

D. Diver 391

Chapter 391

I think quickly, reacting to her words and decide to go along with what she thinks this intruder may be. If she thinks I'm from the Association without me having to lead her to believe it, that's even better.

Stepping forward, I activate my Hush Skill and let it expand just large enough to encompass both of us. The light sounds of magic items clicking together, boxes being taped, and people moving around vanish from our audible senses.

I deactivate my stealth skill, and activate my mana manipulation skill to summon two humming pink daggers in my hands.

The ring of concealment along with my skill makes me look as if I'm just some random man with two high-level assassination skills. A noise-canceling perk, along with some ability to conjure knives that don't leave a trace.

The pink glow from my hands lights up the room just slightly, and in the same moment, I see the tips of Bri's fingers flicker with white light as well.

I speak up.

"Well, there's been a change of plans."

She stares straight ahead, standing up from her desk without a drop of fear.

"That's not how things work. We had an ongoing agreement. No messing with me or my business, it's part of Rodrigo's soul pact."

I step closer but stop in place at her last line. Rodrigo is her brother, the A-Class hunter that was the head examiner of my C-Class advancement event. To date, that's the strongest hunter I've ever seen in my life. Hearing his name brought up here is a bit confusing.

"He doesn't matter. This is about you."

I continue to step forward, letting the pink blades in my hand glow brighter and brighter before continuing to speak.

"Would you like to make a deal? Hand over the names of just one of your high-paying clients. We'll need a time and date to seize illegal products on their premises, along with their past order numbers. A lot of people in Vice City have been getting far too comfortable in the shadows away from the law."

Bri's hands glow even brighter white, now illuminating the full backside of the room.

"You're not allowed to ask a favor like that of me. No one below a regional director rank should even be standing in this facility. We had a 0 tolerance interference policy. The only way you could be showing up here now is if Rodrigo either betrayed you, or he's dead-"

Her eyes widen for a fraction of a second as I jump forward and put both blades right up to her neck, reflecting a pink glow off her body.

Even in her moment of hesitation, I'm impressed with her reaction time as she counters by moving her left hand hot with light magic toward my waist and her other hand grabs a knife from her desk.

However, I have the high ground and the closer hand to the kill shot.

I reply.

"You give up one client, and you keep your life. A simple exchange. We'll even make it look like an accident, and compensate you for long term business losses."

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Her eyes remain fierce, and she grits her teeth.

"Piss off. I'd never give up a single client unless they themselves backstabbed me first. On top of that... I'd never help the Association after what you did to my family.

I bring my blades even closer, just millimeters away from her neck.

"Is this really how you want to go? All I ask for is a simple name. If you're doing this because you're worried about your brother, I have nothing to do with him. Our meeting here is only about you."

I let my blades pulse pink, and all I get in response is her resolute stare. She continues to charge up her left hand with more and more light magic, bringing the room we stand in to fully lit.

"So you're from one of the special units?"

Her expression changes to anger.

"He can take care of himself, this is more personal."

I nod, keeping a straight face, but smiling inwardly.

"Last chance."

"My answer is no. I'll never go back on my word. Kill me if you can."

I feel a warm sensation hit my stomach. It's a light magic attack that's easily deflected by my many layers of dense mana shielding.

I don't budge, and based on Bri's reaction, she expected this. Her blade in her right hand immediately becomes covered in a layer of mana shielding and swings up and across her body to bash the two pink daggers in my hand away.

On contact, I deactivate my manipulation skill and let the blades shatter into a glimmering pink glow while airstepping backward and putting my hands up in the air.

I can tell she's surprised it was so easy. It was clear in her mind that I was a much stronger opponent since the second I walked into the room.

"Good. You passed."

As Bri runs at me glowing with light magic all over, and pulling even more items out of a small item box, I take off my ring and deactivate my concealment skill to reveal my regular form.

She stops mid-stride with a look filled with shock, and before taking another step a wave of understanding washes over her.

"J-Jay? You're alive?"

Her blinding lights dim, and she takes the weapons aimed at my vital points down, releasing her tight grip.

I reply, taking out the sword and dagger she crafted for me from my item storage for a moment, then put both the weapons away once she confirms they're really the ones she made.

"Yes, it's really me. Sorry to alarm you, I just wanted to get a genuine reaction before I decided to fill you in on what happened to me."

The green mist of the lie detector skill still radiates off of Bri, telling me every word she said was the truth. She'd rather die than give up her clients to the Association.

She lets out a long sigh, and walks back over to her desk and sits down.

"Never a dull moment when you're around, is it? You know, you could have just knocked. I have truth detector items and bonding agreements if you were really that in need of a definite answer."

I shrug.

"Well, how was I supposed to know that? At least I heard what I wanted to hear my way. What do you say we get down to business?"

I walk over to one of the cushioned seats in front of her desk and take a seat. She replies.

"Give me a moment."

She takes a deep breath in and out before organizing things on her desk and looking straight up at me.

"You may have known that was just a test, but for me I was sure a ranked up assassin from the Association's Black Ops Unit just came in to kill me."

She breathes in and out one more time, wiping all worry from her face entirely. I'm impressed how unphased she is by all of this. Or, how good she is at hiding it.

"Anyway. I take it with an introduction like that after coming back from the dead, you didn't just come over to say hi?"

We chuckle at her statement, and simultaneously, I take out the 5 pieces of paper from my item storage with regional order details on them.

"It's a bit of an urgent request actually, and a very big one at that."

My Hush skill is still blocking out everything not on this floor, and the only noise hitting my ears is Bri's accelerated heartbeat and fast breathing the moment her eyes meet the details written on the page before her.

Over a minute goes by as she flips through each of the pages and examines each item order very closely.

Finally, after an awkwardly long pause, she speaks.

"How did you possibly get a hold of these lists? Does this mean what I think it does about the rumors going around about the Sector 2 Leader being missing?"

I slowly nod.

She looks at me straight in the eyes, then back down to the papers.

"Impossible- But- I guess it's not..."

There's another long silent pause before she speaks again.

"So, what exactly are you asking of me?"

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"Well, let's say I provided all the raw material necessary to make these items, could you and your team get it done?"

She looks down at the papers again, flipping through and making notes on a paper beside them all.

"The volume is way too high for me to do alone. I have a few craftsmen under me, but none of them are high enough grade or level to handle a majority of these orders..."

Bri continues flipping through the papers, so I reply.

"What if I power-leveled your craftsmen in a dungeon, and gave them upgrade crystals to bring them all to legendary grade?"

Bri looks up at me.

"If you can get your hands on enough of those for all 6 of my craftsmen downstairs, that would work."

She looks at the papers very thoroughly, making more and more notes on a separate sheet, then hands it to me.

"We could fulfill these orders. Everything from Sector 3 and 4 would be manageable. All of the Sector 1 and Vice Regions standard items are doable, but the above 120% buff enchants are not capable at my level no matter the crafting materials. The upgrade and teleport crystals aren't possible for me to do either, I assume all of those used to be sourced from Sector 2. Unless excessive mana crystals are provided and large amounts of specific blood to bond certain skills or abilities to items, a lot of these higher grade enchants are not easily replicable."

She pauses, thinking to herself for a moment before carrying on.

"Anything over a double element stone bonds won't be possible for me either - and yeah, not a single one of the Apex Region's order items can be done by team to fulfill either. Even if we were all legendary grade, each one of these items are priceless treasures. I had no idea that region was buying items like this, but it makes sense... That Region has 4 A-Class hunters and tons of B-Class hunters too, recruited from the yearly exams. They probably run through gear like this in training all the time. I'm sure they'd want to stock up a lot right now, considering another wave of new recruits will be coming in soon."

I nod slowly, looking at the paper.

"Still, this is enough to move over 100 platinum worth of product per month."

I reach into my item storage and pull out a single platinum bar, along with one of the speed fragments, ice scales, and a few swords from the Red Ogre dungeon I farmed last night.

Placing the rare items that most likely have never seen the light of day outside Valor City, I speak up.

"So, will you take these as an apology for the scare earlier? I just wanted to be positive I could trust you with my plan to take over the Sector 2 trade route."

Bri's eyes scan the gear on the counter, and she even touches some, activating her craftsmanship skill to analyze the rarity and stats on the items before her.

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"Apology accepted."

She smiles.

"Although, there's no need. We'll just call it payback for the first time you showed up here asking for your sword and I almost got you killed by forcing you in that fight ring."

I sigh and roll my eyes while she lets out a chuckle.

"Sure, we'll call it even."

"Anyway, these materials are at a higher grade than pretty much anything I usually craft. I'd be hitting my upper limits using them. Any higher quality and the end crafting result would all be the same."

Her eyes track over to the small bar of platinum beside all the materials.

"So, this is the kind of money you're working with now, isn't it... I'd like to know what happened to you, and what exactly I'm getting involved in before I fully agree. Start from the beginning. Who did you get these lists from? What is your true goal with this business deal? And most importantly, how did you die, who knows you're alive, and how long is it going to stay that way?"

I lean in and start to explain.

With the Hush Barrier raised and still on full power, for the next hour, Bri and I talk business.

First, I start with the power imbalance that occurred after the Sector 2 leader was defeated, and my meeting with the powerful Sector 1 businessman, Lith Galeheart.

Bri surprisingly reacts in a calm manner.

"Yeah, I've heard of him. Never formally met, but I've seen him show up to a few auctions."

Next, we discuss logistics. I don't know what the situation in Sector 2 is yet, so building this larger scale operation might be better off done right here in Vice City.

I smile to myself once finishing my proposal.

"That's right. Everyone that does business with me will assume everything is produced in Sector 2, but in reality, it will be a front. All valuables and production will be kept here. With your zero-contact agreement already in place with the Association, it's like my enemies are protecting their own worst nightmare."

Bri gets a kick out of this idea but won't go into full detail about the exact conditions of her brother's contract. However, by the end of our conversation a few details become a bit more clear.

I explain the situation in the dark continent, when my team's mission all started. It was all going fine until the total freakout happened with a few organizations once they learned we ran into demonic energy.

Her eyes widen at this portion of the story and I remember Rodrigo having multiple Demon's cores, and even an Arch Demon's core so he's definitely cleared a labyrinth over 20 levels in his past.

"So they know you have a core too? That's exactly why they forced my brother into a life-binding contract at such a young age."

"Well - they did. Until Lith faked our capture and deaths, every single one of us. I've been hiding very carefully since then. Other than 2 rogue assassins a while back, no one else has come looking for me. The cover up seems to have worked pretty well."

Bri replies.

"Over here outside those walls, there's a whole different story going around. Two years of Elite Squads killed in a dungeon break to save millions of lives. What a headline."

She pulls out a new paper from a few weeks ago, and we both have a good laugh reading it.

Another hour passes, and we consolidate potential plans for expanding her building of operations here but put it on hold until I get confirmation back from all the buyers involved along with the dungeons to get all of the crafting materials needed for this job.

"Sounds like we've come to quite the agreement here. I look forward to making a lot of money together."

I stand up to shake Bri's hand.

"Pleasure talking over our future business too. Come back once you have all the plans for moving forward. Next time, just knock."

I smile and release her grip.

"Got it."

I deactivate my Hush skill, throw my ring of concealment on, reactivate stealth, and disappear before her eyes. I walk down the steps right out the front door.

While walking down the street away from the brick building, the two guards out front scramble to close the door that just mysteriously opened on its own.

One argues that it was the wind, while the other looks around with a serious expression trying to find an intruder. About 15 seconds later, they forget about it once they can't come to a conclusion and go back to their usual business standing guard as I turn a corner and make my way back to the dungeon hub.

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When I make it back to the dungeon hub in full stealth mode, I look at all the available dungeon entrances for a moment, and my eye catches the B Class gate.

I never really thought twice about it when I was spending most of my time around this place. My level and power were never high enough to even think of going into dungeons like this.

I use my perception and scanning skills to find that the two guards standing in front of the gate are level 556 and 509.

The higher level guard is ranked up with an advanced earth magic skill while the other is stacked with two special grade party buffing skills. One for strength and the other for speed. They're wearing very high-grade gear and looking straight ahead as no one comes near their gate.

I was going to hop back into an E class dungeon with stealth activated, but now I'm curious.

Bri mentioned something about the Apex Region recruiting B Class hunters soon, so out of curiosity, I walk over and completely change my status to an E Class businessman to match my concealment ring's suit and alter my face to look much older.

With a professional smile, I come out from the shadows and walk over with a hand raised.

"Good afternoon gentlemen, I have a question for you if you don't mind me asking."

The higher level tan-skinned earth magic user turns my way with jaded eyes and a course toned reply.

"What can I help you with, sir?"

I come to a halt, scanning him up and down to see [Damien S.][B-Class Hunter] on two small silver pins on his Association uniform's collar.

"Oh, I was just wondering what the date and location of the B-Class exams were? I know they're coming up and may have a client or two eligible to try out."

His expression doesn't change, but the guard nods and replies in the same tone.

"They're a month and a half away. Anyone above level 500 can enter if they wish, but the exact location and time is not available to the public. You'll have to check in with an association office with your clients present to sign them up."

I nod and begin to turn away.

"Very good, that's all I wanted to know"

"Sir, could I ask to see an ID or your status? It's not every day we get questions like that."

I shrug and show them my doctored status, showing lv79 and a no-grade Appraisal skill before walking off. Although appraisal skills are fairly rare, many top businessmen have them. Snagging some for the association would always be helpful, but they're really better off working on their own.

A lower level hunter would have tried to recruit me to get some good faith, but this man just nods and doesn't even wave me off as I leave. He faces straight ahead as I disappear into the crowds of hunters.

Once completely out of sight, I activate stealth once again and slip into a dungeon before teleporting back into the Labyrinth to continue farming with my time remaining.

Monk said it'd take 3 to 4 hours, and I still have a bit of time, so I dungeon walk around the red-tinted dungeon full of speedsters for the remaining hour and a half I have left, bringing my level up to 629, gaining 1 extra PP, a few million MCP, and collecting 5 more crimson speed fragments to add to my item storage.

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I attempt to practice my Qi control further, but it's not even worth trying. Every time I make an impact I desolate my opponent.

"Not bad... but I'm ready for a real challenge."

Crushing the transport crystal in my hand, I'm brought back to the Galeheart tower and go through the process of exiting the walls and reentering under a new wristband ID. This time, adding 14 platinum to my balance, keeping a clean 50 bars in my storage.

As I walk through the walls to make it back to Monk's base, I think about how much easier all this traveling would be if I learned how to craft and set points for transport crystals myself. I begin outlining where I'd place points around each Sector and Region for quick teleportation without the use of dungeons, but these thoughts start to fade once I enter the monastery again.

There's more important information to know right now. I speak up while pressing the wall open back into the training room to hear loud cracks of Qi on Qi echoing throughout the room.

"How's the progress coming along? Are they proper Qi fighters yet?"

With a grin on my face and the door shutting behind me, I watch both Abby and Maria fight Monk with Qi-infused steps and white-hot fists colliding over and over at lightning-fast speeds.

Monk turns to me while blocking one of Maria's punches with his forearm just centimeters from his face.

"Oh, they learned real quick. All three of you were born to be monsters."

He laughs while blocking a kick from Abby at the same moment.

Then, everyone steps back, stops, and Monk bows.

Maria starts to laugh, and Abby crosses her arms as I walk over, showing an impressed look on my face.

They're both covered in sweat, and Maria is the first to speak.

"Spar with us next, I want to see how we stack up against you!"

"Sure, why not. A little warm-up before we head to the Arena again would be nice. Don't hold back."

Both of them reply.

"We won't."

I take off my gear, and Monk stands back as I get into a fighting stance.

Maria and Abby face me, forming a triangle, and forcing me to pay close attention right from the start. It looked like they were very skilled opponents when fighting Monk, but I don't want to use my full strength just in case.

I'll limit myself and only block until I can gauge their actual skill level.

Monk's voice starts the match.

"Begin"

Both of them immediately lunge forward with fists full of Qi at an incredible speed.

My eyes widen as I have to use my full power Qi-infused step to spin and dodge, knocking their wrists to the side with a reinforced forearm of Qi only after I manage to slip through.

Simultaneously, two kicks come from both sides of my back after blocking their punches, and I have to spin again, thinking fast and letting a wave of Qi flow through my torso to block the kicks as they collide with my body.

All three of us are thrown back at this collision, and I put my fists up above my face to hide my grin.

"So, it seems I really can use a good bit of strength. You learned much faster than I thought."

We jump back in, and I start throwing real punches to gauge their actual strength. Maria's waves of Qi seem to be pulling from a bottomless base of energy, powering her footsteps and the strength of her punches much faster and harder than Abby's. However, Abby's agility and precision make up for it.

They learned how to focus their Qi together, so it seems they developed an interesting battle style to deal with Monk or any high power enemies like him.

They use the same techniques on me.

Maria is the powerhouse, bringing all attention to her while Abby guides the attacks, and lands her own in between while I make sure to dodge Maria's.

I do still have the upper hand from pure battle experience, as well as being more comfortable with using Qi for more than just a 4-hour session. However, we have a great spar, and I can tell they're both going to be more than capable of defeating at least up to the 6th stage of opponents in the battle arena.

We're all going to have to use the red hydra's buff on the 7th... but that's why we're here to practice.

After some more basic tips from Monk, we all head to the individual shower rooms and eat together in the cafeteria hall. Once we're done, and consume a brand new Qi pill, we all stand up with satisfaction and head over to check in for the Arena.

Abby's voice echoes through the narrow stairway up to the surface as we start to leave.

"I'm excited to try this out on some real monsters... Especially that 7th Stage Ghoul..."

Maria replies as Monk presses open the door to the outside world as we leave the monastery.

"Me too! I wonder what kind of monster comes after it. Has anyone ever faced the 8th stage?"

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"The 8th stage?"

Monk looks back at Maria as he leads us out.

"I'm not sure, I've never seen anyone face it. It's probably better that way."

Each of us nods and doesn't reply after that note. We follow Monk, walking out of the fortress and regaining our mana sense.

Our rings of concealment and alteration activate the moment we step out from the dark tunnel.

Abby and Maria's faces light up as they take their first breaths of both mana and Qi-infused air.

"Feels nice, doesn't it?"

"Sure does..."

The walk back to the arena goes pretty quickly. Although my mind is still racing through possibilities of how to set up a business with Bri, and the potential offer Lith will give me tomorrow morning; once the sounds of the yelling crowds hit my ears, my brain switches gears.

I will have to save up a lot of money for startup costs if I want to do all of this on my own. Farming every single material for crafts may not always be feasible, I'll have to pay a team to farm for me. It may not seem optimized on a small scale when I can do everything myself, but I have to think bigger...

So, the mission right now is to make as much money as possible before my fight, and practice my Qi to its upper limits during my actual time in the ring.

Maria and I put on our black and white masks, while Abby just stays content with her ring of alteration.

"Masks are too stuffy, I don't need an extra layer of disguise just to look cool."

Monk gets a chuckle out of her line.

The four of us walk through the crowds of people in the lobby and make our way behind the registration and down the steps to the training rooms.

The announcer's voice is echoing through the stadium as usual, hyping up some of the last remaining midday fights while the sky above begins to shift from the golden yellow sunset to a black sky with twinkling stars.

Mr. Wright greets us as we make our way down, and his eyes practically light up with joy when he sees yet another fighter appear from nowhere next to the three others that broke record high numbers in the fight arena last night.

"Do we have another future legacy fighter on our hands?"

I nod, grinning under my mask and replying.

"Yeah, it'd be best to put all of us into the later rounds. You're in for another great showing tonight, I believe."

We mark our names, and Abby gets registered last minute without even having to throw her punch on the block upstairs.

"If you're attending with this group, I assume you're more than strong enough to handle yourself, Ms. Emerald Warrior."

Abby smiles and turns away, and Maria does too.

Monk and I follow close behind, we walk over to where the usual legacy fighters are standing by the teleport platform.

He speaks up with his arms crossed.

"I'm curious to see how they perform in the ring today. They seemed to be of a similar strength to you when you first awakened, let's see how they deal with real enemies in front of them."

I cross my arms as well, replying as we come to a halt to look up at the holographic display of the final midday fight taking place.

"That's right, we will see."

As the final match ends, and even more people pile in above us in the arena, Max, Sia, and Ace walk over to greet us.

Max, the shield, looks at all of us together and just smiles and shakes his head.

"More and more of you keep appearing. It's time I stop questioning it and just enjoy the extra eyes you new Elite arena fighters bring to the show. No one other than Monk has ever even made a scratch on that 7th stage until recently."

He laughs, and Sia interjects.

"Hey, we're not complaining, more eyes just mean a bigger prize."

Ace flips a gold coin up in the air with his thumb and catches it.

"Yeah, keep the bidders coming, let's put on another good show."

He smirks, and with perfect timing the announcer upstairs begins to yell again.

Sia turns to the teleport platform and waves us goodbye.

"That's my cue."

The nighttime fights begin right after the midday without much intermission at all. And from the overview shots of the crowd, it looks like equal if not even more people are at the event tonight than yesterday's show.

I immediately bring my wristband up to my eyes and watch the betting odds tick up and down as the matches begin.

All the legacy fighters' matches along with a few familiar newbie faces, and I bet nearly my full balance on every fight. Though, I play it very safe, never betting over stage 5 for any of the matches other than Ace. I take the chance on his stage 6 match and he wins in a flash of blue light.

I turn my 14 Platinum balance into just over 32.

Monk goes next, and his matches go just as usual. I turn my 32 Platinum into 49 betting all in on wins from match 1-7.

Maria is up next.

Monk gives her some last-minute tips, and I describe how I was able to channel Qi into my blood-bonded sword when I concentrated hard enough.

She smiles beneath her white mask and gives a firm nod before turning to enter the teleport circle and entering the arena.

With her sword on her waist, the first stage begins.

A low-level hobgoblin comes running at Maria, and she stands her ground using just her fists to counter.

On impact with the monster, the wave of hot Qi disintegrates it in seconds, but Maria activates her Ice magic the moment after to create an exciting performance for the crowd.

Everyone goes wild in the stands, and the next few rounds go just the same.

She gets used to using her Qi to kill opponents for the next 4 rounds until it's possible for the monsters to actually withstand a hit if it's not in a vital area.

Upon this realization, Maria takes out her sword to practice with one of the Mutant berserker giants that's placed up against her in the 5th Stage. It's the same opponent I had when I first started learning.

The clangs of metal on metal ring through the arena. Maria hardly uses any mana shielding and focuses on her bonded sword after every attack to attempt to channel Qi into it.

I can tell the first few attempts don't go as planned, but once it clicks, I watch her sword slice through the Berserker's weapon like butter, and basically melt the monster in half before our eyes.

She excitedly jumps in the air in the ring, celebrating the fact that she figured it out.

The 6th round goes in a much similar fashion. A Red Ogre King is brought out, a monster Maria is very used to fighting.

Once the match starts, it takes less than 5 seconds for her to replicate the sword motion from the previous match, and channel Qi into her blade.

Surprisingly, it takes a few hits for her, unlike the precision of the blade swings I was able to achieve with my swordsmanship skill. However, it doesn't seem to matter, in 3 clean swings of her sword, the monster's arms are sliced clean off and its head topples to the floor.

All of her movements are masked with an extreme wave of ice magic. The floor is covered in glimmering light blue crystals, and the pieces of fallen monster are frozen solid as well.

The crowd goes nuts again, and the announcer yells with excitement while Maria raises a thumb in the air to move to the next round.

"That's what we like to see! The Ice Empress is moving on to the 7th Stage! She'll be facing the one and only Mutant Ghoul. A level 691 at that."

There are some oohs and ahhs, but most of the crowd remembers her 2-second performance from last night, so they bet as if they already know how the match is going to end.

I do the same, putting all 66 of my platinum on her with a 1.23x payout on the 7th Stage.

The moment it starts, the stadium goes silent in anticipation.

It's fairly hard to pick up what really happened on the big screen without examining it closely with my perception skills, but Maria went head-on against the white-skinned, orange-tinted beast without her buff activated.

However, the instant it touches the creature's orange aura, the red Hydra's buff activates and she blips away from the monster in the middle of the ring.

Her eyes look very focused and she deactivates her buff the second she's out of range of the Ghoul.

She activates her Ice magic on full blast to attempt freezing the monster in place next.

Its orange aura melts through the prison of Ice in an instant, but while distracted she still slips through to force another attack.

The same exact reaction occurs.

Maria plunges through the orange aura but activates her Red Hydra's buff before sinking in too deep.

She jumps back and deactivates her Buff again, filling the arena with Ice and reassessing her options.

It seems as though the same thing is happening to her Qi, like it did mine. Every time she makes contact with its borrowed soul energy, the Qi is being destroyed. She'll need to learn to focus her Qi control much further if she even wants to make a dent in that monster's orange energy.

Even if she does, it'd be a miracle if she actually broke all the way through it without help from the Red Hydra. Without a higher overall capacity, it may just be impossible to beat this monster naturally.

I let out a thin smile beneath my mask and look to my side, speaking up in a low tone only loud enough for Abby to hear.

"Looks like she's really pushing her limits on this one, we should do the same."

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The pillars of ice summoned from Maria's feet and sword nearly fill the entire arena's dome. However, the unyielding orange aura and ferocious speed of the ghoul tear down her mana and Qi-imbued attacks one by one without slowing down in the slightest.

Over 10 more clashes go by, making bigger and more extreme explosions of blue ice crystals each time. Every clash they have ends with Maria sinking slightly deeper into the ghoul's aura, but activating her Red Hydra's buff moments before disaster.

I can tell she's growing at a rapid rate, channeling more qi into her blade, and making it denser and denser every time. She's learning her upper Qi imbuing limits just like I did in my fight yesterday.

However, this doesn't last forever. Every attack into that orange aura evaporates a large amount of Qi, and it's clear she's starting to run low when on her next attack, a red aura envelops her entire body before her blade even makes contact with the Ghoul.

In a glimmering display of pink-tinted ice, the monster is defeated, and the crowd erupts into cheers that even shake the ceiling above us.

What the audience thought was going to be a one-attack match turned into an epic duel.

I smile as she walks around the ring in a victory lap, destroying the leftover ice in the ring and politely declining the announcer's offer to move on to the next stage.

Over 81 Platinum rest in my balance as she's teleported back into the training room and Abby steps up to the platform.

"Good luck out there, put on a show and take your time in the earlier rounds. There's no rush."

She continues forward and the two female fighters exchange words as they pass too.

"Flashy match out there, good job."

"Thanks, I think you'll enjoy fighting that 7th Stage too!"

A few people overhear their back-and-forth, and already begin whispering and readying their bets on an unknown fighter closely associated with the woman who just put on the performance of the night.

Abby teleports away, and Maria stands next to me, letting out quite the long sigh.

"I dropped down to nearly 20% in my stores, that was exhausting... But very eye-opening."

I cross my arms and look up at the screen displaying Abby readying a fist-fighting stance with her two bonded daggers on her waist.

"Yeah, It's not going to be easy figuring this out. I have a few ideas, but we're going to need a lot of time and practice."

We place our bets and the matches begin.

Rounds 1-5 go just the same as Maria's.

I turn 81 Platinum into 89, going all in every time. At this point in the tournament, everyone knows that a new participant named the "Emerald Warrior" won't lose early this late into the night.

The crowd still enjoys her presence, and in return, Abby puts on quite the show. Using her stone magic to hop around the ring while glowing bright green, she punches her opponents into bits with Qi-infused fists.

Blasts of rock and green energy fly around in all directions to mask her blows, making it seem as if the monsters she's defeating are turned to stone the moment they're hit and crumble to pieces.

On the 6th stage, she's matched up against one of the extremely quick lizard creatures that carries a spear.

Using her earth magic, she materializes a floating spear of her own to block the monster's fast-paced constant attacks. Meanwhile, the green-haired hunter focuses very hard on infusing Qi into her daggers.

The understanding of Qi imbuement doesn't happen instantly, and she faces off against the lizardman for much longer than needed. Over 30 seconds of back-and-forths go on before the first wave of Qi finally enters one of her daggers and she lands a body shot on the lizard.

It doesn't instantly get blown away like the other opponents, but a large chunk of flesh on its side is missing.

Abby grins, and a zoom-in on the holographic fight display shows this very clearly. The mood in the arena shifts, and everyone knows she's going to go in for the kill.

A series of Qi-infused slashes later, and every new hit is getting more and more powerful as the stone mage becomes more comfortable infusing this new power into her bonded weapons.

By the final attack, it only takes a single clean blow to slice the lizard creature's head clean off and end the 6th stage with a roaring applause.

A full 96 Platinum are credited back into my account and Abby takes a victory lap while giving the okay to move onto the 7th round.

Based on her performance in the 6th, the odds on the 7th begin leaning against her because the victory wasn't as swift and clean as Maria's, opening up a 1.52x bet that I take full advantage of and go all in.

The grin on my face beneath my mask gets wider and wider as the same results as Maria's match unfold before me.

Abby continuously shapes and molds the arena floor with walls of rock to limit the Ghoul's speed, while getting in close enough to attempt some Qi-infused slashes. Her attacks are instantly absorbed by the dangerous orange aura, and the Red Hydra's buff is activated just in time for the healer to jump away.

The stone being manipulated beneath Abby's feet is tinted crimson while her buff is activated, and the sharp glimmer in her eyes every time she jumps back in at the monster before her makes the crowd roar with excitement.

As her Qi gets sucked away more and more, her reliance on the Red Hydra's buff increases. However, unlike Maria and I, Abby is able to use her buff almost indefinitely as long as she continues to heal her fatigue after it deactivates with [Restore].

This allows her to be more conservative and precise with her Qi placement, and use her Hydra's buff to dodge instead of striking when the angles aren't ideal.

Her match lasts almost twice as long as Maria's but ends all the same, with a flash of dark red aura eating through every drop of the possessed Ghoul and leaving it in pieces on the floor while she circles the ring and uses earth magic to bring the rocky arena floor back down to a flat ring like it was before.

She's teleported back into the training room as just over 146 Platinum are credited into my account.

Mixed cheers and boos come from the audience, but they're almost immediately drowned out when the announcer says a familiar name.

"Now, I know there's been some entertaining fights this evening, but we've saved the best for last. I assure you this will be a night you won't forget. Please welcome, The Flame Emperor!"

The rumbling noise of the crowd above and overview shots of the arena confirm that there are definitely more people at this showing than any of the other times I came...

Abby gives me a smile as she steps off the platform, and I get a round of good luck remarks from everyone I pass before stepping on myself. I'm teleported into the ring with my sword on my waist as a weapon.

"Let's get started..."

The matches go on, and I bet all in on myself every round, turning 146 Platinum into 172 by the time I finish round 6. Though, 21 Platinum was from exclusively my % gains of the fighter cuts,

hardly any winnings have been from the actual betting payouts themselves. All of the odds are constantly on me.

I've made quite the name for myself, and no one wants to bet against me other than a few drunkards that want in on the potential 20x+ payouts for me losing.

The announcer yells out with a happy tone as I move onto the 7th Stage.

"It looks like we really have a crowd favorite tonight! Let's make some noise for the main event!"

I grab my sword tight and watch the level 685 Ghoul appear before me while the crowd goes wild.

Everything slows down as I breathe in and out, focusing large amounts of Qi into my blade.

It almost overflows as I let every drop trickle in and run forward with all of my buffs activated including my new and improved extreme speed skill.

The instant the announcer gives the go-ahead for the match to begin, my Qi-soaked blade is already challenging the edges of this monster's borrowed Soul energy.

I smirk as my first attempt slices through over a full third of its depth before the density of the energy is too much, and it begins eating away at my sword's infused Qi.

I activate my hydra's buffs and jump backwards with the insane multipliers boosting my already monstrous speed and power.

I doubt anyone in this ring can perceive what's happening below them. The only ones with any possibility of understanding what's going on are Monk, Maria, Abby, and possibly the other legacy fighters to a certain extent.

With none of this on my mind, and only the enemy before me in my sights, I dive back in.

Over and over, I attempt slicing through with more refined and different shapes of Qi infused into my blade. After over 10 attacks go by, my Qi stores are already nearing half, and I think of an interesting idea.

"Maybe this could work..."

Throwing out the same attack will only get me so far. It's great practice in refining my Qi control bit by bit, but it's clear I won't be able to break through its energy without drastically increasing my Qi capacities base.

But, what if I just made the energy I'm trying to cut through weaker?

With a sly grin, and blade tightly grasped, I activate my Hydra's buff before I even run toward the Ghoul on this attack.

When I swing my blade, I don't even aim to kill it.

I just narrowly miss, aiming only for the aura surrounding its body.

On contact with its energy, my crimson veil disintegrates its orange energy in an instant as I fly past.

Once I turn around, the energy seeps out from its body and begins to grow back, but that doesn't stop me from running at it again.

Over and over, just like my previous attacks I fly by the Ghoul with speed too fast for it to track over 10 more times in under 2 seconds. Chunks of its energy are melted away, and I get more efficient at moving my blades and body to cover higher surface areas and take more energy each time I pass.

At first it doesn't make a dent, but by the 10th try, I can see the aura around this Ghoul has dwindled slightly.

Doing all of this work with the Red Hydra's buff is not going to be pretty for me afterward, but at least I get to test my theory out.

Another 10 slashes go by, and to the audience's around streaks of red aura fill the stadium as another 2 seconds pass.

The orange aura falls to less than half of what it was when I started this match, and I give it yet another 10 slashes to bring it to a state where I'm almost certain my blade could penetrate solely infused with my own Qi.

I come to a halt on the far side of the ring, deactivating my crimson aura, and feeling a wave of fatigue and discomfort fall over me.

Using my newly upgraded self-regeneration skill, I heal myself to the best of my abilities, but it doesn't do very much at all with the limited time I have to act.

I still get the sensation of wanting to fall to my knees even as I see the angry screeching ghoul come running at me from my left side.

"This is it..."

I push through the pain and reactivate all my skills with active battle buffs and turn straight toward my enemy wielding a Qi-infused sword. I allow my swordsmanship skill to take over and my aching body and bones follow the guiding line right at the monster's midsection.

The orange cloud around the monster looks one fourth the thickness it did at the start of this match, and my blade filled with Qi has not wavered in strength at all.

The Ghoul shielded by a dwindling orange light is sliced in two by a crisp white hot wave.

Both of its halves lay motionless on the floor.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

I hit level 633 and 226 Platinum are credited to my balance while the crowd erupts in cheers. The announcer hypes up my victory, while I smile and deactivate my buffs.

I continue to self-regenerate my aching muscles and bones, standing straight with my sword raised in the air.

It really wasn't that difficult to defeat as long as it's worn out. Maybe if I were to battle it long enough with its aura activated, it would run out naturally. Or if I used multiple Qi pills in a match, and made it use up its power destroying my own that might be faster.

I start scratching my chin, thinking of more possibilities of how I could get the same result without my Red Hydra's buff for the future. The announcer continues to stall while the crowd is still hyped, showing close-up recaps of the fight to the eccentric audience.

It doesn't seem too odd to me, but at the back of my mind, I'm waiting for the announcer to ask me if I'd like to move on so I can leave the ring and get fully healed up by Abby.

However, it seems there are more reasons than one for this delay... Before I realize what's going on, out of the corner of my eye I see multiple Black Armored Knights enter the ring via small white blips of teleportation magic.

I activate my perception skills and turn to see a main guard unlike all the others. It's twice the size of the other 3, and already less than 5 meters from my back.

The monstrous guard's metallic voice rings through my ears like some kind of telepathy skill.

"Congratulations... You'll be participating in the 8th Stage."

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I start to step back, grab the handle of my sword, and activate all of my stat-boosting skills at once.

However, the other three guards blip over to me faster than I can even react.

Two place their hands on my arms, and another stands at my back, raising a dark black sword of its own, not letting me move anywhere but forward, closer to the 3.5-meter tall Royal Guard.

Its robotic, static tone vibrates through my head again.

"This is an order, from the Dark One."

Almost immediately, before I can react, the guard with his sword at my back speaks in a low static tone too.

"You'll be awarded the full 10% of betting transactions on this match. Consider it a gift for entertaining the King."

I think about activating my Red Hydra's buff and breaking out of this dome entirely for a moment, but stop myself before doing anything too rash.

The taller guard looks down at me and speaks again.

"Use all of your abilities. Stolen power or not, you'll need it."

Before I can blink or even try to respond, all 4 of the guards disappear in a flash of white light.

Using all of my scanner skills, their items and status came up with distorted [Access Denied] messages covered in weird letters and question marks. Our interaction only lasted a second at most, but I couldn't gauge their strength or capabilities at all...

The roaring crowd and the announcer's voice come back to my senses.

"Let's give it up one last time for The Flame Emperor! Now, I'm sure we all thoroughly enjoyed the show, but I have to ask; Will you be moving on to the 8th Stage?"

The arena goes silent, and some audience members in the crowd are already turning to leave in order to beat the lines and crowds that follow after an event like this.

However, people start to grow restless when I don't immediately decline.

"What's taking him so long?"

"Why isn't he moving? Is he that hurt from the fight before?"

"There's no way he's actually considering it... A monster over level 700? Is that even possible?"

"I don't know, man, I've never heard of anyone challenging the 8th Stage."

I take a deep breath in and out, assessing my situation. Ember, Monk, and Lith; all possibly stronger and wiser than myself, told me I'm surely not strong enough to fight the Dark One. Considering this... it would not be a good idea to get on its bad side right now.

If I'm still just this entity's evening entertainment, it's best I don't disappoint. On top of that, opportunity awaits. It's time to push my limits even further and put on one heck of a show.

Once I've made up my mind, I step forward and raise a thumb straight up in the air.

"Bring it on!"

The audience and the announcer both stay silent again.

Whispers and small talk in the crowd cease while their minds begin to register what's happening.

An eruption of cheers makes the stadium shake, and after a 10-second pause from the announcer that seems like a lifetime of waiting, he finally speaks again.

"Our First Challenger of the 8th Stage. The Flame Emperor, will be facing off against a level 779 Wraith. Let the betting begin!"

I can barely hear myself think with the crowd yelling around me and the announcer's voice echoing through the stands. He's continuously hyping up the next match and yelling out the live betting odds while I lean against my sword dug into the ground by my side.

Controlling my breathing, I take the remaining time I have in between matches to use my self-regeneration skill while plundering as much excess mana in the ring as possible to heal my fatigue.

About 3 minutes pass before the fans begin getting extra rowdy, but this is enough for me to heal myself back up to fighting condition. Luckily, I only had my buff active for a few seconds last match, and didn't have to use too much extra power. I may not be at 100%, but I've fought in worst condition.

The announcer begins counting down from 10, signifying the betting is close to ending, and that the match will soon begin.

I raise my sword in the air and let it flicker with flames to show the crowd I'm ready to fight, and bet 26 platinum on a 1.87x multiplier for me to win. This leaves a clean 200 in my balance. I have no idea what my opponent will really be like, so it wouldn't be wise to go all in on a gamble match like this...

It seems like a lot of people still believe in my abilities to win, but there are definitely a lot of doubtful bettors that feel the outcome of this match is unpredictable. Considering the 10% take from the house, the audience's bets are nearly split 50/50 down the middle.

The screams of anger and joy coming from the stands show the conflicting opinions are mostly just excited fans throwing their money on an extra bonus event they never knew was even happening tonight.

Not a single person in this stadium knows what's about to happen in this Stage 8 matchup.

"3... 2... 1..."

I activate my perception skills to their max, and ready my weapon along with my other abilities at a moment's notice.

"0... Let the match begin!"

A large white flash of light appears at the far side of the ring.

My scanner skills immediately pick up a similar status to the Ghouls I faced in the round before...

A [Lv. 779] rating pops up on the top, and no skills or items appear in its other status boxes.

The only thing I see is the familiar-looking buff [Curse Mark of The Lich King] at the bottom of its status before my attention is brought to the hand of a skeleton that emerges from the white light.

I activate all my stat-boosting buffs in this moment.

As the rest of the teleportation magic fades, a black cloak hovering about half a meter above the arena floor is left in its place.

There are no facial features visible through its shadowy hood, and the bony hands I watched emerge from the white magic before are connected to thin bone-white arms that protrude from the wavering black mass.

It looks as if there is a breeze fluttering the edges of its ripped-up and tattered cloak, but the air in this arena is still...

An overwhelming aura fills the ring like a dreadful version of my intimidation skill, so in return, I activate mine and let our invisible energies clash.

The ring fills with a buzz of power, and an orange aura comes seeping out from the creature's robes. Streaks of black energy leave the Wraith's body as the Orange Soul energy leaks out, mixing into the aura and staining it a much darker color closer to crimson-brown.

It raises both of its bony hands in the air, revealing 10 individual bones for fingers, then moves its shadowy hood right in my direction. If it had eyes I could see, they'd definitely be staring directly at me right now.

Two orbs of dark orange and black energy begin to grow in both of its hands, and I take this as a cue to activate my Red Hydra's Buff and prepare for the worst.

An eruption of power beams off me as I grip my sword and run in a zigzagging pattern as fast as I can, but the monster's jet-black hood tracks me with ease.

The orbs in its hand glow brighter and brighter, as it concentrates soul energy in its bony palms and I wait for it to make the first move.

I don't want to get anywhere near it before I know its capabilities.

Just from my visual senses, along with my enhanced mana and Qi perception, I can tell this energy is multiple times denser than the Ghouls in the previous round. However, these black streaks are a mystery to me. The only thing clear is this is a monster on a level I've never witnessed in person before.

Controlling my breathing, keeping my eyes locked on my enemy, and channeling Qi into my sword along with the overflowing fire magic of multiple element stones, my own skill, and the overwhelming buff of the red hydra coursing through my body; I feel like an unstoppable force.

However, as the Wraith swings its left hand, sending an Orb of Hot Orange energy hurtling through the air toward me, my survival instincts scream for me to run. Without a moment's hesitation, I harness every drop of energy I possess and lunge to the opposite side of the ring, driven purely by the primal urge to escape imminent danger.

My neck cranes to the side as it swings its right hand too, releasing the second orange orb.

My heart races faster, and I use Qi-infused steps, extreme speed buffs, and even wind magic to push myself away from the ominous approaching ball of light.

But it's no use. The attack I previously dodged turns in mid-air, rocketing back toward me at an even faster speed than it started.

In the same instant, the other orb shifts its momentum to follow me too.

Fractions of a second later I'm backed up against a wall, with both orbs of energy closing in.

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With nowhere to run but up. I use two massive air-steps full of wind magic to boost myself upward, nearing the upper limits of the mana-shielded dome.

The orbs follow, but I swing my flaming crimson aura-covered sword downward as there is nowhere left to run. If I can't block this long-range attack, I might as well just forfeit now... That would be the easy way out.

If I fall below 10% health, I'll be instantly transported outside the ring and lose the match. If I allow that to happen, I won't be able to learn the secrets of this stronger version of the Lich King's soul energy.

It may be the one and only chance I get... So I have to continue.

As I swing my sword down, the two orange orbs continue to rise up at a faster and faster speed.

I can see the black-robed wraith far below me with its skeletal arms lifted in the air, somehow manipulating this energy.

Once the energies collide, a sizzling sound vibrates through the entire arena.

I put my feet backward to hit the mana-shielded wall, and an extra additional force pushes me forward to face the incoming attack.

The glowing edge of my blade sinks deep into the orbs, and the energy around them starts to bubble like a hot knife dropped into a tub of butter.

The deeper it sinks in, the more they bubble, and the closer my body gets to the approaching orbs, the more the energy is dispersed.

By the time my blade slices all the way through, both balls of energy explode into plasma that continues its upward momentum to splash against the top of the arena dome. I feel an outer layer of my red hydra's buff tear away from my sword, and every point that made contact with the orbs. But in the same instant, I see the explosion of orange energy being eaten away and dissipated in the same reaction.

I continue to fall downward and catch myself from hitting the floor with a combination of earth and air magic before I get too close to a dangerous impact.

However, my eyes still stay locked on the orbs of energy dispersing above me.

Along with the trail of red energy leaking from my blade and body, the even more fascinating part about it is the two energies destroying each other on contact.

The sizzling and bubbling reactions from before were just the two soul energies fighting and disintegrating each other upon making contact. The layer around my entire body as a whole stayed intact, but this is the first time I've seen any part of the Red Hydra's buff be destroyed.

By the time the two energies colliding above me completely eat each other up, the thin crimson layer of energy that was lost from the attack regenerates around my body and sword.

It reminds me exactly of how the Ghoul's soul energy regenerated in my last matchup. Up above me, there is still some leftover red aura stagnating in the air, but it is impossible to control just like the natural red cloud that is left behind me when I activate this buff.

Before I can think too hard about it, the activation of another two orbs of magic appear in the Wraith's open palms.

I run forward in a zigzagging pattern again, but it tracks me perfectly and throws both orbs of light at once.

I go through the same gut-wrenching instinct driven battle before the orbs of light are destroyed by my aura covered sword, but a small portion of my buff is stripped away and destroyed as well.

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This time when I hit the floor and see it charging up another attack, I decide to take a different plan of action.

I've already used my buff to the point now where if I deactivate it, I'm most likely going to be out of commission until an outside force heals me.

So, I might as well go all out...

This ability allows all of my skills to be aided and boosted while activated, so I'm going to play every card in the hand I've been dealt.

Once the next double attack of orbs is sent toward me, I burst into a deadly display of jet-black flames that fills a quarter of the arena up with fire almost instantly.

The edges of the flames are coated in a crimson veil, constantly being buffed by the Hydra, and when I jump to dodge the incoming orbs, my flames only spread further.

While covering nearly the entire arena floor with flames, I use earth magic combined with telekinesis and wind to summon spikes of stone from the ring floor and send them hurtling toward the Wraith. Even these are coated in a thick red aura.

The tone of the battle completely shifts in an instant.

For the first time since the beginning of the match, I watch the monster at the back of the ring move. It shifts, floating quickly and gracefully through the air about 10 meters to the side to avoid the incoming crackling flames.

However, when it sees the spears and pillars of stone approaching, the monster does not even bother to move...

I block its orbs of light with my sword again, releasing a portion of crimson aura to nullify its attack. Then, simultaneously see my massive stone bullets hit the creature at point-blank range.

Grinning wide underneath my mask, I jump backward after deflecting its attack and generate even more flames to cover the floor while plundering thousands of MP from the dome behind me.

During this explosion of black and red flames, the supercharged fragments of stone pierce right through the Wraith's body.

I watch 6 large sharp stone spears stab right through its midsection, while smaller ones collide with its head and arms.

A loud series of cracks is followed by dozens of bone fragments flying high into the air. Fingers, arms, and shattered white fragments of mass fly off in all directions as the excitement of the kill powers more and more hot black fire from my body.

The larger attacks that hit its torso and head, however, have a much different reaction than the exposed limbs...

My eyes widen as I watch the stone come out the other side of its wavering robes without a single drop of red aura left on them.

It's almost like the black cloak turned into an energy-sucking black hole, and once the stones fall out the other side, I even lose the connection of my manipulation skill with them. They fall to the ground with a loud series of thuds.

At the sight of this, I begin to gather even more power together.

If these attacks didn't do enough damage, I'll hit the monster straight on with my strongest element.

I charge my sword with all the mana I can infuse from the wall behind me, as fast as possible before the Wraith can recover or throw in an attack it can't possibly take head on. Then, in an instant, I swing a dense dark fire imbued blade of mana covered in a veil of crimson aura.

The monster's arms have been blown away, but it's still floating in the air, unmoving, staring straight at me.

As the blade of flames rockets directly at its torso again, I feel the dreadful aura from the beginning of the match return in even greater intensity.

The ring feels as if it's being suffocated with a dark and heavy force, but none of it is visible to the naked eye, it's all in my mind.

The second this happens, the fractured bones, hands, and arm parts come floating back to the Wraith, covered in a dense orange energy that is swirling with more black streaks than before.

Each of the fragments and bones reconnects to the Wraith's torso at the same instant that my black blade of flames makes contact with its body straight on.

The Wraith shifts its stance, taking a step to the left right before it's hit and split clean in two.

However, my mana blade's red veil of energy disintegrates and the innards of black flames fall to the floor behind it, even as it's split in two.

Its black cloak separates in half, exposing a full bone-white skeleton in a sea of churning black energy. The cloak itself isn't even a cloak, it's just an energy manifestation covering its skeletal body and keeping it floating in the air.

Deep within the Wraith's bony ribs is a bright orange pulsing heart.

My mana blade missed it by just a few centimeters... if it hadn't moved its body right before being hit, that heart would have been split in two as well.

I jump to the other side of the ring, charging up another identical attack while summoning ice, earth, and wind magic to act as miniature distractions in the meantime.

While I do, the ominous creature keeps its head pointed at me and both of its halves come back together.

Two more orbs appear in its hands. These ones are tinted black and hardly show the glimmers of orange beneath their surface.

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"It has a heart..."

My eyes lock onto the bright orange energy source beneath its layers of black energy manifested cloak. It avoided being hit there on purpose, so I know this is exactly where I need to land my final blow.

The moment its halves comes back together, the battle is back on instantly

I release another mana blade full of fire, and in response, the monster throws its swirling black balls of energy my way.

The Wraith doesn't bother dodging, but to conserve energy and test out what this new attack will really be, I do.

I immediately air-step back and recharge my sword with the mana in the air and dome behind me while two orbs of black swirling energy come rocketing toward me.

They pierce through the flickering flames that grow higher on the arena floor, disintegrating the red aura around them, and even putting out some of the roaring flames.

Wisps of orange seep out from the orbs as their energy is used up to extinguish the flames in their path, but the jet black core only gets faster the closer it comes to me.

I use the same strategy as before, pushing myself off the arena dome for extra momentum to face the attack full-on with a charged blade, but upon impact, I face a lot more resistance than I initially expected.

Instead of sinking through, the edge of my crimson aura reacts to the black aura in the orb like two identical magnets repelling each other.

For a moment, I stop in mid-air, and there isn't even a sound on impact.

Then I'm repelled backward and the black orbs are too.

I'm thrown back into the arena wall, but get my footing before I hit the dirt floor.

Both of the orbs follow with incredible speed, one attacking from the left and the other on the right.

I use all my might to block again, but the angles and speed of this secondary surprise attack are too awkward to perfectly line up. I manage to block and repel one with my sword as the other black orb collides into my blind spot on my upper back's left side.

There's a moment where the energy repels just like before, but on collision, the orb self-destructs and a wave of orange light erupts from inside. It is hotter, denser, and brighter than any light I've ever witnessed before.

On top of that, it's all focused on a single point as the black swirls of energy disperse into the air.

The intense sizzling and bubbling sound comes back as I turn around.

A massive hole in my Red Hydra's Aura has been burned straight through, and the smell of burnt metal in the air and plumes of smoke coming from my back signal something is very wrong...

The orange light dims, but the sensation of my own power being drained as well doesn't make me feel any better about it.

I turn and use my perception skills to see not only my aura has been burned through, but my layer of mana shielding, Salamander King's Cloak, and even a portion of my Berserker King's blood-bonded armor set.

The moment my Red Hydra's aura seeps out from my body to refill the hole in my defenses, I use the self-regeneration skill to heal the portion of bonded armor, but the burn hole in my cloak remains.

While gritting my teeth and charging my sword back up, the second orb comes flying my way in the same fashion as before.

I block it and it's repelled with a bounce that does not give off a sound at all, but out of the corner of my eye, I see the Wraith charging up two more black orbs.

It throws them my way, and before I know it, I'm forced to block two more with my sword and I'm hit at point-blank range with another attack. The black outer casing of swirling energy dissipates the moment it contacts the area just a little to the right of its last attack, releasing another wave of the orange energy that flashes so bright it's almost yellow-white.

Sizzles, bubbling, cracks, and smoke erupt from my body and I jump away again with an even more determined gaze.

Another large hole is torn through my cloak and armor, but I have no time to think about aesthetics.

The Wraith has already formed another two orbs and the two remaining in the air are already coming my way.

If I keep playing on the defensive like this, I'll surely be battered down until I lose.

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My natural aura and armor are enough to take its attacks head-on, and clearly, it won't give me an opportunity to block. This monster is only going for the cheap shots when I'm distracted. It may be a cowardly method, but it sure is the smart one.

It's keeping me at a distance for a reason. My best guess is it can't take a hit as well as I can...

My eyes lock on its torso, using every drop of my Red Hydra-infused perception skills to try and locate the orange glowing heart I saw before. However, in the small moment of time I have before a whopping 4 black orbs come flying my way, I can't manage to pick up a single reading.

I make the decision and run straight forward, continuously charging my sword up in order to make the most powerful attack, and completely disregard the orbs of energy coming my way from the sides.

One after another, I'm hit on the back, shoulders, and sides as I zip across the ring swinging my sword in an upward motion.

I release an energy blade equal to the full power strike I did before while showering the Wraith with the same earth spikes and spears as a bonus.

The aura around my body is bombarded by hot acid-like soul energy attacks, and my Salamander's cloak is decimated even more than I imagined it would, My chestplate becomes cracked and melted in places, but I push forward to watch the black blade of flames slice the Wraith in half once again.

It gives minimal reaction, releasing another set of orbs my way before the stone bullets destroy its boney hands and arms.

I tank the two incoming attacks before my aura even fully recovers from the last barrage, and the impact isn't pretty. Almost half of my cloak is burned away, and a huge hole in my armor is made too. This time, it even managed to burn through and touch my skin...

I feel a horrific burning sensation, hotter than being covered in lava, but it only lasts an instant.

My aura leaks out from deep within me to nullify it almost instantly, and I self-regenerate my skin and armor given the time I have until the Wraith's hands and arms need to be put back onto its body.

In the same instance, I see its glowing orange heart emerge from the two jet black halves, and the only thing on the front of my mind is claiming that prize.

I swing downward again, releasing another flaming mana blade, now at such close range, it's nearly impossible for me to miss.

As the crimson-covered mana blade closes the gap, the half of the Wraith without a pulsing orange heart shifts its body in front of the attack.

It slices right through like butter, but the moment it comes out the other side, the red aura surrounding it is significantly weaker.

The other portion of the Wraith reconnects one of its arms to the half with the heart, and creates a miniature orange orb, shifting its body, and taking the brunt of the blast with its summoned energy.

The red and orange masses collide and disperse, nullifying my attack completely, but I still run forward getting closer and closer to the dismembered Wraith.

Its half with the heart attached floats backward, and its dismembered half is left in the dust as I run past.

The arena around me feels as if it's slowed down so much in this moment that time has almost come to a halt.

The amount of energy being plundered from the arena and put out to charge and block attacks is unfathomable to the average person. To anyone watching from outside the ring right now, it must be nothing but a blur of bright lights and series of loud sounds.

What feels like a long series of exchanges to me in here has been less than 5 seconds to the rest of the world since the battle began.

I run forward as my black flames from earlier continue to rise higher and fill the arena floor everywhere I step.

Charging up another mana blade, the gap between us lessens to 5 meters, and I swing again at its main body.

I can hardly even see its arms, energy cloak, or even other attacks being thrown at me.

My eyes are on the pulsing heart in its chest, and nothing else matters. I'll kill it here and now. Retreating again will only lead to more cat and mouse, draining my precious energy. I'll have to go on the offensive eventually, and right now is the only time I can catch it by surprise.

I have to go all in.

The red and black blade slices through the Wraith again as it shifts its body, narrowly twisting its heart away from the dense part of my attack.

I get less than 3 meters away now, and feel another two balls of hot energy hit my back.

The intensity burns the remainder of my cloak away and severely damages my armor more, but it's far from the first thing on my mind.

I focus deeper, allowing even more of my surroundings to fade away, activating my swordsmanship skill, and see a very faint thread to follow. All I can truly see now is the swirling black energy, a skeletal ribcage, and a bright pulsing heart deep within it.

My blade swings right through the Wraith's remaining black body, but my eyes are filled with shock once the eerie feeling of dread comes over me again...

The same dark feeling I felt when I entered the ring, again in the middle of our fight, and now again the instant my blade makes contact with its darkness. I can feel the swirling darkness of its energy cloak split in half as my blade pierces through it. However, the more I push through, the more energy I feel leaving my own body.

The Red Hydra's aura is being sucked away from the outer layer of the blade the deeper I pierce through, and the thread from my swordsmanship skill becomes dimmer and dimmer.

I have to dig deep to follow it.

Pushing through, the tip of my blade is less than half a meter away from the heart, but the red aura around it becomes so thin that holes in its outer layer begin to let black energy seep through.

I let a wave of Qi rush into the blade, but it doesn't do a single thing to help.

The darkness envelops my sword, and the edges of it begin to crack and crumble. The blade's tip is less than 10 centimeters from the pulsing orange heart, but every ounce of power and momentum has been used up from it to make it this far.

Pushing my sword any further may damage it beyond repair, and most likely not even make a fatal blow.

My eyes widen and I completely change my momentum. I let the sword fall short, downward, without piercing the heart and take another step forward plunging my other free hand deep into the darkness covered in The Red Hydra's Aura following the open path carved out by my sword.

The tips of my fingers hit the edges of the darkness and it immediately feels as if I plunged my hand into a bucket of boiling water.

However, I don't hesitate to push it further, reaching closer and closer to the bright beating heart.

As the skin is melted away from my hand, and the essence of the Hydra is burned away again, I tighten my grasp to feel the pulsing heart and let out a victory yell.

I activate Life-steal and Plunderer the instant I make contact, and a rush of MP and HP fills my body. I fully grip the beating heart and rip it out of the monster's body.

Chapter 399

I pull my hand out of the darkness right through the path it entered, and tight within my grasp is the orange beating heart.

It's hot to the touch, and the skin on my hand and arms is continuously being melted off and regenerated with my skills.

My mana stores are draining a dense supply from the creature's main power source, and my HP is being brought up to full over and over again as well.

Red Aura from my Hydra's buff is constantly flowing down my arm to refill the areas that are being burned away, and portions of the Wraith's black swirling energy body swirl toward the heart in my grip. Piles of its shattered bones gravitate toward me, but I don't hesitate to activate more of my skills.

Black flames cover the heart while spears of pink mana, stone, and ice are all forced through it as I air-step upward and hold the glowing mass to the sky.

In the same instant, I activate one of my oldest skills, Equivalent Exchange. The ability allows me to sacrifice as much of my own HP as I want in order to do the equivalent amount of damage on an opponent.

It only works when I can maintain contact with the target until the skill activates. This is the perfect moment to do so.

I input over half of my HP as collateral, and a blinding white light forms in my palm. My full body pulses, and I feel my health disappear instantaneously. However, with my lifesteal skill still activated, more HP soon returns.

After this barrage of attacks, the orange heart still glows... but once the casing of mana flames and elemental spears all fall from the punctured and battered heart, the bright orange light begins to dim.

Its bones and dark body attempt to follow me upward even further as I near the top of the dome, but its movements slow and the bright light flickers like a candle at the end of its wick.

I grasp it tighter, using a reinforced layer of legendary grade hydra infused body hardening in my grip, and finally, the heart bursts into pieces, and the light goes out.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[1/13 Wraiths Defeated]

The outer flesh-like layer of the heart begins to dissolve into thin air the instant I hear all of the level-up notifications going off in my inner ear, bringing me to level 644. With it, the remaining orange soul energy leaves with it, drifting higher into the air and leaving my grasp. However, I still feel something round and extremely hard left in my hand.

I release my soul-crushing grip and my appraisal skill scans the clear marble-sized stone left in my hand.

[Wraith's Essence Stone][+155% Mental Strength][Hidden Passive Ability]

Inside the tiny clear orb, there's swirling black energy, similar to the mass that surrounded its energy attacks as well as the manifestation of its black cloak-like body.

My eyes dart downward to see the aftermath for myself.

Its white bones are left shattered in pieces on the arena floor, now being consumed by my residue of black flames. The body it once had dissolved away into the flames as well the moment its soul energy was dispersed.

I begin to smile, and accept my victory, but I'm stopped before the corner of my lip can turn up any further.

Deep in the back of the flaming arena floor, 4 blips of white light appear.

The extremely tall royal guard's voice resonates through my mind before I can even make eye contact with it.

"It seems you're weaker than we thought. You are not a threat, but I thank you for the show."

A notification pops up on my wristband, alerting me that my new platinum balance is just over 326.

The main guard disappears in a flash of white light, and one of the others speaks again continuing in its place while the two by its sides retrieve all of the leftover bone fragments of the Wraith.

"You're authorized to challenge stages beyond the 7th now if you desire. Just know, that was the weakest of the 13 Dark Guards. The Dark One is always watching."

This guard disappears too, and the other two that recover the ashy remains of the wraith disappear soon after. I don't even get a chance to respond. I'm still grasping the Wraith's Essence stone, floating high above the black flames in the stadium below.

Once I finally fall to the ground, I place the item drop under the ripped and burned rags that remain in the front of my Salamander's Cloak. It's beyond repair, but a fine cover for me to use to place the clear marble into my storage with no prying eyes.

I take a deep breath and put out the flames around me, finally deactivating most of my perception and stat-boosting skills. I keep my Red Hydra's Buff activated, as I have no idea what will happen to me if I shut it off right now. I'd like Abby by my side before I try.

The overwhelming roar of the crowd finally comes back to my senses, and my adrenaline spike ceases, letting reality flow back in at a normal rate and the excited announcer's voice echo through the entire arena.

"What a show! Our first challenger to ever face the 8th Stage! And he won! Let's hear it for the Flame Emperor, everybody! What an epic battle we just saw!"

Recaps and slow-mos are shown on a big screen while the announcer continues.

"Would you like to go on to the next-"

Before he can finish his offer, I put a big thumbs down in the air, and put my sword on my waist. Crossing my arms and shaking my head consolidates the point.

He laughs over the loudspeaker.

"Very well, have an excellent night. Until next time. Let's all make some noise one last time for The Flame Emperor!"

I feel the teleport magic kick in again, and the announcer keeps hyping up the recaps to the crowd as they continue to shake the arena with noise louder than any gathering I've ever witnessed.

The intensity of my aura that radiates from my body once I come back to the training room below the ring is powerful enough to instantly knock out every single non-ranked-up hunter down here.

Over a dozen people hit the floor at once, and even Max and Sia lean against the wall holding their heads. Ace manages to stay upright while Maria, Abby, and Monk stare straight ahead with serious looks on their faces.

A blinding green flash of light fills my vision, as the massive summoned rune of Abby's restore skill stretches toward me.

She walks closer at a quick rate, but even from a distance the skill is already taking effect.

I feel the warm energy seep into my body. Simultaneously, I take a deep breath in and out before deactivating my buff.

My body instantly wants to fall limp with fatigue. Every bone feels as if it's been shattered to dust and my muscles feel like they've turned to hot jelly. In the same instant, Abby's warm rejuvenating energy courses through my veins and keeps me standing upright.

Only a few seconds go by as I stand in place, but the mental battle feels like it goes on much longer. Both extreme pleasure from being healed and pain from the Hydra's aftermath clash at once making my mind want to go blank.

Staring forward, the white room blurs more and more, begging to go dark. However, I hold on tight to my consciousness and endure it.

Chapter 400

Slowly but surely, my vision begins to become clear again, and my legs stop trying to give way under me.

I begin to focus on my heart beating and heavy breathing slow back down to normal.

The pain in my body ceases, but most of the fatigue stays the same. Even so, I step off the teleport platform back into the white training room, and the green glow of Abby's rune on the floor dissipates as well.

I accept the incoming hug from Maria and hear her speak in a worried tone.

"What was that all about? Don't you think that was a little too risky...?"

We step back from each other, and I reply.

"Yes... it was, but I didn't quite have a choice in the matter."

My eyes dart around the room and see the scene I just caused. Some hunters are waking up, while others are still out cold on the ground or foaming at the mouth.

"I'll explain later."

She nods, and I watch Abby turn around to use a much lighter version of healing magic on the entire room for a split second before turning back.

"Pretty impressive fight. It looks like you actually went all out."

I sigh and walk closer as she eyes my burnt cloak up and down.

"Yeah... If I had the option, I wouldn't do it again..."

Even walking now, my energy stores feel completely drained. I don't know by how much exactly, but it feels as if a portion of my red Hydra's Buff has completely been destroyed.

It really is borrowed energy. Just like the Ghouls, once it runs out, I'll be left with only my own power. I may have another stone left in my storage, but this only proves my point further that this energy resource is finite.

"We need to get stronger."

I whisper while walking past both of my teammates with a half-dazed look in my eyes.

The only thing on my mind is every moment of that battle replaying in my head. The Wraith had the upper hand every instant of that match. It was only defeated because of brute strength, will power, and the perfect combination of using multiple skills and hidden abilities.

On top of all of this, that was the so-called weakest of the Dark Guards. There are 12 supposedly stronger... and one can only assume the Dark One is much stronger to order these guards around.

The monsters in this city are far out of my league... So far out that they don't even see me as a threat, more so just entertainment. They let me do as I please while inside these walls because they know I can't lay a finger on them.

I continue walking forward slowly through the training room, now suppressing my mana aura as many other fighters get up from the floor.

The Legacy Fighters congratulate me on my victory, and Monk praises me for my talents in the ring, but I can hear by his undertones he understands the seriousness of the situation as well.

Above us, the crowds slowly disperse, and many fighters get in line to sign up with Mr. Wright again before leaving the room. Once he gets to me in line, I politely decline.

The narrative has been taken without permission. Report any sightings.

"I may be busy tomorrow. I don't think I'll be showing up."

He smiles and nods.

"Very well, even if you show up late, you're always welcome here."

The crowds finally calm down, and we go upstairs to leave the arena. Max invites us all to the restaurant bar again, food and drinks on him to repay the gamble payout he won on my 8th Stage match.

Maria and Abby look excited and want to celebrate their match victories. I nod and accept.

"Why not, let's have a good night!"

I want to let my teammates celebrate their progress, so there is really no reason not to go.

We leave through the golden walls, agreeing to meet with Monk tomorrow around the same time for sparring, and go to the bar with Sia, Ace, and Max.

Maria and I take off our masks, but use our concealment items and skills once we leave the public eye, and everyone introduces each other while Abby makes up a backstory about being Maria's old friend visiting the city.

As they chat, I look up at the night sky and continue to think about the impossibly high power gap between myself and the monsters lurking in this city.

Even as the night goes on and we get luxurious drinks and food, I'm barely present in the conversations. I just rewatch the match clips on my wristband and picture myself fighting the Wraith over and over again.

By the time the midnight tax comes around, I still haven't found any solid solution to my problem.

The only right answer here is time. I need more time than I physically have to raise my Qi Capacity. Whatever the Dark One is planning, it knows I won't be capable of stopping it.

After another hour or so passes, the Legacy fighters get rooms in the upstairs lounge for the night while the three of us leave to roam the city streets.

Once we make it to the silver walls, each of us receives a massive payout. My item storage now holds 390 Platinum Bars. My teammates cash in a hefty sum too, placing their arena winnings in their item boxes.

Abby is capable of restoring herself to negate her intoxication but doesn't until we get far outside the city walls. Maria tells me to let her enjoy the walk too, but once we're ready to head back to the Galeheart Tower, I share my Self Regeneration perk with her, and she sobers up.

Once far out of sight from the city, we all take out a teleportation crystal and find ourselves back in the lobby. Maria speaks up.

"So, back to farming?"

Abby replies as we enter the elevator and go toward the dungeon access room.

"Yeah! We have a lot more time than yesterday. We can gain some serious levels and resources."

"Right, I really want to get enough Ice stones to craft a nice set."

The elevator door opens as we walk into the teleport room and grab a few transport crystals each. I reply as we make our way down to the cave system.

"How about I let you two farm alone tonight. I think I need to rest up in an isolation pod... I have a lot to think about."

Simultaneously, I reach into my item storage and pull out the containment case that holds the remaining Red Hydra's Soulstone.

I open it with a click and place the stone into my storage without a casing. Its violent swirling energy ceases to react the moment it hits the pocket world in stasis just like the element stones.

After closing the case, I hand it to Maria.

"You can use this to hold any new stones you farm without worry of them going bad."

She smiles and takes it.

"So, our explanation of that 8th Stage fight is going to have to wait?"

"Yeah. I really need some time to rest."

Abby interjects.

"My restoration really didn't do the trick?"

I shrug and let out a tired chuckle.

"It did more than enough. I'd probably be passed out or worse if you didn't heal me on time, I just pushed the limits too far. After some time in a pod, I'll be better at explaining things and have a clear next plan of action."

"Fine, don't complain when both of us blow past you in levels tonight."

Abby smirks and jumps through the swirling portal of the Red Ogre's dungeon.

Maria smiles at her remark and jumps through too.

I follow, teleporting them into the icy serpent dungeon and red speedster dungeon in the labyrinth before crushing another crystal and blipping back to the Tower. I agree to come back to train with them if I'm feeling better, and if not, they'll use their teleport crystals to come back to the tower in 10 hours before the training session with Monk.

Once I return, my eyes are threatening to close as I make my way to the isolation pod room.

As I walk in, I notice there's already a pod in use on the far left side that says just over 4 hours remaining on it.

[04:06:55]

Considering the pods make time pass roughly six times faster inside, 4 hours would be a full day.

I whisper under my breath while getting inside the pod all the way on the other side.

"That's exactly what I need."

I enter 4 hours on the touchpad, close the heavy metal door to surround myself in the dense mana-imbued mist, then finally take a Qi pill to restore my core back to full. My eyes shut, letting the dense waves of mana rejuvenate my body, and I fall asleep in a matter of seconds.