

D. Diver 371

Chapter 371

My mind is trying to fit more pieces of the puzzle together, but there are too many unknown variables in my way.

Clearly, Maria isn't trapped or here completely against her will, and this most likely means my other teammates are fine too. Her level has grown significantly, and fighting ability too.

Although quite a few things don't make any sense here, at least I don't have to rack my brain for ways to get into the center of the City anymore. Maria will have some answers for me.

It's best I push any more questions to the back of my mind for the time being and focus on my match ahead. The sole reason for coming here tonight is to fight in the ring. If I wanted to just practice on more people or normal monsters, I could have gone outside the city.

What I'm really curious about is how my new ability to wield Qi will help me against the battle with the Ghoul. If I can avoid using my Hydra's Buff, and still take this monster out, I'll be much more confident in taking many of them on at once if need be.

I take a deep breath and calm my mind, crossing my arms and looking up at the screen as Monk begins his fights.

Just like the other rounds, I bet 100 gold on every one of his matches, bringing my total up to 23.1901 platinum by the end of the 7th stage. Monk has a picture-perfect run, punching the monsters with fists of Qi and not taking a single bit of damage himself.

I would bet more, but anything can happen in the ring. The only person I'd trust to win with 100% certainty is myself.

Monk steps off the transport platform, and I get the cue to step on.

I'm transported into the ring, and the announcer hypes up the crowd while I start to walk around the dirt circle and wave to the audience.

Some people are cheering my name, others are booing, and others are just screaming and yelling in a drunken state for the fun of it.

"Everyone, I'd like to give you the final event of the night. With only a single match in the fight ring previously, The Flame Emperor has made it to the 7th round and won with flying colors. You're in for quite the show!"

The betting odds are in favor for me to win in such a skewed amount, the number on my wrist just says 1.00x.

I don't bother betting on the first round, I just take a deep breath and concentrate on the Qi in my body. Although I'm here to put on a show, I need to warm up for the match that counts in the end.

A level 31 hobgoblin is teleported into the ring, and I keep my sword at my waist as I run forward at the monster.

Letting the warm wave of energy build up in my core and allowing it to flow into my fist, I jump forward and land a punch on the monster's chest.

Instantly, as it makes contact, an energy wave ripples through the monster and it flies backward, disintegrating into so many pieces it looks like red dust.

My eyes widen as the crowd cheers.

I absorb the small amount of MCP offered from my absorption skill and accept the silver for winning the match.

I know my base level strength from my levels gives me more than enough power to take out this low-level mob without Qi, but the violent shockwave of energy sent through its body is a very new feeling.

When I sparred with Monk, it felt like a crashing wave was hitting a sturdy barrier.

This felt more like a tsunami destroying a sea wall with ease.

The energy trickles back into my core and the announcer brings out the stage 2 monster. The betting odds now say 1.03x, so I decide to just throw my entire credit account in on the match. Some return is better than nothing.

A level 122 cyclops creature comes out for my next match, and I decide to try something a bit different.

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There's hardly any difference in strength between these low-level opponents. Controlling my strength to be able to spar with low-level mobs is not the kind of training I'm interested in. Monk may do it so he can teach his disciples, but I'm here to try and make the most deadly technique.

I activate my fire magic and light my fists with flames.

Running forward just like before, I let another wave of Qi flow into my arm as I punch the Cyclops at point-blank range.

The same thing happens...

On impact, a great pressure builds up and ripples through the monster's body, instantly breaking the tension and disintegrating the monster into nothing.

The fire magic around my fist reacts with the flying monster matter and erupts into a huge dark red explosion. However, the fire had nothing to do with the attack itself. It's more like confetti for the crowd after the fact.

The audience cheers as usual, I get paid a set amount of silver for winning along with my bet payout, and the matches continue.

Stage 3, and 4 are almost exactly the same.

A single hit obliterates my opponent, and the eruption of flames makes the crowd cheer.

Stage 3 rewards the usual set price payout, but after winning stage 4 I finally get my 1% cut of the arena betting and the notification puts a smile on my face.

[Stage 4 Fight Victory: Reward: 79.5540 Gold Credits]

Last time I won in stage four, the payout here was under 20 gold. That means over four times more people are betting tonight.

I win another 1.04x bet and a 1.07x on these rounds, but my main focus is figuring out how to use both my Qi and mana together in the same attack.

It feels as if there's something I'm missing, but it's so close. I just need to send out this attack many more times before I'll understand it.

The 5th stage comes along, and a very familiar opponent comes to the stage. A level 405 Berserker Giant. The same monster from the 19th floor of the Vice City Labyrinth.

The betting odds reach 1.10x and I go all in again.

As soon as the dark-skinned, green-eyed, sword wielder comes into the ring with mana-bonded swords and a berserker skill I grin and run forward.

I don't use any of my buffs, and am not using the full power of my fire magic or Qi. I know these monsters can take a hit, and won't give up no matter how dire the situation seems. In fact, they get stronger and more lively.

This will be the perfect time to finally learn something.

As my fist makes contact with the monster's chest, just like all of the ones before, I feel the wave of energy ripple over the entire outside of its body. Then, the portion where I exert the most force cracks like an eggshell, sending the monster flying backward with blood and fire trailing in the air.

It hits the back wall of the mana-shielded dome and falls to the ground, but begins glowing red and smiling wide with its creepy jagged teeth.

I smirk back, whispering under my breath.

"That's what I like to see... I can finally get some practice in."

There's a chunk missing in the middle of its chest, but it sprints forward with almost double the speed and power now. It's enraged and has activated its berserker skill.

I gracefully dodge its attacks while paying close attention to my breathing and sending in another Qi-infused punch to hit its left side.

As I make contact, a very interesting reaction occurs. Similar to the time before, the contact point explodes, taking another chunk from the beast, but the moment it does, the red aura surrounding its body vanishes in the spot that I hit it.

It didn't negate the whole buff, it more so pushed through it, forcing the aura to the side and making contact for the fist.

The monster goes flying into the side of the ring again, but quickly stands back up and faces me holding its long silver sword and staring at me with its sharp green eyes showing no fear.

I nod to my opponent out of respect, then use a gust of wind magic in my feet to push myself forward and collide with the monster again, this time punching it right across the face. Its head is hit with a wave it can't just walk off. A splatter of blood and eruption of flames ends the match.

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 22,795

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Berserker

Upgrade: Legendary Grade

[YES][NO]

[Stage 5 Fight Victory: Reward: 210.8045 Gold Credits]

I accept both options, and a ding from my wristband showing the 1% payout for this betting exchange hits a record high. Last night, the payout was just under 40 gold for this round, now it's over five times. People are betting more and more as the rounds go on. I get my 1.10x bet payout back as well and my platinum balance hits 32.2261.

People in the crowd are chanting my fighter name over and over as the announcer continues to yell and hype everyone up to bet more.

The Announcer speaks to the crowd.

"For our 6th Stage match tonight, we've brought in a monster from a brand new dungeon to spice things up. Get ready for a very special round. The Flame Emperor will be fighting a level 595 Blue Wyvern."

There's oohs and ahhs from the crowd as this name is brought up.

The odds start to shift much more than any of the previous matches, giving me a 1.37x payout if I win.

I was expecting to fight the same Red Ogre King they had me fight before, but it seems the event planners have something new in store.

"Maybe this one will be strong enough for me to actually go all out..."

Full of confidence, I throw 30 platinum on myself and wait for the timer until the fight to run down.

I light my fists with flames, but keep my sword ready at my side. It is a new monster at a higher level than me, so it'd be best not to underestimate my opponent before seeing it face to face.

White transport magic brings the monster into the ring, and the cheers of the crowd fill the air with excitement. A loud screech slices through the noise as my opponent stares me down and announces to the stadium that our match has begun.

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A Blue Wyvern.

As the white flash of transport magic brings my opponent into the ring, it spreads its long pale blue wings and jumps high into the air.

The ear-shattering screech provokes the crowd to yell louder to match its sound, and I get a good view of the 10-meter-long lizard creature doing circles over my head.

It looks very similar to Ember's younger form, only this monster doesn't have front legs. It just has long taloned feet, a white underbelly, and long out-stretched wings.

Its sharp eyes are locked on me from above, waiting for the perfect time to plummet down and strike.

The announcer's voice echoes through the ring as I use appraisal on the level 595 ranked-up creature above.

It has 3 skills and 1 ranked-up buff.

Active skills:

[Intimidation][Special Grade]

[Body Hardening][Legendary Grade]

[Combat Magic][Advanced Fire Summoning]

Bufs:

[Blue Wyvern's Inferno]

Another screech fills the ring, and it dives down at me, releasing a wave of its intimidation skill.

It sends shivers down my spine, just like the first time I felt this skill in the bloodhound dungeon months ago.

I activate my buffs in reply to boost my mental strength as much as possible, counteracting the psychic attack and throwing back a wave of intimidation myself. The invisible waves of energy collide and make a loud cracking sound like thunder, but the monster uses this opportunity to dive down and ignite its body with dark red flames.

Its skin shifts colors too as body hardening is activated, shimmering silver beneath its veil of flames. Its wings look like sharpened silver butcher knives falling from the sky. Its entire body is covered with a dense layer of mana shielding as well.

I make the split-second decision to grab my sword and brace for impact. Although I'd like to train my Qi, there's a time and place for testing. Right now I need to properly gauge my opponent's strength and guarantee the upper hand before I do any experiments.

My entire body ignites with flames, and I swing my blade upward at the monster's incoming attack.

On impact, both of us let immense balls of fire go from our advanced fire magic skills and for a moment the audience can't see a single thing.

The whole dome fills with dark flames and the echoing twang of mana blades colliding keeps everyone on edge.

I grit my teeth with pain and excitement, as the edge of the Blue Wyvern's wing stops the upward motion of my sword. At the same time, the Wyvern is shocked that my swing stopped it from crushing me completely.

With a wide stance, I stand my ground above the cracked layers of earth below my feet.

The monster swoops upward as I begin to activate lifesteal and plunderer. It can sense the energy leaving its body, but I hardly manage to take more than 2% of its overall health.

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Another loud screech fills the air as the plumes of flames dissipate and both of us stare each other down.

"This is going to be a long one... Isn't it...?"

Another few waves of intimidation come down at me while the Wyvern circles in the air waiting for a perfect time to strike.

It's taking a lot of energy for me to keep my mental strength buffs activated. Thankfully, the recent upgrade to my berserker skill to legendary grade has brought its buff to 125% on both strength and mental strength, but just like the bloodlust upgrade, it uses up much more mana to activate it now.

Timing is everything.

The monster dives down a few more times in a similar fashion, trying to tire me out with long-range intimidation and use its claws and wings in an aerial attack, but each time we collide, it's a very even matchup.

Massive balls of fire fill the fight dome every time we make contact.

I begin using earth and ice to trap it in place, but its mana shielding and raw strength destroy these attempts in an instant each time. After this result, I stick to restoring my MP and stealing small amounts of its HP every time it attacks.

After 4 more collisions, the Blue Wyvern stays high up in the air on 90% HP, thinking of a smarter way to take me out. It realizes mindlessly diving in is a losing battle.

As I'm continuously hit with waves of intimidation with no end in sight, I try to come up with a plan of my own.

I could use my Red Hydra's Buff, but it may wear me out for the next round... I need it to be a failsafe for my fight against the Ghoul, so I can't use it here. Plus, using that power isn't why I'm in the ring again tonight.

Learning how to use Qi is.

If I land a solid fist on that monster's defenses, my theory is it would break through its tough shielding and hardening like it's not even there. However, one slip-up and I'm done for.

I think to myself for a moment, then smirk as a an interesting thought comes to mind.

A new strategy that will confuse the monster, and allow me to test out a unique technique. I'm unsure if it will work exactly how I'm envisioning it, but the logic seems sound.

"I won't know unless I try..."

Another intense wave of intimidation comes down on me from above as I grip my blade and prepare to airstep upward.

Once taking the mental attack straight up, I jump up to the sky. The Wyvern sees this as its opportunity to strike as well. While in the air, it can move with much more agility, and as far as it's concerned, I'm very low on mana.

That may be partially true, but the attack I'm trying to throw isn't relying on the power of my magic.

I let my legendary swordsmanship skill activate and the silky thread colored bright red appears in my vision. While taking airsteps upward, the crowd all around me disappears from my vision and the only thing on my mind is my sword, my body, and my enemy.

I slow my breathing and concentrate on the Qi in my body and how I'd normally throw a punch filled with a raging wave.

This time, however, I picture the black sword in my right hand as an extension of myself. With the mental clarity and 100% conviction of my swordsmanship skill, I feel the warm wave of Qi flow down my arm, through my wrist, into my fingertips, and fill my sword to its sharp edges.

Not a single drop escapes my blade. It's saturated up to the thin outer layer of the blood-bonded weapon, and I've never been so sure about an attack in my life.

We collide, and I see the layers of mana and steel-colored body hardening get pushed to the sides of my black sword covered in a dull white glow.

Even my own fire magic and mana shielding get pushed aside as the extension of my body, my sword, cuts through a portion of the Blue Wyvern's wing, then lands a deep gash across its entire torso.

Blood gushes out, and as my blade leaves its body I lose concentration out of pure excitement.

This causes all of the layers of manipulated and unnaturally twisted mana shielding to release their energy. Both the Wyvern and myself are thrown backward in a blast of fire and excess mana.

There are two loud thuds as we both hit opposite sides of the mana-shielded dome.

An angry screech comes from the Wyvern and a light chuckle comes from me.

"It works."

I take advantage of the impact touching the shielding dome and absorb enough MP to bring me back to full, however, my HP has dropped about 10% from that blast.

As the flames clear, the flapping of wings alert me to the creature up in the air again. Its wing is injured, and its front side is covered in blood. However, its sharp eyes are filled with conviction and its bombardment of Intimidation continues.

I stare up at the beast, replaying the feeling I just felt that attack over and over in my mind.

The next goal of this fight is not only to win, but to use that Qi-powered sword strike again and master it.

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The imagery of white-hot Qi energy rushing from my core into my sword repeats over and over in my mind as I stare up at the Wyvern dripping blood in circles above me.

It continues to throw intimidation attacks down at me over and over, and they seem to be getting stronger with every time it sends one.

My MP is full after recharging from the Dome's outer wall, so I manage to boost my mental strength with buffs, fending off the psychic bombardment.

However, it gets to a point much more powerful than last time, and a light blue glow begins to form around the outside of the hovering creature. Every pulse of energy it sends out starts to become tainted with this blue energy, and the temperature inside the dome begins to rise.

I realize it's activating its buff, but have no idea what it's going to do.

The blue light around it starts to flicker, then begins to grow in size, and in a matter of seconds, it envelops its entire body igniting into a bright blue display of flames.

I start to sweat as the ring gets hotter and hotter.

The flames in this monster's buff are significantly more intense than the advanced fire magic it was using earlier, potentially more powerful than my own.

However, using my All-Seeing Eye, I can tell it's a 100% mana-based attack. I can still use my trump card and break through any attack it throws at me.

The Wyvern swoops down, and I brace myself, waiting for it to come.

I control my breathing, activate my swordsmanship skill, and allow a wave of Qi to flow from my stomach to my sword.

A crimson red string twists around in the sky leading to the Wyvern's front side, so I air-step upwards following the path of least resistance.

All I hear are the whooshing sounds from my feet, crackling flames around my body, and the crashing wave flashing through my sword.

The Blue Wyvern screeches and erupts into an enormous ball of blue flames as we collide.

As predicted, the magic fire is hotter than my own, and the intense concentrated mana embedded in its attack sears through my own flames and eats away at my mana shielding. My arms, legs, and joints where the shielding is the weakest instantly feel like a bucket of lava was poured on them.

My gaze is focused on my sword attack, though.

Even with a buff over twice as powerful as its previous flames, the black blade infused with Qi slices through without a hint of resistance. Its fluorescent blue flames are pushed to the side like leaves in the wind. Its shielding is melted through in the same fashion.

Without any doubts or breaks in concentration, I land a much deeper cut this time, severing its right wing almost all the way off its body and making a large X across its chest to match the previous hit.

The moment my blade leaves its flesh, I purposefully allow the Qi to release, making both of our mana shields become disrupted, and another explosion of red and blue flames throws both of us backward.

What felt like buckets of lava on my limbs before, now feels like I'm diving straight into a volcano as my body is enveloped in its blue flames.

I let out a yell and push all my buffs to the max while summoning layers of ice magic and pure pink mana to put out the flames even before I hit the dome's wall behind me.

The Wyvern, on the other hand, is having a much more difficult time.

As the fires in the rings begin to disperse, it stands up on its two back legs, realizing with a severed right wing and an injured left, its time in the sky is over.

It's still flickering with blue fire from its buff, and sending weak waves of intimidation my way, but its last dive bomb took a lot out of it.

I hit the ground and don't take a moment to waste. If my enemy is weak, this is no time to relax.

Using earth magic to move the ground to my liking and wind to propel me forward faster, I activate swordsmanship again, and replicate my Qi-infused strike without having to force it.

After just 3 tries, and the help of my swordsmanship skill, it feels almost as instinctual as throwing a punch.

There isn't even a single sound as my sword slices the helpless monster in half.

Its two sides fall to the floor, and a barrage of notifications hit my ear from both the system and my wristband.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Intimidation

Upgrade: Legendary

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 930,645

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Proficiency Points(PP): 1

[YES][NO]

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

[Your 30 Platinum Base Bet has been returned to your account.]

[11.1 Platinum Credits have been added to your account.]

[Stage 6 Fight Victory: Reward: 439.8955 Gold Credits]

[439.8955 Gold Credits have been added to your account.]

[Total Account balance: 47.7251 Platinum]

I accept every notification given, and soon after, the magic residue in the air starts to clear. My eyes scan the text boxes and I get excited to see a proficiency point was finally absorbed from my opponent.

This is a special trait from my legendary absorption skill, allowing a 5% chance for me to absorb 1 PP from opponents at a higher level than my own. Although it's not much, and I have the ability to upgrade skills if I just find a monster with the same one using absorption, more PP will come in handy if there are unique skills that other monsters don't have.

I smirk, looking forward to reading the perks of my upgraded Legendary Intimidation skill once I have a moment alone, but I don't want to open my status screen in front of so many people and recording devices.

The flames finally dissipate, and the Announcer yells to the crowd as they erupt into cheers. I give a thumbs up to allow them to move onto stage 7 while using plunderer to absorb any remaining MP in the air to bring myself up to full before the next round starts.

I'm on about 85% HP and have a few burns from the blue flames of that final attack, but don't want to take an HP potion and be accused of cheating. Technically I could argue that my spatial magic skill is not a storage item, but would not like to expose the fact that I have this skill unnecessarily.

I feel fine, but my breathing is a bit heavy. I take a slow lap around the arena while the timer counts down and the betting odds show up for my next fight.

As the timer reaches the final 10 seconds, my winning payout is 1.55x. It's nowhere near the massive 5x+ wins I had available to me last night, but I'll be betting more on myself this time around, so I don't mind.

To play things safe and leave my balance full, but still make a killing if I win, I throw another 30 Platinum on myself, and the 7th Stage begins.

The audience is chanting my name, and the ground rumbles with the excitement from the crowd.

A bright white light flashes at the far side of the arena, and a level 688 Ghoul appears with a long silver sword, no skills, and the same buff at the bottom of its status [Curse Mark of The Lich King].

Standing just over 2.5 meters tall, slowly exuding an orange aura, its eyes lock with mine, and immediately charges at me with incredible speed, far quicker than the Wyvern I just faced.

I activate all my buffs and raise my sword, then allow swordsmanship and Qi infusion to take over my subconscious.

No more than 2 seconds after the Ghoul teleported into the ring, my blade clashes with its silver sword.

The moment they clash, I visibly see the orange energy around the monster slash directly against my Qi-infused sword. It feels just like when my fist clashes against Monk's when we trained this morning. However, a new sensation comes over me as I feel the Ghoul's Soul energy begin to seep into my sword.

Before my eyes, the white-hot Qi in my blade begins to disintegrate into thin air.

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The reaction taking place looks exactly like what happened when I used my Red Hydra's Buff on its Soul Energy in my match against a Ghoul last night.

The crimson energy melted away the orange aura in an instant, letting my blade slice through the ghoul and defeat it without a problem.

Although it is happening at a much slower rate, I can see the Ghoul's soul energy disintegrating the Qi in my sword.

My concentration breaks, and I immediately air-step backward and up in the air to avoid the rest of the motion in the Ghoul's swing.

The remaining Qi, that wasn't sucked away, trickles back into my core.

I can sense less energy within me. It really overpowered me completely using a single attack...

I burst into a huge ball of flames to block out the wandering eyes of the audience as I reassess my opponent.

Using all my new buffs, I have the upper hand on its speed, power, and agility. On top of that, my Red Hydra's Buff can annihilate it in seconds just like Maria did a few rounds ago.

However, I need to figure out why my Qi attack was negated so easily.

"Is our power gap really that wide?"

I hit the ground again and start to zigzag over to the Ghoul as it runs at me, covered in an orange aura swinging its silver sword.

My breathing slows down as I channel more Qi into my blade and allow my swordsmanship skill to form the perfect attack. Meanwhile, all my buffs are enhancing my speed, power, and precision to dodge the monster's incoming blade and land a slash right into its torso.

A wide-open gash appears across its side, erupting into a huge ball of flames, but the look of dissatisfaction on my face as I skid to a halt on the other side of the ring tells the full story...

The moment my Qi-infused sword sinks into its orange aura, the same reaction takes place.

My mana-based attack hits its flesh, causing a fiery explosive result, but every drop of Qi in my blade melts away as it is engulfed by the monster's soul energy aura.

Just like our match before, the Ghoul quickly heals its torn-up flesh without a moment to waste and comes running at me again like nothing happened.

The sensation of my energy being ripped away twice now repeats over and over in my head.

I activate all my buffs and dodge its incoming strike, not countering, just thinking to myself while air-stepping to the far side of the ring.

Its buff must be really powerful... or maybe my Qi is just that weak...?

I took out a nearly level 600 Wyvern just minutes ago, so the latter can't be it. My Qi isn't weak.

Just like the Power from the Red Hydra is shared with me, it must be getting a lot of shared energy from a higher being; The Lich King.

Maybe there's a way to overpower it without activating my buff. Just like mana control, maybe Qi just needs to be used in much denser points with less surface area, or possibly just more volume of Qi overall.

"I won't know unless I try."

The Ghoul comes running at me for another attack, and I decide to take it on this time to test my new theories out.

First, after outmaneuvering the monster again, I try to push the wave of hot energy into a more finite point in my blade as I slice through the Ghoul's white flesh.

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

I focus on the feeling I used every time I would move up a skill level in training with Monk, especially when using Qi for fine movements in footwork. Using denser amounts in smaller surface areas gives a much more powerful effect.

The majority of the Qi in my attack here is positioned all to the tip of my blade.

As it makes contact with the Orange Veil of energy, the small dense tip of Qi pushes it inward for a fraction of a second. Instead of sinking in, the aura of the Ghoul is pushed to the side, just like the weaker mana-imbued energy all around us.

However, it fails to make it to the Ghoul's skin as the surrounding pressure of soul energy evaporates the incoming Qi before I can successfully land the attack.

Another explosion of fire follows as a gash is made in the monster's side and healed moments later.

I'm partly discouraged that that attack didn't do any damage, but also very excited to see there are limits to its power. My own Qi can scratch the surface. Knowing this, it's time to open up the flood gates.

I smirk, eyeing down my opponents again as we both run at each other.

After taking the Qi pill from Monk, my stores of energy seem to be filled to the brim. Used conservatively, this could last hours of intense fighting. Even against an opponent like the Blue Wyvern, if there were many of them in a ring, I could easily go a few hours using only the Qi stores I have left in me.

When Qi is thrown with a punch, or swung in a sword, most of the energy trickles back into my core after using the attack. Only trace amounts leave my skin or blade on contact.

However, this Ghoul is different. Every time I touch its aura, the entirety of my attack is taken away, and my core is being drained at a rapid rate. Just from the last 3 attacks, already 1/10 of my stores are completely depleted.

It's an odd sensation, but one I need to embrace to continue this fight.

If dense attacks work, maybe I just need to use a bit more Qi to increase the volume too.

In our next exchange, I allow over three times as much Qi to flow through my blade, oversaturating it to the point where energy stays in my wrist and arm still while throwing the attack. This nears my limit.

The movement feels much heavier, and not as natural, but using my swordsmanship perk, I still manage to keep it on target and maintain a peaceful state of mind while making contact with its aura.

The same thing happens as it did on my previous attack, only just a bit more. The edge of my blade pushes the orange soul energy away for a fraction of a second before it's fully engulfed and dissipated and the fiery blast concludes our exchange.

We turn to each other and try again.

Each time I swing my sword, I try to add just a little more Qi into the attack and compress it into the tip of the blade as much as I can.

We clash half a dozen more times before I take a breather to stop.

The crowd is roaring loudly, as to them it looks like an intense battle with fireballs and sword clashes is taking place.

To me, it's been a fruitful string of experiments that have led me to one conclusion; I'm too weak.

My MP stores are at 20% and my Qi is just below 40%.

I could absorb mana from the arena dome and continue, but from the fact that my last 2 attacks have been identical, and both of them hardly pushed through 25% of the monster's Orange Aura at most makes me believe no matter how hard I try, that Soul Energy is too strong.

I need many hours of practice, and a new style or technique to make any actual progress.

I take a deep breath in and out as the Ghoul screeches and runs at me, sensing the fact that my guard is down.

In this moment, I activate my Red Hydra's Rage Buff and run forward covered in a veil of Crimson Energy, slicing the Ghoul into pieces without a hint of resistance.

Before my buff is even activated for a full second, I turn it off and the ringing sound of notifications fills my ears and cheers from the crowd overpower the loud voice announcing me as the winner.

[Congratulations! 1.55x bet won on Fighter: The Flame Emperor]

[Your 30 Platinum Base Bet has been returned to your account.]

[16.5 Platinum Credits have been added to your account.]

[Stage 7 Fight Victory: Reward: 1.6450 Platinum Credits]

[1.6450 Platinum Credits have been added to your account.]

[Total Account balance: 65.8701 Platinum]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[117/1000 Mutant Ghouls Defeated]

I'm hit with a wave of exhaustion post buff, but manage to stand my ground and wave to the crowd as the rest of the flames clear.

This was a good eye-opener for me to see I have quite a ways to go. I need to train with Monk much more to get my attack power magnitudes higher before I'll get a chance to take a Ghoul down with my Qi alone.

The announcer asks if I'd like to move onto the 8th stage, but I show two thumbs down. The crowd is more than happy enough to end on an epic battle like that.

I was so concentrated in my own world trying to figure out how to use my new power, that I didn't realize I just put on one of the most entertaining high-stakes performances of the night.

The cheers of the crowd and yelling announcer fade from my senses as I'm teleported back into the underground training room.

My mind switches from wondering how I'll be able to raise my Qi capacity with Monk to wondering how fast I can get to Elen's Moon bar to finally speak with Maria.

Chapter 375

Slow claps from Max, one of the legacy fighters, come my way as he speaks up in a cheerful voice.

"Another interesting show from you. Tonight was one of the biggest events I've ever seen, and as the closing act, you didn't disappoint. I was worried you'd end it in a single move like last time, but it seems you really do know how to put on a show."

I shrug, walking off the platform and replying.

"With the money they're throwing down tonight, I had to give them what they paid for."

Everyone in the training room glances down at their platinum-covered wristbands, agreeing with my statement, not knowing that stretching that final fight was not intentional by any means.

Max speaks up again.

"Round 2 at Elen's Place? What do you say? Ace bought last time, how about drinks and food on me tonight?"

I smile beneath my mask. I'm going there anyway, so there's no point in saying no.

"Why not, I'm down for another night out."

Both Ace and Sia congratulate me on my flashy victory too, and we make our way over to Mr. Wright in his bright white suit at the back of the room.

Many of the newbie fighters stare at us in awe and fear, not knowing how to properly react to fighters so far out of their league.

I can see many of them tremble in fear, and a few from the midday fights that stuck around in the training room actually faint as we walk by.

I've never seen such a reaction before, but maybe they're just still worn out from the match...

Their wristbands notice that their vitals have been altered, and a few are teleported out of the room to what I can only assume is a medical facility.

My eyebrows are scrunched and a confused look is plastered on my face beneath my mask, then I get a nudge in the side from Sia and a whisper.

"You know that match is over, turn off whatever ability you're using. The fighters that can't use mana control are having a hard time handling it."

I'm even more shocked at her comment, until I activate my perception skills to scan the room and sense that she's right. There's a very dense and menacing aura coming off of me. However, I'm not activating any skills on purpose...

I try to calm my breathing and turn off my mana, but despite that, the rippling aura striking fear into the newbie fighters won't stop. I conclude it must be a passive skill trait of some sort.

The only thing that heavily suppresses it is putting up a thin but very dense wall of mana shielding around my whole body. However, I decide to stop this as it drains my MP at a rapid rate.

I could take in energy from the shielding in the training room, but if anyone noticed that'd raise too many questions for my liking.

Ace laughs and speaks up too.

"Nah, keep it activated. Shows them that there's levels to this fight game."

I nod at Ace, keeping it activated because I still don't know how to turn it off. The pressure being sent out feels almost as intuitive as breathing. Now that I am aware of it though, I can tell it's using up MP at a very slow rate; about 1 point per minute.

I naturally regenerate MP at about the same rate, and with ambient mana in the atmosphere almost everywhere I go, I use Plunderer in small amounts to stay at full anyway, so it's not going to be a problem.

sightings.

My best guess right now is it has something to do with my Intimidation skill upgrade. It feels like I'm sending out weak waves of intimidation without even trying, but I'll know for sure later when I'm in private.

For now, we focus on the shortening line in front of us as the rest of the fighters register for tomorrow's events. The Legacy Fighters do the same and step aside, as I put my name in for tomorrow's nighttime event. I can tell Mr. Wright is having a hard time handling the mental pressure I'm putting out, but he doesn't say a word and carries on business as usual.

Monk's voice sounds in a low tone behind me as he's waited for everyone else to get out of line before approaching.

"Here, a gift for you after a great match."

I turn to see him holding a small silver container in his hand.

I take it politely and reply.

"Thanks. It was... harder than I thought it'd be."

He shows me a thin smile, speaking in a low tone only I can hear.

"Yes, you've come far, but there is a long way to go. Come meet me in the platinum district tomorrow if you wish to continue what we started. I already gave you the key, so you can come in whenever you'd like. Enjoy your night out."

He bows, and I nod back, moving out of line back to the legacy fighters as he checks in with Mr. Wright for tomorrow's event too.

"Sounds good."

The crowds of people above us make their way out of the stadium, and we wait patiently by the stairs.

Out of curiosity, I open up the silver box Monk gave me with my back to the wall. It seems to be made of normal steel, not a special containment case, and inside, I can sense a large amount of Qi from within it.

Once my gaze reaches the inside of the small container, my suspicions are proven right. I see about a dozen Qi pills on one half of the box, on the other, a small bar of smooth black stone.

I didn't sense its presence before, but once I see it, I know what it is and place a finger on the bar.

In an instant, the world becomes dull, the wristband on my arm becomes transparent, and the aura around me ceases to emanate such a monstrous force.

A few sighs of relief follow around the room, but just to confirm what I've felt, I take my finger off and all of my mana senses come back. The aura returns too.

I smirk inwardly, then take the bar out from the case. Placing it in an inner pocket of my cloak and maintaining a small amount of contact on it to suppress my mana.

Sia stares at me with a half-annoyed stare and Ace struggles to keep in his laughter as another one of the new fighters faints from the small burst of aura I put out after he let down his guard when he thought it was finally over.

I guess I'll be holding onto this until I can figure out how to control this new passive Intimidation Buff.

Eventually, the crowds clear and we're brought up to the empty arena. Mr. Wright manually registers each one of us to get through the gate and happily sends us off on our way.

As we walk through the Gold district, the legacy fighters ask a few questions about how I beat the 7th Stage monster and also ask about what Monk gave me, but I dodge both questions and they decide not to pry. Soon, they forget all about it and the conversation then turns into what kind of gear they're going to buy with the massive winnings from the fights today.

Ace says he's looking to get a new sword, Max wants a set of bonded armor but needs to find a reliable ranked up craftsman to make it, and Sia is hoping to find enhancement crystals to raise her base stats by a few points to get past the 6th Stage more consistently.

I raise an eyebrow at her words, as she says sometimes they show up at the auction house, but very rarely and it'd cost her whole Platinum balance.

These crystals seem very interesting to me, and I'd like to know what she's talking about in the future. However, I don't interject as I have even more important things on my mind.

We enter the same red gates of the restaurant after Max pays for the premium service, costing 20 gold in total. The young white-haired woman leads us through the dimly lit tables over to the place setting with the large tree overhead we sat at last night.

Once within very close range of the tree, I release my finger from the piece of stone in my pocket, and put up a dense mana shielding around my entire body instantaneously. I activate my concealment skill to alter my face and take off my mask as well.

With the overflowing amount of mana in the air, it doesn't take much effort to keep my aura suppressed while rejuvenating my MP bar from the tree above our table. I still let out some pressure, but anyone over level 100 won't be affected.

It's nowhere near the same aura that made level 300-400 fighters faint just being nearby.

The moment we sit down, everyone begins to order, so I do too. Sinking my back into the soft seat cushions allows me to let out a sigh of relief and while typing in details to order a feast from my wristband.

Once our food comes and the first round of drinks are gulped down, the joyful laughs and shenanigans begin. My demeanor changes to fit in with the group, but inwardly I begin scanning the restaurant for my teammate. She told me to come here, but never specified where she'd be and when she'd arrive...

In the meantime I enjoy the good food and pure source of mana.

It takes well over 2 hours before I sense the presence of a level 612 Ice Magic user appear nearby.

Chapter 376

A woman with long flowing blond hair, fair skin, and piercing blue eyes approaches our table. The status readings I'm getting from the woman say without a shadow of a doubt, it's the same person I met in the arena.

The Advanced Ice Magic, Red Hydra's Buff, and unforgettable blue eyes seal the deal.

However, the altered facial features, slight body type changes, and item on her hand that shows up with my Appraisal skill, but isn't present on her status labeled [Ring of Total Alteration] seems to be just like the ring of concealment I use to wear a suit. However, hers changes her facial features.

The moment she comes over to the table she waves at every one of us and smiles wide. The way she carries herself shifts from stiff and serious to overly bubbly. I open up my telepathic link with her, and she immediately answers.

"Play along. I need a believable excuse to have actually met you in case I was tailed."

The corner of my lip curls up as I realize it's all an act.

She speaks out loud to all of us, but fixes her drunken gaze on me.

"Fellow Legacy fighters, care if I take a seat to celebrate our Victory?"

Max's eyes widen as Maria slides into the red booth right next to me without waiting for an answer.

He lets out a laugh, looking at me, then back to her.

"The Ice Empress? It's you?"

He chomps down on his bite and washes it down with another gulp of his drink.

"What are the odds?"

Sia interjects in a low tone.

"It must be, Elen wouldn't have let anyone else near our table. Her or Monk, and I doubt this is what that brute looks like out of the ring."

Ace smirks at Sia's joke and is the only one who replies to Maria's question.

"Sure, join us. We're almost done here anyway, but a fellow strong fighter is always welcome."

He leans in over the table to grab another bottle.

I shrug and turn to Maria.

"Fine by me-"

Before I can finish my sentence, I get a tight hug from Maria and a loud voice echoes through our link.

"Good to see you're doing well. I knew you'd make it out of there alive."

I squeeze her back and she speaks outloud to please those watching.

"The Flame Emperor, your performance was amazing! I've been looking all over for you!"

I let out a chuckle but reply inwardly through our link.

"Happy to see you safe and sound too."

Then, give a response outloud.

"Nice to meet you too... Your fight was impressive."

We stay embraced for a bit longer than strangers should, but the drunken act that Maria plays off is impeccable.

She continues letting out a bubbly laugh, and details a backstory of how she saw The Flame Emperor on her wristband while visiting town from Solara and how she needed a last-minute name to see if that 7th stage was as hard as the rumors made it. These tales are followed by another few rounds of shots, and it's more than enough to dissuade the other legacy Fighters from digging too deep into the situation.

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Apparently new strong fighters come through town pretty often. In their intoxicated state, Maria's story seems like a plausible scenario.

Before another hour passes, the midnight tax dings in all our ears, deducting 1 gold credit from our wallets.

The rate of drinks earlier has made the 3 legacy fighters much drowsier than when we first came in here, and less than 30 more minutes after midnight pass before talks of hitting the hay to rest up for tomorrow's fights come up.

Each of them leaves to their respective rooms, one by one, Ace being the last to go with a final shot and a salute before both Maria and I let out long sighs and I pull up my wristwatch window to find the premium feature called [Ping the Host].

I press it and speak out loud to Maria.

"Now that we're alone, let's get a room for the night."

She nods, and before she can even reply, the outline of the restaurant owner approaches our table from the darkness.

I turn to her and ask for the most secure silent room she has available.

"I remember you told me you could make it seem like we're not even here."

Elen nods and taps her wristband with a thin smile, a few moments later a ding pops up on mine, asking for 5 additional gold. Next to it is labeled [Secure Room + Excess Mana Usage].

I roll my eyes, silently cursing my new perk's ability to drain thousands of MP while concealing it with shielding; but accept. We both follow the woman from our table up to the rooms where I stayed last night.

She brings us upstairs, and Maria puts on quite the act with wobbly steps and giggles all the way to the end of the hall upstairs before two sets of mana-shielding imbued doors open up to show a premium suite.

There's a living area with fancy furniture, then a master bedroom with a single massive bed connected to the main area without any door.

There isn't a single window in sight, but there are holograms projecting a city view onto the walls to make it feel real.

She turns away and speaks while leaving.

"Enjoy your stay."

Maria and I walk in and the mana-imbued doors close behind us.

I activate my Hush skill to make a precautionary layer of security, then scan the room to double-check for recording devices or extra pockets of energy and find it's completely empty, I deactivate all my skills except the hush bubble and fall right onto the comfortable couch in the center of the living room.

My real face is revealed and the monstrous aura from my intimidation skill is let out.

Maria does a similar thing, sitting back on the couch beside me and taking off her ring.

I let out a sigh and look up to finally see her real face, she looks even older and more mature. It's a similar change to the one time she took that upgrade crystal. I blurt out my thoughts.

"You've changed... a lot."

She chuckles, curiously looking at my face. Her eyes track all around my body before replying in a bubbly drunken fashion.

"You've changed quite a bit too."

Her smile is a bit too wide, and her gaze seems to be going right through me, then I realize her drunken state might not actually be an act anymore.

I sit up straight and look her in the eyes, concentrating on one of my buffs I haven't gotten the chance to test out yet.

The moment I think of [Rising Emperor's Domain] a blue text box appears above Maria's head only available in my mind's eye. Asking [YES] or [NO] if I'd like to activate my buff.

I can sense the range has grown quite a bit since I last thought of this buff, it's almost 20 meters in diameter. It encompasses most of the restaurant. Enough for close-range combat, or in this case, using it on someone in the same room or general vicinity.

I choose yes, and a list of all of my skills appear.

I choose [Self Regeneration][Special Grade] and the moment I do Maria's eyes widen.

Excitement fills me for a moment too, as this is a sign it's working. I speak up.

"Accept it if you want to have a much clearer head. We have a lot more to talk about than just how good each of us looks."

The moment she accepts it, I can see the gloss clear from her eyes and her posture straightens more, but her cheerful attitude stays exactly the same. The passive poison resistance nullifies her drinks for the night.

"W-What kind of skill is that...?"

"It's my ranked-up buff. I haven't been able to use it much yet because we've all been separated. It lets me share my skills with anyone that trusts me and acknowledges they're on my team. Looks like it worked on you without having to ask."

Maria opens up her status and turns it to me.

"It's there! A new skill, I didn't even know that was possible, it's really there! How many more could I add? Is it unlimited? Is it only temporary? Are there other conditions?"

I let out a laugh, also excited to see the [Self Regeneration][Special Grade] skill show up on her status.

"I haven't tested it much yet. It is temporary though. We'll need to try some things out once we get the chance. However... there are some more urgent details I'd like to ask you..."

There's a pause and silence in the room.

I continue.

"Like how we got here in the first place...? From the Battle in Solara to here and now, I need a full explanation."

Chapter 377

We sit in the middle of the living room of the premium suite, and Maria recounts the events of the past week in full detail.

The fact that my ranked-up buff worked on her without any resistance, and the plumes of green energy coming off of her from my lie detector skill reassure me that everything she's saying is the truth and her mind isn't altered in any way.

She goes over the battle that took place at the observatory, and I'm impressed with their quick and powerful victory.

Maria begins to explain what happened after they went back to the house.

"Then, a man named Lith Galeheart showed up at the door once we got back to Chester's home. He said he knew you and gave us an ultimatum with an offer we'd be stupid to refuse."

I raise an eyebrow, not liking the sound of this, but let Maria continue.

"Go on... what did he offer?"

"Well, Lith said we could come with him and he'd fix the mess we made. That includes faking our deaths, giving us the means to get stronger, and the opportunity to become forces of political pull in the world to make sure scenarios like the one we just left never happen again."

She pauses.

"Sometimes punching things in the face isn't the best way to solve every problem..."

Although the offer sounds good, a lot of things aren't adding up still.

"Okay, and if you refused? What's the other option? How'd he get everyone to accept and come here so easily?"

Maria lets out a sigh.

"Well, the other option was for him to just walk away and let us deal with the situation we created on our own. He never forced us to come to Valor City, he just gave us the option."

I think about what we'd do if we were still in Sector 4 right now, and the gears in my head start to turn as a fascinating idea fills my mind.

Maria continues as my eyes start to sparkle with curiosity.

"We killed 2 out of the 4 main powers on this continent over a single kidnapping. These powers maintain peace, order, and massive trade deals across this continent and even to cities outside the walls. For anyone connected to the Association, or with advanced intel on missions, our fingerprints are all over their disappearances. With no help, we'd be on the run for the rest of our lives. Permanent enemies of the Dark Continent Underground leaders, and the Hunter's Association world wide network."

This content has been misappropriated from Royal Road; report any instances of this story if found elsewhere.

I nod slowly, and the room fills with silence. It takes me about 30 seconds to formulate my thoughts before replying.

"So, what you're saying is... Someone needs to fill those two empty leadership positions."

Maria grins.

"Exactly."

She reaches into a small item box by her side and pulls out 2 teleport crystals, tossing me one.

"These will take us directly into the inner wall undetected, straight into the Galeheart Tower. Lith would like to formally meet you. Abby should be just about done with her training for today too."

I catch the crystal and toss it up and down in my hand before replying immediately.

"What about everyone else? Arie, Fisher, Lydia? And even Chester? What happened to all of them?"

"They're all out on missions of their own to make preparations for what's to come. It will take quite a while, but we've got a pretty good head start going while you were asleep and healing. A lot can get done in a week."

She looks at me in the eyes and keeps talking.

"Arie and Chester went back to Sector 4 not too long ago. Arie has been power leveling him in the dungeons out there to raise his base stats up high enough to fend off low-level thugs if needed. Meanwhile, Chester has been using all of his old business connections to fix up the underground lair beneath Solara. With some extra funding from the Galeheart guild, they reinstalled even more powerful shielding and security to the whole place in a matter of days."

My eyes widen at the thought.

"So that means... Chester is taking the place of the new Sector 4 Leader?"

Maria shrugs and laughs a little.

"Who else would be better for the job? He knows every merchant and every crook in the city already. After Arie pushes him over level 400, he trains the guards sent over by the Galeheart guild, and throws on a mask, it'll be like nothing ever changed."

My shock turns to a smile, then I speak up again with another question on my mind.

"What about Fisher and Lydia? Where are they off to if not in Sector 4 or here training with Abby?"

"They went to scout out the Sector 2 region. Even Lith said most of it is a mystery to him. Many of the scouts he sent out over the last few years just went missing or turned back before getting any information on the region. The old leader didn't like visitors."

I scrunch my eyebrows, remembering the mysterious Sector 2 leader I fought with the Mythic grade crafting skill.

"That's where a lot of the rare items were produced and shipped out from, right? Meaning soon supply will be very limited, and the demand will only rise."

Maria nods.

"Yup. We still haven't heard much back from them, only a few transmissions. They haven't made it to the capital city yet. The Sector's size is similar to the 4th, so it figures they're taking time to note down everything important. Both of them have transport crystals, so they'll be back once all the proper intel is recorded."

After this, my mind races to the only logical conclusion. I could take the craftsman's place, and be the leader of Sector 2. Lith wants our help taking over the region. Whether he knows about the fact that I have the Mythic Grade skill or not, it doesn't matter. The guild leaders intentions are pretty clear.

However, that's a lot of responsibility, and with such immense help from the Galeheart Guild, this must all come with an overwhelming cost.

Nothing in this world is ever free.

I tighten my gaze at the floor, thinking deeply to myself, then finally look up.

"What's in it for Lith? Is this all in exchange to help him fight against the Sector 1 Leader? Does he want us to work under him? He's sending out subordinates to work for Chester in Sector 4, will he do the same for all the other Sectors? Are we just pawns in his master plan, playing along for a small slice of the pie?"

Maria looks at me with a troubled but curious stare. Then, replies.

"I'm not sure. These are good questions."

She lifts up the transport crystal in line with my gaze.

"There's only one way to find out, ask him yourself."

Chapter 378

I stare at the shimmering crystal in Maria's hand, with a million questions still on my mind after the hour-long conversation we just had catching up on everything my teammates have been through while I was away.

Now, I finally have a way into the Inner walls of the city, but I'm hesitant to make the first move.

"How will we get back out? Won't a sudden transport into the city's inner walls alert the wristband system that we're not where we're supposed to be?"

Maria gets up from the couch.

"You're right, we'll leave the city and transport in from outside the walls. Getting out is the easy part, there's a private teleport platform in the Galeheart Tower that connects to the station in the town below the mountain that can be used at any time, leaving is the easy part."

The room goes silent as my curiosity hits an all-time high. It's a roundabout method, but the logic adds up.

I nod in approval and stand up to move toward the door.

"Fine, let's go then."

Maria follows close behind, putting on her Ring of Total Alteration while I put up a strong mana shield along with my concealment skill to alter my face. Both doors open, and we walk out together into the dimly lit hall from the private suite.

I feel a warm hand interlock between my fingers, easily bypassing my layer of mana shielding and putting up her own to keep the seal of intimidation energy constant.

My gaze falls down to Maria holding my hand, but her grip only tightens and a whisper comes from her lips.

"Don't overthink it, I just missed you while you were gone. Don't pull anything stupid like that again without warning me first."

Her face blushes slightly, but in the dim light and concealment items, it's hard to tell if I'm imagining it.

I come to realize I really didn't leave many clues behind when I decided to self-destruct my body double to win that fight back in Solara... My teammates had to have faith that I'd come back with no solid proof I was still alive.

My mouth opens, and I look her in the eyes, but don't reply for a few seconds.

"I'll try my best to make sure that won't happen again. "

We walk down the hall and make our way to the exit.

Every table is empty, and the concentration of mana in the air has lowered to save energy while customers aren't around. A familiar woman's voice rings out as we step toward the restaurant's exit.

"Thank you again for stopping by. I hope both of you enjoyed your stay. Come back anytime."

Elen's white outline is visible as we leave the restaurant, walking out into the cool nighttime air with bright stars overhead.

Making our way back through the Gold District is quick, and neither of us say a word to each other. We just enjoy the company in the silent night. My mind is still racing over all the information Maria just dropped on me about the Dark Continent takeover plan.

Up until now, I've only ever had to worry about myself. My only goals have been to survive until tomorrow and to be a stronger fighter after every battle. This focused and single-minded mentality is what has gotten me this far, changing what's working is a scary thought.

Maybe, just maybe, if I just get even stronger, it's a thought I won't have to worry about anymore...

However, the window has been opened in my mind again. The reality that my new enemies are much bigger than just a strong monster in front of me is starting to sink in.

The night sky always makes my thoughts go wild.

As I ponder my new fate, the guards let us through to the outermost walls of the city.

The walk through the Silver District goes just as quickly as the Gold. Most of the shops are closed and their lights are out, but the mana-powered street lamps on every corner still dimly light up the whole area.

We make it to the final outer wall of the city and are met by two silver-armored guards.

They both step forward and speak to each of us separately but in unison.

"Thank you for visiting Valor City. We hope you enjoyed your stay. Would you like to save your credit ID for another stay or cash out what you have in your account?"

Maria replies.

"Cash out, please."

So I repeat the same thing to the guard in front of me.

"I'd like to cash out too."

Both of the guards bring a tablet to our wristbands, and they glow light green before a white flash of light that feels like transport magic envelops the entire tablet.

My eyes widen at the sight before me on top of the tablet the guard is holding.

There are piles of thin rectangular platinum bars and a mountain of gold coins beside them.

In the same flash of white, the wristband on my hand turns clear, then breaks in half, falling off my wrist and to the floor.

"Here is your 65.8201 Platinum balance, paid out in full. We look forward to seeing you in the city again soon."

My head turns to Maria as she collects a sum of precious metals about a quarter of the size, but still enough to set up a normal family for generations.

She throws the platinum bars and gold into her item box, and I do the same.

I count all 65 of the small shiny bars and shovel the gold into my item storage beneath my clothing as the doors open, showing the long trail down the mountain. In the same motion, I decide to push the silver container holding my Qi pills and block of black stone into my item storage. It disappears and sits inside like any other item without a problem.

Both of us walk off, and the large metal doors close behind with a thud.

"65 Platinum, not bad. I was wondering if you were betting all in on yourself every match, that answers my question."

She lets out a chuckle as we continue to walk down the mountain.

The lights of Valor City fade away until it's nothing but a faint glow, and we're walking through the wilderness under the gaze of no one but the night sky.

Maria is the first to speak up.

"I think we're far enough away, we won't cause any disturbances teleporting from here."

I take out the transport crystal from my storage, and Maria does the same.

Without saying another word, we both crush the crystals in our fists, and a blink of white light brings us into a white room with no ability to sense the outside world at all... The air is so dense with mana I can't help but start plundering it.

My eyes begin to focus, and I see the outline of two men in suits behind a white desk fall over onto the ground to either side of where they're sitting.

I curse under my breath as the instant we were teleported in here, my mana shielding was disrupted and a pulse of intimidation energy was released.

The moment I start to walk over and apologize with a friendly expression across my face, two Black Suits of armor emerge from white doors that open in the walls. I reach into my item storage to pull out my sword on the spot.

The small wave of energy I was letting out before is a drop in the ocean compared to the wave of fury that erupts from my body when my real intimidation skill is actually activated along with every one of my stat enhancing buffs.

One could say I'm overreacting, but the sight of 2 Royal Guards emerging from nowhere in a concealed room is not the welcoming invite I was expecting to receive.

Chapter 379

The men on the ground begin foaming at the mouth, while the two Royal Guards freeze in place as my wave of buff-enhanced legendary Intimidation hits them.

They don't move a muscle as I run forward with my sword trailing black flames.

Given a few more fractions of a second, I would have turned on my Red Hydra's Buff and sliced the two guards clean in two, but a familiar voice echoes through the white-walled room, causing me to stop my attack.

"Enough, enough. You always do seem to keep things lively wherever you go, don't you?"

As a third door at the back of the room opens up from a flat wall, the tall, fair-skinned, blue-eyed hunter walks toward me, the corner of his mouth turned upward.

Clear wisps of magic flow from his fingertips in the form of miniature tornadoes, lightly bringing both the men on the floor to their feet.

In the same gusts of air, green potions float over and tilt into the men's mouths before they both begin coughing and open their eyes back to reality.

At the sight, I turn my high mana consumption buffs down and intimidation skill off, but keep my sword pointed straight ahead and eyes locked on the frozen Royal Guards at the back of the room.

"What do you expect? I come in here and get attacked seconds after being invited..."

Lith's curved lip breaks into a smile before he replies.

"Well, you knocked out my lobby men, so of course my Royal Guards came in to see what the issue was."

He looks left and right over his shoulders at both of them, the guards still trembling from the wave of magic that just shocked their systems.

While this goes down, I attempt to do a status scan on all of them, but the readings I get back are exactly the same as the last time I tried.

[Lv. 824]

Active Items:

[??? Access Denied]

Active Skills:

[??? Access Denied]

Bufs:

[??? Access Denied]

The two Guards show levels of 605 and 606. Their items, skills, and buffs have 'access denied' written all over them too.

He replies after confirming his guards aren't permanently harmed.

"It seems you weren't in any real danger if you can freeze two of my guards with a mental attack in mere seconds."

He looks at me curiously, then continues to speak.

"If you were that combative from just the sight of a few Royal Guards, it appears you know more than I thought already. The Origin worshipers didn't make me look too bad, did they?"

He takes a step forward as I raise an eyebrow at his remark.

"Origin worshipers? You mean...? How do you know I went in-"

Lith brings his hand up in the air again, and the tall walls around us change color to dark black with hints of white light. It looks as if the night sky is all around us.

Seconds later, the view shifts, and moving images of the city in a fast-paced slideshow begin to zoom in and out of all angles of the city. It looks like a video recording of the entire town, just like the arena.

A few lonely souls roam the streets, and some are still at some of the bars drinking in the golden district. I whisper under my breath.

"Real-time surveillance... but how? I couldn't sense a thing..."

The images cease, and a massive circular map of the city shows up on the ceiling for us all to look up at. Hundreds of tiny red dots cover it. Each of them has an ID number and a credit balance next to it.

Lith zooms in and out at each one.

"It's not exactly video surveillance. The system is a bit more unique than that... You see, each wristband tracks the user's ID, and money usage, but there's no way to physically see or hear what you're saying just from the wristbands."

My eyebrows scrunch in as the 2D map of the city rotates into a 3D model, and a visual re-creation of sonar-like waves are being sent from the walls, lamplights, and storefronts. The ripples of energy overlap on each other, bouncing off the structures and people between each wall.

The sonar beams are eventually caught by a transparent mana-imbued overarching dome above the city.

Lith speaks again.

"The only picture we ever take of you is when you enter from outside the walls. Our advanced pattern recognition security system uses that image to accurately recreate exact images of individuals based on where their wristband is located in the city at all times. The only way out of the eyes of the surveillance is behind strong walls of mana."

He points to the walls around us.

"Or a place where mana can't be found."

The holographic picture on the wall shifts to show the black pyramid-shaped structure in the platinum district, with an image of Monk and me walking in and disappearing into thin air the moment we touched the inside wall.

Then it shifts again to show Maria and me walking into the suite just a few hours ago. We disappeared into an indistinguishable white box the moment the mana shielded door closed behind us.

Lith continues.

"I'm not the only one with access to the surveillance system, so just try to be a bit more careful within these walls."

He lets out a sigh.

"Anyway, how about you come upstairs and we have a talk. I assume you have a mountain of questions for me."

My eyes are still open wide at the tech Lith just showed me.

The fact that I couldn't sense any advanced surveillance systems, but felt like there were always a light set of eyes on me makes much more sense now... but it's even less settling to think about now that this is the fact.

"Yes, I have quite a few."

The same door Lith walked in from opens in the back of the lobby area, and he turns around motioning for me to follow.

I turn to Maria.

"You come too, whatever is discussed, I'd like everyone to be in on it as a team."

She nods and follows with a smile, and we walk through a door into a smaller white rectangle that rises quickly the moment all of us are inside.

No more than 2 seconds pass, before it feels like we've risen hundreds of meters in the air.

I get a slight head rush, and my stomach drops, but I keep my composure as the door opens and Lith walks out into an impressive-looking office. There's art on the side walls, fancy-looking furniture, and racks of armor and magic items all surpassing B-Grade rating.

The back wall of the office is a blank white wall with a large desk and a few comfortable couches facing it.

As we walk over, Lith snaps his finger and the wall behind his desk projects a hologram of what an incredible view looking down on Valor City would look like from a tall building in the center of the inner wall.

Three curved layers of platinum, gold, then silver-tinted walls and establishments look tiny from up here.

I'm almost lost in the beauty of human architecture before finally sitting down on a comfortable white couch next to Maria while Lith sits at his desk facing us.

I cross my arms, and Lith picks up a silver colored, thin tablet device from a drawer in his desk.

He speaks.

"Jay. Nice to finally meet you face to face for a real chat. Let's get down to business."

Chapter 380

Lith repeats most of what Maria already told me back in the hotel suite, just in case anything was missed, recapping where Arie, Chester, Lydia, and Fisher have been. Then, he gets to the point.

"So, my offer to you, as objectively the strongest and most versatile member of your group, is to offer you the position of the new Sector 2 Leader."

There's a pause, but he expands on the point.

"I have a team of craftsmen that could work under you, and some of the old leader's business dealings could be mended if someone were to step up and take the leadership position in the Sector 2 region."

I stay silent and let him continue his offer, despite my clear hesitation to accept.

"We have all the contact information and trade deals from Sector 4, and Sector 1. With Chester in control of the underground market there soon enough, business may resume, and with me being a large buyer in sector 1, business will go back to nearly normal here. There just needs to be new negotiations done in Sector 3, The Vice Region, and The Apex Region."

My eyebrows raise at the sound of this.

Lith sees my surprised look and continues his explanation.

"The Sector 3 Region is mostly a farming region. A lot of food products come out of that region and supply the entire Dark continent. They're a simple and peaceful sector, as long as a contract is set, I'm sure a new trade deal can be met. The Vice Region, which you're all very familiar with, may be a harder ask. The contact for trade deals is Brutus, your previous handler. You'll need a damn good disguise or separate team that I can provide to renegotiate that deal. They bought mostly upgrade crystals and enhancement items. With a team of a few legendary craftsmen, this can be handled, however, some of the multi-enchanted custom gear orders won't be able to be carried out with the old leader gone. That goes for the Apex region too. With all of the highest grade hunters for the Association staying there, most of the orders were only special enchants, so striking a new deal with them may be out of the question. Though, it's worth a try."

Lith lets out a long sigh.

"That means we won't be getting any more unique armor or high-grade concealment items either. I don't know of any craftsmen on par with his expertise. However, it's not worth getting upset about now. What's done is done. It was good while it lasted.

We sit in silence for a moment, then I finally speak up in a slightly angered tone.

"You expect me to do business with the Vice Region? With Brutus? That old backstabber? The guy who sold out our mission information and screwed me and all my teammates over into this whole mess to begin with?"

I start sitting up from the couch, but Maria holds my left arm back, so I sit back down after taking a deep breath in and out.

Lith goes on.

"Raise the prices on them, make them an offer they can't refuse, or just don't do business with the Vice Region if you really feel passionate about it."

He shrugs.

"I'm not here to force you into anything. I'm just giving you the option to reconnect Sector 2 with that trade partner if you wish."

I ponder the thought, but not even considering this fact, there's way too much that makes no sense in this offer to me.

"Why are you even giving me these options? We met on a whim a week ago, now you're offering to help me take over half of the dark continent with no strings attached. This doesn't seem like a smart business decision for you on the surface. There has to be a hidden agenda. I don't feel comfortable accepting this at all..."

"Yes, yes. I see how it looks on the surface, but think about your unique position for a moment."

We both stare at each other.

My gaze is full of confusion and a hint of anger, while Lith's is filled with confidence and hopefulness. He continues.

"Our city has been completely taken over by the Dark One. Before it came, I was in total control and ran a much more fair economy. I had nearly a thousand royal guards that watched over the city I managed to build from the ground up using the natural resources from this mountain range."

I murmur under my breath.

"That you stole..."

"That I managed to take under control... The world is full of war and conquest. Only the strongest can call anything rightfully theirs. Unfortunately, the same thing I did to your new friends in the monastery is happening to me, but with a much less peaceful deal. My thousands of troops have been dwindled down to less than 50 remaining. Those guards you saw in the lobby are the real Royal Guard under my command, the ones outside in the platinum district and in the fight arena are being manipulated by the Dark One. They've been turned into Ghouls. Monsters in human's armor, roaming the streets and pretending to protect the people."

"And...? You're hundreds of levels above me. With all the resources in the world? You can't handle this problem yourself?"

He nods slowly with a solemn expression.

"I've been trying to for months, but the issue is only getting worse. At my peak, I can handle one of those Ghouls you took out in the arena if I went all out, but one or two may be my limit... The Royal Guards don't stand a chance. Every time they get into an altercation, the Dark One manages to turn more of my loyal men to its side. Your team, on the other hand..."

His eyes move back and forth between me and Maria.

"Your entire squad managed to control a power that may bring freedom back to my people, and save my decade-long business venture. I thought by letting you win those stones in the auction, you'd go off and kill yourself trying to absorb them and maybe I'd be able to pick up the leftovers for free. But to my pleasant surprise, I witnessed a team of barely ranked-up hunters take out two sector leaders like it was just another Tuesday."

He laughs out loud while thinking back to it.

I reply with an unamused tone.

"So what's your real offer here. Tell me what you really want me to do, and what you're giving us in return."

His expression turns much more serious as well before responding.

"In exchange for granting you a permanent leadership position as the Sector 2 Leader, funding to fix up the region, a team of craftsmen to fulfill orders, and access to high-grade dungeons in Valor City to train and get stronger; I ask that you and your team kill the Sector 1 leader and every last one of the corrupted Royal Guards."

A million thoughts go racing through my mind as I scan the room with my perception skills and senses out of instinct.

The first thing I notice is the extremely strong shielding that is constantly around Lith's body. It's packed with mana and scrambles my appraisal skill, but I'm certain there is no high concentration of Qi within him.

The fact that he mentioned he could take out one of the Ghouls in the arena makes me think maybe there are other ways to defeat them than just the method I've been using. Or, possibly he's absorbed some weaker kind of Soulstone in his past. It's impossible to tell without viewing his status.

Next, my thoughts go over the offer itself.

The lightly tinted green mist that comes off of a person when they tell the truth under the gaze of my lie detector skill constantly pours out of Lith from the very start. He hasn't tried to deceive me one time.

Considering my circumstances, if I refuse this offer I'd just be on the run from the governments of two continents for the rest of my life, just like Maria said back in the suite. There's no point in saying no other than the possible dangers of facing off against this mysterious Dark One, and the responsibility I'll have to take on for managing a massive trade region.

I don't like the fact that Lith would be sending in hand-picked craftsmen to work under me, but that also means he doesn't know that I myself have the Mythic Grade craftsmanship skill.

If I were to take control of any project, I'd be the one picking the people that work for me exclusively. I don't want unknown eyes and ears to be where they don't need to be.

Even with all downsides considered, this could be a once in a lifetime opportunity to become one of the strongest hunters in the world. Both in political pull and raw power.

I stay silent as my mind continues to race over the possibilities. More than a full minute passes before Lith interjects again.

"Of course, you don't have to accept on the spot. If you'd like to spend some time here in the city and use my resources to get stronger until Fisher and Lydia return with detailed intel, that is fine by me. However, I'll need an answer or counter offer in the next 3 days. We don't have much time."