

D. Diver 341

Chapter 341

The merchant looks at me with a curious gaze.

"What did you even come here for? It's not often people make their way this far north into Sector 1 by accident."

I think to myself for a moment, but shrug and reach into my storage to pull out the silver card with an address from the guild leader on it. While showing the card to the man I reply.

"I'm here to meet a friend, they said I could find them at this address."

His eyes start to widen as he scans the card, and I can visibly see his skin begin to turn paler. After a few seconds pass, he points to the door and speaks in a low tone.

"Just- Just keep making your way north. Once you make it to the walls, I'm sure you'll be able to find that guild."

He audibly gulps and refuses to make eye contact with me again, but I still give him a smile while walking out the door.

"Well alright, thanks for the concealment ring."

There's no response as I walk out into the town's streets and keep walking north as he said to .

His strange behavior makes me become a bit more wary of my surroundings. Just the Solaran worker acting off when I mention Valor City is one thing, but now a second person gives me an odd look when I show him a guild address.

The town goes on for another kilometer uphill, and I make my way through a few smaller districts of residential and green park-like sections with winding paths, small ponds, and healthy grass and trees. The soil is hard, rocky, and cold, but the wildlife seems tough enough to survive in this environment.

Eventually, I finally get a peek at these so-called walls the man in the merchant shop was talking about.

Once far enough north, the apartment buildings become less common, and I actually get a view of the landscape behind this settlement.

What I see is shocking.

As the city thins out, more green grass, winding roads and trails, and wildlife come into view. There's a tall range of mountains behind the city with lively grassy green bases, and snow-capped peaks.

They go on for as far as the eye can see in the distance, and shadows of even taller ones lurk in the background behind the clearly visible ones before my eyes.

The more incredible sight of all is the enormous city atop one of the largest mountains.

It looks like its top was chopped clean off and a city rests on an elevated plateau kilometers above this small town below.

Silver walls surround it, making the height look even greater, and the only reason I know there's a city inside is because of the towering skyscrapers stretching out from the circular walls up high through the cloud line.

My eyes are glued to the magnificent structure as I continue to walk further away from the town behind me and up the winding mountainous paths toward the city.

Many others take the same routes. There are a few silver and red trolley carts that make their way up and down the main road to the city, bringing people to and from, but I decide to enjoy the view and crisp cold air to walk on my own.

Quite a bit of time passes before I start to make my way toward the crowded base of the mountain.

The towering silver walls look even more enormous now that I'm so close. It takes almost an hour to make my way up the mountain to the gate. There are hundreds of people standing in an orderly line, and to my surprise, there are only 2 guards in silver armor that match the walls.

The line slowly moves forward as I prepare to come up with a disguise and pay a fee to enter. One of the masked silver guards speaks up.

"What's it going to be? Silver, Gold, Platinum, or the Royal Coin today, Sir?"

I freeze for a moment, as these words don't make much sense. The guard senses my hesitation and continues.

"This is the city of commerce, what amount of money will you be spending during your stay? Silver, Gold, Platinum, or the Royal Coin?"

I pause again but clear my throat and reply, this time more aware of the question.

"Gold, I'll most likely be spending gold in the city today."

He pulls out a small wristband and replies again while motioning for me to give him something.

"How much gold would you like to insert for starter credits? You may add to your total credits or cash out your credits back into gold at any given time at the credit stations all around the city."

I pull out a small handful of gold and place it in the guard's hand.

"I'll start with 5 gold. Maybe I'll add more later."

He nods and presses a few buttons on the small wristband before allowing me to place it around my left wrist.

The moment it clicks into place, it changes colors from a nearly transparent coloring to now shimmering gold. A few thin black numbers show up on the underside right beneath my wrist.

ID: C#129880

Rank: Gold

Credits: 5.0000

"There you go. Enjoy your time in Valor City. Just scan your wristband at the golden wall if you'd like to enter further into the markets today. You'll need to add more credits if you'd like to travel inside any deeper. To find the gates just walk north from here. You can't miss it."

The guard motions for me to walk through the gate, and I make my way into the silver walls of the city.

High-quality densely packed stone makes up the streets, and the storefronts that line the streets exude prestige the moment I look. With white marble columns and glass windows displaying magical items and jewelry, I walk forward into the city with my eyes open wide.

Everyone within this city is dressed properly in suits and higher-class items. I'm glad I bought the ring to change my appearance before entering. Even if my hunter's gear is worth a small fortune, it still looks rough on the eyes to these cityfolk.

As I walk further into the city, the fact that there aren't people yelling out sales on the streets is rather soothing. It seems as though the shops just display what they have to offer, and customers either buy or they don't.

My eyes sparkle more and more the further into town I get. Using appraisal on every item I can, some of the gear even surpasses 40-50% buffs. If these are the items within the silver walls, I can only imagine what's behind the gold.

This portion of the city looks like an upscaled version of the town I just left. There's not a single apartment, only storefronts and high-class restaurants line the streets.

Further north in the distance where the guard mentioned the next wall was located, the sky scrapers I saw from afar tower above and look even more impressive than I previously thought they were.

However, the further I walk forward, the more I feel as if I'm being watched.

The high presence of mana in the air feels eerily similar to my all-seeing eye skill, but I can't quite pinpoint where it's coming from.

It's not abnormal for a city to have a surveillance unit, but I'm usually able to pick up exactly where it's coming from in a matter of seconds. Today, I'm not having such luck. It seems to be a very intricate system. Though, I'm not breaking any laws or rules, so there shouldn't be anything to worry about.

Another 20 minutes pass before I finally see the golden wall the guard mentioned to me when I entered. As I walk closer, I realize I never even asked the first guard where the Mercenary Guild was located. Hopefully, there's someone at this entrance that can guide me to it.

As I approach, two guards stand in front of the tall golden wall in shimmering gold armor that matches it.

The wall to this next inner wall isn't quite as tall as the one outside, but I can tell it's imbued with mana all the way through and would be much more difficult to break through than any C-Grade mana shielding.

One of the guards holds up a silver tablet, and I raise my wristband to scan it.

As the tablet flashes green, the other golden armored guard opens the wide gate for me to walk through without a single word. I take this opportunity to ask one of them the question that's been on my mind.

"Hey, where exactly can I find the Galeheart Mercenary Guild?"

Simultaneously, I show them the silver card.

The guard that scanned my wrist just stares down at the card through the small slit in his golden helmet before glancing at my wristband and shaking his head.

"Stop messing around, and put away that card. The Royal Guild isn't something to joke about. You'll need 200 times more gold to even think about stepping into the Royal Coin Section of the city."

His eyes dart around underneath the armored helmet like he's watching out for someone or something as he says these words.

I take a step back to make a mental note of his actions just like everyone else I've interacted with today. Third time's a charm, and this sets it in stone. Something is not right here, and I'm going to find out what it is.

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I let out a sigh.

My 5 gold in the credit system apparently needs to be 200 times greater in order to enter this Royal Coin Section of the city. Making the necessary total 1,000 gold coins. Just 100 gold is equal to a platinum coin, so this must mean a single Royal Coin is 10 platinum. I've never heard of this currency before, so it must be a special region-specific one in this city.

I'd have to clear out all the quests in cities similar to the Size of Solara for the next 10 days straight to make that kind of money.

"Is there any way I can contact that guild without entering the inner-most wall?"

He lets out a laugh.

"This is Valor City kid. No one cares who you are, and no one will believe a word you say unless you have the money to back it up. I don't know how you got that card, but I can guarantee you, you won't even get a smell of a single Galeheart Guild member unless you have the coins to enter their domain. Money is everything in this city. That's just the way it works."

I nod, seeing he's not going to budge on this point.

"Is there anywhere in this city one can make money? Or can we only spend it? I've brought quite a bit of gold with me, but unfortunately not enough to make it into that Royal Coin border."

The armored man lets out a long sigh and points off back to the direction I came, then turns his hand to point to a portion of the Silver-walled city I haven't been to yet.

This city stretches all the way around in a circle, so my walk here has hardly scratched the surface of all the sights to see.

"Go check out the arena. People from every rank in the city reside there to place bets and make money on the fighters that take on beasts. If you're feeling lucky, I'd say go check it out. Walk that way and you can't miss it."

I take a look at the open golden gate, then turn back toward the direction the guard pointed with a firm nod.

"Thank you, I'll be back soon."

The gate closes up and I head off in the direction of the arena without another word leaving the inner city behind me for now.

Considering the expression on the guard's face, even if I walk through the golden gates and even into the platinum walls, I won't be making my way all the way through without the money to back myself.

This city doesn't care about your identity. If you have money, then you have power...

I grin to myself with my arms crossed as I walk through the rows and rows of high-end shops.

Eventually, people in the streets start to crowd around and congregate to a single area off in the distance. I follow the crowds until a stone arena that looks similar to a coliseum comes into view. It's right up against the back of the golden wall, and it looks like one of the entrances actually allows people to enter from there.

However, here within the silver walls, there are 3 arching entrances with people flooding in. Outside, projected onto the stone walls above each entrance, there's a display of a blond man with a large scar over his left eye holding a long silver sword.

He stands alone, gripping his blade with two hands, fighting against a massive cyclops.

There's no sound coming off the projector, but as the beast opens its mouth I can imagine the roar it lets out.

The hunter and beast run at each other, but the creature is sliced to pieces in an instant. The ground around the hunters feet rises and crumbles, making it look like he's an earth magic user.

The view on the projector shifts to the rows of seats and cheering crowd. I can't hear a thing until I walk through the lightly humming archway of an entrance with everyone else and enter the arena.

The cheers of a crowd full of hundreds fill my ears and I walk up a few rows of steps to find an empty seat to watch.

The sound of an announcer's voice rings out.

"Stage 2 is complete. The Hunter 'Stone Breaker' has defeated the cyclops and has now decided to move onto the 3rd stage. He'll be facing off against a level 240 High Orc in the next round after the 5-minute cooldown commences. Please feel free to place your bets."

As I hear these words, a small blue window automatically pops out from my wristband.

Place Bet

[Hunter] Stone Breaker: 1.35x

[Monster] High Orc: 2.79x

My mind races to do the math on these odds.

I even try to use inspect and appraisal on the man's gear down below me to get an edge, but there's a mana imbued protective dome that covers the main arena. It must be used as an anti-cheat, but also protects people in the audience from getting harmed by whatever beast is fighting as well.

Clearly, the hunter is the safer bet. By the sound of the crowd, he seems to be a regular.

Some of the voices I hear around me double down on this notion.

"I'm all in on Stone Breaker, this Orc doesn't stand a chance!"

"Yeah me too, he made it to stage 5 before quitting yesterday, so I'm sure he'll come out on top!"

"10 Silver on Stone Breaker!"

I watch the odds of the hunter get closer and closer to 1.00x and the High Orc's payout skyrockets past 10.00x.

However, I'm in no mood to gamble. After a quick calculation, the house takes about 10% of all bets placed here. They win no matter how the fight goes. So, the more bets placed the worse off I'd be. This is not where the money is made.

The real money must be in the fighting itself...

As I come to this conclusion, the announcer's voice echoes throughout the stadium again.

"Thank you all for placing your bets, you have 1 minute to finalize them. The Stone Breaker vs the High Orc match is soon to commence. If any of you are new to the arena and stopping by for the first time, this is how it works!"

I listen attentively, and many others stop their chatter as the announcer continues to speak.

"Every stage, the beasts that are captured by the Valor City Royal Guard are brought to our arena for your entertainment. Stage 1 begins with a monster between level 1 and 50. Stage two, the monster is always above level 100 and below 200. From here, the level range rises by 100 every stage. Every round, the hunter may choose to proceed or stop and take their winnings. All of you are able to bet on the odds of our prized hunters. There is no lower or upper limit to your betting amount. However, every bet placed affects the odds."

The announcer stops talking for a moment, and silence fills the arena. All eyes are on the hunter below as a large red timer counts down from 10.

Once it hits 0, the betting screen disappears.

"Let the battle begin!"

On the opposite side of the stadium, a red-skinned High Orc appears in a flash of white light, wielding two large silver axes full of rage.

It lets out a roar and storms forward, and the hunter runs at the monster with his own blade drawn.

The ground rumbles and the sound of metal on metal fills the area, but in less than 20 seconds the crowd is cheering and erupting with noise again as the monster falls to the ground and the hunter takes his victory lap around the ring.

I chuckle to myself, sit back and cross my arms to enjoy the show.

The next match ends in a similar fashion with the hunter taking a victory in stage 4 against a level 320 mutant wolf-shaped monster I've never seen before, but he doesn't fare as well against the familiar enormous Berserker Giant at level 405 in the 5th Stage.

He's defeated by the monster in the ring and disappears in a flash of white light the moment he's torn to shreds. It seems as though they're using some kind of magical item to ensure the fighters aren't actually critically injured. The beasts on the other hand, they're real and are really slain every match.

The same cheers still ring out in the stadium as he's transported back to a small fighter's booth outside. The fans are here to see a show, they don't care who wins or loses.

A team of 3 guards in Black Armor quickly subjugate the final beast that wasn't killed by the previous hunter.

The Announcer's voice echoes through the room again.

"After a quick intermission, our next fighter will take the stage. For anyone that would like to sign up for tonight's fighting slots, we still have a few available. If you believe you have what it takes to challenge the Arena, please come down to the registration table at any time to talk with a representative and secure your spot."

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The announcer calls for a 30-minute intermission as the next fighter gets ready in the ring.

In the meantime, I make my way toward the registration desk at the far side of the arena. There are two separate booths in the vicinity. One has [Bidders] in bold letters above it, and the other says [Fighters].

I walk up to the fighters' booth in full disguise to meet a blond man in a white suit smiling brightly as I approach.

"The name's Mr. Wright. How can I help you today? Would you be interested in joining the event tonight? We still have time slots open."

I nod slowly before replying.

"Nice to meet you. I'm new to town. Could you run me through the numbers? How does the event work in terms of fighters' pay?"

He glances at my golden wristband, then looks up to me to reply with a bright expression.

"Well, as I'm sure you've already guessed, the city takes a percent of all bids in the arena. This facility and the auction house in the platinum district are the two main income sources for the Valor City Government. It's what allows business in the city to run tax-free."

I raise an eyebrow at his remark but decide not to question it too much. As he said, I already did the math and know 10% of all bids don't get paid out to the bidders. So that money has to go somewhere.

"As I assume you watched at least some of the previous event, Stone Breaker walks away with a few gold coins every showing, I'm sure of it. Stages 1-3 are what we call the beginner stages. If you

pass stage 1, the arena will pay you 1 silver coin. For passing stage 2, you'll receive 10 silver, and for stage 3, you're awarded 30."

I tighten my lips and give him a confused look, but he replies, catching onto my disappointment.

"I can see you're already a gold rank guest to Valor City, so these silver rewards may not be very enticing to you. Stage 4, the level 300 monster threshold is where things get interesting. If you win your fight in stages 4, 5, or 6, you earn 1% of all bids on the show. Just a single stage 4 victory on a busy night can set up hunters for life. What do you think?"

I smirk.

"What about the higher stages? How far up can it go?"

This seems like a good money opportunity, but also a controlled environment to farm levels and skills.

The man behind the counter lets out a laugh.

"Yeah right. If you make it past stage 7, 5% of the biddings go straight to your credit account, but no one other than one of our top fighters and members of the royal guard can beat monsters like that. Here, walk this way with me, let's do the registration test to see if you're even strong enough for the nighttime event."

He exits the booth and we walk around its right side.

Against a stone wall, there's a rubber-like padding that I can feel mana seeping out from. It's almost as dense as the shielding dome that covers the arena. At first, I thought it was just a protective measure for the people behind the booth, but now upon closer inspection, it seems to be some kind of testing device.

The man in the white suit points up at the digital screen above the large black square on the wall.

"I'll need proof of any elemental abilities you claim, then I need a punch or a kick on this device to break 300 points. The use of strength-boosting items or buffs is allowed, use everything you've got. That's the baseline for late-night hunters, we want to make sure everyone can at least make it to stage 4."

I step forward with a nod, putting a finger in the air and lighting it with a dark red flame before putting it out a moment later and squaring up against the testing device.

"I'll be using fire, and 300 points... what exactly does that mean? How strong is a single point?"

"Points are calibrated to the average strength per level gained. The baseline of a level 300 hunter's strength is what we're looking for."

I focus on the wall, and slow my breathing while trying to tone down my power to just over what a level 300 hunter might be. To be honest, I'm not quite sure how to hit this measurement exactly, but I don't want to use too much of my power and cause any problems right now.

So, I stand casually with both my feet in place and use a small fraction of my strength to release a punch while lining my fist with a small amount of mana not to unnecessarily injure my hand. I imagine the strength I would use to send a level 300 hunter flying back, but not kill them. This seems to be enough strength.

On impact, the entire black square ripples and flashes bright blue. I hear the stone wall behind it crack slightly, but luckily as I bring my fist back everything is still standing and still in place without a problem.

My gaze turns to the 3 black numbers on the digital screen above that continue to rise while calculating my power.

[479 Points]

I curse under my breath as the man that brought me out here lets out an excited sound from behind.

"Ha! Look at you. You must have some great gear on to push a number like that. Maybe you'll join the legacy fighters and make it past the 5th stage. It looks like Valor City is in for an interesting show!"

He laughs again, and it only makes me realize how out of touch with my strength I am. With all my gear on, even if I hardly try, my strength is near what a base-level elite association hunter would be.

Even so, it looks like this reading isn't going to be much of a problem. Whoever these so-called legacy fighters are, they seem to be on par or higher than the reading I just threw. This only makes me more excited. The fact that there really are monsters here available higher than my own level means I can't miss out on an event like this.

I join in with his laughter before replying.

"Sign me up for tonight's event. I'd like to give it a shot."

Money signs practically light up in the man's eyes as he walks back behind the counter. He picks up a silver tablet and begins tapping it a few times.

"Sure, let me scan your wristband ID and get you connected to the system with the number of points you just had recorded. With a reading like this, you're allowed to come by anytime you'd like to participate. The limit is one entry per day. It's fully confidential, so we don't need your actual status level or any specific gear stats, but we would like to know your main combat skill that you'll be using and a stage name to go with it. I've already recorded that you'll be using fire, but what would you like us to call you?"

Flashbacks of my time in the underground fight arena back in Vice City pop into my head and I smirk inwardly before replying.

"My stage name? Call me The Flame Emperor."

After a few more taps on the silver screen, and the smile across the man behind the counter's face growing wider and wider, he looks up to me.

"I like it. You're all set. The midday fights still have a few left to run through, then there will be an intermission before the main events tonight. So, feel free to enjoy the show or explore the city for a while longer. A reminder will be sent to your wristband an hour before the night events. During this intermission, you'll have to come back here to be granted access into the ring and given the proper gear to prevent real injury during the show."

"Sounds good. I'll see you very soon."

With that, I turn to walk out of the arena and back onto the streets. I'd like to keep up my appearances, so I weave in and out of item shops in the streets before I find what I'm looking for.

A glossy black mask with the appearance of obsidian stone, but the weightlessness of a feather. The young lady at the front of the store greets me with a smile as I bring her just the one item.

"Just the mask? Are you sure there aren't any non-ornamental magic items you're looking for today, Sir?"

I shake my head.

"No. Just this."

"Alright, That will be half a silver credit."

I put out my wrist and she scans it with a small silver device.

Before my eyes, the 5.0000 gold credits drop to 4.9950 credits. I place the mask into my coat pocket, but it really falls into my item storage as I walk out the door.

"Thank you very much, come again soon!"

Her voice trails off as I explore the city more. I keep an eye on the golden wall and think about entering the first layer of the inner city, but decide it'd be best to take things slow and finish up this event before I explore too far into this place.

I won't even be able to get much further than the gold walls without putting every gold coin I earned in Solara into this credit system. I don't quite trust a digital system like this to hold all my money, so I'm better off earning as much as I can from a special event tonight and see how far that takes me.

Before I know it, the sun starts to set slightly and the sky turns orange overhead. My breath in the cold air comes out as frozen mist and mana-powered streetlamps automatically turn on at every corner.

As this happens, I get a notification on my wristband telling me the intermission has finally begun and it's time for me to check in and verify myself before the main event.

I put on the glossy black mask and make my way back over and walk in as crowds of people walk out to nearby restaurants and shops in town to spend their time before tonight's show.

When I walk in, the place seems eerily empty, but I see the blond man in the white suit waiting nearby the registration booth. He stands with a silver tablet in hand and 7 other fighters talk amongst themselves in a semi-circle.

He recognizes me even with the mask and waves me down from a distance and speaks up as I join the crowd.

"Very good, everyone's made it here. The preparations can begin."

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As I walk up to the seven other fighters, I can clearly see they're split into two groups.

One group of four, off to my right, is dressed in high-class gear, similar to what I'd expect an Elite to wear. The first to turn their head is a slim, womanly figure in armor that seems to be made of stone. She has sharp eyes, dark brown hair, and holds a spear, but shows me an interested smirk as I approach and speaks up.

"Finally, some fresh meat that looks worth keeping around. They call me the Stone Maiden; I'm the opener for the legacy fighters. But outside the ring, you can call me Sia."

She steps forward to give me a handshake.

Before I put out my hand, I decide to take off my concealment ring to show my fighting gear and other buffs.

We shake hands and make eye contact while I take a look at her status to find she has an advanced earth magic skill and is level 512. The buff below her status shows "Rock Prison," but there isn't any extra information I can take away at a glance.

I'm about to introduce myself, but a man in dark black clothing approaches from behind. He has two blood-bonded swords on his sides that both have high strength and speed buffs surpassing 100%.

He looks me up and down, then nods.

Sia speaks up for him before releasing our handshake and pointing a thumb backward.

"That's Ace, the Swordsman of the Legacy Fighters."

I quickly scan him to find he has one legendary-grade skill; extreme speed. He's level 531 and has a ranked-up buff called "Divine Speed."

A tall and heavy-set man comes over with a legendary-grade body-hardening skill next to greet me with a jolly smile. I see his level 548 status flash in front of my eyes along with a ranked-up buff labeled "Iron Body."

He gives me a tight handshake, but I return the favor. He squeezes harder like he's trying to test me, but I don't give in until he lets out a laugh and releases his grip.

"Ha! You're the real deal. They call me The Shield. I'm a Legacy Fighter as well. But, you can call me Max if that's easier for you! I'm not trying to hide from anyone."

I nod slowly, a bit taken aback by their friendly gestures while scanning the rest of the contestants around me. The three others that stand alone, closer to the man in the white suit, are all below level 450, and don't immediately come up to me, and none have elemental or legendary skills, so I can only assume they're newer here or not top-ranked fighters like the ones that greeted me.

However, there's a young man with a shaved head in an orange robe who stands still behind all the other legacy fighters.

He doesn't wear any magical gear and has no skills or buffs at all.

Even so, his level is higher than anyone else's here. It clocks in at 694.

I try to do a full scan to see what kind of base level mana control he lets out while in a resting state, but to my surprise, there isn't even a single MP of excess mana leaving his body.

He doesn't raise an eyebrow or care to walk forward and greet me at all. This is the response I was looking forward to when meeting fighters of this caliber. Max catches me looking at him and puts a hand up, motioning not to get involved.

"That's Monk. We don't know much about him, but he's been here the longest out of any of us. He's the strongest too, so let's just leave it at that..."

I sit in an awkward moment of silence as all the top fight members here just openly told me their names, so I reply with mine.

"Well, thanks for the warm welcome. My fighter name is The Flame Emperor. For now, that's all I have to share."

I turn back to the man who checked me in at the registration desk.

Although I appreciate the introductions, people don't just become ranked-up battle-seasoned fighters by smiling and playing nice.

I need to sit back and observe more about this place to understand what's really going on.

The man in the white suit finally speaks up and leads all of us behind the registration desk and down a flight of stairs to the training room beneath the stage. He goes over all the basic fight details and instructions that were outlined for us earlier.

We're stood in a large, wide-open white-walled mana-shielded room with a staircase that leads back up to the surface behind us, and a small isolated circle on the other end of the room that transports contestants into the ring.

In between, there are punching bags along the walls, special black squares just like on the surface to test powers, and even weapons and shields available for fighters to use in the arena as they please.

It's all C-Rank gear and below, but it still looks like it would be useful for the average fighter during normal daytime fights.

As we all get situated, a crowd of bidders and audience members enters above us, and a moving picture of the stadium and empty fight ring is shown on a projector against one of the side walls for us to see.

I hear Mr. Wright's voice echo through the training room once the seats fill up about halfway.

"Alright, the first event is going to begin shortly! Everybody line up, I'll assign your fighting order for the night along with setting up safety precautions."

Everyone does as he says and gets in line as he takes out a small device to scan each member's wristband. My eyes wander as I see gold and platinum bands in front of me get scanned in by Mr. Wright's device. He speaks again while scanning my band.

"You all know how it works. If your HP goes under 10% you'll be automatically teleported to our medical team to receive a full heal from one of our two healers on standby. Lost blood, missing limbs, whatever the injury may be, given enough time you'll be healed back to 100% before the next fight day comes around."

Ding

As he scans my bracelet a small green plus sign with 100% appears next to it. Beneath this, the "Fight 008" shows up in thin black text as well. He continues.

"We have 8 fights tonight, and I've staggered the Legacy fighters in with the newbies as usual. Stone Maiden, you're up first for fight number 1, so finish your warmups and get ready to board the platform. Let's put on a great show tonight and make some money!"

Sia, the Stone Maiden, walks over to the platform with the same grin across her face that she greeted me with and begins twirling her spear around.

"Ready when you are! I don't need a warm up."

As the people outside pile in more and more, the same announcer's voice from mid-day fights speaks up in a loud and excited tone.

"How are you all doing tonight? Let's make some noise! Our opening event is about to begin!"

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The stadium fills up to its limit. The crowd that piles in is almost three times as large as the mid-day fights. From the projector screen below, I can see that every seat is filled and people are attentively waiting for the night show to begin.

With the dark star-filled sky above, and mana-imbued light sources illuminating the arena below, it's almost impossible to see the invisible protective dome between the actual fight ring and the cheering crowds ready for a blood bath.

Sia stands on the transport platform with her spear in hand and a serious look on her face.

Then, she disappears from the warmup room, and is teleported into the ring.

"Let's hear a warm welcome for our nightly opener! She's been a regular the past few months in the arena, with a standing record of 46 Stage 5 Victories and 3 Stage 6 Wins. The Stone Maiden is here to put on a show for you all tonight, so get your bets ready, and enjoy!"

She waves to the eruption of noise in the stands and takes a lap around the arena as the announcer continues to explain the event rules to anyone new that has joined for tonight's event. Soon after, the stage 1 monster is brought into the ring and bets are placed.

A small white rabbit with a long brown horn on its forehead materializes into the ring and the battle begins, but is over in an instant.

As Sia shows off with an overpowered spear throw, tossing her weapon across the ring while raising the ground beneath the creature all around it so it has nowhere to run or hide. It's defeated and explodes into pieces along with the rock wall display that held it up in an explosion of stone.

Max smirks and walks up to my side with his arms crossed down below in the training rooms as we watch it all happen on the screen.

"She's just getting the crowd excited. No one bets on the first couple of fights because the odds and payouts are nearly nothing. Stage 5 and 6 is where the real money is at... Just wait and see."

He grins and stares up at the screen as the stage is cleared and the next monster is brought in without a moment of wait.

Stages 2, 3, and 4 end in all similar results. Beasts of level 118, 249, and 326 are all brought in and one-shotted in a magnificent display for the crowd to enjoy. This is why Sia didn't bother to warm up, the first 4 fights are more than enough.

I whisper under my breath.

"Now this is where the real fights begin..."

Sia takes the full 5 minutes to rest in between this stage and the next before the announcer speaks up again.

"We have a monster that many of you witnessed take out our best midday fighter today. The Berserker Giant. A level 405 beast with impressive battle IQ and destructive power. Will the Stone Maiden face the same fate? Place your bets and find out!"

I grin as I watch the numbers on my wristband actually show some different odds. All of the previous stages there was not much movement on the bets, but now people are much less sure if she can beat the monster before her.

I'm confident in her ability, and turn my gaze to see every one of the legacy fighters looking down at their wristwatches and placing bets.

Max speaks again as he sees my confusion.

"You can bet on any fight you please, even your own. But you're only allowed to bet on yourself winning, other than that, there are no rules against betting on other fighters."

I raise an eyebrow at this. Apparently, insider betting isn't frowned upon at all...

However, there's always someone deeper in with more information calling the real shots. I won't risk any capital until I'm in control of the fight itself. For now, I'll observe and enjoy the show.

A few minutes pass and the giant humanoid monster with sharp teeth and green eyes carrying a shimmering silver sword is teleported into the ring.

"Bets are now closed, let the battle begin!"

Sia uses similar tactics as her previous matches, but to my surprise, the monster isn't killed in a single shot.

The spear hits and its armor is severely damaged with blood dripping out, but this is the first monster with mana control in the event that I've seen so far. She's able to break through. But just enough to injure the beast.

It breaks out from the rock that creeps up its ankles and jumps toward the spear wielder with battle-crazed eyes and blood-stained armor.

She activates her ranked-up buff and I see two semi-circles of stone materialize out of thin air on both sides of the beast.

A loud thud sends ripples through the air as the stone crushes the life out of the monster. The crowd stands up and goes wild. Sia drops to a knee with a smile, then takes a victory lap to retrieve her spear and let the remains crumble from her rock formation.

As she takes a break, the announcer hypes up the crowd again.

"A rare occasion for the Stone Maiden to take on the 6th stage. You're all in for a treat tonight, will she be able to take on the level 566 Red Ogre, or will this be a one-sided battle?"

My eyes light up and are locked to the screen at this mention.

A new monster at a level higher than anything I've ever seen in dungeons other than a few extremely rare breaks and labyrinth boss fights. Yet, this city just lets people fight them like it's an every day thing.

The crowd starts to yell so loud, I can feel the entrance of the training room rattle, and people start to stand up in their chairs.

The odds on my wristband are against the legacy fighter for the first time in this whole event. Based on what I've seen so far my bet would be against her too, but I can't wait to get in that ring myself.

Minutes pass, and the monster is transported into the ring.

It towers above any creature I've seen in here all night, easily 4 times my own height and carries an enormous black club. Its skin is dark red, and teeth are bright white. The silver chestplate it has on reflects off the mana-imbued light fixtures as it lets out a ferocious roar.

At this, the battle begins.

However, it glows bright gold and zips around the ring with agility far greater than the Stone Maiden attempting to dodge.

She activates her Stone Prison Buff that took out the berserker giant in one hit last round, but the red ogre smashes it to pieces with a single hit from its club.

Sia is hit next, and is teleported out of the ring as her wristband hits 10% HP in a matter of milliseconds.

The crowd roars louder and the excitement in the ring grows even greater while the Black Knights are sent in from seemingly no where to defeat this beast in an instant while the arena is cleaned and the announcer hypes up the next upcoming fighter.

I murmur to myself.

"They sure do know how to open a show..."

My eyes stay glued to the screen, and I tingle with excitement. I can't wait for my turn in the arena to come.

Chapter 346

The next contestant is one of the newer fighters. He's a dagger user with considerable skill, making it past stage 4 unscathed but losing in the 5th to a large snake creature with scales too hard for his weapons to penetrate.

This event was a nice palette cleanser for what's to come next, the announcer speaks as Max walks onto the platform.

"I welcome the next Legacy fighter you all know well back onto the stage, The Shield!"

The crowd perks up and starts to cheer just like they did in the first event.

"With 91 Stage 5 Victories and 16 Stage 6 wins, you're in for another incredible show. Let the fight begin!"

Max pulls a large war hammer out from an item box around his waist, then throws it to the ground by his side outside the transport circle before he's sent to the arena.

I hear the whispers of one of the fighters behind me remind his friend that no item boxes or potions are allowed in the event. This wasn't mentioned to me before, but I take note of it now. I'll have to take all my items I wish to use out of my storage before getting on stage not to cause suspicion.

Just like the contestants before, he does a lap to hype up the crowd before the event even begins.

Once the battles start, it's a picture-perfect version of Sia's run.

The moment an opponent appears, he runs across the ring and strikes them down with his hammer. For stages 1 through 4, every beast is killed in a single strike.

The tank looks like he would be slow, with a heavy shield and massive hammer, but his speed and agility are no match even against a level 430 Mutant Yeti in the 5th Stage.

The monster's mana control looks fairly developed, but Max takes the beast out in 3 swings, leaving the creature lifeless in a pile of its own blood in seconds.

He gives the announcer the go-ahead to start the next round without a break, and the same thing happens. All the betting odds flip against the legacy fighter. It seems round 6 is their usual limit.

A huge scaled lizard creature standing on two legs is transported in. It wears light silver armor with various weapons strapped to its sides, and the creature carries a bow. The mana shielding around its body is visible to the naked eye, and it's clear the creature is imbuing its weapon with mana as well.

It's a level 549 lizard archer of some sort; it looks nothing like anything I've seen in any dungeon.

The fight begins and it zips around the arena with blinding speed.

Although I thought Max was quick for his size, this creature is nearly twice as fast.

The crowd goes crazy, and many members of the audience yell out in excitement and fury, contradicting each other and arguing about who is going to win this fight. Others just cheer and keep their eyes glued to the fight below as it's a very interesting one to watch.

The lizardman readies a shot, and for the first time, Max activates his ranked-up buff. Along with the silver coating from his legendary body hardening skill, and a thin layer of mana shielding he's just capable enough to conjure, the "Iron Body" buff he uses places another layer around both of the lower ones, including his shield and hammer in a dark Iron coloring.

The mana-imbued arrow bounces off his shield and shatters into pieces as the metallic twang of mana being dispersed echoes through the air.

Then another hits him from the opposite side, and the same result repeats itself.

Over and over, the lizard archer zips around the dirt floor with incredible speed, firing off arrow after arrow directed right at the tank's vital points. They're blocked time and time again until the monster runs out of arrows completely.

The moment it does, the monster throws its bow to the floor and grabs two daggers from its sides. Its battle IQ is off the charts. If I didn't know this was a monster, I could easily confuse its movements for a human's.

The projector zooms in on Max as this exchange occurs, and a smirk can be seen across his face.

Close-range combat begins, and the lizardman begins to try slicing through the Iron Body defenses but is struck with the same predicament.

Its daggers are blown back by miniature explosions of mana every time it attempts to attack, and after half a dozen lunges in, one of its silver daggers breaks in two. This is when the battle completely changes...

It's clear the tank can't follow its opponent's movements to the exact points of contact, but with his defensive abilities, it's not even necessary.

Every time there's contact with his Iron Body, the tank spins around and attempts to land a blow with his hammer. It takes quite a while, but the lizard's movements are limited when it's surprised at the dagger breaking on impact.

This small hesitation gives Max enough time to finally make contact with one of his hammer strikes and send the lizard flying in the air to hit the clear barrier of mana shielding high up in the ring's inner dome.

Another small explosion of white mana erupts from the barrier, propelling the monster back as it makes impact, sending the creature flying toward the floor at double the speed it came up at.

The lizard hits the floor, creating a crater, and before it can think to move, Max comes swinging down on it with his hammer to land a final strike.

The crowd around the ring can't believe their eyes, and everyone goes wild as the announcer yells out, only to hype the crowd up more.

"Can you believe it? The Shield! He's done it! Our first stage 6 victory of the night!"

Max raises his shield and hammer up in the air to celebrate. As he yells this out, the buffs and active skills on him deactivate, and he falls to the floor next to the lizardman because of a lack of MP.

The announcer plays it off as a usual occurrence, and many from the crowd don't even seem to care that he's unable to move on. Everyone is still excited for the first event of the night with unexpected results. Some people that still bet on Max just made over 3x their money back.

Before the hype is lost, another newer contestant is brought onto the stage to give the crowd a cooldown again. People continue to talk about the results of the final match for many fights that follow, not paying much attention to the fighter that makes it through the 4th round and gets defeated in the 5th just like the other newbie.

Ace, the swordsman, takes hold of both his blades and walks up to the transport platform. He doesn't say a word, looking very serious as he's teleported onto the ring and the announcer gives his introduction.

"Everyone welcome one of our newest Legacy Fighters, Ace! With a record of 14 Stage 5 Victories, and 13 Stage 6 Wins, you're all in for one of the best fights of the night here! Make some noise!"

Ace stands still in the ring as each new opponent is spawned in and runs toward him. Stages 1 through 4 go by in a flash as he raises a thumb after each match to continue without the rest period offered in between.

After all 4 of the starting matches, he hasn't even moved a foot out of place. The swordsman just waits for the monster that spawns in to attack him and he swings a glossy black blade from his right side every time they come in range.

There's a thin white light that appears around the blade each time he swings it, showing it's imbued with mana.

As stage 5 starts, I expect the fighter to act differently, but he still just stands still. However, this time the swordsman grabs both of his swords and slices the level 446 creature into pieces in an X formation without batting an eye.

Stage 6 comes around, and the betting stats are going wild when the announcer yells out that the same type of monster that defeated the Stone Maiden opener in a single hit will be his opponent too, a Red Ogre.

The crowd fills with whispers, and the odds for the fighter and monster fluctuate greatly as mystery fills the colosseum.

Once the level 569 Red-Skinned Ogre is teleported to the arena, the crowd starts to cheer louder and louder. Instead of the huge metal club the last variant had, this one carries a long black sword.

Ace smiles and his eyes finally show a hint of life.

Before the battle even begins, the swordsman shifts his stance and readies his blades. Then, the roar of the beast and its shimmering glowing golden strength allow the battle to begin.

The man dressed in black activates his legendary grade extreme speed skill and matches the impossible agility of the Red Ogre in an instant. There's a loud metallic clang and scraping sound that rings out as the two blades of the fighter collide with the Ogre's.

The moment they do, a blue light flashes around the swordsman's body, and he twists around the Ogre's blade with ease. If my natural perception wasn't so high, I'd completely miss what just happened. I'm sure 99% of the audience did.

The swordsman activates his divine speed buff and lands two clean hits on the Ogre's torso before flashing across the area to prepare for another exchange.

Two open wounds appear on its frontside, and before it even turns to see the swordsman facing its back, he already deactivates his buff and stands in a ready position to fight again.

Consumed with rage, the monster runs forward and following the loud clang of metal on metal, there's a small flash of blue light and the swordsman is on the other side of the ring without a scratch on him. Meanwhile, two more open wounds cover the beast's chest.

This repeats 4 more times until the Ogre's movements start to slow down.

Its body gets covered in a red veil of energy. I can't use my inspect or appraisal skills from here, but I can only assume it's a conditional stat-boosting final move.

The swordsman sees this and glows bright blue before their next exchange even starts. He starts zipping around the ring at speeds I doubt anyone here can even hope to perceive in their lifetime. In less than a second, the swordsman returns back to the position he stands in and turns off his buff while falling to one knee.

In the same instant, the ferocious glowing red ogre falls into pieces, and the red glow fades as a crimson liquid stains the floor below it.

The audience goes wild. They have no idea what just happened, but know the fighter won.

Ace wipes his swords clean of the monster's blood while standing back to his feet and giving the Announcer the go-ahead to push him to the next round.

"That's right, folks! Our second stage 6 win of the night! This brings us to our first stage 7 duel."

Chapter 347

Ace seems to be extremely strong. He just took out a monster many levels higher than himself with ease, using only his swords and mana, no extra combat skills. However, I can tell he's breathing heavily. That divine speed buff he uses in a flash of blue light looks like it takes a lot of MP out of him.

"Please would you all begin placing your bets, the Royal Knights are preparing a level 672 Mutant Ghoul."

Just by hearing its level, my mind is running wild. On top of that, its name is like nothing I've ever heard before either. They really do have unique and powerful monsters here.

The crowd goes silent as they whisper to themselves and place their bets.

When I look down at the odds, the favor is against Ace many times over. I sit and wait, hoping to gauge the strength of what this creature would be that is about to be released into the ring.

Once the announcer closes the bets, a flash of white light welcomes the Ghoul into the fight. I get a glimpse of its tall humanoid frame, just a head or two taller than the swordsman across the ring. It wears ragged clothing and has pale white skin tinted almost yellow in color.

It has no hair on any part of its body. Its eyes glow orange and its teeth look rotted away. There's a light aura around it that matches its eyes, and the faint glow reflects off its two silver swords.

On its left wrist, I notice a shimmering platinum wristband, but can't make out what it says on it or figure out how or why a monster would have one of those on them.

In bare feet, the creature sprints forward at its opponent the instant it's teleported into the ring. Its body leaves the orange mist behind and Ace reacts by activating his divine speed buff without hesitating at all.

There's a loud clang less than half a second later as the two collide in the middle of the fight arena.

It's followed by flashing orange and blue lights as the two match each other's speed without a problem. Seconds pass, and the blue glow around the swordsman weakens while the orange mist around the Ghoul only grows denser.

I can see the grin and sparkling eyes of the swordsman grow with anticipation after every clash they exchange. His eyes track the monster's blade, but with his ranked-up buff slowly shutting down it's clear he doesn't have much time left.

Still, the swordsman is using every exchange as a learning opportunity. His reason for coming out to the ring makes a lot of sense to me now. He just wants to fight stronger swordsmen, monster or human I can only assume it doesn't matter. Right here is exactly where he can experience it every night. Win or lose, this is a successful match in his eyes.

The blue buff completely dissipates, and as a result, the swordsman's divine speed goes away with it.

In less than half a dozen more exchanges, the fighter is outclassed by the pure speed and battle IQ of this mysterious Ghoul Monster. Ace is transported back to the medical team once he hits 10% HP after a number of deadly hits.

It didn't make a sound, and only mimicked the swordsman's battle style.

Before I can study it anymore, a flash of white light brings the Ghoul away from the ring as well. This isn't the normal way they're usually taken out of the arena, but the only thing I can think of is its wristband that I spotted prior to the brawl. Maybe it would be too difficult or take too long for a guard squad to take a monster like this out. So, it must be standard procedure to teleport them to a save containment chamber after the match.

After this fight, there are a few cheers, but mostly whispers and small talk about the Red Ogre fight beforehand. Most people predicted the outcome of this match without a problem, and a lot of the audience couldn't even perceive what really happened.

While the audience continues to gossip about Ace, the next newbie fighter is brought on and clears the first 4 stages without much issue. He's able to defeat the 5th stage with a desperate move, but both him and the monster fall to the floor in the end.

He's unable to move on to the next round, but fights like this are what the crowd loves to see. The excitement is coursing through the ring once again. Especially in anticipation after the mention of the next fighter.

"Now, it's the moment you've all been waiting for. The main event of the night. Our longest standing legacy fighter. You all know who I'm talking about... let's make some noise!"

The crowd's regulars start cheering loudly and stomping their feet to make as much commotion as possible. The new watchers that have come into the city for the first time all join in on the fun and the energy in the air is ecstatic.

Underneath the ring in the training room, there's only one other person left other than me; the bald young man in the orange robe.

He steps onto the transport circle and is teleported in an instant.

"Welcome, Monk! With a standing win record of 316 Stage 5 Victories, 204 Stage 6 Wins, and 141 Stage 7 Clears, please make some noise for the champ!"

He appears in the center of the stage with his head down and his hands clasped.

The crowd only goes more wild, but is calmed down after a few minutes once the announcer brings in the first fight and everyone places their bets.

A single green hobgoblin with a pair of daggers at level 30 enters the ring and runs toward the man in the orange robe.

The crowd goes silent as the man steps forward to put his hands up in a fighting stance.

Still, there is no visible mana surrounding him or any sign of skills or magic being used. I'm thoroughly confused.

As the monster steps closer he does too, adjusting his hand positioning ever so slightly with every movement the hobgoblin makes.

Once they're close enough to clash, the young man throws a punch at the monster's side while narrowly dodging its incoming blades.

The punch sends the monster backward a few meters and it lets out a shriek, but to my utter shock, the beast isn't defeated.

It runs close with its blades at the ready again and all the man does is dodge them just barely and throw another punch back.

The monster is visibly hurt with some broken bones and much slower movements, but this doesn't make any sense at all.

Monk is nearly level 700, and he's not even able to one-shot a level 30 hobgoblin...

My eyes track the two opponents on the screen for another dozen exchanges until the monster's movements slow down more and more after every hit. After 16 attacks, the hobgoblin finally falls to the floor in a bloodied and bruised state.

The fighter is unscathed and the crowd erupts into cheers, I on the other hand have no idea what just happened.

I murmur to myself as the announcer begins hyping up the next stage.

"How is this guy the number 1 fighter in the arena?"

Chapter 348

The next few fights that follow play out exactly the same as the first. Monk adjusts his speed and power to whatever opponent he's facing and takes them out in about 2-3 minutes each time; dodging the incoming hits and only throwing normal punches at the monsters' vital points.

In stage 2, a level 113 Orc gets pummeled around the ring and is defeated in 17 punches.

Next, in stage 3, a level 251 bloodhound gets circles run around it and is defeated in 14 punches.

After this, in stage 4, a level 340 humanoid creature with three eyes and a heavy club is taken out in 15 punches.

Every round that passes makes me question what powers this man really has more and more. He's clearly using mana in some way, but it's invisible to the naked eye. There's no shielding that covers his body, and not even a layer of mana over his punches either.

I know there's a trick, I just don't know what it is...

Stage 5 comes along, and he takes out an enormous mutant bear-like creature with long white claws and a thick brown hide in just 13 hits.

The man doesn't break a sweat.

Every round that passes, the fights look exactly the same. Each time I think I'm going to witness him slipping up and showing a hint of mana or hidden ability, but I'm mistaken with every stage that follows.

The 6th stage comes around, and the man gracefully jumps around the arena with ease, twisting and turning away from the same lizard archer creature that Max faced in his fight.

Monk's speed matches the lizardman without a problem, and the arrows seem to fly by him mere millimeters away every single time. After his careful dodges, he manages to get in close, and just like every other opponent, the monster is taken out in just 14 punches.

My mouth is left wide open after this fight.

I saw how fast and powerful these stage 6 monsters were against seasoned battle veterans even with their ranked-up skills activated. For this man, he's using the same effort in this fight as he did in the first hobgoblin's brawl.

"This makes no sense...."

Although I may have this reaction, the crowd outside is going wild. Newcomers to the arena don't know what to make of his battle style and are hesitant to bet on him in these higher rounds, opting for the monsters, while regulars are betting solely on Monk every round and making a small fortune.

This must be the real money maker of the night. Even if it seems predictable, there are always new people coming into the city to enjoy the show.

My eyes stay glued to the screen as stage 7 begins, and the exact same level 672 Ghoul from the previous round against Ace enters the ring.

Monk does a bow before the match starts, unlike any of his other matches. Then, begins his fight with the pale-skinned beast with orange energy leaking from its eyes and pores.

Because of the starting bow, I thought maybe this fight would be different, but the man just speeds up more, running around the ring with ease and punching the Ghoul with lightning fast fists when it leaves itself open after each sword swing.

Without activating my perception buffs, it's almost difficult to track their movements. However, the fight just looks exactly the same. Dodge and punch, that's all this man does.

None of his punches show any signs of mana imbued, but an interesting phenomenon I see is every time he makes impact, the glow in the Ghoul's eyes gets brighter for a fraction of a second. Then after, it dims slightly lower than before it was punched.

Over and over, 15 punches later and the orange light in the Ghoul's eyes goes out. The creature falls to the floor, seemingly unharmed on the outside, but devoid of energy remaining within.

It's overwhelming speed and strength against Ace, the swordsman last round seemed as if it wasn't even there anymore. The creature in the ring seemed like it was helpless against just simple punches.

Monk steps back and bows again at the spot where the remains of the monster once stood. Its teleported away and the crowd erupts in cheers.

"There you go folks! Our one and only stage 7 victory of the night! What an amazing showing! That only begs the question, Monk, are you ready to proceed to the 8th round?"

The moving picture display pans to the fighter standing alone in the ring. He crosses his arms and shakes his head.

"Still not ready yet I see! Well, you'll all have to come back tomorrow to see if Monk will take on the undefeated 8th stage..."

Monk is transported back into the training room in front of me as the crowd cheers his name and the announcer continues.

"Now... We usually end our showings on this stage 7 victory, but tonight we've decided to throw in an extra wildcard that you're all sure to enjoy!"

The audience goes silent and begins to whisper among each other, trying to figure out what's going on.

Monk gets off the transport platform and makes eye contact with me for the first time. I see an orange shimmer beneath his gaze for a split second but can't tell if it's just his robe's reflection or my imagination.

Either way, the announcer's words are my cue to get onto the stage.

I reach into my item storage beneath my cloak and pull out The Flame Emperor's sword while smirking inwardly and whispering under my breath.

"Now, it's time for the real show to begin."

The moment I step on, the transfer magic of the teleportation circle reacts with my wristband, and I'm sent into the fight arena with hundreds of people looking at me from every side. The blinding mana-imbued lighting fixtures make it almost impossible to see outside the ring; the only thing clearly visible is exactly what's in front of me.

"Welcome, The Flame Emperor! This is a fighter debut, with 0 wins in any event so far. A true wildcard, and an exhilarating event to end the night off. He could be defeated in stage 4, or he could make his way to the 8th. We have no information on this fighter other than his signature elemental skill, fire."

At this, there are some oohs and aahs from the crowd around me, then a notification pops up on my wristband in blue text asking how much I'd like to bet on myself.

I smirk and place 1 gold credit on myself as a starting bet to see how it all works. In the same instant, the announcer starts the show.

"The stage 1 fight against a level 17 horned rabbit will begin in 10... 9..."

As he counts down, I hold my sword steady and point it forward where the monsters appeared in every event prior to this one.

I have two options right now. I can take things slow and work my way up like Monk and Ace did, or be flashy from the start like the Stone Maiden and Max.

Once the transfer magic on the other side of the ring begins to shimmer and a fluffy white rabbit with a long brown horn appears in front of me, I activate my fire magic and run forward.

Chapter 349

Showing off my full strength from the start is not a good option; it wouldn't be an optimal move. Having the odds stacked against me in the later rounds would be the best strategy for potentially greater payouts from betting on myself.

However, there's no reason not to put on a show and get the crowd excited. I get paid the same amount for the first three stages regardless, so I might as well build up some hype.

With this in mind, I raise my left hand above my head and begin forming a ball of fire that grows larger as I approach the tiny rabbit.

Just at the sight of my dark red flames, the crowd begins to cheer and become excited.

Instead of swinging my sword, I throw the flaming ball of magic, about five times the size of the rabbit, down onto it, instantly incinerating the miniature beast. Plumes of fire erupt from the ground, and dirt and stone fly off in all directions.

It was overkill for a small monster like this, but nothing so immaculate as to raise any suspicions that I'd be any better than any of the other newbies competing in the previous rounds.

Fire magic may be a common elemental ability, but it uses up a lot of MP for the average user. Unknown to me, it's unusual for many fighters to use an attack like this in the first round.

Ding

A string of notifications pop up on my wristband.

[Congratulations! 1.12x bet won on Fighter: The Flame Emperor]

[Your 1 Gold Base Bet has been returned to your account.]

[0.12 Gold Credits have been added to your account.]

[Stage 1 Fight Victory: Reward: 1 Silver Credit]

[0.01 Gold Credits have been added to your account.]

[Total Account balance: 5.1250 Gold]

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 104

[YES][NO]

I choose yes to absorb the small amount of mana control available.

Before the debris even clears, the crowd is roaring with cheers, and some are even chanting my fighter name over and over as the announcer is already hyping up the next stage.

I went from a nobody to a fighter to put their money behind in a matter of seconds with that flashy attack.

I just need to continue building up this hype for the stages to come. The bets that really matter are on stage 4 and further when the total amount won will be a percentage of the bets and not just a set win amount. I won't be able to do much damage with a 5 Gold balance.

The stage 2 bets are placed, and I throw 3 gold on myself because I'm much more confident in the system and outcome now.

A cyclops comes into the ring, and I decide to run at it this time to slice it in two with a single flaming strike but make sure that the flames on my sword don't leave the blade until contact is made. While slicing through, I plunder every drop of its MP in milliseconds, bringing my own bar back up to full. The two halves melt with dark flames on them that don't go out until its completely turned to ash.

[Congratulations! 1.08x bet won on Fighter: The Flame Emperor]

[Your 3 Gold Base Bet has been returned to your account.]

[0.24 Gold Credits have been added to your account.]

[Stage 2 Fight Victory: Reward: 10 Silver Credits]

[0.1 Gold Credits have been added to your account.]

[Total Account balance: 5.4650 Gold]

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 915

[YES][NO]

"Another Win, just like that."

I take notes from watching the previous legacy fighters and do a lap around the ring, raising my sword in the air and covering it in a bright flickering veil of flames until my stage 3 beast is announced.

"Stage 3 will begin shortly, The Flame Emperor will be facing off against a level 247 bloodhound! Place your bets!"

At the sound of this name, my mind starts to race, thinking back to the time I faced a similar beast in a dungeon a few months back.

A sly grin starts to come across my face as I think about it more and more while placing a 5 Gold bet on myself with 1.11x odds.

It's not the money that excites me, it's the potential for another powerful upgrade that makes the gears spin in my head.

Once the ferocious-looking dog is finally brought into the ring via teleportation, it runs toward me, glowing bright red.

I run forward too, activating appraisal and seeing [Bloodlust] in its active skills.

The grin across my face only grows, and instead of killing it right away on the spot, I let the hound run by me and attempt to grab an arm. I dodge with ease and position myself for an attack, but then think about the possibilities of leading on the crowd right now. Making them underestimate me as much as possible will be beneficial in the upcoming fights.

As the hound circles back again, I light up my sword with flames but let the hound in close and allow it to latch onto my arm, flailing in the air as if it was unexpected.

In the same moment, I ignite my left arm with fire magic and blow the beast that's latched on to pieces.

[Congratulations! 1.11x bet won on Fighter: The Flame Emperor]

[Your 5 Gold Base Bet has been returned to your account.]

[0.55 Gold Credits have been added to your account.]

[Stage 3 Fight Victory: Reward: 30 Silver Credits]

[0.3 Gold Credits have been added to your account.]

[Total Account balance: 6.3150 Gold]

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 3601

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Bloodlust

Upgrade: Legendary Grade

[YES][NO]

The crowd explodes into cheers as the remains of the beast hit the mana-shielded barrier of the arena along with my eruption of flames.

I stay on the ground for a moment, excitedly choosing yes to the bloodlust upgrade and checking my status while using self-regeneration on my arm beneath my cloak. The extra MCP is absorbed as well. In the meantime, the announcer hypes up the crowd for the next round, allowing me to take my 5 minutes of rest.

Standing to my feet, I grip my sword and give the go-ahead.

"Next up, we have a special monster for you all in the 4th stage. As you all know, this is the round that separates the regular fighters from the fighters that face off in the main nightly events. To face the Flame Emperor, we've found a formidable opponent known for taking out fighters well above its level 365 rating. It's time to place your bets on the Mutant High Orc Matchup. A sword wielding monster with a fire aspect."

The reaction from the crowd is mixed.

Some describe the power of my fire, while others point out the fact I was taken off guard by a mere level 247 bloodhound.

I smirk inwardly while placing a 6 gold bet for myself to win at a 1.37x payout multiplier.

Once the High Orc comes into the ring, I can feel the heat coming off of it immediately. The beast runs at me, wearing silver armor head to toe, wielding a long shimmering sword with golden accents, and bursting with flames out of the armor's holes.

It has a regular fire combat magic skill along with swordsmanship skill.

The same twinkle in my eyes from the previous round comes back to me, and I decide to put on a show for the crowd yet again.

Even though my movements are clearly much more crisp and practiced, to the naked eye of a fighter below level 300, it all looks the same. This is most of the audience.

As long as I get hit with fire and take longer than a few seconds to defeat the monster that's attacking me, to the crowd, it means I'm having trouble.

"Come at me, it looks like you're going to need to give me a hard time," I whisper under my breath while blocking a hit from its long silver sword and taking a fireblast from it head-on without even attempting to move away.

My gear and natural fire resistance are so strong, it just feels like a warm breeze passing by to me. However, to the crowd, it looks like I'm being burned alive. The erupting cheers are ear-shattering. Through all the noise, there's one thing on my mind that is crystal clear. I'll be taking this audience for every bronze, silver, and gold coin they have to spare.

Chapter 350

The plumes of fire clear, and I jump backward, igniting myself with my own flames to play the part. It's a cool flashy power-up to hype the crowd, but also shows that I'm trying to mitigate the supposedly brutal attack that I just took head-on.

For the fun of it, now that I have a natural veil of dark red flames surrounding my body, I activate my newest bloodlust skill to see what improvements going from no grade to legendary grade provide.

The aura that envelops me is much darker red than the usual bloodlust buff, more so matching the darkness of my flames now. The surge of energy is not what I was expecting to feel at all either. The no-grade bloodlust skill used to give a 50% buff to speed, agility, and mental strength. Now when I look down to check my status, it says 125% buff on each of these options and a 50% natural perception buff is added as well.

I instantly feel like I just activated my final breath skill or my red hydra's rage buff, but immediately decide to turn it off because, in a matter of seconds, my MP bar almost falls down to half.

It is definitely an intense boost, but the cost is significant too. This arena isn't the place to test its potential.

I get up close to the High Orc by outpacing its movements and coming around to place a hand on its back.

In the same manner it attacked me, I plunder all of its MP to bring me nearly back up to full while blasting a wave of fire through its body and sending it flying backward in a similar fashion to the attack it just threw.

Moments before its lifeforce hits zero, I stop my attack and let the High Orc come running back at me while letting out a roar of pain and frustration.

In seconds, the intensity of my flames will burn it to ashes, but I want to have a final clash to put on a show for the crowd.

As our blades clang again, each of us releases a wave of flames at each other and I jump back for dramatic effect as the Orc is incinerated in the final blast. I fall backward and let the force of my own attack throw me to the floor. Leaving my own flames burning on my body for a matter of seconds before putting them out.

[Congratulations! 1.37x bet won on Fighter: The Flame Emperor]

[Your 6 Gold Base Bet has been returned to your account.]

[2.22 Gold Credits have been added to your account.]

[Stage 4 Fight Victory: Reward: 17.8950 Gold Credits]

[17.8950 Gold Credits have been added to your account.]

[Total Account balance: 26.4300 Gold]

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 12,966

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Swordsmanship

Upgrade: Legendary Grade

[YES][NO]

I choose yes on both, upgrading my swordsmanship, and my questions about upgrading my fire magic skill are answered too. The Advanced version of this skill is as high as legendary grade absorption will upgrade it too, for now.

The new skill upgrade is great, but the fact that I just made over 20 Gold Profit in a single match is the more exciting part of this string of notifications.

It looks like the crowd agrees with me too as they shake the arena, and the announcer continues to yell out in an excited tone as I give him the thumbs up to move on to the next round.

"Can you believe it? The Flame Emperor has taken a hit at point-blank range and retaliated back to finish off the High Orc with a taste of its own medicine. That begs the question, will he be able to defeat the level 481 Volcanic Salamander King? It's not everyday we get a fire wielder in the ring, so we're saving opponents like this for the special occasion."

As the announcer goes on, I realize the fights being sent to me are not random. Thinking back even further, every fight in the ring today has been very selective.

Sia had tough fights against opponents in the later rounds she had no hope of beating to set a standard for how tough each event would be. Max got opponents he has a defensive edge against monsters he could barely beat. Ace had only sword wielders to battle in the later rounds, and now I'm getting solely fire element fights.

Someone is pulling the strings and clearly not randomizing these monsters, but I'm not complaining.

"Finish your bets up soon, the match is about to begin in 10... 9..."

I lock in a 25 gold bet at a 1.59x multiplier. I'm still the crowd favorite, but the odds are beginning to shift against me. This is good, its exactly what I want to happen.

During this next fight, I need to make sure it looks like nothing close to an easy win.

"2... 1... 0!"

A flash of white light brings the crimson-scaled beast into the ring. Its body is dripping with lava and looks exactly the way it did when I faced the same type of creature in a dungeon break way off in the desert of Sector 4.

It has advanced fire magic and a body-hardening skill. Two skills I myself already have at their maxed-out ranks, so this fight will be purely for the fun of it and putting on a convincing performance for the crowd.

This may be the first monster strong enough to take hits from my attacks if I go easy on it. That will add to a much more convincing display.

With a smirk on my face, I run forward with my sword ablaze and my fire magic enveloping the red cloak.

Its body glows orange, red, and yellow, producing more molten stone as I charge forward to throw down a low-density attack at its scaled armor.

Legendary Swordsmanship is automatically activated as I swing downward, making the movement feel even more precise and natural. However, this opponent isn't a weapon wielder so I won't be able to test its full range of possibilities until another fight.

The instant my blade makes contact, I feel its scales beginning to crumble and its insides start to burn. I let up on my downward motion, and soon see its tail coming toward me.

Everything looks like it's moving in slow motion, but I pretend not to see the tail coming and let it hit me and send me flying toward the arena's mana-shielded dome.

I cover my side with a thin layer of mana before making impact. Once I do, all of the shielding I created explodes in a loud metallic twang sending me flying toward the arena floor twice as fast as I was moving upward at the wall.

I manage to turn my body to land on my feet, but the ground beneath me cracks, and a small crater forms.

The audience erupts into cheers of madness. They all remember the fight with Max and the lizard archer earlier, and what's happening right now looks to be a repeat.

The Salamander King takes the time I was in the air to its advantage to come down on me, spewing molten rock.

I jump out of the way just in time and land another low-powered attack on the monster scales, making a small mark to show the crowd I'm not entirely powerless.

However, I let the salamander throw me around the ring a few more times to make a point. I land more small hits on it while plundering just enough MP to refill my bar, and using my lifesteal skill to drain the monster's HP at an even faster rate than doing physical damage. This restores my own health bar every time I lose a few points from bouncing off the mana-barrier above the ring.

The crowd goes crazy, and the announcer begins describing the fight play-by-play to those who are watching as I narrowly avoid death over and over just to land small hits each time.

"He's done it again! The 9th exchange between the Flame Emperor and the Salamander King! I can't believe it! Another escape from near elimination just to land a hit! I have to give it to our newest fighter, he's not one to give up easily!"

Half a dozen exchanges go by, and the arena itself is full of molten rock and covered in craters. In the eyes of the crowd, it's a miracle I'm still breathing, but there's one thing that is starting to become clear.

"He's really going to do it! There's no way! The Salamander King's Movements are really slowing down!"

After excess MP and HP drainage to restore my own, and many tough hits through the monster's scales, the beast in the ring naturally begins to slow down.

I start landing 2 to 3 hits each exchange instead of 1 and, in a matter of minutes, I release a final blow to the back of the salamander's head with a fireball to top it all off.

"He's done it! The Winner of Stage 5 is the one and only Flame Emperor!"

The screams of excitement and cheers, along with anger and frustration, fill the air, and I fall to my knees to play the part with my head down.

It may look like I'm out of breath and trying to stay conscious after such a strenuous battle, but in reality, my eyes are glued to the notifications popping up over my wristband.

[Congratulations! 1.59x bet won on Fighter: The Flame Emperor]

[Your 25 Gold Base Bet has been returned to your account.]

[14.75 Gold Credits have been added to your account.]

[Stage 5 Fight Victory: Reward: 38.1050 Gold Credits]

[38.1050 Gold Credits have been added to your account.]

[Total Account balance: 79.2850 Gold]

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 24,178

[YES][NO]

The smile across my face grows wider and wider as I see over 50 gold coins enter my credit account.

I whisper under my breath.

"Now, it's time to get serious and go all in..."