

## D. Diver 361

### Chapter 361

The platinum doors close behind me, and I look up at the skyscrapers towering over the outer city.

These are the tall buildings visible from a distance, but it was hard to tell whether they were in this district or one deeper when I was in the golden walls.

As I take a step forward onto the single moving walkway that begins to give me a tour around the city, I take in the view.

Blue text boxes automatically pop up from my wristband, naming each tall building that passes. The buildings are mostly business centers and privately owned real estate. There are options to set up appointments on some, and others just display the name of the company that owns them, and I can see personalized guards outside each one.

My stomach drops when I turn my first corner and see two guards in black armor standing in front of a skyscraper easily 40 stories tall.

The guards look just like the black knights in the arena that told me not to continue to the 8th stage. This is the Royal Guard... I can't read any of their stats; they all have that appraisal-blocking armor on.

I slowly move past on the moving sidewalk, and the guards don't even bother to turn their heads my way, so I decide not to overthink it too much.

As more privately owned buildings pass, it becomes more common to see anywhere from 2 to 8 Royal Guards standing outside each one, depending on how many entrances there are and how extravagant they are, more guards stand on duty.

Half of the buildings have silver knights that seem to be private security, and others just have businessmen out front, but upon closer inspection, the casually dressed hunters are of high levels. Mostly between level 350 and 450. It's possible anyone higher would be hired by the city, but that is only a theory.

The further I travel around the slow-moving circle of the city, the more I get an understanding of the way things work.

Before I know it, a building that looks unlike any other in this district comes into view. It has white marble pillars and a long staircase up to its front entrance. No more than 5 stories high, but in a wide concert hall-like shape that takes up the full corner of the block.

I can see a few people walking up the steps and others loitering around at the top near the entrance. This is the first time I've seen anyone other than the guards in this district at all today. Out of curiosity, I wait for the moving stairway to bring me near and step off to make my way closer to the stairs.

The moment I place a foot onto the first step, a ton of blue text boxes pop up from my wristband.

[Welcome to the Valor City Auction House!]

[The Morning Auction will begin in 1 hour and 31 minutes.]

[Would you like to reserve a seat?][YES][NO]

[The Mid Day Auction will begin in 4 hours and 31 minutes.]

[Would you like to reserve a seat?][YES][NO]

[The Night Time Auction will begin in 10 hours and 31 minutes.]

[Would you like to reserve a seat?][YES][NO]

I X them all out and take a step back from the towering structure and decide to hop right back on the moving stairway.

The auction house is the last place I want to be right now...

From the lack of people in the area, it seems like the night showing is the more popular event. At least I know where it is for visual reference, I can attend here when I have more money to spare, or possibly something to sell.

Everyone within these walls has over 1 platinum coin in their wristband ready to spend, I'm sure the high rollers in Valor City make Solaran bidders seem like lower class citizens.

I hop back on the moving sidewalk and recall the conversation last night I had with Max. He said the monastery is on the opposite side of the platinum district to the auction house.

Before making my way into the innermost walls, I might as well check the place out to see if it's worth investigating later or not.

The moving walkway takes me past more of the tall silver towers that are built up high in the sky. Every few buildings that pass have a wide open road with small black arrows on it that curves off the central path and leads toward the inner walls.

If I squint, I can see the tall black walls in the distance at these few open arena turning points, but everywhere else the buildings block out the view of any scenery.

The closer into the walls I travel, the more compact the city becomes. Taking another half loop around the entire city on this moving walkway takes less than 20 minutes before I find the structure I've been searching for.

The moving walkway stops in front of a wide open lot of land similar to the auction house.

There's no tall skyscraper or extravagant temple like I was expecting.

In reality, there's a small pyramid-shaped structure made of glossy black stone eerily similar to the coloring of the walls that I'm trying to reach.

The structure has 4 sides and stands a few dozen meters tall. There's a small rectangular opening on the side facing the walkway that's ended at the side of the land lot.

As I take a step forward to see if any status notifications pop up like the auction house, two robed figures step out from the dark open doorway.

I don't recognize either of them, but they wear the same orange clothing as Monk wore in the arena. Both of them have shaved heads and seem to be younger than me, or the same age as me at most. Sia's words earlier of her believing Monk lived here are starting to add up.

I put a hand up in the air and wave, but get no response back.

The two figures cross their arms and stare at me with indifferent gazes as I walk forward and use my appraisal and inspect skills.

My eyes widen as not a single number or stat shows up in my status when I try to scan them.

I activate enemy detection, and to my surprise, they do show up in this reading... Not as a number, but as the presence of life and that's it. The only other time something like this happened to me was when I used this skill on my teammates when they were trapped in mana-negating cuffs beneath the City of Solara.

I stop my steps forward with a tightened gaze, examining the material this structure is made of more; coming to the conclusion it is much different than the armor of the Royal Guard...

After taking a deep breath, I finally speak up with the most friendly look on my face I can muster.

"I come in peace. I was the other fighter that made it to stage 7, just like Monk."

There's no response from either of the young men that stand right inside the entrance.

I think about taking another step forward, but it's clear they have no intent to engage with me and also don't wish to cause a problem. I'm the one making a commotion here.

I let out a sigh after attempting to scan them and the structure 5 more times but fail to get any different results.

No readings come back at all... I decide to turn around and leave.

"Well, I'll be heading off now, I guess. The reason I came is to ask your top fighter how he does that soul energy trick. I'd be happy to show him how mine works as well."

With a shrug, I leave and step back onto the moving walkway.

The moment the black pyramid gets out of my line of sight, the two figures that stood guard at the open door entrance turn around as well and walk back into the darkness.

I stand in silence trying to wrap my mind around all the oddities that I've encountered recently as the sidewalk brings me to one of the roads that leads to the Royal Coin's Gate.

I hop off and start walking toward the enormous shadowy wall in the distance.

My perception skills are on full blast, scanning everything in sight, even the shimmering black wall that approaches falls under the gaze of my all-seeing eye.

It gives off an odd energy signature similar to the Armor of the 4 Black Knights that stand in front of the gate.

All of their status windows pop up in my mind's eye, but are still scrambled by whatever powerful enchantment these armor sets have.

I raise my wristband, and one of the knights takes a step forward to scan it with a tablet.

A small red light reflects in the shine of its armor, then it takes a step back and doesn't say a word.

I gulp, thinking to myself if maybe that guard at the golden gates made a mistake with his math and the royal coin is really 100 platinum, or if there's another reason this isn't going as smoothly as I thought it would...

"Is there any reason I'm not allowed in?"

There's no response from the guards. On both sides of the black gate, 2 of them stand with silent professional stances.

I wait a few seconds before asking again, looking down at my platinum wristband, then back up at the guards.

"Do I not have enough money? Are there some other requirements I haven't met?"

Still, not a single guard bats an eye. They all stare straight forward and pay me no mind as if I'm not even here.

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"I have to meet with the leader of the Galeheart Mercenary Guild. Please, tell me what requirements must be met for me to pass."

I get no response.

Eventually, I resort to waving my hands up and down as no words I say seem to make it through to the 4 Royal Guards standing outside the final inner wall.

Without the grey mist activated, these black armored suits seem much less intimidating to me. I witnessed a few of them activate in the fight arena earlier, so I'm almost positive that these are the exact same armor suits worn by the prior Sector 2 Leader.

I let out a long sigh after standing in front of them for another few minutes, then reach into my item storage and pull out the silver card with the mercenary guild address on it to show it to the closest guard's vision.

"I need to get here. I was invited. There are a few people I need to meet."

Finally, I get a response, but it's not the one I was hoping for.

The closest guard takes out his tablet again and turns it toward me, displaying the flashing red message that popped up before, but he didn't care to show me.

[User ID C#129880: Unregistered]

[Royal Coin District Access: Denied]

[Reason: No formal Invite]

An electronic static voice comes out of the man's helmet. It sounds just like the Sector 2 leader's did. The awkward pauses in between every phrase are replicated as well.

"Please... Scan an ID with your full name and picture... You may be on the green light list..."

My eyes scan the tablet for a moment before I respond.

"I don't have an ID on me to share."

He puts away the rectangular piece of technology again and takes a step back before looking forward off into the distance, not acknowledging my presence at all.

To this guard, and the entire city, I am just an anonymous visitor... If the inner city is really invite-only, this explains why they're treating me like this. However, if I were to give them my real identity, that would open up a whole new box of issues I'm not interested in entertaining just yet.

I'm supposed to be captured and dead to the world, along with my teammates handed in to the association. Showing my face inside a secure city filled with guards isn't the right thing to do, even if my name would get me inside the inner walls, letting any rumor of my existence out might not end well.

I nod and slowly back away from the guards, thinking over my predicament.

There may be a way to get into the city without showing ID. I could build a reputation up in the fight arena or maybe start selling and buying very rare items in the auction house. Both of these will surely bring attention to me, but may have their downsides too.

The biggest one being time.

I don't know if my teammates really consentually followed the leader into this place and are just waiting for me to arrive, or if they're stuck behind these walls in trouble.

Putting my index finger and thumb to my chin, I turn around and start to walk back to the moving walkway.

This is going to be tougher than I imagined... I need to think...

As I take a step on, a familiar voice sounds from nearby from the side of one of the unguarded buildings. I turn to see who it is as their words trail closer to me, following me onto the moving platform.

"What business do you have with the Galeheart Mercenary Guild? Whose side are you really on?"

To my surprise, I see the fighter from the Arena that I've been most curious about ever since I left that place. It's Monk.

Gracefully and silently, he comes closer to me with eyes full of curiosity, but with movements not showing any malice at all. The orange attire he wears contrasts the dark grey tones of this portion of the city. He has a small backpack on now that he didn't wear while fighting.

The man sticks out like a sore thumb, but somehow I didn't notice him until now. He must have been following me for quite a while.

My first instinct is to do a full scan of his body and skills, but it instantly comes up the same with a level nearing 700, no skills or buffs, and oddly, still not a hint of mana in his entire being.

I respond.

"There are some people I need to meet behind those walls. I don't work with the guild if that's what you're asking about."

He crosses his arms and nods, staring off into the distance where we're headed, in the direction of the auction house.

There's a pause for about 15 seconds where neither of us say a word, but I speak up.

"So I assume you heard my proposal before I left the monastery. You'd be interested in sharing techniques?"

His eyes look around up in the air and around the tall buildings, then he brings an index finger to his lips.

I let out a sigh and look around in a much slower and less careful manner on the verge of boredom. Just like everyone else in this city, he's acting sketchy too like someone is watching or listening.

Monk responds.

"Come to my home, then we'll talk."

"Sure."

I shrug and agree. I planned on trying to enter before, now that I have an invite it'd be rude not to come over.

We stand in silence for the rest of the walkway's ride, passing tons of skyscrapers, the auction house, and even the exit back into the golden district before wrapping all the way back around to the black pyramid-like temple made of mana-negating stone.

Once both of us step off the moving platform to make our way to the dark hallway, I spot two men in robes disappear into the darkness again after they make eye contact with Monk and bow.

My perception skills are back on full blast as we get closer to the structure.

I'm less than 3 steps behind Monk as he leads the way.

Before I know it, I take a step onto the black stone material and enter the doorway. The moment I do, all of my skills cease to function.

It feels just like the cuffs I had on that blocked all my skills. I don't feel tired or weak, I just can't sense or manipulate any mana in the air. Any and all mana from the city around us disappears from my mind's eye.

Even the wristband around my arm powers down and returns back to its natural transparent state.

I see Monk's wristband do the same, but he doesn't slow down his movements at all. The young man continues walking down the long dark hallway and I question if it's a good idea to follow.

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I stopped my forward motion for a moment, looking back at the sunlight behind me.

"What is this place made of? I've felt material like this before. It blocks me from using mana... Is this—"

Monk turns around and, placing a finger over his lips again, motions for me to walk further into the dark hallway.

"Hold your questions a little longer."

I try to activate my status window to see if anything works, but the only two things that seem available to me right now are my demonic energy manipulation skill and my red hydra's rage buff. None of my items are giving me any buffs, and even my base stats from leveling up are negated completely. I feel just like I did in those cuffs a few weeks ago, weak like a normal human.

However, the exit is near, and I'm not restrained. The fact that some skills that don't need mana to operate still function is a little bit of a relief too.

I continue to follow him down the hallway. Whatever he can tell me would be the biggest lead I've had yet. So far, no one wants to say a word about this city. Even the legacy fighters were pretty tight-lipped while drunk, or they just didn't have the information I was looking for.

We make it to the end of the single hall, and the two younger men that stood at the front of the open door previously now stand in front of a solid wall. It's the only thing this place leads to...

They both step aside as Monk presses his hand on the black wall and pushes it forward. A white light pierces through the darkness on all edges as we step through and the door closes behind us.

Fluorescent lighting that seems as though it's not powered by mana at all hangs from the ceiling, giving off a small amount of heat and filling the small room with light.

The walls and floors are still made of the same black stone, but now I hear chatter from many people. The sound of music and even laughter sounds like it's coming from below me.

The only thing in this small room is a handrail on both sides that leads to a hole in the floor spiraling downward with a narrow staircase.

Monk doesn't slow down one bit; he just begins walking down the stairs and finally speaks.

"We're contained now; we may both talk freely. No one but us can hear or record us."

I scrunch my eyebrows at this statement, and am about to ask who exactly we should be worried about here, but the sight in front of me as we take steps off the spiral staircase makes my eyes widen with awe.

Easily 50 men, all between 18 and 30, are in a large open room underground. Every one of them wears the same orange clothing as Monk. There are about 2 dozen circular tables, and many of them are eating food together, reading books, and sharing conversation.

Half of them wear transparent wristbands, deactivated just like mine. Others don't even have wristbands on at all.

There are many rectangular door-shaped slits in the walls all around the room that look like they could be pushed in just like the one Monk pushed forward to bring us down here.

He walks forward through the crowds of people.

Some of them stare at me for a moment but look over to Monk, and their expression changes; most smile or bow as we walk by and go back to minding their own business.

One very young man comes close and bows very low, speaking in a relaxed voice.

"Welcome back Elder, your travels have concluded faster than expected. Shall we continue mid-day training without you as scheduled, or now that you're back, do you have other plans?"

Monk pauses and smiles at the younger teen, while I contemplate why he's calling a man no older than 25 an elder.

He responds, stopping his steps and clasping his hands.

"Yes, continue training without me today. I believe I'll be busy with a private session for quite a while."

He continues walking forward until we make it to the back of the room. The man in the orange robe places a hand on one of the rectangular doors and presses on it with an open palm to open it up again.

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Just like before, it opens slowly and another narrow hallway appears behind it.

I follow him through and down the hall again before he turns to another door on the wall.

"This is the last one, thank you for being patient with me."

The door opens silently just like all the other ones, and we walk into what seems to be a training room.

It's almost as large as the recreational dining hall we just passed, but this area is almost completely empty.

On the left side, I see some wooden spears and metal weapons. Some of them look jet-black as if they're crafted from the same stone this fortress is made of. By all the gear, there's a table and a few comfortable-looking chairs too.

Monk walks over and sits down in one on the far side of the long wooden table.

"Please, take a seat."

I do as he says, sinking into the chair and looking out at the dark black open room dimly lit by the white lights surrounding the gear and over the entrance door.

There's a long pause of silence before I break the awkwardness.

"I understand you've brought me here to be much more discreet and out of the eyes and ears of anyone listening, but why? What have you brought me here for? Is it the soul energy technique? Is it because I brought up the mercenary guild to those guards? Is it another reason?"

He looks at me with a curious yet indifferent expression again before responding.

"The simple answer is; I've come to ask for your help. Your soul energy is not your own, yet you're able to control it with ease to take down soul bound opponents. It's power like this that may help us finally defeat our enemy."

I raise an eyebrow, thinking very carefully about what he just said.

"This enemy is... who? The Galeheart guild?"

He pauses again. The room is eerily silent.

"Yes, but no... the man you are trying to meet with, Lith Galeheart is the reason we're in this situation to begin with but he isn't my main concern."

I gulp, but Monk continues.

"Technically they're the ones we've opposed ever since they took our land and built this fortress on the mountain, but the mercenary guild is not the enemy I wish to ask for your help to defeat. If anything, they could be an ally in the battle that may unfold."



There's another awkward pause of silence. Everything that was just said makes no sense... It seems like Monk knows much more about the inner workings of this place than any of the legacy fighters knew, so I might as well dig for more and give him some information about myself in return.

From what I understand, Monk has no reason to harm me. He's the one asking me for help. I finally respond.

"I don't know much about this city, but I do know from talking with the legacy fighters that things have changed a lot over the last year or even a couple of months."

Monk nods as I continue.

"I only came here originally to find my teammates. They're supposedly in the inner walls with the leader of the mercenary guild."

I lean in and whisper under my breath.

"They're also able to wield the same soul energy, if that makes things any clearer for you."

His eyes widen.

He covers his mouth with his hand and thinks to himself for well over half a minute before responding again.

"If this is the case, I believe the guild leader already knows you're here and chose not to put your ID on the green list for the inner walls. Your showing in the arena made you a direct threat to our common enemy. Just like me, you have a target on your back, and Lith does not want to jeopardize whatever he's planning to publicly allow a soul energy user into the inner walls."

I respond.

"So, who is the enemy...?"

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"Well, to explain this, I'll have to recall some events that go back about a year."

I nod as Monk continues.

"My monastery here and the Galeheart Guild came to a reasonable agreement ages ago. They have overwhelming power in numbers, so in theory, they could wipe us out in a turf war, but many of their men would die as well. It would make us both too weak, and the land beneath our feet is far too valuable to leave us vulnerable to attack from a third party. We thought if we worked together, we'd be strong enough to keep anyone from attacking."

"So you have an alliance?"

"More like an agreement."

Monk stands up from his seat and starts pacing slowly along the back wall with the weapons lining it.

"Lith gives us work sometimes to farm or subjugate dungeons, and in return, he allows us to live rent-free in the city behind many layers of defenses."

I nod slowly, sensing this isn't the root of the problem.

"Although many in our group resent this city, others are grateful that we still get to live peacefully as we once did in the changing world. Almost all the animosity has gone away, that is, until earlier this year when the Dark One attacked."

My face lights up with curiosity.

"The Dark One?"

He nods and continues.

"Yes, ever since the abyss in the center of the continent began to grow, many dungeons in the area have been breaking constantly. Every few weeks there's a new surge that needs to be taken care of."

Monk's eyebrows scrunch and his jaw clenches as he says his next line.

"Usually, my team was more than enough to handle any breaks within 100 kilometers of this place. The population in sector 1 is fairly spread out, and even though this is the capital, there aren't many people that stay for long as their money gets eaten up and they move back to the surrounding villages."

"So what happened? Was there a labyrinth break or something?"

"There are no labyrinths in this sector, only a few very strong dungeons. We often code them with the outer continent's grading system. There are many C and B Class dungeons deep in the mountains, and quite a few that have formed beneath the city itself from constant tourism. This is how the arena we fought in earlier easily farms level 500 and higher monsters with ease. However, the day the A-Class Dungeon broke was the day we lost our freedom."

Stolen novel; please report.

There's a long silent pause, then I speak up.

"So what happened? Was there a break in the city? Everything seems fine to me... Someone must have handled it."

"Something... Something handled it."

There's another pause before he continues again.

"You remember that notification you received after defeating the Stage 7 Ghoul in the arena, right?"

I nod slowly as he keeps speaking.

"That's one of the monsters from the A-Class break. In the almost year-long process of hunting them down, there have only been 114 defeated, including the one you killed in the arena. They cannot be killed with mana. None of my disciples are strong enough to take them on solo just yet. They need training outside the city or would have to fight in the arena like me. Allowing more attention to come on my people as the only soul energy users in this city would be a fatal move. My desperate attempt of fighting in the arena to slowly knock down their army is risky enough. This is why I ask for your help specifically."

I stare at the man in the orange robe with another thought on my mind for a moment, then decide to let it out.

"These monsters are middle B Class at best. How is this an A-Class break? Wouldn't the Royal Guard just handle them? How do they keep them contained in the arena and let people fight them in

the first place if they're so hard to defeat...? Wouldn't it just be best to kill them as fast as possible once they're contained?"

Monk shakes his head.

"The Ghouls are just a tool for the Dark One. That being is the true monster that came out from the break. It leads an army of 1000 Ghouls, and they follow its every order. It may be a monster, but it's highly intelligent; smarter than any human by far. I never got the chance to fight the leader myself, but this may be a blessing in disguise. All the strongest Elders before me with far more power were all defeated in a single battle. After both my troops and many of the Galeheart Guild's highest paid mercenaries were defeated entirely, the Dark One made a deal with Lith in his weakened state and took over the city..."

"Just like he did with you? So you're saying there's a secret leader to Valor City?"

Monk nods.

"Similarly. However, the real intentions of the Dark One are unknown to me. All I know is, the Royal Guard is controlled by that creature now. It is not in human hands. Still, even though it's an entity that came from a dungeon, the select few that know about the break refer to it as the Sector 1 Leader. Others are in the dark. Many think all the recent changes in the city are because of the Galeheart Guild, in reality this is not the case. It's the Dark One. The strongest Entity ruling the economy and trade deals of the Dark Continent as well as some stretching into other far-off lands."

I remember back to seeing the eyes of one of the Royal Guard glow orange through the slit in its mask, and theories begin to creep into my head.

I respond, now thinking about the "Lich King's Curse" that was on the Ghoul's buff slot when I fought it.

"You mentioned to me after the fight that even the strong can fall to its curse. What did you mean by that?"

Monk stops pacing and stares at me.

"All of the elders and paid mercenaries that were defeated by the Dark One were killed and turned into undead puppets. Every one of the current Royal Guard is not a human anymore; they're monsters in disguise, being manipulated by the soul energy of an unbeatable Undead King. I've never felt soul energy as powerful as its in my life... that is, until I saw the power you wielded in the arena last night."

He walks over and sits back down at the table with a hand stretched out to meet mine.

"If you unlock the power of your own soul energy, I believe you may be the key to saving this city. Please, allow me to train you."

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I let out a long sigh, looking down at Monk's outstretched hand.

"Save the city? Fight a monster that's killed thousands of men stronger than you? The only reason I came here was to get my teammates and leave this place. I'm always up for a good fight, but it has to be winnable in some capacity and have great rewards afterward. Do you expect me to just agree to help because it's the right thing to do...?"

There's a pause and a moment of silence, but Monk doesn't move from his position.

I speak again.

"What's in it for me? What kind of training can you provide, and what other information do you have on this Dark One that may be useful to know?"

He nods, still keeping his hand outstretched.

"There are no conditions to the training. You may take any gear or materials you need from our monastery if you wish. That includes knowledge, ask me anything. If you don't think you can win the fight, then there's no reason for you to put yourself in harm's way. However, I have a plan to lure them out of hiding. I'm sure you want to fight more of those Ghouls if you could get the chance to, right?"

I think about it for a moment, then reply.

"Yes, if you say there are nearly 900 of them left. The level gains could be very profitable. I'm just... unable to use my soul energy for very long. One or two long battles at most before I need to take a long break to heal."

Monk's gaze tightens, then he looks around the room.

"It's only us in here. Whatever you tell me will never leave my lips. I need to know as much as I can about the Soul Energy you used during your match last night to help with controlling it. On my ancestors, your secrets are safe with me."

He looks me in the eyes and continues to speak, explaining that the rate at which high-level fighters, mercenaries, and even strong travelers that come to this city are disappearing the moment they're put in a very compromising position. The new midnight tax has taken many good people's lives, turning them into tools for the Dark One. At the rate the city is changing, the deal with the Galeheart Guild for protection will be meaningless and the Dark One's army will force them to leave or fight very soon.

In response, I decide to give a rough explanation of how my teammates and I came to obtain the soulstones, bonded with them, and how they work. Of course, excluding the parts about many of my unique skills and our past affiliation with the Association, but there's enough information for him to fill in the blanks.

"Very interesting... So it seems borrowing the power of a monster with soul energy even after their death has major side effects and limits to the user's body. I've only ever seen Manifested Soul Energy like this from the Top Elder who passed last year and the Dark One itself..."

Monk pauses again.

"I'll teach you how to wield your own soul energy. Well, in its base form when not linked to a user, we call it Qi. The soul energy that is linked to the system reacts with mana or certain rank-up processes. Some buffs like the one you have allow the user to manipulate Qi along with the mana manifested essence of a creature. Just like the Dark One. However, Qi itself does not react to the system or mana at all. It is the power passed down from the originators."

He looks down at the floor, stomping lightly two times to show me he is pointing at the black material itself.

"Qi can't be learned naturally, it needs to be shared. Either from a person that awakens another, or through powerful deposits like the soulstones you mentioned. I'm sure if you used those stones enough they'll either run out eventually and the buff will stop working, or you'll unconsciously absorb some of the energy it grants you and awaken yourself. That would take quite a while though."

My mind races at this information, thinking back to some of the explanations Ember gave me when I asked him about the Soulstones and the Monsters that rank up again at higher levels. Pairing this knowledge with the fact that this "Dark One" is most likely a monster that ruled an A-Class Dungeon, we could be dealing with a monster over level 1000.

If what Monk is saying is true, Qi is another power source like Mana or Demonic Energy. Though, it seems not to be rooted in the system. At least, not for anyone below A-Class.

Just like Demons and Demonic Energy are a mystery to most of the world, this seems to take things a step even further.

I take much longer to think about my response, but finally do.

"I'd like to learn more. If you're able to teach me this power with no strings attached, I'd gladly accept."

Monk smiles and I see his eyes sparkle with excitement.

We shake hands, then stand up from the table and walk over to the center of the black-walled and glossy-floored training room.

I speak, very excited, but pretty nervous at the same time.

"Let's do this."

I knew coming in here he would have a proposition of some kind for me, but I didn't think it'd be this intense and secretive. However, this only makes it more intriguing. If I can learn how to wield this new energy source stronger than both Mana and Demonic Energy without the bodily harming limits of the Red Hydra's Buff... I could be unstoppable.

Monk instructs me to sit down on the floor with my legs crossed and close my eyes as he places a hand on my back.

"Ready?"

I nod, and Monk explains to me I need to stay still until he speaks again. It may feel unnatural, but that is part of the process.

The moment I take a deep breath in and out through my nose, I feel a warm energy in the shape of an open palm leave Monk's fingertips and enter my back. It immediately spreads through my shoulders and down my arms. Simultaneously, it flows down my spine and into my hips to trickle through my legs.

After just a few seconds, it feels as if my entire body is full from my toes to my fingertips.

It feels like warm waters flowing through my body, but there's no weight to it at all, it just feels as if a liquid is constantly flowing through me until Monk releases his palm from my back and the stream of more warmth stops.

After a few seconds, my fingers and toes start to get colder.

The warm water flows away from them and it all begins to settle near my stomach. There's no weight to it, only warmth.

As the energy leaves my hands and feet, then even my arms and legs, I feel Monk's palm fall onto my back again.

The flow of warm energy crashes in like a calm ocean wave, filling my body entirely just like the first time before it even got the chance to settle in the invisible resting place in the center of my being.

He releases his hand and the warm energy goes through the same process, eventually trickling back into my core and leaving my extremities.

Then, again.

Monk does the same thing a third, fourth, fifth, and finally a sixth time before finally stopping.

At this, all of the warm energy leaves my body and finally settles in my invisible core near the bottom of my stomach. This leaves me shivering as if I just walked out of a hot bath without a towel.

Monk's voice calmly speaks to me.

"You may open your eyes now. You have an impressive amount of energy capacity. Even without any formal training, I can tell your natural talent will be incredible."

I open my eyes and take a deep breath, still shivering. The more I move, the colder I feel, but I manage to stand to my feet and face the man that just shared his power with me.

I feel disoriented, but the sensation of being powerless and systemless while making contact with this mana-negating stone is gone.

I can sense something in the air, there is definitely energy to feed off of here that I couldn't sense previously.

Monk speaks as we make eye contact.

"You took the instant exposure very well too. Most people can't move for hours or possibly days after an awakening like this."

My vision is doubled, and it looks as if I should feel dizzy, but my mind is actually crystal clear. My body just needs to catch up.

A moment later, my vision focuses and I see Monk bow in front of me with clasped hands.

"Let us spar. We don't have much time, and you have much to learn."

Chapter 366

I put my hands up to show Monk I'm ready, but I see an assortment of rings on my fingers, and the ends of my red robe limit the movement of my arms. Even my armor feels heavy on my chest. Without the magic buffs these items give me, they're very movement-limiting.

For a split second, I re-consider the fact that none of my skills are activated at all. That includes my concealment skill changing my face, but Monk didn't say a word about it... My eyes track over to

the wooden table at the back of the room, and Monk gives me a nod to remove my gear. I come back with just my boots, black pants, and a T-shirt on.

My body still feels cold, but the light walk has warmed me up and I can feel energy coming out of the floor and walls. It slowly flows through me, and warms me up, replicating the process Monk did on me. It's far slower, like the hint of a warm breeze, and the absorption process feels more like condensation from a water bottle.

Particles that float around the room come to me and stick to my skin, slowly soaking through and warming my body up.

I can't manipulate the energy here, I can only wait for it to come to me.

Monk speaks as I come back to him.

"Ready? I'll start slow and we'll train until one of us can't go any further."

I lock eyes with him and imitate his bow, then our mock matchup begins.

There were no rules outlined, and he hasn't given me any tips or techniques, so my guess is the best way to learn is to just spar...

Monk runs forward, so I do the same.

As he does, I can faintly sense the buildup of pressure in his body, and as he pushes a fist forward at me, a wave of hot white energy rushes up his arm and into his hand.

The movement isn't fast. A normal fighter without a leveling system could easily dodge it. However, I'm not quite sure getting hit with a punch like this would be as simple to brush off.

I spin my body out of harm's way, and Monk instantly shifts his feet and lunges in with a spinning kick. I duck and dodge this slow-moving attack too.

Even when my eyes momentarily leave the target, I can still sense the same wave of white energy flowing from the middle of his body down his leg and into his foot.

To the naked eye, it doesn't look out of the ordinary at all... but I'm sure he's using Qi to bolster these attacks.

Monk stares at me with a straight face and motions for me to attack now.

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I take deep breaths and slowly step forward with both my palms raised. My eyes are staring straight forward, but my mind is entirely focused on the hot invisible core of energy inside me.

My first thought is to try and move it around like Mana Manipulation or Demonic Energy but the feeling I get from latching onto every individual particle when wielding those energies never comes.

With every step closer to Monk I take, the more frustrating it gets.

The core of warm watery energy doesn't budge. I can feel it as clear as day in my lower stomach, but it won't move like I want it to.

I'm frozen in place, clenching my fists.

"Too slow."

Monk comes running at me with another attack with quite a bit more speed, The white energy pulses in his heels before every step, and I can sense the growing power in his fist is much more concentrated than before.

I jump backward, and the fighter's fist flies by my face mere millimeters away.

There's another source of energy forming behind me and flowing upward like a gust of wind before I can even react.

I try to dodge again and jump out of the way, but a white hot kick hits me in the gut and I'm sent flying backward almost 5 meters.

On impact, I feel a wave crashing into my side. Most of it feels like a wall that forces me away, but a small amount of it sticks to my body just like the ambient Qi that comes off the walls and ceiling.

As I hit the floor and stand back up to my feet, I feel the slow slosh of my own energy settling after the hit.

Monk yells out as I put my hands up.

"Don't think, just fight."

I run forward taking his advice, and actually throw a punch this time. However, there's no Qi in my attack at all, it's just a normal fist.

With quick footsteps and precise blows, I get my punch blocked with ease and another foot to the side of my ribs sending me flying back.

It feels the same like a wave of hot ocean water hits me across the body with no warning at all.

Still, I get up and fight again to get thrown into the same situation over and over.

Monk doesn't make it harder for me, he just stays at this same strength and speed difficulty. After I fall to the ground for a fourth time, he speaks as I get up.

"Guide the flow of energy. You don't have to be in control, you only have to lead it to the path of least resistance."

I nod, but scrunch my eyebrows inwardly, trying to figure out what his phrase means.

Then I'm hit with his kick again.

Every time I think I have his movements figured out and am ready to dodge, he always switches things up last minute and I'm hit point-blank with the same crashing wave of energy.

However, each time I'm hit, I feel my own core of energy ripple and slosh.

After two more falls, I mumble to myself while running forward at Monk.

"Guide the energy... don't force it..."

I sway my body back and forth synchronizing with the light ripple and shifts of energy that settle in my stomach and for the first time as I throw a fist, I feel warmth flow up into my shoulder and down my arm.

It's not much, but I can feel trickles of warm energy reach my fingertips.



As Monk's forearm collides with mine for his usual block, instead of his energy bouncing my arm away it feels as if two ocean waves collide and a shimmering invisible essence of energy fills the air as both sides of the watery flow fall back.

Almost instantly, all of the Qi in my arm flows back into my core and I feel another roundhouse kick to the side, but I see Monk grinning with pride as he does so.

"Not bad, you're a quick learner. Let's do it again."

I stand to my feet with a smile of my own. I'm not quite sure how I did it, but I know exactly how it felt. It's one thing just seeing it happen, and another actually experiencing it. I'm much more confident I can replicate and improve this movement.

With both hands guarding my face, I run forward again.

## Chapter 367

We continue to spar.

The more times I get hit and knocked down, the more I understand the mechanics of this new power source.

Every fist I throw has to have meaning and focus. It feels very similar to my newest swordsmanship skill upgrade. Every time I throw a fist, it feels as if I'm guiding the warm energy in a perfect line to a certain point.

If I ever second guess myself or waver from the correct path, the flow of Qi halts and it all trickles back into my core. The movement has to be done all over again to get the energy to flow perfectly.

I'm able to let Qi flow from my core to my fists, and even manage to replicate the movement technique by allowing energy to flow into my heels. It's much more difficult than my fists. Every step I take has to be with confidence and precision. Even one change in position and the extra propulsion is negated instantly.

Once I manage to block both the punch and kick from Monk a few times in a row, we move onto another exercise.

Monk's feet light up with Qi just like before, but this time with much more. The concentration is easily 5 times as much.

"Catch me. You need to touch me once, then we'll spar again. This exercise will teach you the volume of flow. Only use what you need, but learn how to open the floodgates when necessary."

I nod, focused already. Then he begins jumping around the room with Qi-powered footsteps.

I try to follow, but my style is more like a charging bull compared to his graceful movements.

Every turn made makes me halt for a fraction of a second in my mind to reassess the situation and locate the target, but in doing so the flow of energy to my feet ceases. I lose my speed and have to take a moment to lock on and charge toward him again.

Just like my punches, it's all a work in progress. The more I guide the energy, the more natural it becomes.

After almost 45 minutes pass, I'm able to curve my movements in sweeping strides in order to not stop altogether, and after another 45 minutes pass I'm finally able to move quickly and gracefully similar to Monk.

Not much more time passes before I finally manage to nick his shoulder with my right hand on a passing sprint.

We both stop in our tracks and let out laughs.

"Good job, your speed of progression is quite frightening honestly."

I'm too out of breath to respond, but I muster a "thank you" as I place both hands on my waist.

There's a high reliance on the Qi for energy in these movements, but it's still pretty taxing on my physical body. It feels as if I just ran 20 kilometers.

Although I'm used to stretching long distances like this in training before, it's usually fighting monsters. I can't remember the last time I fought with a human on equal terms for this long. Plus, it's clear Monk is still holding back a lot.

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I look up and put my hands up again after taking another long deep breath.

"What's next?"

"We spar again."

I run forward with a Qi charged fist with multiple times more power than it had just hours ago. I'm pulling from the same exact energy source, but the more control I have over it, the better I can guide its flow.

The energy doesn't leave my body at all, but it feels as if it's right on the edge of my outer layer of skin. Invisible to the naked eye, but more dense than diamonds.

Two massive waves splash together as our fists collide in the center of the training room and our second sparring match begins.

Punches and kicks are thrown in rapid succession as we sprint around the room. I use my full power every time I throw an attack. With an opponent that's able to increase his skill level accordingly, making himself just slightly stronger than me and slightly faster every time I make a breakthrough leads to the perfect training environment.

I'm pushed to my limits for another full hour until what I didn't know was possible happens.

As I throw another fist at Monk full of confidence, the endless pool of power that filled my stomach reaches its bottom.

My eyes widen and I completely lose control of the energy in my feet and fists as there's not enough left in me to send another full attack at the fighter in front of me.

In this moment caught off guard, the familiar feeling of a kick to the gut sends me flying into the back wall of the room over 15 meters away.

A loud thud of me hitting the stone floor ends our training session.

"Your Qi stores have finally run out. It took over 3 hours of full-on fighting. Again, very impressive. I'd say it's time to take a break and recharge."

I push myself up from the floor and walk back over breathing heavily and completely exhausted. However, the smile across my face is wider than any post-battle victory I've had in months.

"That was one heck of a workout."

I imitate the bow he always does and continue.

"Thank you."

He bows back, then points to the floor.

"One more thing before we make our way upstairs to rest."

He sits in the position I was in earlier with legs crossed and a straight back on the floor.

"Join me."

At his words, I do the same, facing him and closing my eyes expecting something interesting to happen.

About 30 seconds pass and nothing does. I open one eye, but he's sat there sitting still with his eyes closed motionless.

I take a deep breath in and out of my nose and close my eyes again to be polite.

My heavy breathing from training eventually ceases and the endorphins relax me even more, putting me into a calm state mindful of all the energy seeping out from the black stone around me.

The longer I sit, the more of the energy passes through me on its natural flow through the air and sticks to the outside of my body slowly being absorbed into every place it makes contact. Tiny streams of energy lead back to my inner core.

Over 20 minutes pass and I feel the Qi inside me slightly growing. It's an incredibly slow process. The amount I naturally took in while sitting here for almost half an hour is just enough to throw one more punch. At this rate, it'd take weeks to bring me back up to full capacity like I was before training begun.

Once my concentration finally breaks, Monk senses my movement and opens his eyes while standing up to his feet.

"Very good. You now know how to perform natural Qi gathering too."

I stand to my feet and follow him back over to the wooden table at the front of the room.

"It's more like just sitting and waiting to recharge."

He nods as I start putting my gear back on. Even though it doesn't give me buffs, I don't have any other way to carry it right now, so wearing it is the simplest option.

"Yes, the natural process does take time, but understanding the process is how you will increase your capacity in the future. If you gather more Qi while your core is full, your capacity will slowly grow."

I think about that for a moment as he leads me to the door.

"Understood."

Monk presses his hand against the rectangle of black stone and I sense the warm energy flow from his palm into the door. It lights up white and shifts open just as it did on our way down here.

He turns back, motioning for me to follow.

Chapter 368

We make our way through a winding black hallway before Monk leads me to a room that has dozens of rectangular doors on it.

He turns to one, then points to all of them.

"Choose a room; there are showers and fresh clothing in all of them."

I walk up to the closest door and pause for a moment, then place my palm against the cold stone.

I push on it with a lot of force, but it doesn't budge at all. It's like a solid wall.

Monk speaks.

"All it needs is a small amount of Qi. Less than you would use to throw a punch. Channel a small amount into your hand while making contact with the door, and it will open wide. The stone won't budge unless a Qi user opens it."

I do as he says, letting a small amount trickle into my fingertips, then the panel of stone swings open.

There's a small dimly lit room with fresh white shirts and pants, along with the orange robe everyone wears in this place.

On the back wall, there's a shower and bath.

I take 10 minutes, and the room steams up nicely as all my soreness and fatigue from our training goes away.

I change into the shirt and pants provided, but decide against wearing the robe, putting my armor and cloak back on as an overlayer before coming out.

Monk greets me, and we make our way to the Dining hall as initially intended.

There are many bows and greetings as we get food from a fast-moving line. Everyone gets a very similar meal, but it smells delicious.

I sit down across a table from Monk and we begin to eat.

There's meat, vegetables, rice, and plenty of water. It's all very standard food, but I'm grateful for the hospitality.

The only thing that stands out to me is a small spherical white pill that comes in a black cup next to the water.

Monk swallows his whole without a second of hesitation, and I watch many people at the surrounding tables doing a similar thing. They all take the pill before even starting the meal.

I pick up the tiny black cup with the pill inside and look straight ahead.

"What's this? Why is everyone taking it?"

I can sense there is energy coming off it, but it's unclear what exactly it does.

"A Tier 1 Qi pill. Everyone takes it after training."

He points to the floor and continues.

"Natural Qi resides in these mountain stones; we've mined and harnessed the power for centuries waiting for a time like this. Everyone restores their Qi after training instead of waiting weeks, months, or possibly even years to fully restore one's core."

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I stare at the pill with a curious gaze but place it back down on the table.

Monk begins to eat, but nods.

"You don't have to take it now, but it would make you feel much better and prepare you for the next stage of training."

I take the pill out from the cup and hold it between my thumb and index finger, examining it carefully.

"What's the next stage?"

Monk replies.

"You need some practical training, and you'll need to adapt to a fighting style that includes both your mana-based skills and new Qi Techniques. The Arena event tonight will be a great place to test out what you've learned."

My gaze tightens on the pill for a final time before I decide to throw it into my open mouth. The moment it's swallowed, it feels as if a warm ocean wave hits my stomach and rushes through my entire body.

The tiny puddle of Qi that was left in me has turned into a raging river, igniting my body with energy.

As my eyes light up with power, Monk speaks again.

"Feels good, doesn't it?"

My gaze wanders around the room as everything looks just a tiny bit brighter and more colorful.

The feeling from empty to full is nearly instantaneous. It feels as if I have almost double the energy stores that I did at the peak when fighting Monk earlier. This confirms my Qi stores weren't even on full before, I was just working with shared power.

Soon, my sparkling daze settles down and I raise the question back to Monk as we finish our meals.

"So we'll go back into the fight Arena tonight...? What's the plan you mentioned earlier? To fight more Ghouls? Didn't you say the Royal Guard keep an eye on Soul Energy users?"

He nods.

"Sure, yes. I'm sure the moment you leave this building many eyes will be on you. So, be careful where you go, who you talk to, and what you say if you don't want them involved."

I gulp at the sound of this, thinking about my teammates potentially stuck behind the Royal Guards in the center of the City.

We finish all the food on our plates and bring them back over to the place we got them.

Many other men in robes do the same, leaving through seemingly random doors on all sides of the room. Some mention a nightly training session, others talk of Qi gathering to raise their natural capacity, and some talk in a tongue that I can't understand.

Monk and I walk back up to the surface.

I use small amounts of Qi to open each door as we walk up until making it to the final narrow hallway that leads to the outside world within the Platinum Walls.

Two men bow as we leave and stay guarding the doorway, but if I remember correctly, the two there are a different pair than when we entered before. They must have rotating shifts.

Monk speaks as we approach the light.

"Brace yourself."

"For what?"

As both my feet leave the black stone structure, I understand exactly what...

The wristband on me turns from transparent to platinum again, the containment ring on my finger puts my formal outfit on, and every option on my status comes back to me all at once. There's a barrage of blue text screens that pop up in my mind's eye, ready to be used.

Best of all, I take a deep breath of fresh air in through my nose. Mana fills my body once again, and it feels as if I didn't even know what I was missing out on.

A few steps of euphoria is all it takes before my body and mind get used to it, and the world around me goes back to normal again.

Apart from one thing...

There's always small trace amounts of mana in the air that I can absorb, but now I can faintly sense Qi in the atmosphere too. It's barely 1/100th of what it feels like inside the monastery, but I'm sure I sense it in the air even far out into the city.

After I let out another long sigh and use conceal to change my face back to a disguised version, then rummage through some items in my storage system beneath my clothing to make sure everything is still in the right place where I left it.

Monk and I step onto the moving platform and make our way to the gate that leads back into the golden walls.

A pair of Platinum Armored guards scan our wristbands and allow us to move through without a moment of hesitation or a single word.

The same process happens at the next gate, and before we know it, both of us are walking side by side into the fight arena as the midday events start to come to a close. I throw on my mask, and both of us walk over to the registration table.

Mr. Wright, the man in the white suit, spots us from afar and his eyes light up as he realizes his two top prize fighters have arrived earlier than expected.

Chapter 369

"Welcome back, Mr. Flame Emperor. I wasn't sure if I'd be seeing you again. However, I'm even more surprised to see you here with Monk. What are the odds?"

Mr. Wright smiles wide as he gets a tablet ready and I reply.

"I wasn't sure if I'd be back either, but I had a change of heart. The show must go on, right?"

He taps on the silver tablet a few more times before giving me a nod and looking up.

"Indeed, I like the way you're talking. You're registered for the last spot in the nighttime event, just like before. There's a lot more people watching tonight, even in the midday events there has been over double the usual betting volume."

I raise an eyebrow as he continues.

"We accepted a few more fighters into every event as well. There won't be any break time between the midday and the evening event. So make yourself comfortable."

He points to the stairway behind the registration desk, then looks up at both of us.

"You can mingle with the competitors downstairs, or enjoy the show out in the open air. You two are the exception to the rules, just make sure you make it downstairs in time for your match to begin. What you do before then is none of my business."

He gives us another smile as Monk gives him a slight bow. I nod and turn away, looking for some seats in the crowd.

Monk whispers in my ear.

"I'll be heading down to scope out the new fighters."

"Sounds good, I'll be watching from the stands. I'll be down before my match."

We split off in opposite directions.

The familiar sound of the announcer's voice echoes in my ears as he commentates on a sword wielder fighting a monster in the 4th Stage.

The crowd is pretty rowdy, and there aren't many free seats available even though the main event hasn't even started yet. I whisper under my breath as I find a spot about 10 rows away from the ring.

"This will do just fine."

I sit down and let out a sigh. After a great workout, a solid meal, and a complete recharge in Qi, everything feels amazing.

There's a few hours before my fight starts, so for now I'll let my meal digest and enjoy the show.

That's exactly what I do.

The crowds around get more and more packed, and after watching 6 matches the betting odds become more and more volatile in the 4th and 5th stages. There are huge sways in the payouts at the

start of every betting sequence, it's clear to see there are some high rollers in the crowd betting hundreds of gold for fun. Even on these midday matches.

One of the midday fighters manages to defeat the 5th Stage monster, but other than that there wasn't anyone skilled in the ring just yet. Still, it's fun to watch the talent here and study some of the lower-level monsters' fight patterns.

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Eventually the announcer's voice rings out into the crowd.

"That brings our midday fights to a close! We will have a short 10-minute intermission if you'd like to take a breather, buy some food, restock or cash out some credits. Afterward, our opener for the Late Night Event will begin."

The energy in the arena shifts to a serious tone then a burst of excitement. All the tension from watching the lower level fights all day has been building up and the anticipation for the real events to start is finally getting close.

Many people leave their seats and small scuffles start up when even more people walk in from outside and either steal taken places or can't even find room for more.

The arena is overpacked, and even I'm getting hyped up to see what's in store.

A few minutes pass, then a display of rainbow lights coming from charged mana crystals beneath multi-colored glass sends radiant beams around the stadium as the night sky becomes dark overhead. The crowds are overflowing as the announcer speaks in an excited voice again.

"Would you all give a warm welcome to our first competitor, the opening act. A legacy fighter we all know well, the Stone Maiden!"

After her fight record is shared with the crowd, and more words of encouragement to give more hype; A flash of transport magic brings the familiar legacy fighter to the stage.

The ear-shattering roar that follows shakes the arena. I decide to place a 100 gold bet on Sia, the Stone Maiden.

A few minutes later as the announcer's voice sounds again, an eruption of stone blowing a small horned rabbit to pieces is followed by a notification alerting me I won 2 gold on a 1.02x bet.

The next few matches go almost exactly the same. I bet 100 gold on stage 2, 3, 4, and 5; winning another 56 gold in total. The odds raise more toward her losing as the rounds get higher. I decide not to bet at all on the 6th round, it's not a guaranteed win in my mind.

She loses to a Red Ogre, and my suspicions are confirmed.

I smirk, crossing my arms and wait for the next event to come about.

Two newbies follow and I decide not to bet, just watching both of them make it to the 5th round. One taps out after barely winning, and the other gets defeated in seconds in the 6th.

Next up, Max, the shield takes the stage. Just like Sia, I bet 100 gold on him winning every event from stage 1-5. I make another 74 gold in profit and decide not to bet on the 6th round. He wins, but I don't feel bad about not taking the gamble. He doesn't move onto the 7th round by choice.



More newbies follow, and they're better than the last ones. Both make it to the 6th stage but neither of them defeat it. I don't bother betting on them.

Ace takes the stage next and I watch closely as he slices through every one of his opponents. I bet 100 gold on each fight, and even take the chance to bet on the 6th stage with another 100 gold bet at 2.16x odds. People are voting against him, but I've seen this swordsman's buff in action and trust he'll get it done.

As he defeats the massive beast in the ring with a series of slashes, covered in a blue aura, the notification dings on my wristband and the crowd goes wild. My credits have risen up to 15.1077 Platinum. Almost 300 gold profit and it's not even time for the main event.

I sit back and watch the 7th Stage Ghoul take Ace down with ease, and many drunken betters cheer or get angry at the results.

The announcer hypes the crowd even more, hinting that there may be more stage 7 fights coming up again in the future.

More people pile in from the streets, and the stadium becomes even more overpacked.

The announcer introduces another newbie, and I decide to stand up and squeeze through the crowds back down to the registration table to make my way underground to the training room. My fight is up soon, and it's best I get there earlier rather than late.

While I do, the next unknown fighter's match begins and a flash of bright blue and white light fills the ring.

I turn my head to see pillars of ice form all over the stage 1 goblin, showing an unnecessary display of strength.

One of the display screens zooms in on the fighter that placed this attack as the announcer starts hyping up the 2nd stage.

A womanly figure stands tall holding a silver sword covered in ice. She glows blue and wears silver lightweight armor too. Through a white mask covering her face, I see familiar bright blue eyes and long flowing blonde hair.

## Chapter 370

"Could it be...?" I whisper to myself as I continue squeezing my way through the crowd to get to the underground training room.

My seat is already lost, so there's no point in trying to go back to the ring to see her up close for myself. The screens that appear all over show the blond-haired woman with a white face covering. Her blue glow has ceased as the announcer hypes up the crowd to bet on the stage 2 matchup.

I start walking underground behind the registration table, and the words that echo through the arena confirm my suspicions.

"The Ice Empress will now be moving on to the 2nd fight in 10... 9... 8..."

I roll my eyes and smile at the blatantly copied version of my fighter name but don't mind much as I have many other questions running through my head. As the noise of the crowd becomes muffled, the white walls and glossy floor of the training room come into view. Some familiar legacy fighters

stand around after their matchups watching a big fight screen. Maria is on the big screen, instantly taking out her opponent in the ring with another overwhelming wave of Ice magic.

With my mind racing at why she's here of all places, and if any of my other teammates may be nearby, these thoughts are soon put to a halt as Max spots me from the other side of the room.

"Hey, it's you! We missed you this morning, I wasn't sure if you'd be coming back to the ring! Just in time!"

At his loud welcome, almost every hunter underground turns their heads to watch me walk over to the legacy fighters watching the fight over by the transport platform.

Monk doesn't get up from his seat on the ground on the other side of the room. His eyes are closed, and he's preparing for his upcoming match.

I'm greeted with more warm welcomes from both Sia and Ace, then we continue to watch the matches. I bet 100 gold on every one of the following fights, making 132 gold back on the 3rd, 4th, and 5th rounds combined.

She moves onto the 6th and the payout on her winning is over 2x again and rising. I throw another 100 gold on the Ice Empress, and she freezes the stage 6 monster in an instant, winning without any resistance.

There were already murmurs about this newbie before, but now the topic of conversation has shifted to only her. Maria raises her thumb in the air, and the crowd outside goes wild as the announcer hypes up the 7th stage match.

Max turns to all of the other legacy fighters, ripping his eyes away from the bright screen on the wall.

"Do you see this? She's stronger than all of us... she just took out the stage 6 monster in a single hit."

He turns to me with wide eyes, then something clicks in his head.

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"Wait. Her name... It's just like yours. Do you know this woman?"

My gaze is still on the screen as I wait for the betting odds to get high enough to place a bet. I just shrug and reply to Max in a low tone.

"First time I've seen her in this city."

His eyes move down to his wristband.

"Over a 3x payout if she wins? Ha! I'm in!"

There must be some high rollers that understand how tough that 7th stage monster is... Based on her performance in the ring, no casual viewer would bet against her now. However, I agree with Max on this one. Maria has the same buff as me; she'll be able to beat this Ghoul without an issue.

I smirk and nod.

"Me too, let's get a nice payout."

Ace and Sia stay away from betting, but their eyes don't leave the screen as the announcer counts down and the match begins.

A white-skinned creature with yellow teeth, a long sword, and a faint orange aura around its body teleports in, and the match begins.

Maria glows bright blue and runs forward with a trail of ice behind her. The Ghoul runs forward to match her speed in silence. Both of them swing their blades at each other.

Moments before impact there's a flash of red light. Maria's blade releases a pink-colored ice that slices the Ghoul in two, freezing both halves faster than normal eyes can see.

The orange aura of the Ghoul disintegrates in milliseconds, and Maria plants her feet to turn around and slash the frozen Ghoul with her sword again. By this point, the crimson buff covering her body is already completely powered off. She didn't have it activated for more than half a second.

The red-tinted ice shatters into a million pieces like snow, and the crowd roars as the announcer yells out in awe as the 7th stage was taken out in record time.

A dinging notification brings my coin total up to 21.5056 platinum.

Then, it's followed by the ice wielder in the ring putting her sword on her waist. After, she refuses to move onto the 8th round. I don't spot the royal guard coming into the arena to stop her, it seems like she said no on her own.

A blink of transport magic brings her right back to the small platform in the training room, and every head in the room turns to her.

Beneath the bright white mask and form-fitting lightweight armor, her eyes scan the room before locking onto mine for a split second, then facing forward again. She walks forward, and no one approaches.

I activate my telepathy skill instantly, and send a link directly to her. Before I get a word in, her voice sounds in my head.

"Meet me at the restaurant you went to last night after your match. They're watching and listening, I had to get your attention somehow, it seems like this did the trick."

She pauses for a moment, then goes on.

"Plus, I wanted to see how tough that stage 7 Monster really was... I'll explain everything once we're in a secure place to speak."

I gulp and look away before replying.

"Understood... Good match, you've gotten much stronger."

Maria sends a final message back before closing our link.

"You have too. Good luck on yours, I'll see you soon."

She continues to walk through the room and makes her way up the stairs. It's not until then that I turn around again and activate my inspect and appraisal skills out of curiosity.

Her gear is almost all the same, but her level has risen to 612... That's higher than me. She's been training while I've been asleep and trying to get to this city.

Just like Monk said before, there's some kind of widespread surveillance in this city, so we need a safe and quiet place to talk. However, this begs the question, how did she even know I was at a restaurant last night in the first place? Or, why not just leave the city to talk in private?

More questions race through my mind now than they did when I walked in here. I thought seeing her here would explain a few things, but it's only made things more complicated.

The last glimmer of her silver armor disappears through the staircase upward and I see Monk approach the transport platform as he's next up in the fight arena.