

## **D. Diver 621**

Chapter 621

Raven's silver blades swing upward to block the incoming white threads.

Her greater form activates at the same time, and a reality-bending ripple of divine energy shakes the white mansion.

All of the statues, walls, floor, and ceiling shake, but somehow they all withstand the intense pressure of two true Cores colliding.

The thick forest outside, however, is not so resistant to the energy waves.

Kilometers of forest outside the mansion are vaporized, and even further out, the shockwave uproots trees even more tens of kilometers away.

Lingering portions of this attack ripple far out to vibrate through the 8 Great Regions to the east.

The bulk of the shimmering strands are stopped dead in their tracks by the silver blades tethered with divine energy, but on contact, they splash outward, multiplying into hundreds more.

They're both graceful and terrifying as they shimmer and bend to flood the room and avoid Raven's upward slash.

The movement of the threads is unpredictable, acting as if they'll shoot down in one direction but spinning and twisting off into multiple separate unexpected angles, while multiplying into more in some directions and consolidating back into single strands in others.

Raven twists her body out of the way, lunging toward the open doors at the exit of the mansion, but more and more threads burst out from the strands she just dodged.

An elaborate, constantly moving prison of threads fills the room, and she yells out loud while more blood trickles out from her nose and mouth.

"You can't do this... It's against the code. If you kill me here, you will be punished by the others. We cannot fight until the throne has awakened—"

As she yells out those words, more volatile white threads come shooting her way from all angles.

There's no way to block them all, so Raven uses her True Core's hidden defense ability, and at every contact point that the shimmering threads hit, small portions of her body disappear from reality, allowing the white threads to phase right through.

She scowls and changes her positioning again, taking a lunge toward the open exit doors, but a violent burning sensation pulses through her body, and the ringing in her ears intensifies.

The sudden jolt of pain disrupts her movements and makes the portions of her body that are in her divine stealth-empowered pocket dimension phase in and out of reality.

Even as she lunges out of the way at full force, a few dozen of the white strands still manage to sink into her flesh, planting their roots in her right shoulder and left leg.

Dense streams of True Core's divine energy surge through the strands from the source at the back of the mansion, and the distorted laugh of insanity echoes through the large open room again.

"Raven, my dear. You are making my masterpiece even more satisfying. You have yet to see, you are already dead."

The white strands of energy start to glow with a yellow light as more divine energy is channeled into them, surging into the points that have already taken root in Raven's body.

As the divine light builds up, the hundreds of internal wounds all over her body pulse and burn brighter, making the ringing in the silver sword wielder's ears grow louder and louder.

Even through the pain, she doesn't hesitate to reactivate her stealth ability but comes to the horrifying realization that it won't be enough.

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As her entire body disappears from reality, the two collections of white strands still stay connected.

Her entire being is invisible, but the two rooted anchors still show her exact location and grow deeper into her flesh, wriggling and tethering to every cell in her body they touch. White blotches of material, like moving marble, appear in the room in the shape of her left knee and right shoulder.

Another painful burning surge ripples through her body as the divine energy poisoning and fatigue get far worse, especially while she uses her greater form and full power now.

She flashes back to reality, and more puddles of blood cover the floor as the mad artist's voice echoes through her mind along with the ringing that sounds like alarm bells blaring.

"Your True Core's signal on our transmission tablets has been fading ever since the surges began. It will be an epic tale. Raven, the invisible savior, who gave her life to battle the Flame Emperor just days before the throne showed itself. None of the other members of the Order will think any differently of the situation; none of them will doubt my words when I say you came here and died of natural injuries on my front steps. Our mortal bodies cannot withstand this True Core's power, this is why we seek the throne, after all."

Raven's eyes widen as the ringing gets louder and louder, making the end of the man's speech harder to hear.

She does know that what he's saying is true.

Raven's battle with the Flame Emperor was the most exhilarating moment of her entire life. In all her decades of cultivating, there was never an opponent that dared to push their body to the limits like that.

Everyone's fear of death always held them back.

Their fear of injury or overburdening their core, not allowing them to properly ascend.

Everyone in the Order patiently waited and never allowed their true potential to be tested for fear of failure once they reached the final stage.

It is this careful and calculated strategy that brought them this far, but as Raven replays the last few hours of her life on repeat in her head, she questions if this is truly the way to live. The exponential growth of the fighter she battled in the desert is like nothing she's ever seen before, it gives her a spark of extra motivation to jumpstart her decaying mind out from the deafening ringing.

She lets out a yell to match its rhythm and doesn't hesitate to use her divine energy-imbued blades to slice off her own arm from the infected shoulder and a large amount of her right leg, then slips away into a pocket dimension for a few fractions of a second before the next burning pulse electrifies her system.

She phases out and away from the densest portion of white threads but is still paralyzed with pain, sliding across the entire entrance hall to leave a long crimson trail of blood across the white floor.

More echoes of mad laughter fill the room as a tall, lanky man walks down one of the curved staircases that leads from the top floor down to the bottom.

His shiny shoes, long pants, and well-fit suit are all exactly the same shade of white as the palace around him.

Hundreds of threads vibrate and glisten out of the ends of his sleeves where his hands should be, and where his head would lie, a jumbled volatile rotating ball of thousands of white threads is in its place.

Words come out from the center of the ball of threads as he creeps closer to Raven's body as her core pulses violently, and the scars inside her body burn bright through her bloody armor and flesh.

"Fighting even in your final seconds... Maybe a warrior like you should have been the one to claim the throne. As the Originators text states, they have left us the key, and one that never stops climbing may one day unlock the door."

He lets out a sigh.

"Reality isn't kind to fairy tales... but don't worry, I will make sure this art is not forgotten."

Strands of countless white threads flood all around the room and retrieve Raven's severed limbs, while the other half plunges deep into her last remaining good leg and arm, pulling her upright and bringing all of the pieces of her body together to stand tall in the entrance of the mansion. She's now overlooking an endless forest of downed trees and an untouched walkway of statues trailing off into it.

The ringing in Raven's ears has grown so loud that the man's words hardly reach her.

"You will be the pinnacle piece in my collection, I tell you that is certain. Once I walk through the door to the other side, I promise to bring you and all of my masterpieces with me."

The pain surging through every cell in her being makes it impossible to move.

Her limbs are reconnected, and the man made of threads stands right behind her while her arms and legs begin to turn hard and marble white, just like the countless statues littering this mansion.

Her blades are gripped tightly in a fighting stance, and there are bright yellow-pulsing scars shining through the threads as they seep deeper up her legs, down her shoulders, and start to creep up her neck.

The sound of heavy breathing, identical to the noises heard from the transmission tablet not long ago, is all Raven hears as the ringing takes over her mind.

Just as she's about to lose consciousness entirely, a bright yellow flash of light appears from the East.

Raven can't tell if this is a hallucination, as just moments ago she was replaying her favorite battle of all time in her head. Now, the presence of a True Core that feels just like the Flame Emperor's is approaching rapidly, and it's even stronger than it was when they clashed...

## Chapter 622

As I leave the A-Class suites and step into the elevator, another pulse of divine energy ripples into my consciousness.

Raven's is even weaker, becoming overshadowed by a bright True Core far away.

If I were in my greater form and released my full perception, I could get a better view of what's happening.

Instead of making my way toward the surface, I press the button to head down toward the labyrinth on the 20th floor, believing this will be a faster way to leave this base deep within the ground.

Many theories race through my mind, but none of them are concrete as the true nature of the silver sword wielder is still a mystery to me.

In my double's memories while I was recovering, I caught a glimpse of the empty entrance hall of this fortress and recalled Raven's words that she would be visiting the Apex Region to pick up a package.

I piece together that she took the white dragon statue for some reason, and the only other clue she mentioned in our short exchange was that she's part of an organization called The Order.

Prior to today, I never knew any other True Cores even existed on this planet, and now they're making themselves known left and right...

The elevator hits the bottom floor, and I waste no time activating my stealth skill and flying forward to dive straight into the glowing green portal at the back of the room.

Less than a second later, I've dungeon-walked to the furthest dungeon to the west in all of the 8 Great Regions I have access to.

I then exit to find myself in the outside world and soar high up into the sky, away from any civilization, before activating my greater form and letting out a pulse of pure True Core perception.

To the west, in the direction the pulses came from, a whole new portion of the world I've never seen before becomes clear.

Past the furthest western portion of the 8 Great Regions, there are enormous barren lands full of large lakes, hundreds of kilometers wide, and vast stretches of forest that rise upon mountains and fall deep into valleys.

Wildlife and dungeons fill these lands, and small self-sufficient civilizations can be seen around a few of the lakes. However, the further I let my sense reach out, the fewer humans I sense.

My mind settles on a portion of dense forest about 500 kilometers in diameter that has no dungeons and not a single wild animal in its vicinity.

A white marble palace comes into my senses, and the imagery of pristine white monster statues lining a walkway to its open front doors comes to the forefront of my mind while freshly obliterated trees surround the white mansion atop a small hill.

Inside, it is hard to sense exactly what is happening, as the entire white structure glows brightly with yellow divine energy, as if it's alive.

I make a split-second decision and propel myself forward toward the structure.

My senses of the woman I just fought are fluctuating and pulsing, and every time they do, her baseline of energy becomes weaker.

This is exactly what I remember my own mind, body, and core experiencing when the wounds ravaging my being were catching up to me.

She seems to have been far tougher than I was if she lasted this long, but it seems the divine energy poison is catching up with her.

Not only that, but there is another True Core present, taking advantage of her weakness.

If our battle in the desert had gone on any longer, we probably would have continued fighting and died together.

Or even more probable, she could have used that extension of her ability that makes portions of her body disappear to wear me down, forcing me to retreat or use abilities that would lead to the first possibility.

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Instead, she offered me advice, stuck to her words of not harming my people, and indirectly helped me unlock new levels of power in my True Core after defeating her dragon and using my abilities to their full potential.

If it wasn't a true fight to the death, I wouldn't have been able to push myself to such high limits.

I have no idea who this woman is or what her true intentions are, but I get the gut feeling that saving her will be my only way to learn more about The Order and the awakening of the throne...

Using every high-speed skill, buff, and special perk in my arsenal, I rocket across the skies toward the white mansion.

More pulses of yellow light come out of it, only growing stronger as Raven's grows weaker.

I get the blurry visual of her bloody figure sliding across the entrance of the mansion with limbs missing, then a tall, lanky figure holding her captive at the front entrance of the white mansion, while white threads continue to tether deep into her body.

The closer I get, the more insight into this other True Core's ability I receive. As I watch Raven's arms and legs reconnect to her body and turn to white stone, the unexpected emotion of anger that washes over me confirms I will do whatever I can to save her.

A noble fighter doesn't deserve a fate like this...

For some reason, I can't sense the exact position of this True Core to get a read on his status, but his abilities are like thin spider webs that multiply at will. Whatever they touch is susceptible to being assimilated into an ever-growing collection of these threads that almost have a mind of their own...

As they attempt to seep into her pulsing midsection, where her core burns brightly, they face resistance. As the threads creep up her neck, reality and a state of delusion mix in her mind.

The bright yellow flash of divine light is the last thing she sees.

This is when I pull out my two blades and come rocketing through the front entrance of the mansion without slowing down.

I soar over Raven's head, missing her by millimeters while slicing through the hundreds of white threads connected to all four of her limbs.

There is a hint of resistance, but the amount of divine energy surging through them isn't close to the same amount I have charged up in my blades after fully recovering and not holding back in my strike at all.

Every last one of the strings snaps, and I follow through with my swing to slice the thin lanky man in half vertically, sending crescents of Soul Energy enhanced by my True Core straight through the mansion's floor and deep underground.

The man made of threads breaks into countless pieces, and the entire mansion shudders.

My speed from the flight over still hasn't slowed, so I continue flying forward until I hit the base of the staircases at the back of the room, making the mansion rattle again.

The white marble texture stops moving up Raven's neck and toward her core, but my senses are still on high alert, as I know this isn't over.

There was no presence of a True Core in that manifestation I just cut down.

It was strong, imbued with about the same strength as the bronze dragon, but I feel the majority of this being's energy still coursing through the walls and floors of the mansion itself.

I send out a dense wave of perception, and now I'm able to see inside where I couldn't before.

Every fiber of this place is vibrating with divine threads, and they're all coming from a single point, far at the back of the second floor.

A dense, hot True Core sits at the back of the mansion, but it is hidden behind thousands of layers of thin white webbing, like a hardened marble sphere.

I can't tell exactly who or what's inside, or how strong exactly the core is, but I know this is where all of the danger is coming from.

As soon as my head turns up and toward the source, three more tall men jump down from the second floor with jumbles of white string for a face and arms that spew silky divine webs.

Each one of them has the same amount of divine strength as the single manifestation I cut down before. I'd expect more manifestations to equate to the power being spread thinner, but this isn't the case.

Still, with pure force and the overpowering nature of my attacks, I'm able to jump upward and spin my blades to cut through all three of the manifestations in a single rotation.

As soon as they're sliced through, they too fall to the floor of the mansion like a lifeless jumble of spider's web. Divine energy doesn't even stay imbued in these parts; it seeps back into the floor and walls, traveling to the source.

Following through with my upward slash, I make it to the second floor of the mansion and take in the full view of the dozens of human statues that line the long walkway toward the massive marble ball at its back.

My greater form is large, but the high ceilings in this mansion make it so my full energy body doesn't even reach halfway to the ceiling.

As the light from my burning hot blades illuminates the entire corridor, an even brighter glow pulses from the massive marble at the back of the mansion, and a loud eccentric laugh echoes through my mind, as if direct telepathy is being used.

Then, a voice enters my head too, but it doesn't feel like it's talking to me. It's more like mad rambling.

"Yes... This is it.... The hero arrives. A flaming man comes to save the invisible warrior he knows nothing about, only to burn both of their dreams to ash. In all my years, decades of searching, I've wanted to craft the perfect piece. Day after day, night after night, there was truly no perfect moment in time worth capturing... Until now..."

As his words stop, the two front doors of the mansion swing shut with a bang.

Simultaneously, every one of the human statues turns its head toward me, and their eyes glow bright yellow beneath the hard white exterior.

## Chapter 623

I feel the outside world becoming far less visible to my senses.

Through the two holes in the mansion floor where I slashed with my full-powered attack to free Raven from the threads, I can still send a weaker pulse of perception through it.

However, the outside world isn't my main concern right now. It's the dozens of yellow eyes on me and the pulse of divine energy that floods out of the large marble orb at the back of the room, powering all of these statues.

The density of True Core's power circulating through the white statues varies a lot, but the two that lunge toward me have the highest amount inside them.

Their strength is equivalent to the manifestations I cut down entering this mansion, but the difference lies in their battle patterns. These statues aren't just dancing puppets rambling away and spewing white threads my way.

The statue to my right is a tall and muscular man wielding a large battle axe, while the hunter to my left carries two short swords.

My greater form towers over them in stature, speed, and strength, but they charge at me with no hesitation.

Behind them, the remaining statues quickly shift into a triangular formation with the base holding the majority of marble hunters guarding the large sphere at the back of the corridor.

All of them move in unison, and the yellow glow in their eyes seems lifeless. However, their intricately detailed armor, weapons, and facial features remind me that these were humans too...

The blurry visual of Raven's body turning to stone as I flew here at my top speed replays in my mind while I swing my two swords in their greater form at the higher-powered statues aiming to attack me.

They were at one point human too, but with the amount of power streaming through their systems right now, it's too risky not to go for the instant kill...

As both my swords slash through the stone hunters, I'm met with minor resistance, but my attacks are ultimately successful, cleaving both warriors in half in a single strike.

My decision not to hesitate and go straight for the kill was the correct one, as behind me, seemingly summoned out of thin air, thousands of shimmering threads multiply from a single one, and three clones of the tall, lanky man appear, sending waves of white tendrils my way.

I have enough time to jump out of the way, following through with my attack and dodging the white threads that seek to tether to my greater form.

At the same time, two more hunters from the defense line step forward, and the sphere pulses, allowing two more full-powered hunters to lunge at me.

It's five versus one.

While they're not exceptionally strong, the growing web of white threads behind me and the huge army of hunters in front of me isn't the best position to be in.

My greater form gives me very noticeable strength benefits, but inside this narrow hall, I feel a bit limited in the maneuverability of my weapons.

I can't jump or take long flying motions to build up momentum for my swings.

To make things even worse, the manifestations of the lanky, faceless man behind me are very aware of this fact, using it as an advantage to cut me off and force me into a corner.

Still, I'm in control of the battle, slashing through a swordsman and a tank in front of me, and step off the white wall to my left to narrowly avoid the incoming web of countless white strands.

However, when I attempt to position myself to fly further down the hall, over the army of still guards, three more manifestations of the faceless man materialize and grow out from a single stray strand.

A web of countless white threads now falls toward me on all sides, and there are only small exit points far too narrow for my greater form to slip through.

I don't know if my higher level of True Core's strength can combat these threads and strongly consider using the reflective unique barrier ability to create a potential opening, but all of these options are risky and the outcome isn't certain.

A more viable option seems to be deactivating my greater form, but I want to keep all the strength and speed buffs that come with it.

So, instead of fully deactivating it, I decide to focus on the energy that surrounds my body with much closer attention to detail.

It is a pure mana manifestation, linked to my lifeforce at its core.



A larger-than-life version of myself. Whatever happens to my greater form is reflected onto me. This gives a far greater surface area to be attacked, but in turn gives me far more strength.

Its form isn't exactly concrete.

I've altered it two times before. The first was when I began flooding it with Soul Energy, turning the dark black shadowy reflection of myself into a dark red fiery warrior. This significantly strengthened my greater form by allowing it to be fully saturated with a perfect mix of Qi and Mana at all times, fully able to reflect my ultimate attacks in a larger sense.

Stolen story; please report.

The second alteration was more recent, when I intuitively began imbuing my greater form with divine threads, all the way back in the construct.

It gave another layer of enhancement and has rooted my greater form far deeper into reality, as if this massive version of myself is truly an energy being.

Now, I get another intuitive feeling as my instincts scream at me to keep my greater form activated while also relaxing the necessity to downsize to dodge these webs falling in on me.

The True Core's silky energy that permeates through me compresses my Soul Energy as my gaze turns toward a closing gap in the webbing.

My bright yellow glowing body shrinks in size as I air-step forward, but the amount of pure energy coming off me stays constant, glowing brighter and brighter the more it's compacted.

I feel my overall strength slightly decrease, as I don't have the leverage or ability to generate as much torque in each of my swings and strides, but with all of this compact power, only creating a greater form about 1.5x the size of my actual body, I feel my speed and agility rise to heights far surpassing what they were even when I came crashing into this mansion seconds ago.

I grin while a streak of yellow light zooms out from the closing webbing, leaving a trailing zig-zag of light all throughout the long corridor.

I slice through all six of the manifestations before they can even turn to see that I've escaped their trap.

The infinite sphere of threads falls lifelessly to the mansion's floor, seeping back into the structure, and the maniacal laughter starts up again.

"It wouldn't be as fun if you let me win that easily—"

The voice comes back, echoing out from the marble pearl as four more stone hunters wake from their stances, and two more bundles of string manifestations appear behind me.

"It has been decades since another True Core came about. I thought all of the fragments in this world were collected after the Great War, but you've certainly made things lively again. I thank you for that."

I don't listen to his words, and only zip through the corridor, easily slicing through the two string puppets. But when my swords clash with the knives, axes, and shields of the hunters before me, I face far more resistance than I did in my larger form.

I shatter three of them to pieces despite the harder time cutting through, but it takes me two slashes to break through the shield of one of the tanks.

The laughs echo through the corridor as I come to the realization there is a cost to increasing my speed and agility—that's a minor loss in my overall pure strength...

However, I can tell this isn't the full picture.

Not only has my strength fallen by a small amount, but that tank's divine energy density was greater than its partners...

As more and more guards wake up every time I kill them, and countless thread bodies are created, things become clearer and I start to piece together a few patterns.

The first is, I was right about that tank being stronger than the others...

The closer to the sphere I get, the more powerful the hunters become.

It takes me three to four hits to injure and finally kill each of them, shattering them into fragments of white marble.

Just taking off an arm or a leg isn't enough. When I manage to break off small parts, hundreds of tiny white threads seep out from the wounded area and reach for the broken stone, piecing itself back together and hardening like nothing happened. Their chests or heads need to be destroyed in order for them to stop fighting...

The other thing I notice is the manifestations of pure threads that attack me never change in strength. No matter how close or far away they get to me, they are always identical, and all it takes is one heavy slash to get rid of them.

The last pattern I notice is the maximum number of moving statues and thread manifestations combined I ever face is six...

The closer I get to the sphere at the back of the room, however, the fewer are summoned at once.

Only two to three statues are sent toward me at a time, and they're significantly stronger than when a full six are sent my way.

I get into quite the rhythm slashing through the constant stream of statues and strategically placed webs of threads to try and lead me away. Despite this, I make a few meters of progress every second, spinning and slashing my way through the air with my eye on the prize—the pulsing sphere at the back of the room.

As I slash through more and more of the stone statues of hunters mindlessly trying to kill me, like they're monsters in a dungeon, I feel Raven's lifeforce growing dimmer and dimmer.

She is frozen, with over 80% of her body turned to the same lifeless stone that I'm slicing away at here, but her core and mind are still intact, barely.

The answers to everything I want to know lie within her mind.

The only one stopping me from finding out is this mad, rambling man that finds pleasure in turning great warriors into stone and playing with their bodies like puppets.

My own core burns brighter, and I start to control the output of my greater form with a far more intricate degree as I'm on a strict clock. I want to be as efficient as I can and destroy the source before it's too late.

I begin manipulating the amount of energy I compact, growing in size temporarily by 25–50% during a slash of my blades to increase their power output, and compact my greater form even tighter, almost pressing up against my real body's skin when I need to make a split-second escape from the vast arrays of webbing.

Eventually, as the seconds go by, and I smash through dozens of statues, I gain proficiency in my new technique and the ability to even manipulate only certain parts of my greater form becomes more natural.

My legs can be compacted for greater speed, while mid-strike, I allow my swords to expand and extend to gain the maximum amount of power.

Even as the divine energy of the statues becomes over double that of what they were at the front of the line, I'm able to slash through them in a single hit once I've completely mastered this new ability.

The mad rambles and endless laughter don't stop as I smash through the last statue guarding the orb at the back of the room...

In fact, they get louder and more incoherent.

"Yes... Yes... this is it. Another worthy candidate for the throne I can keep for eternity. One who grows with ease and climbs to greater heights, obsessed with the fight even when there is no need to be. Another savior, blind to the fact that it is this instinct that kills them in the end. A moth helplessly flying toward the flame..."

Behind the white orb, lurking in the darkness, there is a final statue that I couldn't perceive before.

This is because it was merely just stone.

Now, as the sphere pulses bright yellow, the brightest it ever has, the entire back of the corridor shows itself, and a glossy white dragon I recognize from the Apex Region's Association Headquarters stares down at me.

Its body glows with True Core Energy, and its eyes pulse yellow with its light.

Five faceless thread manifestations come to life behind me in a semi-circle formation, casting their nets.

At the same time, the white dragon stretches its wings and lets out a roar as it comes to life.

The entire mansion shakes from its intensity, and an aura of intimidation makes the air pressure and room temperature rise drastically.

A thick stream of white threads bursts from its mouth, and a dome made of millions of white tendrils forms above me, collapsing downward. It stomps its front legs forward, protecting the orb with its entire body. Visible streams of energy pulse from the source it guards, and the density of the True Core's power flooding into the dragon continues to grow, far surpassing any of the prior statues.

In an instant, all paths of escape disappear.

The dragon's body grows brighter yellow as pulses of energy come off the orb, and the web of threads all around me gets smaller.

Many options run through my mind.

I could use a teleport crystal to get out of here right now without another thought, but I'd lose the chance to save Raven. Plus, I'd have shown myself and my abilities to another True Core... completely neglecting the warriors' words I'm trying to protect.

If I leave now, I might be safe in the short term, but it'd put me in an even worse situation, considering there are probably far more members of this organization than just Raven and the thread user...

I take my chances and lunge forward with an idea in mind, letting my sword in my left hand fall back into my storage while I twist my body and enlarge the energy form of my free arm, channeling Soul Energy, divine threads, and even activating my reflective barrier True Core trait into the movement.

Exactly what I expect to happen plays out.

On collision with the shrinking dome, portions of the threads that hit the center of my reflective barrier are sent erupting back, but all of the countless multiplying threads around its edges start to seep into my energy form, tethering into my cells, mimicking the same marble-like material I saw forming on Raven.

I don't flinch and continue my momentum forward, pushing through the raining wall of white webs with an enlarged left side, then slice off the entire exposed area the instant I make it through.

I don't even take the brain power to quick-heal my lost limb, I just set my sights on the source, zipping through the open air and swinging my blade at the marble orb.

My fiery blade clashes against the hard layer of countless threads, and an ear-shattering twang makes reality ripple where this True Core's highest defenses and my most powerful attack meet.

I pour every bit of power I can into the attack, enhancing its raw strength and size many times with my greater form, but the pure white barrier enhanced by the True Core's silky yellow energy doesn't budge.

Even with my perception on full blast, I can't see through the walls.

I grit my teeth as, out of the corner of my eye, the bright yellow dragon's front set of claws comes sweeping down at me, and I have to twist my body upward to block it with my only good arm. Surprisingly, its strength is the same as the orb's, as they're sharing a stream of divine power. Another ripple shakes the floor, walls, and ceiling, then the creature lets out another ear-piercing roar.

I'm forced to use the momentum to let myself get pushed back and avoid its other set of claws.

As soon as I touch the ground, and the dragon repositions itself in front of the orb, the man's voice ripples through my mind again as the white webbing in the air shifts its direction, coming from the five clones and the dragon above me.

"No hesitation to mutilate yourself to win the battle. Just like your invisible friend... In a battle of pure strength, I am sure you could best me, but you stepped into my house. No one has ever left without giving me what I desire."

The orb pulses again, and the dome of webbing starts to fall down toward me again, but in this instance, as the maniacal laughter of the man fades away from my consciousness, I notice something...

At such close range to the marble sphere, I can get a far more accurate reading on it.

There are still layers upon layers of threads hiding a True Core deep within it, but during the time it transmitted a message, and while the orb pulsed yellow to feed more power into the dragon above it, the layers loosened, and I could temporarily see a fuzzy image inside.

The image of a tall, thin man with a sunken face and bright white, wide-open eyes stares ahead with a look of insanity.

He sits on the hard white ground with his bony knees touching his chin, and his hands up in the air, spewing threads of divine energy to continuously replenish the orb, his clones, and the dragon standing over him.

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It's an off-putting image, making me remember the real body of the Apex Region's director. Time has not been kind to this man either, but he has at least managed to compress his True Core, and its burning hot power is about 50% greater than my own.

Despite this gap, my speed, reflexes, and array of skills give me an edge that far surpasses his need to rely on weak clones of himself and the corpses of monsters and hunters...

My combat experience and fighting instincts are on a greater level than his. Just from the movement patterns of the clones and statues being controlled, I can tell they are all led by logic and mimicking studied movements. He is not a natural fighter, but is relying on his gap in pure power alone.

However, once the transmission to speak to me stops, my ability to see within the orb ceases too. It gives me the impression that the defenses during that time are weaker.

The man inside only talks when I'm further away, or unable to get a hit and harden his shell.

As the second attempt to encapsulate me in the falling dome of webs commences, I sense Raven's lifeforce becoming weaker and weaker. It flickers rapidly, and I can only imagine the amount of pain and violent ringing that is going on in her mind...

The still statue of her that stares at the closed doors of the mansion is covered in crimson blood, as it continues to leak from her mouth, nose, eyes, and ears.

The bright True Core in her chest blinks and desperately holds onto light, as an endless loop of the desert battle she fought hours ago plays in her decaying mind.

While I could toy with this mad, rambling man, lose a few more limbs and regrow them as he casts his nets down on me to learn more of his weaknesses, I fear I have no more time to waste.

I stop zipping around the room and stand with my sword grasped in a single hand, staring directly at the closing gap of open air between myself, the dragon's two front legs, and the white orb beneath it.

I take a deep breath, grin, then yell out.

"Let's finish this!"

Then shove my fully charged blade into the floor, letting out a violent wave of mana enhanced by my True Core's energy.

It carries a very specific set of instructions using telepathy, and it takes my full power to make a crack in the top floor of this mansion and get my message to pulse out from the fracture I created while making my entrance.

As this wave of telepathy ripples throughout the endless forestland toward the 8 Great Nations, and past them into the Dark Continent, I set up my plan for once this transmission hits.

Three skills and a single ranked-up buff are activated: Dark Mist, Echo, Stealth, and Master of Illusion.

They're all enhanced by my True Core with every drop of energy I can produce.

The entire mansion blinks into darkness for a fraction of a second as my new ability [Dark Mist] creates a moment in time where my enemy is unable to use any source of perception within a contained area.

I feel the conflicting divine energy, stronger than my own, pushing into this skill, and it overpowers me, but that fraction of a second is all I need.

I limit all of my divine energy and mana control to stay contained inside my purple barrier, then activate stealth to disappear during this moment where my enemy's perception is limited.

[Echo] and [Master of Illusion] fill in the gaps for when the man of threads' perception returns to normal, needing an explanation for the odd burst.

This gap is filled in by a fake manifestation of myself attempting to break through the barrier, sacrificing a leg, and sneaking around the left side of the dragon to go in for the kill again, despite knowing that I can't break through the white shell no matter how hard I strike.

Meanwhile, in my real body, two things are happening.

The first is my left arm growing back at a rapid rate to grasp the Flame Emperor's sword with both hands and speed toward the closing blind spot.

The second is the sensation of my telepathy channel with one of my doubles linking up, receiving my memories instantly, killing itself on the spot, and allowing me to summon it here in place of the mirage imagery created with my skill and buff.

The dragon guarding the orb takes a step forward, predicting my double's movements as it bursts through the silky barrier, and another dome instantly forms to guarantee there is nowhere left for it to run.

My grin only grows more as I squeeze through the small opening and fly right past the dragon's front legs with a fully charged sword headed toward the orb in full stealth mode.

As my body double fails to fully slice off the infected portion of its limb, and another wave of white threads falls down on it, laughter echoes through the air.

"A valiant effort, but I've won. You even had more tricks up your sleeve in your final moments, but the ultimate victory is mine. I haven't had to use my full power in many, many years. Truly an exhilarating piece of art, a powerful warrior for my collection. I will immortalize you as a reward."

The double is quickly flooded with white threads, turning to marble far faster than Raven, as the man clearly doesn't want to take any more chances. The strength of my [Master of Illusion] buff and its exact match of mana control to my own makes the act just believable enough for me to follow through with my next portion of the plan.

The echoing laughs ripple through the room, and the dragon roars with excitement, and I can see the madman inside his protective orb as bright as day.

I don't waste a second to thrust my blade, crackling with True Core enhanced flames, through the outer shell of the protective sphere.

The tough white surface splits and fractures just like the floor moments ago, allowing me to thrust my blade's tip through, just barely.

It's more than enough...

I release every bit of True Core-enhanced flaming hot Soul Energy into the isolated hollowed out sphere.

The white orb glows bright yellow, but the hardness of the shell keeps it from breaking despite the immense amount of energy being forced inside.

The cackling laughs of a madman turn to screams.

Chapter 625

The body double at the side of the hall dies, and the shock from my attack makes the white threads and divine energy streaming out from the dragon and clones go wild.

The screams from within the dome make the mansion itself shake and rattle.

My purple barrier transmits all of the offputting emotions and thoughts rippling through the man being burned alive directly into my mind. There is an intense underlying emotion of bliss and genuine pleasure coming from the dying man inside the orb being heated up to temperatures nearing the surface of the sun...

It's as if his greatest artistic fantasy is playing out as I burn him to ash.

First he wants more than anything to turn me to stone, and now he enjoys his own death as I'm certain to take the victory.

I can't quite wrap my mind around his twisted view of reality, but don't let the madman's actions deter my attack and continue to put my all into it.

With a yell from me as I completely drain my soul energy stores, matching the height of the man's screams, I hear and see notifications roll into my mind's eye. Then, feel the extremely pure divine energy being pulled out of this man's true core and flowing directly into mine.

[Level Up] x328

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Mana Manipulation

Upgrade: Superior

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 191,874,234,929,550

[YES][NO]

I instantly press yes on both options, reaching level 7340, but am quite surprised at what I see...

For small instances as I torched the inside of the marble orb, I could see his status, and his level is far lower than the strength output I felt while facing him suggests.

Even from the Director of the Apex Region, at just over level 9000, he granted me 10 trillion MCP, and the bronze dragon at a similar level gave me 50 trillion. The man that ran this mansion's level clocked in at 9620, yet the variance of mana control is so great it feels like he was even stronger than Raven, who is a much higher level.

There is a pattern here that isn't quite adding up. It feels like there is someone or something limiting people from surpassing this level 10,000 threshold. It isn't just pure power, or else Raven wouldn't have made it passed.

Many questions continue to race through my mind as every drop of power. The pure silky compressed divine energy, and the instinctual power to activate a new True Core ability, is completely absorbed.

The glowing yellow dragon and the lively clones are all drained of their bright True Core's light.

Loud roars that once shook the mansion cease, and the set of claws coming my way slowly stop and completely solidify into pure white marble before they can reach me.

The dragon falls back into a lifeless statue, striking a far different pose, but it looks exactly like the image of the pure white dragon I saw in the lobby of the Apex headquarters when I first walked in.

The floating thread puppets all fall to the ground and unravel, fracturing into tiny pieces of nothing but stone.

As I fully pull my blade from the small pierced hole in the orb and put it away into my item storage, the mansion falls dark and silent.

The only light that remains other than mine is the pulsing and flickering dying remainder of Raven's core on the far side of the mansion.

I turn around and jump forward, lunging off the balcony down toward her while considering activating many abilities, but with the signal of her lifeforce growing weaker and weaker, there's only one option I'm positive will work.

I activate my plunderer skill and allow a dark red aura to permeate from my body while pushing a wave of telepathy into the woman's mind.

As I touch down on the bottom floor and make my way over, the full sight of her bloodstained figure becomes clear, and I press both my palms against the only remaining exposed portions of her



body left. One hand is placed on her forehead above her closed eyes, and the other on her chest where her core violently spins.

There's no response at all to my telepathy, but at this close proximity, I can hear the extreme ringing in her mind.

My plunderer's aura expands, filling the entire white mansion, and begins to seep out from the small cracks in the floor.

Simultaneously, I let my mind and voice seep into hers and repeat the same words: that the only way she's going to survive right now is if she trusts the voice that is trying to reach her and swear her loyalty to the Flame Emperor.

Even with my extreme rise in power in the last few seconds, the extreme ringing and painful emotions that seep out from Raven's mind as I try to push a message in take all of my concentration.

The walls and ceiling of the mansion quiver and creak, as it's drained of all residual mana left behind.

Outside the mansion, a red fog creeps out to disperse through the forest, greedily draining all of the mana from the land just as I did before to the Vice Region.

With the experience under my belt from before, absorbing mana from the atmosphere outside isn't hard. The real puzzle I'm trying to solve is the one inside Raven's mind.

It's like an endless maze of walls and barriers, doing everything in its power to push out any external noise, a natural defense from the blaring ringing of divine energy poisoning. My own brain begins to burn as I try to force my way through her mental walls and overpower the ringing.

It is an impressive design. Every fraction of a second that passes, the deeper I plunge into this intricate defense, and it astonishes me further. I have to use the entirety of my mental strength, buffs on full blast, with my greater form activated before I see a single pathway in.

A wave of satisfaction washes over me as I feel my message break through to the small amount of consciousness locked away, and the moment my message makes it through, the blood-stained hazel eyes of the warrior flutter open once to look at me, and a pulse of perception follows to verify exactly what's happened inside the mansion while she was out.

In the next moment, her eyes close, and I lose the connection to her conscious mind, but a link of loyalty is formed, and her status is added to my rising Emperor's domain interface.

My attention shifts to sharing my mythic-grade hibernation skill with her and forcing it to activate through my control panel as her mind is on autopilot.

Through my palms, millions of MP are drained from the outside world and siphoned into the activation of this skill.

However, millions are far from enough.

The necessary amount to cure all of her ailments is over double what mine cost.

[Use Hibernation] [Mythic Grade]

Cure: Mana Fatigue [Raven Blackwell], Soul Energy Fatigue [Raven Blackwell], Divine Energy Fatigue [Raven Blackwell], Divine Energy Poisoning [Raven Blackwell], Divine Energy Internal Combat Injuries [Raven Blackwell], Petrification [Raven Blackwell]

[Slow Mode]

Cost: 1.26 Billion MP

Time: 549.9 Days [YES][NO]

[Basic Mode]

Cost: 209.33 Billion MP

Time: 156.1 Days [YES][NO]

[Express Mode]

Cost: 400.05 Trillion MP

Time: 7.0 Days [YES][NO]

[Emergency Mode]

Cost: 556.04 Quadrillion MP

Time:

As more and more mana is channeled into the skill, Raven's lifeforce gets weaker and weaker, and I'm more certain that instantly healing her isn't an option.

I myself have used hibernation two times in the past. Each time, once the skill is activated, the user is placed into a state of suspended animation, where no harm can be done. Even if I press the lowest option, she'll be safe.

However, the questions I have need to be answered a lot faster than 550 days from now...

I grit my teeth and do some quick calculations in my head about how long it will take to absorb enough mana from the atmosphere out here, and the only possible option I can choose is [Slow Mode].

As the seconds tick away, it's clear this is the only option. I reluctantly choose it, and a flash of white light fills the mansion as hibernation is activated. Through the mind link I share with her, the ringing instantly stops.

Her brain and body function do too.

The pulsing and flickering core in her chest calms down to a steady low burn.

All of the mana I siphoned into her circulates through her body as the skill slowly gets to work.

It's quite interesting to see the skill at work from the outside. It now makes far more sense why I lost my full cognitive ability while I was healing.

A new textbox shows up in my interface.

[Use Hibernation] [Mythic Grade]

[Slow Mode]

[Time Remaining] 549.9 Days

[Add Mana To Accelerate]

Bright white light freezes Raven in time as she slowly begins to heal, and simultaneously, my red aura that plunders the abandoned forest outside grows in size upward and outward, sucking away the mana from everything in sight.

The immense pressure and intensity of this whole situation is finally lifted as I choose the option to accelerate, and the mana from outside slowly speeds up the process.

Raven is safe, and I've won the battle.

The lack of mana in the marble palace we stand in weakens its structure, and the high-powered waves of divine energy from before make the cracks in the mansion slowly grow larger.

The ceiling crumbles and collapses, creating small holes, allowing the light of day to stream in from the sun above.

Chapter 626

The ceiling continues to crumble, and my red aura extends further into the endless forest around us. Past the decimated area of woodlands that were disintegrated by the divine energy waves, and deep into the thick trees in all directions.

It drains the air, ground, trees, rocks, and every living thing that comes in contact with this crimson mist.

The abandoned forest stretches thousands of kilometers in diameter, extending even further to the west.

Its landmass is even larger than the 8 Great Regions, though the pure mana here is slightly less abundant.

In my previous use of my plunderer skill, there was an extremely high concentration of mana in the hundreds of dungeons, high-grade shielding, city technology, vaults full of mana crystals, and tens of thousands of hunters with full MP bars to pull from.

That was just 100 kilometers, and I was able to gain roughly 40 quadrillion MP in mere minutes.

However, that Region won't be recovering anytime soon.

While it doesn't affect the average citizen, and neither does it any hunter below the B-Class rating, there are no dungeons left in the Vice Region that hold monsters above level 500, and the labyrinth has been decimated as well.

The only other Region with mana that dense is the Apex Region. It has a labyrinth with enough mana to instantly heal Raven right now, along with thousands of dungeons and hundreds of thousands of citizens to drain from, but I have other plans for that energy.

I'm going to fully rely on the mana from this abandoned Region I'm in and not touch any more of my new Nation's valuable energy reserves.

My eyes shut as I put my full conscious effort into expanding my tendrils of pure red plunderer energy out as far into the depths of this region as I can.

I summon a new body double to fly over my area of red mist, and it details and logs all of the small villages within the Region to reimburse them after the red mist fades.

In over 2000 kilometers on all sides, reaching over 4000 kilometers in total diameter, I only sense 19,544 total natives to this land and 172 dungeons.

Most of the small villages near the lakes seem to be situated near small E-Class dungeons, so I don't fully drain their only source of mana crystals and loot. I don't know the culture of the civilizations out here, but if I want to assimilate them into my growing kingdom in the near future, it's best I make a good first impression.

The only dungeons I drain completely and fully collapse, plundering 100% of their mana, are the ones far from human reach in deep canyons, abandoned forests, and underground caves.

My aura permeates as far as it can reach, nearing the border of the 8 Great Regions and far off into the west, deeper into the forest until my senses hit the border of a new region.

Icy mountains meet the forest region, coming down from the north and creating a natural land barrier near the edges of my senses. I stop trying to expand my aura when I meet this landmark, as I don't know who occupies this territory, and I need to inspect it myself in a stealthier manner.

The red glow sinks into the ground and floats high into the sky, and slowly but surely, nearly 90% of the Region's ambient mana is channeled through me into Raven's hibernation skill inside my control panel.

Over 1 hour passes.

I watch the mode name change, and the time remaining tick down as trillions of MP are siphoned into the skill.

The 550 days remaining quickly fall below triple digits, and after a few dozen D grade and a handful of C grade dungeons, the time remaining falls below 5 days, surpassing the time needed for the express mode option.

Far off in the outer edges of my aura, there are a few more pockets of C grade dungeons, and even two high-strength B grade dungeons.

According to my calculations, in this entire Region, there is less than 50 quadrillion MP total to pull from, not enough to trigger the near-instant emergency heal, but it should be enough to bring my wait time down to something I can handle.

It takes a bit longer than the others to fully drain these, but once it's done, I finally let my aura begin to retract and stare down at the control panel before me.

[Use Hibernation] [Mythic Grade]

[Accelerated Mode]

[Time Remaining] 0.4 Days

[Add Mana To Accelerate]

"Just under 10 hours? That's more manageable." I whisper to myself while grinning, and pull my hands away from Raven's body, wiping sweat off my forehead.

The white glow around Raven's body becomes much brighter. I watch the particles of white marble evaporate, and her flesh regrows at a microscopic level in real-time.

My aura finally fully retracts back into my body, and my double that was hovering above this new forest region flies back to the dark continent to get supplies to reimburse the villages that were just drained of all their resources.

A long sigh escapes my mouth as my footsteps echo throughout the empty mansion.

"That was not easy... but I wasn't expecting it to be, after all..."

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

I can't help but laugh to myself in the middle of an abandoned region as I can finally relax and think straight, appreciating the new boost in power I received from killing another True Core.

Dozens of statues still fill this entrance hall.

Some of them are broken to pieces from the fallen portions of the ceiling, and others have managed to survive with luck.

I scan the entire eerie building and float back up to the top floor to see the marble orb now split in two below the petrified dragon angrily frozen in time with its set of claws reaching to defend its master.

As I touch down on what's left of the cracked flooring on the upper level, and peer into the blackened, charred inside of the orb, I see the body of the frail, lanky old man inside, and an odd intuitive feeling rushes through me.

At the same time, a blue notification pops up over the pile of ash.

[Use Superior Mana Manipulation]

Superior Perk: [Eternal Minion]

Enter Desired Level: 0-9620

[YES] [NO]

My hand raises to press yes and enter the maximum level out of curiosity...

I remember when my mana manipulation skill reached the advanced grade a long time ago, when I first ventured out into the dark continent. It granted a perk called [Temporary Minion], but the only monsters it worked on were certain types of golems when they dropped their cores as loot because it was a physical item I could take out of the dungeon.

All other monsters I tried to turn into my minions would only stay visible and fight for me for a few minutes at most, because they would disappear and be absorbed back into the dungeons.

While I think about this, the instinctual activation of my new True Core's ability activates at the same time as my newly upgraded skill.

Mana, and a silky yellow and white stream of divine energy, leaves my fingertips and revives the pile of ash on the floor of the mansion, bringing the pile of bones to life, into the form he was in before he was killed...

With shiny white shoes, long pants, and a well-fitted suit. The short-haired, sunken-eyed madman stands before me as nothing but a statue of stone.

My divine energy flows into him and settles right in the center of his chest, forming a pseudo True Core before my eyes.

There is no interface for commands or modes like my Dark Magic's summoning technique; all I have is an intuitive feeling to rely on.

I move all ten of my fingers as if I'm playing with a puppet, and as my mind thinks about the lanky man's movements, it plays out in reality before my eyes.

If I wasn't the one moving him to my will, I wouldn't even know that he was being controlled.

The fluid movement of mana intertwined with pure divine energy is so smooth; I've never been able to move pure divine energy with such accuracy before...

I make the man step out from the cracked orb and dance around the destroyed floor, even floating into the air, mana stepping with ease; but I finally set him back on the ground when a few ideas hit me.

Once I think about letting him go, every drop of mana and divine energy leaves his body and floods back into mine.

All that's left is a lifeless white statue frozen for eternity.

It gets me thinking about an explanation for this True Core ability. Clearly, the man was not much of a hands-on fighter when he was alive. Before he awakened his True Core, my guess is he used fallen monsters and possibly allies to do his bidding, as one's True Core ability mimics what they've done before in life...

So it goes hand in hand with his only skill, mana manipulation, allowing him to make soldiers at will and imbue them with all of the power at his fingertips. Or, display them as art in his case.

However, as I walk further down the hall, toward the various doors at the back wall behind the orb and the dragon, I explore this new ability further.

Activating it with my superior mana manipulation skill, I allow pure mana and divine threads to seep out from my fingertips and form balls of pure energy above my palms.

It takes a lot of mental power, and the floors and remaining walls and ceiling around me shake as I shape these orbs of energy into sharp daggers, then into arrows, and eventually a sword. It takes 3 full minutes to do so, and my full body and mind fill with fatigue as I try to manipulate it away from what the True Core's ability is meant to be used for.

I smile as I find there is another use for this ability. It has given me far greater control over divine energy itself... I need to practice, but this is another very intriguing addition to my repertoire.

While deactivating this test, the back wall of the mansion rumbles, and a series of large boxes, crates, containment items, and item boxes all reveal themselves in all of the private rooms at the end of the hall.

I continue walking forward to explore this eerie mansion, finding more statues in some of the rooms of less-clothed men and women hunters, numerous paintings, and all kinds of magical items locked away in the madman's private studies.

There is a large food supply, HP and MP potions to last centuries, and various seemingly random collections of gear ranging from 10% stat boosts up to over 300%, but nothing priceless or usable. The majority of the gear is just unique in other ways, like coloring or shape.

The longer I look through these storage boxes, the more twisted this man's tastes in art and hobbies become.

That is... until I find three item boxes in the lower drawer of a desk that has been buried by the rubble of a fallen ceiling from the escapades earlier.

I'm not expecting anything significant, after rummaging through junk for over half an hour, but when I plunge my hand into the first box and my hand senses thousands of red divine fragments, my eyes widen and my heart rate spikes.

"No way... There has to be at least ten thousand in here..."

I instantly plunge my hand into the second, and there's about two thousand orange fragments this time.

I drop both of these into my storage, and shove my hand into the third and final item box to find over 800 pristine yellow divine fragments.

I pull one out just to look at it, and the reflection of the beautiful glowing stone shimmers in my eyes.

The final item box drops into my item storage, and I use my new True Core's ability to cover the one stone that was in my hand in a thick layer of mana and pure silky divine energy.

In seconds, the stone dissolves, and all of its energy is streamlined directly into my core.

It doesn't feel like much, as draining an entire True Core is far more efficient. If I absorbed every single fragment in that box, I would feel slightly stronger, maybe a ten or twenty percent gain, but my teammates back in the Dark Continent would benefit from these fragments far more than me.

For the next hour as I continue to rummage through all of the containment cases and item boxes in this entire mansion, I'm not upset at the fact that there aren't any other interesting items to take with me.

I've managed to snag more than enough from this unexpected encounter.

Smiling, I walk past the old petrified man next to the white dragon, and hop down to the bottom floor.

Then, I take a seat on the cold hard marble next to Raven.

A large portion of the white stone on her body has completely vanished, and her bare skin and blood-bonded armor have repaired themselves in place. Her core is growing brighter as well.

My body double has come back and visited all of the nearby villages and left to continue working with Bri and Rodrigo to schedule a perfect time with the other Regional Directors and higher grade hunters, relaying that I won't be back until my business is done here.

The sun slowly moves in the sky overhead, falling toward the horizon as I take a short rest and wait for the hibernation clock to tick down before my questions will be answered.

Far away, at the heart of Sector 1, in Valor City: an old man with a long white beard, and two disciples beside him touch down in front of Monk's black pyramid.

A bright yellow core cycles in his chest, and the two men decades younger than him to his sides both hold orange cores.

No mana is present in their bodies, only Qi, and dense barriers of the white energy contains their immense divine auras to make sure no weaker humans are hurt by the pressure.

## Chapter 627

As the sun sets overhead, I allow my consciousness to shift between all of my body doubles, like I'm in three nations at once, continuing my work while sitting here with Raven as she heals.

One double continues to work with Bri and Rodrigo, acting as Mr. Freeman as transmissions are sent out to all of the eight Regional Directors.

Most still need time and resources to handle the events of today's surges, but it's settled that new teleport crystals will be handed out to each of the Regional headquarters today. This will allow all high-level Elite C-Class Hunters, B-Class, and of course, the remaining A-Class here in the Apex Region to be ready to attend.

The meeting is set for tomorrow morning, bright and early, as I have many announcements to make.

Meanwhile, in the two labyrinths I have control over, in the Apex Region and Dark Continent, a new project is taking place.

Two of my doubles are hard at work siphoning pure mana out of the Apex Region's labyrinth and funneling it into the one in the Crimson City.

On the top floor of the Apex Region's labyrinth, my doubles find the same exact phenomenon as the Vice City one I hibernated in. There's a demon, fast asleep on a black block of stone. There's no dragon in sight...

With no way of communicating with the guardians, despite multiple attempts at telepathy, I decide there's no use thinking about it now, and I'll just continue my process.

Instead of using the old method of farming element stones, waiting for monster respawns, and imbuing them with my Plunderer skill to absorb the dungeon's pure mana, they're now using a combination of my crystal creation skill and the pure power of my Plunderer skill to naturally absorb mana into its physical form and transport it directly from labyrinth to labyrinth.

It's a tedious process, which takes a lot of mental and physical strain, but it's far faster than the old method. Instead of managing to absorb tens of billions of MP every hour into containment stones, I'm able to expand my red aura throughout the entire floor and safely collapse each one, converting it into a pure crystal form in the same time, netting me hundreds of trillions of MP per minute, speeding up the process by a massive leap.

I estimate there's over 500 quadrillion MP in the Apex Region's labyrinth. While I could destabilize the entire labyrinth in a matter of minutes if I went all out, that would waste a lot of mana, so to be safe I'm taking it slow. At this rate, it should take about 12 to 24 hours to complete the process, but all I have is time.



The Apex Region's labyrinth will be drained down to 60 floors, making the strongest monster inside roughly level 3000, while all of the siphoned mana will be placed in the Crimson City's labyrinth, bringing it up past floor 90. I'm not sure exactly what floor it'll reach, but it will surpass level 6000 monsters for sure, giving the Crimson Army and my teammates more floors to train in and level up.

—

While all this is occurring throughout the eight Great Regions and the Dark Continent, the obliterated forest region that has been sucked dry of mana turns a shade of orange as the sun sets and curves over the horizon.

The white glow around Raven's body continues to shine brightly, and the portions of pure white marble that imprison her arms, legs, and major portions of her torso flake away into the air as her muscle tissue and bones grow back in their place.

The weak dull light of her Divine Core slowly grows brighter and hotter too, sending out a raw, uncontrolled aura of pure True Core light in all directions, easily covering 50 kilometers.

I'm glad I stayed here and didn't try to bring her back to the Crimson City.

Even with my own True Core and mental strength, withstanding this pressure is not easy. I'm sure any normal hunter caught up in this aura wouldn't survive a single second.

The white mansion continues to crumble away, and by the time the sun sets completely all that's left is the foundation of the building, a few intact sculptures, the white dragon and the deceased True Core user on the barely held-up remains of the top floor, and the cracked and crumbling walkway of white stone that stretches out into the darkness.

The only light left once the hibernation's white glow fades is both of our bright yellow True Cores lighting up the night.

Once I watch the seconds tick down to zero, I stand up and take a few steps back, preparing to retrieve my weapons and activate my Greater Form if needed.

However, once the white light disappears, I find that isn't the case at all.

There's a light ding in my head that tells me Raven's hibernation process is complete, and this echoes through both her and my consciousness, as I've been closely monitoring her for so long I hear her system notification too.

Her fingers move first, then she flips her palms to look at the fronts and backs.

Next, she takes a step forward, and her head turns slowly in my direction.

Our True Cores light up the area around us, and both of our perceptions are good enough that even in pitch black, it might as well be daytime.

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

However, with no sun in the sky, it still gives the atmosphere quite a dark setting.

Her hazel eyes meet mine, and she speaks out loud.

"You saved my life... why?"

She stares at me without any malice, not even keeping her guard up, accepting that if I wanted her dead, I would have finished the job already.

I pause to think, then reply back into the silence of the night with a shrug.

"Why not...?"

We stare at each other for a few seconds longer, then her gaze leaves mine to look at the state of the mansion around us.

Her echoing footsteps make their way across the rubble-cluttered entrance hall until she's right below the dragon and the man turned to stone.

"So, your True Core ability... you can steal power from whoever you kill? Be it pure Divine Energy, skills, or even a True Core ability itself."

I'm surprised at her words, as she's laid out this fact so bluntly, and with such little data to back her claim.

The link of loyalty created before the healing process is still extremely strong, unwavering, almost like blind trust as she's putting her life in my hands. It's odd...

I don't bother confirming her suspicions as she already knows it's true, and ask a question of my own.

"Who are you people? The Order. I want to know why you told me it would be better to act like I lost our battle... and who exactly you wanted to keep it a secret from."

The corner of Raven's lip curves up an unnoticeable amount, and she doesn't turn her gaze away from the petrified white dragon above her, reflecting back her yellow aura's glow.

"Well... it seems after aligning myself with the threat known as the Flame Emperor, and failing to protect a fellow member of the council, I don't think there's any point in keeping secrets."

She lets out a sigh, and turns back around to walk toward me again.

"Plus, we've triggered the throne's awakening, the alliance will crumble soon whether I tell you or not."

She stops in front of me, and my expression shows I want nothing else but a response.

I can feel lots of mixed emotions churning around in Raven's head as she tries to organize her thoughts...

I've had many hours to think this over, while she has basically just woken up from a coma after our battle and learned of the death of another member of her organization.

If I were to only read her body language and facial expressions, I'd have no idea of the mental strain she's juggling right now. So, I patiently wait and give her a moment to formulate a response.

"The Order... is an organization formed long before the dungeons appeared in this world. I, for one, only had the privilege of joining about five decades ago, once the throne was discovered, and the Great War was fought."

Internally, my interest is piqued. The reason being, she doesn't look a day over 30, but she's speaking of witnessing an event that happened half a century ago. However, I don't make any physical reaction to her words, and she continues.

"There were ten members, but in the last few days, you've managed to dwindle our numbers down to eight."

She looks back toward the petrified man, then back to me.

"None of the outer members are truly loyal to the others. We have all just signed a pact in order to conserve our energy over the years. If a fight between two True Cores broke out in this world, well, it would result in both of their early deaths without question."

We both know she's pointed out a false idea here, as both of us are still standing, but her next words make me second-guess this.

"Divine Energy is not meant to be wielded in such high density in this world. Even if you believe you've gamed the system, there is a cost for everything. Mr. Freeman is a prime example of this fact—healing magic only gets you so far. Time always catches up to us..."

We stand in silence for a few seconds again, as I take in her words, but still have so many more questions that need to be answered. Now that she's opened this box of previously unknown knowledge, I need to hear it all...

"What do you mean by outer members? Does this mean there's some kind of ranking to this Council? And... the Great War... 50 years ago... you said the throne's appearance is what triggered this war. Why?"

The corners of Raven's lips visibly turn up, and it looks like she's on the verge of letting out a laugh.

"You... are truly an interesting one. With an ability like yours, maybe the path of growth is endless... Your reckless nature has granted you great opportunities, yet it could have easily been the root of your downfall as well. I'm impressed you've made it this far, sticking your nose in places it doesn't belong without getting yourself killed..."

The tense mood breaks a bit, as this feels like Raven's attempt at giving me a compliment and adding in humor as well, so I smile back, but I still cross my arms and reply in a serious tone.

"I know. I'm out of the loop. That's a large reason I decided to help you in the first place, if you're still curious as to why I saved your life. I need answers to questions no one in my kingdom knows. It appears to all be trapped away behind the public eye. What happened here 50 years ago? What is the real reason everyone is so obsessed with that damn throne?"

Her smile stays on her face, and she lets out a chuckle while turning back toward the dragon and petrified man above us.

"Other than the big three, that man was the closest source to an answer you can get to finding out what really happened back in the Great War. Despite his quirks, he's quite the history enthusiast. A real originator freak. That's the reason he left the central branch and isolated himself out here 40 years ago, to study some unreadable runes."

She clicks her tongue and shakes her head, then stares up at the empty black sky above us.

"I doubt he ever figured it out. He'd have rubbed it in all of our faces if he did. My best guess over the years to rationalize it has been that whatever civilization perished on this world millennia ago just left artifacts behind to play a cruel joke on us all..."

She pauses, then turns her head back toward me.

"Then again, joke or not, the throne was still discovered. The only legible originator text we have left states this throne is the key to understanding the divine. Once the doors open, it's said a single being will walk through and claim this world as their own. If they can climb high enough, their core shall never go out."

Raven shrugs and walks back over to me in a nonchalant manner, clearly rehearsing something she's heard before countless times over the years and not thinking much of it, but her words mean a lot more to me hearing them for the first time.

I don't even have enough mental space to respond quickly; I just think to myself.

Memories of Monk talking about these originators in the past flood through my mind. There's the link between Qi being an energy source that predates mana on this world and the black material that makes up his temple, and the tower in the center of the Dark Continent.

Ember's past mentions of the Great War, and the fact that he somehow died around the same time and was reborn 50 years later with no additional knowledge of this world; it must be connected as well. After all, his Divine Core is special... he called it an Immortal Core, one that never goes out.

More and more thoughts race through my mind, making connections, and over half a minute passes before I realize Raven is standing right in front of me still waiting for a response.

She's pulling a small silver device from her item box with glowing yellow gems on the face of it.

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Raven replies as I'm still lost for words.

"As much as I'd love to speculate if our ancestors left us a gift, or if the demons have fed us enough misinformation over the years to make ourselves crazy; it's best we talk about the more immediate problem at hand."

She holds up the silver device with eight glowing yellow gems and two stones that are clear and dull on the face of it.

Still, I don't give a response as my mind is still racing elsewhere.

Celia's old memories of demons taking over worlds, and Ember's words of the throne on almost every world he's lived on being captured by demons come to mind after Raven's statement; however, with so many sources giving similar yet flawed explanations for the same phenomena, I don't know what to think anymore.

Demons may have their eye on the throne, but clearly, humans have built up a force of strong hunters to fight for it too.

The fact that this organization, the Order, has supposedly been around even before this world was connected to the system makes me even more curious what Qi is in relation to the divine... and who these originators are that no one has any clues or solid facts about other than old poorly translated texts.

I finally nod, looking at the odd device in her hands and reply.

"Immediate problem at hand? What are you talking about... What is that device?"

She holds it up and points to one of the two crystals that are no longer glowing.

"These are the two members of the Order you killed... Remember how quickly I came to check things out after the disappearance of Mr. Freeman?"

She points to the second dull crystal.

"I'm surprised they haven't come to eliminate the threat already... It's best I send out a response now before one of the big three from Central comes to see what happened here for themselves."

My eyes widen slightly as she moves her finger toward one of the bright glowing yellow gems.

Our link of loyalty is still as strong as it was the moment her eyes opened, but the fact that she has direct calling access to what seems to be seven other Divine Core holders is still a bit unnerving.

I speak up as her finger hovers above one of the crystals.

"Who are the big three? And is everyone in the Order a True Core? Are there others stronger than you?"

She grins again.

"You really did just kill Mr. Freeman without asking him a single question, didn't you? One minute his core was steady, and seconds later it went out..."

She laughs, then points her gaze toward the device, so I do too and look at it with more detail.

"See these four? The crystals glowing a bit dimmer than the others? These are other members of the Order. They have yellow cores awakened and are far more powerful than anyone in their respective nations, but they haven't fully compressed their cores. Everyone has their natural limits, not all people are capable of subjecting their bodies to this much pressure over time."

Her eyes move to the other four crystals, including the one her finger is hovering over.

"These are the only True Cores left in the Order. Myself, and the big three..."

She pauses, and the fact that she talks of them like this, and isn't a part of their close-knit group, tells me all I need to know.

Clearly, these three are the strongest in the world. The ones that run the Order behind the curtain, and from her earlier remarks, it's obvious they control the Association at Central headquarters as well.

If the man that owned the marble mansion, and Raven herself, aren't strong enough to be among their ranks, I wonder how strong they really are.

Even now, I sense a tinge of fear coming from Raven's subconscious as she looks at the device, and as she's about to continue speaking, one of the four True Core Crystals blinks and glows brighter than the rest.

A man's voice ripples out.

"Checking in again on the top of the hour, Redgrave here from Central. Raven, if there isn't a reply in the next few transmissions, I'm going to have to take care of this issue myself..."

Raven's eyes widen, and I raise an eyebrow.

Her pulse speeds up, but I'm still in the dark on who exactly this is.

The man's voice ripples out again in the same monotone pitch with undertones of residual anger and impatience.

"I repeat, this is the top of the hour check-in, Redgrave from Central. Raven, if you hear this, we need a status update. Elara is the closest, so we'll be sending her out—"

Raven clicks her yellow gem and responds before the man can finish his words.

"Mr. Redgrave, reporting in. I've been quite busy healing, but the business you wanted taken care of is finished. I just ran into a few roadblocks along the way."

Immediately, the uninterested-sounding voice of the man animates, and the angry undertones come out full force.

Raven places a finger over her lips, making sure I don't make any noise as his angry yells come over the transmission device.

"What happened to Sebastian? Did you two get into a fight delivering a package? Injuring any members of the council is strictly against our pact... and it looks like you did a lot more than injure him."

Raven clicks her gem, but takes a few seconds to think to herself before replying.

"It was self-defense. I either turn into one of his twisted pieces of art, or I break the pact..."

She pauses for a few more seconds, and adds another line.

"I'm sure I don't have to report this to you, but there are most likely single-digit days remaining before the doors open, and we see what trials the originators have offered. Our pact is as good as ended..."

There's silence for a few more seconds, but the man's voice that replies back is more cool and calculated.

"It is still vital that we honor it until the end. It would be a waste to kill one another before even laying eyes on what some of us have waited centuries to see. Beckman studied your gem's fluctuations ever since your battle with that pest in the Dark Continent began. We know you were weakened when you showed up at Sebastian's mansion... and it appears both of you were in quite the fight when you arrived."

There's silence in the air for a few moments, then a long sigh comes next.

"I don't know how you healed... but I'm glad you made it out, Raven. You've always been one of my favorites."

Raven's face doesn't change, but a mixture of emotions comes out of her. Half is pure disgust and resentment, but another half is filled with respect and awe.

He continues to speak.

"It's a shame the old man won't get to see the trophy our ancestors left us. He truly was a believer... but that's life, not everyone gets what they deserve."

He laughs, and his mood changes again in an instant. It makes me wonder if every True Core in this order is as psychotic as the man in this mansion.

"Well, that is all. I look forward to seeing you again. Most of the Central forces will be moving in to start making temporary bases near the throne in a few days. I'm sure the Eight Great Regions are a mess, and the Dark Continent will be up for grabs as well. But, there's no point in negotiating rights over it now. Whoever takes the throne will own this entire world anyway."

His laughs fade away, and his crystal clicks off.

Raven leaves a final message.

"Indeed. I will see you all soon."

She too takes her finger off the gem and puts the transmission tablet into her item box while shaking her head.

I want to ask a million more questions, but concern is the only emotion I feel as Raven whispers under her breath.

"That will buy us some time, but I doubt they bought a single word I said. Beckman is too meticulous to write off today's events as a simple quarrel..."

She thinks to herself for a few more seconds, and I finally interject.

"That was one of them, right...? One of the big three? They're coming to the Dark Continent? And what do you mean they didn't buy it... he seemed to believe every word you just said."

Raven shakes her head again and looks at me.

"Yes, he's one of the big three, a fire user just like you actually. But him taking anything I say at face value? No... He's just wasting time. All of this is a big joke to Redgrave. He knows we're not a threat. He couldn't care less if I went on a rampage right now and killed every one of the outer members of the council and lied straight to his face about it. He's just putting on a show for his equals, Elara and Beckman. If he really cared, he would have come and leveled these two nations the instant you killed Mr. Freeman."

I look around the abandoned mansion, thinking about the fight I just had here, and the battle I had with Raven in the desert that morning.

The fact that there are really three people more powerful than them, not even bothering to take care of a potential rogue force on the loose when so much is on the line, both frightens and excites me.

Another line she's said makes me quite curious too, the fact that if all of the outer members of the Order were killed right now, no one would bat an eye...

I look back up at Raven and reply.

"Well, I think we should lay out everything on the table now. Where our loyalties truly stand, and how we can help each other in this impending war. You're a member of the Order, but an outcast that will be crushed once the big three really come out to play. I say we work together. I have an idea of how we could get much more powerful in the next few days..."

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Raven replies as we stand a few meters apart in the crumbling mansion below the night sky.

"Where does my loyalty stand? That's a good question..."

She takes a step forward, and it echoes through the silence.

"If you were to ask me that question a few days ago, my answer would have been with the Association without a doubt. I've been a contracted hunter since the day I awakened, skills like mine aren't common. People in power always needed to hire someone to listen in on others while using stealth, and an ability to disappear in dungeons allowed me to level up far faster than my peers, even in dungeons far above my strength..."

She crosses her arms and looks at the sky.

"You heard Redgrave. I've always been one of their favorites. It's because I always did what I was told and was rewarded for doing so... I even got to use the Central Labyrinth a few times about a decade back. Other than the big three, I'm the only triple ranked-up hunter in the world."

She grins and looks back at me.

"Technically, we're called S-Class hunters, but that rating in the Association's system was thrown away long ago to make the public believe level 1000 was the pinnacle of power...."

Her frown disappears, and her gaze tightens, looking deep into my eyes. I feel her aura get stronger as she speaks again.

"I thought I knew the pinnacle of power too... A True Core, even among all the members of the Order, this was the strongest anyone in the world had ever achieved. But after our battle..."

Her eyes change. Instead of a pure calculated, practical gaze, a tinge of crazy aspiration twinkles in them; I feel it ripple out through her aura too as she continues.

"I've never seen anyone fight the way you do, growing stronger with every swing of the blade you make... My memories of fighting like that back in the training facilities of the central academy are long gone. It's like you haven't lost your childlike view of the world..."

She pauses, and the sparkle in her eyes grows brighter.

"No... It isn't a fantasy to you... You truly believe your potential is limitless... No... it isn't that either. You don't even think about such labels that put you in a box. You see what's in front of you, and merely find a way to take it..."

The feeling of pure inspiration pours out of her True Core's aura as a moment of understanding washes over the hunter who has been stuck in her ways for decades, playing it safe, and biding her time while the leaders of the Order keep power and safety just out of her grasp.

While assurance through a pact that no one will attack each other for decades to come has given her some security over the years, there has always been the looming anxiety that once that time comes, she will never be strong enough to stack up against the true threats.

I nod and interject.

"Sure... If that's how you want to see it. I want to grow with and protect those who helped me, and I don't want anyone telling me what I can or cannot do. I don't care for personal profit other than



gaining more strength. Power over people and the money it brings me is a side effect of my ventures, and a tool that must be used. Basically, I wanted to have the Dark Continent and 8 Great Regions all to myself so I could train in peace and give the citizens of my growing nation a safe life... But of course, there are always more greedy hands in every pot."

I look up at the dark night sky, not looking for anything in particular, but the vastness of it helps me organize my thoughts and consolidate a point.

"I want to take down the Order, every last one of them. These big three used their power and resources to hold you on a leash, even if it felt like you were free. If you say they'll be coming to the Dark Continent to claim the throne, that means my people will soon be under threat of their rule."

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I look back down from the sky and stare at Raven with the same intensity she's giving me. Then, I put out my right hand.

"You're either with me or against me. I have a plan, but I want your confirmation of full trust first. What do you say?"

Raven's heartbeat becomes faster, and her aura of inspiration and excitement becomes even stronger as she lifts her right hand too.

"There's more to life than just waiting to die. You showed me that in our battle, creating a spark of inspiration in my heart, protecting that dull flame when you brought me back from the brink of death, and now you're giving me a chance to fan the fire. Deep down, I've always wanted to see the leaders of the Order burn, but there has never been an opportunity to try until now."

Our hands clasp together, and our True Core's auras intertwine as her thoughts and emotions become crystal clear.

"Good. This is my new plan. We'll start with the remaining outer four..."

—

Over the next few hours, I outline my plan, and we continue to share information back and forth.

I learn of the inner workings of the Association and the Order in far more detail, but there isn't much that I couldn't have guessed.

Each strong nation around the world that has large military forces of above 4 A-Class hunters is run by members of the Order. They report back to central headquarters every few years and pay resource taxes, as well as have their hunters' talent scouted to be taken into Central.

Over the years, many artifacts of both originator and divine nature have been found around the globe; so many strong nations have soul energy users as their leaders, but very few are capable of using Divine power.

Even in some of the weaker nations, without Order members running them, there are a few red and orange cores that pop up every once in a while; but they are usually eliminated by any nearby Order member before they can become a greater threat, as most of the divine energy has been regulated with a tight grip.

Each of the powerhouse nations is only allowed to share divine energy with those approved by Central, but there are hundreds of red cores around the globe, and dozens of orange; however,

Raven states that now there are surely single-digit yellows, and only 5 True Cores that she knows of. That includes both of us.

After learning this, she tells me of the 4 powerhouse nations run by members of the Order all around the globe, and offers to bring me to them.

"There is a very large island nation off the coast. Two of the outer members reside on it." She points west, even further away past the mountain range that stops my view at the edge of the forest.

"It's past the dead zone of the mountains. Believe it or not, there's a pretty large ocean on the other side of that mountain range. Across it, the mainland takes you to Central if we fly far enough... The other big three have combined their nations to surround the Central Headquarters on all sides. One of the other outer members is on the mainland even further west of central, while the final member has been dark for a number of decades... I don't know how to find him."

She pauses, and a small ripple of concern leaks out of her.

"Visiting that mainland wouldn't be wise; you'll be spotted if we get too close... even visiting the island nation could be a huge risk. One of the big three will sense you."

I raise an eyebrow.

"What? And they won't sense you? Your ability can evade their perception?"

Raven nods.

"It can. But the moment I slip out from my stealth domain, it'd be over for me, they'd notice a True Core in an instant. You can't hide your—"

Mid-sentence, I decide to retract my aura, hiding it all behind my purple divine barrier. Not a single thread leaks out. It is, after all, an artifact created by a being many cores above a yellow. With the help of a mythic-grade concealment skill and my master of illusion buff, it appears as though I'm nothing but a normal man, without a drop of even mana running through my veins.

Raven looks me up and down again and continues her sentence.

"Maybe... you can... still, we should do some tests, and going to central right now would be a death sentence."

She lets out a pulse of full-strength perception, but the look of confusion still stays on her face.

I grin.

"We don't have to push it too far. There's no point in going directly to Central. All I want to do is visit the four outer members, the two on this island you speak of is a good start. I don't want to kill them today, nor take over their economy. Doing that now without having any knowledge of their local infrastructure would be a waste. Plus, as much as you believe the big three wouldn't bat an eye, I'm not taking any chances."

—

We continue our talk beneath the stars. Then, once all the logistics are figured out, we both do long-range perception testing on both of our techniques.

All throughout the forest region, both of us use our full perception to try and sense the other from close up and far away, and at varying flight speeds.

There is a point when my greater form is activated, and I try to soar at a velocity fast enough that some of my mana control and divine threads leak out, but we nail down a top speed I can soar at beside her and stay concealed. The sound and changes in air pressure I create, even while using my own stealth skill, need to be taken into account.

While it would be easy to make a lap around the globe in an hour or two, that won't be possible if I want to stay inconspicuous.

Eventually, we set off further to the west to begin scouting out new lands.

Just yesterday, I believed the 8 Great Regions would be the long haul project I'd be focused on for months to come. However, a day later, a new True Core ally has joined my ranks, and my eyes are set on a much larger prize.

## Chapter 630

The 8 Great Regions and Dark Continent fade away from my perception, but the real-time memories of my doubles are still being relayed to me, and I can swap places with one anytime I'd like.

The progress on harvesting the Apex Region's mana has moved along quite nicely. By the time I have my meeting with the Regional Directors and powerful hunters in the morning, it should be complete and ready for use.

Even though I know Raven is near me in the sky, it's still quite fascinating that I don't sense a thing.

She vaguely described how her ability worked, revealing that when she activates her divine-grade stealth skill and tethers it with her true core's innate ability, she finds herself in a flow state between existing and not.

Physical contact and extremely close proximity are the only things that negate her power.

While she can stab an enemy through the heart while fully in stealth mode, it won't do any damage until she comes back to this physical plane.

While this is more than enough to kill anyone at her strength level or lower without them even knowing they've been stabbed, the big three have a power gap so large, they can feel her presence when she's within a very close proximity of their auras; a few meters would set off the mental alarms.

If I didn't have my purple barrier to trigger my perception when her silver blades were close to cutting me, I would never have been able to perceive her presence.

However, now that she is connected to me through a link of loyalty, I am capable of zeroing in on her general location with the geo-points my Rising Emperor's domain interface grants. Along with that, even while she's in her stealth mode, the instant long-range telepathy perk I have through the interface grants me an open speaking channel even if my perception can't pick her up in the physical world around me.

As the near endless forest of thick trees below us starts to turn into a more mountainous and rocky landscape, I realize something isn't quite right and raise a question.

"These aren't real mountains... Did someone make them?"

My perception is dampened, as to not send out any abnormal waves of divine energy into the atmosphere, but even now as we fly over them, I can sense that something is off using just my mana senses.

It feels like these massive pyramids of stone stretch for hundreds of kilometers in front of us and thousands of kilometers north and south to form a border between the sea and the land that leads to the 8 Great Regions and beyond to the east.

I know earth summoning well, as it's a skill I use often, but this massive scale of use seems unbelievable. Many labyrinths' worth of mana must have been used to create such a mountain range.

At the outer edges of my radar to the north, I sense these same mountains made completely of ice, and it feels like they're mostly made of mana as well.

To the south, the mountain range curves east and leads down to Raven's volcanic territory, but those mountains and landmarks are far smaller and more natural. This phenomenon has me stumped until Raven replies.

"You're right. These mountains aren't real. However, they've been around for as long as I can remember. Apparently, they were created in the Great War. Elara's kingdom used to be to the north, and Beckman ruled where we're flying over now... It's the residual aftermath of a battle fought long ago. Believe it or not, the divide used to be far larger; most of the mana has already dissolved back into the atmosphere."

I don't respond for a moment, thinking over her words, imagining the large-scale fight that must have taken place to create such a massive change in the landscape of the world...

Raven continues talking through our link as my mind wanders.

"To the southeast, it's rumored Redgrave won a battle where my territory and the Dark Continent stand today. Old maps show that the sandy wasteland you've built your city in wasn't always that way. It used to be far more full of life, and the volcanoes in my region that never go out used to be nothing but mountains 50 years ago..."

My mind wanders more, as pieces of the world puzzle click together.

Back in school, they never taught us much of anything outside of the 8 Great Regions, and commonfolk never had the means to travel elsewhere. There was always talk of other nations in the world, and other stronger hunters rumored in the news; but I'm seeing it all for real now.

I respond to Raven.

"So you mentioned before that the throne appearing is what started this war... but what stopped it?"

She responds.

"I was too young back then to know what the truth really was. It must have been more than the throne. Powerful nations grew out of nothing after 30 years of profitable dungeon diving. The whole world was on edge, with superpowers rising and falling left and right. A war like that was bound to happen, and the high-ranking members of the Order must have had a falling out when the throne showed itself, and it was a catalyst for it all... Who knows, maybe there were more than just three world leaders back then. History is re-written by the victors."

My curiosity isn't yet satiated, as I still have a feeling demons and dragons played a massive role in this war, and still have a finger on the pulse of this world now.

The fact that Celia's memories show world after world being destroyed and taken over by demons before her eyes is still burned into my consciousness. She was a purple-cored entity witnessing these catastrophes, which makes me believe that no matter how strong the powers of a world may be, demons must have dominating mana rich planets down to a science. There is something I'm still not understanding in all of this.

Despite this nagging feeling, Raven has given me some valuable information here about the big three.

"Makes sense... So Elara is an ice user, and Beckman uses earth magic... What about the island nation we're visiting now? Who are the Order members that stay there, and what are their abilities?"

Raven takes a moment to respond, but finally does; and at the same time on the horizon through the dead of night, the mountains finally end and a vast sea begins.

"Elara and Beckman are multi-skill users... So is Redgrave... I don't know the full extent of their power; they never reveal it. For all I know, they aren't element users at all. This world is their playground, and every time I see them, it's like they're living out a long, elaborate act... You have to remember, they've been in power before I was even alive. They are ruthless killers and meticulous planners. We think in days, weeks, months, maybe even years. They think in centuries, and have thought of every possibility many times over..."

Her response hits my consciousness, and the seriousness in her tone makes me fly in silence for a full minute before we reach the sea and continue to fly deep into the ocean under the night sky.

She responds to the next half of my question after letting me conceptualize her words.

"As for the island nation, its two rulers are husband and wife. They're both water wielders, yellow cores near the strength of Mr. Freeman. The nation they rule is known as the Kingdom of Palmyra. If we visit in these stealth forms just to survey the main city, there will not be a problem. I don't recommend we visit any of the finger cities; there aren't usually any citizens present on those. They're all Association-run."

I raise an eyebrow and respond as the mountains disappear behind us.

"The finger cities? What do you mean...?"

Raven chuckles through our link.

"You'll see."

Another hour passes as we soar through the air over the endless ocean.

Finally, a shining bright light appears in my vision through the darkness.

It appears to be a few kilometers above sea level, and about 70,000 individual systems register on my enemy detection radar as well.

A good amount of dungeons and a single labyrinth reach my senses too. I mentally map out the large city, it is near the size of Solara, but far more densely packed with strong hunters.

There are a few dozen B-Class hunters that touch my perception, and even a handful of A-Class hunters too. One of which, I can feel gravity bending around him, and a red tint in my mind makes me believe this is a red-core holder on the island.

My perception seeps deeper into the city the closer we get, and the more of my power I can use without bursting through my stealth disguise.

I sense five smaller islands in a curved pattern around the back of the island, however, they are also floating above sea level.

At this distance, it's hard to fully make sense of what I'm feeling in my mind's eye.

It's as if one large island, about 60 km wide, and five smaller islands ranging from 2–3 km wide, are all floating above the sea.

There's an empty void below them that appears to be holding them up above the water.

It isn't until we arrive, and I get a view of the island up close with the city lights illuminating the night, that I see it for what it is...

A massive black hand, that looks like it was taken off a statue of a giant as large as the world, sticks up and out of the sea.

On its palm, a fully functioning city rests, with modern skyscrapers, roadways, shopping centers, apartments, housing, dungeon gates, and trade markets.

There's a thick layer of earth that rests above the pitch-black hand, allowing for parks, lawns of bright green grass, and small forests to flourish.

Atop the five fingers of the island, smaller cities stand, and these house many of the stronger hunters.

On the largest of what Raven referred to as the finger cities, the thumb, I can finally sense the presence of two dense yellow wells of gravity within a guarded mansion. It is an estate with nature, walkways, resorts, and many high-grade mana-shielded facilities. One of the most protected facilities on this island has a dense labyrinth portal within it.

On the other four fingers, there are Association-branded buildings with training centers, high-grade dungeons, and housing for many D, C, and B-Class Association hunters.

My gaze scans the entire city many times over as we get closer and closer, then eventually float down to touch down on the outer edge of the city together under the darkness of a well-maintained public park.

As my feet touch the ground, the realization of why the black stone of the hand is completely invisible hits me.

The entire base of this island is an originator artifact. It's completely made of the same black material as the pillar reaching up to the sky in the middle of the Dark Continent.