

D. Diver 351

Chapter 351

To make the previous match even more convincing, I stand up and start walking with a limp before facing the crowd again and placing a thumb in the air to begin the next match.

The announcer yells in an excited tone.

"That's what we like to see! At this rate, The Flame Emperor could actually do it, he could defeat the 6th stage monster and become a Legacy fighter on his first time in the ring!"

The crowd erupts with cheers again, but I don't like how positively they're taking things. I want them to have no confidence I can defeat the next opponent that is teleported in.

At this thought, I cough and drop to my knees, holding my chest and let my sword hit the ground with a clang.

This makes the announcer pause, and the crowd begins to whisper and talk amongst themselves. Still, I raise a thumb and slowly get back up to my feet while using my sword as a crutch.

My wristband clearly states that I'm still at 100% of max HP, but I cover it up underneath my red cloak in case anyone in the audience has extra keen eyes. Unlike them, the announcer is not worried at all. His voice still rings out as enthusiastic as ever.

"Here in the Valor City fight arena, we don't hold back. Even if you're injured from the past stage, we won't go easy on you. Everyone place your bets! The Flame Emperor will be facing a level 599 Red Ogre Tyrant in the Stage 6 matchup!"

My eyes widen at the announcement.

The crowd goes silent too...

My opponent in this next round is going to be the maximum level available for a stage this high. I don't know who is choosing these opponents behind the scenes, but it's like they read my mind... This is exactly what I wanted to hear.

After the awkward moment of silence, the crowd begins to cheer again and rumble the stands around the arena and even slightly shake the floor itself.

The odds that pop up on my wristband make me smile inwardly, but I don't dare show even a little bit of emotion before the match begins.

For the first time in the event tonight, the betting odds are stacked against me. I stare down at the numbers, and it says 2.67x for a bet on myself and it keeps on rising.

I make a slow walk around the ring, just to make sure everyone can see the sorry shape I'm in and the crowd's confidence toward me as the potential winner in this fight lessens more and more.

The odds raise past 3.00x and I hear a few people yell out in the front rows down to me.

"Forfeit while you still have your dignity!"

"This will be the easiest money I've ever made. I'm going all in on the Red Ogre!"

"Look at him! He can barely stand. That last battle was all luck, there's no way he becomes a legacy fighter with moves like that."

"The Red Ogre Tyrant is more powerful than any normal Red Ogre, he doesn't stand a chance! Even Ace lost to one of these last week, my bet is on him losing too!"

I walk back to the center of the ring after my full lap and the announcer starts counting down for the fight to start.

"The match will begin shortly! Get ready in 10...9...8..."

More and more bets are placed and I peek at my watch to see the odds against me rise to 4.29x.

"7...6...5..."

I enter 75 gold into the betting notification, and wait longer for every last bet to be placed. The odds keep rising, and I want to lock in my bet at the highest payout I possibly can.

This opponent is going to be a higher level than me, but I've faced much more difficult monsters in battle before. I may have to pull out some more tricks, but I'm confident in my abilities to defeat it.

"4... 3... 2..."

The odds that I'll win have fallen so low, that the payout on me is now at 5.41x. I lock it in, draining most of my credit wallet, then finally standing up straight with a wide grin as my bet is now set in stone.

"1... 0... Let the Stage 6 Match begin!"

A blinding light transports an enormous Red Ogre Tyrant into the ring. It looks very similar to the Red Ogres in the previous matches I saw, but this one is much more muscular with crimson veins bulging out from its silver armor.

The beast lets out a roar as it begins to glow golden the moment it steps forward and swings a massive metal mace in the air. A thick chain that looks like it would hold an anchor to the sea floor connects a spiked metal ball as it swings it above its head.

The sharp eyes of the beast lock onto me in an instant as I approach and activate my own extreme strength and berserker skills as well.

As it swings the mace, a glimmer of pink mana starts to cover the entire weapon and its two skills show up in my mind's eye.

[Extreme Strength][Legendary Grade]

[Combat Magic][Advanced Mana Manipulation]

My gaze falls down to its ranked-up buff too.

[Ogre Tyrant's Dominance]

It storms forward with incredible speed, and I jump out of the way using my full strength and speed to dodge.

"No more playing around. This fight is for real."

I use wind magic to propel my movements away from the golden glowing beast and turn back to release a mana blade imbued with fire from my sword at point-blank range at the Ogre's back.

The moment it's released, the instincts of the beast kick in, and it senses the shift in mana density that fills the air. Its shielded spiked mace spins back around to collide with the incoming attack and an explosion of mana and flames instantly fills the entire dome.

I activate my all-seeing eye, and sense the creature not taking a moment of rest. Through the chaos of the blast, it uses the plumes of flames as a smokescreen and runs at me to throw another hit.

I swing my blade up to collide with its spiked mace. The physical weapons don't collide, but the dense layers of shielding around them do. Another mana-on-mana eruption blasts both of us backward, sending the ogre and myself flying into the dome's mana shielding, then into the floor below with two loud bangs.

However, we got much closer this time around. Our energies colliding is close enough range for me to use my MP plundering skill along with Lifesteal to take as much MP and HP as I can before we're both sent flying to opposite sides of the ring.

The fire from our last attacks dissipates, and the audience can clearly see the next exchange. Just like before, the battle-hungry monster doesn't take a moment of rest, neither do I. We both run forward and clash again.

I can feel an invisible subconscious pull much stronger than normal guiding my sword with precision. It's the legendary swordsmanship skill at work, but the movements that enter my mind like instinct are very different than my normal fighting style. I suppress the urge to try anything too new and risky right now.

At this point in the battle, its best I stick to what I know and observe my opponent.

The speeds we're fighting at, and the precision of each hit is far greater than what I'd assume most of the audience has the ability to perceive. But if there are any highly skilled fighters or ex-hunters in the crowd they'd see us both collide in mid-air fighting with waves of mana, trying to cut through the other's defenses while regenerating our own before being thrown back from the excess energy.

My flaming sword covered in layers of pink mana shielding collide with the shielding that surrounds its mace. We both have a mana manipulation skill, so the shielding being used is just being constantly regenerated by the mana within our bodies.

The real test of strength will be who runs out of MP first.

Pure level numbers suggest this Ogre has higher MP stores than me, but each exchange we share drains its own stores and adds them to mine.

Although it looks like an even match, it's really a matter of time before the Tyrant runs out of MP and I can send a fatal attack that blasts through its weakened shielding.

Another four exchanges pass and just like the salamander in the previous round, I start to sense its movements slow.

At this point, the crowd realizes what's going on to an extent too. A few angry voices start to stand out to me in between the next few attacks the Ogre and I send at each other.

"He was strong all along? Was this guy playing us for our money?"

"There's no way... He set us up..."

"Could the Ogre Tyrant really lose?"

"Boooo!"

Half a dozen more exchanges pass and the audience has resorted to throwing things down at the ring. The mana shielding blocks anything from actually flying in, but the sounds of random items hitting the dome make me smirk.

In the meantime, I can tell the Red Ogre Tyrant is frustrated out of its mind as it roars louder and louder after every exchange we have. Its eyes start to shift from the jet black they started at to now a crimson glow.

After our 15th collision, I'm almost positive I've stolen over half of its HP and MP. It has noticed and is making its move.

The red glow that has slowly grown in its eyes begins to spread into the golden shimmer of its extreme strength skill. A shimmering red wave of energy surrounds its body and I feel a shockwave vibrate through the arena floor.

The air pressure shifts, and I feel most of the ambient mana from our previous clashes begin to gravitate toward the Ogre at the opposite side of the ring.

I use my own manipulation skill to attempt bringing it back my way, but the force at which it's being pulled in at the monster is significantly stronger than before.

Even the dome around the ring starts to vibrate. It hums loudly as it tries to stay in place, but the new buff my opponent is using seems to be pulling in every spare mana particle in the area. This feels extremely dangerous. Not only for me, but nearby audience members too if this monster is doing what I think it is.

It's using its ranked-up buff as a last-ditch effort, Ogre Tyrant's Dominance is being activated.

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The Red Ogre Tyrant's golden veil of energy starts to shift to red as its rank-up buff activates.

The dome that surrounds us, protecting the audience outside the fight ring, is now rippling and bending toward the monster on the far side of the arena.

I'm sure they fight monsters of this caliber very often, but none of the past monsters could have had a buff and skill combination like this... With the name Ogre Tyrant's Dominance, and the absorption of MP it's taking in from all directions, I can only assume this rank-up perk allows the monster to take superior control over all of the mana in the nearby atmosphere.

Along with its only combat skill being advanced mana manipulation, my confidence in the barrier overhead to keep our dangerous attacks contained is dwindling.

It runs forward at me with its spiked mace swinging in the air once again, this time around layered in a much thicker mana shielding, and I can tell its MP bar has raised far past full. The monster is wielding more energy than it did at the start of the match.

I can sense mana seeping out from the shielding above our heads, aiding its next attack.

Still, I grit my teeth and counter, activating the newly ranked-up legendary bloodlust skill in small bursts to increase my speed and magic power.

It burns through a lot of MP to use this buff now, but with the massive cloud of mana swirling around my opponent, the moment I get in close I can easily restore myself to full.

As we're about to clash, I sense my swordsmanship skill begin to activate, instinctually pointing me to swing in a different direction than I first planned to.

I hesitate, and the feeling goes away...

Our shielded weapons collided and we're both blasted backward to opposite sides of the arena. Even with my new buff activated, I wasn't able to overpower this tyrant. Each time we collide, our shielding is nearly equal in density and strength, but the weight and power of its weapon is intense. The precision at which it swings won't allow me to get a proper hit in, getting hit by that mace may mean the end for me.

However, If I can get past it and land a good hit on the Ogre, it would mean the end for this beast as well.

Once I stand up off the ground, my mind races over the odd sensation I felt before our attacks met. It was like a subconscious pull, leading me to use my blade in a much different way than a regular straight-on attack.

A roar echoes out through the ring again as the Ogre charges at me.

I run forward too, activating my bloodlust buff again, and hoping that feeling from my swordsmanship skill comes back.

At this rate, I need to switch things up. Just colliding over and over, stealing a few HP every attack won't cut it. The shielding in the arena may give out before I can finish this monster off.

As we're about to collide again, I feel the same pull, and decide to give in to it and let my instincts completely guide my blade.

I change directions in mid-air with an airstep, and a faint silver line that looks like a nearly invisible spider's thread shows up in my mind's eye, but projects itself into reality.

Almost like the system text has come to life, and is showing me a holographic path to follow with the tip of my blade.

It twists and curves, but I shut my mind off and follow. With every airstep and curving swing of my sword, I narrowly miss the fast-spinning mace that constantly soars toward me.

Even so, the end of the thread is in sight, and it ends right on the Ogre's neck. The closer the thread gets to my opponent, the more it changes color. At the tip of my sword it shimmers silver and glows almost white, but near the monster's vital point the thread is stained blood red.

I twist my body out of the way of the beast and come within a 5-meter range of the end of the thread. The creature's mace is all the way on the monster's side of its body. The world feels as if it's slowed down, and everything except the thread and the monster that is my target has been muffled out and faded from existence. My sword comes down with all my might in a graceful swing, and I slice through the creature's mana shielding along with a large layer of flesh.

An eruption of mana explosion, crimson blood, and dark flames sends both of us flying backward and reality creeps back into my senses all around me as I hit the back of the mana dome.

The mixture of cheers and boos fills my ears, but it doesn't matter to me at all.

I raise my sword in the air and light it on fire, letting out a laugh, as the injured monster starts to run back at me filled with rage.

I grip my blade with both hands and smirk.

To anyone in the crowd that could follow my movements before, they're already aware of the fact that I can use air magic, so there's no reason not to show a bit more of my hand.

As I run closer, the instinctive feeling begins to grow more and more, but I activate my earth magic first to give myself an additional edge.

With a simple thought, the ground beneath the Ogre turns to liquid stone and begins slowing its footsteps. Every meter closer it travels, the more rocks form around its ankles and shins. Once it's close enough, the creature has to physically break free from the mounds of rocks on its legs every step.

I jump in the air and search for the thread.

Breathing in and out, the world around me disappears again, leaving just the shimmering silver line leading to the monster's neck, and the slow-motion mace spinning around in the air with a clear path before me making it easy to dodge.

In a graceful fluid movement, taking 5 airsteps in total, I get in close and release another full-powered slash, slicing through the excess mana shielding around its neck, and also cracking the top portion of its chestplate, sending it flying backward, now dripping blood all over its silver armor.

This time; mana, rock, and flames erupt into the air but I still feel its life force pulsing strong.

Once the debris begins to clear, the red glow around its body becomes larger and larger. Instead of running at me, it backs up and places its free hand against the shielding dome. The energy starts to ripple and vibrate more than ever before.

The dome's inner surface looks like a thin layer of water being bounced around by the vibrating frequency of a powerful music playing device.

The more volatile the shielding around the ring becomes, the more the red aura around the creature grows.

The boos in the crowd against me begin to turn into whispers and frightened screams as people soon realize what's going on.

I run forward gripping my blade with one thing on my mind, finishing this battle once and for all.

I decide not to hold back one bit. If this monster manages to take out the shielding around the ring, there will be many more problems than one...

The audience wouldn't be safe, they may send in extra guards to subjugate the beast and I wouldn't get my level-ups or skill upgrades, and worst of all; the bets could be off. My chance to 5x my money and fool the crowd would have all been for nothing.

"I need to kill this monster now."

Without hesitating, I activate every single skill that will allow me to get closer to the beast as fast as possible, and keep it stuck in place to land a finishing move without any interference before any announcements can be made.

With my wind magic and buffs on full blast, propelling me forward, and earth magic surrounding the creature at the far side of the ring, the distance between us is negated in milliseconds.

Its legs are held in place by rock reinforced by telekinesis while waves of intense intimidation are sent straight into its psyche. Meanwhile, my blade is being charged up to its maximum potential and the world around me is fading away as a single shimmering crimson line of mana leads to the same unguarded blind spot on the Ogre's neck.

I jump upward and swing the blade with unmatched strength and precision. The head of the Red Ogre Tyrant is sliced clean from its body and begins spinning high into the air before anyone in the audience can even blink.

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The edge of my blade shortens the distance between the deep crimson red thread and the neck of the monster threatening the lives of everyone in this arena.

In an instant, using over 1000MP in a single strike, I release a mana blade while making direct contact with the monster's neck and its head is sliced clean off in an instant.

My boosted perception is so much greater than the world around me, that even as the beast's head slowly spins in the air disconnected from its body, the wide eyes and mixed reaction from the crowd seem so slow that they're not even moving...

The severed head collides with the rippling mana shielding dome and instantly splatters into indistinguishable parts.

[Congratulations! 5.41x bet won on Fighter: The Flame Emperor]

[Your 75 Gold Base Bet has been returned to your account.]

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

[Stage 6 Fight Victory: Reward: 68.4450 Gold Credits]

[68.4450 Gold Credits have been added to your account.]

[Total Account balance: 4.784800 Platinum]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 1,034,980

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Extreme Strength

Upgrade: Legendary Grade

[YES][NO]

The moment the Ogre Tyrant's head leaves its body, the red aura that fills almost half the rings dissipates in an instant.

However, the vibrating and churning mana shielding that makes up the arena's dome gets more and more violent following the explosion of the Ogre's head.

I jump back and land on the floor, choosing yes to all the notification options that pop up and excitedly look at my wristband as it shifts in color from golden to a shimmering platinum glow.

My eyes dart around the ring at the dome. I assumed it would calm down the moment the Ogre's skill dissipated, but the turbulent nature only grows worse as the seconds pass and the crowd erupts into cheers, yells of anger, boos, and frightened screams.

Four flashes of white light come into my peripheral vision for a fraction of a second, and knights in black armor teleport in on opposite sides of the inside of the dome.

I turn my head to try and scan one with my appraisal skill as they all place their armored hands on the vibrating shielding.

Wisps of grey and white energy come out of their gauntlets and the violent unstable nature of the ring ceases, leaving the stable humming mana shielding in its original form.

The 4 of them disappear along with the corpse of the monster I defeated before I can even blink again.

The only reading I managed to see from one of them leaves my mouth wide open underneath my mask in a state of confusion.

[Lv. ??? Access Denied]

Active Items: [??? Access Denied]

Active Skills: [??? Access Denied]

Bufs: [??? Access Denied]

These readings look eerily similar to the odd black armor of the Sector 2 Leader I defeated not so long ago...

The announcer finally speaks up, quieting the crowd down.

At this disturbance, my natural perceptions of time begin to go back to normal.

"We... have a winner... The Flame Emperor! Give it up for our newest legacy fighter! Can you believe it? From an unknown name, to a man that beat all the odds. What do you say, will you be taking on the 7th stage?"

I'm in quite the daze after what I just witnessed, but still slowly put a thumb in the air.

Almost all my HP and MP were restored after that final blow using plunderer on the body and excess energy that escaped from the shielding in the ring.

Although it wasn't a walk in the park, I was far from being in real danger while facing that monster, if anything, the audience was in more trouble than me. It seems the announcer isn't going to bring attention to this fact at all. They did have safeguards in place just in case any events like this were to happen.

The sounds of the crowd aren't the excited screams that were rattling the stadium earlier, but the quick thinking of the announcer changes their minds.

"You all know we have only had one contestant get anywhere close to beating the stage 7 Ghoul in years. This is another major step up from the stage 6 fights. Even if the Flame Emperor finally showed you all his full strength, we know that's part of the fight game. You can't hate the player."

The angry words and whispers start to change their tone, and I hear a few members of the crowd speak up. Instead of all hatred, I'm beginning to get mixed reviews.

"He's right, the rules of the arena never said any bets were fair."

"No kidding, I'm glad I took the risk. I can't believe it, I bet on him as a joke and just 5x'd my money!"

"I lost everything. I hate the Flame Emperor, he'll get what's coming to him in this next round."

"You're right! Monk is the only one I've seen beat that Ghoul monster in the 7th stage, and I've been coming to this arena for years now. There's something really off about those monsters. Pure magic power, or even superior skill never seems to be enough to kill them."

"I bet my whole wallet on that last round, I'll be kicked out of the city if I'm still here at midnight."

"Ha! Then you better leave now. This is a gambling area! What do you expect, never bet what you can't afford to lose!"

By the time the announcer speaks up again, all hatred has left the crowd's mind, and they're all fully consumed with the next round.

"Everyone, place your bets on the next Stage 7 matchup of the night! The Flame Emperor will be facing off against a level 689 Mutant Ghoul."

The crowd completely flips tones again. As the betting odds pop up in front of their faces and they're consumed with greed.

I take my slow lap around the ring as the announcer continues on and on, hyping up the fight more. This time around, I'm more confused at what the purpose of this arena really is.

The man at the registration desk did say it's one of the main income streams of the city along with an auction hall in the platinum district, but after that display of power from what I can only assume is the royal guards, something isn't adding up.

Why do they really have a fight arena in this city, and where are they getting all the incredibly high-level monsters to teleport in like it's easy? Who are the legacy fighters...? Why does no one seem to care about anyone's true identity here...? And why did my teammates agree to come to this city in the first place?

For some reason, all these questions start to hit me at once as the announcer counts down the betting timer as the show is about to begin again.

"10...9...8..."

I take a deep breath in and out, then shake my head while staring straight ahead to where my opponent will be standing next.

Then, look down at my wristband and see the odds for me to win are still stacked against me, but much less so than the round before. People seem to be more confident in my abilities after that last display of strength, but the prestige of the final event in the eyes of the crowd is still a very tough challenge. The payout on me winning is 2.09x.

This will most likely be my last event in the ring... A level 689 is far above my own level, but it's still within reach of an opponent I can potentially defeat. I've taken on a Demon of a similar level, and a Demonic Minotaur recently of strength that may match it.

"7...6...5..."

I'm going to have to plan for this to be my last event. I need 10 platinum coins to make it into the final gate, so it's all or nothing right now.

"4...3...2..."

The payout raises to a 2.51x multiplier and I bet 400 gold credits, equal to 4 platinum coins on myself to win.

"1...0.... Let the Stage 7 Match Begin!"

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As the announcer's words fade away, I grip my blade and get ready for the real fight to begin. From my understanding of the crowd's reaction and the words echoing through the arena, close to no one is capable of defeating this ghoulish monster. The fighter known as Monk is an anomaly to this rule.

Even with the display of strength I showed in the round before, defeating a monster at the peak of stage 6, the crowd is confident enough to place their bets against me still. I showed nearly all my skills in the last event.

My hopes are that I'll be proving them wrong once again.

I have a few more tricks up my sleeve, and I may have to use them all in this next upcoming fight.

The transfer magic lights up a small portion of the arena near the back side where the opponents are usually spawned in.

A familiar-looking pale-skinned figure appears. With orange glowing eyes, and rotting yellow teeth, a Mutant Ghoul locks its gaze on me in fractions of a second. Its height is similar to mine, possibly half a meter taller than me at most.

This variant of Mutant Ghoul only carries one long silver sword, and its body is barely covered in clothing. They're more like rags that are held on by threads.

Its eyes pulse brighter, then the beast runs forward at me without making a sound.

I activate all my buffs to try and scan the creature for any extra information while lighting my sword on fire and positioning myself for a counter.

Its status throws me for a loop when it shows up in my mind's eye.

[Lv. 689]

Active Items: [Enchanted Long Sword] +200% Strength +200% Speed +200% Agility

Active Skills: [NONE]

Buffs: [Curse Mark of The Lich King]

All it has to its name is a single sword and a mysterious curse in its buff slot. To my surprise, there aren't any active skills either. Something is very off about all of this.

Nevertheless, I hold my sword up to position myself for a block to test the monster's strength. It falls for the bait without hesitation for a moment and there is a loud clang that echoes out in the arena.

It's the sound of pure metal on metal... A noise I haven't heard in quite a while.

The moment its sword touches my mana shielding barrier, an orange glow surrounds its own and the two barriers of energy pass right by each other without reacting at all.

The swords meet, and our strength is nearly even. The oddity of the creature just slipping through my defenses without any resistance throws me off guard, and I take a step back, but soon decide to activate my bloodlust and newly upgraded extreme strength skill to counter before it pulls any other moves on me.

The moment the crimson and gold lights begin to shimmer around my body, I feel MP being burned at an immense rate. The buff percentage rises on my extreme strength skill. Instead of just a 50% boost at its normal no grade ranking, it's risen to 125% at legendary grade and shimmers so bright golden white it almost looks platinum.

It's worth the burned MP. I lunge forward and swing my blade across my body to propel the Ghoul away from me, airstepping back and deactivating my buffs to reassess my situation.

At the same time, I try to use my plunderer skill to siphon some MP off my opponent to restore the mana used in my buffs and clash, also attempting a minor lifesteal to weaken it as much as I can from a distance, but my heart skips a beat at what I soon realize.

"No mana... and no health points either..."

The Ghoul in front of me doesn't have a drop of MP in its body, despite the glowing orange aura that now covers its sword, arms, and is slowly expanding to engulf its entire body. It also has no HP to be stolen either.

This monster may have unfathomable defenses, or some way of masking its inner mana control, but all my senses are pointing to something else.

"Its Buff... The Curse Mark of The Lich King..."

I have keener senses than any hunter or monster within hundreds of levels, there's no way I could visibly see an energy source, and not be able to sense any of the mana flowing through it. Not even my all-seeing eye can pick up the presence of even a bit of flowing energy.

The only reasonable explanation in my mind is its buff giving it some type of power source that isn't mana. It's using energy I'm unable to manipulate.

It runs forward and we clash again. The sound of metal on metal echoes, but this time I use my buffs much more conservatively while straining my senses to attempt to find any more clues.

Three more equally powered exchanges take place, and already over 30% of my mana is used up and I'm as clueless as I was when I started examining the ghoul.

This next attack, I'm going in for some blood. As much as I want to understand what makes this creature tick, winning the battle is much more important right now.

Instead of the equal exchanges we had earlier, I start charging my footsteps with wind magic and strategically activate my buffs as I move and turn to use them as efficiently as possible without draining massive amounts of MP and get in line for my swordsmanship skill to slowly activate.

As my flaming blade gets closer and I run around the Ghoul in circles, dodging its blade, the thread finally begins to form in my mind's eye, attaching the tip of my sword to the Ghoul's midsection in a winding shimmering line.

I take a deep breath and begin to follow the path.

After half a dozen sweeping motions, I lunge in close after multiple near misses from its own sword before mine makes contact with its upper torso.

The searing sound of my fire magic melting its flesh and tearing the monster clean in half lasts only for a fraction of a second before I'm raising my blade in the air for the audience to react as two pieces of the Ghoul rest behind me covered in flames.

Cheers of joy and boos of hatred don't come as I expected at all...

The crowd doesn't react at all actually, minus the few intoxicated bettors yelling out loud. Most of them just point straight at me with devious grins or wide-eyed in horror.

It isn't until too late I realize they're not pointing at me, but at the two halves of the Ghoul I just cut down crawling back together and reforming its burned tissue and skin in the areas where it was sliced.

The orange glow that surrounds its body and now pours from its gaze grows brighter and brighter as my confusion grows at the same rate.

I turn to the monster, and my conclusion that its buff is giving it power becomes my number one theory.

The only time I saw its kind defeated was Monk beating it down with nothing but his fists. However, I never saw that man use a hint of mana either.

One thing I do know, by the end of this fight, I'll either be broke and out of luck, or know exactly how the arena champ defeated a nearly level 700 creature without a hint of magic power.

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A monster with no MP and no HP..

It can survive my advanced fire magic, and also can reform and regenerate without any skills or extra visual energy exertion whatsoever.

The only clue I have of how to defeat this thing is the single encounter I witnessed of monk punching the ghoul to death.

Every time his fist would impact the monster's body, I clearly remember its eyes glowing brighter for a fraction of a second, then the glow of the entire beast becoming dimmer every time.

Whatever this life force or energy is, most likely provided by its curse, it needs to be extracted from its body slowly, and the monster will die once sucked dry.

The real question now is, how...?

"I'll have to figure this out fast."

The Ghoul comes running at me again without a moment of rest with its silver blade glimmering orange, and leaving a trail of its residue behind.

I'm struck with a moment of clarity as I use my strength buff to counter the incoming strike of the ghoul and send it flying back again.

The faint cloud of orange mist that trails behind it looks eerily familiar, and things are beginning to add up. Not completely, but enough for me to comprehend what's going on to a certain extent.

"Soul Energy..."

I'm just unsure how and why this works, but there's a high chance I'm dealing with the soul energy of a Lich King. It's orange energy reacts to the air just like the red aura of the hydra's soul energy I'm able to use.

Our weapons clang against each other again and again, and I begin going down my list of skills one by one to see if anything works other than the one thing I'm hoping I don't have to do... After trying to intimidate, plunder MP, lifesteal HP, equivalent exchange health, and even attempt to use telepathy, nothing seems to be getting through to this mindless battle machine and my MP falls down to about half as I sporadically use my buffs to keep up with the monster.

It doesn't slow down at all. The movements of the ghoul are as precise and clean as the moment it was transported into the ring.

Even after slicing the Ghoul in half 4 more times, the crowd only gets more excited every time it gets back up.

The announcer begins to egg them on to start getting rowdy. After the last match of manipulation, the crowd deserves to have a nice win.

However, my mind is running at a million beats per minute trying to figure out a way to injure this monster or replicate the way Monk drained its life force.

Even if I had Demonic Energy on hand, I've found that it doesn't even react with soul energy either.

The only way I'm going to be able to fight on equal grounds with this monster is to use my own soul energy buff.

Its side effects are brutal, but weeks of work in gaining money are on the line here. If I lose now, showing off all these powers to tons of prying eyes would have been all for nothing.

I'll do a single hit, put my all into it, keep it quick, and if this fails too... then there's nothing more to do tonight. I'll have to grind in the arena for a few more days regardless, or find another way to make money and get into the inner walls of the city.

We run at each other once again, and moments before our blades collide, I activate my buff again.

"Red Hydra's Rage."

The less time I'm activated in this state, the better off I'll be afterward.

The shining orange eyes of the creature in front of me pulse brighter and brighter as a veil of red energy floods out from my chest and covers my entire body in an instant. My perception boosts drastically, my speed and power increase at an alarming rate, and my strength increase is so immense the ground beneath me starts crumbling away with every extra wind imbued step forward I take.

Our swords begin to collide, but the moment they do, the crimson energy surrounding my weapon finally reacts with the orange glow around the Ghoul's, disintegrating it on impact.

A chain reaction like lighting fire to tissue paper travels down the contact point of our swords and the Red Hydra's energy completely destroys the orange light that envelops the ghoul in milliseconds.

For the first time in our entire match, I hear the monster screech.

Before it can retaliate, my sword slices straight through its own, sending the two silver halves of metal flying off in opposite directions.

Right after this, the edge of my blade slices the Ghoul in half once again.

This time, obliterating every bit of orange energy and letting the two halves of the ghoul finally fall to the ground with lifeless eyes.

I plant my feet and come to a halt on the other side of the ring, looking back and confirming the ghoul is really defeated before deactivating my buffs and all my skills.

[Congratulations! 2.51x bet won on Fighter: The Flame Emperor]

[Your 400 Gold Base Bet has been returned to your account.]

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

[Stage 7 Fight Victory: Reward: 171.3000 Gold Credits]

[171.3000 Gold Credits have been added to your account.]

[Total Account balance: 12.5378 Platinum]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[114/1000 Mutant Ghouls Defeated]

As I deactivate my buff, the extreme fatigue hits me like a rock as usual, but I didn't have to use as much of my skills as I thought I would. The adverse effects aren't as extreme as after defeating the Demonic Minotaur a few days back. A single night of rest will heal me up just fine. Even now, I'd be able to fight at at least 80% of my fight capacity if needed.

As the announcer yells out the final results of the match, I still manage to stay on my feet and stare down at the odd text displaying a number of Ghouls defeated.

It itches at the back of my mind, but I soon forget about it and become more consumed in the 10 levels gained and the fact that I reached my money goal in a single night. I'll be able to see my teammates very soon.

The echoing voice of the announcer continues in the ring.

"The Flame Emperor! Will he be taking on the 8th Stage of the arena tonight?"

I ponder to myself what kind of monstrosity they possibly have to offer that's between the levels 700 and 800, but before I even get to make a decision for myself, the same four black knights enter the ring, moving so fast without my buffs active I can't even see them.

The only reason I realize they're here is because one stops no more than 5 meters in front of me and I see a pair of sharp eyes completely orange peer through the slit in the black helmet. I activate my all-seeing eye and buffs momentarily to see the other three.

An echoing noise similar to a telepathy skill sounds out in my head.

"Drop out of the match. The 7th Stage is as far as you will go."

Before I can even think to respond, the black Knight is gone, and its other partners with it.

I'm left in a state of awe and disbelief, wondering what that was about... and if Monk had the same thing happen to him each time he makes it to this point in the competition.

I gulp, and decide to take my winnings while I'm still up.

Crossing my arms and shaking my head, I look exactly like Monk did declining the man's offer.

"Another pass on the unbeatable 8th Stage of the arena. Maybe one day, we'll get to see our two new champions have at it and see who can defeat the 8th stage first! Next time-"

The Announcer goes on, but I'm teleported back to the underground training room in the same moment.

Facing me with looks of awe on their faces less than 10 meters from the teleportation platform are 3 out of the 4 legacy fighters. Max, Sia, and Ace don't say a word as I step back onto the white glossy mana-shielded floor.

Status Updates:

Pre Arena:

[Status Open]

Name: Jay Soju

Level: 562

Hp: 2815/2815

Mp: 2815/2815

Strength: 1491 [+2803][+2058][+746][+1491][+746][+746][+2237]

Speed: 1625 [+975][+1625][+813][+1625][+813][+2438]

Agility: 1733 [+780][+1733][+2080][+867][+1733][+867][+2600]

Defense: 1262 [+1401][+1262][+1742][+631][+1262][+1893]

Mental Strength: 1787 [+1072][+1787][+2716][+2109][+1430][+894][+1787][+894][+894][+2681]

Skills:

Absorption [Legendary Grade]

Swordsmanship

Combat Magic [Advanced Fire Summoning]

Inspect [Special Grade]

Enemy Detection

Body Hardening [Legendary Grade]

Self Regeneration [Special Grade]

Spatial Magic [Item Storage]

Plunderer [Special Grade]

Telekinesis

Appraisal [Special Grade]

Conceal [Special Grade]

Berserker

Dungeon Walker [Special Grade]

Intimidation
Dagger Mastery
Stealth [Legendary Grade]
Bloodlust
Equivalent Exchange
Combat Magic [Wind Summoning]
All-Seeing Eye
Extreme Strength
Dual Wielding [Special Grade]
Telepathy [Legendary Grade]
Final Breath [Special Grade]
Combat Magic [Advanced Earth Summoning]
Combat Magic [Advanced Mana Manipulation]
Life Steal [Special Grade]
Hibernation [Special Grade]
Combat Magic [Advanced Demonic Energy Manipulation]
Combat Magic [Advanced Ice Summoning]
Body Double [Special Grade]
Lie Detector [Legendary Grade]
Hush [Legendary Grade]
Craftsmanship [Mythic Grade]
Items Equipped: [12 Slots Available Post-Rank Up][Current Items Equipped]
High Ogre King's Ring [+60% Mental Strength]
The Behemoth's Platinum Amulet [+111% Defense]
Dark Elf Boots [+60% Speed]
Serpent King's Scale [+45% Agility] [+45% Magic Resistance]
Platinum Ring of The Blue Ogre King [+100% Mental Strength]
The Flame Emperor's Sword [Advanced Fire Aspect][+188% Strength][+152% Mental Strength]
[+100% Defense][+100% Speed][+100% Agility]
The Wind Tyrant's Dagger Set [Wind Aspect][+137% Strength][+120% Agility][+118% Mental Strength]
Berserker King's Armor Set [Blood Bonded] [+138% Defense]

Salamander King's Cloak [+80% Mental Strength] [+80% Fire Magic Resistance]

Greater Demon's Core [+50% All Stats]

Arch Demon's Core [+100% All Stats]

Midnight Dagger

Bufs:

[Berserker] +50% Strength + Mental Strength

[BloodLust] +50% Speed + Agility + Mental Strength

[Extreme Strength] +50% Strength

[Final Breath] ~ +150% All Stats (Exact % will vary, conditions & circumstances apply)

Permanent Bufs:

Rising Emperor's Domain[Hidden Ability][Passive]

Red Hydra's Rage[Soul Bond Attribute][Active]

~

Post Arena:

[Status Open]

Name: Jay Soju

Level: 576

Hp: 2885/2885

Mp: 2885/2885

Strength: 1526 [+2899][+2090][+2091][+763][+1526][+763][+2289]

Speed: 1665 [+999][+1698][+833][+1665][+2081][+2498]

Agility: 1773 [+798][+1808][+2128][+887][+1773][+2216][+2660]

Defense: 1295 [+1437][+1308][+1800][+648][+1295][+1943]

Mental Strength: 1822 [+1093][+1822][+2806][+2150][+1458][+911][+1822][+911][+2278]
[+2278][+2733]

Skills:

Absorption [Legendary Grade]

Swordsmanship [Legendary Grade]

Combat Magic [Advanced Fire Summoning]

Inspect [Special Grade]

Enemy Detection

Body Hardening [Legendary Grade]

Self Regeneration [Special Grade]

Spatial Magic [Item Storage]

Plunderer [Special Grade]

Telekinesis

Appraisal [Special Grade]

Conceal [Special Grade]

Berserker

Dungeon Walker [Special Grade]

Intimidation

Dagger Mastery

Stealth [Legendary Grade]

Bloodlust [Legendary Grade]

Equivalent Exchange

Combat Magic [Wind Summoning]

All-Seeing Eye

Extreme Strength [Legendary Grade]

Dual Wielding [Special Grade]

Telepathy [Legendary Grade]

Final Breath [Special Grade]

Combat Magic [Advanced Earth Summoning]

Combat Magic [Advanced Mana Manipulation]

Life Steal [Special Grade]

Hibernation [Special Grade]

Combat Magic [Advanced Demonic Energy Manipulation]

Combat Magic [Advanced Ice Summoning]

Body Double [Special Grade]

Lie Detector [Legendary Grade]

Hush [Legendary Grade]

Craftsmanship [Mythic Grade]

Items Equipped: [12 Slots Available Post-Rank Up][Current Items Equipped]

High Ogre King's Ring [+60% Mental Strength]

The Behemoth's Platinum Amulet [+111% Defense]

Dark Elf Boots [+60% Speed]

Serpent King's Scale [+45% Agility] [+45% Magic Resistance]

Platinum Ring of The Blue Ogre King [+100% Mental Strength]

The Flame Emperor's Sword [Advanced Fire Aspect][+190% Strength][+154% Mental Strength]
[+101% Defense][+102% Speed][+102% Agility]

The Wind Tyrant's Dagger Set [Wind Aspect][+137% Strength][+120% Agility][+118% Mental Strength]

Berserker King's Armor Set [Blood Bonded] [+139% Defense]

Salamander King's Cloak [+80% Mental Strength] [+80% Fire Magic Resistance]

Greater Demon's Core [+50% All Stats]

Arch Demon's Core [+100% All Stats]

Midnight Dagger

Bufs:

[Berserker] +50% Strength + Mental Strength

[BloodLust] +125% Speed + Agility + Mental Strength , +50% Perception

[Extreme Strength] +125% Strength

[Final Breath] ~ +150% All Stats (Exact % will vary, conditions & circumstances apply)

Permanent Bufs:

Rising Emperor's Domain[Hidden Ability][Passive]

Red Hydra's Rage[Soul Bond Attribute][Active]

Chapter 356

The first fighter to walk forward is the friendly face of the shield, Max. From being on the verge of death less than an hour ago and completely exhausted, it looks like they healed him up nicely.

"You're more of a fighter than I thought... Are you from the Royal Guard? A country leader in disguise or something?"

He lets out a laugh, but I don't respond.

I'm very fatigued from the use of my Red Hydra's buff, and the majority of my energy is being used to scan the room and keep myself from limping or looking hurt in any way.

Max stands next to Sia, and Ace is close behind them. Far off in the back of the room, Mr. Wright talks with a few of the newer fighters, logging in their fight records and signing them up for future events. Monk stands by in the back of the room silently staring at me but doesn't move forward.

Sia speaks up as I take a step off the platform.

"You were really something out there, what's the trick? How'd you beat the 7th Stage? Monk will never tell us how he kills those things, you have to let us in on the secret."

I smirk inwardly beneath my mask, then finally respond.

"I'm not sure what the trick is either, I'd love to ask that man the same question."

I get some confused looks back, but that doesn't stop Ace from walking forward and putting out a hand.

"I didn't know you were such a skilled swordsman, I apologize for not introducing myself earlier."

I nod and shake his hand.

"No problem. Your speed and precision in the ring is some of the best sword technique I've seen myself as well. I'm impressed."

We release our grip, and Max interjects again.

"You know, we're going to get dinner in the gold district tonight, I'm sure you won more than enough to afford a nice meal." He chuckles. "Would you like to join us?"

I shrug and think to myself. Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea. Picking their brains and asking normal higher-tier city goers about the inner workings of this place could be exactly what I need to do right now. Every one of us has a platinum wristband after tonight.

Considering the amount of money making potential in the ring and their fight records, I'd imagine they have well over 10 platinum too. However, no one wears the color of the Royal Coin. For some reason, no wristband changes color automatically like it did back when I hit over 100 gold. This and many other things confuse me about the city.

"Sure, a meal in the gold district would be great. I'd love to join."

We all begin to walk over to the back of the room together just as the newbie fighters leave and we're met by the man in the white suit.

Each fighter lines up single file without him saying a word as they register and log their names for the next event scheduled tomorrow night.

Once the single file line comes to me, he looks me in the eyes through my mask and speaks up.

"You put on quite the show there, kid. I'm glad I put you last, I knew you'd be a fun wildcard performance. However, you certainly out performed by expectations."

His eyes look up and down a silver tablet in his hands before looking back up to me.

"Would you look at that, over 10 platinum in a single night. Not bad at all... so, What do you say? Are you interested in signing up for tomorrow's showing too? I'm not so certain you'll be able to fool the regulars in the crowd for such incredible odds like you did tonight, but you can see the earnings will be considerable."

I stay silent and think about the offer.

Coming back into the arena again would be a money machine. Even if the odds are always in my favor, just on the percentage revenue share the event provides, I'll still be earning hundreds of gold per night.

However, I need to stay focused on my mission to get to the center of the city.

"I'm sure there will still be a slot open for me in the morning, right? I'm going to need some time to think about if I'll be coming back."

He lets out a light sigh, tapping the silver tablet and looking up at me with a curious gaze.

"Of course. Come by any time, I'll be looking forward to seeing you fight in another late-night event."

At this, he turns around and walks up the stairs, waving goodbye to everyone.

"As usual, wait a few moments before you all leave. You know better than I do how fans get sometimes. I'll open the golden gate entrance for anyone of you that would like to use the stadium-only pathway. If I don't see you until a later date, I'd like to say thank you for visiting Valor City."

The coat tails of the white suit disappear up the steps as we're all left in silence together.

Ace, Max, and Sia all start to slowly climb the stairs, but I turn my head around to still see Monk staring at me with a serious look on his face. It's not an intimidating gaze, it's more one of concern mixed with curiosity.

Once he sees me turn to look at him again, he begins walking over to me in a slow and calculated fashion.

The young bald man stops less than 2 meters from me and bows just like he did in the ring, then whispers under his breath in such a low tone that it's nearly impossible for me to hear him.

I boost my senses momentarily to make sure I understand what he says.

"Thank you for the help, you have set them free, 114 down, 886 to go. Be careful who you side with, even the strong can fall to its curse. This city is not what it seems."

At this, the man comes up from his bow and walks up the steps past the 3 other legacy fighters patiently waiting for enough time to pass after following in Mr. Wright's footsteps.

I myself am frozen in place trying to figure out what Monk possibly meant by those words.

It's clearly a warning relating to the opponent I just faced. 114 Ghouls defeated is the exact message I received for taking out one of the monsters, meaning he receives a similar message when defeating them too. The mention of a curse is related to the Lich King's curse on the monster's status, but how would he possibly know this without some kind of appraisal skill or seeing the buff on their own status?

I want to open my mouth to ask him more, but before I shake myself out from the slight daze, he's already left the ring and disappeared into the crowd.

Letting out a confused sigh, I wait on the steps wracking my brain for ideas before Max finally speaks to break the awkward silence.

"Alright, that's enough waiting, let's head to the golden gate and get some good food. I'm craving barbecue, how about all of you?"

There's two replies from Sia and Ace as they walk up the stairs to follow.

"Works for me."

"How about Elen's place? Can't go wrong there."

They all nod and agreement.

I follow close behind, pushing Monk's warning to the back of my mind and focus on extracting more information about this city itself during our upcoming dinner.

Chapter 357

The stadium is almost empty now, and the shielding that lined the large dome in the middle of the arena is shut down and not buzzing with power at all anymore.

We walk over to the far side of the ring together, near where the announcer's stand is, and just like on the far side of the ring, there's an exit back into the city. However, instead of regular stone arching doors that lead out to the silver city section, there's a single golden gate with Mr. Wright standing nearby, typing in a code on a small tablet next to the door.

"Alright, everyone just scan your wristbands here and you're free to enter the golden gates. I'm sure you can all afford to stay out late, so there's no point in warning you it's getting close to midnight."

Max is the first to scan his wristband.

The golden door opens with a click, then Sia and Ace proceed to do the same before walking through.

I bring my wrist to the silver tablet held by Mr. Wright and he gives me a nod as I follow them.

Once the golden gate closes behind me, I murmur under my breath.

"That was surprisingly easy..."

At the same moment, I reach beneath my cloak and take the ring of concealment I bought from out of town and place it on a free finger. My appearance changes in an instant, and the dark black suit and formal wear cover my body.

I even take off my mask but leave my concealment skill activated in order to shift my face to be a generic version of a city-goer in the area, but keep my black hair the same.

Max turns back as we walk forward into the town.

He pauses for half a second before replying as this is the first time he's seen me without my gear on or a mask, but doesn't comment on it. He directly answers my question of why it's so easy to enter the inner walls of the city.

"Technically we're all independent contractors. As fighters, our security clearance is much more lax than the average visitor."

I nod to myself as this makes sense and take in the view of the shops and crowds of new people that go about their nightly shopping routines under the bright mana-imbued streetlights that illuminate the town in a soft yellow glow.

It almost feels as if we're inside. The lights perfectly balance with the outside ambiance, making it easy to forget that the dark sky and twinkling stars are above us.

A light hum sounds in my ears as we walk closer to the shops, and I immediately see what's causing it. The sidewalks on both sides of the middle stone road are moving on their own.

Many businessmen, women in high-class dresses, and established hunters in phenomenal looking gear stand on the moving walkways examining the items visible through crystal clear glass windows in the shops.

At closer inspection, I use my appraisal skill and see items in every single shop window that could easily be sold at the Solaran Auction house as a top 10 item.

Every store in this section of the town has small fortunes for sale and up for display.

By the looks of many wristbands that glimmer gold and platinum as the 4 of us board one of the nearest moving sidewalks, everyone walking these streets has the capabilities of buying the items in the passing shops.

"What a different way of life this is..." I unconsciously whisper under my breath.

Sia leans in with her arms crossed, but her eyes are pointed at the glass displays of the passing buildings.

"This is really your first time in the city, isn't it? You may dress the part, but you're definitely not from around here."

I gulp softly but reply honestly. There's no reason to lie.

"Yeah, I've traveled quite a way to get here. I'm looking for a few friends. There's a good chance I'll be able to find them here if I look around for long enough."

She laughs.

"Well, I won't pry. But, we owe you one. I'm sure after tonight's performance, there will be many more high rollers coming out to watch tomorrow's show."

Ace smirks and turns around.

"True. I made quite the killing tonight. After that performance you put on, I wouldn't be surprised if the average betting size doubles tomorrow. Dinner's on me."

Sia slaps him on the back in a friendly way.

"Alright! That's what I'm talking about!"

Max points across the street as the moving sidewalk rounds a corner and he steps off onto the solid road.

"We're here. Welcome to The Moon Bar, Elen's place."

As we all step off and approach, faint calming music begins to play through the street and it only gets louder and more beautiful as the red doors of an exquisite restaurant come into view.

A woman in a red robe with white skin and white hair walks out to greet us, and Ace is the first to put out his hand with his wristband up in the air.

"A table for 4, I'll pay in advance for the premium service."

A transaction of 20 gold credits takes place between the two platinum wristbands and the woman nods gently with a thin smile.

"Very well esteemed guests. Welcome back, please follow me to your table."

She turns and walks through the red doors, and as soon as we follow inside, I can feel a shift in the air pressure. The mana density in here is far greater than outside. As I activate my all-seeing eye, it's clear as day the air is full of pure dense mana particles and they're passing through everyone.

The restaurant is large inside with floating orbs of red, white, and purple light in the air. Each table seating is far enough from each other than noise does not travel between them well. It's at most a muffled chatter.

The air feels crisp and relaxing. At the level of skill and mana control I'm at, even without consciously attempting to absorb MP, the environment around me naturally re-ups my bar to full and constantly fills me with a rejuvenating feeling.

"A premium booth with your personal tree of life. Order as much as you'd like, the bill is already covered."

A circular red booth, the same hue as the doors, comes into view and behind it, a faintly white glowing tree no more than 3 meters tall. It's purple blossoming branches curve over the top of our seating, and the feeling of fresh rejuvenating energy entering my body becomes even stronger. With my perception skills all still on high, it's clear that this tree is what is putting out about a thousand MP into the air every minute from the flowers blooming on its branches.

As we take our seat, I sense 3 other trees on opposite corners of the large open room doing the same thing and other guests are spending their night here too.

The moment we sit, blue menu screens pop up in front of us from our wristbands on the table.

Simultaneously, other screens with options for drinks and other items and services pop up. Each of them has the option to X them out at any time. Most options are already paid in full by the premium service fee Ace paid in advance. However, one of the largest screens catches my eye. It isn't a screen to buy anything, it is one that looks more like free entertainment, or the news.

My eyes widen as I realize exactly what's playing on the screen. It's a picture perfect display of my final fight against the Ghoul in the fight area from less than an hour ago.

I watch my black blade covered in a red aura slice right through the Ghoul's silver sword and disintegrate its orange aura in slow motion over and over again. Each time, the angle shifts and the final strike is examined from every possible side. The program flashes to a man with a charismatic smile as he begins to go over the fight play by play for an audience like this is a nightly sports recap program.

Chapter 358

The three other legacy fighters start tapping the blue panels that pop up, ordering food and drinks at a rapid rate.

I'm too focused on the moving picture display of my fight being analyzed on the nightly Valor City News Program like it's no big deal. After a few more seconds pass, the images shift again and one of the sword moves that Ace used to defeat his final opponent shows up on the screen.

He chuckles and turns to Max.

"Hey, look at that, my finishing move of the Red Ogre made the news."

Max crosses his arms to reply.

"Not bad, not bad."

He turns to me, and I'm still staring at the blue boxes that float around my vision in a dazed state.

"What? You're not gonna order anything?" He leans over to look into my status view, and the only thing playing now are the fight matches. I reply in a low tone, still captivated by the screens. "I'll get whatever their most popular item is, and uh- a few of their strongest drinks."

Max lets out another laugh, opening his own menu boxes up again and pressing some on the item options.

"Sure, I'll throw in a few orders for you. Did you-" Sia leans over too to see what I'm looking at, finishing Max's sentence.

"Did you not know the event was being recorded or something?" She pauses...

"Hey, that does beg the question, how'd you use all those skills? I know your main element is fire, but the ground clearly moved beneath some of your opponents' feet, I know better than anyone that is earth magic."

Ace jumps in too.

"Your buffs also come from a skill too. That red and golden glow, it's the same as the bloodhounds speed buff and the red ogre's strength..."

Max finishes off the sudden array of questions in a hushed tone.

"You're a multi-skill user, aren't you?"

I let out a long sigh, turning my head from the screen while X'ing out the remaining blue boxes. Meanwhile, I'm thinking whether or not coming to dinner here was a bad idea.

I assumed I'd get an unfiltered conversation while everyone was drinking, but the heavy questions have already started and we've hardly been sitting down for half a minute.

Instead of completely outing myself, or resorting to violence like usual, I decide to just deflect the question with a few additional details and hope that's enough to curb their interest for now.

"It's complicated. You're right though, I had no idea it was recorded. I would have probably fought differently had I known prior... how many people see this news program?"

Sia smiles and looks at me with a very curious gaze.

"Everyone in the city of course. A few thousand people minimum, I'm sure you caught some attention from the investors and guild members in the platinum district."

I raise an eyebrow and reply.

"What about the Royal Coin Sector? Would anyone there be watching?"

There's an awkward pause, then Sia replies.

"Well, I wouldn't know that."

Max replies too.

"Not our business."

Ace shrugs and doesn't say a word, his eyes dart around for a moment then the awkward silence continues.

I'm at a loss for words at their reaction, but the calming sound of a woman's voice cuts through the air to alleviate the tension.

"Welcome back Legacy Fighters. You all put on quite the showing tonight. Please, enjoy your stay as always."

A woman with smooth white skin and long white hair to match walks over to us with many circular golden trays of food and bottles of drinks floating around her in a slow-moving circle as if she has a telekinesis skill.

She looks very similar to the woman that greeted us at the door, almost as if they're related. The only difference is her eyes are much sharper and her curves are far more mature.

The woman wears a red dress and points her finger down toward the table in a gentle manner as our orders find their way in front of us before she turns to leave and disappears into the darkness of the restaurant's privacy before anyone can say a word.

The moment she does, it still feels like her eyes are staring right through me. Her image is burned into the back of my mind.

I'm left speechless, but Max hits me on the back in a friendly way while grabbing one of the bottles to pour us all a drink.

"That's Elen, the owner of this place. Kind of her to stop by and say hello, I haven't seen her in ages."

Ace and Sia take their drinks, so I do too.

Clink

We tap our glasses together and begin to enjoy the meals.

Any thought of the previous conversations about my skills and the question about the royal coin are in the past. The only thing that fills the table now is laughter, drinks, food, and talks of what kind of matchups they think will be in the 5th and 6th rounds tomorrow.

Apparently there's a pretty normal rotation of 3 or 4 monsters per stage. Meaning there's a limited amount of dungeons they capture the monsters from.

I take a sip of alcohol, but just like usual my poison resistance passive ability kicks in and it's negated instantly. Still, I keep up with their drinking speed and slow my speech while widening a smile to play the part and not sour the mood.

Once I take a bite of the premium cut meats and incredible cooking however, the euphoria that hits my body and mind is one that I can actually feel.

Light plumes of mana flow through every bite, and a notification pops up on my status window once I finish the first plate.

[Congratulations! Elen's Dish consumed.]

[Temporary Buff Added: 30 Minutes: +5% Strength +5% Mana Regeneration]

I smile at the sound of this. If it was harmful, my poison resistance buff would have negated it already. The woman that came over earlier must have some kind of mana imbued abilities. It makes sense why this restaurant is so expensive.

Maybe I could pull something like this off with my crafting skill if I tried.

The 4 of us drink and eat for about 45 more minutes. An interesting phenomenon I find is that every time a new dish is finished, the 30-minute buff timer is reset. The buffs don't stack as I initially expected they would.

I turn to Sia as Max starts pouring a 3rd bottle out into glasses. Each of us drinks a considerable amount.

"Could you tell me more about this city? As I said before, I'm pretty new here. I'd like to know as much as I can if I'm going to be here for a while."

She smiles and responds as we all clink our drinks together again.

"Well sure, what do you want to know? This is known far and wide as the city of commerce, but in reality, it's the city of gambling. The only ones that make any money in this place is the city itself."

She looks around and whispers under her breath.

"Until you land a commerce contract, work for the royal guard, or live in the monastery; there's no way of walking out of this city with more money than you came in with."

Ace keeps his mouth shut, staring up at the shimmering purple and white tree with glossy eyes and a smile uninterested in our conversation. Max, on the other hand, overhears what Sia has to say and jumps in.

"It wasn't always like this you know. My father used to work in this city as a merchant before the..."

He gets in close to me just like Sia did before whispering again.

"Before the mercenary guild came to town about a decade ago."

He leans back up to sit straight.

"The city used to run just like any other, with taxes on merchants, and relaxed security that let citizens of any financial class explore wherever they pleased."

Ace finally turns to us with his arms crossed.

"That was before our time. Who cares about the good old days. We're succeeding in the system that exists today, so it doesn't matter."

Max shrugs and lets out a sigh, then decides to pour another drink.

"I guess you're right. I just think it's sometimes a bit unfair. People are lured in by the shiny walls and stripped of every dollar they have before they're thrown out. Most of the gear, services, and

items here are overpriced; but the only other places to find stuff like this would be in Sector 4 to a certain extent. For real luxuries, they would have to go outside the dark continent. That's not an option for almost everyone here."

Clink

We say cheers and the strong liquid consumed shifts the conversation in an instant back to a more mundane topic.

Another 30 minutes or so of the fight arena talk and meaningless gossip about their lives outside Valor City goes by. Their laughter gets louder, and their words get slower. Now is the time I'll get to start asking some much more serious questions.

As I'm about to interject again, a ding sounds in my head and a blue text box pops up in front of my eyes. By the reaction of everyone else at the table, they have received it too.

My heart skips a beat when I read the message.

[00:00 Midnight Tax: Golden Gates Area: 1 Gold Credit has been deducted from your account.]

Chapter 359

"What's this? A city tax? I thought there were no extra taxes in this city! That's what the fight arena is for... What's going on here?"

Sia turns to me.

"The citizen tax is standard. It's only business owners and city officials that are exempt from paying it. However, even for visitors, it's not mandatory. The tax can be avoided as long as you leave the city before the local time hits midnight. Whatever wall you're standing in, you'll get taxed 1 credit of that specific coin."

Max sighs and replies under his breath.

"It's another one of Valor City's new rules..."

He leans in closer.

"They've really been cracking down since last year. There was a big shift in the way the Royal Guard protected this city. It seems like every year they want less and less people coming closer to the inner walls. This tax definitely keeps people away."

Ace talks for the first time in a while.

"I agree, the guards have been getting way too close for comfort in the last few months especially..."

He pauses, staring up at the shimmering purple and white lights for a moment before speaking again.

"You know what? This all started when Monk beat the first stage 7 monster. I don't want to point any fingers, but I never even saw a single guard pass the platinum walls until then. Now they're watching matches in the silver gates."

Sia laughs and responds.

"It's true, but you weren't even a fighter in the ring at that point; were you really paying attention to all this?"

"Hey, I was studying the arena for a while before I entered..."

He crosses his arms and sits back in his seat, fading out of the conversation again.

I speak up.

"How strong were all of you before you started fighting in the ring? You're all pretty young at levels of strength most could never dream of achieving."

Max replies.

"I could ask you the same thing."

He smirks and continues.

"We were all under level 400 when we started; we could hardly pass the 4th stage. Sia and I started around the same time, then Ace joined from the crowd like one of the newbie fighters we saw in the ring today and rose through the ranks pretty quickly."

I turn to Ace, expecting an eye roll or a snarky comment back, but he's checked out. The swordsman either doesn't care or really wasn't listening to Max's remark.

Max continues.

"There are no dungeons free for public use within over a hundred kilometers from here. I grew up in one of the villages near the border of sector 1 and sector 2. It's easy to grind levels and make money from the unregulated dungeons out in the wilderness, but not many of the smaller village dungeons ever pass more than level 200 or so for mobs. It's known that if you have the talents, you have to move to Solara and use their dungeon hub to reach your full potential here in the dark continent. Everyone that passes level 300 has trained in that hub; it's well known."

I nod, replying again.

"So why aren't there any public dungeons here? Wouldn't it be in the city's best interest to let people farm them? Just using the monsters for the fighting ring seems like a pretty wasteful use of materials and energy."

Max shakes his head.

"It used to be that way. The mountains this city was built on used to be inhabited by farmers, miners, and hunters that respected the land and many men like my father got wealthy off the rich resources."

I reply, remembering what he said earlier.

"Then you said a mercenary guild came in and took over?"

"That's right. Some businessman from outside the continent came in and teamed up with Sector 2 and waged war on the monastery atop this mountain, and took control of all the dungeons and raw resources. Instead of the people in surrounding villages getting resources at premium prices, for the last decade everything is farmed solely by the Royal Guard, and all resources are shipped off to Sector 2 to be crafted into magic items and gear, sold around the world, even outside the dark continent walls."

My eyes widen at this statement.

Unless they have a team of craftsmen working under the Sector 2 leader, my recent escapades may have unknowingly halted an ongoing multinational trade deal.

I gulp, but keep asking questions as Max pours out the final bit of alcohol from the table's 4th bottle.

"Okay... this is all starting to make a bit more sense. The only thing that confuses me is the monastery you keep bringing up. What is this?"

Sia slips into the conversation to answer this.

"It's where Monk lives, I'm sure of it."

Max laughs at her remark.

"Yeah, yeah. I've never actually seen him go in that place, but it would make sense."

I raise an eyebrow.

"What place, what do you mean?"

"There's a huge temple in the Platinum District. It's on the opposite side of town to the auction house. People say it's the remnants of the old monastery that stood on top of this mountain before the walls were put up, but I was too young to remember what it even looked like."

He shrugs, then we clink our glasses together and take a final drink for the night.

The conversation shifts back to what gear they'll get tomorrow morning, or where sales are for collecting mana potions so they can all work on their mana control training like usual before the matches. Then it just falls back to friendly arguing over who is going to beat the 7th Stage first out of all of them. Even Ace joins back in to duke it out.

A long time passes as I ponder to myself about the information I just heard.

The deeper I dig into this, the more complicated things are beginning to become.

Max finally is the one to let out a long sigh and pull up a blue text box on his wristband status.

"Alright, it's starting to get very late. I say we turn it in for the night. We have to be well rested for the big matches tomorrow."

At the click of a button, the slender white-haired woman that greeted us at the door appears from the darkness surrounding our booth with a thin smile. Her soothing voice replies to the summons.

"I'm glad you all enjoyed your meals here, please follow me; I'll gladly escort you to the resting quarters if you wish to spend the night."

The three of them all stand up from the table and stretch their bodies before following the woman, so I decide to do the same.

We walk to the back of the restaurant, leaving our table behind. There are a few customers still finishing off drinks, smoking, and relaxing as the calm music continues to play in the background. However, almost 90% of people have left for the night.

The white-haired woman brings us to a black staircase. As she moves her foot onto the first step, it glows light red to illuminate the walkway. Every step upward lights up red under her feet too, and the lighting slowly fades after she makes it a distance away from it.

We all follow up and are given access to separate rooms with a large comfortable bed along with a shower and a view of the city. There are paintings on the walls and everything is accented in black red and gold to keep the theme of the restaurant.

The woman that brought us upstairs leaves as fast as she came, speaking the same final line as the bedroom door of each of us closes.

"Please notify us from your wristband if you wish for any further goods or services. Your Premium membership extends until tomorrow at noon."

The air in the room feels just as rich with mana as the restaurant below.

I look around for a moment, scanning the walls to make sure there are no listening or recording devices present. Then, once I'm content the place is clear, I take a long hot shower and go to bed with all the new information from tonight's talk on my mind.

Chapter 360

Only a few hours pass before I wake up feeling great. The morning sun is just peeking through the windows, and it's clear I've only slept a few hours, but it feels like I've been resting for an entire day.

Even with the use of my Red Hydra's buff in the arena last night, the constant rejuvenation of mana in the air heals me up good as new.

Another interesting phenomenon I've noticed recently is that the higher my overall mana control increases, the less food and sleep I need to recharge back up to 100%. Although after intense battles I need a long rest, if I'm just going about my daily life without any physically or mentally exerting challenges, I can go almost 3 times longer without food, water, or sleep than I would have been able to a few months back.

My eyes re-examine the extravagant room, then I hop out of bed and walk out into the hall to make my way down the steps.

The black stairs still glow red under my feet, but the general lighting of the restaurant is much brighter now, slightly lit up by the morning sun.

As my feet hit the bottom step and I walk onto the main floor, a woman's voice echoes through the place.

"I hope you enjoyed your night."

My eyes dart around, but I don't see anyone. In response, I activate my all seeing eye to spot a figure at the far side of the room waiting for me to walk closer with no ill intent. So, I continue to make my way past the empty tables and light purple glowing trees.

The concentration of MP in the air is strong, but no where near as intense as it was last night with all the guests here.

Once I'm within 5 meters of the exit, the store owner appears in front of me, popping out from behind the closest crimson red bar booth.

Instead of her tight red working dress she wore last night to exaggerate her curves, the woman wears a black one that contrasts even more against her snow-white skin and hair.

"I didn't get to fully introduce myself yesterday. My name is Elen. I watched your match and was very impressed. It looks like there's a new top tier legacy fighter in town; Mr. Flame Emperor."

The corners of her lips curl as she says my fighter name.

My gaze narrows, and I finally get to use appraisal and inspect the woman that disappeared from my sight last night.

A few readings pop up in my mind's eye; [Lv. 344] and [Mana Imbuement][Legendary Grade].

The mystery of how she's able to add buffs to food items, and most likely the trees in this place too, is explained in an instant.

There's nothing too special about this woman, but she's clearly a competent businesswoman and respected by the locals. On top of that, she's interested in me, so I'll play along.

I respond.

"Oh yeah? You watched the matches? Do you usually introduce yourself to all your premium customers?"

She takes a slow step forward.

"Not all of them, but you spike my curiosity. I've never had a customer consume more mana than they paid for in a single night. I keep close track of the energy in this establishment and can't fathom where it's all gone."

Her eyes lock with mine, and she comes to a halt less than a meter from my face.

I let out a sigh, thinking this was going in a different direction.

"So what, you want me to pay extra or something?"

She smirks.

"No, no. It wasn't much, just the cost of doing business. You're welcome back anytime. Just know, we offer many other goods and services here as well that may come in handy for a hunter like you. The two most popular ones would be temporary buff enhancement pills or discreet housing to disappear and heal with no questions asked.

"How much for one of each of your strongest buff enhancement pills? I'd be interested in that, nothing else is necessary right now."

The tension of her elusive arrival and my attempt for a sneaky exit deescalates as I purchase 10 small red pills that boost all stat points by 30% and increase mana absorption rate by 15% for 3 hours. I transfer 5 gold credits over to her wristband and place the pills into my pocket, but underneath my disguise, they go straight into my item storage.

According to Elen, they can't stack; each time a new one is consumed, the 3-hour countdown just resets back up to full.

I'm interested in examining these later and trying to recreate them with my crafting skill, making a quick deal with her here may also put me in better faith for future business. It's better to be remembered as the new legacy fighter that is ready to do business than a spoiled young man that comes in paid for by a friend and absorbs as much mana as they can.

I nod and turn to leave after our quick interaction.

"Hey, if the other legacy fighters ask where I've gone off to so early, just tell them I'm off to continue looking for my friends. Maybe I'll show up to the event tonight, but if not, that just means I've found what I'm looking for."

She gives me a nod.

"Of course, I look forward to seeing you again."

"Likewise, maybe I'll see you soon."

At this line, I walk out the door and back into the city within the golden walls.

The first step I take, there's a moving sidewalk nearby, and small golden arrows with shop names guiding city-goers to any specific place they wish to travel to. As I round a corner, one of the pathways on the opposite side of the street sports a small platinum-colored arrow.

I hop off this one and get on the route that will take me to the entrance gate of the platinum walls.

The streets are much quieter right now than they were last night.

Almost no hunters, businessmen, or high-class shoppers are on the street at this time of day. I assume most of them left the city last night to avoid the tax or are sleeping in still from the long night.

Artifacts, gear, and magical items line the shopping windows as I continue to pass them. The price tags range anywhere from 10 to upward of 100 gold. I even scan a few items on the way past to see a few break 100% buffs. However, the pricing is a bit unreasonable. I can easily farm gear like this for free or craft even better gear once I have the raw materials ready and a moment free to relax.

Right now, I only have one thing on my mind; using the money in my balance to make my way into the inner wall. I have just over 12 platinum, it's barely enough to make my way in. Spending exorbitant amounts would not be a good idea even if the gear looks incredible. Which many of them do.

Finally, I make it to the platinum gates and, just like the silver and gold, there are two knights in shimmering platinum-colored armor standing in front of it.

I hop off the moving sidewalk and raise my wristband in the air. Immediately one of the knights steps forward and moves a tablet close to my wrist to scan me in.

It goes off a light dinging sound, and the reflection of a green light is visible in the glossy armor of the knight. Simultaneously, the Platinum gate opens slowly behind them and the knight that scanned me in steps back into his previous position.

Neither of them say a word as I slowly walk through the open doors.