

Tutorial 411

Chapter 411: 3rd Trial

I'm constantly being attacked by powerful monsters, and the king of the forest is lurking about somewhere - threatening to be even more dangerous an opponent than the others. Some of their attacks come as a surprise to me even now, and that's not even counting the monsters attacking from the ground.

Even so, for me, it may as well be a mere formality.

I know the system has probably adapted the trial to my talents as it has with the others, but after all the training I did with Lissandra and the corresponding increase in my strength, I don't think I will fail.

Sure, the system is enough of an asshole to try and pull a fast one. There might even be some Rulers trying to mess with me here and there, but I still think my trial will be somewhat fair. The system won't give me anything too absurd for my 3rd trial - something around the level of an "average" Beyonder.

Probably.

A few wounds here and there are to be expected, but with my new passive I barely get any from physical attacks; instead, they literally make me stronger by replenishing my mana.

Mana-based attacks can be handled with by disrupting their structure, and that's before I start teleporting and creating barriers, I can fly, and I can move quickly by flooding my body with kinetic energy.

It could be said I'm a goddamn sneaky little jerk who's very hard to kill.

I've also discovered that the kinetic energy I absorb can't turn into mana and overfill my reservoir. If my reservoir is full, it just absorbs the damage and produces no mana.

In an attempt to deal with some of the more annoying monsters, I also try setting the forest on fire. Inspired by my Avatar from the third event of the tournament, I put in a lot of effort trying to burn the

surrounding trees and vegetation. I even try setting them in different places with bombs, flames, and by simply radiating as much heat as I can.

In the end, I do manage to start a few small fires, but the extreme humidity quickly douses them once I stop feeding them mana.

Currently, I'm surrounded by a massive suit of armor, allowing me to face the huge monster before me. It's made out of earth covered in vegetation. Its figure is similar to a human's, but there are no details, no fingers, no eyes, or other visible sensory organs.

[Vine Golem - lvl ??]

I'm trying to expand my passive's effects to include the massive mana mech and use the absorbed strikes to generate more mana. If I can pull it off I should be able to keep the armor active almost indefinitely in combat. Of course, that would necessitate taking a constant stream of blows.

So as I face the golem, I don't bother to dodge any of its attacks and keep trying even though it doesn't seem to be working. The passives just refuse to expand into the realm of more active skills. It seems like the only real control I have over them is my ability to deactivate them, while any other effects are restricted by the "settings" of the passive in question.

Disappointed, I destroy the golem and take a quick look around.

Jungle and forest as far as the eye can see, and standing here on the ground makes me feel so small, even surrounded by massive armor. As I deactivate it and land on the ground, I feel even smaller. It leaves me in awe. Struck by the overwhelming sensation of being surrounded by the scenery of such an alien place.

I take a deep breath in and then out. And another one.

The trees creak as they sway in the wind, monsters scream somewhere in the distance, and I feel presences all around me. The flowers and plants around me tend to be colorful and taller than me, and a lot of them are poisonous.

Some of the trees have a bark that secretes a white liquid that is extremely sticky, enough so to trap monsters from time to time. Some of the leaves currently swaying in the wind are very tough, a lot of attacks can't so much as pierce them. Others, upon taking damage, bleed an extremely potent mana-corrosive liquid.

I etch the scene into my memory alongside many of the others I've witnessed since this started.

Then I head towards the next group of monsters.

The system didn't say how much time I have to hunt the king of the forest. So let's try to sneak in a few extra levels.

A day passes, and the crown already has a nice amount of mana in it. The passive is working amazingly well, though at the cost of taking a bit of damage. The bones will grow together, right, so why should I worry?

I also learn more about the body upgrade I just went through, which almost seems to be complete.

My bones are tougher than they were, it's not quite the same as getting free points in Constitution, but I would say the base is better.

That also means the moment someone with a high Constitution gets this body upgrade their body will probably get a significant boost.

The cellular regeneration part straight up means increased regeneration. It's not up to the level of average healing skill, but my wounds will continue to regenerate even if I don't use my passive to do it.

I wonder if it would be able to regrow my limbs. Probably not, but I could try cutting off a finger just to see.

The muscle efficiency turns out to be the weirdest part, but I would say my mind-to-muscle connection is better while all effects of strengthening my body improve.

Overall, this upgrade straight up seems to be a massive improvement for anyone who relies on high level physical stats. Tacita comes to mind.

Still, there is a thing for me as well; when using my skills to a higher level, it's easier, especially the ones over level 50 or very close to it.

I also manage to confirm that by lacking the proper body upgrade and having a level under 250 I made it much harder to get my skills to level 50. It seems I leveled them up way too quickly, and that they probably shouldn't be quite so high level.

But that's a good thing.

[You have defeated Mesmerwing - lvl 306]

[Lvl 251 > Lvl 252]

It seems like my attack from earlier - with the compressed javelin, really hit that damned bird flying high in the air. Likely wounding it enough to kill it outright or to get it killed by something else.

This place can be quite unforgiving.

Two more days pass, and I think I've located the king of the forest.

I know of an area that no monster will enter; they just straight up refuse. There is no other information confirming it, but I think I'm on the right track.

So I just turn around and head in the opposite direction.

A few times I even allow myself to fall from great heights to see if I can get any mana out of it. I do, but the amount isn't really worth it, unfortunately.

Other than that, most of my mana gets funneled into a thermal orb that hovers over my shoulder.

Out of boredom, I've even created a few evil orbs to train with.

I can easily go a week or two without sleep, make preparations, and raise my level in the process. It's similar to the strain I just went through, and I find it quite funny. I think if I had come here before training with Lissandra I would have been a lot more tense and cautious, but getting here stronger has its advantages.

So I wonder.

How much thermal energy do I need to store in my orb to be able to set the forest ablaze?

A week has passed since I started the third trial.

My access to the Community has been cut off ever since the start, but I have leveled up twice. Some skills leveled as well, most notably [Mana Crown] by two levels.

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I am also getting used to my unique passive, and it works really well, but it's better for melee combat and fighting huge monsters.

A few times, I got into powerful storms, trying to absorb kinetic energy from the wind to store in the form of mana. It did work but not as well as I had hoped.

As I'm fighting the monsters, I continue to use Mana Cycling to keep my mana under control. At this point, that technique runs in the back of my mind nearly nonstop, a part of my mind constantly maintaining the flow.

I think it's one of the main reasons my control over my mana keeps increasing and a big part of why my body hasn't been torn apart by my stat imbalance. I still remember what it was like before Lissandra taught me how. And now she's made improvements to it. These improvements make it more difficult to use, but at the same time, they were desperately needed, lately I've been feeling that the original version has stopped being enough.

The king of the forest is hunting me now as well. It's a funny twist to my situation and my quest.

I figure that the monster is either doing it because the system's had enough of me using the 3rd trial as my private leveling grounds, or because the monster can sense my thermal orb and the terrifying amount of energy it contains.

Somehow, it makes sense that the king of the forest would try to stop me from setting it ablaze.

I can use that.

Well, just a day or two, and we will see.

Two days later, I think I'm ready.

I've placed a number of anchors over as wide an area as I can manage. The limitation is in the [Tether], I can't use the skill over too great a distance. The sites I placed anchors on are the driest I found in this goddamn excessively humid place. I swear most of what I breathe is water rather than air.

I also created as big a sprawling web as I could, the threads having been tuned for the delivery of thermal energy, nothing else.

The king of the forest is somewhere far behind me, I used plenty of kinetic energy to put distance between us.

[Focus] activates, and my mind splits into multiple parts, each managing a different task. Then I start using [Infusion] and [Redistribution] to send thermal energy through the web and through my anchors.

The distance is so great that I can't even see some of the explosions, but I know they're going off.

Five of my anchors receive a huge amount of golden thermal energy, and the flames explode into the skies, the heat drying out the air and setting the huge trees on fire.

And more.

The orb near me starts to deplete its stores at great speed as I channel all that thermal energy through my web in an attempt to dry out the area and through my anchors to keep feeding the fires.

I also take the wind into consideration and time it so that it blows the fire in the direction of most monsters.

And just like that, I deplete all of my thermal energy, leaving me waiting.

Then the notifications come.

[You have defeated Thornbeast - lvl 306]

[You have defeated Dreadroot - lvl 301]

[You have defeated Thornbeast - lvl 301]

[You have defeated Mosslurker - lvl 303]

[You have defeated Dreadroot - lvl 304]

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It looks like there is any number of slow plantlike monsters that happen to be highly flammable. Just not as many as I would have liked.

Someone—the king—is fighting against the fires.

Taking a step towards the beast I've been running from, I form a javelin over my shoulder and extend it to twice my height. Then I start making it as dense as possible, the projectile gaining weight. My domain expands into the area, and the pressure that was about to disrupt my projectile clashes against my domain reinforced by my subclass.

The king is coming.

I let kinetic energy flood into the javelin to give it more piercing force and store a huge chunk of power for the launch.

And the forest keeps burning despite all attempts to stop it.

[You have defeated Shadowvine - lvl 303]

[You have defeated Mireproowler - lvl 303]

[You have defeated Mireproowler - lvl 302]

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[Lvl 254 > Lvl 255]

[Lvl 255 > Lvl 256]

It took me days to level up once or twice and now I'm leveling up in a matter of minutes. Not bad at all.

I boost my body away, and a stream of water as thin as my finger cleanly cuts through the tree I was standing on and several others as the beam follows me.

The trees, as tall as skyscrapers, start falling, and I absorb their kinetic energy, slowing their falls until they seem almost suspended in the air.

A lot of my mana disappears at that point, only to be replaced by the absorbed kinetic energy which flows through my body and into my projectile.

The king of the forest moves closer. It's not that big—really, an unassuming monster with three orbs of water trailing behind it. It seems distracted by the fires, trying to put them out even from this distance.

I can sense how much effort it takes for the monster. It's an immense feat to weaken multiple massive fires over such a vast distance and without any preparation.

Good, that should make it more difficult for the monster to face me, now that I've managed to divide its attention.

[Flood Tyrant - lvl ???]

The creature has a streamlined, eel-like body covered in dark, wet scales and a sleek appearance with four nimble-looking legs.

All three orbs fire at me at once, thin streams of water cutting through my barriers with ease, and I just manage to block one of the streams with Flamebearer, as the force makes the weapon vibrate in my hands.

When another two streams reach me as well, I fight against the pressure trying to stop me and teleport to one of my anchors, my javelin moving with me.

I keep dodging and avoiding its strikes as the notifications from the burning forest sound off, but after a few minutes, they slow down. The presences of the many monsters rushing closer.

[Lvl 256 > Lvl 257]

What a weak king, calling for help before we've even gotten started.

But the fight should be over before they can even get through what's left of the fire.

The Flood Tyrant's three orbs of water fuse together and launch a stream of water at speeds too high to track, boring a hole as thick as a pencil in a damaged section of my ax.

Another attack pierces me, streaming through the new hole in my ax and destroying my shoulder in the process.

The monster shoots again, this time aiming for my heart, but the stream hits the undamaged part of the axe, and the immense energy contained within the attack throws me back.

I return fire with a concentrated stream of thermal energy, lightly scorching the monster without truly damaging it. Instead of taking the brunt of the damage, the monster turns into water and quickly seeps into the ground.

My senses shoot into the area to detect the monster, but another attack of concentrated water burrows into my chest and tries to move diagonally to cut me apart.

I teleport before it happens and immediately after another attack cuts into my leg, trying to repeat the strategy. I burst into action, blocking the attack with my ax, and teleporting away as I lift the ax once more.

As expected, the monster is tracking my anchors, and another attack crashes against my ax, following up with another and cleaving through the dense barriers I put in its way.

I create as many anchors as I can, keeping my mind sharp and eyes peeled, looking for any trace of the monster. It's created multiple presences all over the forest, but only one of them is the real body.

I receive more and more wounds, the creature's attacks moving at impossible speeds, and hitting too hard for me to deflect them with anything other than the ax.

The forest and the giant trees around us fall apart, sliced by three streams of compressed water as if they are nothing.

My heart is beating wildly, the forest loses all color and sound, and everything is only black and white as I slide into my skill. Mana alone retaining its beautiful vibrant hues.

I fail to detect the original and am punished with another hole in my foot.

My use of the anchor is too slow, and I lose a finger—thankfully, only a finger.

The ax in my hand moves too slowly, and a jet of water carves a deep wound in my side, nearly cutting me in half.

Nothing I do can stop these attacks; they slice through my fires, my mana, and my body.

But I detect the original.

I block the first attack with my ax.

I tilt my head to avoid the second stream and then duck under it when it swings back. The trees behind me fall down as they are cut cleanly in two, and I absorb a bit more kinetic energy, adding to my reserves.

Before it can launch a third strike, I've readied my aim and release my javelin, boosting it with my heavily inflated pool of kinetic energy in a single powerful push.

The javelin disappears with a loud boom, piercing through everything in its way.

I don't even see the path of its flight, and neither does the Flood Tyrant. The only visible result is a fist-sized perfectly round hole bored through the length of the monster's body and a similar hole behind it, who knows how deep.

A powerful disrupting wave erupts from my body, directed at the monster and preventing it from turning into water like it did before. Looking through my enhanced eyes.

I match its wavelength perfectly, nullifying the monster's attempts at escape.

Even so, the monster tries to move, as the flesh around the wound bubbles up and begins to regenerate. In response, I use [Tether] activating the anchor I left on the javelin and pulling it back.

It flies back to me from a much deeper point in the ground than I expected, but it dislodges itself nonetheless, burrowing its way through the body of the monster. As it does, I release the stored kinetic energy, causing it to explode.

The explosion cuts through the forest, the threads that made the javelin untangling and rapidly slicing through the surrounding trees, while the highly compressed kinetic energy tears through everything in its path as the shockwave expands through the area.

[You have defeated Flood Tyrant - lvl 339]

Congratulations, you have successfully completed Beyond's 3rd Trial and may now enter Beyond.

You can now buy Beyond Stay Tokens from the system shop. They will also be included as rewards for certain floor and side quests. You may also earn Beyond Stay tokens within Beyond itself.

After entering Beyond, you will receive more information and be assigned a handler.

Well done!

Chapter 412: Handler

Okay, I'm getting more and more curious about what's waiting for me in Beyond.

Before I can think about turning around and resuming my leveling, the scenery begins to fade, the system recognizing the King of the Forest's death and returning me to the sixth floor.

Obviously, the system wasn't going to let me get away with it forever.

Stepping out into the bleak wastes of the Astral Prison, I sense some weaker monsters nearby and release a bit of my mana, which scares them off. Their level is low anyway and I want some time to think. But before that, I send a message.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - 3rd trial completed.

Sset (Hell, group 4) - congratulations. I'm curious to hear more when we meet.

Savant (Hell, Alone) - took you a while.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - I took just the right amount of time. I'm surprised you didn't forfeit your third trial.

Savant (Hell, Alone) - how many limbs did you lose this time?

Noname (Hell, group 4) - welcome to the 6th floor

Tacita (Hell, Luce) - |O_0)|

Sset (Hell, group 4) - we have no idea when she got here before you ask.

NotDennis (Hell, group 4) - hell, she could have been here before us. She could have been trolling us during the tournament.

NotAaron (Hell, group 4) - are you dumb? There was no restriction during the duels.

NotDennis (Hell, group 4) - are YOU dumb? There was no text showing the floor during the duels.

Tacita (Hell, Luce) - (☹ _ ☹)

Noname (Hell, group 4) - has everything been ok so far?

Sset (Hell, group 4) - we took over the place we attacked and started pumping the surviving natives for information. The system will censor most of the things I would like to write here so I will tell you more in person. But I can tell you this right now. This floor won't be short.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - got it. I will continue dealing with my own stuff.

Closing the Community, I reach the place where I hid my items. Standing there, I look over all of them and think about what I should take with me.

The most valuable things are the mana stones containing the mana shaping exercises, improvements on Mana Cycling, and the Restrictive Training Emblem that I got from Lissandra.

Then there are these items:

Arcanite Alloy (Low Arcane) - Arcanite Alloy is a meticulously engineered blend of a dozen metals, each chosen for its unique resonance with arcane energies. This alloy was designed to amplify magical powers. Despite the complexity of its creation, items forged from Arcanite Alloy will be durable and capable of channeling immense magical forces.

Flamebearer (Low Arcane, Damaged) -Flamebearer held dominion over fire, with a mere swing capable of igniting the horizon. This ax's blaze once burned with immense fury. Despite the damage and its weakened flames, moments of intense heat surge through its blade, offering a glimpse into its fiery past.

Then there are any number of mana stones filled with information I've collected from the floors, a big pile of metals I collected for experimenting. Pieces of bones from the bone fortress, pieces of bone from the snake that attacked the Veil ignition station no. 2, also known as the Cinder.

Lily still has a finger bone from one of the Champions from the 5th floor. A few voidsteel blades, an epic water bottle, a decent supply of clothes, food, water, and more. It's a pretty big pile now that I look at it.

In the end, I take some time to wash myself and put on clean clothes. I wear a black shirt, rolling up the sleeves, and gray pants. I also put on shoes. Then I take all the things Lissandra gave me, I take Flamebearer and Arcanite Alloy as well, and a few of the smaller pieces of bones.

Waiting for my body to fully heal and my mana to fully replenish, I sit and open the system shop and look for new additions.

Beyond One-Day Stay Token - 9,999 shards

Beyond Three-Day Stay Token - 29,999 shards

Beyond Seven-Day Stay Token - 69,999 shards

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Firstly, what the actual hell is with the pricing? Is the system shop really trying to pull some cheap marketing pricing strategy? Second, what the actual hell is with the prices?

Just the seven-day stay is worth almost as much as the cheapest arcane item. Actually, wouldn't a 10-day stay token cost the same as the weakest arcane item? If I used all of my shards, it would give me just 13 days there, and I don't think there are many people with half as many shards as I do.

"I want to sell Beyond Three-Day Stay Token," I try.

Do you really want to sell the following item for 1 shard?

Beyond Three-Day Stay Token

Yes/No

Yeah, seems about right.

“No,” I say, and the window disappears.

Anyway, it's time to go, so I jump to my feet, sending an experimental burst of mana through my body as if I were stretching with my mana, and warming up in the process.

As I have so many times before, I watch as the wounds decorating my body heal. It's a slow process that I still can't help but find fascinating: the bones healing, muscles reconnecting, tendons reaching out from their severed ends.

It takes a few more hours, even with as much compressed thermal energy as I'm using. The entire time, I'm stuck impatiently waiting, my body urging me to move, and my mind already thinking of Beyond.

Then when it's done, with the ax on my back and mana ready to be activated, I use the token.

The world around me twists and changes until I find myself standing in a different place.

“Welcome to Beyond,” a soft voice murmurs from somewhere nearby.

It seems to be around midnight, and I find myself standing on a plane of polished and perfectly smooth black stone that seems to stretch on forever. There is nothing as far as I can see. No hills, no trees, no mountains, no clouds. Just straight and perfectly polished black stone flooring. The sky glimmers and sparkles with a vast array of beautiful stars and nebulae. Easily making for the most amazing view of the night sky I've ever seen in my life, even counting the pictures I once saw on Earth.

If you spot this narrative on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

Turning to the side, I find the woman who greeted me. She's currently seated behind an old wooden desk, heavily laden with stacks upon stacks of paperwork, mana stones, and a number of items I fail to identify.

There is no text over her head.

She is a bit older than me, her hair is black with a bit of red mixed into it, and her eyes projecting a feeling of calm and curiosity, are brown in color.

"I'm your handler." She says, introducing herself as she looks me over with her head tilted to the side.

She then looks back to one of the papers in her hand and starts reading, "Nathaniel Gwyn, 22 years old from Earth, 5th round of the tutorial. Completed all three trials and entered Beyond just one year and some weeks into the tutorial. You've had a really good time, and you aren't even the 1st one from Earth to come here. Your planet seems to be a nice addition to the system."

She leans back in her chair, her eyes moving on the paper, "You already have a few really good skills, and a unique epic passive and an abundance of shards for someone of your level," her eyes expand in surprise at that. "Pride, Wavelength eye, winner of your 1st tournament. Good, it's nice that I got you."

"Why is it nice?" I ask.

"Oh, your handler gets a small percentage of all the shards you make in the dungeons and through any Beyond quests you receive and a few other benefits."

Great, so now I have this woman taking a cut as well.

"Would be good if you explained a bit more," I note.

Finally, she looks up from the paper and snorts, "Don't be impatient. You have potential, but you're still just a small fry here. And you should already know that the system limits what I can share with you. The system is just that way and its rules reach even to Beyond."

As she stands up, she walks around the table and looks me up and down, her eyes coming to rest on my face.

“First, hide your Mana Wavelength Iris, second, hide one of your primordial energies. Just having one is rare enough so don't walk around showing two until you are stronger. I mean, it could be fine to show it all, but as you are now, there is no point in bringing that much attention to yourself. Third, I accessed some of your records and checked a few things, I recommend that you not use what you call black mana.”

“Would be nice if you could tell me its real name.”

“Ten thousand shards.”

“What?”

“I will tell you for ten thousand shards.”

“Is it really such valuable information?”

“Not really, I just test to see how many shards I could make off you.” She seems to be serious.

Looking at her, I answer, “No.”

“Five thousand shards.”

“No.”

“Cheapskate, you have plenty of shards,” my handler sighs and then returns to her seat at the desk. She's entirely clad in gray in a blend of formal and casual wear. “Anyway, there are a few things I can tell you and some you need to discover on your own, so listen carefully but consider it on your own too. This advice is not something set in stone, and every handler has their own, so here is mine.”

She makes sure I listen and continues, "Beyond is on the edge between the real world and the tutorials. It was created a long time ago with the cooperation of multiple Rulers over a very special place called the First Dungeon. Got everything so far?"

"I do, please continue."

"You are from the 5th round, and your 1st tournament just ended, meaning your Earth's tutorial's rounds should be in the process of synchronization to prepare for the second tournament. The point is that after the synchronization you will be able to accept Beyond quests. You will learn more about them later."

"How long will pass on Earth compared to the five in the tutorial?" I ask.

She seems to be thinking for a while or checking something and answers, "Five years, but it's not that simple."

"Got it. Another question, how many other people like me are you acting as a handler for?"

"Good question," my handler smiles. "Average for each handler would be a few dozen. To become a handler, you must have at least that much potential. Either by virtue of your own skills or by being able to use an item created by the Ruler of Diligence."

That sounds interesting. Are handlers all Absolutes or Champions? As I open my mouth to ask, I see her looking at me, and hold my tongue instead. Something in her eyes makes me think better of asking.

"Once we're done here you will appear on the surface of Beyond. Leave as quickly as possible and find an entrance to the First Dungeon. If you're unlucky with your spawn location, you will die. The surface is dangerous even to someone on the verge of becoming a Champion, and it's recommended that you only go there in large groups. Got it?" she asks seriously.

"Yes. Any hints as to where I can find such an entrance?"

"Can't say."

"Got it."

"After you enter the First Dungeon, you will find yourself on the Entrance floor. You only have three days, so just look around for now, maybe do some trading, and collect some information. Check the rankings as well. Try to avoid guilds and do not join any groups or expeditions. Do not enter the dungeon at any cost, and do not go to the surface. Take it slow, and after you get back to your floor, do some side quests to earn more Stay tokens. I would recommend at least a week's stay so that you can start exploring what Beyond has to offer. Got it?" she asks again.

"Yes. How much more can I ask?"

"Not much, I told you most of the allowed information. The rest would be censored. The system wants you to discover it on your own. Where is the adventure and fun of exploration in having all information spoon fed you?"

"What's your name? That shouldn't be censored, right?"

The woman lifts her eyebrow and looks somewhat amused. She then moves and sits back behind the table.

"I might tell you in the future. Also, I know you Pride guys tend to do things your own way but consider the advice I gave you." She pauses and seems to be listening to something. "Well, our time seems to be gone, so good luck. I will see you the next time you enter Beyond."

Before that feeling pulls me away, I think of grabbing some paper or mana stones from the table but decide against it. Doing so could end very badly for me.

Appearing on what I guess is the surface of Beyond, I rouse the mana under my skin and redirect most of it to my defenses. My crown activates, and I slip into [Focus] to help me with skills and concentration.

I do not take the warnings she gave me lightly; she didn't seem prone to lies or exaggerations.

The place I've appeared is eerily quiet, and there is no wind at all. It's early morning, looking at it, but I can't find any sun in the sky. Yet there is light, and the blue of the sky is mixed with the orange colors of dawn.

The first difference is a huge increase in gravity pulling on me. Then another one is the constant pressure of something trying to take my mana. Only gradually do I realize it's the planet doing it, trying to pull my mana and send it somewhere below.

I then send my senses into the area around me and almost immediately feel something touch them. Some being senses my use of mana from what feels like miles away and immediately detect me, tracking my exact location.

Without any hesitation, I release all the kinetic energy I can and start running, then flying away from the presence.

I do not use my mana sense anymore; instead, I concentrate on keeping as much of my mana as I can inside my body while kinetic energy propels me forward.

As I run, I hear a sound reminiscent of a series of small, consistent explosions.

Just from that short touch of mana as it detected my senses, I know I have no chance at all.

Even so, I'm getting ready for the worst option, mana collecting inside my body, as I prepare to activate all my trump cards.

A constant wave of detection is being projected over the area, but the being seems to have trouble finding me now that I've stopped using my mana externally. It's still a mile or two away, a distant explosion erupting from its location as I run and fly, searching for an entrance to the dungeon.

And the presence keeps coming closer, and closer from the sound of it. At this rate, it'll find me in a few short moments.

Ready for anything, I boost myself high into the air and send my senses as far as I can, immediately feeling that pressure on me again. The rest of my kinetic energy pushes my body towards a cave in the distance, which radiates a constant stream of mana.

Already beginning to drain the kinetic energy in my core with my constant use, I start creating more with my heart as I use mana to boost my body and fire projectiles into the space behind me.

The view around me disappears in a blur of motion, and the explosions behind me slow down. There are fewer of them now, but they're stronger, and the air reverberates even at this range.

As the cave comes into view, I rush inside, crashing into the walls and scrambling to rush further inside as I fail to slow down in time.

Another explosion thunders in my ears, and I feel something hit me.

The world spins, and a rush of different sounds fills my ears.

There are cobblestones under my body, and I find myself surrounded by a group of surprised people and buildings. All located inside of a huge cave.

I look down, and both of my legs are gone, ragged wounds covering what remains of my knees, pieces of bone and torn flesh exposing themselves to open air as I bleed profusely.

Generating thermal energy inside my body, I let my passive close the wound and replace my missing limbs with prosthetics made of mana.

Ignoring the looks I'm getting, I check my body and items and head somewhere more quiet.

Chapter 413: Four Rankings

The Entrance floor of the Beyond dungeon is massive, and crowded with people. So far I've seen humans, lynthari, demons, and more of those smaller humanoids with scaly legs; I don't know what to call their race.

And many more. The different races seem to come in all shapes and sizes, some are men and women with wings growing from their backs, another one with hair that keeps glowing and floating around their head, I even catch a glimpse of a man twice as tall as me, and too many others to count. Sitting on the ground with my back against the wall of a nearby building well out of the way, I observe each of them as they move about.

None of them have text over their head. All of them are just as real as me, as real as Group 4, as real as Vega. Each one a person who managed to complete their Beyond trials to make it here.

It makes sense. Our round has seven people in Beyond. Earth should have at least five rounds, and if each round has around, let's say, an average of five people. That means there should be 25 from Earth alone, probably twice that if we have ten rounds. Even if some of them die, it means a decent number should manage to enter Beyond.

Now multiply that by the hundreds, maybe thousands of tutorials running at the same time, and you should get an idea of the number of people here. Well, probably not exactly here; from what I've seen, this entrance floor is huge but it's probably not the only one. I would expect there to be a few more at least.

It's all so overwhelming and fascinating that I have to force myself to tone down my excitement.

Beyond, according to my handler, lies in between the real world and the tutorials. So what exactly does that mean? I want to know. I also want to know about Beyond quests. I want to know about the First Dungeon that Beyond is built on and the whole 1st floor I should enter for now.

Guilds, rankings, trading, quests, a small possibility of meeting some Beyonder from Earth. Hell, I might be able to meet our round's first Beyonder or even Victoria, I'm sure she would have found her way here.

Another big question is, are all of these people part of the tutorial, or is it possible to enter from the outside world as well?

"Hey," I reply.

Everyone here is a Beyonder. The same as me, Tacita, or Savant. None of these people can be underestimated.

“You are probably new here, so if you want, I can point you to a place where they can restore your legs,” he offers.

“That would be nice,” I say, pretending to accept on the off chance he has some decent information.

He nods quickly and points in one direction, “If you go that way you’ll find a branch of Serene Circle. For the right price, they can heal you.”

“Is it possible to trade shards?”

The man laughs, “Yes, but only within Beyond, and the system always takes a 20% cut, so they generally prefer that you just buy items for them. Prices in the system shop are 10% higher here in Beyond, but it’s a bit better than trading. I have to go, good luck, man.” He waves, cutting off further comments as he leaves.

I watch as he joins a small group of other people, and they disappear together around the corner.

So the system takes 20% when you trade shards, and prices are 10% higher in the system shop.

There’s so much potential for abuse and every opportunity for someone very rich to make someone much stronger extremely quickly. Shards can be used for better passives, items, and information.

But the more I think about it, the less worried I become. In the end, it’s all about the user, and active skills are the most important.

I then make an experimental attempt to open the Community interface, but it seems to be impossible here, the same goes for the Beyond Community. Checking the other notifications, there are no quests or other information.

So I decide to check the Rankings as my handler recommended and find myself confronted with a number of categories.

Guild Rankings

Exploration Leaders

Individual Rankings

Crafting Rankings

The first one seems obvious, and I open it and check the first few guilds.

Guild Rankings

1. Bloodline

2. Frontier

3. Primordial Knights

4. Crimson Forge

5. Astral Brotherhood

...

The list goes on, showing hundreds of guilds, but these five seem to be the top ranked. There is no information regarding how the rankings are calculated.

Then I open another list.

Exploration Leaders

1. Adrian (6th Floor)

2. Voss (5th Floor)

3. Nyssa Volare (5th Floor)

4. Orion (5th Floor)

5. Zenith (5th Floor)

...

Looking at them, I guess the floor shows the First Dungeon's floor and not the tutorial's. And there sure seems to be a big difference between 1st and 2nd place.

Is it possible to enter Beyond after the tutorial? Are these rankings limited to those set during the five years of the tutorial? There's so much I need to ask. I'll need to find someone to question. Hell, I can probably offer an item or two.

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Onto another ranking then.

Individual Rankings

1. Adrian (Ivory Tower)
2. Lyraen (The Silent Veil)
3. Solae M'Karn (Bloodline)
4. Zarith K'Traal (The Darkmoon Collective)
5. Nyssa Volare (Primordial Knights)

...

This list also continues on listing hundreds of individuals up to one thousand. This raises still more questions: Are all the people listed in the rankings currently active in Beyond, or are they historical rankings updated over millennia or greater scales?

The more questions I have, the more shards I'm willing to pay. I really need to grab someone on the weaker end of things and try to bully them into answering.

And lastly, there are

Crafting Rankings

1. Eldrin (Crimson Forge)
2. Isolde (Crimson Forge)
3. Silverweave (Crimson Forge)
4. Vaelith (Frontier)

5. Orin (Stormrider Company)

...

Well, here it seems like Crimson Forge is kind of obliterating the rankings.

After closing the windows, I glance at my still recovering legs and send a bit more mana into my mana replacements, and stand up. It's a bit more difficult to keep my balance without any feeling in my feet, but it's nothing I haven't dealt with before.

Walking on the cobblestone, I look around, examining people around me.

So far, no one tried to use mana to examine me, so I do the same. It was considered rude on the floors I've already visited, so it's probably the same here.

Most people seem to gather in groups, moving in the direction of what I assume is an entrance to the dungeon or a path to the surface. Each of these groups is bigger, often over 20 people, sometimes even 50.

There are also smaller groups of less than 10 people, but they seem very strong. It's hard to estimate just by looking, but they're surely in their 300s, likely years into their tutorial.

I wonder how many of these weapons are arcane, how many of these people have arcane passives, and what level are their skills. It frustrates me to not know, I have so many questions. Was Savant right when he said that arcane was the limit of rarity in the tutorial? Could I fight some of the 3rd, 4th, or 5th year Beyonders? How many shards do they have?

As I stand there, I notice someone from the crowd move closer, a man dressed in simple clothes and a big bag on his back.

"Let me guess, you're new here," he says with a smile that immediately betrays him as an extrovert class.

"Did my looking around give me away?" I ask.

"Yeah, I passed by three times and here you are, standing in the same place, looking around while trying not to stand out." He smiles, "My name's Duncan, I'm one of the locals."

"Locals?"

"Oh, of course, you don't know. To say it simply, the earlier generations of tutorial attendees came to Beyond. Some of them had kids and they... Well, they left them here. So a few of the Rulers twisted the rules a bit and since then there have been locals. Would you like to know more?"

It's all interesting stuff so I nod. Maybe I've really found myself a truly informed guy.

I nod in answer.

"One epic item and I'll be glad to answer your questions for an hour or two. Not all of them of course, that would cost a lot more, but some basic information should be fine. Things that everyone should know."

I'm not even surprised.

"No, thank you."

"Got it! I have to go but this one is free, beware the guilds. They generally like to make a push to reel in newbies with terrible contracts so don't sign anything yet. See you around."

And with that, Duncan leaves.

For now, I will follow the advice my handler gave me, at least until my legs regrow. With the amount of concentrated thermal energy I'm feeding my passive and my body upgrade, it should only take a day or two.

In that time, I should be able to glean a bit more information for free, so there should be no need to waste 4 thousand shards or more.

As I walk through the crowd, everyone else seems capable, that's the word I would use. They often have an abundance of nice equipment and I even recognize a few voidsteel blades, the Housekeeper's rapier, some of the items from the 3rd Floor, equipment from the 2nd floor though it's higher quality than anything I was able to get.

Plenty of these people have stuff I do not recognize. Maybe even from the 6th, 7th, and higher floors of Hell difficulty.

It makes me feel like a rookie again, someone who just found themselves somewhere new, and I have to wonder if, in a few years, some new Beyonders will look at me the same way I look at these people.

Rather than demoralizing me, it fuels my competitive spirit. There are multiple rankings I can get onto. The surface and the dungeon to explore and all the information I can collect about the system, other planets, and any number of other things.

And there is hope the difficulty here is higher. Other than the "bosses" of the floors, I don't really have much to worry about in Hell difficulty - well, maybe only if I decide to make things harder on purpose. Of course, I'm certain the higher floors of the tutorial will be much more difficult and dangerous.

As I walk into an area that reminds me of a town square surrounding a central fountain, I glance at the ceiling of the cave. There are dozens of crystal-like stones, radiating a light reminiscent of sunlight. There are probably inscriptions on them, but I do not send my senses towards them. Forcing myself not to use them feels like I've lost half my sight.

"Hey, you're a Pride subclass, right? I recognize your clothes, they are 5th floor style, right?" A woman comes closer to me.

She is surprisingly friendly.

As an answer, I nod but she doesn't seem to be bothered.

"I'm Pride as well, I reached Adept not long ago so I could sense..."

She blabbers away and I listen with one ear, waiting for a catch.

"So, me and a few of my friends have this guild. We just started, but our guild master has huge plans. He is on the 8th floor of Hell difficulty you know. 8th already, just three years into the tutorial!"

"He must be really strong," I say.

"Yes, he is and..."

"Listen, by any chance, do you know more about rankings and would you answer some of my questions?" I ask, trying to get some answers before she tries to scam me into anything.

With a sigh, her expression goes from cheery to neutral and she turns to leave.

"Fucking smartass rookies," I hear her mumble under her breath before she disappears into the crowd.

Shrugging my shoulders, I continue to walk around, looking for answers. I locate a few buildings with guards in front of them, smithies, places for enchanters, and even a few inns. There are gardens, there is trading and a great number of exchanges.

Everyone seems to be energetic and rushed, and remembering the prices of Stay Tokens, it all makes sense.

In the end, I get invited to two more guilds. Someone offers to buy my ax. Another person tries to sell me a damaged epic item they say will have the performance of arcane when fixed.

A bunch of people as confused as me try to invite me on an expedition into the dungeons. I refuse and watch them leave.

And no one answers my questions. Most people just ignore me. It's something I'm really not used to, it's like they've pushed me aside as if I weren't worth their time.

So when a few hours pass and I see Duncan passing by, I stop him. I don't even have to say anything as he smiles brightly at me, fixing his huge bag on his back.

Then he asks for the payment first, his price for answering my questions increasing from 1 epic item to 1 epic item and 1 rare item.

Chapter 414: Duncan

Duncan puts away the items I bought according to his requirements and turns back to me.

We sit opposite each other with a table in between us. It's a small but cozy-looking restaurant owned by one of the locals. The prices are ridiculously high, so I just order the cheapest drink and take some food from my bag, and nom on it while we wait for Duncan's order.

"Damn, I haven't eaten in over a day," he says in between bites of some mystery meat. Turning to me, he asks, "What's your name?"

"Can you pick a name to register in rankings here?" I ask instead.

"Nope, the system will use the name you picked for the Community."

"In that case, it's Noname. By the way, why are there aliases for the Community? Is there a reason to hide your real name?"

"You don't have to if you don't want to, but some people prefer to hide it, and the system gives you the option. Your world is already changing, and it will change more after the tutorial, so there's not really much point." Duncan shrugs and takes another bite.

As he chews I continue asking questions, "You said the world will change, tell me more."

"I can't say much because of the system's censorship. You know about the First Generation?" He watches my reaction and continues before I answer, "Good, you seem to have heard about it, and the system didn't censor it, so I can tell you a bit more than normal."

Turning back to me, he explains, "There are 10 rounds of the tutorial. Each round gets 2 thousand people in Easy, 1 thousand in Normal, 500 in Hard, and 250 in Hell, and 10 of those can enter Beyond. You guys will be the First Generation of your planet with access to the system. While you're gone, your world is awakening, and there will be changes. The changes are very individual, and I don't know anything about your planet. When you return and the first person of the First Generation steps back onto the surface of your planet, the system will slowly awaken for the others. I don't think I can say more than that."

"Got it. About Beyond..."

He lifts his finger, "This kind of information is even more restricted and expensive, and your handler probably told you most of what I can."

"I was curious about rankings, guilds, trading, dungeon, surface, and similar stuff."

"Huh, your handler didn't tell you? Who did you get? What do they look like?"

"Humanoid, woman. Pale skin, black hair with bits of red mixed in. Pale brown eyes. Gray clothes."

"I haven't heard of her. But it's not like I know every handler there is. I could answer these questions, so what would you like to know first?"

"Guilds."

"Got it! Guild rankings are one of the live rankings. Before you ask, there are rankings that change over time and some that are static. For example, guild rankings update once a year according to the performance of guilds. Currently, first place is held by Bloodline, they're one of the oldest guilds, at least a few hundred years old? Some say they're older than that. They have rules they follow and always find a powerful Beyonder to lead it for the duration of the tutorial, and before they leave, they find a good replacement. Things have been that way for a long time."

I lean closer, carefully listening to Duncan's words, and when he finishes the sentence, I ask, "Is there any sense in joining one of the guilds or keeping them up for so long?"

"There are some advantages to being in a guild. Even more, if they're one of the higher ranked groups. From what I know, they're used to cultivate relationships that endure beyond the tutorial. If you want, I can go deeper into this, but I will ask for another epic item."

"That should be enough for now," I say, quickly refusing his offer. What is this guy? Third stage Greed sub class, Master of Greed?

Actually, could he be?

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Duncan asks, confused.

"Nothing, so what about other guilds in the top 5?"

"Primordial Knights some say they're even older than Bloodline. You need to have primordial energy to join. Lately, they've been hit with a rough patch, and they've gradually lost their 1st place spot over the past hundred years or so. They'll probably drop out of the top 5 the next time the rank resets. Where Primordial Knights look for people with primordial energies, Bloodline cares more about powerful traits. I would like to point out how rare it is for a guild to stay at the top of the rankings for so long. Just imagine how many hundreds of guild leaders must have put forth a massive amount of effort to keep them there. Bloodline and Primordial Knights are the only two I know out of the top ten. Frontier is a group of rising stars focused on exploring the dungeons and surface. Crimson Forge got three amazing crafters recently, Eldrin, Isolde, and Silverweave, so they jumped a lot. No one knows where they came from. The last one in the top 5 is Astral Brotherhood, and their guild master has been using Beyond to create alliances to reel in powerful people. He is very rich too."

I make sure to remember most of the things he said.

My unreliable handler can stay right where I found her. Explore on your own and enjoy the adventure, she said. Where the hell is the adventure in paying for information?

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"I want to ask more about some guilds, is that within my budget?"

"You are surprisingly polite for a rookie, they tend to be cockier after clearing the 3rd trial," Duncan smiles. "But sorry, I've already said a lot, and I don't want to go into details. Let's just say you can learn more at the guild branches, and they hold tests and scouting events to find new members. Any guild within the top 10 would be great to join for the bonuses, but I personally don't know much about them and they are extremely picky so there is a low chance to get in. Anything between the top ten and the top fifty could also be a good choice, but some can be very... well... predatory."

"Got it." Well, that shouldn't be too much of a problem.

The question is if I want to make my own guild or join an already existing one. Would a guild try to restrict my freedom? If so, would the bonuses be worth it? What are these bonuses?

"What do you need to create a guild?"

"I think it's currently 10 thousand shards for a few people, and the price goes up the more members you want to have in your guild. There are also restrictions on who can be a guild master, but I don't know. Listen, Noname, I need to deliver another item. Would you mind if I go? We can meet back here in two hours and continue. I still owe you some answers."

At this I look him over, he doesn't seem like a scammer. Though, if he is, I will find him.

"Works for me, two hours?"

Duncan seems a bit surprised at first but then smiles brightly, "Thanks. I won't take long!"

He then takes the rest of the food with him and after checking over his items, rushes away.

I remain seated, watching the other Beyonders move around and wonder, is there anyone here keeping order? I expected it to be more cutthroat, but so far I haven't seen any fighting, which could imply strict consequences. Maybe I'm just overthinking it.

I also decide that the next time I see my handler I'm going to steal some of the stuff on that table. She gave me just a few small pieces of advice and I don't even know how useful they are. Don't go to the surface, don't go into the dungeon, don't join any guilds.

Sure, Mom.

Even though I'm nowhere near the top of the pack here, I don't think I'm the weakest either, and my curiosity is already killing me.

Just a short expedition should be fine. I can even try to find one that starts just before my Stay token wears off so that I get sent back to the 6th floor in the middle of it.

A familiar sight catches my attention, and I glance to the left. There, surrounded by a group of people, is a man with a crown floating above his head. The crown glows yellow, its edges flickering like tongues of flame, lazily licking the air.

More than ever before, I want to send my senses to it, to examine it, and to learn more about it. Maybe I could go to the guy and ask, if he refuses and decides to be a huge dick about it, I can beat him up and ask again. There is no need to hurt him too much, just a surface wound or something.

Maybe I could even provoke him into attack... I pause my train of thought and force myself to remain seated. I guess this is why Tess had so much more success dealing with Miwa in my stead.

Patience, I need a bit more patience, I just have to channel my inner Savant. Not too much, though, I wouldn't want to start forfeiting.

I'm still new here and don't know the rules. People here can't be underestimated, and if I end up getting killed by some weakling's more powerful older brother, it would be truly shameful.

So, I watch as the man with the crown leaves.

Another person catches my interest as he does, a beautiful woman with blonde hair hanging just over her shoulders. She's dressed in simple armor and has a sleek bow with a string made of mana. Her eyes are dark green.

What catches most of my interest is neither of these things. It is the mantle she's wearing if you could call it that. The mantle is made out of mana or something close to it and moves like it's alive or caught in an unpredictable gust of wind. The mantle is pale blue with a gradient, darker at the top. It also looks like tiny purple stars shine inside of it. Some are bigger, others smaller, and some are of darker purple while others are of lighter color.

Out of everyone I saw here, I'm sure she is the strongest by far. It feels odd that I would even see her here, and the people around her seem to be of much the same opinion. It's as if a noble knight decided to visit a rural village too small for visitors.

But that mantle of hers, is it like a crown? Is there an entire "equipment" class of skill? Are there skills like a fire sword? At this point, I wouldn't be surprised, and I would even welcome it. I will always prefer my own power over equipment that could be taken away, and my [Mana Crown] and [Regalia] confirm this sentiment.

She must have sensed my gaze, as her eyes turn to me as I meet her stare.

As quickly as she finds my gaze, she looks away. I'm immediately discounted as anything resembling a threat and I'm apparently too boring for her to stay any longer.

Just that single interaction irks me to a surprising degree, and with some amusement, I observe my own feelings. I've found that I can enjoy the process now that I'm not using [Focus] to push my feelings away.

How bold of me, present Nathaniel is angry he isn't the top dog in the room, and that also means he isn't safe - he's at the mercy of more powerful people. Yet, he wants to activate his trait, release his mana and skills, and he wants to fight these people.

There will be time for that, no worries. We'll see what we can do about the rankings over the next few years.

An hour later, Duncan returns totally breathless, sweat beading on his face.

"Sorry, Noname! I tried to return as fast as I could. You know how it is, a man has to make his living and I need to save up for something. I hope you weren't waiting for too long."

"It's fine."

He is here half an hour earlier than he said he would be, and in that time, I haven't been annoyed by waiting not even once. Just watching passersby made it fun. Observing people here, their equipment, bearings, and the size of their groups, I've learned from the experience as well.

And Duncan, bless him, orders a drink and drinks it all down in one gulp, clearly tired from his hasty return. It almost makes me feel bad for the tiny anchor I left on him so I could track him if he tried to scam me.

"I still have a lot of questions, but the most important one is: Do you know about any expeditions into the dungeon in the next 2-3 days?" I ask after he finishes his drink.

There's no way I'm wasting a 3-day Stay token to sit around collecting information.

Chapter 415: Melee fighter Noname

Duncan, having given me all the information I need, points me in the direction of a popular recruitment center for expeditions.

Such places tend to be more popular with the smaller guilds, as the larger ones generally have no shortage of their own members. They also have ways to communicate with each other in case they need help from a member of a more specialized guild, for example, a healer.

The information I got from Duncan is a lot to process, and I'm still sorting it out in my mind. He told me a lot about everything from the rankings to guilds, trading, Beyonders, and Beyond itself. All in one big info dump. It was certainly costly but it was well worth it.

I check my timer, only a few hours have passed, but figure I may as well not waste time heading for the place Duncan mentioned.

As I pass between buildings, I watch the people around me. This time, it's a demon that catches my interest. He looks almost human, though his eyes are red, and he has horns growing from his forehead curling backward until the tips point at the back of his head. They're jet black and probably as long as my forearm.

What I find curious is that the demons I saw in the crowd before had different types of horns. Some demons have shorter ones, some have one horn longer than the other. Even the bends and lengths differ without any obvious connection to their relative strength.

And the demon I see right now doesn't care. He bears that confident, crazed expression on his face, and lines trace his body like tattoos pulsing in time to his heart as red light flows through them. These lines pulse in sync with his heart.

The demon's movements are nimble, each step measured, like those of a predator. He wears no armor, but there is a hilt hanging from his hip. Though nothing extends from it.

His senses don't touch me, otherwise, he could probably have felt my heart. Demons seem to be good at that even with all my attempts at camouflage.

Obviously.

Some of the biggest outposts have headquarters for the top guilds, granting one the chance to meet with some of the oldest and most powerful locals around, and sometimes, very rarely, you can even run into the handlers that seem to be the one of top dogs in the Beyond.

Following Duncan's instructions, I reach the building he recommended as a starting point. It's a white building, on the smaller side, made out of stone. It isn't guarded, and the big doors in front are wide open. Entering, I see a group of people seemingly in the same boat as me. Newbies, just entering Beyond.

It's funny when I think about it. Each of us represents the top 100 members of the first generation of our planet, yet here we are - no better than common newbs.

There's a hungry look in their eyes, though some of them seem nervous. Nobody came here to stay at the bottom.

I find a spot in the corner and sit there. In an attempt to avoid wasting time, I devote more of my attention to focusing on my improved method of Mana Cycling to better hide my mana and keep it from seeping into the area.

Gradually, each of the people around me enters one of the small rooms, only to exit the building upon their return. When it's my turn, I follow instructions given to me by one of the locals and enter a room.

It's a simple room, with a red carpet spread out on the ground and two seats placed opposite each other and separated by a small table. A window offers a view of a small garden at the back of the building.

A woman who's clearly been waiting patiently gestures for me to take a seat, and when I do, she launches into a well rehearsed explanation.

"As you know, you will be able to visit and explore Beyond until the end of your tutorial. Your handler will be there to help, but as always, the results will depend on you and your decisions. There are a lot of dangers and opportunities to match."

At this point, I decide to keep quiet and listen to her before asking anything.

She seems to take notice, humming in satisfaction, "One thing I can tell you though is that the surface is usually much more dangerous than the 1st and 2nd floors of the First Dungeon, so take that into consideration."

I nod to acknowledge her, and she continues, "Beyond explorers are separated into five ranks, D, C, B, A, and S, with S being the highest. These rankings only serve a purpose here in Beyond and will have no effect on your stats. They serve to ease guild recruitment and the formation of expeditionary parties, and some groups will only accept people of a specific rank. You will be given an identification emblem

that will contain information about your Beyond rank. It was created by one of the Rulers, and will update as you improve, your rank will be calculated based solely on your performance in Beyond.”

“Sounds clear so far.”

“Good. You can hide your emblem or display it at will. With a bit of practice, you may learn how to share select information about your status through your emblem. Lying is not possible with this method, so I’m sure you can imagine how that might be useful. That’s all for the most part. Any questions?”

“How many people have S rank emblems, and what year of tutorial is usually what rank?”

“Typical,” she smiles, “most attendees ask about the S rank. For now, don’t let it bother you. There are usually only around ten S ranks at a time. It’s not a limited ranking, but that’s the average. They are the most talented of all attendees, each of them is almost certain to become an Absolute or a very powerful Champion in the future. And it’s with that that I would like to remind you that these ranks are only relevant in Beyond and aren’t a clear indication of a person’s talent. Plenty of A ranks go on to become Absolutes or Champions. So I can’t really answer your other question.”

“That makes sense. Then what is the average level of attendees before they leave the tutorial and Beyond? Any Champions?”

“This will be the last one I answer. And no, I don’t think I’ve ever heard of anyone becoming a Champion within the tutorial. It is a rank not to be taken lightly and not something one can reach within a mere 5 years. Now, show me the back of your hand.” She demands, reaching into her pocket to retrieve a small item that resembles a stamp.

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

I offer her my pale left hand, and she stamps the back of it, leaving a black circle on my skin.

The circle quickly starts to fade, but I send a bit of my mana into it, which brings it back into stark relief, and a simple but beautifully illuminated letter D appears in the middle of the circle.

“Obsidian Black for D rank, Ivory White for C rank, Royal Blue for B rank, Shimmering Silver for A rank, and Radiant Gold for S rank. There will be a surcharge of a thousand shards for the identification emblem.”

That sounds cool, but what was that last sentence?

The woman gives a quick gesture, and a notification pops up.

Request to transfer -1000 shards. Confirm?

Yes/No

Yo, what the fuck.

I hesitate, my eyes flicking between the window and the woman in front of me. Should I run? Is this place full of scammers? Would they try to hunt me for a measly thousand shards?

“Is there any problem? If you don’t have enough shards, I will have to ask you to wait so I can remove the identification emblem.”

Damn it.

“It’s fine,” I answer and confirm the trade, “but can you answer any more questions?”

The woman leans back in her chair, “I don’t mind answering some within the limit allowed by the system. What would you like to know?”

“Before I ask my questions, will you charge me for the answers?”

She tilts her head in a confused manner, “Obviously, I will.”

Maybe my handler wasn't that bad after all. Maybe she was right too and I probably should be more adventurous and make more of an effort to learn the answers on my own.

With as polite a goodbye as I can muster, I quickly leave the place behind.

A few minutes later, I'm in a massive room at the very heart of the outpost. There are hundreds of people rushing in and out, and I can already feel the energy being drained from my body just by sheer proximity to such a large crowd.

Most of the people here seem to be fairly new to Beyond, going by the number of active identification emblems I see, their obsidian black lines standing out on their owner's hands.

I follow their example and move from bulletin board to bulletin board.

There are boards for the 2nd and 3rd floors of Beyond, though they don't have many requests posted on them. The most occupied is the board for the 1st floor of the First Dungeon, with hundreds of fliers covering every inch of the surface.

Before checking it, I move around, taking notice of the other boards, loaded with requests for crafting, training, and information. There are jobs listed for almost any task with contacts listed on the relevant fliers. Some direct people to inns, others ask to meet at specific times and places to discuss details.

I also notice that every once in a while, a flier will burn and disappear.

Perhaps the listings time out and disappear to avoid cluttering the boards.

It's kinda interesting and cool. It makes me think of the inscriptions I could use to duplicate the effect, and I come to the realization that I should be able to do it.

Another thing I find fascinating is that some of the listings are seeking people from specific planets. Aetherion, Grimhold, Orynthia, Pyronix, Eldros... and many more. Likely attempts to find people in other rounds that they can't communicate with through their Community tab.

I spend the next 30 minutes going through all the papers, searching for something similar for Earth, but in the end, find nothing. Either no one from Earth has had the idea yet or no one is in this outpost. It's highly possible that others have appeared somewhere else.

In the end, I just pick a flier posted by a group seeking additional members for an expedition to the 1st floor of the dungeon in 2 days. Out of all the offers I went through, this one seems to fit best with my timing.

The only problem is they need a melee attacker capable of resisting disruption and reaching and disposing of ranged attackers.

Well, it's not too big of a problem, and I shift Flamebearer on my back. Having this weapon should give me something of an advantage, you can tell just by looking that it's a high rarity piece of equipment, even in its damaged state.

Then I change some settings and shift my focus to better manage my kinetic energy which I allow to radiate from my body in a small area around me while keeping my thermal energy safely tucked away in my core.

None of these people can be trusted, so I'll lie low for now, though I'll need to balance that with being enough of an asset to find a group. Skilled, but not too much. I got plenty of warnings before.

Until I become stronger and more confident in my place here, I'm Noname, a melee fighter with a damaged arcane ax. No shards in the bank and one of 5 well-known primordial energies, kinetic energy. And an asshole for a handler.

And like that, I arrive an hour later, approaching the group I picked out for myself, at the place and time of their choosing. There are a few more people looking to join the group, and they take some and send others on their way.

The core of that group seems to be a party of 7 people and an additional 13 to be chosen from the mass of hopefuls before me.

When it's my turn, they ask a few simple questions by a woman who seems to be their second in command, wearing the armor of the Fallen Hero from the 4th floor.

"Do you have experience with the 1st floor?"

"No experience. This is my second time in Beyond, and I spent my first token on a 3-day Stay to collect information and learn about the place."

The woman nods, "Smart. Plenty of rookies are overconfident and die on their first expedition. How much time do you have currently left?"

"Two days and 14 hours."

"Hmm, that's not a lot but it should be long enough for us to reach a safe zone where we won't need you anymore. Abilities?"

"Primordial kinetic energy and a lot of experience with close-range combat, and this is a damaged arcane ax from the 5th floor."

"That's what caught my interest. Flamebearer is extremely rare, barely anyone has managed to get a hold of it. You must have some skill or luck. Okay, go and talk to that man over there; he'll have more questions for you." She decisively points at a scrawny man who holds a number of items and talks to other people and calls, "Next! Hurry up!"

I quickly leave and start heading towards him.

Well, that was simple. Simpler than I thought and quicker than it should be.

Someone's in too much of a hurry.

This expedition smells, it stinks to high heaven, and everyone here seems to know it. The new recruits, the core seven, both. The newcomers are already making smaller groups and other deals. If it comes to it, I'm sure the newbies are going to be ready to fight the core group.

Yet no one seems to be backing out, and as dumb as it is, it also makes sense. You won't get into Beyond without being daring and confident in your abilities.

And then, while I wait for the scrawny man to deal with a woman with small wings on her back and color changing hair, I think about the name of Beyond's 1st floor dungeon.

The floor attendees call The Corpseyard.

Chapter 416: Eugin, Shayna, Roculus, and Rat

I still don't know how to clear the first floor - the information regarding that is apparently a valued commodity, despite being the kind of thing one could easily learn on their own

However, I don't really need to worry about that at the moment. My only goal right now is to experience the floor, just to see how it compares to Hell difficulty. I'm also eager to see the other attendees in action. These people should be at least as strong as Tess, Savant, Lily, Tacita, and Gareth. There is a lot I could learn from them too.

I fully intend to compare myself to them as well. How do I stack up? Against those who've been here a while and those on the higher floors of Hell? That's why I'm keeping such close tabs on the other 4 members of my unit. Our entire 20-man group is being led by a single man after being split into 4 smaller units, with a squad leader for each.

Each of these squad leaders is a member of the core 7 who arranged our little expedition.

So to make things easier, we find ourselves seated around a table in a nearby inn, owned by one of the locals. The leader of our small group is a woman called Eugin. Then there are Shayna, Roculus, and Rat.

Eugin is on the quieter side and has a sort of confident aura around her. She is a mage and seems to have a decent pool of Mana. She specializes in barriers and wide-range attacks. Out of all of us here, she has the most experience.

Of course, she doesn't share her level, subclass, or the floor she's on. The identification emblem could be used that way, but without trust or a good reason, no one will do that.

The next member of our group is Shayna, and she isn't human. Her hair and eyes change color in sync with each other, and I'm currently in the process of discerning what color is for what emotion. However I suspect that she can hide and manipulate it to her advantage, so I'm trying to be careful about making assumptions.

There are small wings on her back too, and her race seems to match the description of Lily's disciple, whose name I've already forgotten.

I wonder how these people would look at Sophie.

Other than that, the winged woman is good at single-target disruption and doesn't volunteer anything further.

Roculus is a close-range fighter. He wears no armor and relies on his natural durability and regeneration. I even suspect that he might be putting less than 10% of his stats into mana.

That makes me wonder how much it would show. Would he still be able to use skills? Are there skills that only need mana for the activation process, drawing on the body's reserves of energy to maintain their effects? There must be something to it, seeing how far the man had gotten.

His preferred weapon is a combination of dagger and mace, both weapons upper epic if I had to guess. Dagger, some kind of poison effect? I couldn't examine them much after he started giving me annoyed looks. Asshole.

Anyway, the last one is Rat. Just Rat. He is an older man who hasn't said a word other than to introduce himself, and apparently, he's going to be our scout. He isn't human either; both of his arms are too long, and his skin color is grayish. I bet his figure cuts an intimidating image in a dark alley.

Rat can create... well, rats out of some weird substance he produces. They're extremely quick, and he can use them to scout.

I suspect he can do much more, but much like everyone else here, he doesn't reveal much.

And lastly, there is me, Noname. A kinetic energy bearer, which does get me a few curious look, but nothing more. Primordial energies seem to be rare, but not on the same level as a healer or a mind mage. It should garner just enough attention to make me interesting without inviting more pointed questions.

How's that for a secret identity arc? Future Nathaniel is going to have a blast with the setup I'm making here. Screw that weirdo too.

So yeah, kinetic energy, a decent weapon as a cover should I need to use a bit of fire here and there, and a reliance on kinetic energy to strengthen my body. And just to seal the deal I pretend to have most of my points invested in my physical stats instead of revealing the degree to which I use kinetic energy for strengthening.

And that's all, I have no more information to offer this squad of mine.

No one seems to want to talk much, Though Eugin tries to learn a bit more about our abilities and create a more cooperative atmosphere.

"Shayna, I really must insist that you only use your mental attacks on weaker opponents. It's not worth using on anything on the stronger end of the scale. If we do end up in a situation like that, just go for single-target disruption," Eugin pleads, gesturing impatiently at the stubborn woman.

Shayna smiles and her eyes and hair change color to orange, then white and blue. "I'm sure I know more about my abilities than you."

She's totally playing with us by changing the color of her eyes and hair. She'd have to be crazy for her mood to swing so quickly.

Of course, it could be a bit of both.

"You know what we're up against, and trust me, mental attacks are nearly useless until you're way over-leveled. So tell me, can you control them or make them attack each other?"

"As if I would have such a disgusting ability."

"They seem rather useful, I would like a few myself," Roculus says, smiling brightly as he sips on his third glass of some weird alcohol he's bought. Though I suppose it could just be poison. It sure smells bad enough.

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"I don't know how it is for you humans, but I despise abilities like that." Shayna answers.

"Did someone give you a bit of?" Roculus asks, seeming curious.

"On the second floor, one of us had a skill that caught the interest of the mind mage emperor. We had to kill them after we got to the third floor, and he took a few of us with him when he died," Her hair and eyes change color again, flashing red before staying that way. This time I don't think she is pretending.

"To your friends, may they rest in peace," Roculus toasts, lifting his glass and knocking back the rest of his drink.

Shayna smiles wryly in response and her hair settles, shifting to a pale yellow.

"And you, Roculus, have you had any trouble?" she asks.

"A bit, but such is life," he smirks, a hint of cruelty revealing itself in his expression.

I wonder if he was the cause.

"Are any of you Champion candidates? Eugean? Roculus? Rat? What about you, Noname you said?" Shayna asks, looking around.

"You can become a Candidate in the tutorial?" I ask.

"Maaaaan," Roculus laughs loudly.

Shayna frowns, "If you're talented enough and recognized by a Champion. You've heard of Champions, right?" she teases.

"Who didn't, but I would have thought you'd need a real Champion, not someone from the tutorial, to make the declaration," I say, laying back and taking a sip of my drink while returning their gaze.

"Apparently, you don't. It's rare, but you can be declared one. Hey Eugean, you've been here the longest, how many of the attendees in Beyond are Candidates as well?" Shayna asks, her eyes and hair turning pink.

Roculus and Rat also turn towards our leader.

She seems to think for a bit before answering, "Here in the starting outposts I would say 5-10%, the further you get the bigger that percentage is."

"I heard you need level 400 to become a Champion," I lie.

"Bullshit," Shayna shouts, erupting in a fit of giggles and shaking her head, "It's probably closer to 450 or 500. You're not very well informed."

I shrug, "My group leader usually takes care of those things, I just fight. He also said you get a Primary class upgrade at level 250."

This time Roculus joins with an even louder laugh, "He's bullshitting you, man, listen, and this is for free. Body upgrade at 250 and I heard from an older Beyonder that you get a Primary class upgrade at 300."

I nod and make a thankful gesture, "Yeah, my leader could be lying. Not like I like him very much anyway. His name is Savant so if you meet him here in Beyond avoid him. He's a notorious coward too and tends to run away when things get even slightly dangerous."

Satisfied with the conversation thus far, I take another sip.

Indeed, the best way to make people talk is to say something stupid and watch as they jump at the opportunity to correct you.

"So should we take that to mean you're all brawn and no brain, Noname?" Eugean asks, nodding at my ax, "Flamebearer, kinetic energy, some kind of regeneration trait or passive more likely than not, looking at how nicely your legs are coming in, and what seems like a decent mastery of mana."

Hmm, maybe I did show too much?

"I find internal manipulation of abilities easiest, so strengthening it is. Are we sharing our abilities now? Can I ask you to tell us more about yours, Eugean?" I reply, staring her down.

Roculus, Shayna, and even Rat turn to her, curious, at which point the woman smiles and lifts her hands in a placating gesture.

"I just got curious. Of course, you don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"Got it." I nod and let them get into the conversation again. The same as me, Rat sits there and observes the others. And unlike me, he hasn't said a single word, he's just sitting there watching, unblinking, and sniffing at the air.

What a creepy guy.

An hour later and everyone goes their own way, our next meeting being scheduled a few hours before the expedition itself. And as I leave they also give me a pamphlet with some useful information.

The location of the entrance to the 1st floor of the dungeon, our meeting time, and a list of recommended supplies.

Interestingly, one of those recommendations is an item to preserve food and water against the influence of the floor itself. The items in question apparently come in a range of forms, a bag, assorted packing materials, and more besides.

Apparently, the floor has an aura that makes food spoil faster while fouling any poorly stored water, rendering both toxic, even for superhumans like us.

Of course, these protective items have to be bought.

I also get a contract, a piece of paper with a stamp that glows in a pale blue color to check before signing.

Contracts, apparently, can be written on nearly any material, while stamps can be bought from a specialized institution for the purpose of confirming said contract.

Once applied, the stamp ensures that the contract is recognized by Beyond's system. That means if one side decides to violate the contract, there will be consequences. And it seems like there's a group of Enforcers for the sole purpose of doling out said consequences.

There are also different tiers of stamps and the highest one ensures that the contract is upheld by the System itself or its Handlers, who are the top dogs here. Most of the Handlers themselves are located in outposts deep within the dungeon.

Each new piece of information makes my cold heart beat with excitement.

My handler mentioned something about adventure and fun, and I agree with her. When I think about it, I realize, This place isn't really all that different from the floors, but there is one huge difference.

Everyone here is real.

It's a new kind of fun for me, and it helps that I can actually enjoy it without walling off my emotions. But I also prepare in the back of my mind. As far as I can tell currently, we newcomers might well find ourselves as pawns to be sacrificed in an effort to preserve the core group.

Eugan did strike me as the type, and I did notice her putting some sort of mark on each of us with an item when she thought we weren't looking.

So far, I haven't removed it, opting instead to examine it. It seems to have three functions: something like a locator, a single pulse of disruption directed at me, and a single use pulse of mana into my surroundings. Probably a means of drawing attention to me while they run.

It doesn't contain much mana, so each function is restricted to a single use and only one of them can be activated without reapplying. It's amusing, but I'm disappointed that the others didn't seem to notice.

Or maybe they did and decided to stay quiet.

Well, in the end, even if they are real, it doesn't matter. I will treat them the same way they treat me, and if they decide to betray me or use me, I might add some extra.

Chapter 417: Important. Consequential.

I take full advantage of my remaining time hereby pestering every crafter I meet for as much free information as I can get.

My D-rank Obsidian Black identification emblem may not be worthy of note, but having a damaged arcane ax helps. Some of the crafters definitely seem to be intrigued by it.

I also have the mana stones with Lissandra's three mana exercises, her improvements on mana cycling, and a Restrictive Training Emblem. I'm sure they are worth a lot.

Like, a lot a lot.

So they stay as hidden as possible. Otherwise, I'm sure I would find an "accident" coming my way. The same goes for the arcane-grade alloy Nevan left me with.

That's why I'm only using the ax, and even that seems to be pushing the bounds of whatever unspoken rules guide this place, at some point I just become a newbie with some cool stuff worth enough to justify the consequences.

These unspoken rules seem to be the only reason this place isn't completely lawless. However, I fully expect this to change from outpost to outpost, especially in the dungeon. There, you can find better facilities and stuff, but it's also more dangerous, and the guilds made most of the rules.

Of course, if you were to kill an attendee, you'd risk angering their handler. Handlers often saw their "person" as an investment. A talent they intended to grow. There was apparently a whole field of politics around the relationships between handlers, the forming of contracts, the trading of talent, and more besides. It's like we're football stars and our handlers are playing the role of managers while the guilds act as their personal football teams.

Some of the higher-ranked attendees even get contracts from guilds and receive monthly or yearly salaries. The higher ranking guilds can even double the duration of your stay tokens. And if one did well they could even gain access to their facilities, contacts, and information.

Clearing my mind, I turn my attention back to the man who's examining my Flamebearer.

"I can't fix it." He says, shaking his head.

"Yeah, I expected that."

"Listen here, you brat, it's not..."

I quickly interrupt him, "Don't misunderstand, I didn't mean it that way. It's just that I know how difficult it is to work with these items, and after months of trying, I didn't expect it to be as simple as finding someone on the entrance floor to help."

His eyes squint, but in the end, he accepts my explanation.

Damn, dealing with people sure is difficult. Tess, please help.

“Got it, so what do you want?”

“I got curious if it would be possible to change its shape. I would prefer a sword or maybe a javelin over the current one.”

That makes him laugh, and he returns the ax, the fires of his smithy burning behind him.

“What you want would be more work than just fixing the weapon. You would need to redo everything while adapting it to the new shape. In the end, you would only recycle the material the ax is made of, and everything else would be new.”

I tilt my head in surprise, “What if I melted the weapon just enough to change its shape while removing the damaged parts and repositioning the working ones?”

“Do you even realize how crazy something like that would be? With an arcane weapon? You could end up dropping the rarity, you could ruin the inscriptions, you could screw up the weapon’s balance. Not to mention the level of heat you would need to melt a weapon of this grade while retaining enough raw power to work the inscriptions and the skills to do so.”

“So it would be possible?”

“Did you hear anything I just said?”

“Sounds good.”

He sighs but thinks of it, “You would need someone with a fragment of eternal fire, primordial thermal energy of high level, or a high-tier fire skill, over level 60 most likely. Then someone who could work on the weapon in all that heat or a way to isolate it. It would take a lot of mana just to keep the inscriptions from melting much less to be able to work with them; an inscriber would be able to tell you more.”

"If you succeeded in all that, could you repair the weapon and revert it to its arcane status?"

"Probably? It could end up a weaker arcane than it was before. It's currently low tier but it's pushing mid arcane - without damage, of course. Decreasing its size and reforging it could leave it on the weaker end of low arcane or drop it as far as strong upper epic."

I hand him the ax as he gestures to request another look, and ask, "How about adding some additional inscriptions or some other metals to improve on it or add another function?"

"Hmmm," he murmurs, flicking the blade with his fingernail and seems to think for a moment. "That could work, but it would increase the difficulty even further. I'm sure there are people capable of doing so, deep in the dungeon, but they would want so much money it would be easier just to buy a new weapon."

This blacksmith in front of me is one of the locals, probably one of the best in the outpost. It's amusing to watch the excitement blossom in his eyes whenever he gets the opportunity to talk about his thoughts on the subject.

"Weapons don't matter much. It's not like you get the opportunity to work on an arcane item all that often, and the things you could learn would help a lot more than the item itself," I say.

And I mean it. Even as I am now, I can buy the cheapest arcane items, and if I were to wait a bit longer and save my funds until I had around 150 thousand, I could buy an arcane weapon of low grade that could be probably comparable to Flamebearer. A bit longer, and somewhere around 200k, you can buy low arcane weapons that would be equal to or stronger than Flamebearer when it wasn't damaged.

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The prices are just crazy like that.

Even so, I think of this damaged arcane ax as an opportunity for me to learn and improve. It's a fun side project I could work on and maybe, sometime in the future, I'll be able to use the alloy left to me, and in combination with Flamebearer, create something of a mid arcane rarity. And sell it. If it were my own

work, I would get 50% of its system shop value instead of getting the 10-20% I do for the items I find on the floors.

And that would mean a lot of cool stuff for me. Mid arcane weapons in the system move around 300-500 thousand shards, with upper arcane being from 500 thousand up to a million shards.

However, in the end, I still strongly prefer to buy passives, and my current goal is to grow my shards again to buy one. I could even try to make some shards here in Beyond.

There is no system-managed shop for me to sell through as I did during the tournament, but there are shops I could sell to, and interestingly, there are auction houses. There's a whole economy at work down here.

The smith nods at that and breaks into a smile, "Maybe I judged you too harshly, young man. I'm willing to pay 25 thousand shards for that damaged arcane weapon."

"No, thank you."

"What is a few thousand shards among people like us? 26 thousand."

"I have to go now," I say, quickly leaving and ignoring the pleas of the man behind me, as I turn my mind to other things.

I still have a few more hours, and my legs have regrown, so that's good. At this point, I don't bother looking for shoes and instead find myself a dark alley where I can sit for a moment. Lifting my sleeves, I start painting on my skin with mana conductive paint I bought. It might be a good idea to go fully prepared like that. I also have a small mana orb inside my body that I've been feeding with my mana for the past day.

It is not as good as the crown, but it's the second-best option without bringing undue attention to me. Besides, I've begun to find a kind of beauty in the way others seem to underestimate me without giving me a second look.

I prepare my mind. I know I will probably be forced to kill or use those who plan to betray me. This time they won't be fakes, shadows of people, destined to die when the floor ends. No, they will be real people. Attendees from their own tutorials with their own hopes and goals for the future.

Even so, it doesn't matter. I have goals and hopes of my own, and mine are more important than theirs, for me at least. My sister, my mother on Earth left to endure 5 years of Earth's awakening and who knows what kind of changes brought about by the system.

Then there is also that group of mine.

I want to live, I want to master my abilities, I want to explore what the system has to offer. I want to see how high I can climb before my pride crumbles and my body turns breaks.

So as much as I'm trying to change bit by bit, I won't hesitate if anyone tries to abuse me.

Out of curiosity and because I don't have much more time left, I seek out the anchor I left on Duncan.

Locals, the descendants of people who got into Beyond. The most talented members of their tutorials - rounds of people chosen from millions, billions of people on the planet. Do their efforts leave a mark on their descendants? Are the locals more talented than normal people?

So far, from most of what I've seen, they don't seem all that strong, at least not here. But I know you can hire them for expeditions to the dungeons. As guild attendants mainly, but sometimes they will help you.

I don't think it's that simple though, and they probably come at a high price. But unlike those of us from the tutorial, the locals could spend tens, hundreds of years in Beyond. The amount of information they've collected in all that time cannot be underestimated, and neither can their value.

That's what makes me so curious about them.

Duncan is a year or two younger than me, at least that's how he looks and feels, and upon reaching his anchor, I hide my presence as much as possible.

It's in the poorer-looking part of the outpost, even though it's still nice.

I train, shaping the mana inside my body, as I watch the timer tick down and observe the locals and attendees rushing about on their business. This time, I'm trying to count each of the different races I see while waiting to see if Duncan will leave the house he just entered.

When I count over 20 races, I stop.

There seem to be a lot of humans and other races with weird eyes, oddly colored skin, or any number of other small changes. Then there are the lynthari who have a pretty decent representation. There aren't many demons, though each one feels more dangerous than the average attendee. Each has red eyes and horns.

The time we arranged for our meeting is growing close, and I glance at my feet and I wiggle my toes. Some time ago, I joked that I had probably lost enough limbs for Lily to build a Nathaniel or two. The thought of that is still as amusing as it is scary.

The flesh is weak, embrace the sanctity of blessed mana, Is that how it goes?

I lift my fingers and touch my lips, noticing the corner of my mouth twitch into the barest hint of a smile.

I've been having a lot of fun lately, haven't I? As dangerous and dirty as this all feels sometimes, it also feels so beautifully real. Important. Consequential. I make mistakes, and I have to deal with them.

I do not regret making these mistakes. Because every time I correct one, there is that clear feeling of progression.

It's hard to properly explain. At least it is for me. But that's what makes it fun, the slow process of discovery.

The door of the house finally opens, and Duncan steps out, still chewing his food. His huge bag rests on his back, and he smiles brightly, turning back to the people inside the room.

There is a boy and a girl, both children about the same age as Isabella and Vega. Each wearing a clean set of hand-me-down clothes. There is a clear resemblance in the cast of their faces which all but confirms their status as siblings.

The way they look up to him reminds me of something.

Duncan says something, and with a serious nod, the kids close the door, and Duncan checks to make sure it's locked. Only then does he rush away.

I observe that house for a while and then, with a sigh, place an anchor inside, the house bare of protections against it.

Inside, the house is clean but mostly empty. Sending my senses through it, I avoid the children who are upstairs and seek out the kitchen.

The fridge-like appliance is broken, and there is just enough food for a few days. The water tank is running low as well and getting close to kicking the bucket, as is the stove whose mana stone might explode soon if not handled carefully. It's so simple to fix, it's not even a bother.

Quickly, within a few seconds, I find each non-working appliance and fix it, putting all of the food I have on me in the fridge and refilling the water tank with water from my vial.

I know how expensive the food and water are here in Beyond, and Duncan, even though he's earning some shards, seems to need them for something else. After all, I can't sense the items I bought for him anywhere in the entire house.

Everyone has their problems, I guess, and he said as much, and it's not like I need food or water. I'll be leaving Beyond soon, and I can last a day or two without it. It would just be too annoying to carry it all with me.

Teleporting away, I make my way to our meeting spot.

Chapter 418: So that's how it is

Eugan leads Shayna, Roculus, Rat and I to the side. Most of the expedition has already arrived, we've gathered in a small clearing speckled with trees near the edge of the outpost. A short distance from the path leading to the entrance of the first floor.

"Have you checked your contracts?" she asks.

"Yes, I have a question." Roculus says. "What the fuck does 'Loot will be split according to performance' mean?"

"It means what it says. When everything's said and done, we'll sit down and split everything. If you're worried about the core group taking everything, it shouldn't be possible, given that there are twice as many newcomers. That's why the language is so open."

"What if some jackass thinks he did better than he actually did?"

"In that case, we'll put it to a vote. If that doesn't work, we can elect a mediator. Someone we will all trust. Worst case, we sell it all and split the shards evenly."

Roculus still doesn't seem to be satisfied, but he stays quiet.

"The other contracts I've seen usually had more details, this one's kinda vague," Shayna mentions. "It just says that we split the rewards, we're not allowed to attack each other, and that the main objective is to reach the first safe zone on the 1st floor as quickly as possible."

"Yes, it's a simple contract. But plenty of expeditions make do without contracts at all, so this is just a bit of insurance on our part."

Rat and I remain silent, and I can't help but think. This smells.

Well, at least I have plenty of mana stored away and a few surprises I could use.

I read over the contract a few times myself, but our only true assurance is the section prohibiting direct attack. With this level of contract, only an enforcer could even try to impose sanctions. But that would mean nothing if no one survived to report the breach of contract.

That piece clearly helps the core 7, who know and trust each other. If even one of them survived, they would try to inform the enforcers, which would probably lead to an investigation. If that's even how it works.

As far as I can tell such a thing would be almost beneath the attention of the higher-ups and handlers. The system doesn't hold hands, so it's unlikely that anyone else would do anything either. They would probably just laugh. My handler would be among the first, I bet. I need to find out if I can get a new handler. The current one seems to be the type to throw people into the lake, just to see if they drown or learn to swim.

I observe as Shayna signs her contract, and then do the same. My identification emblem activates for a moment, and I put my thumbprint on the paper when the circle appears.

Then, in accordance with the conditions of the contract, enforcement doesn't begin until all twenty people sign it. There is no change or effect on me, but I take it as my introduction to contracts. Such a low-level compact won't do much and could be easily abused, but the higher-level ones will certainly be more interesting.

Everyone gets ready, and finally, the leader of our small expedition steps up. And engraved on his right arm is a Ivory White C rank emblem, on prominent display.

"As we said before, our goal is to reach the safe zone as quickly as possible. My group has been there before, so listen to the instructions of your sub-leader, it will be their job to help you with anything outside the scope of the information we've already given you. We will be staggering our departure to avoid bringing undue attention to the group as a whole. Should anything happen, your subleader will contact me through our communication channel, and we will decide our next step from there."

He is looking around. The armor he is wearing looks old, and battered, but it still reeks of quality. Considering the fact that he's held on to it even in that state, it's probably very good. His weapon is a simple-looking spear made out of a single piece of crystal, with blue mana swirling inside, likely fed by his own reserves.

It looks like it may be as much a mana battery as a weapon.

“Noname,” Euan interrupts my observation.

“Yes?” I ask back.

“We’ll be relying on you to keep enemies away so Shaya and I can do our stuff.”

“Not Roculus?”

“He’s fine, but he looks like the type to run after his opponents. You seem more reasonable.”

“Got it.”

The leader continues with his small speech, making sure everyone sees his rank, so instead of listening, I turn to Euan. The woman is quietly listening and seems to be talking to someone I can’t hear. Probably through the communication channel for the core group.

It reminds me of Sophie and the twins, and I know how useful it can be.

Just for fun, I try to read the conversation from her lips but give up just as quickly and wait in silence.

Finally, the big group splits into four, and we start heading for the entrance. As we discussed, the groups enter 5 minutes apart, with our group going last.

When our turn comes, I stop in front of the entrance to the first dungeon.

It’s two pillars carved into the stone, with a simple door made of wood between them.

There is a pathway leading to the door, made out of worn cobblestone with bits of grass growing through the cracks. There are also lights on the walls, providing just enough illumination to cast a myriad of creepy shadows.

As we approach, the door opens on its own with a loud creak and admits us to the first floor.

As we step through we find ourselves in a sickly-looking area, full of fallen trees, dried-up grass, water so stagnant that it may as well just be poison, and a few old buildings made of crumbling stone bricks.

There are craters and other signs of damage everywhere we look. Mountains stripped of material, sprawling fields pocked with craters, and the drooping edges of melted buildings, with their stone facades crumbling to dust.

And just to cap everything off, I look up to find myself staring at a ceiling. A great overhanging rock face, not unlike the walls of the cave, exactly the same as the entrance. The first dungeon floors aren't their instances like the floors of Hell difficulty.

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

No, here you go underground. Deeper and deeper with each floor in an effort to reach whatever awaits us at the bottom. Whatever brought the first dungeon into existence for the Rulers to build Beyond over it.

I follow the others, and we pass through the entrance. When I look back, it's gone, leaving us adrift in this place.

Welcome to the 1st floor of the First Dungeon!

You may exit the 1st floor in designated safe zones spread across the floor. After reaching a safe zone, you will be able to use the array to teleport there from the Entrance Floor.

1st floor quest:???

Rewards:

7-day Stay Token

???

“Let’s go,” Eugean says decisively and starts running, leaving the rest of us to follow. “Rat, start scouting, please.”

The creepy gray man does as requested and a dozen rats made out of an unidentified black substance pour into the area, scouting every nook and cranny.

We’re barely a minute into the dungeon when Rat decides to speak for the first time, “Two presences to our right. Not very strong.”

His voice is raspy and quiet. And going by Shayna’s expression, I can only assume it’s unusual to encounter enemies so quickly after entering.

“We shouldn’t be meeting any so soon. Roculus, block them for a moment! I need to connect with the main group!” Eugean shouts, confirming the abnormality of the situation, and I can sense her communicating with the others.

Without skipping a beat, Roculus heads towards the approaching enemies, jumping over a deep crater to cut off any attackers trying to reach our backline.

I move to the front as well, holding back a bit as we planned. And just a few seconds later, the presences appear before us.

Two men in matching armor. One wielding a sword, and the other a staff. Neither says anything.

Well, they can’t. They’re dead.

Their skin's a pale shade of white and has shriveled with age, while their eyes though clouded with decay, still shine with a strange form of intelligence. Their movements are twitchy and unnerving while still being decisive. They just don't feel like living beings.

[Reanimated Corpse - lvl ??]

[Reanimated Corpse - lvl ??]

This floor got its nickname Graveyard for a simple reason. If the locals or attendees die here, they will be forever condemned to attack future expeditions, respawning in an endless cycle of undeath.

"Description doesn't fit any known named ones," Eugean hisses, while I notice her communicating with someone else through their link. She is also doing something with the marks she left on us.

Roculus attacks the corpses, mace, and dagger in hand. He moves quite a bit quicker than I would expect, propelling himself forward with small explosions of mana from his feet.

The corpse with the staff lights it up, sending a stream of lightning streaming after Roculus and tracking his movements, while he avoids it nonetheless. The other corpse charges the man, sword in hand and coated in resonating mana. The warrior and Roculus clash, and when the mage tries to join, a combined attack from Eugean and Shayna collides with him. A barrage of projectiles and a disrupting wave from Shayna.

Attention now turned to us, the mage disappears, flames blazing into existence at our backline, allowing him to step forth from the conflagration.

I let kinetic energy burst through my body, and the earth cracks under my feet as I reach the mage before he can even attack.

He quickly turns his attention to me, his blazing staff swinging around to meet my ax.

Flamebearer starts devouring his flames, as I jump back with a burst of kinetic energy, the warrior striking the place I once stood.

Roculus crashes into the wall of an old stone building, having been thrown by the warrior just before it attacked me. It happens too easily, and Roculus should be able to hold on a bit longer.

So that's how it is.

I dodge the warrior's next swing and block a burst of flames with my ax, the flames burning the side of my arm when I refuse to absorb them fully, the ax moving to block another sword strike. Boosting myself a few more times, I dodge another attack. Mana covering the sword changes its length and oscillates. As I dodge, the monster follows its strike with a kick which connects with my chest.

It's at this point that the fire mage lifts his staff, waves of heat pouring into the area, scorching the air and igniting the dried wood of his weapon.

There are fewer of us facing the corpses than there were a moment ago.

Roculus and Eujan are both gone, having used some sort of teleportation, Rat is running somewhere into the distance, and Shayna stands confused, frantically looking around.

I see her gaze tick between the corpses and me, as she curses, quickly coming to a decision. A wave of her mental attack disrupts the fire mage's skill.

The warrior charges her immediately, and Shayna flies into the air, her small wings creating an odd effect that supports her weight. Even so, the warrior bends his knees and jumps, shooting up like a bullet.

With a sigh, I strengthen my body and throw the ax at the mage, boosting it with kinetic energy. The ax hits him in the chest, sending him flying in a burst of flames.

There is no notification about the kill.

I activate the anchor I left on Shayna and others just in case and teleport in front of her, right into the attacking warrior.

Quickly creating a sword made of mana, I coat it in [Resonance], our blades meeting as my sword cuts through his.

A high-pitched sound and a blast of kinetic energy sends the corpse crashing into the ground, his limbs breaking and bending as he collides with the unforgiving stone.

I send another weaker burst at Shayna, moving her away, and a blaze of fire attacks crashes through the space she occupied.

She reacts quickly, forming a barrier around herself, her attention turning to the fire mage.

I lift my hand, and using [Tether], Flamebearer flies back into my hand, pulled by the anchor I placed on it as I boost myself downwards, following the warrior and cleaving into his forearm.

His body is already healed, the broken limbs fixed. Most likely a skill he possessed when he was alive. All the mana he was releasing up until now is gone, glowing white tattoos blooming across his shriveled skin, and his dead eyes beginning to glow white.

The first attack crashes into my chest, most of it absorbed and turned into mana, but even then it's enough to send me staggering. Another one aims to kick my legs out from under me, adding more mana to my reservoir as I stumble. The third one collides with my face, repeating the process.

Blunt attacks of this level won't work against me, I guess, and he comes to the same conclusion.

As quick and strong as he is, he extends three fingers of his hand into something resembling a blade and tries to stab me. Smart.

A blast of kinetic energy sends him staggering before he can reach me, and then I strengthen my body with it and thrust at him with my sword, extending the blade of mana and easily piercing into his chest, its path eased by the resonating mana coating the surface.

With a kick, he breaks my blade to my sheer surprise, and grabbing a piece of it, he tries to jam it into my eyes. Just in time, I make it disappear, dispersing it into a field of particles. His fist hits my head instead.

He then grabs my hand and tries to pull me into a stranglehold and take advantage of his strength, but I send a disrupting wave through his body, giving it a big thump. It's much more difficult than I expected though, given that the people here tend to have good defenses against disruption. But I push through with an overwhelming flood of mana, and by activating my eyes for the slightest of moments.

The tattoos deactivate, and before he can do anything else, I pull him closer, and crack the side of his head with a swing of my elbow, sending him to the ground.

He tries to stand up and reactivate his mana, but another disrupting wave hits him. A javelin with a flat head pins him to the ground until I step on his head, splattering it, as the corpse finally stops moving.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 278]

Chapter 419: Lurkers

Using my anchor once again, I teleport back over to Shayna, who's standing, rooted in place and breathless, feet planted on the ground. She cradles her scorched limb, as her barriers flicker around her.

She's completely focused on warding off her opponent's flames, precisely timing waves of disruptive mana towards that end. The flames explode lighting up the space around them and turning the battlefield into a scorched hellscape.

I stop myself from helping and watch as the reanimated corpse of an attendee pulls all these flames towards him, compressing them into an orb as big as my fingernail, making it float over the staff.

Shayna curses, but she doesn't give up. Her hair and eyes taking on a pure white sheen.

Just for the shortest moment, the fire mage blanks out, just before he launches his attack, and Shayna pushes through her limits, subjecting the orb to a massive wave of disruption. Though on second thought it may be something a bit different. The orb destabilizes, and the mage, upon recovering his senses, tries to pull it back under his control, as the heat starts to burn his skin and the trees around him begin to crumble into heaps of ash.

The hand holding the staff burns, melting until only the bones remain, clinging to the staff in their tenacity, and finally, the orb expands more, clearly about to explode, as the mage casts it aside.

It's at that point that the flaming orb explodes, etching a glass crater the size of a house into the hill nearby, the edges glowing red with the heat.

Before the mage can repeat his attack, Shayna launches a projectile that buries itself in his head. Even I have trouble sensing this new attack. It's extremely fast, quiet, and even manages to pierce through the barrier and heat around the fire mage.

Finally, Shayna falls to her knees, turning her head to me, "Fuck, you could have helped."

Boosting my body, I reach the corpse and quickly go through the pockets, not finding anything useful. So I just grab the staff.

Emberflame Staff (Upper Epic): Crafted from volcanic glass, the staff ignites producing a fierce conflagration. By channeling mana through this staff, one may unleash a barrage of flames to devastate the battlefield. The Emberflame Staff also enhances fire abilities, making them more potent and all consuming.

Not bad.

Blowing off the corpse of the fire mage, I move back to Shayna.

"Shouldn't that be mine?" she asks, her hair and eyes turning black with bits of white.

"Think of it as payment for saving your life," I say.

"Fucking hell, just take it. We're dead anyway. We're never going to reach the safe zone by ourselves."

"Why do you think they did it?" I ask, wanting to hear her opinion despite my own theories.

“Isn’t it obvious? Roculus was part of the core group, he was just pretending to be one of us. They’ve probably planted more people like him in the other groups.”

“And Rat?”

“He just ran away, and we should too before more lurkers come. It’s probably too late already.”

“It’s fine, continue.”

“We should...”

“I said continue.”

She looks up at me, and a bit more white appears in her hair.

“It’s obvious, they were either after our items or using us as bait to lure away lurkers. The more lurkers you kill, the more others are attracted to you. I’m surprised they didn’t leave any marks behind. There are frequencies of mana that attract lurkers.”

“Oh, they did. Eugean left a mark on each of us. I just removed yours and blocked mine. I think she activated Rat’s, so he might be in trouble.”

I still have a mark on me and I have fun watching Eugean’s constant attempts to activate it. So they did it to avoid killing lurkers while forcing us to kill them instead... which draws more lurkers to us?

While Shayna watches with a blank expression, I coat the tip of my finger with resonating mana and cut into my belly, pulling out the mana orb I’ve been feeding all this time. As the wound starts slowly closing, I look at the orb and the amount of mana contained within.

It should be enough.

“Give me a moment,” I tell her.

I use another of my anchors, this time the one I left on Roculus. The man is not good with detection, so he’ll be a safer choice than Euan.

Teleporting through, I appear next to the two of them, both of them turned to me with weapons already in their hands.

Of course, they noticed the activation.

The orb in my hand starts shining with blindingly white light as I throw it to the ground, before pushing through Euan’s attempts at disrupting my escape and teleport back to Shayna.

Even where we stand, I feel a strong pulse of mana ripples out from my exploding orb.

“What...”

Before Shayna can finish her question, I teleport again, returning to the scene of my attack and finding little more than rubble in the place of the buildings that once populated the area, the shockwave throwing them all over the place. The heat is still in the air.

Roculus is a bit further away, crawling along and leaving a trail of blood behind him. Both of his legs are gone, and one of his arms is missing as well. Even so, they are regenerating fairly quickly, as is the missing half of his face.

If you find this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the infringement.

He spots me, emotion flickering in his eyes, “I didn’t know... I...”

I lift my finger, and he stops talking. Then I send a probing wave of mana into the area and fail to find Euan.

Did she run away? Teleportation again?

Looking around, I find and pick up the weapons Roculus had, a mace and a dagger.

Serpent's Fang (Upper Epic): Forged from the fangs of an ancient serpent, this dagger's blade is perpetually coated with a venom that induces severe hallucinations. The Serpent's Fang also allows the wielder to launch the dagger at distant foes, releasing a toxic mist upon impact with the potential to affect multiple enemies.

The mace seems to be heavily damaged. Did he use it to block the attack?

Impact Mace (Upper Epic, Damaged): Designed for delivering punishing strikes with precision. The Impact Mace features a balanced design that allows for swift, powerful swings. Each hit generates a localized shockwave.

"You cheap fucker, attacking like that," Roculus hisses.

Turning around, I see him standing, his limbs regrown and body healed. Even so, it must have taken a toll on him, especially after blocking my previous attack. I'm still surprised he was able to survive it; the power contained in that orb would have even given Gareth trouble. The ruins left behind after the explosion confirm that.

Still, Roculus charges me, muscles bulging through his skin as a skin tight barrier forms around his body.

The anchor I left on him while he was regenerating activates as I send a big part of my stored kinetic energy through, and both of his legs explode again as he falls to the ground.

With a hateful expression, he stands up, not hesitating to run on the ragged remains of his shattered limbs.

I modify my attack a bit and blast him away with kinetic energy, the area around us clearing from debris and some flames dying off.

Then I track Eugin's position through the mark she left on me as she struggles to activate it, and when I focus my senses in that direction, I feel fighting going on there as well, most likely lurkers that found the group. The waves of mana radiating from the area seeming to confirm it.

With great interest I watch as the mark on Roculus activates, the same one Eugin put on me. It vibrates with a frequency of mana that I find unusual to grasp and spreads into the surrounding area.

Roculus seems to sense it as well as he stops, his face turning pale white.

Multiple presences approach from the area where Eugin and her group were fighting, seeking the source of the strange frequency.

Couldn't she put it on the ground or an item? Does it need to be applied to a living being to work?

"N-no," Roculus whispers.

Waving to him, I activate my anchor and teleport away. I immediately cleanse the remaining mana in the area and turn to Shayna.

"How much if I help you to survive?" I ask.

She quickly grasps it, and it takes only a moment, "15 thousand shards."

"Twenty."

A few more seconds of her gaze.

"Fine," she says, finally giving in.

Maybe I should ask for more, but even though she has been in Beyond longer than me, I don't think she would have much more.

Incoming transfer of 20,000 shards. Confirm?

Yes/No

I confirm.

Shards: 148,648

"Let's go this way," I say, choosing a direction.

Rat is to our right, Roculus and the group to our left, so it's probably better to avoid them both.

With both of them grabbing the attention of lurkers, it might even work better than with the group before. The question is, for how long.

Seeing Shayna moving slowly, I walk over and pull her into my arms before continuing down the chosen path, using kinetic energy to boost our speed along the way. At the same time, I create a field around us to camouflage our position. I also keep an eye on Shayna. It would be unfortunate if she tried to attack me and I died just like that.

Lurkers may be the true danger of the 1st floor, but they probably aren't the original danger. I know that much from the information I've managed to collect.

The first floor is special. If you die here, your body will be revived and controlled by something that's constantly seeking out attendees to kill.

If you die as a lurker, it will usually take around 1 year for you to respawn, along with your items.

From one point of view, it could be abused as a constant farm of equipment. But someone powerful enough to do so probably wouldn't have a need for these kinds of items. Beginner attendees usually have upper epic items at most, very rarely do they even have a damaged arcane.

The danger here is also huge. The problem is the so-called named ones. Lurkers of powerful attendees who died here through some form of fuckery. Either murdered by their guild or party, perhaps even through a mistake on their part. People who reached the deeper floors of the dungeon but decided to return to the 1st floor for some reason.

There are a few dozen named ones on the first floor who keep respawning even if they get killed, most of them receiving nicknames like Rookie Killer, Whitey, Specter, Sly Fox, and that's only the beginning.

My problem at the moment is all the lurkers moving around at the moment, each one representing a person capable of clearing Beyond's trials. And the fact that their corpses retain most of their abilities.

Then there is also our group who never so much as hesitated to kill. Everything they did reeks of desperation, and that makes me wonder what their real objective is.

Sure, I nearly killed Roculus, but that was largely through trickery. If we fought one versus one, it would be a much more difficult fight. And if I had to fight Egan as well, it would have been even worse. Sure, I'm still sure I would probably be able to win or run away, but it's risky.

Even then, I don't put them on the level of Savant, Tacita, Lily, or Tess. So far, I'm sure each of them has more potential.

Good. Go Earth go.

[You have defeated Blood Ravager - lvl 279]

It's surprising Roculus was able to hold on for so long. The presences moving towards him were powerful. He was quite strong after all.

Well, rest in peace, Roculus. It's a shame I couldn't get any shards off you.

A bit later and much further we find Rat, or what remains of him at least. Only half his head is intact, its dead eye staring at the stone ceiling of this place.

Just like that.

Killed by who knows what, deep underground in a place so infinitely distant from his home.

One of the chosen from his entire population. Someone talented enough to become the top of their First Generation. Nothing but a chunk of skull and flesh with nothing to show for it. No amazing last stand for the world to witness, no great goals. Condemned to a fate of being used and hunted down as he did everything in his power to survive.

There's a strange feeling of melancholy to it.

Pushing it to the back of my mind, I boost my body with even more kinetic energy and continue to run with Shayna in my arms. I modify our course and rely on the woman in my arms who apparently memorized our map better than I.

And as I do so I check my timer, finding that I still have more than 20 hours remaining on my Stay Token.

Chapter 420: We don't want to go there

The first floor thus far has failed to present any greater danger than the lurkers.

Sure, the gravity here is much stronger than it was on any of the floors in Hell difficulty, requiring the constant expenditure of kinetic energy from me. Higher physical stats could probably deal with it easily enough, but that would mean less mana.

We can't have that.

I've also noticed a sensation that I recognize from the surface, there is also a pull on my mana, trying to drain it away and send it into the ground below me. So far, my Mantle's dealt with that quite easily, though it still makes any external use of mana more difficult. It isn't all bad either, if only because it keeps focused and drives me to improve.

Shayna and I are currently holed up in what appears to be an old cathedral, hiding our mana signatures, and working to maintain the barrier around us.

Three lurkers detected us a while back and immediately started heading our way.

Shayna said the more lurkers we kill, the more the others can sense us. It's odd too because I can't figure out how it works, meaning it's either directly set by the system, leaving me with no way to deal with it. The second option is that the lurkers and everything about them are just the side effects of the settings on this floor.

It makes me curious and excited to explore the options it presents me with. With a good group, this place could become an amazing spot for farming items. Every one of the lurkers is a Beyonders, meaning they have items fitting their status and with a bit of luck, some of them may even be damaged arcane.

Could I go out on my own and do it?

Both the warrior and mage from before were powerful. Not as much as me, but as the winner of our round's tournament, I should be above average. But with Tess and Lily, we would bulldoze through groups with more than three members.

That is also where the problem lies - bigger groups. The deeper we delve and the closer we get to the safe zone, the more lurkers... well... lurk around.

Currently, it's limited to groups of 2-5 members, but according to Shayna, there are groups of 10, and as much as I hate having to accept that, it would be too much even for me. I'm not even sure I could handle a group of 5.

I always look at it from the angle of whether or not I would be able to defeat specific Beyonders. Gareth? Tess? Savant? Lily? For sure. Tacita? Probably yes, but I have a lot of respect for her as my archenemy, plus, after her loss against Savant, there is no way she doesn't go full training arc and power up like crazy.

So, could I defeat Lily and Tess attacking me at once? Probably. Savant and Tess? There I'm not so sure.

Even though our Beyonders seem to be above average, a group of 3 of them would probably be enough for the fight to become dangerous. The difference between success and failure would be my chances of pulling off some sneaky attack.

That's why my crown is active, and I'm not trying to my abilities, and why Shayna's not asking about it.

"In a few more minutes I'm going to send out a probe," she whispers.

"Let's give it five minutes to be sure," I reply.

She nods. This time her hair is blue, and her eyes are as well. And there's a bit of white mixed in. Meanwhile, I can sense her heart beating wildly through my use of kinetic energy.

Is this a normal reaction? Sure, we are close to a group of 3 lurkers, and killing them would make the process of survival more difficult given our position hours away from the safe zone.

Yet, even though I feel the same kind of fear, it's not as bad as hers. It makes me feel lightheaded, and my arms and legs are cold, sweat runs down my back. With some curiosity, I lift my hand and look at it.

It's trembling, and my fingers are twitching. As I close it into a fist, I take note of the chill and take a deep breath.

My mind feels so sharp, and my body is tensed for the attack, ready to respond to the slightest of movements. I even catch myself subconsciously running mana through my body.

I love it. I love the feeling of tension and fear washing over my mind.

"Careful with your mana," Shayna whispers.

I check it, and she turns out to be right; there's a bit of leakage, my excitement is getting the better of me. I quickly pull it back under my control and force it into my body and check the barrier around it.

As I make these changes, I turn up the power on [Resonance], disrupting any excess mana that leaves our bodies. The skill disperses it into tiny particles that should be more difficult to notice In any scans for mana.

I'm also using thermal energy and [Redistribution] in an attempt to hide the heat of our bodies.

Shayna is lowering the presence of our minds and maintaining a field that nullifies the sound of our movements, and heartbeats.

There are so many ways to detect someone. Heat, mana, movement, sound, emotions, sheer presence; there are even monsters that can feel the weight of your gaze.

Hell, at higher levels, you start being able to hear people breathing, through walls and across great distances. Sometimes the mere presence of one's mind can give them away.

As much power as lurkers lose when they die, they do come fairly close to the genuine articles. I would say they operate at anywhere from 90-95% power, at least from what I heard. They're generally pretty good with their abilities too. So that's why we are hiding, I don't even find the prospect insulting. I just know that sooner or later I will come back here, and on that day, explosions will thunder through the floor, and dozens of lurkers will die, condemned to respawn in a year.

"Sending probe," Shayna announces.

She then uses her mental skill, trait, or whatever it is. I can't sense much about it given that that's not where my talent lies, but she waits tensely nonetheless.

Did you know this text is from a different site? Read the official version to support the creator.

We wait a few more seconds, and she breathes out, a small smile appearing on her face.

"Fuck," is the only word she says.

Immediately I extend my domain and place an anchor, grabbing her hand, and she lets me as I teleport us both away.

Appearing high in the air, I watch as the building we were hiding in gets bombarded by attacks, Crumbling the stone into dust.

I form a dense barrier around us and infuse kinetic energy throughout the surface, just in time for a dozen metal projectiles to crash into it, the kinetic energy and [Redistribution] absorbing most of the impact.

Someone tries to put a mark on us, and Shayna disrupts it while sending a counterattack in its wake.

Boosting us with kinetic energy, I fly at full speed, constantly adding to it.

Shayna uses the weird field created by her wings, and it becomes easier.

Much further away, I land, and a mana javelin appears over my shoulder. I start adding more and more mana to it until it grows much denser and heavier, and then I start channeling kinetic energy. Shayna does some preparation of her own.

“Stun one of them. Just a second should be enough,” I say, starting off in the direction we came from.

“One of them is protecting their minds; I won’t be able to.”

“Which one?”

“Lynthari woman; the human in the blue shirt is using [Metal Manipulation] and a feylith man is using some kind of wide range bombardment skill.”

The feylith man turns out to be the same race as Shayna, meaning they’re called feyliths. Nice find.

"I will disrupt Lynthari's mana for a moment; try to stun her then," I respond.

As I speak I create another javelin, thinner this time, and infuse it with the disrupting effect of [Resonance]. I do not save my mana, more interested in making sure it has the intended effect. Then I add some more.

[Infusion - lvl 33 > Infusion - lvl 34]

It's manageable despite being more difficult to keep both of them at once, mainly because of how much I'm packing into them.

They don't give me any more time, two figures reach us, a feylith and a human with a blue shirt.

The blue shirt has pieces of metal following him - an iron door, an anvil, an old sword, and more besides. These pieces are bending and changing their shape as if they were made out of clay. He quickly launches these projectiles at us, adding to my workload, as I use [Redistribution] to absorb their kinetic energy, adding it to the mass waiting to launch my compressed javelin.

The feylith flies into the air, shining orbs of blinding light forming around him. Meanwhile, the lynthari is hiding.

Shayna grabs my arm and points.

Extending my domain, I place an anchor and teleport, repeating the process two more times until they succeed in disrupting my anchor; before flying the remaining distance.

"She's in the house with the red roof."

A mental attack crashes against us, only to be blocked by Shayna, as I launch the disrupting javelin. It pierces into the house, and a strong wave of disrupting mana floods the area. It can be felt even up here though it's much weaker.

Shayna reaches down, and the lynthari, caught in the process of her escape, freezes in place, and I release my other javelin. It disappears with a loud boom, leaving no trail behind and no explosion as it hits. It just burrows deep into the ground, piercing through everything in its way.

The lynthari happens to be one of these things, the sheer impact nearly evaporating the entirety of her chest.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 269]

I grab Shayna's arm and boost us to the side, dodging a barrage of metal projectiles and the slower feylith bombardier, bringing me into reach of the blue-shirt human.

"We should run; killing more will only attract others," I hear.

Why worry so much? Such useless thoughts? I'll just kill them all. I haven't even gotten warmed up yet. Bombardment? I'll show you a bombardment. And that human with [Metal Manipulation]? Let's see how well he deals with my [Mana Manipulation].

As much as this has strained my mind, it's far from enough. I will...

Then I feel a presence. The single beat of a heart far, far away. Followed by another, and I feel the presence reaching for me, seeking my strongly beating heart and the kinetic energy within.

Then the presence disappears.

"Yeah, let's go." I agree, blocking another barrage of projectiles before shooting off a few of my own to keep the flying feylith busy before flying in the opposite direction.

"Wrong direction, you should..."

"Trust me, we don't want to go there."

The presence appears again with another powerful heartbeat, this time much closer.

I change direction and head for the traitorous group that brought us out on this expedition, and I give it everything I've got, not caring about leaving tracks in our way.

"What are you doing, we should..." Shayna keeps talking, but I ignore her.

She doesn't seem to be feeling that presence at the moment, but soon she will, and then she'll understand.

Once we're far enough away from the duo, I land on the ground and stop using kinetic energy, going so far as to stop my heart from generating it. Instead, I change it to thermal and manually bolster my Mantle. Not skipping a beat, I boost my body this time with mana, and though I haven't done so in weeks I quickly get back into the rhythm.

Shayna runs by my side as quickly as, and probably even faster than, me, passing under the trees, across a huge broken bridge and a destroyed city that must have been glorious once, left as a stone-cold reminder of older times.

"Are there any powerful named ones with kinetic energy?" I ask as we run. I don't know how far away the presence is anymore, and it's probably having a more difficult time tracking me right now.

"Two or three, but none that should be so close to this area; they tend to be a lot further in."

"So?"

"Metal Bitch, Owl, and Whitey, those are the three I know of."

"Which ones do we want to avoid?"

"Fucking all of them. Any one of them could kill us both and another 10 like us with ease."

"Which one do we really, really want to avoid?"

"Is it," she pauses, the gears in her head spinning, "... fuck. Please don't tell me..."

"Probably."

"Damn it...," she jumps nimbly over a crater and onto the roof of a nearby house which cracks under the force of her feet as she runs.

I increase my speed as well, sensing she is using her abilities to find the group as well. She might not be as good as Rat, but she's probably decent over small distances.

"If it's a male demon with long white hair, then we need to start hoping we, by some miracle, meet a freakishly powerful C rank or rogue B rank who's decided to visit this goddamned place."

I have nothing to say in response to her blatant jinx and check the timer instead.

18 hours remaining.