and hopelessly track the sky for an attacker I can't see.

Eventually, the MCP transfer notifications completely stop...

Another 15 minutes pass, and I'm attacked 21 more times.

In this barrage of kill-shot targeted blows, not a single point of mana control is transferred to me.

At first, I thought maybe my double was just waiting extra long to get to a higher floor, or possibly it was killed on a floor with unique monsters that a mere mana manifestation couldn't handle; however, no memories come flooding back in, so this can't be the case.

Once I get a new string of notifications in my mind, I begin to make new theories of what's happening back in the Apex Region.

[MCP Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[42,823 MCP]

[Skill Upgrade Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Blood Weaver] [Mythic Grade]

It's a very low amount of mana control, meaning my double isn't even fighting double ranked-up monsters.

I doubt it's inside the labyrinth still; my best guess is it's left the Apex Region base and began making dungeon walker points in the countless dungeons all around the Region.

If I had more mental power to spare, I would scan the Apex Region to try and pinpoint my double. If it is hopping out from dungeon to dungeon, even while in stealth mode, I could still pinpoint it.

It isn't important enough right now to use such mental strain.

While mana control would benefit me most right now, the main thing I'm thinking about is why would it leave the labyrinth...?

The only reason I'd leave is if I made it to the top, or if the floors were too hard and needed my main body's assistance.

My train of thought is completely interrupted as the silver blades come flying back toward me, pointed straight toward my spine.

This enemy comes at me with the same bloodthirsty urge to kill each time; they haven't wavered a bit since the start.

All I can do is reflect them back each time.

Whenever I attempt to guess where their main body is, sending a counter back, it just leads to me wasting energy, sending a powerful golden slash out into the open air.

No matter how good I think my guess is, painting right above where the silver blades hit me, they always disappear away from my senses and my attack misses.

My fatigue grows more and more, and the strategy to wear me out mentally and physically is very clear.

Another 15 minutes pass, and 32 more attacks are exchanged. I counter on 4 of them, but they're still hopeless attempts.

In my inner ear, more and more tiny MCP transfer notifications riddle my consciousness between 500 and 100,000 MCP, confirming to myself that my double is definitely in random dungeons.

Another upside of this is that more skill transfer notifications add to my status.

[Skill Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Stun] [Mythic Grade]

[Skill Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Meteor] [Mythic Grade]

[Skill Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Mana Storm] [Mythic Grade]

I would take the time to read them up close, but the barrage of attacks is being sent at a faster and faster pace. Now, the invisible sword wielder is coming back from my reflective barriers in less than half a minute and going straight for the kill each time.

I can't take my eye off my surroundings for too long, the only snippets I read are that my stun skill is similar to confusion and intimidation; a mental attack that stops the attacker from moving. Meteor creates a large pink stone as large and dense as the mana imbued into it, similar to my crystal creation skill, but with the sole purpose of creating a large weapon of mass destruction. Mana storm takes control of all the mana particles in a given area of aura and scrambles them, putting them only in control of the caster and making the mana useless to anyone else within the aura of a lower mana control.

In addition to all of my other skills, I attempt to use these new ones too, possibly gaining some kind of hidden advantage on the invisible attacker, but they all do absolutely nothing, just provoking the silent assassin to speed up their attacks even more.

Another 15 minutes pass, forcing me to block 77 more attacks, making this explosive exchange in the sky last over an hour now.

I'm getting more and more fatigued, the natural mana in this desert is nearly gone, and my own personal supply of crystals in my storage is running dry too.

This needs to stop soon, but the silver sword wielder is only getting faster and their accuracy and intent to kill hasn't wavered one bit. They are still just as sharp as their first shot.

Explosion after explosion fills the air as I'm blocking attacks every few seconds that hold enough power to obliterate full nations.

There's nothing I can do.

No matter what or where I throw my attacks, they never hit.

If I run away and save myself, this being will follow me back to the Crimson City. If I'm not there to stop them, anything could happen, and even if I do show up to stop them and we clash too close to the city, a single exchange would kill every mortal in sight from the aura expelled alone.

The only way I come out of this exchange with a victory is if I end it now.

As I contemplate how many more hours, or even minutes of this absurd beating I can continue to endure, a notification rings in my inner ear that may finally level the playing field.

[Skill Upgrade Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[All-Seeing Eye] [Mythic Grade]

Chapter 614

My All-Seeing Eye is already activated.

Every bit of my perception has been on full blast since this fight began, yet it's been hopeless.

Now, as the notification of its upgrade rings in my ear and my Divine Threads tether with the new pulse of aura that radiates out from my eyes, a whole new world becomes visible around me.

I thought my perception abilities were nearly at their peak, but I've been deceiving myself all along.

It's like my eyes have finally opened once again.

It feels just like the first time I absorbed this skill during the C-Class exams in that labyrinth.

Back then, it was one of the first times I started seeing the dungeons for what they really were, beginning to see individual mana particles in the air and learning how monsters and the system itself truly worked.

Now, the countless new data points entering my mind feel as if the veil has finally been lifted, and I'm seeing reality around me for what it really is once again.

Everything looks more vibrant, like golden sparkles of never-before-seen light create and glue reality together between every particle in the atmosphere. Even the oxygen atoms in the air are visible down to the protons and neutrons in their cores, I can see the glue that binds even them together and that's not even the end. It's like I'm peering into the building blocks of reality, down to microscopic levels I never knew were even there.

The deeper I look into this golden sparkling phenomenon that glues the universe together before my eyes, in any given area, my mind starts to intuitively move away from it. My focused perception instantly zooms out, and a slight brain fog covers my mind on the intricate details of what I'm seeing.

It's like my ability is allowing me to see things I shouldn't be able to perceive; it feels very similar to the times I stared into the center of Ember's golden core.

I take a slight gasp of breath at the thought as my vision returns to searching for the invisible assassin I'm currently battling to the death.

My eyes dart all over the sky, and I airstep forward in the direction that I last reflected the sword wielder.

However, everything feels like it's going in slow motion around me.

My body still moves at the same rate, but my vision and my mind feel as though they're moving far faster than they were just moments ago.

After my fifth step higher into the air, I instinctively make a sharp head turn to my left side when I see a faint ripple.

I can't even describe exactly what it looks like, it's more of a feeling; like a microscopic panel of reality accidentally flipped the wrong way for a fraction of a second.

As I charge my blades and reflective barrier toward this point, the visual sensation becomes more and more common.

Groupings of these shimmering clear, almost white, ripples in the air grow larger and larger from a single microscopic point into solid metal objects, appearing out of thin air, like a divine pocket dimension just opened up before my eyes.

The two silver blades come into full view once again and collide with my yellow reflective barrier right after they appear.

I was able to perceive the incoming blades as they were plunging into reality, but now, as the blades make contact with my Divine Threads and begin to interact with my purple divine barrier, a whole new wave of information floods into my consciousness.

Holding these two silver swords, there is a woman with fair skin, dark black hair, and covered in countless black and silver armor and magical blood-bonded items.

A greater form of bright yellow divine light surrounds her being, just like me, and I turn my head to make eye contact with the bloodthirsty warrior who has relentlessly tried to kill me for the last hour.

Her vibrant hazel eyes are full of determination, confidence, and behind them all, I feel the genuine thrill of the fight burning in her soul.

There isn't even a hint of fear or surprise in the fact that I'm staring right at her.

The corners of her lips are turned up so minimally, it's hard to tell if it is just my mind playing tricks on me.

The deeper her blades sink into my reflective barrier, the clearer her features become, and the more panels of reality flip my way to reveal her to all of my senses.

I'm flooded with 20 individual readings of blood-bonded items on her status first, all of which have 5 stat slots with well over 500% buffs, some of which are even higher than 1000%.

The fact that she can carry 5 more gear slots than me piques my curiosity, but when I get close enough to read her level, skills, and buffs, it all makes sense...

Stolen content warning: this tale belongs on Royal Road. Report any occurrences elsewhere.

[Lv. 15831]

Skills:

[Stealth][Divine Grade]

Bufs:

[Silent Steps]

[Cloak of Shadows]

[Greater Invisible Battle Form]

The moment these metrics enter my mind, the attacks she's made into my reflective barrier hit their stopping point, mere millimeters before sinking all the way through to puncture my chest, and the violent exchange of energy explodes to send her reflected back.

Her silver blades cross to block the brunt of the blow as she's sent flying, but once this silver sword wielder leaves my purple barrier and immediate range of perception about 10 meters away from my greater form, she completely disappears once again.

My mind processes everything while I prepare for another exchange.

This is the first triple-ranked-up being I've ever seen before.

She has a true core, is well over level 10,000, holds 20 gear slots, 3 ranked-up buffs, and most impressive of all things, she has a divine grade skill.

My heartbeat speeds up, and despite my burning and aching muscles and the fatigue riddling my joints and bones, the excitement to fight someone like this overrides all of my natural senses.

My Mythic Grade All-Seeing Eye pulses through the desert, enhanced by the burning hot strength of my Divine Threads, overturning every building block of reality in the atmosphere.

Even so, as I airstep higher into the sky to face off against the mysterious hazel-eyed woman, I'm not able to sense her until she comes within a deadly range.

I'm only able to barely sense her, basically just a vague intuitive outline of her being as she comes within 10 meters of me, and can only see her for what she really is and her status information when she's making contact with my purple barrier.

Instead of reflecting her away in fear of getting hit like every time before, I want to make a move and go on the offensive.

I use every bit of divine energy I would have manifested into a yellow hexagon and channel it into both my blades.

I twist my body the moment I see her entire greater form, swinging my swords upward to clash with her silver swords and lock eyes with this assassin again.

This time, I'm smiling wide as we both stand still clashing in the sky, radiating pulses of divine light like a beacon rippling through the air for hundreds and hundreds of kilometers.

I can even sense the excess radiation and sound of this clash reach some of the smaller towns and villages in the outer bits of the populated areas of Sector 2.

We're at nearly identical strength, and the burning divine energy in our True Cores is extremely similar too. My reaction time and speed are faster than hers, and my defensive power is too. However, this sword wielder's stamina is far greater than my own, and if she wanted to run away, it would be impossible for me to locate her.

Still, even with this change in my technique, blocking her with my swords instead of the logical reflective barrier move, her emotions and physical state don't change at all.

Her gaze is locked on my core, and her conviction to fight doesn't waver.

There is no malice in her movements, and unlike the dragon that was battling me before, it doesn't seem like she's being forced to do anything.

The sword wielder is here because she wants to be.

She wants to fight because she's enjoying it.

Nothing more, nothing less.

This realization is both exciting and also a bit worrying.

There is nothing more dangerous than an opponent like this. I know so, because I myself have felt the same way many, many times before... My instincts tell me, there is no reasoning with her. The only way this battle ends is if one of us falls to the other's blades.

We stay locked in the sky with our blades colliding. She pushes mine back a few centimeters, and I do the same as more and more pulses of silky Divine Threads seep from our cores through our blades and out into the completely decimated desert.

There's nothing at all left below us but an impossibly deep ravine stretching further than mortal eyes can see.

Despite this, we continue on.

The scraping of divine energy tethered to greater form's swords echo through the air, and finally, we both go in for the kill at exactly the same time.

Both of our right-handed swords break away from the other's left, aiming for the core, but we both twist our bodies and dodge, only piercing one another's sides while flying through the air onward in the opposite direction.

Once again, her yellow divine residue tears a gaping hole in my stomach after it pierces through my armor like butter, but the slow healing process begins while I airstep around, charging my blades to get ready for another exchange.

Another clash ripples through the air, shockwaves traveling over a thousand kilometers, less than a second after our last exchange.

A small yellow slash from my own divine energy residue is visible on her side once we meet again. While mine is healing, hers is still burning bright.

However, instead of being concerned, the hardly noticeable grin on her face grows just slightly as both of us go in for the kill again.

Over and over, a new style of battle continues in the sky.

Now that I can see my attacker, we're on equal footing.

When she takes me by surprise in awkward angles, I manifest reflective barriers, and when she attacks straight on, our blades hit every time.

On the head-on attacks, both of us always leave those with wounds.

Although they're not severe, they do build up over time.

Mine heal, but not fast enough. I have slashes all over my legs, arms, chest, and torso. However, the silver sword user does too.

The collisions only get more frequent, ramping up to multiple clashes per second.

The waves of divine energy that erupt from our collisions are stacking together and pulsing out further and further into the Dark Continent and Volcanic Region.

To the south, more and more lava erupts from the active volcanoes, and the mana in the air is being distorted by the constant energy pulses to create and break dungeons.

My Plunderer skill absorbs so much mana from the air that pockets of dense mana are flooding into drained portions of the atmosphere and odd phenomena are occurring down below in the crater where the dead zone of the desert used to be.

Rogue dungeons are being formed from the excess mana residue trapped in our divine energy pulses.

While new dungeons forming and breaking within a radius of our fight won't be difficult to clean up, there is a far more dangerous result of this exchange that is beginning to show itself.

Far away, in the center of the Dark Continent, weak vibrations of yellow divine light from two True Cores clashing begin to ripple into the depths of the demonic energy-filled abyss.

While one or two waves don't get much of a result, the continuous and growing pulses of Mana and Divine Threads that are being consumed by the darkness make the entire abyss tremble.

As I clash with the silver assassin in the sky for the 139th time in the past minute, another ripple of Divine Light filled with Mana collides with the abyss thousands of kilometers away.

In the center of the abyss, a pulse of black energy responds back, making a ripple outward, and above it, the clouds in the sky begin to slowly part.

Chapter 615

Back in the outer desert, just about a hundred kilometers away from the Crimson City, my teammates sit in a circle, absorbing orange divine fragments.

Weak ripples of yellow radiation from my fight reach their senses, and Maria is the first to speak up.

"That's Jay... First, he leaves in a hurry claiming that we'll need to use this power sooner than we think, then he borrows our stats and mana control. Now, these pulses of energy can only be the result of a fight."

Fisher smirks, looking up while still sitting in the lotus position, and responds.

"And he didn't even think to invite us in on the fun. Come on, even though we haven't consolidated our orange cores yet, we're still leagues above what we were days ago..."

Lydia turns to him, opens one eye, then closes it and shakes her head.

"It's too dangerous. He isn't one to draw out a fight... whoever, or whatever, he's facing, they're definitely at or above his strength... We wouldn't last a full second near that battlefield."

Abby is the last to add to the group's words.

"I can't sense a thing, he's so far to the south... As far as I know, there is only a dead zone of desert for thousands of kilometers until..."

She pauses and thinks for a moment.

"I might be right... There are more Association-run Nations far to the south, and word of the director's death must have already traveled to the higher-ups..."

They all sit in silence, knowing that the only thing they can do is become stronger and wait for good news.

That is, until the outward ripple from the center of the abyss meets its outer ring.

A wave of invisible grey energy pulses outward, similar to all of the surges triggered by the abyss in the past, but this one is far stronger than ever before, easily three times as powerful.

The outer edges of the dark abyss creep outward a few more kilometers into the desert.

The four of them feel it harmlessly ripple through them but recognize that feeling from past surges that have caused mass dungeon breaks and calamities.

The grey shockwave that erupts from the abyss begins triggering even more breaks throughout the Dark Continent, and even further into the 8 Great Regions, spreading further out into the world like a massive sonar.

My doubles back in the Crimson City feel it too and immediately jump into action. One of them heads out to Sector 3 to handle the breaks in the farmland, while the other alerts the Crimson Army to stop their training immediately and begin securing all of the dungeons within the canyon.

Once they are stabilized and guarded by the proper ranked hunters, farming will be allowed for rare and unique loot for a limited time, just like the last surge.

Lith and Monk have the proper strength alone to handle Sector 1, and the armed guards led by Chester are high enough level to manage the overflow in Solara and surrounding villages up in Sector 4.

Far out in the Apex Region, my double that's farming dungeons feels it too and uses a teleport crystal to head back to the guildhall immediately, breaking up the family reunion of Bri and Rodrigo to learn the proper protocol to handle breaks in the 8 Great Regions.

A double nationwide dungeon break emergency has been triggered by the battle that has just begun.

—

High above the impossibly large crater dividing the Dark Continent and the Volcanic Region, our battle rages on.

Every clash in the sky we exchange leaves both of us milliseconds away from making a fatal move.

I don't even try activating my elemental or extra magic as a distraction; it's impossible to predict what direction the silver sword wielder will come from, and I only have fractions of a second to make my counter each time.

The most effective strategy is using my fully charged blades, which happen to be my strongest offensive and defensive move.

True Core-enhanced Soul Energy within these two blood-bonded weapons is the only thing that can possibly block her relentless strikes, and it's the only weapon that can pierce through her defenses as well.

Both of us must keep total concentration on solely the fight in front of us, or it will be the final lapse in attention one of us will ever make.

The fight only becomes more intense, colliding up to ten times per second, releasing more nation-destroying shockwaves into the atmosphere, and riddling each other with holes and slashes.

Her excitement and thrill for the fight only grows the longer it goes on, and the worse shape both of us look.

The woman I'm clashing with may be the only human in the world I've ever met with a crazed obsession with battle that matches mine, or is possibly more severe than my own.

I'm enjoying every millisecond of our battle.

It feels like the most natural, free-flowing dance in the sky.

We both want exactly the same thing: to kill the other.

No emotions are being held back, and the other participant in this deadly dance knows exactly what the other wants without a shadow of a doubt.

It is the most pure exchange of feelings there is, a graceful dance in the sky that can only end with one of the dancers falling to the abyss below, covered in their own blood.

However, our fighting styles differ.

I have something I want to protect, a city of loyal citizens, and teammates that have watched me grow and never once betrayed me, waiting for me back in the Dark Continent. The woman I'm fighting seems to fight for a different reason.

I feel with every strike she sends at me that the essence of battle itself is what she strives to protect. Every one of her strikes feels like she's continuing to search for the perfect kill, but craves an equal or even superior exchange back to allow her own fighting skills to evolve further.

The conviction, confidence, and absolute certainty of each one of her strikes make me believe there has never been a single opponent that has ever witnessed this side of her, and lived to tell a soul about it.

She would rather die on this battlefield right now than let me escape.

The clashing of our swords drowns out the state of the entire world, blinding us to the fact that deep in the abyss, enough divine energy harboring an uncountable amount of mana has triggered it to pulse again.

Mere minutes after the first, a second bulge in the pure darkness of the black and purple demonic energy of the abyss forms.

It ripples out to meet the edges and sends another powerful surge, twice as strong as the last, throughout the surrounding nations.

The edges of the abyss crawl out deeper into the Dark Continent once again, becoming visible now, from the Crimson city by normal human eyes.

Above the abyss' center, the clouds continue to part, creating an opening of bright sunlight to peer down into the endless darkness that swirls within the Abyss.

As the second surge triggers more and more breaks throughout the Dark Continent, my doubles, teammates, and Crimson Army have secured all of the most volatile breaks. Over 10% of all the dungeons have been triggered to break by the surge, and up to 50% of them are showing signs of elevated mana levels.

My doubles are able to use element stones imbued with my plunderer skill to settle dungeons back to their resting state, but this process isn't instant.

Traveling from dungeon to dungeon still takes time outside in the real world.

Meanwhile, Rodrigo, Bri, and one of my doubles head back to the Apex Region to give orders to all of the A-Class Hunters and send transmissions out to all of the Regional Directors to begin their usual surge protocols.

The battle in the sky rages on, as we're unaware of the mass destruction being caused all around us.

Now, over a dozen pulses of energy from our clash radiate out from our blades every second.

We're both losing blood, mentally and physically fatigued beyond the limits that either of us have ever pushed.

It looks as though two glowing yellow suns are colliding in the sky over and over, digging a deep crater into the side of the world, and every living being on the planet is paying for it.

As enough shockwaves hit the abyss, a third bulge in its center starts to form.

It rises higher than the previous two, and the clouds that have begun to part in the sky continue to be pushed away as the abyss looks like it's being pulled upward, like a swelling wave of Demonic Energy.

It swells so high, that the center of the abyss can be seen in the sky from the outer ring, even hundreds and hundreds of kilometers away.

It looks like an impossibly large rounded pyramid of dark fog, and only takes its shape more and more as the round bulge in its center looks like it's pushing upward like a point.

This all changes when the large circle of parted clouds in the sky turns dark as well, to match the color of the abyss.

The point at the top of the swell breaks, and out from its center, a cylindrical structure dozens of kilometers wide shoots up, materializing out of it, and quickly continues growing up into the sky.

From the depths of the abyss, a jet-black tower grows high into the darkness above.

A final surge ripples through the entire world as the swell falls down to its natural state, and the clouds roll back in to fill up the circular portion of sky that parted.

This shockwave is far stronger than both of the first two combined.

So strong, that it reaches far into other nations while keeping its overwhelming strength.

While no physical damage is done by it, as the pulse expands outward, an eerie sensation is shared by millions of people nations apart.

—

As I clash with the silver sword wielder in the sky again, the third surge ripples through both of us, and the shiver it sends down my spine is reciprocated in my opponent.

Despite being mid-clash, both of our attentions waver. We've been in a flow state of pure battle for hundreds of exchanges, but this powerful burst of energy is too strange to ignore.

Our eyes meet, simultaneously realizing there is another threat among us, and both make the decision to use up valuable Divine Energy to send out pulses of perception to see the result of our actions at the center of the Dark Continent.

Chapter 616

As my pulse of perception creeps into the center of the Dark Continent, the cylindrical pillar that grows out from the depths of the abyss becomes visible to me.

The clouds part in the sky to reveal the structure as it seemingly materializes from thin air into existence, climbing higher into the sky.

My divine energy-enhanced vision can see the obsidian black outer barrier of this tower crystal clear, but even with my new Mythic Grade All-Seeing Eye activated, I can't see within it.

The mysterious black pillar shooting up from the abyss is made from a material unknown to me, but with qualities that seem familiar.

From this distance, it's hard to say exactly what it is, but it has very similar characteristics to the black stone of Monk's pyramid back in Sector 1.

The pillar materializes higher and higher into the sky, so high that it eventually reaches too far for my senses to reach.

I watch the abyss swell and flow rapidly like an ocean during a storm, and the eerie sensation that rippled through me from the 3rd surge keeps repeating in my mind.

The fact that my clash with this other True Core at such scale has triggered this event becomes very clear, but what exactly that pillar is raises tons of theories to race through my mind.

Both Ember and the Lich King have stated in the past that the abyss is where the Throne will awaken, but what exactly that means I'm still very much in the dark.

The visions of past memories from Celia, the purple-cored being in her last minutes of life, showed me the aftereffects of what happens if a Demon is to claim that throne, but that doesn't explain much about what happens before it's claimed and most importantly how to claim it...

I don't know if this is normal, or if my interference has changed the trajectory of this world's future.

So many questions are left unanswered as I turn my attention away from the ominous black pillar and stare back into the hazel eyes of the silver-sworded assassin whose blades I'm still clashing with hundreds of kilometers above a crater in the desert.

However, the sight before me now is almost as shocking.

For the first time in our entire battle, the woman's expression changes.

Instead of continuing to attack me relentlessly without any emotion or sign of letting up, the sword user's eyes are filled with shock as well.

The odd sensation of fear, anticipation, confusion, and excitement ripple out of her, and I feel the telepathy link that I've been trying to send out to her for the past hour finally connect.

Her voice echoes through, but it doesn't sound like she's aware we've even linked; it is more of an inner thought seeping out in a moment of great stress.

"This is too soon..."

Her pupils shrink, and her intense battle instincts, overwhelming aura, and urge to kill me completely disappear.

For some reason, she's done fighting me.

This doesn't mean I'm taking any chances, so in this moment, I overpower her left arm's blade and aim my right directly toward her core.

This moment of hesitation has decided the fight.

I don't hold back while the tip of my Flame Emperor's blade pierces the center of her chest, but an unexpected reaction occurs.

Unlike every other time I tried to do this move in our hundreds of past clashes, when she would usually spin her body just enough to make my blade plunge through her shoulder while her blade punctures me; this time, my blade meets no resistance and pierces right through her chest.

I would be satisfied with this result; however, in the area where I'd pierced her, there's no longer any flesh in its place.

There is just a circle of open sky.

From her core outward, the fair-skinned, well-endowed, long-haired woman disappears before me, dodging my deadly strike in a very unique way.

My All-Seeing Eye can still vaguely pick up her presence in front of me, and my blade is definitely sitting in the center of her chest, but for some reason, I can tell she's not injured.

The barely visible shimmering figure of the woman steps back a few dozen meters to fully disappear from my senses as I pull my sword away and get back into a fighting stance.

I'm sure I hit her... but at the same time, my eyes and all my senses have seemed to deceive me. It's like she slipped away into a divine pocket dimension, being right where my blade struck, but dodging it in a direction that I'm not able to shift my attack into.

Instead of attacking again, I hear the woman's voice echo in my head.

"That was an admirable strike. If I was distracted by the throne's awakening for even a tenth of a second longer, maybe you would have won this duel."

Over 100 meters away, the woman materializes into existence, showing herself to me, and there isn't a gaping hole in her chest as I would have imagined.

She still has both of her silver swords up in a battle stance as well, but there is no urge to strike at me rippling through her anymore. I wouldn't have believed her next words if I couldn't read emotions so perfectly.

Stolen from its rightful place, this narrative is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

"Let us call it a draw. While you were my favorite fighting opponent I've ever faced, I've lost interest in killing you."

She powers down her greater form and just reveals her plain armored body riddled with yellow divine slashes from our battle, then turns her head in the direction of the massive black pillar thousands of kilometers away.

"Maybe the urge will return when greater stakes are on the line. I think it's only fair we save a duel like this until the world itself is the prize."

She shrugs and lets out a sigh, letting the thin smile that I witnessed on her face while mid-battle return to the corners of her upturned lips.

"One of us killing the other now would be quite the waste. Don't you agree?"

Then she turns back to me, pointing her sharp eyes at my greater form without any fear that I'll take advantage of this moment again and go in for the kill.

I'm shocked at this turn of events; the ruthless, emotionless warrior only battling for the thrill of the fight seemingly becoming uninterested in battling me anymore is the last thing I was expecting to happen.

She coughs up blood, and the glowing yellow wounds on her body leak the crimson liquid as well as she waits for a response.

This halt in battle for even just a few seconds has given my own mind and muscles enough time to rest and let the adrenaline begin fading, and waves of fatigue and extreme pain start to enter my psyche.

I grit my teeth but cough up blood too, as the majority of my injuries will take a long time to heal. Attacks tethered with True Core divine threads are not the same as mere mana alone.

I respond while pulling out a teleport crystal from my storage to let it float nearby me just in case, and power down my own greater form to conserve energy.

"A draw it is..."

As I shrink down to human size, she looks down into the crater below us, then back up to me and locks eyes with me.

"You killed my dragon. But I don't really care—it was property of the Central Branch anyway... They will be wondering what happened here today."

There's a long pause before she speaks again.

"It would be in your best interest to act like you're dead. Unless you want more True Cores coming to kill you before the doors to challenge the throne open."

My eyes widen, as the way she's describing the throne is a bit different than the cryptic guesses I've received from three entities in the past.

I want to ask her a million questions, but the dripping blood from her wounds and the look in her eyes makes me believe she doesn't have time to educate her enemies for no reason.

I pull out a pile of mythic-grade regeneration potions from my storage, and use telekinesis to slowly levitate them toward her, making sure it doesn't come off as a threat.

"These may aid your healing process... Maybe in exchange, you could tell me more about the throne... what do you mean by the doors to challenge it will open? What exactly did we just trigger?"

She suspiciously looks at the half dozen green potions in front of her and doesn't take a hand off her swords until she coughs up blood again and is forced to do something about her wounds.

The woman drinks one while I watch and hold the other five up next to her with my heart racing in my chest.

The bleeding from her open wounds slows down a little, and some color in her face returns, but the woman is still extremely injured.

So am I—even while using this healing skill during the entire battle and now, my own wounds have only recently stopped gushing blood.

She gladly accepts the 5 other potions into an item box and responds.

"You are not a council member of the Order, unfortunately, I cannot divulge our secrets. The only piece of advice I would share with you is, if another True Core approaches your land, try a different greeting. I don't think many other members will take your instinct to kill on sight as lightly as I have."

She smirks, and turns toward the Northwest. A direction that would send her flying through Sector 3 and up into the 8 Great Nations if she flew straight, so I'm a bit confused when she speaks up again and her body begins to disappear from reality into the divine pocket dimension I can't sense.

"Consider us an alliance. I won't attack your people, and I have faith you will not attack mine. I'm well aware you were the one who defeated Mr. Freeman, so I will leave the 8 Great Regions alone as well. I'm just headed to the Apex Region to pick up a package, no one will know I'm there."

I raise an eyebrow, and reactivate my greater form as in the back of my mind, the fear of a sneak attack is still a possibility.

As she disappears completely from my senses, she says a final message through our telepathy link instead of out loud.

"I'm Raven. If you would like to speak again before the doors open, come visit me in the heart of my Region with your stealth ability activated. Until then, it's best you play dead, as if you lost this fight."

—

A red-haired man with a bright matching beard nervously watches a silver device on his white marble table. It pulses with yellow and white light as one of the crystals on it has shown increased activity higher than ever before over the last hour.

News of one of their high-level labyrinths linked to the dragon that Raven uses as transportation, mysteriously disappearing, doesn't sit quite right with the old man either. It means the dragon has been defeated, and the pulsing light means Raven is using her True Core's full power repeatedly.

Eventually, the blinking and flashing of her crystal begins to settle down and fall back to its resting state. However, right as it does, three major surges ripple through the central world headquarters of the Association, causing massive dungeon breaks all over the capital Region.

Vice Central Director, Mr. Redgrave, ignores the surges and patiently waits for any news from his receiver.

There are plenty of higher-ups and A-Class hunters that can handle surge protocol, they don't need him to directly send the order.

Minutes after the third surge ripples through his luxury suite, the silver device on his center table finally makes a sound.

"Raven here, giving an update on the 8 Great Region's Leader Disappearance. It is true that Mr. Freeman was killed. I battled the source of the problem, but seemed to have created a bigger one..."

Mr. Redgrave immediately reaches for his transmission device and yells through it.

"You killed him, right? This Flame Emperor isn't the bigger problem you're talking about, is it?"

He anxiously looks down at the transmission device while silence fills the room for almost half a minute.

There are three other True Cores visible on the crystal panel other than Raven and Redgrave. The other 4 crystals all seem to be normal yellow cores that don't shine as bright; they look similar to Mr. Freeman's crystal before it went dark.

Then Raven replies, and her bright stone flickers.

"No, he isn't the problem. It's the fact that the throne's final stage of awakening was triggered from our clash. We have far less time than we thought. The doors will be opening soon. The originator's text has led us this far. Many of us have waited decades—our entire lives—for this moment..."

There's silence on the line again.

Inside Mr. Redgrave's suite, his eyes widen and an excited yet devious smile shapes onto his face as he presses his crystal down and replies.

"Excellent, Raven. Excellent. You have done well. I hope we do not have to meet each other once the trials begin."

He clicks his device off and begins pacing around his room.

Meanwhile, Raven flies through the skies with her divine stealth skill activated, and the only other voice responding in the transmission is the same heavy breathing man with a bright True Core crystal shining on the device.

Raven clicks her device to cut off the annoying repetitive noise.

"I didn't forget about your offer, get your 200 fragments ready. Your white dragon artifact will be delivered shortly."

The breathing noise ceases, and the transmission channel goes silent.

Chapter 617

I'm left floating high above a dark crater in the desert, hundreds of kilometers wide.

As Raven completely disappears from my sight, wisps of green mist are left in my vision as my lie detector skill confirms her words are genuine.

I power down my greater form again and place my swords back into storage, letting only the single teleport crystal I took out earlier float in front of me.

My body is still riddled with hundreds of puncture wounds, and my mind races to make sense of all the information streaming into my brain.

I use half of my remaining energy to continue the slow and painful healing process, while using the other half to extend my net of perception outward to assess the true aftermath of my battle here in the deadzone.

Hundreds of dungeons are breaking all over the Dark Continent and the 8 Great Regions, and powerful hunters are securing the territories with impressive speed.

In the Crimson City, the army has already set up makeshift roadblocks in front of each dungeon that has broken, only allowing hunters 100 levels above the normal threshold to farm from them. Meanwhile, my double evacuates and stabilizes the more violent breaks with plunderer-imbued element stones.

Far off in the Apex Region, my double that was farming in the labyrinth uses all its concealment skills, light magic, duplicated gear, and ranked-up [Master of Illusion] buff to act as the Regional Director, ordering the A-Class hunters to guide the B and C-class Apex Region workers to handle the usual protocol for the breaks.

Meanwhile, Rodrigo gives my double and Bri a tour of the Apex Region Headquarters, as soon this will be another home base for all of us.

Throughout the entire 8 Great Regions, messages are transmitted with Rodrigo's help to all of the Regional Directors.

My divine thread-enhanced gaze skims through all the regions, pinpointing various dense points of mana where the highest-grade breaks are appearing.

Familiar faces pop into my mind's eye.

Deep in the Talton Region, a few B-Class breaks appear in the heavy jungle. Marcie, the newest B-Class warrior in that region, leads the charge, sensing the breaks the moment the first surge rippled through, and taking out full dungeons solo in a matter of minutes.

Out in the Raya and Silca Regions, a new B-Class wind magic wielder, Dane, is the first to notice dozens of breaks in the partnered regions.

The two Regional Directors get a transmission at the same time, and the three of them—the strongest hunters in both regions—begin instructing hunters and taking on the most difficult breaks alone.

The Vice Region and Veridian Region receive the signal from headquarters, but have already started sending out extra hunters to handle the surge.

The fact that no order has been given to send extra troops to the Dark Continent is unusual, as these two regions are usually responsible for keeping it in line. Neither of the old Directors comments on it, however.

Nat, now contracted to the Veridian Region, is sent out to secure a batch of the deadliest B-Class breaks in the region.

Many of the other hunters in her party are anxious and scared, as it's likely many will be severely injured and some could die today.

This is the largest mass dungeon break to be recorded in decades.

Fear and unease fill the streets, as many hunters from the association know what's happening. There seem to be many more on duty, rushing toward the dungeon hubs than usual.

Even the weakest merchants and non-hunter citizens can feel the eerie atmosphere.

There's a protocol for off-duty E and D-class hunters to ensure there aren't riots or mass hysteria in the streets.

As Nat enters the strongest break in the entire region, her demeanor is calm, and her fists ignite with flames.

The monsters inside the Divine Construct were far more deadly than anything that could possibly spawn in here today.

—

In the Dark Continent, my last remaining double speeds through all of Sector 1, 2, 3, and 4 deadzones and unpopulated areas.

Months ago, when I was in my exploration phase while farming mana for the labyrinth, and even further back when collecting luminite and mana for the isolation pods, I placed dungeon walker points all over the continent.

Many breaks need to be dealt with quickly, as there are no strong hunters in some of the far-out villages who can handle them.

The higher-populated cities like Solara and Valor City are easily taken care of as I expected.

Chester and Lith deploy their guards and hold a temporary lockdown on the public dungeons.

Best of all, around the Crimson City, there is no panic at all...

Many hunters and merchants remember the last surge that occurred in this city and easily stand in line to enter the unique dungeons and buy loot from hunters who manage to get in early so they can sell to neighboring nations.

Even the outer city folk, who are usually just passing by, become interested as word of what happened last time spreads.

Over 200 new links of loyalty are formed from traveling merchants and hunters in the outer city, just so they can enter the Crimson Dome and get a piece of the pie.

—

A wide grin crosses my face as I watch the results of my actions play out in real-time.

While it may look like a catastrophe on the surface, there are upsides to this mayhem.

Notifications ring out in my ears as my doubles farm a few unique breaks and secure new skills before stabilizing the dungeons.

[Skill Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Final Strike] [Mythic Grade]

[Skill Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Dark Mist] [Mythic Grade]

[Skill Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Enrage] [Mythic Grade]

About half an hour passes before all of the breaks throughout the 8 Great Regions and Dark Continent are secured.

I read these 3 skills' details and continue healing myself with more of my remaining power, allowing my perception to dull. Then, deactivate my stat and mana control sharing perk, to give those I've borrowed power from their full strength to battle the mutant monster back in the canyon of dungeons.

[Final Strike] is similar to my [Final Breath] ability, allowing me to unleash a single final move with increased attack power. It doesn't show the exact amount of power it adds, nor does it show the

downsides afterward. It is pretty much based on how much mana I imbue into it, but if it's anything like the final breath's aftereffects, I don't really want to test it out.

[Dark Mist] creates an aura of darkness, blinding opponents that come within a certain range. Only the caster can use perception skills within it. This, too, depends on the caster's mana control.

Lastly, [Enrage] is a buff similar to [Bloodlust] and [Berserker]. It raises my Strength and Speed by 250% while active, and gives an additional 150% to my base perception as well.

This is definitely a passive buff I'll be keeping active during battle.

As I close my status screen, I finally grasp my floating teleport crystal nearby.

It's been long enough now that my wounds have all finally closed up entirely.

They're still healing slowly, and even my blood-bonded armor is still regenerating. It feels like this may take many long hours, or even days, to fully recover from. My body is still trying to absorb and break down the divine energy residue from each slash.

Even though my body is healing, my fatigue from the most intense battle of my life is not fading at all.

As I contain my entire aura beneath my purple limiter and crush the teleport crystal in my hand to bring me beneath the Crimson City, I'm met with exactly what I was looking for.

Abby, Maria, Fisher, and Lydia all stand in the bunker below the guildhall, watching over Ember in the isolation pod while my double continues to work out in the canyon of dungeons.

A bright green restoration circle tethered by red and orange divine threads covers the floor, and a rush of healing magic surges through me.

"Welcome back, Jay. I take it my assumption was right?"

Abby looks at me with a worried face, while my other three members share her sentiment.

I respond.

"Yeah... you were right."

I form a [Hush] barrier around us.

"It was two more True Cores... One I managed to kill, the other got away... but they consider us an ally, for now."

I feel a small amount of my fatigue disappear as Abby's Mythic Grade Restoration magic, fueled by a red core and small traces of leftover orange threads, trickles through me. However, they do nothing to combat the yellow True Core residue that still burns me from the inside out in hundreds of places.

These wounds are on another level, and I'm sure the silver sword wielder is feeling the same burns thousands of kilometers away right now...

I grit my teeth as another wave of fatigue hits me, and Maria speaks up.

"What do you mean they're an ally for now? How long is that going to last?"

My head turns in the direction of the abyss.

Even though we're underground, all four of them know exactly where I'm looking, as this is where the source of the three surges came from not long ago.

I respond and cough up blood mid-sentence.

"Not long. I need to rest, and you four need to consolidate your orange cores. Soon, we'll be venturing into the Abyss."

My gaze turns to the isolation pod sitting inside Abby's restoration circle, and whisper, adding on to my statement.

"You better wake up soon too, we're going to need all the help we can get."

—

High atop a snowy mountain, just outside my perception range, the three surges finally ripple through the endless Icy Region to the north.

An old man with a dense, bright yellow core stands up from his sitting position and places the half-consumed yellow fragment in his hands into an item box beneath his robes.

He speaks up to his two orange-cored disciples, cycling orange energy in their cores at his sides.

"The time has come sooner than I believed it would. However, it looks like this threat in the Dark Continent may be more formidable than the Order."

A blue video crystal plays a blurry image of an endless pit in the center of the desert, shifting to show another visual thousands of kilometers away in much higher resolution of the black cylindrical tower.

He speaks again, as his disciples haven't stopped cycling their orange fragments.

"Stand up, we're going on an outing. Prepare to defend yourselves; where we're headed doesn't seem to greet its guests very lightly."

Chapter 618

I quickly make some upgrades to the shielding in this underground shelter.

With my remaining few million MP worth of mana crystals and a contribution of additional crystals from my four teammates here there's more than enough mana to get the job done. I imbue the shielding in this bunker to far surpass A-Class shielding, giving it additional mythic-grade stealth, hush, and barrier creation protection, lightly imbued with trace amounts of my True Core's divine threads.

This is not only to keep my teammates safe inside but also to keep everyone outside safe from what I'm about to recommend.

"Continue your orange divine core consolidation down here..."

I turn to the isolation pod.

"I want you to keep an eye on Ember and keep his pod within your circle of restoration. I can feel him healing at a much faster rate with it activated."

My eyes track up to the ceiling next, watching as the small red and orange threads of radiation that leak off their bodies become trapped by the True Core-imbued shielding I've created.

All of them have dense Qi barriers up, to not let their mana control disrupt the natural order of the low-level merchants and hunters above in the city, however, this isn't necessary.

I point at the new shielding.

"This should hold in enough power for you all to safely cultivate indoors. You may get quite the efficiency boost too, as a lot of the leftover threads can be recirculated within the bunker."

As these words come out of my mouth, I cough up more blood while the wounds all over my body pulse and burn into my flesh.

An annoying ringing sound in my ears starts too.

Though, I don't bring much attention to it as I walk up the spiral stairs to leave.

"I'm going off to find a place to heal these wounds. It's not safe for me to do it here. I thought it would be a good idea to check in before I left."

There are waves and short messages of goodbye as I activate my stealth skill and leave the bunker to walk out onto the streets and fly above the housing and businesses to make my way over to the canyon of dungeons.

I would have stayed to talk longer, but my fatigue and pain from my injuries are still rapidly getting worse.

On my way, I get the blaringly noticeable visual of the dark black abyss on the horizon.

Just under a thousand kilometers away, the center of the dark continent is visible to me, and the black pillar into the sky is clear as day. However, for most average eyes, all there is to see is the enormous black abyss.

It's a known phenomenon in the dark continent.

Over the years, the mass of darkness filled with mysterious invisible monsters has been creeping further and further outward every time there is a surge.

Today, it sits dangerously close to this settlement.

I have no idea how the darkness would react if it hit my Crimson dome. However, a new phenomenon is showing itself to me now that makes me believe I may not have to ever find out.

Instead of the abyss staying stagnant as it usually does or creeping closer like it does during each surge, the abyss is actually receding before my eyes.

It's incredibly slow, maybe a few centimeters a minute right now, but my eyes are far sharper than the average hunter, so I can see its movement from all sides throughout the entire dark continent.

Flashbacks of some of Celia's memories rush through my mind, as before each planet was consumed by darkness, they all contracted back on a single point before erupting around the globe.

This same phenomenon is happening now.

All of the dark energy from the abyss is being pulled back into this enormous black pillar, like a tsunami pulling back the sea before it crashes onto the land.

One of my top priorities right now is to enter this abyss and see what's really happening inside.

Two of my teammates, Luna and Arie, ventured into this darkness over two full months ago... They are still on my Rising Emperor's domain interface, but their exact location is still unknown to me, and so are their strength levels and vitals.

So many mysteries lie within this darkness, but I cough up another large amount of blood and the ringing in my ears gets louder. This makes me shift my mindset back to figuring out a way to heal myself, fast.

My self-regeneration skill has done its job in healing up the physical wounds as best it can, and Abby's restoration circle has taken away some of my fatigue to give me a little extra time, but I'm far from healed.

I could easily close my eyes right now and fall asleep. It feels like it would take weeks to naturally heal all these wounds.

With the eyes of a True Core, and possibly others from this organization Raven mentioned called the Order watching from afar, I don't like the idea of leaving myself and my teammates vulnerable for this long...

You could be reading stolen content. Head to Royal Road for the genuine story.

I scroll through my status while I float down into the canyon of dungeons, and one skill pops out at me that was upgraded to mythic grade during my fight against the bronze earth dragon.

I click on [Hibernation], and far more details pop up.

The last time I used this skill at [Special Grade] there were two downsides: the fact that during the hibernation process my defenses will decrease by 99%, and also following hibernation my defenses would stay limited by 50% for 12 hours.

Now, with the grade pushed up two ranks to [Mythic Grade], there is only a 10% decrease in defenses while hibernating, and no more post-hibernation debuffs. Once the process is complete, the user is completely healed.

While this is a great perk, it isn't the one that catches my eye the most.

When I choose to activate the skill, four possible options pop up that weren't available last time.

[Use Hibernation] [Mythic Grade]

Cure: Mana Fatigue[Jay Soju], Soul Energy Fatigue[Jay Soju], Divine Energy Fatigue[Jay Soju], Divine Energy Poisoning [Jay Soju], Divine Energy Internal Combat Injuries [Jay Soju]

[Slow Mode]

Cost: 465.22 Million MP

Time: 510.8 Days [YES][NO]

[Basic Mode]

Cost: 95.09 Billion MP

Time: 140.1 Days [YES][NO]

[Express Mode]

Cost: 212.43 Trillion MP

Time: 6.0 Days [YES][NO]

[Emergency Mode]

Cost: 276.95 Quadrillion MP

Time:

My eyes widen, and my stomach drops as I read out all my injuries and the timeframes at the top of the list of options.

While the timeframes at the bottom of the list look far more reasonable, especially the last one which is near-instant, the amount of mana necessary to activate this option is more than there is available in this entire canyon of dungeons.

Every dungeon in here combined, and even the labyrinth itself with over 60 floors, still only reaches single-digit percentage amounts of what I need to activate the [Emergency Mode] option.

My fantasy of just going to sleep and waiting this out may have been a bit too optimistic.

As I touch down in front of a random unattended stable E-Class dungeon, the reality of this situation sinks in.

It took me months to farm all of that mana and consolidate it into the project I'm working on.

This labyrinth beneath the Crimson dome has monsters inside that reach levels that just peak over 3000.

Every floor added to the labyrinth needs increasingly more and more mana. The higher floors needed hundreds of trillions of farmed MP to grow higher. Growing it another 10 to 15 more floors would cost about the same amount of MP necessary to complete this emergency hibernation. This massive exponential increase in necessary mana is part of the reason my labyrinth has stalled in its growth.

However, these thoughts lead me to remember there are two other labyrinths I've been in before that have even more powerful floors than the one I'm building up.

"Maybe those will be enough..."

I smirk while my divine energy-imbued wounds burn my insides, and I grit my teeth again as more blood trickles from my mouth, and now my nose.

Then, I step forward into the E-Grade portal and dungeon walk to the 43rd floor of the Vice City labyrinth.

I'm left in an empty boss room and pull out the remains of the boss from my item storage that I've been waiting to drop here.

I stand with my arms crossed and my eyes closed as I concentrate on healing the best I can until white transport magic brings me up to the next boss room.

The Vice City labyrinth is designed much differently than my own back in the Crimson City.

While mine will have wide-open floors full of monsters on each level all the way to the top from 1-99, and an extra boss room at the end of each one until the final guardian floor at the top, the Vice City labyrinth works differently.

I remember scrolling through the labyrinth options when I created mine, and this layout feels like the option that gives normal free-reign monster floors from 1-40, and special guardian floors on floors 20, and 40-59, until the final 60th floor where the demon and dragon should stand.

This is, after all, if enough mana and luminite are given to the labyrinth to grow.

My own labyrinth isn't fully matured yet, but the fact that this one was owned by Mr. Freeman and has been active in Vice City for decades makes me believe it will have far more mana than my own.

I don't wait for the 44th floor to fully spawn in, I just locate the boss and send a single spear of earth magic wrapped in a minimal amount of True Core threads through the monster's head.

It falls to the boss room floor before the terrain for this room even fully develops.

I'm left standing in silence in a small mana-simulation of a thick dark forest boss room for a few minutes before the transport magic flashes and I'm teleported to the 45th floor.

Again, I kill the boss monster before the floor even fully forms while standing with my arms still crossed and my eyes closed tight, continuing to heal my body as more blood streams from the corners of my lips, my nose, and now my eyes.

It takes a full 19 minutes to reach the 52nd floor.

The ringing in my ears becomes almost unbearable, and my temples begin to pulse with my heartbeat as blood even trickles from my ears too.

The levels of the monsters I insta-kill rise by 300-700 every floor, rising above level 6000.

None of the monsters on any of the floors below were notable fighters at all. With only mana as their energy source in their arsenal, I quite literally beat them all with my arms crossed and eyes closed.

As I make it to this final floor, at first I'm disappointed to feel the presence of a demon core so early.

I was hoping this labyrinth would be fully matured up to the 60th floor, and maybe I would even gain some more levels, but the mana required to maintain such high hopes is understandably unattainable...

Letting out a sigh, I open my bleeding eyes and prepare to have a short chat with the guardians of this labyrinth, but as the final floor consolidates before me, I'm struck with a sight I wasn't expecting to see.

I won't have to subjugate the guardians of this floor because it looks like someone else already did.

In the center of a dark,, wide-open circular standard cave-like boss room, an archdemon with long red horns lays in its center motionless, like it's asleep on a slab of black stone.

It is made of the same material as both Monk's temple and the pillar in the center of the Dark Continent.

The even more eerie detail here is that there is no dragon in sight.

Many questions race through my mind as I take a few steps forward, but the pain from my wounds and the mental fatigue override my curiosity.

To be completely safe, I form a dense crystal sphere around the demon, and imbue it with some of my True Core's threads.

Then, I sit down in the lotus position about 50 meters away from the sleeping demon and activate my mythic-grade plunderer skill while selecting the [Emergency Mode] hibernation option.

"My curiosity can wait until I'm healed..." I mutter in a coarse tone as the ringing in my ears vibrates like urgent alarms in my head.

There's a surge of energy that makes my entire body glow bright white. Then, as it fades, a dark red aura starts to expand from my Soul Energy core.

I allow my plunderer skill to fully activate with no concern for my surroundings, remembering back to the times Ember drained the Titans' domain and collapsed full dungeons in the past. This same ominous all consuming red glow emanates from me now as I do the same.

Instead of directly converting this mana in the air into pure usable MP for my own system interface to use, I just allow it to flow through me directly into the mythic-grade hibernation's activation fee.

The [0/276.95 Quadrillion MP] hibernation meter quickly begins to rise, and simultaneously a warm and soothing feeling washes over me as I lose consciousness.

Chapter 619

During my last hibernation process, when I was cleansing my body of demonic energy poisoning, I was fully unconscious until the process was complete.

This time, it's a little different.

While my fully alert and conscious decision-making mind is asleep, my passive perception abilities and the absurd rise in power keep the back of my mind semi-aware of my surroundings.

The dark red plunderer aura grows in size, filling the entire boss room and seeping into the very fabric of the labyrinth itself.

Trillions of MP flow through my body every few seconds, drained from the entire 52-floor structure, and channeled directly into the activation of my mythic-grade hibernation skill.

Every few minutes, I feel the odd sensation of an entire labyrinth floor collapsing beneath me, its essence disappearing from reality, much like those dungeons out in the desert vanishing into thin air when I was farming them months ago.

There's an initial click that vibrates in my mind, like a breaking point, then a woosh as all the stored-up mana is greedily absorbed by my passive plundering.

While the quadrillions of MP flow through me, I'm not actively using this mana. Only a small percentage is being applied to my mana control. However, even that small percentage is enormous and will more than double the amount of mana control I gained during my entire battle with the true cores out in the desert's dead zone.

These calculations are an afterthought, as my mind is running on autopilot while the clicks and whooshes of floors being collapsed and absorbed race through my mind one after another.

I can't tell how much time is passing or how close I am to the final hibernation goal, but I know it's working, and there's no longer any reason to worry.

The rhythmic sounds echo in my consciousness as my body fills with a warm light, healing from the inside out with hundreds of quadrillions of MP.

Everything seems to be working perfectly—until the clicking and whooshes stop.

The final floor of the labyrinth is absorbed, yet the hibernation bar that continues to tick up is only at [238.40/276.95 Quadrillion MP], and the boss room itself begins to fade out of existence as my aura of plundering does not slow down.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Telepathy

Upgrade: Mythic

[YES] [NO]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Body Double

Upgrade: Mythic

[YES] [NO]

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 6,023,954,200,642

[YES] [NO]

As the labyrinth fully collapses, the demon linked as its guardian dies as a result, leaving behind only an Arch Demon's core with absorption text floating above it, waiting for me to accept.

I would instantly press yes on all three of these options if I were fully awake, but the only thing my mind wants to do right now is gather these last few dozen trillion MP to finish my hibernation process.

The red aura continues to grow outward, now centered in the dungeon hub of Vice City, and it starts to creep throughout the city, triggering catastrophic events.

All the mana-powered streetlights, crosswalks, and public transportation are instantly drained of the mana that keeps them running.

My aura seeps deep into the structure of the dungeon hub itself.

Countless tunnels of high B and A-grade mana shielding, which form the underground dungeon hub for tens of kilometers in every direction, simultaneously lose their buzzing sounds as mana is forcibly ripped out of them by my aura.

The large Vice City Association buildings, made of high-grade shielding, with bunkers and vaults full of mana crystals, are drained instantly as well.

All around the city, the air pressure drops as every last particle of ambient mana within a 100-kilometer radius is drained away, leaving everyone's MP bars, no matter their status, at zero.

Merchants at low levels and high C and B-class hunters try to resist the eerie red wave of light tinting the city, but it's futile.

All of the hundreds of dungeons scattered throughout the city and the surrounding forest regions are affected too.

Stolen from its rightful place, this narrative is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

Every single dungeon within my aura drops by roughly 50% of its mana reserves in minutes. New dungeons begin to break from rapid destabilization, while others, previously on the verge of collapse, have their excess mana instantly cleansed and stabilize again.

No one knows what's happening...

First, three powerful surges ripple across the entire region. Then, from the epicenter of the dungeon hub, where the Vice City Labyrinth used to sit, a deadly aura drains half of the region's mana in minutes.

The ominous, all-consuming red aura finally stops spreading and disappears in an instant, allowing the blue sky to shine overhead once more.

At the same time, I finally wake up, gasping for air as I try to conceptualize the fractured memories rushing through my mind from when I was asleep.

[Emergency Mode Hibernation Complete!]

[276.95/276.95 Quadrillion MP Consumed!]

[Cured: Mana Fatigue (Jay Soju), Soul Energy Fatigue (Jay Soju), Divine Energy Fatigue (Jay Soju), Divine Energy Poisoning (Jay Soju), Divine Energy Internal Combat Injuries (Jay Soju)]

These words ring in my mind as I look down at the floor to find I'm standing on the frame of deactivated mana shielding.

I'm inside a small box, and I deduce that this is where the Vice City Labyrinth used to be...

I vaguely remember entering this room once. There was a large green spinning portal, locked away behind multiple armed guards and high-security doors.

Now, all that's left is a large black slab of rock that gives off no aura at all.

It was where the demon lay motionless when I reached the top of this labyrinth in a severely injured, brain-fogged state.

I instantly accept the two mythic-grade skill upgrades and the extra mana control, then open a small spatial magic portal to let the Arch Demon core and mysterious slab of rock into my storage.

At the same time, I look down at my body in awe.

"It worked..."

I have no idea how much time has passed or the true extent of the destruction my mindless plundering stunt caused in the Vice Region, but my body is completely healed.

My True Core is cycling energy perfectly, and not a single thread is out of place in my body.

I feel as good as new... If not, better. The hundreds of quadrillions of MP that used me as a vessel to power my hibernation skill may not have all directly added to my mana control, but it feels like my ability to absorb and control immense amounts of energy has risen exponentially.

I've never handled that much energy at once before, but now that my body and mind have experienced it, it feels far more natural. Even at a fraction of that scale, utilizing this power in offensive or defensive maneuvers during battle could elevate me to a whole new level.

I feel incredible. Like I've slept for months, and my muscles and bones have healed and become stronger.

I've only slept a few hours a month for the last few months, training to become strong enough to defeat the Lich King, then preparing for the B-Class exams, and even during the exams themselves, staying on guard and leveling up inside the Divine Construct.

I had small respites, but never a full reset.

My mind feels completely clear, and my body is as light as a feather.

I instantly take advantage of my two new mythic-grade skills, activating stealth and walking right out of the deactivated mana-shielded labyrinth room.

The streets and association workers are in chaos as I activate a telepathic link with all of my doubles simultaneously.

"I'm going to need a large amount of mana crystals farmed and a team from the Crimson Army to help restore the Vice Region. I've left quite the mess here..."

No further explanation is needed, as with my new mythic-grade body double perk, all memories are instantly shared between my main body and my other three.

There's no longer any time lag or mysteries between us. It's like my consciousness is split into four parts, and I can choose which ones to focus on or put on the backburner.

My double, currently in the Apex Region with Rodrigo and Bri, replies.

"On it, we were just finishing up here. I'll notify the army right now. Plus, it's been almost two hours since you left. I'll be happy to notify our teammates of your successful healing process."

I then activate the second new perk of my mythic-grade body double upgrade—the ability to use teleportation magic to instantly swap places with any of my three linked doubles.

In an instant, a flash of white light in the Apex and Vice Regions simultaneously blinks, and I find myself in one of the isolated A-Class-only resting suites at the Apex Region's Association Headquarters.

Bri and Rodrigo stare at me with confused looks as my mana control vanishes from the room.

I grin and look down at the stacks of papers and plans we've come up with in the last few hours, letting the memories of my double rush in so we can continue our meeting.

—

Meanwhile, far off to the west, thousands of kilometers away, Raven flies high in the air. She's carrying an important package that was picked up from the lobby of the Apex Region's headquarters amidst all the chaos.

While my double, Bri, Rodrigo, and all the higher-grade hunters were off subjugating the breaks all throughout the region, the beautiful white statue of a dragon in the main hall was stolen by a woman using a divine stealth ability.

It rests safely in her item box as she flies through the skies at speeds far exceeding anything someone without a true core could hope to reach.

Every ten minutes or so, she drinks one of the bright green potions gifted to her as the divine energy-imbued wounds begin burning into her body and soul.

The mythic-grade potions are enough to temporarily stave off the pain, but even she knows they won't be enough to heal her completely. The thought at the back of her mind is that the 200 yellow fragments from delivering this package should be enough to treat her wounds.

However, after the first cough of blood spreads through the air following her final potion, doubt creeps in.

She approaches a large white mansion deep inside a jungle, with no other villages or civilization for hundreds of kilometers in any direction.

The mansion has hundreds of windows and a long, white central walkway cutting through a cleared out portion of the jungle, leading to the entrance of the mysterious mansion.

As Raven descends into the jungle, she deactivates her stealth ability and begins slowly walking down the white pathway. Along the path, numerous art pieces line the way.

Massive ogres holding axes, long-tailed serpents with venomous fangs, an army of stone golems, a humongous minotaur, and even smaller creatures like goblins, wolves, and slimes.

They all share the same lifelike appearance and shimmering white color just like the dragon statue Raven holds in her item box.

Every hundred meters along the walkway, there's a statue missing, where it seems the collector is waiting for a new masterpiece to display.

Raven's slow, rhythmic footsteps echo closer and closer to the four massive cylindrical pillars in front of the staircase leading up to the mansion's entrance.

She coughs blood again, holding her mouth shut so as not to ruin the pristine displays, and the two massive front doors creak open.

Chapter 620

My gaze sweeps over all the maps, regional contracts, and Association Hunter names scattered on the work table in front of me.

Bri and Rodrigo are across the room, and the meeting that's been going on for about an hour floods back into my mind in full detail.

We pick up right where we left off, while simultaneously, the double that swapped places with me activates mind links with my two other doubles, and a mass farming expedition begins.

I just absorbed a large amount of mana from the densest part of the Vice Region.

Over time, the natural ambient mana will gradually seep back into the affected area, a lot of the public transport, lighting, and protective shielding of the dungeon hub won't just be fixed overnight.

This is why I've tasked my doubles, and now every available member of the Crimson Army, to help me farm pure mana as quickly as possible.

In a matter of minutes, I've organized a well-oiled machine, funneling vast amounts of mana crystals from all the rogue dungeons I have access to throughout the Dark Continent and the 8 Great Regions, farming millions of MP every minute.

Though it would take years at this rate to gather enough mana to restore the entire Vice Region to its former state, that isn't my goal.

The first thing I restore using my craftsmanship interface and my new imbue skill is the power to the crosswalks and train systems, returning them to their former working state.

This simple fix alleviates the overall panic among the general public, and the Association workers on duty can more easily manage the civilians.

Next, I imbue the entire dungeon hub's shielding system with just enough mana to ensure that basic E and D-grade breaches won't allow monsters to spew into the streets.

I focus on the most volatile dungeons, reinforcing their shields with C and B-grade mana supplies, but it takes millions of MP just to complete a small section of shielding at this level, so I limit these high-priority areas.

To ensure I haven't accidentally liquidated the assets of all the smaller merchants in town, I discreetly drop off a few hundred thousand MP worth of mana crystals at each stall, using my stealth skill to remain unnoticed.

The larger institutions, guilds, and the Association itself likely stockpile their wealth in gold and real estate. They can handle the short term minor losses, and they can be reimbursed later by filing claims with the Association headquarters. Since I'm in charge now, it'll be sorted out after the emergency passes.

However, some smaller merchants likely hold a significant portion of their wealth in pure mana, and a few days without it could be detrimental to their families or livelihoods. I don't mind playing it safe and giving them extra now, even if they didn't lose as much as I'm gifting.

One of my doubles even heads to smaller neighboring towns and villages caught in the plundered radius and does the same.

In less than half an hour, the entire affected area of the Vice Region is stabilized, and a larger catastrophe has been averted.

Meanwhile, in my main body, I've wrapped up my meeting with Bri and Rodrigo beneath the Apex Region.

I stand up from the table we've been sitting around and nod.

"Good. You'll send out a transmission later tonight once the commotion from today's surges dies down. I want a meeting here with all registered B and A-class hunters in the 8 Great Regions. Make sure all the Regional Directors attend as well. As the new stand-in for Mr. Freeman, I'll be

announcing our official trade partnership with the Flame Emperor. The 8 Great Regions and the Dark Continent will soon merge as one."

Bri finishes calculating the numbers and the estimated profit increase we'll make by controlling the Apex Region's funds and power over the other 7 regions.

Stacks of papers now tally the new demand for gear and items necessary to run this entire branch of the Association.

While much of the crafting and manufacturing is done in-house here in the Apex Region, we'll gradually replace every worker with our loyal craftsmen—citizens of the Crimson City.

New access to the thousands of dungeons across the nation will lead to far more gear and potion crafting options, and, of course, the labyrinth one floor below us.

Rodrigo taps away on his silver tablet, organizing a lot of the information discussed today on a private database. He types up drafts for the transmissions he'll send to many hunters and higher-ups later tonight to begin scheduling a meeting where I'll officially take over the Apex Region Director's identity and establish the new rules for this soon-to-be dual nation kingdom.

While everything seems to be coming together perfectly, and today's events have been contained and stabilized completely, an odd sensation tickles the back of my mind.

I don't mention it as I turn toward the door to leave, sure that neither of the others in the room can sense what I'm feeling.

It's that same peculiar well of gravity pulsing in the back of my mind. Two of them, actually...

The signal is far to the west, and the pulsing is incredibly weak.

It's so faint that, if I wasn't at full health and strength after hibernating in the Vice Region, I don't think I would've noticed it at all.

One is very familiar—it's Raven's. The other is one I've never felt before, and it's incredibly powerful. I'm certain it's another True Core...

—

Just minutes ago, as my doubles were restoring the city I had drained of mana and my meeting concluded, Raven watches the two white doors of a desolate mansion in the dark jungle region swing open.

She takes a few dozen steps up the pristine white stairs until she finally reaches the entrance, where the 20-meter-high doors come to a halt, leaving the large mansion's entrance hall exposed.

Inside, countless art pieces, seemingly crafted from the same glossy white material, line the outer edges of the room.

Enormous High Orcs, Evolved Yetis, Lizardmen, and various types of golems and humanoid monsters like Berserker Giants and unique species stand along the walls.

Some hold weapons, others wear armor, and a few are displayed on pedestals and wall mounts.

Hundreds of lifelike monsters fill this mysterious mansion as Raven steps inside and walks down the ominously quiet hall.

She calls out confidently, her voice echoing down the long corridor.

"I've got what you asked for—the Dragon from the Apex Region. Now pay me what's mine."

She doesn't slow her pace, and the mansion remains eerily silent despite its doors having opened just moments ago.

There's not a single sound—not even the buzz of insects or the calls of animals from the dense jungle surrounding this place.

It's as if all the wildlife knows to steer clear of the pristine palace guarded by marble-white statue sentinels.

As Raven makes her way about 30 meters inside, the faint sound of heavy breathing breaks the silence. It's the same rhythmic noise she heard over the transmission device long before her battle in the desert.

She speaks again, pulling out the item box from her waist as she approaches two massive winding staircases that ascend on both sides of the hall.

"It's right here. Hand over the payment, and I'll be on my way—"

Before she can finish, a piercing ringing echoes in her ears, and she violently coughs up blood onto the pristine white floor of the mansion.

Gritting her teeth, Raven ignores the pain, holding up the item box and waiting for a response.

The heavy breathing halts a moment later, and the yellow light of another True Core flares up from the back of the second floor above.

Hundreds of thin white threads, imbued with silky smooth, barely visible yellow divine energy, burst from above and curve down toward Raven.

She doesn't flinch, and, as a result, the microscopic threads stop right in front of her, consolidating into a single white strand that snatches the item box from her hand.

Common sense would dictate that as the threads merge, they'd become thicker, but the single thread remains just as thin as before.

Without enhanced senses or perception stats of at least a level 5000 hunter, and a True Core's enhancement, it would appear as if the item box floated out of Raven's hand on its own and disappeared into the second floor.

A trickle of blood drips from Raven's nose, and the hundreds of internal wounds across her body burn with an intensity that makes her wince.

At the same time, a silver containment case, held up by a nearly invisible white thread, floats down from the balcony above.

It halts as Raven lifts her hands to accept it, the bright yellow divine fragments clearly visible through the transparent top. She nods and places the case into another small item box on her waist.

As the single thread splits into hundreds and spirals back up into the top floor, an eccentric voice echoes through the mansion.

"How about the Flame Emperor? I wanted him alive too—a rogue force that pushed the 8 Great Regions to collapse right before the awakening of the throne. Now that would be quite the piece for my new collection."

His tone wavers unpredictably, mispronouncing words in a way that is deeply unsettling.

Raven shakes her head, coughing up more blood.

"It was too risky to try and capture him alive... As you can see, he did a number on me..."

Another pool of crimson liquid stains the pristine white floor as she walks away, speaking again.

"You got what you wanted. I'm not here to catch up. I need to heal for the upcoming battle. Our pact of immunity will soon be over, and I need to be ready."

She takes a few steps, but the threads from the second floor hover, poised as if to attack.

The man's voice echoes once more, and the bright yellow glow of his True Core flares from above.

"You're right... our alliance will be ending. But even so... You can't leave so soon... I must know what happened today. Tell me your side of the story—the one who saved us from the Flame Emperor's evil reign."

He pauses for a few seconds, thinking to himself, then his tone becomes even more erratic tinged with madness.

"The invisible fighter who still bleeds crimson blood like us. Raven, the savior of the Order. The valiant warrior who defended those who sacrificed their entire lives in search of the Originators offering. Yes... this is it. This is even better than having the Flame Emperor himself. Your scars tell an even more magnificent story. I've just found inspiration for my next masterpiece."

The man's tone wavers even more, and the laugh of an insane artist gets louder and louder while his yellow core illuminates the mansion.

Lining the walls of the top floor above the entrance hall, dozens of human statues are displayed.

Hunters holding swords and shields, old and young, in all kinds of styles that look like they're from recent times and others that look like they're from decades ago.

The hundreds of shimmering threads dive toward Raven, and, in response, she draws two silver blades. Her own True Core shines brightly, and the hundreds of internal wounds across her body pulse with the same dense yellow light.