

Tutorial 421

Chapter 421: That place

"Calm your heart and do not move," I whisper to Shayna, both of us are in a hole deep underground where I teleported us.

"It's not that easy."

No matter how hard she tries, I can sense it, and if I sense it, there is a chance that presence will sense it as well.

"Shayna, you either calm that heart down, or I will give you back your shards and send you back to the surface."

I haven't seen that presence so far, but I felt it. Even from a big distance, it sensed my kinetic energy and was even able to touch on it. A feeling as if it would be able to take over.

It must be one of the named ones and probably a powerful one.

With clenched teeth, the feylith woman forces her body under her control using some skill, and her heartbeat slows. It's to the point where it beats only once every few seconds, matching the rhythm of my own.

And so we are hiding. Not moving to not send vibrations through the place, not talking, and with our mana suppressed. Slowly like that, we also breathe all the air trapped here, and soon there won't be any. I wonder, could we suffocate? How long can I hold my breath now after body upgrades?

Time passes like that, neither of us moving or talking.

Nice, another asshole to be added to my "to beat later" list. Well, only if we survive until the end of my stay token. I have a feeling that presence is not that far away.

We don't exchange any words and start running towards where the traitorous group is. The idea is simple. If that presence finds us, we will use the group to slow it down while we run.

POV Shayna

Noname is terrifying.

It's not just his skill that is obvious, an amazing versatility of his abilities even though with clear weak spots.

No, it's his bearing.

I have met plenty of people with concentration-type skills, and even though Noname might have one, I know he is not using it.

No, even deep underground, hiding from the enemy that could end us anytime, he forced himself to become calm. That much is fine, I can do that even without a concentration type skill. The worst part was that a side of him seemed to hope for us to be found out.

And now, running by my side, his face bears a simple neutral expression as his eyes tick all over the place. Not like he was looking for danger to avoid it, but like he is the hunter.

He is very careful as well and doesn't trust me at all. His guard is up and strong. But I think I have seen it. An opportunity and a bit of his real self.

POV Nathaniel

A group of five lurkers pops out on the edge of our detection, and this time it's Shayna who finds them through her mental abilities.

I'm more than sure she isn't at the level of Sophie, but her ability seems to be similar to Isabella's [Empathy], just sensing minds and being able to stun them. She might be able to sense emotions just a little bit but I'm not sure of that.

Well, there could be more, and she is just hiding it, so I keep my guard up in case she tries some bullshit.

Thankfully, it seems there is no lurker in that group able to sense her gentle mind probing, so we avoid them quite easily as they pass by. We don't even see them, the group of five being a few stadium lengths away from us. A thought comes to me, at a higher level, you might be able to sense people on the different side of the country or even continents. I don't know why and for what but I want to know how to do that.

While we wait, I look around the cathedral-like building where we are.

As with every building on this floor, it's very old and made mostly of stone. Even in the state it is in now, it's still very grand. It's easy to imagine how beautiful the cities and buildings used to be.

Did locals build them long ago? Is it some setting of the system? Beyond is a combination of the real world and tutorial, so I wouldn't say it's part of the tutorial and instead something more real?

Taking a few steps, I touch the stone wall, and it still feels smooth and powerful. There is that sad melancholy to it. A feeling akin to a dying world. It's sad but also a beautiful feeling.

Am I weird?

Maybe, but I can't be weirder than past Nathaniel or the future one.

I was always fascinated by this kind of stuff. As much as I prefer to spend time alone, it's fun to think of all the people passing by and using this place in times long ago.

There is a scratch on the wall. I like to think it was maybe caused by some young, careless man who was shouted at by the administrator of this place. Both of them used to be main characters in their own stories, going about their lives in a similar way to how I am now.

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"Are you really that calm, or are you using a concentration skill?" Shayna asks me out of nowhere in a whisper. The question sounds like it's something she thought of for a while.

"I don't use it for emotions anymore," I decide to answer honestly.

Looking at her, I also wonder why I helped her back then and why there are two of us. Sure, she helps, but it's not something I usually do. At least I'm sure she is not manipulating my emotions; it's something I'm very careful about and constantly check.

The most likely reason seems to be that moment when Roculus and Euan disappeared, Rat ran, and she decided to stay and attack one of the lurkers. Just that short moment made me have a better opinion of her and turned into all of this.

It could be just pragmatic thinking from her side, it could be her real personality, it could be a shortsighted dumb decision or pure desperation on her part.

Even so, here we are.

"What are you thinking of?" she whispers again.

"Emotions are dumb," I declare.

"Fucking tell me about it," she laughs shortly and points at her hair, which constantly changes color along with her eyes.

"Do you regret coming to Beyond?" I ask her.

She answers right away without hesitation, "No, not even once." At that moment, her eyes are light blue, and so is her hair. She has a nice expression on her face too.

"I see."

"And you?" Shayna asks.

"No regrets here so far, just a few complaints."

"Only a few?" another smile, and then her attention moves somewhere else only for her to turn back to me again. "They are out of my range, we can go."

POV Eujan

"So?" Misk turns to me.

"We can't be that far away, it should be near here."

"Eujan, if you fail to lead us to the place, this is all for nothing. You realize that?" Misk looms over me. His armor, which permanently looks damaged, is covered in blood that seems to seep into cracks in it and sticks to the surface even though it should fall down.

Out of damaged arcane items, I saw, that armor sure is the creepiest.

"I told you already, we saw that place while running away, and plenty of us died. I remember it only in flashes!"

"I know, Eujan, you have told me already. But try harder." Saying that he turns to the man on his left. "Waul, how are... our new friends?"

Waul has no emotion on his face, and I don't think I ever saw him showing any. It's a clear sign of the concentration-type skill he has constantly running.

"We have two more we can use to take attention off us if we activate the marks. I also think Somir is going to die, he got wounded really bad at the start when Eugean and Roculus screwed up their job." even his voice bears no emotion and is flat.

"It's okay, Waul," Misk says calmly. "We couldn't have known there would be that many so soon. Roculus paid for that, and we didn't have to kill any lurker."

"Understood," Waul nods. "Should I prepare the sacrifice? We will get to the zone where more lurkers move around soon."

Misk nods, "Eugean, help him, and just in case, place one more mark. We don't want the situation from before to repeat, and while you do so, please

There is no "or" in his words, but the look I get from him is obvious.

We must find that place.

POV Nathaniel

"What is this place?" Shayna says what I have on my mind.

Even from as far as we are, I can sense lingering bits of mana in the air. It doesn't even feel new, just remains of a fight that happened days, weeks, hell, maybe even months ago.

From the top of the hill where we are standing and looking down, I can say that it's the most damaged area I've seen so far.

A crack in the ground spanning over a large distance, extremely smooth-edged holes the size of houses made all over. Signs of a skill that left a smooth surface over a big patch of the area, reminding of polished stone.

There are also spikes piercing through the ground, all of them made of the same material they are piercing through, but at the same time, they are much tougher as if compressed. And much more. A clear sign of a fight that happened here and the usage of powerful skills.

I risk it and send my senses into the area, but nothing comes back. At least for now, no lurker is moving around. Shayna also confirmed it just a few seconds before we walked here.

"We should avoid it," the scaredy-cat of a feylith says.

I ignore her and what she says after that, and instead continue to scan the area. There is something I have sensed down there. Something familiar.

"How far do you think we are from the group?" I ask, interrupting Shayna's monologue.

"At this point, I have no idea. We tried to follow their direction and even found their steps, but this isn't even in the direction of the safe zone, so I have no idea where they are heading."

"We might have found that place," I note and, jumping from the hill, head down towards the battlefield.

On our way here, we have found a few more members of the group, all of them very dead and with signs of that frequency that seems to attract lurkers.

Following them gave us a bit of an advantage, as the large group seems to attract more lurkers, even though we killed some. They are now only throwing sacrifices. It all smells of desperation and hurry.

They are not heading towards the safe zone where they would be able to find a portal out of the 1st floor to the entrance floor.

So what would make a group of 12-15 people hurry so much? What would make them try to get 8-5 more members to be used as sacrifices so they can delve deep into the area where plenty of lurkers are?

Walking through the battlefield, I touch the smooth edges of the house-sized holes, the impressively tough spikes, and I squat and tap with the tip of my finger the smooth area left behind by another attack.

There, a bit further, a first corpse lies. From the looks of it, it's a Beyonder killed by a lurker, as the corpse of a lynthari isn't shivered nor has that deadly pale color. And a bit further, another one, a corpse of a demon with half of his chest missing, dead eyes staring towards the ceiling. Another lynthari with limbs torn off. A demon with his chest exploded from a powerful attack. A feylith with wings pulled off and head as well, missing somewhere.

Two dozen corpses as far as I can see and probably even more out of my sight.

It doesn't even look like they died fighting each other. It more feels as if they were killed one by one by a single powerful opponent. An expedition of Beyonders meeting a very powerful lurker.

The reason why I think it's by a lurker is simple.

They still have all of their equipment.

The reason why I think it's by a very powerful lurker is also very simple.

Some of these people have damaged arcane items that are still here.

Chapter 422: A lot of items

Is this the place our precious group of traitors have been trying to reach? Hurrying, desperate to find it. Scared to let someone else find it first or the corpses turn into lurkers, which would probably render the area impossible to scavenge? They might be dead, but going by their equipment, they must have been powerful, a group like Eujan's would have never been able to take them.

Hell, that they might not even know how long the corpses have been lying there since they must have spotted them and been unable to retrieve the equipment. These corpses in front of me could probably turn into lurkers at any moment. The lurkers respawn after a year anyway.

Moving from corpse to corpse, I use my senses and quickly collect the items. There is a pile of upper epic ones, armor, some orbs, and more. There are even plenty of materials and mana stones with ciphered information.

There are also some interesting clothes in the bags, with threads spun from a range of different materials, allowing them to fit normally while retaining the durability of upper rare armor. Not to mention the variety of metals stowed with them.

And these are just the items they had on them while traveling. They're not going to be on par with my arcane alloy, but they're not far off either. I do wonder if they had anything more valuable stashed away somewhere, maybe something they left with their guild?

Of course, the most valuable are the three items. Likely the things Euan and her group were after. Items they were willing to kill for. Three damaged arcane items.

Bloodthirst (Arcane, Damaged) - Bloodthirst once thrived on the essence of life, growing stronger with each battle. Its hunger for blood has lessened, but it still sporadically draws strength from fresh wounds, offering glimpses of its once insatiable power.

Echo Gauntlet (Arcane, Damaged) - The Echo Gauntlet was once capable of replicating any spell or ability it encountered, up to a certain level. Though its power has waned, it can mimic nearby magical effects with unpredictable precision.

Golem Heart (Arcane, Damaged) - The Golem Heart could animate stone and metal, bringing golems to life. Now, its core is cracked, but it sporadically imbues nearby objects with a flicker of life, allowing them to move and respond to commands for short periods of time, echoing its once grand animating power.

The Echo gauntlet, already on my right hand, looks more like a glove and covers everything up to a point slightly above my wrist. It's made out of smooth and supple light brown leather, and the inside is covered with myriad threads of material woven into inscriptions. The back of the glove is covered with a few damaged strips of black metal etched with inscriptions of their own, protecting the back of the hand.

The effect sounds way too powerful, so I'm already curious about its limitations. I expect the effect to be limited by level, amount of uses, or excessive mana costs.

It's interesting anyway.

The Golem Heart on the other hand is a piece of clay-like material that seems a lot tougher than it should be while hiding secrets all its own. It's light brown and smooth. However, it seems to be missing a small piece as well.

These items are amazing, even now I could sell the whole lot of them for a nice sum of shards, despite any reduction in payout from the damage.

Flamebearer alone has given me an idea just how powerful arcane weapons, even damaged ones, can be.

So now I have these three, a staff from the mage lurker we met at the start, a dagger and mace from Roculus, and a pile of upper epic weapons.

It's quite a lot and they come from a group that was probably pushing elite status. The higher end epic items alone would have been a nice addition for any group. Not to mention the materials. There's so much at this point that I'm starting to wonder if there are storage items available. Soon I won't be able to carry it all.

Surprisingly, Shayna isn't trying anything. Despite my apparent distraction and relentless hoarding of items, she doesn't attack. There isn't a single attempt from her, nor is she acting strange. Sure, there is a hint of greed in her eyes, but that's it, she doesn't ask for weapons or offer any complaints.

"Do you think there might be a good reason for the lurkers to be avoiding this area? Even accounting for the ones the group lured away, we should have more on our trail given the ones we killed. This is too unnerving," Shayna says while looking around.

"Isn't it obvious?" I ask. "We've probably entered the territory of a powerful named lurker. More likely than not the guy who did this," I clarify, gesturing at the corpses.

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As we speak, I keep an eye on the area, scanning our surroundings and Shayna with my mana. Watching for any signal she might try to send the group. Roculus was one of them, so why the hell wouldn't she be? Sure, it would be weird for her to stay with me, but who the hell knows how these people think.

"So why aren't you taking any of the items?" I ask, taking a more direct approach.

"Because we're probably going to die anyway. Just take them if you want, I don't want to die carrying all those bags on my back." Despite her words, she seems calm. Determined even.

There is some truth to her words but I don't plan on dying.

"So what kind of item do you want? You should take something." It pains me, but I offer nonetheless. Without her, I would have been in a lot more trouble. I'm not stubborn enough to deny her that.

Out of nowhere Shayna smiles, almost shyly, "I already took one when you weren't looking. I found a ring on one of the corpses," she admits.

Okay, give me back my feelings and take back what you just said.

"Show me," I challenge, and she does so right away.

Phantom Ring (Arcane, Damaged) - This Phantom Ring once provided unparalleled stealth and silent movement. It now intermittently bestows the wearer with heightened stealth, making them nearly undetectable for short periods of time.

Such a cursed object, it even has a phantom in its name. It should be destroyed.

Checking the timer, I confirm that I have less than an hour until my Stay Token wears off. Hopefully, when it does, I find myself back on the 6th floor. It wouldn't make much sense for the system to keep me here. I hope... It would also mean I wouldn't have to reach the safe zone, unlike Shayna.

Looking at Shayna, I sigh. I must be getting soft.

"Use the ring and run away."

My answer seems to surprise her, her eyes and hair changing color and taking on a pink hue, "It clearly didn't help its previous owner."

"Just slow down your heartbeat as much as possible, and if you think there's someone tracking you, stop and don't move. You should be fine otherwise. I don't even think I would be able to detect you if you were using a damaged arcane item to hide. And I'm quite good at detection."

For a moment, she just stares at me, blinking slowly and hesitating, "Are you sure? You seem to have a plan, but..."

"Go before I take that ring."

That brings a thankful smile to her face, her hair color changing to bright yellow. "I guess you have a plan. Okay then, I'll see you, Noname. You know my name, so look for me the next time you come to Beyond. Good luck," she says briefly.

Everyone is on their own here, their life has to take priority, so she doesn't hesitate much. It's completely reasonable, and the short time we've survived here together can't be valued over your own life. It's as simple as that.

I watch as she jumps over a few craters and stops at the top of one of the hills, waving back to me for the last time before putting the ring on. She slowly disappears from my sight, her smile the last thing I see.

Then I'm left alone and spend a short time examining the corpses, looking for anything useful. I go through their pockets, and clothes, and find a few more further away. They all seem to have been destroyed in the same way - an explosion of raw force from a very powerful body. It even seems like some of them got stuck in place, unable to move under the force that eventually tore them apart.

Well, it seems to be about time, I need to start getting ready.

I turn around, take a step, my arm moves swiftly, and I reach into the air to grab an invisible wrist. Oscillating mana coats my free hand, and I slash the air in front of me.

Shayna slowly appears, materializing from the air, her severed arm falling to the ground with the ring on her finger as blood sprays from her shoulder.

I've got her other arm now, held by the wrist, in her hand is a dagger made of that transparent, difficult-to-sense mana of hers. Pointed at my eye in an attempt to penetrate my brain.

She tries to attack me again, but I bury my hand into her leg and tear off a chunk of flesh, disrupting her concentration with the pain. I add an extra punch to her chest for good measure, breaking a few ribs in the process.

Even in this state, her disruption crashes into me along with a barrage of projectiles created from her mana.

I block it off easily and then fire off a disruption of my own, causing her to lose control of her skills.

Shayna then stands there, missing an arm and bleeding from her leg.

"I thought you had finally let your guard down around me," she says simply.

Finally, let your guard down, she says. There are no excuses, no lame explanations. She just breathes heavily, staring into my eyes with a determined gaze, constantly trying to retake control of her mana.

In the end, These arcane items really seem to be worth that much to some people. Enough to risk their lives for, enough to cloud their thinking. Just a hint of opportunity I given her was enough.

If she asked, I would have split the items with her evenly. I feel like that would have been fair after what we'd been through. I would have never betrayed her over a few measly items. But she had a different opinion; she wanted it all, even if it meant killing me. As of this moment, all the good feelings she had fostered in me are gone.

I let thermal energy coat my hand and touch the stump where I severed her arm, causing the wound to sizzle, her flesh burning as my heat cauterizes the wound and stops the bleeding. Then I do the same for her leg where I tore a piece off. The air fills the disgusting smell of burned flesh, and sweat beads on her forehead, as her hair starts turning gray. I think it's the first time they are showing real emotion instead of those she wanted to show.

"Noname, listen, I..." she starts, but before she can finish, I coat my finger in oscillating mana and stab it into her side.

Then I send thermal energy through.

When she opens her mouth to scream, I use [Redistribution] to hold her movement, and only her eyes show the pain.

Chapter 423: Named lurker

Shayna died.

At some point, she tried to use a store of mana she had secreted away in her body. She used it to create a projectile, the same one she used to kill that fire mage lurker. Extremely durable, and nearly invisible. It's clearly a better version of Brainiac's skill.

It's nothing short of crazy that she was able to create it without me sensing it under active interrogation. I gained some valuable information about Beyond, the guilds, and the 1st floor, but I wasn't able to ask as much as I wanted or get any more shards out of her.

Shayna acted quickly and decisively. She wasn't in Beyond for nothing.

That projectile of hers tore a hole through her chest, she must have been using the beating of her heart and the mana it generated to mask her work. The projectile pierced through the side of my neck, curving

into one of the big veins. It was headed for my brain, but I still managed to tilt my head back and to the side, avoiding a mortal wound.

Almost by reflex, I killed her, a hand coated in oscillating mana cleaving into the center of her skull, as the notification rang.

Then I forced thermal energy to the injured area while manipulating my mana in an effort to seal off the vein and staunch the flow of blood.

So now I'm standing here, a bloodied neck and clothes. Hand on my neck as I watch her projectile explode high in the air, erupting into a wide-range burst of mana. One last spiteful gift, a flare to everyone and everything in the area.

Thirty minutes remain, and I only have two options. Either run away or try to make my stand here and try to hold out for the next thirty minutes. There's a high probability I get ejected from Beyond after that. It's not quite a sure thing, but I'm willing to bet on it.

There are a few options for who I might meet. If I'm unlucky, it will be the named lurker, and in that case, I might die. If I am lucky though, it will be a group of Beyonders followed by lurkers, leading to a bloody melee.

I still keep my heart beating slowly and avoid using any kinetic energy; instead, I hold the Emberflame Staff I got from the first lurker we met. Thermal energy trickles out of my core and flows through the weapon, gathering into a golden orb just over the tip of the weapon. I stab the staff into the ground and adjust the arcane glove on my right hand, ready to activate it.

I have the damaged arcane ring Shayna took in my pocket; A last ditch option for when everything goes to shit. Sure, I could use it right away, but I can't say I'm thinking too logically right now.

In my other pocket, I have the Golem Heart, which should be something I can use as a distraction should I need to run away. In the worst case, I can sacrifice the item to slow my enemies. The problem is I don't know how to use it yet, and relying on it to slow down enemies could hurt more than it helps, given that it would mean expending a lot of effort trying to activate it rather than focusing on the skills I already have.

Lastly, the dagger I took from Roculus is charged and ready to be thrown, at which point it should release a poisonous mist upon impact.

Flamebearer is on my back, it can be used as a shield, and the Bloodthirst claymore has been planted in the ground next to the Emberflame Staff.

The other items are tied together and stowed in my bag, stashed away in a hole I found deep underground, and placed there through an anchor. They can stay here or be teleported to me should I feel the need to use them.

And so I wait, the minutes passing slowly and presences gradually appearing at the edge of my radar. Multiple waves of detection-type skills wash over me, and I take note of a number of fights. As the expedition members move to engage a few lurkers that must have gotten too close.

The smaller groups of lurkers quickly disappear, steamrolled by the 12-member group of Beyonders who, upon finding their target, do not hesitate in their rush to secure the site.

Once in a while, my eyes glance at the corpse of the feylith on the ground, and each time they do, The pain flares up in my neck. My wound has mostly healed, but the reminder remains.

When the first attack lands at my feet, I stop holding my heart back; instead, I start generating as much kinetic energy as it can handle. At the same time, that presence senses it far away and starts rushing here. The feeling alone makes me think it fully intends to crush anyone who would dare use the same energy as it.

Pulling the staff into my left hand and the claymore into my right, I lift the blade of the claymore and intercept an arrow aimed at me, absorbing the inertia of its movement. However, the power contained within still pushes me back, and mana seeps out of the ground attempting to disrupt my hold on my mana.

Rather than letting it, I counter with a skill of my own and block another attack, and shield my mind against the influence of hostile mental abilities.

Spikes shoot up from the ground, so I stomp, releasing a blast of kinetic energy, cracking the ground around me and disarming the attack.

Flaming blue projectiles shoot past me, sailing by on either side, before reversing course and targeting my back as I reposition and let Flamebearer absorb the blow while blocking an arrow with a new frequency of disruption.

The presence keeps coming closer, and soon the group will be able to feel it as well.

Multiple attacks connect high in the air, and bolts of lightning lance out at me, followed by primordial energy I haven't had the opportunity to face yet. The lightning crashes against a hastily constructed barrier, and my Mana Wavelength Iris activates as well as I fight off their attacks.

Mana seeps out of me in waves, compressing and strengthening my defenses until that primordial energy hits my barrier. The disruption it causes is so very different from any I've felt until now, and part of my barrier disappears as if it had been eaten by the attack.

Void primordial energy, if I had to guess, with a dark purple hue and bits of white sparkling through at the corners.

For the first time, I reposition, boosting my body with the kinetic energy I've collected so far.

Then I sense Eugean's mana gathering for some wide-range attack.

Locating her position, I boost myself into the air, and creating an arm out of mana, I grab Roculus' dagger and boost it with kinetic energy, flinging it at the group where it collides with their barrier, spreading a toxic mist into the air.

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One of my orbs shoots ahead, and as it collides with the barrier, it sends a powerful disrupting wave into the area. Then I focus on the compressed orb of thermal energy, and all of it shoots ahead in a finger-thin stream of golden flame.

It pierces through their first barrier and another more hastily created version. It rushes forth at a speed they couldn't have anticipated and causes the staff in my hands to crack as I abuse it, forcing it into overdrive without any care for the item itself.

The golden stream hits, landing in the middle of Eugean's chest, and I swing my left arm, bringing the flames with it, slicing through her along the vertical plane and splitting her head in half.

[You have defeated Manaflow Shaper - lvl 268]

I move the stream towards the leader of the group, but he just lifts an armored glove from his damaged suit of rusty armor and meets the flame with ease. Before I can move it again, he reaches towards Eugean's body, and her blood floats into the air, seeping into him.

Listening to my instincts, I lift the Bloodthirst and cover my face and body in the blade's winds, as I stack a Multitude of barriers in front of me.

It's all for nothing.

I find myself thrown into the air once again, with my left arm severed from my body and still holding the staff, and I watch it fly through the air in my peripheral vision, moments before it gets evaporated by a barrage of attacks, and the newly-destroyed staff falls to the ground.

Slamming into the hills nearby, I let out a groan and teleport towards one of my anchors just as the attacks reach me.

Before I can even check my wounds, a trap lying in wait explodes, sending me crashing through a number of buildings nearby, adding to the wounds I've already accrued.

Seizing on the opportunity, a man reaches me, swinging a hammer imbued with mana and hitting my right arm as I lift it to guard my head.

My unique passive absorbs the impact, and a noticeable amount of mana seeps into my reservoir. I use the surprise and boost my body with kinetic energy as I swing the claymore in my hand.

I don't get the opportunity to finish my attack though. I wind up having to absorb my own inertia, stopping mid-swing and boosting my body once again to deflect the three arrows that rush after me in quick succession, only to ping off my blade.

Each with its own unique disrupting effect.

I succeed in shaking off the fields, but the force of the attack launches me into the air anyway, and mid-air, I boost myself with kinetic energy, avoiding a burst of flames.

A lightning attack crashes against the Flamebearer on my back, and void energy disrupts one of my barriers, and the leader's blood projectiles pierce my body again, leaving more wounds in their wake.

I take a step and stumble, noticing a piece of my leg missing.

My mana flares up, a mana prosthesis quickly replaces it, while I dash to the side.

Multiple attacks surround me, heading towards my body, and after a long while, my mind and eyes feel like they're burning as I disrupt the attacks.

[Resonance - lvl 50 > Resonance - lvl 51]

The reward for that is a sword to the belly and a blow from a hammer that sends me rolling again, with a big part of the impact absorbed by my unique passive.

I use another of my anchors, and as another trap explodes in front of me, I cover my body with mana, enduring it all, and quickly replacing the damaged parts with mana from my reserves.

More mana seeps out of my body and reservoir, creating armor around me that becomes denser and slightly bigger. For the first time, I activate my domain, instantly feeling a range of attempts to destroy it

and fight against it, several people joining forces to that end. Their rapid reaction makes me note in the back of my mind that negating domains appears to be a regular aspect of the fight.

I grab the claymore with a new left arm made of mana, and using the glove, I touch the blood on my clothes. Then I activate the damaged arcane glove, and projectiles made of my blood, not unlike the leader's, shoot through the air, targeting the archer.

They pierce through barriers, armor, and anything else in their way. A shower of bloody projectiles tearing the archer apart.

[You have defeated Nullshot Ranger - lvl 261]

Bitch.

Then they tear my domain apart, with the three much weaker domains attacking me all at once.

My armor cracks under their attacks. Disruptive waves hit my body, making the armor flicker, and more bloody projectiles manage to pierce me.

It's difficult to even stand now, thermal energy working on overdrive, In an effort to power my poor epic healing passive.

The leader appears in front of me. I can't even see his movement, and I'm sent flying, more bloody projectiles piercing my body as I scramble to protect my vitals.

And then they finally feel it, that presence with its terrifying mastery over kinetic energy finally coming to their range with incredible speed.

A spear made of blood forms in the leader's hand, and it pierces through my armor, and the arm I place in its way, before continuing halfway into my chest.

I hate to accept it, but it's obvious.

I'm not strong enough yet.

I release all of the kinetic energy I had stored, but the leader endures it all, though I do break the spear in his hand. Reforming the mana around me, I shape it and compress it into a javelin which I shoot at him. The javelin turns bright white, and I teleport away.

Only to find another trap waiting for me as I proceed to be thrown against the wall, even though I block most of the explosion with an orb that I manage to surround the disk with, taking inspiration from Gareth. The orb just bursts open and part of the explosion burns my side.

Then there are no further attacks. In the distance, I can see the leader standing where my javelin hit him. There is no damage on his body, but he is looking between me and the new fight. The rest of the group faces the powerful enemy. There are no other lurkers nearby, just the one.

A tall male demon with long white hair and short black horns. Even though he's dead, reduced to a lurker, his face is beautiful, his pale red eyes retaining that hint of craziness all demons seem to possess.

I'm not using any senses, all of my kinetic energy is gone, I've even emptied my core. My heart is beating as slowly as I can make it. Even then, I can see the demon's mastery of kinetic energy for what it is.

His movements are incredibly quick and twitchy, with bursts of kinetic energy propelling him forward and allowing him to move at incredible speeds.

He has no weapons, and he's tearing the group apart one after another with nothing but his own two arms. There seems to be a sadistic kind of entertainment to it all, and anyone who tries to run away freezes on the spot, as the kinetic energy of their movement is absorbed.

Debris freezes in the air, weapons stop moving, severed limbs and spurting blood, everything floats in place as if the scene had been frozen in time, and the demon alone moves through it all, allowing his targets to move only as he attacks them.

The remaining half of the group faces him like that, while more people are already running away, each in a different direction.

It takes just a single glance, but the leader starts running as well, and I do the same, putting the damaged arcane ring on my finger.

I don't even try to retrieve the equipment I left underground. Instead, I sit quietly on the ground. Gradually, I feel the ring hiding me and my heartbeat slows, I have the thermokinetic construct turned off. I don't even move my fingers, as I focus on slowing my breathing and trying to limit my production of kinetic energy.

Closing my eyes to avoid blinking, I sit there and wait.

Chapter 424: Need some healing?

I don't see anything, nor do I send my senses into the area. I just sit on the ground, still down an arm and a leg, as blood seeps from my many wounds.

I'm not even using thermal energy to power my passive, the only thing I can do is listen to the sounds of the battle nearby and feel the vibrations in the air. The white-haired demon tears through the group, but the point comes where all the sounds and screams stop, while the air fills with the heavy scent of blood.

Something explodes nearby, Whitey most likely leaving to hunt the fleeing members, their movements giving them away. It's a sort of detection that tends to be difficult to trick, even more than using mana. He can just sense your movements, down to the beating of your heart.

He passes through the area around me multiple times, and I refuse to move even as he gets further and further away. Just a trickle of my mana seeping into the ring to power its effects. The least amount possible; I'm trying to hide as much as I can, focusing my entire being on said task.

It gains me a few notifications as the skills level up, but I won't let them distract me. I don't even check the timer to see the amount of time remaining. Even my thoughts feel sluggish from the state I'm trying to force myself into. My own heart beats very, very slowly, and I feel cold in my remaining limbs as it fails to supply enough blood.

The passage of time is hard to estimate, but after what feels like forever, I hear steps approaching me, the slow, confident steps of someone who's found their prey.

It seems like the group's been wiped out already.

I can't stop my heart fully, no matter how much I try. I'm sure Lily could pull it off, but that's not where my talents lie.

And even that little is enough for it to detect me, and the presence stops right in front of me. Proving all my efforts useless, as my own heart reveals my location, even in its heavily suppressed state.

The timer shows 10 seconds left till my stay token expires.

I direct my thermal energy outwards, using the flames to infuse my barriers rather than trying to heal.

I don't want to do it but given no other option, I create an orb of black mana and allow it to seep into my body and mind, strengthening both for the first time in a while. It's easier than I remember, and I find myself reminded of the addictive power it holds.

Another black orb forms nearby ready to be used.

Eight seconds remain, and a building explodes nearby. Another the size of a small apartment complex is thrown into the air, before being reduced to a cloud of debris hanging in the air as if frozen in time. The demon moves through it all, his long white hair trailing through the air behind him while his red eyes remain glued on me.

Seven seconds remain, and he stands in front of me.

I use the arcane glove, blood projectiles erupting forth from my body in an even more powerful copy of the skill the leader used before.

They seem laughable, failing to so much as pierce the demon's skin.

Six seconds remain, and he breaks all of my barriers with a single strike, the whole stack crumbling under the sheer physical force he brings to bear. No mana, no skills, just a powerful body, and kinetic energy.

Five seconds remain, and my flames are blown away, with a single wave of his arm. It looks so slim, and even so, his simple application of kinetic energy extinguishes my flames like a child blowing out his birthday candles.

I try to move, but I freeze on the spot. My heart stops, my lungs stop, not a single hair on my skin moves, and it becomes so eerily quiet.

The demon surrounded by all this debris frozen in time takes a step towards me.

Using my mind, I launch the orb of black mana at him, the orb elongating and speeding towards his head.

He tries and fails to freeze it in the air much the same way he has with everything else, and the projectile embeds itself in his arm as he raises it to protect his head.

Four seconds remain, and I extend my domain as far as possible and place another anchor, teleporting away.

Four seconds remain, and he is in front of me once again.

The mana impaling his arm is already gone, thrown somewhere far away and he grabs my arm and pulls it, tearing it from my shoulder.

At least it's just the mana prosthesis.

I teleport again.

Three seconds remain, and my heart still hasn't beaten nor have I been able to move since he found me, that's just how big the area his skill covers when he decides to stop everything around him from moving. Everything other than black mana and the mana I use to power my skills.

Three projectiles made of black mana shoot at him, and this time he dodges each one with an air of extreme ease, but it does slow him down, at least a little. I teleport again, and before I can do so again, a stone crashes into my body, breaking the bones in my back, and sending my body crashing into the wall of a building.

Unable to move or even groan in pain, I teleport.

Two seconds remain when he reaches me again.

I strengthen my body with as much black mana as possible, my mind straining despite its reinforced state. My unique passive activates, [Redistribution] activates as well, and I even manage to lift the damaged arcane claymore to block it. Just for that split second, I move my body against the hold, using all the power I have at my disposal.

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The punch breaks my arm, and shoulder as my sword gets pushed aside, slamming into my body and causing even more damage. The amount of mana that flows into my reservoir as the kinetic energy is transformed into mana exceeds anything I've felt so far.

It's not enough though, it's so far from being enough to face him.

One second remains when I use [Tether] for the last time.

I once again find myself unable to move as he changes his approach to my immobilization. I watch as Whitey moves towards me. He bulldozes through buildings, trees, and anything else in his way. Every time he does so, the debris rockets into the air before being stopped in place.

His steps don't even seem to touch the ground, they seem so smooth, almost as if he's running on air. None of his kinetic energy seems wasted, damaging only what he wants to damage.

The way he uses kinetic energy is beautiful.

You have no time left on your Stay Token. You will now be removed from Beyond.

You have failed to reach the 1st floor safe zone, the next time you enter Beyond, you will appear on the Entrance Floor.

Before Whitey reaches me, the area around me changes, and I find myself returning to the familiar cold air of the 6th floor, the beautiful stars and nebulas swirling in the sky.

I can move again, but as the black mana strengthening my body wears off, the pain intensifies. So many wounds mark my body that I just continue to lie there, keeping myself conscious and feeding thermal energy to my passive, just to get that little bit of healing.

As far as I can sense, there is only one presence nearby. She isn't even trying to hide, and upon detecting me, it takes her a scant few minutes to reach my location. She drops from her run into a slow walk when she spots me lying on the ground and slowly approaches me.

Lily squats by my side with her knees pulled to her chest and looks at me, curiosity burning in her eyes, "Bad day?"

"It could be worse."

"I see. Need some healing?"

"Not really, just a few flesh wounds, nothing worth mentioning."

"That's true, you're missing an arm and a leg, you've broken most of your ribs, you have three holes piercing completely through your chest, and missing a chunk of your other leg, one of your ears is also

gone, taking a decent chunk of the skin on your face with it. Plus a bit of internal bleeding, and a strained brain. Did I miss anything?"

"A broken fingernail."

"That's true, I'll add one broken nail to the tally," Lily says, nodding seriously.

"My passive will take care of that."

"Your passive sucks, Nat."

"It does well for being only epic grade."

"I could heal better on the 1st floor."

"Show off. So what are you doing here?"

"Just hunting. Tess said this would probably be the place you entered Beyond and that you would probably end up here when you returned, so I've been hunting in the area from time to time," she says, reaching out and poking my body with her finger, and through that, I feel her warm mana flood my body.

I let it happen, and I soak in the feeling as she starts healing me, starting with my internal injuries and the more serious wounds.

"Any trouble?" I ask.

Lily shakes her head, "Everything's been going well, Tess and Sophie decided to take over the remnants of Black Tower, and Tess has kind of become the new leader. She's already started threatening the other groups around us. Sophie's basically vice captain, and sometimes she takes over so Tess can go out to level."

“Sounds boring.”

“Well, we’re all fairly strong, so Tess only ever needs to spend a few hours at a time to manage things. Most of the time, we level and train. We’ve even started using the information they’ve collected to locate powerful monsters and good hunting spots.”

“Still boring,” I say, continuing to lie on the ground and observe my wounds as they heal and my limbs regrow.

It still annoys me that I can’t replicate it, even after all this time.

“How was Beyond?” Lily asks.

“Different than I expected but not in a bad way. It's just another challenge, and I think you, Tess, and I should be able to find each other.”

“You’ll need to tell me everything. It shouldn’t take long, and I’ll be able to do my 3rd trial within the next few months.”

“Don't worry, I'll tell you.”

At that, Lily smiles and pokes me again, flooding me with another wave of her healing mana.

The atmosphere between us is so much different from what I had with Shayna. With Lily, I notice myself dropping my guard, and there is a realization that if she really wanted, she could kill me with ease. I wouldn't even know it had happened, just a short burst of that gray mana in place of her healing. It would be enough to destroy my chest and my heart with it.

“I got four damaged arcane items,” I note and watch her reaction.

Lily giggles, “Maya’s going to be all over you when she finds out, and if you mention it in the Community, Tess is going to be hoping for a javelin.”

She then looks at the claymore on the ground and reads the description, and I show her the ring, glove, and piece of clay.

None of them seems to catch her interest, and she returns them to me. Instead, she pulls a finger bone from her pocket, the one that came from the Champion on the 5th floor. Nevan's father, who was easily one of the most durable people in that world.

"I think I came up with a way to make my bones stronger. I'm testing it now, and if I succeed, I should be able to do the same with yours. Of course, it hurts terribly, and blocking pain receptors is difficult, but you can do it! The stone we got from Savant and Champion Tristan's disciple Hella certainly helps. Oh, and I might have come up with a way to put a mark on you. It could store some of my healing mana, and help you out when activated. It might take a few months to make it work, though, and I'll definitely need your help with that. Oh, and..." Lily continues to babble on excitedly like she does every time she gets a chance to talk about her experiments, and I listen to her.

With another piece of my mind, I check on the notifications I got from that last fight:

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 51 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 52]

[Focus - lvl 50 > Focus - lvl 51]

Not as many as I would like, but at least I got a hold of some items to experiment with. Together with Flamebearer, that makes 5 damaged arcane items. It's a scary amount, enough to convince a group of more experienced attendees to risk their lives. Even a single damaged arcane item makes you significantly more interesting to the right people.

However, I can't bring myself to care too much. Sure, my inner loot goblin would like to have more of them. Arcane, epic, all the items. Mostly so I can use them to improve my abilities. Flamebearer, for example, even now, is a font of inspiration, helping me improve my use of thermal energy.

I just don't want to become reliant on items, so no matter how happy I am when I find one, it can't compare to learning something new.

Pushing these thoughts away, I continue to listen to Lily, who has already started talking about the prospect of growing wings and an extra set of arms.

Chapter 425: An Offer

As we pass through the area, I take a moment to think and begin to suspect that Lily wasn't so much hunting here as she was lurking around in the hope that she would meet me upon my return.

When I come out and ask, she doesn't even lie, stating, without a hint of shame, that she expected me to return half dead. And, to my slight annoyance, I can't refute her logic.

I find it refreshing, especially after experiencing the community in Beyond, where everyone seemed like they were willing to betray their comrades just for an opportunity to betray somebody else harder. Even though I know she probably still has a crush on me, she's not pushing quite as hard as before. Now Lily just feels like a naive young girl looking for any excuse to be around the person she likes.

I've already rejected her though, so I won't mention it again. I'm sure she will get over it soon enough. Or hell, maybe she'll stop being like that and, like a normal person, like me, push those emotions to the side. Maybe her subclass really is Lust.

My mood has improved since I returned, part of it is the trust I've found myself having in this girl and the rest of Group 4. It's a surprisingly warm feeling.

Then there is also all the loot and other items I have stowed away in various holes in the ground, set in place before leaving for the Beyond. Mana stones, weapons, materials, weird leathers, shards of bone from powerful monsters, alloys, mana stones dense with information, and more.

According to Tess, this floor's going to take a while, so I probably have at least a few months to experiment properly. Heck, I still have a mana stone with that Restrictive Training Emblem from LissLiss.

Three mana shaping exercises.

Arcane items to examine.

Quests to complete in the name of earning Beyond Stay Tokens.

Any number of things to learn about this floor.

An idea for my first own technique and so much more.

The grind never stops, indeed, and I wouldn't want it any other way. No matter how powerful I am now, I'm still just a speck of nothing in the eyes of the right people. The other rounds of Earth's tutorial, the other attendees in Beyond, and that's not even getting into everything waiting to happen after we finish the tutorial.

Champion rank, Absolute rank, Ruler rank, maybe something beyond that? That reminds me, I need to find another Champion candidate and see if I can't test out that challenge thing.

"Lily, even after a year in the tutorial, we know shit all."

She slows down her run to match mine and tilts her head, "We know a little bit."

"Nah, we know nothing."

"Why do you sound happy about that?"

"Because I am. Group of five monsters, off to the right, the ones that pop from the ground."

"Got it!" Lily shouts as she changes direction and charges the monsters. Before we regroup with others, we can try to score a few levels.

Stopping in place, I watch as she sets our stuff on the ground and charges them. Not even using her skills, just the pure strength of her body, she starts annihilating the monsters. It might be me, but it looks like she's using less mana than before. It seems to stem from her duel with Tess back in the tournament.

At the time Her impatience and inexperience led to her being almost toyed with as she was forced to waste her terribly low mana reserves.

Now though, faced with these leech-like monsters piercing through the ground, she falls back on the tactic of boosting her body with short bursts of mana instead of relying on [Sacrifice].

Taking the time to truly grasp her strengths will make her more efficient, and ensure that she doesn't have to waste [Sacrifice] on every little thing. There's probably more to it though, I'm sure Tess and others cooperate with suggestions for their training regimens.

"Is Sophie still refusing to go to Beyond?" I ask as Lily returns.

She moves a lock of her hair from her face and looks at me, "Izzy keeps telling her to go, and I think Sophie will do it soon. She is probably just waiting for you to tell her what's waiting for her after the Trials. Learning that it's just another place she can go with Stay Tokens and that she can return to Izzy might finally make her go."

"I think she would do well there."

"Yeah, her skill is scary. But it's going to take her months to get through her Beyond trials when she goes with that time limit. Have you thought of trying to meet up with Savant, Gareth, or Tacita?"

I hesitate for a moment before responding to her question. Should I try to contact the others in an attempt to meet up in Beyond when they get there? Should I try to find people from Earth other than Victoria? They would probably be more trustworthy than the others, as most of the attendees seem inclined to stick with others from their planet.

It makes sense that in such a new environment, their petty resentments for each other get pushed away. In Beyond, it's us versus them, the place just seems too dangerous to explore on your own.

"We'll see, later," I answer, deciding to push the decision onto future Nathaniel.

It takes another day to reach the rest of Group 4. At this point, Lily's initial excuse of hunting nearby is thoroughly destroyed. So she just stays quiet, and I decide to ignore it in exchange for her help carrying my stuff.

We meet the others at the small outpost that apparently once belonged to Black Tower, a smaller one, but it's apparently better than the main base which took too much damage for quick repair. It makes me wonder how exactly they got the twins out and how much damage they caused. Even though they have pathetic mana reserves, Group 4 can be scary at times.

Well, not Biscuit, he is perfect as he is. He's also the first one to welcome me, our future animal Archmage and overlord of Earth and best doggo of the 6th floor floats towards me. Something has changed, and it seems like he can't wait to show me.

Of course, I noticed right away. Biscuit's movement speed while floating has increased by around 6%. It's still much slower than his walking speed and it's barely noticeable, but I can certainly tell!

"You are moving much faster now, Biscuit," I note.

My suspicion is quickly confirmed by the excited wagging of his short tail.

(Food!)

"Yes, you are!"

His tail wiggles even faster at my praise, and I let him float in front of my face and boop my nose with his front right paw. I mirror his action, booping his nose in return, which our future overlord gracefully allows.

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"Stupid Tentaniel!" Izzy shouts, rushing closer as she pulls me into a hug, while her skill attempts to connect to my feelings only for me to block it.

It's scary enough that she can sense them on the surface, even a little bit. Maybe there is some sort of social norm regarding the use of such skills, similar to social norms on when it's fine to teleport away from a conversation. Something tells me we may as well be behaving like brutes when it comes to our skills and the way we use them in certain situations.

"You are not allowed to call me that," I chastise, flicking her in the head.

"Stupidthaniel?"

"Also no."

"Tent Cr..."

I flick her in the head again before she can finish.

Meanwhile, Noodle, who I can always count on to be present somewhere, coiled around her arm, looks at me and nods. I return the gesture and send a whiff of my mana his way, which he gratefully noms on. I also notice him looking over the items we brought here, especially the pouches of bones I took from Bone Fortress, though he seems even more interested in the pieces I got from the remains of the monster that was resting against Veil Ignition Station No. 2.

Interesting, maybe I need to spend a bit more time with Noodle. His ability to eat mana always fascinated me.

"Listen, can I keep that claymore?" The one saying that is, of course, Maya. She's already taken up a spot next to Lily, who carried the damaged arcane weapon on the way here.

"No."

"You have that ax already, you don't need a claymore. You don't even like using long swords, you prefer short swords, javelins, and nuking the area."

"I plan to examine it to see if it can do something cool. I might try to smelt it and the ax to create an undamaged arcane weapon if it fits."

"That's such a waste," Maya moans, shaking her head. "Still, welcome back. Tess, Sophie, and the twins are dealing with some shit. There is a small group trying to mess with the web Sophie's set up. Kim is hunting somewhere outside."

"That's fine, we can talk later," I say, sending my senses through the area.

There are a few people who notice my wave, but I mostly ignore them after failing to find anyone decently powerful.

What I do find is our new underlings, taken from the survivors of the Black Tower raid, and Tess and the others in the process of dealing with them. As always, I'm thankful for the extrovert gang taking care of business.

"Want to know what Black Tower's new name is?" Maya asks with a smile as she lets go of the claymore.

"No, I don't," I reply, already having a strong suspicion.

"Tell him anyway!" Izzy crows in challenge, as she dodges under my attempt to flick her nose.

With a smile broadening on her face, Maya continues, "Welcome to the group known as Angry Kittens."

I knew it.

Hours later I'm sitting in one of the rooms in the main building, I find myself a spot close to the window. The view is absolute shit, and I'm not sitting in a comfy armchair, rather I find myself in some abominable variation made out of cold stone.

Of course, the nebulas in the starry sky are nice, I have to give the 6th floor at least that much, but otherwise, there isn't much to look at. It could work better if the window was bigger and the view wasn't so swamped by the small outpost below.

And there, wandering through the backdrop of the outpost, are a few dozen of the surviving members of Black Tower going about their tasks.

So far, it seems like a person's strength is the most important consideration here, and killing most of the previous regime proved our strength. Sophie's ability probably helped quite a bit as well.

Sure, from what I've heard, the old Black Tower members still fight from time to time or just leave, but most of them have decided to stay. The concept of strength in numbers thrives even here, and camping outside on your own doesn't seem to be a good option.

"I would rather ditch them and do our own thing," I tell Tess once again.

This time, even Sophie breaks down in a sigh making a wild gesture at Tess. It's just the three of us in the room at the moment, planning our next steps.

Tess, more patient than Sophie, just nods, "I know what you mean, but I want to learn more about the central region, the monsters in the area, and the other groups. So far, it seems like escaping is going to be a task in and of itself, and collecting more information can only make it much faster. You want to get to the next floor as fast as possible, right?"

"Don't treat me like a child, waving the next floor in front of me just to get me to cooperate. Sure, it's working, but don't do it."

"Sure, Nat," Tess says, smiling. "Don't worry, it might seem like a lot, but we spend most of our time training and hunting. Between me and Sophie, this barely takes any time."

"You'd better be if you want to survive in Beyond," I repeat.

I have already told her and others all I could about Beyond, and after that, everyone else other than Sophie and Tess left the room. To give us, the adults, the opportunity to talk, apparently.

“Just give me a bit more time and I’ll be ready to join you there and don't worry, I’ll try to set something up with Gareth and the others from Beyond. From the looks of it, we could have a big advantage if we went as a group.”

“Others I met there thought the same.”

“That's true, but we are different, are we not?”

“We are,” I agree.

Earth's Beyonders seem to be above average so far.

Tess has her crown over her head, actively storing lightning. Apparently, she is keeping it up almost constantly to fill it up, and it's still not full yet. It's an example I’ve already chosen to follow with my own crown as it floats over my head.

Taking a few steps, Tess puts her hand on Sophie's shoulder, who seems to be caught deep in thought, before asking “What do you think?”.

“I need a day or two to decide if I want to start my Beyond trials.”

“Have you already fulfilled all the requirements?”

“Yes, I did some time ago. I’ll speak with Izzy, so later, Tess, Nathaniel.” Sophie states, waving as she leaves the room, leaving the two of us by ourselves.

“So what's the plan? Do you want to continue on your own or wait for, at least, Lily and I?” Tess asks after Sophie leaves.

I return Tess' gaze, "I think I'll go back before you and Lily enter. I'll be more careful and only go for a few days, we'll see if I can make some money with my crafting and get some more information. I might try to look for the others from Earth. Maybe even look into changing my handler. That way when I enter Beyond for the third time I'll be able to save some time, and we can form a party if you make it there by then."

"That sounds like a nice compromise. One more thing though. There is something I wanted to tell you about the twins..." she continues to talk and I listen.

Some time later the twins and I go out to hunt, just the three of us. Some of the monsters tend to be strong so I enjoy the fight, but I don't forget to watch the twins fight and slowly confirm Tess' concerns.

So when we finally take a break I address them without dancing around the issue, "Tess wants you two to switch difficulty to Hard if you don't manage to get any stronger than you are now."

"I knew it," Aaron sighs, and Dennis just nods solemnly.

"So why are you telling us?" Dennis asks.

"Oh, I'm not finished," I say, lifting a finger. "You two are weaker than even Isabella. Even Min-Jae could take you on. Maya would wipe the floor with you. You would barely be a challenge for Sophie and Biscuit already kicked your ass during the tournament."

They stare at me, blinking.

"Together you might manage to pull some fuckery given the way your skills make you stronger as a pair, but that's it. Currently, you're the weakest link in group 4."

I can see they don't want to hear it, but I think it needs to be said.

"But?" Aaron asks.

"But you two have a skill called [Connection] and I'm sure I could make use of it to improve one of my skills, maybe evolve it or make improvements. It's also probably much stronger than your use of it would imply."

"Great. Just great."

"Of course, I don't expect you to teach me for free, so this is my offer. We're going to work as a group for another 2 weeks and do our stuff. After that, we're going to split into two groups. Mine will be Biscuit, Lily, and the two of you," I say.

I've been thinking and I think it's going to be worth it. I believe I can make my [Resonance] stronger by observing [Connection]. During that time we can also work on body modifications with Lily. It's a good plan if I do say so myself.

"I will help you train and teach you how to handle your skills. I will also teach you Coordinates so you can improve your [Mana Manipulation] and get some shards. Of course, don't expect it to be easy. I might even throw in some extra tasks, just to make things more difficult for you."

They seem to be getting worried but I can tell they're interested. They must have noticed it themselves. All the ways they're lacking compared to the rest of the group. Maybe, on some level, they've been hoping for this.

"There will be some rules of course, but the main one is this: If, over the course of these next few months you fail to meet my expectations, you will use the difficulty change token when I ask."

Chapter 426: A lot to do

I leave Dennis and Aaron so they can decide. We still have 2 weeks until we need to know, so they have time to think about it. It's not an easy decision, so it will probably take a while.

(Yo, we accept,) Dennis says through group 4's connection.

(We know the training will be hellish, and we'll trash-talk you behind your back as a result, but we don't want to be left behind,) Aaron adds.

(We have some pride of our own as well and we'd be lying if we said we didn't appreciate the opportunity. We also know Tess probably had something to do with it, but still, thank you.)

(Yeah, thanks. We'll show you we aren't as weak as you think.)

(Do you think he called us weak on purpose to fire us up? Comparing us to Izzy like that?)

(Maybe, we...)

(Okay then, no taking back. If you fail, you will switch to Hard Difficulty even if I have to force you.) I say, speaking through the link before disconnecting from the conversation.

Weirdos, at least take some time to think about it. But, they are in Hell difficulty, so I probably could have expected that. It's not like they're actually weak.

A kindred spirit. A genius. I would love to speak with her as a fellow mana enjoyer and shake her hand.

The moment I break the stone I received from Cockroach-Sandra a web of inscriptions begins seeping into my body and covering my skin, almost in its entirety. It's extremely dense and delicate. At some points, it may as well be microscopic, difficult to even observe, even with my eye trait activated.

It serves as a good reminder that I will always have a long way to go as if I needed one.

Then comes the part I've been waiting for.

Immediately after the web covers my body, an emblem etches itself in the skin of my chest reminding me of a tattoo, positioned right over my heart, a dense web of circuits that serve to create some sort of circular and pleasing if functional design.

Upon taking a closer look I find an option that should allow me to strengthen and tune its effects. And of course, the results speak for themselves, resulting in an instant backlash that sends spasms through my muscles. Very painful ones.

I'm glad I didn't use it in Beyond.

A decent chunk of my mana gets pulled away, tying up nearly half of my generated mana, seeping into the emblem now covering my heart and flowing into the web behind it, and dispersing throughout my body. The effect is immediate, the immense pressure applying itself evenly across my body. Unlike the Burden Enhancement Inscriptions that rendered me incapable of moving without the use of kinetic energy, this one does multiple things.

It makes my body feel heavier while putting a lot of strain on it. It's almost like Active Tempering on a lower level and left run at all times. The strain forcing my body to adapt, as it takes damage and recovers, making me stronger in the process.

The extremely delicate and microscopic web of inscriptions connected to the emblem forces my body to fight me, applying constant pressure with my own mana. There is even a "switch" that I can use to decide how much mana I want to feed the Emblem.

As I examine it more, I think about the difference between inscriptions and emblems. As far as I can tell, emblems seem to be more permanent when applied to the body, while inscriptions have always felt like temporary measures. The emblem just seems connected to me on a deeper level.

Maybe I'm wrong. The emblem might be a higher level of inscriptions, or inscriptions work better for items while emblems work best with the body.

I still remember the Emblems Nevan had, the ones that allowed him to create his amazing flames - a gift from his Absolute. I totally want to dabble in the process sometime in the future, and I think that my constructs might be the first step toward an emblem. Or maybe They're all just constructs, emblems, and inscriptions. I don't know, and the system won't tell me. And who cares anyway.

I wait for a bit, but there are no notifications miraculously offering information.

Well, fine, I'll just have to learn on my own.

For now, I let it set at a 50% rate of mana consumption, even though I notice my body starting to hurt as I've just finished a long workout. And I'm only a few minutes in. How crazy is that, but I bet it's effective so I take note of my current stats to compare them later.

Lvl 258

Strength: 123

Dexterity: 116

Constitution: 274

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1078 + 1078

I lovingly examine the emblem currently torturing me. The Champion who made it was truly a kindred spirit.

Next, I have three mana exercises. They are as follows:

Evil orb - an orb with ever changing frequency and mana requirements to keep it from popping or disappearing. I already have three floating at my side.

The next is the infinity orb, an orb with another orb inside and another inside of that and another, and so on, continuing for as far as you can. Each one, growing progressively smaller. The exercise promotes control and delicate manipulations, the goal being to see how small an object one can create while maintaining the proper shapes. The third one is the Spinning Orbs. I've given each their own fancy name. I can't be bothered to remember their original names.

The last exercise involves making two spinning orbs with separate, intersecting orbits. The goal is to make them both spin as quickly as possible without crashing. At some point, even the slightest mistake will cause them to collide, and I can't find any reason not to add more orbs as I go, all with their own orbits, connecting at one point, though that would increase the difficulty by a lot.

For a moment, I stop looking over the mana shaping exercises and close my eyes.

Holy hell, that emblem is evil. I feel like I can barely breathe, and it's been a long time since I felt my muscles burn like this. Even lifting my arm is getting pretty tough, and the Restrictive Training Emblem, or RTE for short, isn't even working to its fullest.

Just out of curiosity, I change the setting, and it takes another chunk out of my mana regen.

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

Yup, totally evil.

Just that short test tore some muscles.

I kind of like it. Of course, it's not like I'm a masochist, but it uses plenty of mana that I don't have to cycle now and spends it inside of my body. It's almost like some sort of limiter, a weight I can cast off to reveal my true power. Or something like that. Maybe I'm just a tiny bit childish when it comes to that sort of thing.

After a long while, I decide to check my quests.

Floor Quest:

Escape the Astral Prison

Rewards:

???

Epic grade passive skill

5000 Shards

Communication with your disciple for 10 minutes

Send a single item to your disciple (up to rare rarity)

Increased daily Community limit

I already know from my conversation with Tess that escaping this place won't be a simple matter. The moon we find ourselves on has some sort of protection against just that, the kind of stuff that prevents people with spatial skills from teleporting out of here. Even flying too high is discouraged on account of a range of defenses that are rumored to be capable of killing level 400s with ease.

Building an array to try to connect it to somewhere outside doesn't work either.

We don't know much more than that, to be honest. Apparently, we're in one of the more rural areas of this prison, which fits with the system's tendencies, with the floors gradually increasing in difficulty. Central regions tend to have more and stronger people with a better knowledge base.

So far, it's been interesting to see so many people from different planets, and there are more arriving all the time. Almost as if there were scheduled dropoff times.

There's also been talk of a coalition, powerful monsters, and the remains of some kind of ancient civilization. What interests me more is the regions no one dares to enter, chock full of powerful sleeping monsters. I even hear the word Calamity from time to time.

As much as I complain about dealing with other people, Tess was able to collect quite the hoard of information, and she's planning to scout out the central region sometime in the next two weeks, force a few more answers from some of the other groups, and then we'll go our separate ways. And I don't mind doing it.

Coming back to side quests, I find some new ones as well.

Side quest: Get all skills over level 40

Reward: Beyond 1 day stay token

Side quest: Get all skills over level 50

Reward: Trait strengthening token (1st stage)

Side quest: Reach level 275

Reward: Beyond 1 day stay token

Side quest: Defeat 1000 monsters over level 200

Reward: Beyond 1 day stay token

They go on and on too. I almost ran out of side quests before, but now there are dozens. Some offer food and water, others offer epic passives and items. A number of them offer beyond stay tokens too, but only for a day at a time.

None of the quests happen to be anything simple either, except, perhaps killing 1000 monsters over level 200. Kaboom, am I right?

It just seems like access to Beyond is purposefully limited, at least currently, almost as if the system's forcing us to keep climbing the floors here in Hell difficulty.

Is there more the system wants to show us?

While examining the effect my new RTE has been having on me, I stand up and nearly fall, barely managing to catch myself. The inscriptions before didn't allow me to move at all. It's like they turned off my body and kinetic energy was the only thing that would make it move.

This emblem feels like I've been covered in weights, weights that have the sole purpose of damaging my body with a single objective: force it to adapt to the strain and grow stronger in the process.

Curious, I use kinetic energy to support my movement, but the moment I do, the emblem stops working.

Well, that's straight-up evil. Nice one, Cockroach-Sandra.

I stop using kinetic energy and let part of my mind focus on the inscriptions Lissandra used back then. I can mimic them and use them to train my kinetic energy, switching between that and my new RTE.

Plus Lissandra's mana shaping exercises. Then throw in the stuff Miwa left to help me work on damaged arcane items. Plus the body modifications I've been planning with Lily. Plus my plans to improve my current constructs. Plus my efforts to level my other skills, and using the twins' skills to improve my own. Plus... more, just more.

But first, I want to see Noodle, and so I start heading for the place I sense his presence, I grab a few of the bone shards I've acquired. One from the Bone Fortress here on the 6th floor and the other one from the snake skeleton next to the pyramid.

I find myself in a smaller room, facing Izzy who has her arms crossed against her chest, "I won't let you feed Noodle weird stuff!"

Noodle is next to her, looking between her, me, and Biscuit, who is currently sitting on my lap, with curiosity in his eyes.

Sophie ignores all of us, focusing instead on some weird mana construct floating in front of her as she practices. I notice myself starting to examine it, but I force myself to stop and turn back to Izzy.

“Look, he kept staring at me and drooling over it. I’m just curious. Also, why the hell is he still the same size?” I ask.

“Noodle can’t drool! And he’s stayed this size because I asked him to; he’s just cuter that way.”

In answer, I lift a piece of bone from the 5th floor and wave it.

Noodle follows the bone from side to side as if hypnotized.

“That doesn’t prove anything,” Izzy nods seriously.

I move it up and down, and Noodle continues to track it perfectly. He keeps it up too, even as I start zig-zagging.

At this point, I start to wonder if I can make the pearl-white snake dizzy, so I start moving faster, spinning the fragment in circles.

“Okay, okay, I get it,” Izzy sighs.

It might just be me, but Noodle seems to perk up at that, turning to her, ignoring the fragment of bone for the first time since I brought it here. He slithers closer, lovingly coiling around her arm and licking her cheek.

What a tricky little creature. Snakes use their tongues to smell as far as I know. They do not, however, lick. It must be something he picked up from Biscuit.

Indeed, our future overlord is great to affect others so profoundly.

I reach down and pet Biscuit who looks up to me and yawns slightly. Using that opportunity, I put a finger into his open mouth, and when he closes it, he bites my finger gently.

His expression is confused, as always when I do it, but he then pulls away and licks my hand before laying back down on my leg, his intelligent eyes focused on the duo in front of us.

Chapter 427: Knight

“So what can Noodle do? You spend the most time with him,” I ask Izzy.

Meanwhile, said white snake is coiled around the shard of bone I gave him from Veil Ignition Station no. 2. He straight-up ignores the second one from the Bone Fortress. So far, he hasn’t eaten or absorbed it. He just keeps flicking his tongue towards it and touching it with his scaly body. He is emitting a small amount of mana though, and I observe the process, even activating my trait to do so.

Izzy watches as well. “Noodle can eat mana from the air. He can also perfectly store and digest until he can’t be felt at all.”

That seems somewhat similar to Biscuit’s primordial energy and a tiny bit to my black mana. The difference is that Biscuit seems to be able to... well, who the hell knows. He just does a bunch of weird stuff that scares some people a lot.

My black mana is an extremely dense form of mana that tries to absorb and dominate any mana in reach. Meanwhile, Noodle actively eats it, and then it... it disappears or gets used for something.

“Can Noodle grow bigger or make use of that mana?” I ask.

“He...” Izzy hesitates as if there is something she is hiding. Her eyes glance at me, Biscuit, and Noodle. “He can grow bigger if he wants to. And I think he needs a lot of time to slowly digest that mana and use it to become stronger. He can absorb a lot, but then it takes even longer.”

So he pretty much has his own reservoir where he can store absorbed mana, changing and transforming it into something he can use.

From my own testing, I know that using mana you’ve taken from someone else is extremely difficult. Each person has a slightly different kind of mana. Part of that can be mitigated by changing the frequencies, but it’s not quite as simple as that. It’s very difficult, and the results of using someone else’s mana can turn out catastrophic. Of course, that’s assuming you aren’t a monster like Lissandra.

A set of skills I believe should mess up anyone trying to use mana in the presence of my Pride enhanced domain.

Oh boy, this is going to be scary in a year or two.

“Noodle also seems to be registered as Isabella’s pet or something,” Sophie adds, lifting her head from the construct she is working on. “His growth is being influenced by Isabella’s, and we think some of his abilities might transfer over to her at some point. Noodle can even resist her flames now, they don’t even damage him anymore, and he seems to have a knack for reading people, not unlike Izzy.”

At that point, the three of us turn to the snake, who continues to ignore us. I’m absolutely sure he heard and probably understood what we were talking about.

Yet he pretends not to hear and continues to snuggle up to the bone.

“This one’s for free, but you’ll have to work for the others,” I tell the snake, before grabbing Biscuit and standing with him in my arms.

Noodle looks at me and then moves his head just a tiny bit, in a tiny imitation of a nod.

There are still some things I want to examine about his skill, and a few pieces of bone aren’t exactly a high price to pay.

Lily’s already got a few for the purpose of researching new ways to modify our bodies.

Later that day, I meet with Maya, as she returns from her hunt with Tess and Lily. She is holding Bloodthirst. I’ve decided to let her borrow the weapon and examine its effects while I work on other stuff. She agreed readily, unable to contain her excitement at getting to try out a new weapon.

“So?” I ask. “How was it?”

“Well, we almost died. A strong three question mark monster popped up out of nowhere and nearly ate Tess. It even resisted Lily’s [Disintegration] a few times through sheer size.”

“Huh? Were there supposed to be monsters that strong here?”

“Yup, they’re all over the place, mostly sleeping or hibernating or something like that. You generally find them marked on maps as places to avoid, but we started checking them out. The one we met escaped, but Tess left a mark on it, declared it her prey or something, so we’re going after it again tomorrow.”

It almost makes me want to grab that map and go out on my own, but I push those thoughts away. I have to stick to the plan.

Maya seems to notice that and smiles, lifting the sword with its white, red tinged, blade. “As for the claymore, it’s very sharp and it gets even sharper when you cut anything that could be counted among the living. I think the moment it ‘tastes’ the blood of a target, it becomes more dangerous against that target. And there might be some kind of weird debuff at work too?”

“That’s it?” I ask, taking the claymore from her, and examining it.

Bloodthirst (Arcane, Damaged) -

The author's narrative has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

“I think it’s also absorbing some of the blood, but I haven’t noticed much of a difference. Maybe it needs to absorb more to reach its full potential”

The blade, despite its sharpness, has been clearly damaged in multiple places, a piece of the hilt is missing and broken as well. It looks like the weapon was chipped away piece by piece by some powerful force. Maybe it was damaged by contact with another weapon or skill. Hell, maybe it was a full fledged arcane item before Whitey destroyed it.

Thinking of it, there isn’t anything of much use for me to learn from studying it at the moment. At least not anything more useful than my current projects.

"You can keep it for another week or two if you want," I offer it back to Maya, who takes it without any hesitation.

I pause for a moment and give her a look. She's dark-skinned and probably the oldest person here, not that I'm going to say that out loud. She was 28 or something, I think. A professional trainer in her past... I pause with a feeling of amusement. In her past life is what I was about to think. It's only been a year and already I'm thinking of our time before this as a past life.

"You are not going to sell these items for a better passive?" she asks, after a moment.

"I was thinking about it, but... they are damaged, and I didn't make them. Arcane items start at 100,000 shards, so assuming I found one undamaged on the floor I would get anywhere between 10-20k shards. If I were to make one, it would jump to 50k. So a damaged arcane item like this would probably fetch anywhere from 5-10k shards. It does make for a nice chunk of change, but it would still leave me a ways off from what I'd need. For now, I'm just going to examine them, maybe use their materials to make something else later."

"Anything for me?" she jokes, spinning the claymore in her hand.

"You go by Knight in the Community, right? We also share some of the same skills, so I may as well throw you a bone." I say, trying to act pompous, "How about you become my knight, call me 'Lord', and handle the occasional annoyance on my behalf? I'll throw in some perks if you like, I could even get you an item or two." I joke, riding my good mood over my recent progress.

Surprisingly, Maya seems to take it seriously and appears to think it over.

In the end, she answers with a smile that seems to imply that she's only half joking, "Sounds better than being a minion. So as your knight, I would be responsible for killing your enemies, leading your forces, and collecting taxes, right? I could do that."

My knight... It sounds weird, but it makes a certain kind of sense that things might slide in that direction with the way events have progressed. With everything we've seen across all these floors, it'll only be a matter of time before things like that start happening on Earth. Maya, despite deciding not to enter

Beyond, is strong even compared to the other Hell difficulty attendees we met in the tournament. She doesn't lack much of the skill she'd need to enter Beyond.

However, the seriousness of her declaration surprises me even now.

Not wanting to deal with it now, I don't reject her, but push it into the future, "It doesn't sound too unreasonable."

"Got it, my Lord," she says courteously before bowing gracefully. Then, with a wave of her hand and a cheeky smile that breaks the immersion, leaves, heading for the area she uses for her sparring matches with Lily.

I Boost myself to the top of the tower our group has taken for our new headquarters, I stare down at the fort stretched out below me. It's the former secondary base of the Black Tower after their HQ was mostly destroyed, but it's still somewhat impressive.

I watch mana moving in the air as it powers the web stretching across the area containing our base and its surroundings. It's an improvement on a system the former owners already had in place, courtesy of Sophie. She is getting quite good at it too, she's visibly improving as I watch the changes.

As for the prisoners, there are a few dozen of them, mostly using this place as a safe haven against the monsters. There is power in numbers, as they say. They are mostly brutes, not unlike those I've already met. It's not even like all of them are powerful. In this place and other "rural" areas, they tend to be weaker than our group.

It seems like the closer one gets to the "central" area, the better the prospects are, with the prisoners there even managing to create something like normal cities if you want to call it that. Or maybe they truly are.

This moon seems to have been used as a prison for hundreds of years, maybe even longer. With the way people at higher levels tend to live for centuries, some of them have more than enough time to set something up for themselves.

There are rumors about multiple Champion candidates; there are even rumors that most people think of as more of a legend, whispers that an Absolute candidate may have been thrown in here, wounded, and left to die, betrayed by the people of his planet.

Information tends to be very sparse and hard to come by, most of these people are fully occupied with their survival, deprived of the luxury of caring about things like this. There have already been a few attempts to kill our members when they went out to hunt. One group tried to kidnap Sophie, another tried to force Min-Jae into betraying us, and more besides.

All of these people were dealt with quickly, cleanly, and with prejudice, showing the others that we are not to be messed with, because that's the only thing people in this place seem to understand.

Joining me at the top of the tower is Izzy. She's come alone this time and doesn't bother trying to connect to my emotions, sitting next to me instead and joining me in admiring the view.

I still remember the way she was when we appeared on the 3rd floor when she was still under Sophie's [Geas]. The current Izzy seems more mature. She's still only 11 years old, a young girl who's been forced to spend the next 4 years here in this tutorial. Forced to kill to survive, forced to make hard decisions. She might be childish at times, but sometimes she feels like the most mature of all of us. So I have to wonder if she's not allowing herself to be childish from time to time as a method of coping with everything she's been forced to go through.

"Sophie decided to go to Beyond," she says, looking at me with her green eyes. "She's strong, so she will do well, but she can be dumb sometimes, so will you help her? For me?"

In response, I poke her side, "We're in the same group, so I will. Why so serious?"

"You can be hard to read sometimes, so I want to be sure."

With a sigh, I allow her to connect to my emotions, and she does so very gently. Lately, she seems to be getting nervous whenever she finds herself unable to sense the emotions of those around her as if she had grown overdependent. I wonder if it's anything like my overreliance on [Focus].

"You aren't using that skill to block your emotions anymore," she states, sounding happy to say it.

“It had to happen somehow,” I shrug.

“Maybe you aren’t as dumb as I thought,” she declares.

At that, I decide to stay quiet, and Isabella giggles quietly, sensing my emotions.

Chapter 428: Another one

I watch as the twins and Min-Jae fight the golem I made with one of my new damaged arcane items.

Golem Heart (Arcane, Damaged) - The Golem Heart could once animate stone and metal, bringing golems to life. Now, its core is cracked, but it may sporadically imbue nearby objects with a flicker of life, making them move or respond for short durations, echoing its once grand animating power.

I made it entirely out of hardened dirt, and it wasn’t even that difficult to make. It’s just difficult to control, and the only orders the golem can process are very restrictive. I suspect that with a bit more practice, I should be able to improve my control and maybe even get it to change its shape.

But for now, the moment I send mana into it, it moves the earth in front of me, causing it to bulge and lift up, creating a simple humanoid shape. Very simple, as if a child had made it out of clay. On the other hand, it is twice my height and could kill said kid easily. It could easily take down anyone from Normal difficulty, and it would take dozens of people from Hard difficulty to reliably bring the golem down.

So we put it through its paces while Min-Jae and the twins fight the result, sweating, rolling on the ground, and screaming at me. Something rude, I’m sure, but I filter it out.

Maya is nearby, sitting on the ground with Bloodthirst in her hand as she proceeds to clean and oil the weapon.

The golem is a rusty shade of light brown. It moves fairly quickly for its size, but the only advantage it has is its durability. It’s way too slow to catch up to any of the three boys, and the only reason they’re taking damage is because we’ve decided to test out the golem’s damage output, and that they let it happen.

Holding the heart in my hand, I send my mana through its circuits, trying to parse the delicate inscriptions within. Activating some switch, the golem falters and falls to the ground.

I get a few weird looks, but I quickly alter my approach, and the golem slowly stands up again, packing more dirt around the heart, taking more of my mana as the dirt compresses.

Another attempt a bit later, and the golem loses half of its material, moving faster, until I mess something up, breaking its leg in the process and watching it fall.

Then I start to think I've come up with a new idea to change its shape, but instead, the golem stands up without its left arm.

For some reason, that makes Maya laugh - a lot.

For a moment I want to take my weapon back, though I settle for sending the golem after her instead, in all its clunky glory.

She jumps to her feet, excitement in her eyes, as blue armor surrounds her. Then, powering it with a few of her mana batteries and supplementing it with her own mana, the armor grows bigger and bigger until it matches the golem's size.

Left arm or no, the brown stone figure attacks Maya in her oversized mana armor engaging her in a punching match, neither side bothering to avoid the incoming blows.

I start getting into it, and it feels fun, so I start funneling more mana into the heart, making the golem tougher and stronger but unfortunately not faster, which Maya uses to her advantage.

The cheating fox of a woman is even using Bloodthirst, the otherwise sizable claymore now looking almost like a dagger in the hand of the blue armor.

As much as I'm focused on the golem, I also take a moment to observe Maya, and I find myself surprised by what I see. I knew she was quite talented, especially with the skills she got. The mecha-like suit of armor always was her idea and I shamelessly ripped it off. However, she seems to have invested a few

more points into mana now. She still has high physical stats, especially dexterity, but mana has clearly been getting a bit more love.

[Armament] still works much the same as it did before, and I think my [Regalia] was stronger while I had it, but she's clearly put a few more levels into it, and when she uses it in combination with her [Boost], it truly begins to show some real potential, Incorporating spikes in the speed, strength, and durability of the construct. And she hasn't skimped out on the mana batteries either, filling them to the brim with her mana.

However many times she destroys the golem's legs, I restore them, and the golem keeps coming back.

With amusement, I watch as her reserves dwindle, and she decides to bow out in the name of conserving her mana batteries for something more useful.

More mana wins again.

As I direct the golem to fight Min-Jae, who alternates between slowing it down with his skill and bombarding it from afar, Maya comes closer.

"In a real fight, I would go after you as the controller," she states, sulking like a true loser, not seeing the value of the best stat.

"Sure." I nod.

"Also can you please recreate that orb for me? It burst again."

"It's called the evil orb."

"... sure."

I do as she asks and create another one of the constructs with its ever-changing demands.

It truly is an evil orb. Yup.

Much like Lissandra did for me, I hand the slightly modified orb to Maya, who immediately shuts up devoting all of her focus to the exercise. She doesn't even bother to move aside, even that little distraction would be too much.

Then, with great satisfaction, I watch as the orb bursts open, as Maya uses too much mana.

Without another word, I create another one and three more for myself which I display over my head.

Maya glances at them and then at me, her eyes seeming to tell me that she knows exactly what I'm doing. She then quickly turns all attention to her orb.

It dissipates this time.

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So I create another one.

After 30 seconds, it bursts open.

Another one.

She fails to follow the frequency, and it disappears.

Another one.

It bursts open.

Another one.

Fail.

Another one.

Burst open.

Another one.

Too slow to adapt to the frequency.

I add one more, bringing the total number of evil orbs floating over my head to four as I continue to keep the golem somewhat under my control. This is fun.

At this point, Maya looks like she wants to stab that claymore through my chest.

Is this what people mean when they talk about having friends? This isn't bad at all. I could get used to it. I...

"Nat..." Tess shouts from somewhere behind me.

Maya immediately rushes to her to complain while pointing her finger at me.

Has she no dignity in her body? So weak.

"I'm helping," I note, nodding over at Tess.

"I saw you helping. Mind creating one for me?" Her voice clearly implies a challenge.

“Very well,” I say, creating another orb before sending it over to her. I maintain its frequencies until Tess takes over, and then I stop.

As expected, Tess does even better than Maya. She manages to keep up with the orb for a bit before it bursts open as well.

Instead of surprise or disappointment, her gray eyes shine with interest, and I create another one.

And another.

Then another.

After each one bursts open, Tess seems to improve, if only slightly. I’m honestly tempted to create the original version I learned from Cockroach-Sandra for her instead of the simpler version of the orb I created for group 4.

Even though this orb is easier to work with, much easier, than the original non-adapted version by Liss, it annoys me that Tess is improving so quickly.

It’s not envy talking or my pride, but I know I’m better at it than her. All my skills, traits, passives, and talents, which have served to bring me this far. All my experience and hard work. Even so, a genius like Tess displaying the full breadth of her talent reminds me that I can never stop pushing ahead. If I do, people like her and the cowardly Savant will take over. And we can’t have that.

“Help me with this one,” the blonde says, nudging Maya, who quickly reaches for the orb and starts helping as well.

The work seems to grow much easier, split between two people.

“Let’s go eat something,” Tess tells Maya, who silently grabs the claymore and follows behind Tess, both of them working on the orb. I even get a short wave as they leave.

Then, once again, I send mana through the golem heart, the humanoid figure made of stones and dirt reforming.

“Try ranged attacks now,” I shout to the boys, as we get back to testing.

The 6th floor monsters usually appear during the day and rarely do anything during the night. They only ever leave their hidey holes when it's scorching hot outside and they attack anything that moves when they do, sometimes moving even in groups.

We have difficulties finding drinkable water and food. Plenty of monsters cannot be eaten either because they taste too disgusting or turn out to be poisonous.

Sure, I bet you could eat an insectoid monster if you had to. Your body should be able to digest it all after all the changes it went through.

But would you want to?

So, the lack of water and food seems to be a major feature of this floor, and buying them in the system shop turns out to be no more possible than it was on the third floor.

That's the system we know. Ah, good old times when I flipped the system window every few hours. I do it even now and then turn to Min-Jae, who looks at me with surprise in his eyes.

“So you will be getting bulli... trained by Tess?” I ask him.

“Yes, she said it might be better to separate me and the twins.”

“Have you been acting like a bully again?”

“I have not.”

“Really?”

Instead of shouting back at me, he seems to deflate, “Look, Nat, I know my behavior in the tournament was pathetic. I’ve already been shit on by everyone in the group over that. I... it just felt...”

“Three monsters at eleven o’clock,” I announce, interrupting him.

With a practiced motion he moves his hand, sending five pieces of compressed metal flying through the air as they hurtle towards the monsters.

They whistle as they pierce the air. Each one the size of a human head, making for an ugly amalgamation of metals squeezed into a lumpy round mass. There is rust covering them in places, and their shapes resemble crumpled paper more than they do true orbs or anything else. But they are effective.

The five chunks of metal slam into the monsters at a speed too fast to dodge.

The monsters in question remind me of bugs with their wide heads, mandibles, and four long legs.

Green blood splashes into the air, but the monsters don’t make so much of a sound as they come rushing towards us.

[Venomclaw - lvl 202]

[Venomclaw - lvl 203]

[Venomclaw - lvl 201]

Min-Jae moves his hand, and the chunks of metal come flying back, but the monsters are faster.

They move very quickly on their long legs, each movement replete with an uncanny twitching, as their hard skeletons clatter against the rocky ground. Mana seeps out of them, reaching towards us as it rises up in a poisonous aura, like a cheap imitation of a domain.

Venomclaws like to move in groups, each one having its own knock-off domain with poisonous mana in it. And they like to combine them to put more pressure on their opponents.

When there are only a few of them, it isn't a problem. But when you have dozens of them combining their efforts... Well, it could end up interesting.

But much as I had expected, Min-Jae moves the orbs he had made out of mana-conductive metal. These do a better job of accepting the effects of his gravity skill and are easier to manipulate for it. And much, much quicker. A barrage of two hundred or so orbs shoots ahead; more than orbs, they look like bullets. In this moment he's like a minigun spitting out projectiles at immense speed.

They pierce through the monsters and then fly back, piercing them again and again until the Venomclaws fall down with their bodies heavily perforated.

Before stowing his orbs, Min-Jae spins them around in a quick orbit to remove any remaining blood and pieces of the monsters' bodies and then returns them to his backpack.

Each of these orbs is about half the size of a golf ball, we had them made for him on the 4th floor. And they're heavy enough that he shouldn't be able to move them at all, though he can always alter their weight, so it's not a problem.

"We should leave; there will be more of them once they smell the blood of the others."

"Nah, we're staying."

Min-Jae looks at me only once and gulps.

The day's just getting started, I wonder how many of these things we can lure here for Min-Jae to kill before they go to sleep for the night.

Chapter 429: What do you think it is?

I've been on the 6th floor for a few days already, and even since the start, I have my [Mana Crown] activated and fill it with mana whenever I'm not using my mana to train with RTE or something else. After a few days, it's nicely filled, not even mentioning my reservoir, my core with kinetic and thermal energy, and my own body containing its mana.

A few creepy horse-sized insects with their knock-off domain cannot compare, right?

"Try saving your mana a bit and be more accurate; plenty more will come," I throw toward Min-Jae, who keeps shooting his hundreds of orbs at the monsters.

"I'm already trying to!"

"But you are missing a lot."

"There are too many orbs," he gestures wildly.

"So use fewer of them."

"But in that case, I won't deal enough damage to kill them..." he says and sends another barrage, this time towards five venomclaws heading at us.

"How come? Just aim for their vitals."

"I'm aiming at their heads already."

"Did you try any other parts? What did you guys even do here on the floor? Did you not dissect at least a few of them to find their weak spots?"

Just for a moment, he stops looking at the monsters and looks at me instead.

What.

Then he turns back, another barrage sent at them, this time until they die.

In addition to these five, close to two dozen venomclaws now lie all around. Probably a nice amount to get more of them here.

The area in front of us is rocky, as is the rest of the 6th floor, a never-ending stretch of gray country with a few spiky mountains in between. Instead of nebulas in the sky and bright stars, now during the day, there is something akin to a dust cloud covering it entirely. That cloud must be really high in the sky.

Maybe a storm? Maybe set by the system? Who knows. That dust is letting through a very orange light that colors everything into that hue. The temperature is also much higher now.

Something tells me if I were here as a human from before the tutorial, I would die quite quickly just because of the environment.

“Nat.”

I thought of it multiple times, but am I considered human? And if I go further, will I stop being one? Someone smarter might have asked What is to be human?

“Nat!”

“What? I’m thinking.”

“There are thirty of them now.”

I answer even without looking at the monsters, “Thirty-two. Just go all out, and if they get too close, I will kill them. Don’t worry about their pathetic knock-off domain. Oh, and make sure you don’t waste all of your mana. That would be disappointing.”

Min-Jae mumbles something, and I sit on the ground to let my legs rest. Actually, my entire body hurts like hell because of the emblem. But so far, I refuse to look at my stats to check the improvement. Something tells me this kind of stuff works best over weeks and months, and seeing just two or three stats up will piss me off.

Sitting down, I look at the boy in front of me.

Min-Jae used to be much scrawnier, but he is now packing a bit more muscle. He still likes to rock that messy haircut and likes to wear nice clothes - as much as the situation offers - and even now, he sports an outfit he got from the 4th floor. Somehow it even survived the 5th floor, the tournament, and the 6th floor so far.

His movements also feel a bit more dangerous? I don't know a better way to say it. I know he practices with the others and also physically like everyone else here. He is also using his [Telekinesis] and some trait to be able to move his body better, levitate, and stuff.

Everyone here prefers to be at least a bit versatile, so basics of melee combat are a must, and some way to strengthen the body as well.

His [Gravity Well] messes up with the orbs and the five chunks of metal. Dust and smaller stones around him float into the air under the effect of his concentration, and even his yellow left eye activates.

All of the projectiles shoot ahead at a much higher speed than before, bulldozing through the monsters in front of him with ease. Plenty of them fall dead immediately.

The projectiles move back, taking a few more, and then fly high into the air, where they continue to rain down.

Watching this, I think single-use projectiles would be best for him. With thousands of them, he would be quite dangerous against bigger groups of certain enemies. Right now, he has to grab the orbs and pull them back, extracting them from the corpses of the monsters, from deep underground where they get stuck, and sometimes over quite big distances.

Something like that must be much more mana-intensive than just shooting them and forgetting about them. But he has to recycle for now. I'm also sure Tess already knows about that weakness, as she is similar, so they might come up with something interesting.

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As the monsters get closer, Min-Jae expands his [Gravity Well], and the monsters slow down. Smartly, he doesn't affect big areas with his skill, just smaller spots, enough to take the monster off balance, break its leg, or make it fall entirely. Just to get enough time to get his orbs or throw a chunk of stone at them.

And the entire time, I have my [Mana Domain] to face the pressure from the monsters. At this number, the pressure is noticeable, but even their combined effort cannot push through my domain, strengthened by my Pride. Not even close to it.

Know your place, trash.

Satisfied, I observe my domain, and then Min-Jae, who plops onto the ground next to me, breathing heavily after dealing with all the monsters. I check his mana reserves, and there is still a decent amount remaining.

"Not bad," I say.

As always, when getting a compliment, he perks up and nods, straightening his posture.

Damn, he is 16 years old already, so why is he so happy about simple compliments? People are weird.

"Your domain is amazing, Nat. I want my own in the future."

"Right?" I sit up and look at him. "Lately, I have been experimenting with it a lot. Really a lot. You remember that cowardly guy?"

“Uh? Do you... do you mean Savant?”

“Yeah, so he had a domain with that weird poisoning,” I shoot off excitedly. “I tried to duplicate it by just pumping more mana into my domain, but it isn’t that easy. So I tried to compress my mana before feeding it into my domain, and it also didn’t work that well. Sure, some weaker monsters here on the 6th floor die just from that, but that is quite useless against stronger ones. Using [Infusion] on my domain also works nicely. Kinetic energy to slow people in a bigger field, maybe Whitey was using something similar. Or I can fill it with thermal and cook anything inside of my domain, but that’s quite wasteful when it comes to thermal energy, and I have better ways of killing with it. I also like using the domain on my body, you know, declaring my body my domain. In combination with using my pride effect on my domain, it works really well. It might be even better than my Mantle, even though it uses quite a bit of my mana. You know, making my body my domain - for some reason, it sounds super useful. I bet there will be some assholes trying to disrupt my mana, so this could give them quite a surprise, even if they are much stronger than me. I also found that after using Pride on the domain, its quality feels higher, almost as if the skill semi-evolved or became just a bit higher tier, and... oh, give me a moment.”

I stand up, and fifty or so venomclaws are heading this way. They are not that far from each other, their crappy domains combining and shooting toward us as they try to pressure us, poison us with that aura.

This time I feel it a bit, and with a huff, I feed more mana to my skill until their attack just slides by.

The area around us, outside of the perfect circle of my domain, starts to sizzle a bit, bits of the ground melting as greenish mana corrodes and poisons the place. I observe it just for a moment, and having nothing to learn, I create a single javelin, compress it, and shoot ahead where it stabs into the ground in the middle of the group.

It contains a decent chunk of my mana, so as it explodes, I do a little test. Instead of a barrier, I use my domain to try to fight against the effect of the explosion.

[You have defeated Venomclaw - lvl 103]

[You have defeated Venomclaw - lvl 112]

[You have defeated Venomclaw - lvl 108]

[You have defeated Venomclaw - lvl 105]

[You have defeated Venomclaw - lvl 106]

[You have defeated Venomclaw - lvl 104]

...

[Lvl 258 > Lvl 259]

More mana!

[You have defeated Venomclaw - lvl 107]

[You have defeated Venomclaw - lvl 107]

[You have defeated Venomclaw - lvl 101]

...

My domain blocks the effects that are just raw mana, and it does so quite easily. It just doesn't allow itself to be overpowered by some remains of a random attack.

The heat, shockwave, and pressure are another thing, and they pierce through. At the last moment, I create a dome-shaped barrier around us.

As Min-Jae takes a step back, his own barrier surrounding him, I take a step closer to my barrier. Did he really think I would let it hit us? Maybe I waited 'till the last possible moment, but he is too much. Tsk.

As for my barrier, it's pale blue, and ripples are sent through as the effects of my explosion crash against it.

It cannot even be compared to my early barriers which used to be very rigid. This one is slightly flexible and absorbs some of the attack by allowing itself to be pushed at places. Ripples like stones thrown into calm water are sent through.

It's pretty.

When all the monsters are all dead, I notice more of them collecting much further and turn to Min-Jae, "This time use just two orbs."

I think I will always love observing people trying to improve and overcome their weaknesses. I find that during such observations, I tend to come up with a lot of good ideas to apply to my own growth.

So, I like to nudge others, just pointing out their weaknesses and throwing ideas at them. In reaction to that, they often come up with solutions I did not think of on my own.

POV Beyond, 1st floor

"What do you think it is?" a short man with a shaved head squats and pokes a small black orb on the ground.

The woman next to him shrugs her shoulders, "I have a suspicion, but I'm not sure yet."

Both of them are dressed similarly. Simple uniform-like clothes that are a combination of white and pale blue. It doesn't seem too formal, just like clothes members of the same group would wear to show their belonging.

"Is it a secret I can't be told?" the man asks and this time sends a bit of his mana toward the black orb. As he does so, the orb absorbs it even as he tries to stop it from happening. It does seem to fascinate him.

“More like I don’t want to come to premature conclusions. Take it and hurry up. Whitey must be nearby.”

“I could probably take Whitey on. I have long since wanted to test myself against him,” the man grumbles but still takes the orb. For a while, he holds it, an expression of deep concentration on his face.

“Fuck, this thing is scary,” he curses in the end. “Even with void energy and my defenses, I cannot fully stop it from taking my mana.”

“I see, in such a case we will skip the vice guild master and go straight to Nyssa. She will want to know. Can you hold on until then?”

“For a while, yes. I managed to slow it down, and it will take a while to empty my mana reserves, but I’m not sure if we can get it through the arrays and you probably don’t want others to see it. Nyssa might have to come to us instead.”

“We will decide what to do closer to the safe zone, Whitey is coming closer already. Damn, if he wasn’t a lurker, I would say he feels pissed off.”

After that, they leave, both moving at incredible speed. The few lurkers that get in their way die nearly instantly under their attacks.

Chapter 430: Mana Desert

Dealing with the venomclaws has gained me another level and a few for Min-Jae, who I had to carry back, thrown over my shoulder.

Even though all of my stat investment is in the best stat, my body is quite powerful, so I barely feel his weight. I wonder how much I could bench or deadlift right now. Maybe I should test it one day just for fun. A ton? Half a ton? Probably more?

During the tournament, I noticed a number of people from Hard difficulty having trouble getting used to their bodies. They kept hurting the much weaker residents of Easy Difficulty by mistake, for example, by nudging them with an elbow. There were quite a few broken limbs and the like. Some kept constantly destroying things like doors and cars; while some of the people from Easy had to get used to taking a beating.

Most of the things we find on the floors are made from tougher materials, or there happened to be ways to make them stronger. Alloys, trees that tend to be tougher when they grow in a world where ambient mana exists.

It could be said the worlds we visited probably went through hundreds of years of having mana, so it's different.

Meanwhile, Earth's stuff is just weak.

Another difference is control. I barely noticed anyone from Hell Difficulty having trouble. Maybe a bit here or there because of the surprising situation. Otherwise, people from Hell Difficulty tended to have much better control over their strength. They did not bend spoons like some of the other attendees did, and they didn't usually tend to hurt those weaker than themselves.

It's a difference in talent and maybe in us as well. It's probably just one more reason we ended where we did, our bodies and minds quickly adapting to our new abilities and increased stats. I can't help but find the idea fascinating and worthy of study.

That's why it's fun when I lift Min-Jae and proceed to carry him like a little kitten. Some might say an Angry Kitten because of our group name...

"Fuck..." he mutters, his very first word after awakening.

"It was fine," I deflect with a wave of my hand.

"Did you kill all of them after I passed out? There were thousands."

"That's such a dumb question. And no, I left a few alive to track with my anchors. I'll check on them later, just in case they have some hidey hole with more of them."

He slowly sits up, taking care with every movement, as if he were getting over a hangover. A common side effect of mana depletion and overuse.

Before he can speak, I ask, "Tell me, has Tess mentioned anything about a difficulty change to you?"

He freezes at that but shakes his head, "She just told me she was going to take a more active role in my training because she thinks she can get more out of me. But I heard about your deal with Dennis and Aaron. Would you really make them change difficulties?"

"Yup."

"Just like that?"

"Would you prefer them dying here if we were to be separated again?" I ask curiously.

"What? No. Hell no! I like both of them. I just thought there would be a different way. You, Tess, and Lily are all very strong. We could..."

"Probably. Any of the three of us could help a few people survive but then would come to the next floor, maybe the system will split us up again, just like it did this time. What do you think would happen to them if they were left here alone?"

"I know. I just don't like it."

I've noticed the way some people, especially those from the lower difficulties, tend to romanticize the tutorial and the system. It's not necessarily bad to have fun with it and everyone has to find their own way through it, but they still shouldn't underestimate the system and the sheer level of fuckery that can take place on any of the floors. And they should definitely throw out the rose tinted glasses.

We still have several years left, so they'll see when the other tournaments come around.

And it's on that note that I give Min-Jae my response, "Then you need to get stronger so you can do whatever you want. This isn't Earth, you have the option."

Silence ensues for a while as I begin my training with the orbs according to my schedule, and he watches me.

After half an hour, he asks the question I'm sure he's been pondering for a while, "Aren't you worried about your sister?"

It's one of the dumbest things he's ever said, I'd bet. Me? Worry about Vic? That's a joke.

"You saw her fighting Lily," I tell him instead.

"I did, but anything can happen."

"Yup, but it doesn't matter."

In my mind, I realize my trust in that fact has probably been highly influenced by the way I grew up, looking up to her for such a long time. It's probably illogical and childish. Like Min-Jae said, anything can happen, even to the most powerful of people. Lissandra and Whitey come to mind as examples. They were both very powerful, and yet they both failed: Lissandra, by not becoming the Ruler, and Whitey, by dying on the 1st floor, even though he probably reached deeper parts of the Beyond dungeon.

But Vic is different.

"You said you have siblings; what difficulty do you think they'd get?" I ask.

The boy hesitates for a moment, "If you asked me before, I would have said Hard difficulty, but I don't know now. I would never have expected to end up in Hell."

This narrative has been purloined without the author's approval. Report any appearances on Amazon.

"Your parents would probably be disappointed in them if they failed to get into Hell difficulty and progress to Beyond. Just imagine if they wound up in Easy," I prod.

The joke doesn't seem to land though, and he just nods with a weak smile. The room becomes awkwardly quiet.

Tess, help.

The other day, I let Tess's lightning hit me. It's not enough to cause any serious damage, it's just enough to make the experiment work. I feed the glove on my right hand with mana and let myself be led by the item as before in the fight against Whitey.

Yup, It was definitely a fight.

I fought. I didn't get steamrolled.

The glove activates, and I return fire with a similar bolt of lightning.

"So what do you think?" I ask.

"It's not Primordial lightning for sure. It's weaker too; we still need to test it a few more times, just to see just how much weaker it is. And though I feel like it's trying to mimic Primordial lightning it can't quite pull it off. Did it have the same problem with Isabella's flames?"

"No, it copied them just fine. They were weaker of course, but her flames aren't Primordial energy either. I just don't think it can replicate Primordial energies and does the next closest thing instead."

"That leads us back to the twin questions of what these primordial energies even are and how they happen to be different from similar abilities."

"Please let me know when the system tells you."

"Will do, Nat. So do you think you can make the counterattack stronger than the attack that you're trying to copy?"

I check the description once again.

Echo Gauntlet (Arcane, Damaged) - The Echo Gauntlet could once replicate any spell or ability it encountered, up to a certain level. Though its power has waned, it can still mimic nearby magical effects with unpredictable precision.

"I think in its current state it can at most equal the power I'm trying to replicate, maybe not even that given the extent of the damage."

"Any progress on fixing it?"

"No chance. I never worked with the materials involved. I think I can fix or reforge Flamebearer, and I suspect that given enough blood, Bloodthirst can fix itself. But that might require a lot. As for the ring, I don't think I can do it. I'm not even interested in such cursed abilities."

"And the golem heart?"

"That thing is weird. I had Sophie test it, and she does so much better with it. She already asked me if she could buy it on credit; she also liked the ring."

"Imagine Sophie, with her [Manipulation], moving around invisible and attacking out of nowhere."

"I fucking know, right?! Scary stuff."

"Please, find some javelins next time you decide to risk your life, Nat."

"I'll make sure to look for some. Any preferences for color?"

"Not really, but it should be conducive to lightning and something durable would be nice. Maybe something made from very pure endurium? If you can, try to find a set. Singles aren't it."

"Got it. Pink. Low durability and lightning resistance."

I let the small lightning bolt she sends my way crash into my forearm and then replicate the ability using my glove.

"So what's the plan for the current items?" she asks.

"I'll keep Flamebearer and Bloodthirst to either fix or resmelt them into new items. I intend to sell the golem heart to Sophie or exchange it for her assistance in the future. I want to experiment with the glove for a bit before I decide. As for the ring, I'm not sure yet. Either I sell it or pass it on to someone in our group in exchange for something."

"Sounds like a good plan, but Maya will be sad. She quite likes the claymore."

I shrug, "I've sparred with her. She's much more dangerous when she uses her mana weapons and alters their shapes converting them into a wide variety of weapons. Maybe there's some kind of conductive metal that she could use to allow for complex changes in shape. Or maybe she can get a skill to help her with that."

"I agree with you on that one. Still, you can't blame the girl for liking nice weapons. If you're ever out on a treasure hunt again, please add some shape-changing weapons to your list along with a pair of javelins for me. Low arcane would be nice, but I won't complain about mid arcane."

"Got it." I let a bit of silence build up then, and Tess doesn't seem to mind, letting it slide for the moment.

Out of everyone here, she still knows me the best.

"Are you worried about what's coming when we split into two groups?" She asks after a while.

"I wouldn't say I was worried. I just know that there are any number of things that could go wrong."

“Mind explaining?”

“Usually, you’re the one dealing with them, and sometimes it’s Izzy acting like a knockoff psychiatrist. Dennis, Aaron, and Lily all clearly look up to me and they probably think of me as the leader of our group.”

“And you don’t like that? You don’t like the responsibility. Preferring to act like an eminence in the shadows, right?”

“Totally.”

“I think you have a bad tendency to overthink some things, Nat. You always were a pessimist.”

“For a good reason.”

“Yes, for good reason,” Tess agrees. “The idea of you spending the next few months as the leader of a small group sounds scary, to be honest.”

“But?”

“But I think it’ll work out just fine.” She says, smiling.

“Well, I still have two weeks before I need to worry about it. So what’s the next plan?”

“We’re leaving in three days and taking everything we can use with us, after getting all the information we can. As we move towards the central region, we intend to awaken a few powerful hibernating monsters for the purpose of gaining some experience, while doing most of our movement in the day to take out some of the weaker ones.”

“What about after that?”

“There’s a place called The Last Rest, the last ‘safe’ place before we enter the Mana Desert.”

“Huh, what’s with the name? Does that mean that there’s a desert filled with ambient mana?”

“Quite the opposite. It’s a plain that stretches for days, where you can’t regenerate your mana due to some strange phenomenon caused by an unknown force. The most common theory is that there was a clash between Absolutes before this place was turned into a Prison, or an experiment went awry, or some powerful group was trying to escape this place when something went very wrong, and that’s without mentioning the powerful monster that’s supposedly keeping people away.”

My imagination starts going wild right away.

“I knew it would catch your interest,” Tess smiles. “So yes, fill your crown. We’ve already started filling all the mana batteries we have so we can explore for a bit. A week from now, a caravan is supposed to pass through there, made up of people trying to reach the central region. So be on the lookout for a bunch of dangerous and treacherous people.”