

Tutorial 441

Chapter 441: That's what I want

I send some mana into the defenses to maintain the field, and climb through the hallway on the crashed Deathtrap up to the deck of the tilted ship.

(Stay inside,) I tell everyone through the link with the rest of Group 4.

Eventually, I reach them, still inside the ship, though they've positioned themselves further back, watching the others stare into the darkness.

Someone uses an item, and it flies through the door and lights up the area, throwing moving shadows on what appears to be a rocky wall. A cave leading down, into a vast, deep tunnel. A few more skills or items follow, illuminating the place further and further with powerful lights in all shades, from yellow, to white, blue, and red.

The old and rusty ship has crashed against the rocky surface of the cave, and its stalled engines leave the place eerily quiet with the sound of the storm totally blocked off by the walls around us. I want to examine the entrance we must have passed through to get here, but I can't see it from where I am.

Dravos also watches the other passengers, and I notice the broad smile that takes over his expression when some of them start exiting the ship.

There doesn't seem to be any white sand, and some probably don't even know the truth of its nature. I can understand their sense of security and curiosity, but there is a reason I've kept the defenses running.

As somewhere around two dozen people exit, reaching the rocky ground below they die.

The small amount of white sand that landed on Deathtrap, that we've managed to bring with us reacts to their mana. The tiny white grains move and swirl as they step on them. Just the smallest hint of white dust on the wind. Something you could even miss in the low light.

His brother is the same, and both of them, I'm sure, they've reached the 2nd stage of their subclass: Adept of Pride, much like me. It's something I can feel, the same way they can feel my Pride. The second stage allows us to recognize our fellows.

I've already met a few people like that, having spoken to them in passing or walking among people I've seen back in Last Rest. Yet, this duo in front of me seem to stand above the rest. They have the same confidence in their abilities that I often find in myself.

The next person to reach our group is the last surviving guide called Kallus, the one who took care of navigation. He seems tired, dead on his feet, and whereas before, when his eyes kept flitting all over the place, anticipating danger, now it seems like he's given up.

There is someone else we need to worry about too, the one who killed the second guide, forcing us to seek help from the Champion. Knowing that we'd need three guides to properly control the Deathtrap and that we would have to wait for the storm to disappear before attempting to leave without making contact.

The mystery continues. Do Dravos and Drekar know who it is? Is the person responsible for cooperating with them even though they tried to run away before and leave them behind? Or maybe they just don't know, and they have their reasons. It'd have to be someone who can avoid my detection and Sophie's web. Someone with the capacity to kill the people we had protecting the guide with little to no effort.

I already have my suspicions about who may be behind it all, but for now, I've decided to let it be. To see where this takes us.

"How did the other guide die?" I ask Kallus.

Sitting on the ground, his back resting on what used to be the floor, he looks at me, "Different from before. They probably used a blunt weapon or unarmed strikes, every person was killed with one strike."

"Stay near me," I tell him, and he just nods.

Even though it's probably not needed, I share the information through the link and head towards the hatch that once led to the deck. Now that Deathtrap lies on its side, it is almost like a normal door. The field still stretches a bit further, and we have plenty of space to maneuver before we find ourselves in danger.

Down below, I can see the bodies of the poor naive fools who decided to leave. I then take another step and make myself float, pushing myself through the air on waves of kinetic energy, proceeding in short, tightly controlled, bursts to make the experience as smooth as possible.

Scanning the area for white sand, I pass through the field and look around, sending my senses outward like a wave crashing against the walls.

A massively long tunnel winds its way deeper into the ground, leading ever downwards. And I can't sense its end even with the extended reach of my enhanced senses.

The people of the system really seem to like building massive structures, isn't there supposed to be a phobia for that? Megalophobia I think it was?

Creating a few thermal orbs and making them as bright as possible, I place them around the ship and the tunnel, the resulting light's golden hue doing its part to illuminate the place. As expected, I find walls, roughly hewn from the stone around us. There are no smooth edges, no inscriptions, no sign that any part could have been the work of a skill. And then there's the fact that there's no white sand, other than what we managed to bring with us, in small piles sliding from the deck to land on the rocky surface below.

It isn't even touching the ship, nor is it anywhere close especially with the angle, It really only accounts for a few small grains. It seems like it should be fairly easy to avoid if we use a different place to exit and check for more sand first. The hole left by the main core's explosion immediately comes to mind. It's patched up, but it should be possible to open it back up.

With that checked, I turn off the backup core from my current location, and the mana being supplied to the field dries up, leaving the field to flicker and dissipate, to the sound of a few screams from within the ship.

I share my thoughts with Tess through the link, and she likely passes it along. To Dravos, Drekar, to the black chainmail Dawnslayer guy Famir, and to the remaining guide Kallus. I then spend a bit longer flying around the ship, watching carefully for more of the white sand, and when I'm done, I return.

Just in time to see the tired guide in the same spot, face buried in his hands.

Next to him stands Biscuit, repeatedly shouting at him, (Food! Food!)

Landing, I reach down and gently smack Biscuit on his back, "I told you already, that's not it."

Biscuit looks at me and then at the guide before gracefully wobbling away, probably on a quest to bully someone else for snacks.

I rejoin the others in one of the bigger rooms, where most of the people have holed up, we still have almost two hundred passengers waiting for a solution. Seeing that many of them, most of them rushing to talk over each other, I decide to leave, only to be caught short by Min-Jae. I slow down matching my pace to his until we're walking side by side.

"Everyone has their food, most people have enough to last a week or two. Water is the bigger problem, most only have enough for a week and they're already starting to fight over the reserves in the Deathtrap," he starts explaining.

Stolen from its rightful place, this narrative is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

I gesture to him, and we take a seat with an open view of the giant tunnel lit by the many orbs I've created, though they look so tiny in comparison despite releasing so much light.

"Most people are fairly subdued, and everyone's fairly reluctant to use their mana, so even if they fight, it'll probably be hand to hand. I think part of it's that they're scared of you," Min-Jae says, smiling, the statement seems to make him happy, "No one knows how much mana you have stored away, and someone's been spreading a rumor that you've been storing it for months before heading here."

"Months..." I repeat. Just how much mana would I be able to store in that much time?

With it comes an intriguing thought. What if I stored away my mana for years? Maybe even decades? Even as I am now, I should be able to live over 100 years easily with a body and capabilities fairly similar to what I have now. So would my crown be able to store years' worth of mana? I'm inclined to say yes.

"Show me your eye," I ask, interrupting his train of thought when he continues to talk about what happened and the plans.

Somewhat awkwardly, he moves a bit closer and turns his head to the side so I can see his newly yellow eye.

I think it's Gravity Wavelength Iris or something like that. Seeing it now from up close reminds me how disappointed I was when we opened that damned back chest after weeks of trying, and the eye only reacted to him.

Carefully, I reach out and touch the skin just under the corner of that eye and send my senses towards it, which he allows to happen. It's something I have done a few times already. As much out of a fear that the eye would reject him as my curiosity.

There are some things I learned from the mana stone Savant gave Lily, things about body modification, transplants, and the like. It represents a wealth of information that Lily and I are still working to understand, and even Sophie's begun to show a degree of interest as of late. All three of us have a skillset that would benefit from the information.

"Is the eye going to start bleeding and pop up out of my head?" Min-Jae asks with a bright smile, "Maybe it's going to activate and siphon away my mana until I die."

"The twins?"

"The twins," he confirms. "We joke like that from time to time, but sometimes I really find myself thinking about it, you know? It's a powerful eye, and I'm still getting used to it though I feel myself growing into it."

"You should be thankful, it's like a free half trait."

"I am," he nods seriously. "But I don't want to rely on it too much. I need to work on my basics before relying on easy power."

At that, I take a moment to study him.

Yeah, Min-Jae might actually be smarter than me sometimes. The amount of restraint it had to take for him to avoid using that power and take the boring route... I needed Lissandra to beat that into me, and he grasped it so effortlessly.

For some reason, I find myself wanting to tease him a little, but then I remember that there are places he's lacking as well. His envious nature, constantly putting himself down, and his occasional fits of over dependency.

I point down at the ground, "Try grabbing a few grains of sand and lift them, use your eye."

"Sure," he agrees and moves to comply, and I watch him move his mana to activate the skill and the eye.

I move one of the orbs a bit closer so he has more light.

The moment his skill touches the grains of sand, they start moving erratically, as they do any time mana touches them. They become charged and deadly.

I gesture for him to stop, and he does so. In my mind, I count down the time until the sand becomes inert and stops looking for mana while also trying to estimate the amount of mana Min-Jae used. With a bit more testing, I should be able to estimate it much better.

"Still no primordial gravitational energy?" I ask as I watch the sand.

He shakes his head, "Still nothing."

I nod in acknowledgment, and when the grains of sand stop moving, I lift into the air and lower myself closer. Then I blast a bigger pile of sand with kinetic energy, which makes it fly into the air before returning to the ground.

And once again we confirm that the sand doesn't react to primordial energies.

I find a few tiny, separated pieces and send a whiff of my mana towards them, causing them to immediately charge and fly towards me. I send a blast of kinetic energy at them, but this time they ignore it and pass through as if I hadn't done much of anything.

Three small grains circle around me a few times, piercing my leg, and belly, burrowing tiny tunnels clean through my flesh and bone no matter how I try to defend against them.

Body strengthening using mana? Nope. Kinetic strengthening? Nope. Disrupting mana? Nope. Resonating mana? Nope.

Having had enough of tiny grains burrowing through me, I fly away from them much faster than they can follow, nearly a few lengths of Deathtrap before they start swirling in a confused fashion. It takes them longer to lose their charge and land this time. It would seem that they can charge themselves with mana from my body when they pierce the skin.

I activate my passive to heal myself as I fly back only to meet the others where I left Min-Jae.

Some of the passengers are milling around, ready to leave Deathtrap. Far away from the white sand, and I see some of the larger groups, already heading deeper into the tunnel.

Group 4 is there with the remaining guide, two thylarin, a few of the other groups we've teamed up with, and Heryd, the vyssari who "guarded" me with his group while I was working in the room with the backup core.

"Tess is dealing with some last-minute stuff, but she'll be back soon. We've decided to join up with some of the smaller groups. That way there's no need to take care of a bunch of assholes who just want to hide behind us," Sophie informs me, while I nod and pull my manabloc chair over to have a seat.

It's the same one I created a few days ago, still holding strong, with a few more snake-mouth-sized bite marks on the legs.

POV Famir

"Do you want me to kill the other guide as well?" I ask the woman standing in front of me.

"There is no need," she shakes her head.

Even though [Suppression] blocks my emotions, I feel a hint of curiosity, so I decide to ask, "Why did you want the guide dead?"

She doesn't even seem to mind, "For my group."

That's confusing, "Doesn't doing this put them in more danger?"

She nods. "Yes, it will. But it will also allow them to shine more brilliantly."

"I don't understand."

"It's fine, you don't have to. Just follow my orders, and we can continue our little alliance when we reach the central region."

"Understood. I have another question, won't he get angry when he finds out?"

"Nat? I'm sure he already knows."

At this point, my level of confusion grows even bigger. This woman, that man, their group, these two animals. I fail to grasp them at all.

She seems to notice it even through my lack of expression, “Aren’t you happy you didn’t decide to help the thylarin twins? If you had or decided to attack us before, he would have killed you by now.”

There’s that small smile on her face, making me question if I made the right choice in following her. From the moment I first saw her, I’ve felt this unshakable pull to stay close, and I’m not even sure why.

It’s not romantic interest or sexual attraction, I’m not capable of those anymore. It’s sheer admiration for her decisiveness and strength. I didn’t know I could still feel that way, but I have decided to place my bets on her to get me off this moon.

Before leaving, she turns to me, glancing over her shoulder. “I don’t want to simply stay here just to find a way to leave. Adventure is what I want. A desperate, life-threatening adventure where everyone struggles to do their best and overcome their limits. Where my group has to rely on each other, strengthening our bonds through the dangers we face together. So that once it’s over we can sit side by side, talking to each other around Nat’s thermal orbs. We might be hurt and scarred from the dangers we’ve overcome, but we’ll be happy, knowing we went through it together and survived. Maya will make her lame jokes to lift our spirits. Sophie will pat Izzy’s head. The twins will sit quietly together, sharing their feelings. Nat will pet Biscuit on his lap and will train with his orbs while Kim and Lily try to show off in front of him. Meanwhile, Noodle will keep nibbling on Nat’s chairs in secret. And I will watch it all, happy to know I’m part of it. That’s what I want.”

And with that, she turns and leaves with a mysterious smile on her face, the lightning of her crown lighting the way.

Chapter 442: Something real like that

Flashback - Tess Hansen

The tall blonde girl patiently listens to her mom, who is yelling. There are a few bruises on her face, but her mom dismisses them as she always does. Too focused on insulting the girl, as her shrieking grows louder and louder.

There’s no point in explaining, no point in making justifications, the girl knows. Her mom just wouldn’t understand.

“You will stay locked in your room until I say you may leave. And I swear to God, Tess, if you get in another fight at school, I don’t know what I will do!”

And with these words her mother leaves, slamming the door behind her.

She doesn't wonder why her daughter fought.

Even before, when Tess tried to explain, her mother wouldn't listen. She didn't seriously believe that her pretty blonde daughter might be the victim of bullying at the hands of other girls in her class. Constantly picked on for her height, which left her towering over her seniors. For her, it was just kids being kids.

"Blondezilla," Tess whispers and giggles. Her new nickname, a gift from one of the girls abusing her.

Already sure it will spread through her class by tomorrow, Tess lies on her bed and touches the bruise on her cheek. Even then, she can't help her satisfied smile; the other girls ended up worse.

Two girls are sitting on one of the benches while three boys loiter nearby. The girls are speaking with one of the boys while the others seem to be joking about something or other, gesturing wildly as they do. That small group of 5 meet there after school every day, no matter the weather. Even when the weather sours, they simply hide under the small gazebo nearby.

Tess has watched them time and again throughout her many groundings.

She's seen them fight and make peace. She saw one of the boys crying as his friends provided comfort. She's seen them having fun together time and again as they come and go from this small place they've made their own.

It always fascinated her. Just how might it feel to have people to rely on? How could they stay friends when they were screaming and fighting just a few days ago? What could the girl have said to leave the boys wracked with laughter for minutes at a time, at least until she took offense and started kicking them?

Why did they come out despite the heavy storm, drenched to the bone, giggling nonetheless as the weather left them sneezing under the gazebo, only to separate for a few days, likely sick with a cold?

She never experienced something like that.

The things she read about in books or saw in movies, the kind where groups of people went on adventures together. Fought together, mourned their dead companions, suffering to the point of total exhaustion all to finish some grand quest.

Persevering, even when everything seemed lost, as they pushed themselves to accomplish their goal.

They'd meet up afterward, sharing something no one could take away from them. A great adventure no one else could understand, an experience unique to those who had been there.

Just once in her life, she wanted to feel something real like that.

POV Nathaniel

The blue brothers try to run away from us.

The dumbasses try to teleport.

The assholes forget how easily they messed with my anchor.

The douchebags end up in a similar state to me.

Using kinetic energy, I get ahead of Group 4, and moments later reach the blue brothers strung out on the ground, their bodies torn, and bleeding as their bones peek through ragged holes in their flesh.

"Fuck, crazy human, you got us this time."

"How the hell did you do something so nasty to our skill without us noticing?"

“Even we weren’t so evil when we messed with yours.”

There, I interrupt them, “You redirected it into the white sand.”

“As if we could! We just made it so your anchor would burst open, its endpoint just happened to leave you there.”

I watch them squirm for a moment. Nearly starved of the mana they’ve managed to collect over the past few hours, likely the work of some passive or other. I’m still curious about that, but they refuse to tell me.

One of them, Dravor or Drekar, looks at me, “At least say something, crazy human.”

“Something.”

“...”

“...”

I then move closer and squat on the ground next to them. “To be honest, I don’t think we need you. The only thing keeping you alive is my promise to Tess, she thinks we can use you. But at some point, the amount of trouble you cause will outweigh your usefulness.”

Grabbing a few small rocks, I throw them at the two thylarin, each one bouncing off their heads.

I reach to grab more stones and continue to throw them as I speak, “You’re trying to betray us, you waste our healer’s mana, you could be plotting to ask the Champion to turn against us. Maybe you are even hiding... Well, you probably are hiding some things from us. And now you’re wasting energy on pathetic escape attempts.”

The stones keep hitting them with stunning accuracy, and neither of them tries to defend themselves.

“I have yet to see anything useful from you, and even though our group is keeping our side of the deal, you two keep fucking around.”

I add a bit of mana to the mix, surrounding the stones with it, resonating it, and as the stones hit the two brothers, they begin to leave wounds, drawing red blood, which flows freely across their blue skin.

It would be easy to add more mana and boost the stones with kinetic energy. Which the two, at some point, wouldn't survive.

“What do you want, crazy human?”

I stop my pastime and stand up. “I'm going to ask some questions, you will answer them, to the best of your knowledge.”

This story is posted elsewhere by the author. Help them out by reading the authentic version.

They exchange looks, and then one of them nods, “We can do that. Ask, crazy human.”

“Tell me more about crowns.” I point at the one over my head.

I can see they want to start laughing but they hold their tongues, clearly thinking better of it.

“[Crowns] are classified as a variation of equipment type of skill, crazy human. There are [Crown], [Mantle], and [Ring]. They are the most well-known, but there are more. We've heard rumors about [Sword] and some sort of [Armor], but we haven't exactly seen them with our own eyes.”

“Well, we have seen [Crown] and [Mantle] but none of the others.”

“What's the difference between [Mana Crown] and [Mana Mantle]?”

“We don't know, crazy human, and I'm not lying. As far as we know, [Crown] skills serve as a kind of battery while assisting with fine control over the stored aspect.”

“I've heard about attribute crowns, and there seem to be others like [Lightning Crown]. What are the differences?” I ask.

“Not much, attribute crowns allow you to store strength, dexterity, vitality, or mana. [Lightning Crown] allows you to store lightning. Attribute crowns are among the rarer types, and to get them you usually need a lot of things to come together. The requirements are generally pretty high.”

His brother continues, “Generally focused around certain skills, no one knows exactly which, and a high allocation of stats into mana. They also seem to be more common among those who chose Mana Amplification as their attribute upgrade.”

I interrupt, “They are rare for people with Regeneration and Potency?”

“Yes, crazy human, the system strengthens, it doesn't cover its weaknesses.”

“As my brother said. If you go for a lot of mana, the system gives you options for more mana. But if you go for regeneration, the system won't give you a [Mana Crown] just to cover for your weakness.”

“But it can happen, brother!”

“Yes, anything can happen, but it's rare.”

“What about [Mantle]?” I ask.

Another voice interrupts, “There you are.” Tess joins us, followed by the rest of Group 4 and the other groups not far behind.

“I'm gathering information.”

"I see." She nods, looking at the thylarin brothers, she doesn't say anything.

Yet her eyes paint a clear message.

"We had to try," one of the brothers says, smiling.

"And we didn't even try to hurt anyone, lightning human, we just ran away. Your friend probably told you, but we have our Pride to consider, so it's a bit difficult to be in a situation like this..."

"Tell me about [Mantle]," I interrupt, feeling more presences on the approach.

"It's just a theory, but we think it forms a localized energy field that can mask the associated aspect and create phase interference to disrupt an aspect when it makes contact with the surface."

"So [Mana Mantle] would help with masking your mana and disrupting external mana sources that come into contact with it?"

"That's just our theory, based on some unreliable rumors we've heard. Crazy human, you really love to simplify things."

I throw a few more stones at them in response, and then we wait for the rest of the groups to catch up.

We move ahead a few minutes later, after taking a moment to plan and for Lily to restore the bodies of our thylarin prisoners. This time though I notice she's missing a finger.

The rocky tunnel is still giant, and at this point, I think it might be actively expanding. Even so, it's still tilted downward, so we head deeper underground, surrounded by the pitch-black darkness lit only by our skills and items, our steps and voices sounding awkward in this dark, quiet place.

Tunnels, why do we always find ourselves in tunnels?

The ant tunnels, the tunnels under the old capital, the tunnels on the 3rd floor, and that's without getting into the bunkers. Nearly everything cool so far has been buried underground.

And this time, there might even be a good reason.

After walking a few miles deeper, I start thinking that this Champion was either trapped here by an Absolute, who spent a few minutes doing this, or by a group of high-level people who had to have spent weeks or months preparing this place.

The sand is still a mystery, and I'm of the opinion that an Absolute made it, Though I could imagine a highly motivated Champion being capable of the feat.

And I already have a few ideas on how to make use of it. Which I'm stealing from the others speaking through our link.

(Or maybe Nat could melt the white sand with thermal energy. It doesn't seem to trigger the effect, and if he turns that sand into a glass or something else, it could be usable,) Min-Jae blabbers excitedly.

It's well along the lines of something I already thought of. Yup. I did. Long ago, even before we learned about the Mana Desert.

Min-Jae continues, (I would love to use it for my projectiles. Maybe we could try to use one of the plates on Deathtrap, bend it, and store sand inside of it before sealing it up, air tight. We could come up with ideas to use it later or just use it as bombs against people, opening and throwing it into strong monsters.)

Dennis giggles, (Or you could go nude and focus on physical stats while covering your body with armor infused with white sand.)

(Wouldn't that hurt you as well?) Aaron asks.

(Maybe?)

(I want to make a golem out of it with the Golem heart,) Sophie suggests, gesturing at the piece of clay comprising the damaged arcane item she currently holds.

(Fuck, that would be scary,) Dennis comments, mirroring my thoughts.

(There is still the question of whether or not we even can bring it out of the desert,) Tess muses, throwing a damper on our excitement as she points ahead, continuing out loud, “ We have a few dozen dead coming up, people from Deathtrap.”

One of the thylarin brothers laughs out loud, his eyes shining in the light of my orbs. Once again a little bit of mana has managed to collect inside of their bodies.

“They hoped to find treasures, items belonging to the Champion sealed here with him, perhaps they were seeking an array that would take out of this place, maybe they thought they saw an opportunity to free the Champion and win his favor,” Dravos says, his smile never leaving his face.

Drekar continues where his brother left off, but he isn’t smiling, “But they will find nothing. This isn’t a normal prison. This place only serves one purpose. To keep the Champion here and kill him should he try to leave.”

“I may not have told you, humans,” Dravos says, casually stretching with a glow in his eyes, “but if so much as a single speck of white sand touches the Champion, the entire Mana Desert will rush in to kill him. Isn't that something?”

This looks like more of a punishment than anything else. To even think of locking the Champion in this place. Leaving him to starve, unable to use his powers. Just how would it feel for someone like a Champion? Anyone who reaches that rank is a powerful person who must have spent years and years developing themselves.

Yet there he is. Crippled, stripped of his mana, and surrounded by layers and layers of defenses designed specifically to kill him.

So would you stay in and endure, with the futile hope that someone would find a way to help you escape? Or would you try to free yourself at the risk of ending it all?

Well, it's an interesting thought if nothing else.

It's also good that I've managed to trap a single grain of white sand inside of my body, constantly charged and moving, damaging anything in its path, piercing my flesh while my passive heals me and my kinetic energy moves in a constant struggle to keep it contained.

All in an attempt to examine it further.

Just that single grain of sand is enough to cause no end of trouble. Even two would be too much to contain, requiring all of my attention.

But at the same time, it's good to have it here.

If the Champion tries anything funny, I can at least make sure he goes down with us.

Chapter 443: Welcome

The passengers Tess' [Farsight] spotted were killed by a hoard of monsters that seems to have surrounded us as well. Tiny bug-like things that cling to the walls and spread an invisible poison through the air.

It's powerful enough to slowly kill people approaching level 200 and even over it if you stay longer in it or if it's more concentrated.

At first, you only feel a bit lightheaded; later, you start having trouble breathing, and by the end, you find your lungs have been paralyzed and now you can't breathe. Sure, your enhanced body will allow you to survive a bit longer given its reduced need for air, but between that and your knowledge of what's to come, it only serves to prolong your suffering.

Tess and Min-Jae work with the other groups to kill these monsters from a distance, while others hang back and disperse the poisonous clouds with wind based abilities, reducing the potential for harm through dilution.

And so we continue. A group of 30 people or so, all making their way deeper underground to meet this shut-in Champion who's apparently been here for the last century. Step by step, we keep finding more and more corpses belonging to the other passengers.

We eventually start seeing other groups head back the way we came, rushing to get back to the Deathtrap and the cave we started in, either in an attempt to fix the old and rusty SDAT or to hide while they wait for us to do all the work.

They can't move Deathtrap though, not even a bit. There is not a single speck of mana remaining in the core, and all the important rooms are closed off. Heavy metal-plated doors sealing the entrances. Especially after the emergency shutdown the remaining guide and I triggered.

I'm also dead certain that the monsters will just be waiting there as well.

The slope of the tunnel starts increasing at a steady rate as it grows ever wider, despite already being wide enough to accommodate a large building within its walls. Like tiny sparks of light, our orbs and items fly through the air, throwing light on just small pieces of it, unable to light it entirely because of the sheer size.

What if the Champion left his cell? Or figured out a way to use mana somehow? I know that's how I would go about it if I wanted to trap something so powerful.

Walking even deeper, we find a group of 20 people, all dead, each one sliced into dozens of pieces.

The cuts are extremely smooth and clean, and it looks like it all happened at once. I keep my orb floating over the bodies and create another, moving it a bit further down the corridor before taking a seat. The others follow my lead, observing from a distance and trying to discern the cause of the carnage before us.

I sense Izzy and Sophie seeking out any living beings. Tess is scanning with her eyes and Min-Jae uses his eye, seeking out any shifts in the local gravity. He said that everybody should have the tiniest gravitational field, so he should be able to see it with his yellow eye. He hasn't been able to do it yet, but he keeps trying nonetheless.

“We’re all going to die down here.” The guide cries plopping down on the ground next to me.

His face still bears an expression of exhaustion, tiredness, bags under his eyes, messy hair.

“Want to try to fly Deathtrap?” I ask him curiously.

“We can’t.” He says, resolutely shaking his head and burying his face in his hands. “The SDAT was made like that on purpose. Yes, for a while, you can control it with two people, maybe one, but then the ship starts its checks, and if there aren’t three people at the controls, it will stop flying.”

“Could you modify it?”

“Given a few weeks? Probably yes, but actually no. I can’t talk about it any more, but if I tried to modify it, I would die.”

“Worst case, I’ll take care of it,” I shrug my shoulders.

“That doesn’t solve our problem with mana.”

“Yup, you are right.”

Our conversation ends with that, and I go back to looking for whatever killed the other passengers.

Unfortunately, Tess beats me to it. “Threads, there are spider-like threads stretched out across the tunnel and more below.”

By way of demonstration, she reaches out with her [Psychokinesis] and grabs a severed leg. She lifts it up and to the right, at which point it splits in two, cut by an impossibly thin and strong thread, almost without resistance. At least that’s what I think is happening.

Though that does beg the question, what if someone with a very high constitution or high levels of body strengthening tried to walk through, would they be able to tear these threads apart? Logically, it should be possible.

I watch as they find the thread closest to us and test different stuff against it. They try cutting into it with a weapon, and most of the time the weapon loses, the only thing that seems to work without damaging the items are weapons of mid epic and higher rarity. Disruption skills don't work either, of course, the threads clearly weren't made with mana. You can't even sense them with mana senses.

Fire seems to work well against them, it just needs to be concentrated a bit and the thread will burn. A serious weakness, but understandable.

We loot the bodies for anything worthwhile and continue deeper.

The groups under Famir and Heryd the vyssari lose two members, to a thread they missed and by moving too far to the side. One of them doesn't die instantly and screams begging Lily to heal him. She even moves to help him, but Tess grabs her shoulder and holds her back. She whispers something into our healer's ear, and the man dies a few seconds later.

They loot his body, and we continue.

Ten minutes later, we find ourselves approaching a bridge. It's just wide enough for a single person to cross and stretches far, far into the distance. I launch a small thermal orb right over it, and it is impossibly straight, and Tess continues to watch long after the tiny speck of light disappears.

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Our best estimate places the distance at a few miles.

The structure of this bridge alone makes me more nervous than the threads before, more even than our ever-decreasing mana reserves and the dangers ahead.

The bridge is made out of stone, but there are no support pillars under it. It's as thick as a person and a bit wider, and the only supports are the anchor points where we stand and the other side.

And yet it still holds strong. Tess and Min-Jae grab some huge stones and launch them far ahead, where they crash solidly into the middle of the bridge, resulting in no damage at all. The bridge doesn't even shake, despite the stones being heavier than six men combined. And to top it all off the only thing to either side of the bridge is a pit of darkness, yawning below, an almost liquid sort of darkness that refuses to be driven back by our skills, and items.

Any light that touches it doesn't pierce deeper, but the stones we throw in fall for almost 20 seconds. Min-Jae puts the estimate at around a mile deep.

Of course, I could fly, I could use kinetic energy to move myself to the other side.

But I don't.

Together with the others, I step on the bridge and walk carefully.

The bridge doesn't shake, there are no monsters popping up, there are no other traps. Even so, my heart is beating wildly.

Step after step, our group of thirty odd people quietly traverse the narrow bridge. No one says a word. No one makes a sound.

I can fly. I repeat to myself. I'm superhuman and there are dozens of ways I could survive the fall. I could use an anchor, I have my mana arms, and I have kinetic energy. I could even survive the landing, using my skills to slow my fall. But for some stupid, illogical reason, my heart won't stop trying to jump out of my chest.

I shouldn't be afraid, but I feel fear, and I'm savoring that feeling.

One of Heryd's vyssari falls down. He just loses his balance and screams, immediately disappearing into the darkness under the bridge.

We can hear his voice as he falls for the next 20 seconds, growing steadily quieter, and then there is a thump and silence.

Then something starts eating the body.

We shouldn't be hearing it from this distance, and yet we can. As audibly as if the beast were right next to us. A wet noise of a sharp maw tearing still-warm flesh and slurping on the blood. We hear bones snapping and something akin to slurping noises.

When it finally does stop a few seconds later, I know the body is gone. And we continue over the bridge slower than before. Quieter than before.

By the time we reach the middle of the bridge, the darkness surrounding it reaches our knees. That's the best way I can describe it. It's not smoke, it's not a skill, it's certainly nothing physical I could sense. Our lights stop being able to pierce it.

The bridge that was already narrow is now gone, invisible to us, the stone under our feet an only reminder that it is still there.

Our small expedition stops and I can feel something touching my feet, something I can't see or sense. There is no mana, no heat, no kinetic energy in the movement.

A scream breaks out somewhere behind me, and another member of the expedition falls into the darkness below.

Twenty seconds. Thump.

More sounds of tearing flesh, and snapping bones.

Then quiet.

Someone laughs maniacally and launches a bombardment of attacks into the darkness below us.

Nothing changes.

Around half of the expedition turns around to leave.

Those that stay are the members of group 4, Dravos, Drekar, Kallus, Heryd with some of his group, and Famir along with the bulk of his.

“Let’s continue,” Tess says, her calm voice ringing out in the darkness, just before she jumps into the air, leaping over several other members of our expedition.

She lands gently in front of everyone, on the narrow bridge that is now invisible. Just a small deviation, and she would be falling down.

Silence reigns.

I can fly, Tess can fly. There are dozens of ways to survive this. I remind myself of that once more. But something feels off.

Everyone here is either approaching level 200 or well over. So why did those people just fall? Why weren’t their reflexes quick enough to grab the bridge? How could that happen when they can bulldoze through most buildings. Hell, some of them could probably destroy entire cities.

And yet they still managed to fall from the bridge?

Something touches my feet again, it feels like a wave washing over my feet, like a myriad of snakes crawling over my legs.

Everyone seems to be feeling the same sensations too, some swing their weapons at whatever it is.

They hit nothing.

We continue to walk much slower, everyone takes step after step, feeling for the edge before committing to a step. Our progress slows to a crawl, but we continue all the same.

Tess refuses to tell us how far we have to reach the end, so with no other choice, we walk.

No one else falls, and we reach the opposite side of the bridge.

Having finally reached the other side, we turn to look back the way we came, the darkness has retreated back under the bridge which still stands, just as solid as before.

I etch that view into my memory. A narrow stone footbridge lit by my orbs, and the darkness below, the pitch black depths looming as if they were waiting to consume the light.

We turn our backs and continue.

There are no more monsters, no doors, no traps, and like that, we reach the center of this place and light it as much as possible.

Once again we find ourselves on a massive platform, surrounded by the same darkness as before. We throw a few stones into it. They fall for 20 seconds just like they did before, only to be swallowed by the silence.

We cross that darkness on another footbridge, this time much shorter. Only a tenth of the one from before. No one dies this time.

The platform is extremely big and circular. The surface is made of a dark blue metal leaning towards black. It's extremely smooth, there are no cracks, no imperfections. It almost looks alien. The platform has three bridges branching off into a series of different tunnels, including the one we used. It's likely that there were three entrances we could have taken - and the Deathtrap happened to fly into the closest.

In the exact center of the platform is a massive, perfectly round hole cut cleanly into the metallic surface. The edges are unnaturally smooth and precise as if they had been made by something far beyond anything we know. The sides are smooth and polished, plummeting straight down, its depths seeming to rival the height of a fifteen-story building.

We can see the bottom, where the light reflects faintly off the same alien material, giving it an unsettling, mirrored look.

And there sits a single man, his back resting against the wall.

He's looking up. Not just in an effort to see out of the hole either, he's looking straight at us even before we look over the edge.

The man has blue skin, but this thylarin has six arms, instead of the normal 4. Or he would've, were 5 of them not reduced to a set of short stumps poking from his white clothes.

He smiles at us and waves his remaining hand.

"Welcome," he says, his voice calm and oddly soothing.

Chapter 444: Lord Champion

"If you truly understood what this place was, you wouldn't be standing so close to the edge," the Champion states in warning.

Something in his voice that makes all of us instinctively take a half step back.

He continues, "You're not the first to visit. The others... well, let's just say they were less interesting." A wry smile dominates his face as he manages to look casual despite sitting trapped in a hole.

There's something about his voice, about that confidence that makes me nervous, but I seem to be in a better state than the others. I've met people much more powerful than the man down there.

Even so, I must never underestimate him. Not even for a moment.

His current state might be similar to Niall's when I met her, they may have crippled him before throwing him in that hole. But, given the smallest opportunity, he would be more than capable of killing us all.

"Do you remember us, Lord Champion? We were candidates to be your disciples," Dravos shouts, stepping before me and pulling his brother closer.

The Champion's eyes move over them for a short moment before he smiles gently and continues in the same soothing voice, "Dravos and Drekar, right? Your father was a Champion candidate before he died."

"Yes! It's an honor you remember someone as low as us!" Drekar responds, seeming excited, "We have come here to offer our services should you require them. As you can imagine, it was a difficult journey."

"We are the ones who got pulled into all of this when these two were trying to reach you," Tess says, interrupting the brothers.

The thylarin's eyes glance at her crown before settling on her face, "And what is your plan, young human?"

"We have been stranded by a storm. In the meantime, we have decided to check our options."

"Am I one of these options?"

"Yes, and I hope you understand. It's something we need to think about with care, we can't make any moves before we know the risks."

He nods, "What if the brothers have decided to help me on their own?"

"I will stop them."

"Just you?"

"It would be my decision, and in the event you escape anyway, I would like to be the sole bearer of your wrath." As Tess says these words, I know she means them. They carry that peculiar undertone of a [Declaration].

The Champion tilts his head, the faintest flicker of amusement crossing his face, as though Tess's bold statement stirred something in him.

There's a tension in the air, a quiet reminder of the power he holds even in this state. His eyes linger on Tess just a moment longer before he finally speaks, "I'm curious, young human. What do you see when you look at me? Do you see a prisoner, or something more?"

"Are you not a prisoner?"

I watch him carefully as Tess asks, looking for any sign of annoyance as she responds with a question of her own rather than answering his. I find none.

"I am, indeed," he smiles at her. "But young human, you are not the first to come here. Some wanted my help, others wanted my knowledge and guidance. Sometimes, out of boredom, I have fulfilled these requests. And yet here I am."

"So you don't think we can get you out?"

"I'm afraid the two brothers, as charming as they are, lack the means to release me. But within your group, there are a few who have a small chance of achieving it - with my guidance, of course."

"And you won't tell us who they are?"

"I won't. I apologize."

"Then allow us to talk among ourselves before we decide our next steps."

“Do as you wish, young human.” He says, leaning back, his movements unhurried, as if this conversation were merely a passing amusement.

As we walk away from the hole, dragging the thylarin brothers behind us, the Champion calls after us, “It’s amusing, really, watching people make the same mistakes over and over, but perhaps you will be different?” He then laughs shortly and quietly.

The meaning of these words stays behind with him.

(What now? This fucker seems almost too confident, is he acting though?) Sophie asks, opening the discussion.

(First things first, be careful what you say. We can’t be sure he’s listening in somehow. Nat, Sophie, how sure can you be that we are not being listened to?) Tess asks.

(I can’t be sure,) I shrug. (The Cockroach wouldn’t have had any trouble, and a Sub-Champion specialist could probably pull it off, so who knows. Try using Community as much as you can. Oh, and I wanna chat with the guy alone for a bit, I’ll rejoin you on the other side of the bridge later.)

With that said, I temporarily cut off the connection and turn around, leaving the rest of the group behind.

My steps feel weird on this metallic material as I head back to the hole. But as I observe the white grain of sand move around inside me, I start to wonder who he thinks might be capable of helping him.

The main suspect is me, given that I have the most mana and primordial energies that can ignore the sand. Then we have Biscuit with his primordial energy and Tess for the same reason. Then maybe Sophie? Min-Jae perhaps, maybe his eye would be useful? Hell, maybe he meant some other passenger? There are quite a few options.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” the same soothing voice sounds from down there as I plop on the edge of the hole, staring down at him, but still making sure to not move too close.

“What happened to your arms?”

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“I used them as fuel for my body in my early attempts to escape. Judging by the state of your left arm, you might understand my willingness to sacrifice them.”

I glance at my pale left arm and then back at him, “Yeah. Do you want me to call you Lord Champion and all that stuff?”

“Do whatever you find most fitting.”

“Sounds good. Am I one of the people who could help you escape?”

“Yes, the one with the second greatest likelihood.”

“What are you going to do if you get out?”

“First, I would reward Dravos and Drekar. They show promise, so I might even consider taking them on as disciples for a time.”

“No such offer for me?”

His eyes glint with a light I can see even at this great distance. Light from my orb reflected in the polished walls of that dark blue metal the hole is made of.

“You, young human, are taken by someone far more terrifying than I ever was.”

“And how do you know that?”

"There are things you can't even begin to comprehend yet. But don't worry, I can guide you without taking your master's place...I just need you to offer something in exchange."

"And if I refuse?"

"I'll pick someone else instead."

"No threats?"

He shakes his head with a soft smile and shifts slightly. His blue body moving under the white clothes, showing off his emaciated body below it all.

"Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to rest. Speak with your companions and decide your next course of action. But be warned - my prison holds greater dangers than you've seen so far. If you're not careful, you'll regret it."

As I turn to leave, his voice calls out once more, "And before you go, remember - sleep in this place comes with a price."

Noname (Hell, group 4) -we should leave the guy.

I send as I walk across the bridge connecting the round platform to the other side.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - don't fall asleep either. I don't know why, but he said to avoid it, and something about this place makes me want to accept that little piece of advice despite everything else.

Sset (Hell, group 4) - we should be able to go without sleep for a few days, probably for a week or two if need be.

Soph (Hell, group 4) - I keep checking just in case, but I don't think he's using mind manipulation or anything. By the way, Nat, did you notice anything about how weird that hole is?

StrongestOne (Hell, group 4) - even I thought it felt weird!

Sset (Hell, group 4) - for now, we'll be using the Community to speak. There is a limit and some information might get censored, but consider our link compromised. I don't know how he could pull it off, but we shouldn't underestimate him.

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - that sounds like a good idea!

NotDennis (Hell, group 4) - how do you like the 6th floor so far?

NotAaron (Hell, group 4) - he's probably had his ass kicked in a few times by now.

NotDennis (Hell, group 4) - surely

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - Gary is doing some scary stuff again, I'm just enjoying the view. I might just hire him as a bodyguard once I start building my kingdom.

NotAaron (Hell, group 4) - oh? Not building your harem anymore?

Brainiac (Hell, WhiteWing) - maybe during the second tournament. I'm kind of a big shot, am I not? I did place well in the tournament duels after all.

In an effort to conserve my time, I disconnect from the Community, reconnecting with group 4 with one last boost of kinetic energy. Tess is there already, telling others that they shouldn't be sleeping right now, and making sure to emphasize the potentially terrifying consequences of doing so.

I watch as everyone listens to her, and supported by Famir and Heryd, she doesn't seem to have much difficulty getting them to step in line. Even the thylarin brothers agree the only problem seems to be our last guide who only seems to want to lie down and sleep, but even he takes it seriously refusing to fall asleep.

I, meanwhile, survived 2 weeks without sleep, and it went quite well. Although the exhaustion and constant training towards the end, caused me to forget that I had lost a few limbs along the way, but other than that, it wasn't so bad.

Knowing what needs to be done, I reach Maya and tap her shoulder, distracting her from her conversation with Sophie.

“Are you still up for giving me a beating?”

At that, her face lights up with what’s probably the biggest smile I've ever seen on her face.

In the end, I end up calling in the twins to help, thinking they might be eager to get some revenge for their treatment on the first floor.

And of course, they were.

So with my unique epic, our group moves to the side, and our experiments start, here in this colossal dark tunnel of a prison for the human equivalent of a hydrogen bomb, which is sitting in a hole nearby.

I create batons made of mana, manabloc batons if you will, which they use to lash my thighs. I think the thigh bone is supposed to be the strongest one in the human body, so it feels weirdly logical.

As I take my beating, I come to realize that it isn't even all that painful. Sure, the blows do sting, but without access to body strengthening, they can only use the power of their bodies.

Maya and Lily probably have the highest physical stats in the group, followed by Tess and the twins, then Sophie and Izzy, and me firmly in last.

Maybe I still come out higher with all my free stats from Active Tempering and my use of the Restrictive Training Emblem, which I still refuse to check. There will be plenty of time to process my disappointment later.

So it's possible that my actual stats are on par with Tess and the twins if not just below? Maybe higher? I could ask them, but given that I refuse to check my stats, it doesn't really make sense.

To be honest, I should have realized it a bit sooner, but this unique passive of mine might be even better than I thought. And that's saying a lot considering I already thought it was pretty "broken" as the twins would say. It replenishes my mana, allows me to ignore physical damage from blunt force, and weakens blows when they get to be too much for the passive. How crazy is that?

The fact that the word Unique appears in the description says a lot. I made this passive by combining two upper grade epics, and it was tailored just for me. A unique passive, as the name says, implies that either no one else has it, or if they do, it's extremely rare.

Of course, the mana isn't truly free, the source of the kinetic energy flowing through me is the bodies of my group members. It's a resource they'll need to replenish by resting and consuming food and water. But they aren't using mana to do it, so in the end, I think it's going to be worth it.

It might feel like a drop in the bucket, but I want to have as much mana available as possible and I need to keep my primordial energies in my vortex core topped off as well.

As we go about this, conversations continue around us, but in the end, we still decide to go back to the ship and use its sensors to get an estimate of the storm's duration. And then we'll consider our options when it comes to modifying the ship and leaving.

Dravos and Drekar do not like it, but according to the Champion, they are unable to help him get out. He might be lying though so who actually knows, still, there is no way I'm going to let them free the guy.

The problem is that I'm sure he can still cause a lot of trouble, even in his current state.

Chapter 445: Stranded

Our trek across the bridge goes much the same as before - we get the same uneasy feeling and the same liquid darkness below, with something seeming to reach out and caress our feet. This time, no one dies, having experienced it before seems to have helped. It doesn't change the fact that when we cross, everyone exhales, clothes sticking to their bodies, covered in cold sweat.

We reach the SDAT and kill a few monsters along the way. Spiders mostly, as they spin those thin and powerful threads. Most of them are well into the 200s and tend to be the sneaky type, preferring to trap their opponents. Their main strategy tends to revolve around the many types of threads they weave into their webs.

There are, of course, the ones that can cut you apart, should you walk into them, though they're extremely tough they don't hold up well against fire.

Then there are the ones coated in a terrible toxin that rots through your skin on contact.

And rarely, we encounter a thicker thread, that seems to have the sole purpose of being impossible to get rid of without cutting away any clothes and skin they come into contact with. The sticky ones also are usually the longest and tend to hang freely from surfaces, entangling you further as you struggle.

[You have defeated Grymllok Spider - lvl 261]

[You have defeated Grymllok Spider - lvl 269]

[You have defeated Grymllok Spider - lvl 233]

[You have defeated Grymllok Spider - lvl 241]

For me, they're not much trouble, and once I've managed to locate a few early on, I know what to look for and find it trivial to snipe them down from a safe distance.

The webs are a different matter. And everyone, including me, has trouble detecting them given their near transparency, there is no mana in them, and most of them are razor thin.

Sophie is working on improvements to her web that should make it easier to find them, and I watch her progress eagerly, ready to steal her ideas and try to implement it into my scans.

Along the way, we find a few bodies, either cut apart or rotted to mush, we even a few even tangled in the web, glued to the stone of the walls, still alive and unable to move.

The web clings viciously to any and everything, and pulling it down tears flesh; burning it is even worse. The web seems to emit some strange substance when it burns, causing extreme pain.

It's an unusually nasty thing, even with our broad range of experience, we never come up with an easy way to remove it without causing even more harm.

The man we free dies on our way back, succumbing to his wounds and shock, and likely whatever toxin was in the thread.

We could have let Lily heal him, or she could have use [Disintegration] to destroy the web at a high cost to her mana. It's possible I could have done something with my [Resonance] or Izzy's unique application of flame and subclass could have spared the man his burns while we removed the thread.

Yet we didn't.

We leave the body behind for the monsters to eat. But we don't forget to poison it with a skill from one of Famir's men with the hope that some of the monsters will be just dumb enough to eat it and weak enough to die from the poison.

A few hours later, we've set up for another round of beating from Maya and the twins, even Tess gets a few hits in this time.

It might be only me, but they seem to be getting bored of it, well, maybe except Maya, who seems intrigued, trying out a variety of techniques, and asking which ones net me the most mana.

I oblige, and she keeps changing her stance, and I notice a slight difference in her attacks. She's still only using the pure strength of her body. Sometimes she also asks me to stand up and tries to target different areas.

Seeing her progress, I think some of these attacks would cause damage if she uses her mana, and if she used her [Boost], she could probably hurt me. Her [Boost] in combination with [Focus] seems to make for a great combo, not just for massive armors.

We've warned people not to fall asleep, but some already had before we got back, and we weren't able to wake them up. They still seem to be sleeping, but it's creepy. They do not shift, they breathe calmly, and they do not react to the pain or Sophie's mind-blending efforts.

The cause of their state is a mystery; we couldn't find a single hint.

There aren't many passengers left either. I think there were around 200 of us in total when we got here, and now it's closer to 100.

Yes, some went to explore underground before our small expedition went after them, but that still doesn't account for all the missing. They've just disappeared, no one knows where they went, and no one's brave or curious enough to go and look for them.

Deathtrap is their safe haven. The old rusty Sand-Defensive Air Transport even fell on its side with a big hole in it. It's just laying there in this huge cavern that we can't even light fully and no one can be bothered or seems to have the will to waste mana doing so.

So it's dark in here.

With a bit of help from Kallus, we reactivate some of Deathtrap's systems and check the storm. There are some calculations running in the background, I think they've stored a huge amount of data in one of the mana stones, data about the previous storms Deathtrap collected, compared to the current one, and then Kallus does some calculations as well. Something they taught them in Guide kindergarten or who knows where.

The storm will last at least for a week with a possibility of it lasting over a month.

I don't think people are happy about it in the least, and when we tell them, a good number of them scream and shout, their faces pale. They're terrified and they really don't want to stay here.

Some try to force us to leave, some even come to me begging and crying, offering up their items and bodies to me if I would only save them, knowing that I'm probably the one with the highest mana and that I've powered Deathtrap before.

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I leave, and when they try to stop me, I shove them against the walls using a bit of kinetic energy. One of them shouts after me, screaming that I will die here with the rest of them, their voice full of spite.

Heading out of Deathtrap, I think about those words.

How would I feel if I died down here?

I'd like to think it would happen only after I'd expended all my options, after I gave it my all, and tried everything I could. I'd also like to think I would die satisfied, knowing there was nothing more I could have done.

Would I regret not making different decisions? Maybe not heading here at all? Storing more mana or acting differently to avoid whatever killed me?

I think I would probably blame my past self a bit, but that's it.

These are just my thoughts based on how well I know myself, so I can't be completely sure yet. But I was close to experiencing something like that, so it probably isn't too far off.

And I'm sure I wouldn't go down easily - I'd be spitting, scratching, clawing, and biting until the very end, probably missing my left arm with my organs spilling out.

I reach Sophie and drop into a squat next to her, her item lighting the small area around us. It's a small floating cube, powered by a small mana stone, only there to serve as a mana battery. It's a pretty cool item, and it can change the focus of the light, making it weaker to light a bigger area or it can concentrate that light onto a smaller area. It can also shine into the distance or provide a softer, more localized illumination.

I also know Sophie would like to make an item like that that would be useful for Izzy and her fire. It's a good idea, and I'm already taking some notes from that curious item to use with my thermal energy.

"You wanted to say something, but then you didn't and got enamored with that cheap Light Box instead," she says, rudely.

"Enamored is too strong a word, but it is a pretty cool thing."

"Yes, it is." With that, she points at a small pile of white sand that sits a safe distance from us. The "Golem Heart can't control it, unfortunately. If the item was fixed and modified? Maybe it could."

"I think it makes sense if the sand was created to kill a Champion, it might be too much even for a fully restored Golem Heart. It's just an arcane item, most likely low arcane, even before it was damaged."

"Only arcane," she giggles. "I disagree there, I think it would have been capable of containing at least a few dozen grains of sand, maybe hundreds or more, if I could combine it with my skills."

"What makes you think that?"

"I have a suspicion that each grain of sand might be a separate construct, too intricate for us to examine at this point, but I think given a few months I could make some changes to the Golem Heart and 'steal' some sand for my use."

"The problem is how do we store it. Do we try Min-Jae's idea? Take some of the protective plating from Deathtrap, twist it, add in a mana battery to keep it powered, and then store the sand inside?" I ask.

Sophie nods, "I think it could work, but maybe we double up the layers and add a few backup power sources? If the white sand got out by a mistake, it could end terribly."

"Triple layers and we might not even need mana to power it if we sealed it properly. And at least three containers: one bigger and better sealed, one for you to experiment on with a small number of grains, and an even smaller one for me to examine, I just want to play with it a bit."

"That could work, what do you want to use it for?"

"My bones? My heart? Maybe I'll find a way to develop a new skill or improve an existing one. It could also help me improve my crafting. Sometime in the next day or two, I want to try melting some of the sand. It might be possible to form it into the shape of a weapon, and in that solid state, it wouldn't be able to move and attack you. If its properties don't change too much, you might even be able to use your mana to charge it."

"Wasn't that Kim's idea?"

"Nope, I thought of it first."

"I... I see."

"Yup, I'll either make these blue brothers prepare some forms for me and move it, or I get them to teach me how to get mana off my clothes and do it on my own, but that would still cost the mana I would need to use to stabilize my crown and leave it behind."

"Let me know, I would love to see how they did that."

"No problem." I nod.

With that, Sophie continues to stare at the small piles of white sand while absentmindedly playing with the piece of clay that is Golem Heart.

"Nat," she calls quietly after a while.

"Yes?"

"We shouldn't speak to the Champion again. Maybe we could destroy the bridge so no one can. Izzy's terrified of him, and she feels like there's something else here with us."

"I agree with you for the most part. But let's keep the bridge for now, just ask Tess to have someone guard the path leading to."

"I will. Thank you."

Two days pass and no one goes too far away from Deathtrap, and that might be the only reason no one else dies. Well, other than the ones who fell asleep. The ones with the lowest levels die in their sleep; we never did manage to wake them. The cause of death is unknown.

There are also more and more monsters crawling in the darkness around Deathtrap. Dozens and hundreds of monsters, patrolling in groups. Grymlök Spiders place their threads all over the place. The smaller monsters keep releasing their poisonous smoke.

We're avoiding using mana as much as we can. Plenty of people with higher physical stats just throw rocks at the monsters, it tends to be enough to kill or seriously wound them.

For some reason, I find it funny just how effective the primitive tactic turns out to be.

I also keep getting my daily dose of beating. At this point, I think most of the passengers at least suspect what it's for, but the mana I'm getting outweighs the risk of them knowing.

And now, Sophie, Dravos, Drekar, Izzy, Min-Jae, the twins, Noodle, Biscuit, and I are all grouped, a good distance away from the mold we managed to prepare and fill with white sand.

The mold is something Min-Jae and Tess made using their skills. A formed and twisted piece of metal. There are also a few wires of mana-conductive metal placed in between the sand that fills the form. The wires have some basic inscriptions on them, but we don't know how much of them will survive the heat.

The weapon we came up with is a spear, a long inscribed metal rod I made. At the end of that rod, sits a mold filled with sand and inscribed wire, with the purpose of forming the blade of the spear out of the molten sand.

It's the first attempt, so I don't expect it to end well; and then there are the haters who, if they knew, would be there screaming at us for doing this in the situation we find ourselves in. They can screw off.

I let out a concentrated stream of golden energy and point it at the mold.

Just like all the times before, the white sand fails to react to the primordial energy, and I gradually, over the next few minutes, narrow the stream and increase the heat.

The white sand slowly rises to temperature, glowing a bright, hot, red, but it takes longer than expected but it does eventually melt. It takes quite a bit of thermal energy, but at this point, it's just too late to stop.

So I continue, and over the following minutes, the sand starts melting just as it reaches a white-hot glow. The texture of the sand changes, oozing from its gritty and granular state to a more viscous and glass-like pool. Small bubbles form and pop as trapped air escapes, and more than anything, it begins to remind me of burning hot lava.

My golden flames light the area, and the heat can be felt even from this distance.

The final result is a pool of molten, glowing, liquid glass that shimmers in shades of yellow and white. It's at this point that I cut off the flames, and the area darkens once more without their illumination, the only light comes from the molten sand and Sophie's lightbox.

The molten white sand solidifies into glass in the form as it cools, its surface rough and irregular. To be honest, it's ugly as hell.

Mana-Reactive Spear (Upper Epic) - This spear ignores mana-based defenses and absorbs mana on impact, sharpening its edge against physical armor and barriers. It becomes progressively more effective with each moment it absorbs mana, but if pushed too far, it will shatter explosively, scattering a mist of fine, cutting particles capable of causing great harm over a wide area.

But as I look at the finished weapon, I have to wonder. What would happen if I stabbed the Champion with it? Would the altered sand forming its blade activate the fail safes in this place?

Chapter 446: Can you promise?

The question I have is how the spear compares to voidsteel and weapons made of it? Maybe voidsteel is a better option for physical threats and this will turn out to be a better option for mana based threats.

I also feel just the tiniest bit cheated. Yes, in the moment of naivety, I had hoped for an arcane item because of the base I used. But damn, that's kind of dumb, I still have trouble understanding the damaged arcane items I already have so I clearly should have checked my expectations. Just the fact that it's an upper epic item, even accounting for my rushed preparations and janky methods, should be enough for me.

I need to make a few hundred more of them after all of this is over. The system will probably limit me somehow, because of course it will, but I should be able to get a good number of shards out of it.

Tess seems to be liking it and as she reads the description I know she's thinking along the same lines as me. This could easily be turned into a weapon of mutual destruction against the Champion. Just overcharging it or break on impact would be enough.

That silly blonde doesn't even ask and does some [Declaration] thingy and after that, she moves the spear around her, testing its weight and feel.

Well, I don't entirely mind anyways, I picked this shape specifically for her.

I turn my attention to the remaining forms and charge my thermal energy again.

The process goes much the same as before but knowing the melting temperature and process from before speeds the process along and soon enough we have both items completed.

It likely cost me most of the mana, converted to thermal energy, that I've gained from my beatings. Though I do wind up with two more spears. One for Min-Jae and another for me to examine.

Well, we here in group 4 like to live dangerously, but even with such a glaring flaw the items do qualify as upper epic. I really need to take as much as we can later.

As I'm examining my weapon Min-Jae moves closer, he glances at the spear, twin to the one in his hand, and then at me.

"Doesn't this entire situation remind you of something?" he asks me.

"The tunnels under the old capital on the 4th floor?"

"Yes, exactly that."

"Maybe a little bit," I agree with him, but with a part of my mind, I start making small changes to inscriptions while repairing the ones that broke during the "crafting" process.

"It's weird to see how differently we're handling things now," Min-Jae continues. To me, he sounds a bit proud of the progress. "Back then these days in darkness would have been terrible and I remember how scared I was. I'm scared now too, but at the same time, I feel more confident."

I pause my work for a moment, "How do you think things would have gone if we had gone through the old capital with our current levels?"

"We would have probably burned the tree to the ground." He smirks confidently.

I feel amused by his answer and tell him, "I think you would die."

He stares at me, unblinking and I see how he squeezes the spear in his hand so I explain, "You think that just because you're stronger now you'd have a much easier time on earlier floors and that's partially true. You could find an easy way to clear the floor quest with your current powers. But on each floor, we went through something fucked up and our decisions made it more difficult than was necessary."

Finishing up my adjustments to the spear's inscriptions I turn to face him, "I know hundreds of people who would have wiped the floor with me on the second floor. From the second floor, The Last King and his warrior supported by that healing aura would cause me trouble even now. The First One, The Matriarch, The Living Tree would be fully capable of killing me if I got unlucky or they got the drop on

me. Even on the 5th floor, there are enemies I still know could kill me, that I would need to put my life on the line just to have a chance of defeating them.”

Min-Jae quietly asks, “Don't you hate it?”

“A little, but more than that I love it. Any time I start to think I'm at the top and there is nowhere to go, someone jumps out from behind a corner to fuck me and climb over me.”

“You may be weird but everything you say seems to have this twisted logic to it.”

“I know, right? Was there something else you wanted?”

“You’ve probably noticed but people are starting to act weird, especially Tess and Sophie. Izzy’s noticed as well, you should talk to her. I...”

“It will be fine.”

“Will it, Nat?”

“Yes, because I'm here.”

“Nat... I think you’re being affected as well.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed.”

Instead of heading to Izzy right away, I spend a few more hours examining the spear I just made. I find it even more fascinating than I should and spend these hours tinkering with my inscriptions. I shape them so that I can channel mana into the spearhead and increase the cutting force of the weapon.

Every time I do I feel the glass blade start to shake as if the sand it's made of wants to break free and attack everything in the area, only its solid form preventing it from doing so.

The tale has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the violation.

It's almost like ethercrystal. Specifically the sword I had on the 4th floor. Its blade absorbed mana from anything it cut and used it to strengthen my body.

It's not exactly the same effect but it is similar enough to make me wonder if the white sand hasn't been made from ground crystals with similar properties, but that sounds crazy. There is so much of it here.

Sophie said something even crazier too, that each grain of sand was a separate construct, every single damned grain of sand has its "own will", or programming.

For the next few hours, I examine the tiny grain of sand I still hold within my body, trying to uncover its secrets. I only stop when the fighting starts and head towards the source of the racket, curiosity getting the best of me.

A wave of not monsters, but passengers, members of our small alliance, have begun to attack our group, targeting those they see as the weaker individuals like Izzy and the boys. Their motivation seems to be blackmail and I watch as 50 or so passengers rush into our group of 20-30 members.

For some reason, Tess is not here.

Izzy defends herself with her flames, many of the attacks concentrating on her while the others rush to her aid.

Before the fight can even truly start, dozens of attackers just stop, frozen mid movement before they turn their weapons on themselves.

One woman stabs at her chest over and over with a short dagger. A thylarin concentrates his mana into a skill before jumping into the attackers, causing an explosion mid melee. A vyssari literally pulls his head off.

But they do not call off the attack, seeing dozens of their comrades die like that only seems to galvanize them as they locate the source and turn on Sophie.

Everyone from group 4 is clearly way above them so the attackers are being cut down before they can cause much trouble, but I also catch a sight of Famir. The Dawnslayer man who clearly has a concentration skill. His level is lower than that of the two thylarin brothers or Heryd, but he still seems extremely competent.

From him I spot clear signs of a domain type skill as well, it seems to mess with the skill activation of others or something of the like. The man weaves through the assailants with a calm and emotionless expression, destroying anyone in his way with a series of simple and powerful strikes.

Dravos and Drekar try to use the opportunity to escape but Sophie breaks their teleportation and Min-Jae shoots a few orbs through the duo's legs, preventing them from running. He shouts something at them as they try to stand up and their bodies crumble under the immense gravity of his skill.

The expressions they give Min-Jae are hateful. Gone is their playful nature, they even appear to be more affected than some of the others.

None of the attackers get spared and the fight ends in a decisive win. But even that win came at the cost of ever decreasing mana reserves and a flood of monsters I can already feel beginning to occupy the area.

I wait for a bit longer and then teleport to Izzy as she separates from the group walking back into our room which still has plenty of defenses protecting it. Teleporting there through my anchor I find her sitting on the ground with Noodle coiled around her.

The pearl-white snake with emerald eyes isn't currently small enough to be tied around her arm, no he is massive, enough so to almost make Izzy disappear beneath him.

It isn't threatening Izzy in the least. In fact, Noodle's head is gently supporting Izzy's cheek while the 11y old girl sobs inconsolably.

“Hello, Dumbthaniel,” she says, her voice sounding weak even as she forces herself to stop crying and turns her wet eyes to me.

“Hello, Izzy. Rough day?” I ask, moving in closer as Noodle shifts, halving his size so that I can plop down on the ground next to her.

“It's terrible, experiencing all these emotions. I can't bear to feel them.”

“Can't you filter them out?” I ask curiously.

“I can't. He did something.”

“The Champion?”

“Yes, everyone's emotions are amplified. Passengers, monsters, by a lot. Sophie's and Tess's the most. Yours too. I tried to help. I tried to reduce them for us but it hurts.” she wipes her eyes into a sleeve and hugs Noodle's head.

“So stop.”

“I can't, it'll get even worse.”

“No, Izzy, I mean it. Stop.”

“I...”

“Just trust me.”

“Tess will...”

"I know. Don't worry, I'll make sure it works out."

"She's..."

"I know," I repeat, reaching down to caress her head. She's not my ESM but it feels nice so I add a pinch of her nose, "Tess deserves some of it anyways, and I think it will help her. I think It's cute how you try to act all adult-like and responsible, but let us dumb adults deal with things for once."

Wordlessly she stares at me and I let her connect to my feelings without any defense.

"W-will it really be ok, Nat? Can you promise?" her hands are still shaking and I can see the desperation in her eyes.

"I'll tell you what I told you back on the 4th floor. I can't promise, but I will do my best."

"You're still so dumb..." she sobs.

"I hear that a lot."

Tess returns an hour later. She comes to the room where group 4 is, smiling brightly all the while. The spear I made, floating behind her along with several endurium javelins.

Her crown is dimmer than before and there are a score of wounds criss crossing her body.

She's missing a finger. A piece of flesh is torn away as she removes a bit of sticky web from her body. She breathes heavily, her limbs have been damaged by some attack or other.

At first, everyone acts normally as she lets us tell her about everything that's happened. She listens calmly and nods, asking questions of her own and adding her thoughts and adjusts a bunch of organizational stuff.

I watch the conversation continue until Sophie asks where she's been.

For the first time, Tess seems to be confused and falls into silence.

"I don't know," she answers honestly, the answer seeming to surprise her as well. "But it doesn't matter. In a few hours, we're going out to explore the other two tunnels leading into the platform where the Champion's been trapped. There might be something useful or another exit. Maybe we'll even find a tunnel long enough to avoid the storm and..."

"What the fuck do you mean, Tess! It's dangerous, we're not going out on some fucked up expedition!" Sophie stands up, screaming. Her mental abilities activate almost without her knowing.

A feeling of fear washes over us, the barest touch on the mind. An ability capable of making a person do horrible things against their will.

Tess seems confused and opens her mouth to say something but I interrupt her. "We're going."

The blonde's expression quickly changes and she smiles. "Thanks, Nat." she then turns to Sophie, "I'm sorry if I did something you dislike. We can talk about it..."

As she speaks I send a message to Sophie, through her web, (Just follow through for now. I will make sure nothing happens to Izzy.)

I notice her clenching her teeth but she still doesn't complain.

I've already decided to use this situation to my advantage, there's no need to interfere yet. I just need to let things happen and poke them in the direction I want.

Still, it's obvious where Tess was and who she talked to, and sooner or later I'm going to need to have another talk with that guy.

Chapter 447: Do you wish to kill me?

Izzy was right, everyone's emotions are being amplified and it's fascinating to watch.

Sophie steadily grows more protective of Izzy and much more aggressive toward anyone who tries to put her sister into the least bit of danger.

Min-Jae is more prickly and defensive every time he finds himself in a situation that leaves him feeling like somebody's lesser.

Aaron and Dennis distance themselves from the others, as they exchange a constant stream of messages.

Izzy quietly endures it all while constantly glancing at me as if she needs to confirm that she still has someone to rely on. Sophie doesn't seem to like it and her behavior towards me becomes colder.

Lily looks like a puppy left out in the rain. Moving from person to person searching for warmth and then becoming quieter, her face darker as she finds her expectations crushed by group members who aren't acting like themselves.

Like me, Maya seems to be handling things better. She just seems a bit lost, tossing around more awkward jokes than usual, I think the [Focus] we share allows us to endure what's happening a bit more. Famir is also an example of that. An empty expression dominates his face as the man leads his group and takes orders from Tess.

As for the last members of group 4, Biscuit becomes quieter, choosing not to speak most of the time and looking around with a dark purple glow in his eyes. He even begins to growl whenever anyone tries to pet him. The cute corgi seems to be distancing himself from us as if to help himself endure and avoid placing us in further danger. A truly merciful future animal overlord.

Noodle, on the other hand, does the opposite. He behaves more like Izzy and grows extremely protective of her. His smart green eyes watching anyone that comes near.

[You have defeated Grymløk Spider - lvl 241]

[You have defeated Grymløk Spider - lvl 281]

[You have defeated Grymllok Spider - lvl 263]

[You have defeated Grymllok Spider - lvl 231]

...

Every time I see a monster over level 200 I try to kill it, my senses seem to be getting better at locating them as time goes on. Sometimes I do it quietly so they don't blame me for stealing their kills.

The twins fight on the front line with Maya and one of them gets their hand cut off by a thread Izzy should've burned earlier.

There is some shouting as the twins blame the little girl and Sophie defends her in turn.

This is a truly unusual situation, everyone seems to be on edge.

Sophie even starts shouting at Tess, who stands there calmly and lets her do it. Tess then gently touches Sophie's arm and apologizes, taking all the blame on herself as the leader.

Tess then checks on the twin's arm and asks Lily to restore it. Even Lily, affected by whatever the Champion's been doing, hesitates, looking at me for a moment, seemingly reluctant to waste resources. In the end, though she gives in and restores the arm.

Aaron and Dennis, noticing her hesitation, quietly leave, and I feel the constant stream of conversation between them intensify.

More curious than before I watch it all go down. My sense of fascination grows as I see these people I've known for a year or more act so out of character. Just a few days ago the relationships were so different.

Everyone knows our emotions are being amplified and that seems to hold them back a little. They know the things they're feeling now shouldn't be this intense.

But these emotions aren't fake either, merely amplified. Their true feelings being dragged to the surface for all to see.

"This won't end well," Famir says, pausing next to me for a moment. His face bearing that same expression of calm that I see in the mirror.

"It'll be fine," I respond.

He examines me for a while longer, "You're being affected too, but you have a concentration type skill, why don't you use it?"

I ignore his question, "For now, just listen to Tess."

"Even if it means my death?"

"I'm not asking that of you. While I'm here no one will die. I will cover for Tess."

His eyes stare unblinkingly, as he searches my gaze for the truth in my words, nodding as he seems to find it, "I will continue to do so."

With that, he leaves to tend to his group and we push deeper.

We don't find any bridges down the new path but in their place, we find a great many more monsters. Scarabs, spiders, little poisonous snakes, and something resembling wasps.

And we fight, often finding ourselves surrounded, depleting our low mana reserves even further, even as everyone struggles to use as little mana as possible.

With that, I watch the improvements, as each and every member of our group is pushed to the brink and forced to fight. They remain sharp as ever, even in their amplified emotional states, their abilities do not diminish nor are they blinded enough to become liabilities.

Though I find it interesting that not a single monster tries to attack Biscuit, they even seem to be avoiding him and the unusually quiet corgi doesn't bother hunting them down.

This tunnel does have one remarkable feature, other than its excess of monsters, an underground lake with its surface so impossibly still that it almost looks like a great pool of glass. The effect is ruined though when several pitch black tentacles, each one at least the length of a football field. The monster's ugly octopus-like head soon follows its glaring red eyes settling just over the surface of the water, lit only by our floating lights.

[Inkmire Lurker - lvl ???]

In the dim light, the fight starts and once again I observe from a distance.

Biscuit makes purple tentacles of his own, they grow to a size nearly matching that of the monster's, and start pulling it out of the lake while the corgi growls with a purple shine in his eyes.

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

Tess's javelins and the spear I made fly after the monster, surrounded by lightning, lodging themselves in the beast's flesh, only to be pulled back to repeat the attack.

Everyone other than me attacks and the monster takes more and more damage. It tries to launch a burst of ink at my party only to have it blocked by Sophie's barriers when it doesn't find itself targeting one of the twins' illusions.

Then a second one appears.

[Inkmire Lurker - lvl ???]

And a third.

[Inkmire Lurker - lvl ???]

Maya crashes into a wall, thrown by a stray attack, and covered in black ink that sizzles, dissolving her armor. Tess gets in front of her, blocking the follow up, lightning blazing around her and burning the flesh from the pitch black tentacles.

One of the monsters freezes mid-movement, stopped by Sophie, while Min-Jae bombards it with a barrage of stalactites from the ceiling, slamming them down with immense speed.

The other monster is busy fighting the golem Sophie made with the item I gave her, Famir acts quickly running across one of the tentacles in a mad dash for the creature's head with a calm expression on his face.

Everyone, even the thylarin brothers are fighting.

Lily crashes into the wall next to me with a loud thump, her neck twisted and leg bent. She falls to her knees and her neck returns to its original position with a series of loud cracks and she gets back on her feet. She notices me and looks at me, confused.

When I wave at her she shakes her head and launches an arrow-like projectile made of [Disintegration] at a tentacle that was reaching out to grab one of the twins.

"That was one of Aaron's illusions," I note as the tentacle gets devoured by her gray mana.

And as I speak Aaron's illusion disappears.

"Well, it would be fucking nice if they stopped chattering away on their private connection and talked to us," Lily groans as her leg recovers and she charges back into the fight.

As I watch, Tess seems to be putting in the most effort out of anyone. She defends, she attacks, she directs. She also tends to get hurt a lot. She and everyone else.

The monsters work well together and they're tough to boot, they even have some kind of regeneration that keeps replacing their tentacles. Poisonous ink that melts mana and a tough hide. Sometimes they manipulate water, turning it into pressured streams which they use to attack and defend.

Meanwhile, I shoot the smaller monsters trying to creep up on the sly and attack the unsuspecting fighters below. Specifically, several sneaky spiders leeches sticking to the walls, and piranha-like fish below the surface of the lake.

Hundreds and hundreds of them, each one over level 200.

And the group below wins, in the end, the last Inkmire Lurker finally being finished by a blow from one of Tess's javelins.

While they rest I watch our group, especially Tess who seems satisfied with the result while the others lick their wounds.

I can say that one or two fights like that and most will be tapped out of mana. Yet Tess still doesn't seem to be satisfied, there is that glint in her eyes as she talks to people, sharing feedback, getting feedback. Planning what to do next.

Partially I see Tess in that behavior, but that's not the Tess I know. Her emotions are amplified to the point where she feels like a caricature of herself. And she doesn't seem to realize to the same extent as the others, likely because of her contact with the Champion. That time when she broke the rule she set.

She then sits on the side and takes care of herself. The others revel in the satisfaction of winning the fight, taking a moment to celebrate, their dark emotions temporarily pushed to the side.

I think I know Tess well enough to know what she wants and what she's hoping to accomplish. No thanks to the time we spent together before the tutorial, though I've learned a lot in the year we've been here. So I think I'll just let it be for now.

Tess, even in her current state, probably realizes what's going on with her emotions to some degree, and for some twisted reason has decided to lean into it while relying on me to take care of anything that falls through the cracks.

And I will, but I'll do it my way.

(Sophie,) I call, opening the private channel between myself and the green-eyed young woman. (It was Tess who got the guide killed and got us stuck here.)

After that I leave the tunnel and quickly head back to the platform where the Champion awaits, I move quickly, and by the time I reach the edge of the hole he's already looking up at me.

[Grimshaper - lvl ???]

"Hello."

"Hello Nathaniel, it's nice to see you again," the thylarin smiles as he says in that same gentle voice from before.

"So what are you trying to get out of this?" I ask, ignoring the fact he knows my name.

"Any number of things."

"But you won't tell me?"

"I apologize."

"You won't stop?"

"Let me ask you, Nathaniel. How many people do you think came here to speak with me other than your friend with the [Lightning Crown]?"

"None."

He smiles ever so gently, "Three. Tell me, do you wish to kill me, Nathaniel?"

"Isn't that obvious?"

"For laying hands on your group?"

"For laying hand on my group," I confirm.

With one smooth movement, he stands up and takes a few steps, an echo bouncing off the edges of the circular hole he is in.

"I have to say I never fully understood any Adepts or Masters of Pride I met. These feelings they have are so distant to me. Please, don't take offense but in some ways, I think they tend to be very foolish."

"You weren't imprisoned here alone, were you?" I ask instead of reacting to his monologue.

As if he were a teacher, excited to be presented with a clever question from a student he pauses and nods, "They placed me here alongside my... well, you could call her my bond. Over these 100 years, I've put in tremendous effort to free her from containment. I'm not quite done yet, but she has been partially released."

"So, do you want to explain your master plan to me?"

"Not yet. I've always found desperate people to be the most cooperative," as he says this, he speaks almost like he's tasting that last word on his tongue. "You will notice your emotions cannot be trusted and eventually you will find that your sense of time cannot be trusted either."

The Champion takes a few more steps and gently slides his finger across the surface of his prison. The touch is almost loving. "You cannot sleep, you cannot trust the others with you, more monsters will appear, resources will dwindle and that's when people will start turning against each other. They always do. Tell me, Nathaniel, how will you react when you see your friends kill each other in the spur of the moment?"

I think the question over for a moment before coming to my answer, "I don't know."

"The people before you weren't very... resistant. My bond likes to play and sometimes she takes it too far. Will your little expedition be different?"

The darkness in the holes segregated by the sparse bridges seems to be getting even deeper as if it were reacting to his words. I can't sense anything, no movement, no mana, no heat. Yet at the same time, it feels like a thick blanket around me, a touch that cannot be sensed but is there nonetheless.

"So what are you in for?"

The question seems to surprise him for a moment and that weird feeling disappears.

"For the pursuit of knowledge," he answers simply. "Now go, Nathaniel. My bond will see you off."

With that, the conversation is over and I stand up. As he said, I can't shake the feeling that something is watching me, and somehow the darkness under the bridge seems more "alive" than before.

When I reach the group they're still seated and resting, but I notice Tess has a fresh blue bruise, shining out around her eye. As if someone had punched her.

Chapter 448: A deal

Tess joins me as I take my seat off to the side, she looks back over at the rest of the group and sighs.

"I might have fucked up," she admits, staring at me with that massive bruise around her eye.

"Did you?"

"Yes. Tell me, Nat, do you think I'm a bad person?"

“Not really, you’re just a bit twisted, like everyone here.”

“But I should have better control over myself, I should...”

I interrupt her then and ask, “Tess, you could say I’m bad with people, right?”

She doesn’t seem to mind the interruption and after looking me over a bit she smiles, her blonde hair shining in the light on her crown. “Yes.”

“Even as bad with people as I am, I’ve noticed something. Want to hear it? It’s about you.”

“You always talk like you want us to be a group. Companions bonded through shared danger. But I’ve noticed something: You always seem to be putting yourself off to the side, instead of trying to be part of the group.”

I look into her gray eyes and continue, “You took on this bullshit leadership role - on the 4th floor, during the tournament, all the way up til now. You always keep yourself in check, trying to give them something to look up to, so that you can lead them and make the tough decisions on their behalf.”

I grab a small stone and throw it at Dravos, who seems to be trying to make his way to the platform, and he stops and returns.

“I don’t think that’s entirely bad, but you take it way too far.”

“Someone has to, Nat, and I’m good at it.”

“Oh Yeah? So killing the guide, throwing everyone in the group into danger, and getting punched by Sophie, was that all part of the plan, or did it happen because you got caught up in your feelings?”

“I will do what I think is the best,” Tess declares.

So that's it, she won't be honest even now? It's almost cute to see her that way.

Even so, I already have a plan in mind. "Well, it's okay. Do whatever you want, Tess, and don't worry about the consequences. I will take care of everything, just this once."

She has held up well so far, but I can already feel that weird pressure closing in around us, and once again our emotions are starting to rise against us.

Tess must feel it, but at the same time, I see hesitation. Between following her feelings and worrying about what might happen.

I stand to leave, giving her one last piece of advice, "I don't think sitting on the sidelines and watching our group advance is what you want, Tess. You'll need to give up some control to get what you're hoping for."

I think a day passes, but that turns out not to be the case. The countdown timer clearly shows that we've lost at least a day and a half.

For the first time, I see the twins caught up in a fight, with Min-Jae, and punches thrown on both sides.

The Korean boy apparently made the mistake of showing concern for them and invited them to join in the conversation, but Aaron and Dennis refused. Min-Jae didn't like that and decided to push the matter.

There were hurtful words said, and Maya eventually had to intervene.

The entire time Tess watched quietly, and our eyes met for a moment before she pulled her knees up to her chest and buried her face, deep in thought.

[You have defeated Inkmire Lurker - lvl 331]

[You have defeated Inkmire Lurker - lvl 346]

[You have defeated Inkmire Lurker - lvl 311]

[Lvl 262 > Lvl 263]

[Infusion - lvl 36 > Infusion - lvl 37]

I went out to hunt and kill these monsters alone. The same monster that took so much effort from my group before.

I'm strong to begin with and higher level than anyone else here.

The amplified emotions are fun to observe. The feelings I had back on the 1st floor, the emotions I felt back then, strengthened and hauled to the surface.

Do I need them? Could I get more out of them if I was more ruthless? My life is being threatened by an extremely dangerous being, and I could easily escape on my own. So why do I stay?

Because I can.

Every day I'm growing stronger and stronger. All towards my goal of keeping fuckers like the guy in the hole from being able to push me around.

Before returning to the group, I stop by the hole, only to see the thylarin brothers leaving it behind. Seems like group 4 let them pass again. This is the second time in the past few days.

"Welcome, Nathaniel," the Champion greets me.

"Izzy, Min-Jae, and Sophie, they are the members of my group you think have a chance of getting you out," I say.

He hesitates, seemingly surprised, but then nods with a smile.

I look down at him. “Why don’t we make a deal?”

[Tether - lvl 35 > Tether - lvl 36]

[Tether - lvl 36 > Tether - lvl 37]

[Tether - lvl 37 > Tether - lvl 38]

[Tether - lvl 38 > Tether - lvl 39]

[Tether - lvl 39 > Tether - lvl 40]

I return a few hours later to group 4’s campsite. Checking the time, I find that I’ve spent three entire days by that hole rather than the hours I’d intended.

The group still consists of group 4, Famir, Kallus, Dravos, Drekar, Heryd, and a few more people from Famir’s and Heryd’s groups.

Just by looking at them, it's easy to see the fights they've been through, and the wounds they now bear, likely the result of fights with people from their groups. The results are obvious, and evident in their behavior.

It’s been days since we’ve seen anyone else, and we’ve been down here for over a week.

Everyone else is running low on mana, struggling to scrape even the tiniest amounts from depleted batteries and their battered bodies. Even Tess is starting to feel the drain, with the exception of the store of primordial lightning in her crown.

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Oh, and Izzy. I only learned this recently, but she seems to have a strong connection to Noodle, who has been storing some of the mana around us. The little snake is devious, he hasn't been transforming all the mana he eats, in fact, he's been saving some. He's been storing it in a place even more separated from his body than my Mana Reservoir. It cannot be felt; it doesn't even seem to affect the white sand.

It's quite amazing.

Otherwise, the people are in shambles. I've seen them fight, scream, cry, and hurt each other. Placing their darkest emotions on display until they almost can't bear to look each other in the eye.

Just that little display of amplified emotions reminds us why Sophie's ability is so hated, along with people like her.

"Let's head back to the Deathtrap," I say, and find their eyes looking up at me. Some look like they've already given up.

Tess stands up first, followed by Famir, and slowly others get on their feet, moving like zombies.

Dangerous zombies that could easily decide to rush you in the blink of an eye and tear your head off.

Only my orbs light our way as we pass over the bridge and walk through the tunnels. It's quieter than before, but there are no monsters attacking us.

When we reach the crashed ship, we find no passengers or bodies. Out of the almost 300 passengers, only our group of 20 remains.

Over the next few days, I direct them as we pull the Deathtrap apart, focusing on the control panels, and the core, taking valuable metals and mana stones for our use.

I blame the Champion's bond for the loss of the white sand, the ones we brought here when we crashed. Well, at least we have the samples we sealed in the containers we made.

The opening we entered through is unusable; it's a very thick wall that only seems to work in one direction. It makes for yet another fascinating feature that I'd love to examine further, and with my emotions heightened as they are, I do just that a few times.

I'm constantly amazed by how much that prisoner was able to do from his cell, especially now that I know a bit more about it. I guess he wasn't a Champion for nothing.

Having gathered the materials I need I follow the instructions the Champion gave me, and we work building an array, step by step.

No monsters interrupt us, and now that they've finally been given some direction, the others seem to be a bit more lively. Heryd Kallus, and Sophie, wind up being the most help in the end.

The array is circular, similar to the ones we saw back on the 4th floor. The most important part is the coordinates, and for this, I use the ones provided by the Champion - something he got from an expedition 80 years ago. The coordinates should lead to one of the smaller forts in the central region. The coordinates were apparently provided by a man who had hoped that the Champion would escape so that his group would have a leader, and maybe even find a way to escape this moon.

Back then, his bond didn't have quite as much freedom, so apparently, the expedition left this place alive, much to the Champion's amusement.

Out of everything, this is the riskiest part given that it relies on the coordinates he provided, but I have one good reason to think they should work.

"We're missing the processing core, and the coordinates are loosely placed. Not to mention that the metals we took aren't as conductive as I would have hoped, so the jump won't be very efficient," Heryd complains.

"He might have placed some traps. I don't trust him, Nat. If something happens to Izzy..."

"The SDAT doesn't have any more arcanadium we could use. These high-quality mana stones are all we have," Kallus informs.

I answer each of these worries, and we continue to work longer and longer. Day and night, I would say if it were even possible to tell.

During one of my breaks, I take Biscuit into my arms, though he remains exceptionally quiet.

I sense his body pushing into mine, and even his breathing is quickened. Sometimes he lifts his head and growls into the darkness surrounding us, causing the feeling of pressure around us to disappear.

After a while, I take him and hand him to Izzy, who looks up at me; her sister by her side as always.

I reach down and put my face on a level with hers. "Thank you for trusting me and enduring everything we've been through."

She blinks a few times, but I ruffle her hair and turn to Sophie. I want to say a few words, but in the end, I say nothing. Sophie is smart; she doesn't need anything from me.

I just nod and join the twins sitting off to the side.

"It will be funny to watch you two beg Min-Jae to forgive you for all the things you little twerps said." I leave them with that one last sentence and head over to Min-Jae.

He looks up at me, his expression mirroring the others. I give his shoulder an awkward tap and quickly walk away, hoping my feelings come through like that.

"Need another beating?" Maya asks with a smile as I approach.

"No more beatings. So what do you think of our fearless leader?" I ask, gesturing over at Tess, sitting quietly on the sideline.

Maya seems to think for a while but then smiles brightly. "It might sound cruel, but it's nice to see her like that from time to time. It's more fitting than watching her force herself to be our glorious leader all the time."

Nodding in agreement, I take a few last steps to plop down on the ground next to Tess. I don't say a word, and neither does she, and an hour or two passes. Maybe longer.

In the end, I think I hear a light sob, but I probably misheard, given that when Tess finally does look over at me she seems as normal as she can be.

"I just wanted..."

"Yeah, I know."

"For a..."

"Yes," I say interrupting again.

She quietens and looks away, as if ashamed to even look at me.

"Do you want to know why I let so many of these things happen as I stood by and watched?"

"I think I do, but please tell me, Nat."

"I may be extremely socially inept, but this time I think I did better than you, Tess." I say, not forgetting to rub a bit of necessary salt in the still fresh wound, but it's no fun taunting Tess in this state, so I decide to give her a break and continue, "I don't want you to sit off to the side and smile like some outside observer. It would be more fitting if you just broke down and sat with the rest of us, but in order to do that, you have to fuck up once in a while, like everyone else, you need to open up more."

Tess seems to take a moment to think it over before nodding in confirmation. "You aren't very good at this."

"Right?"

The silence this time is a bit different.

"What about you, Nat? When will you open up?"

That question catches me off guard and I give it a moment of thought.

"I have time," I answer and stand up. "We will activate the array in a few minutes, so be ready, okay?"
With these words, I leave her.

Stopping by Min-Jae, I gesture at the twins, "What a bag of dicks, right?"

Then, I quietly let slip a few of the things I heard the twins say - things they definitely wouldn't want any of the girls to know. Min-Jae can decide for himself if he wants to drop that nuke.

Lastly, I find our petite healer, missing both of her arms, her own body used as fuel for her healing skills.

"You might be worse than me," I gesture with my both still-present arms.

She stares at me, and I think she may have said something rude a few days ago before our emotions calmed down.

"Nat, no more fucking dark tunnels after this," she says in the end.

"Yes, let's try to avoid that."

As a reward for enduring so well, I pinch her nose and pull, making her shake her head from side to side. I halfway expect her to growl like Biscuit.

Then we collect our small group into the teleportation array. I have three spears, my damaged arcane items, containers full of white sand, and more, everything we can fit even to the point we have to squeeze together.

There is no need for more words after a few days of preparations, but I can tell that most of them look nervous, unsure of what is going to happen.

But not me.

My crown finally flickers and disappears, all of the mana it was holding having been funneled into the core and used to power the array. The inscriptions lighting up as they burst into activity. It takes more and more of my mana as my reserves dwindle, nearly all of it gone, yet I still push and push, sharing the pressure of activation with the materials.

The iron creaks, the sides melt, and the core cracks.

My Mana Wavelength Iris picks up the slack, and I let part of that mana flow through my body, shaping it until I finally activate the array I wouldn't have been able to make on my own. I then make one last-second change that almost breaks the array, and a wave of mana crashes into me, causing some light damage.

Then the bright light flashes, forcing me to squint my eyes.

When I open them again, I'm still in the cave. All the equipment gone, all my items.

The array is now broken, collapsed into a molten heap as it gradually cools, the singed inscriptions letting out a dim light.

Other than me only Dravos and Drekar remain, looking around in confusion.

Here was a very well-hidden trap in the Champion's array, set up so I would stay, but these two were supposed to escape.

I collect the tiny bits of mana still floating in the air, coat my arm in it, and slash twice.

[You have defeated Manabreaker - lvl 286]

[You have defeated Manashroud Shaper - lvl 288]

Even before they fall dead, black smoke begins to aggressively bubble free of their dead bodies, surrounding me like a whirlpool in reverse. The pressure on me increases my feelings of fear, and I can feel the anger radiating from that being. From the Champion's bond.

It crashes against me, dragging me across the ground and smashing me against the wall over and over.

Even the feeling of pain is amplified now, as a huge amount of mana flows into my reservoir from my passive. But the bond is tossing me around with a force I can feel, even through my unique passive.

Something inside my body breaks, and I taste rust in my mouth, but I still smile.

The bond finally stops throwing me around, and the black smoke halts just an inch from my face.

"How about we go have a chat with your master?" I ask.

Chapter 449: Something you are addicted to

For the first time since I've met him, the Champion down in the hole seems to be experiencing an emotion other than his usual lazy confidence. It's not anger, it's not even surprise. He just seems genuinely curious, his eyes ticking between me and the unsealed portion of his bond.

Neither of us moves any closer to the hole. I know for sure that if I enter it, I won't be able to leave; that's just how it's made. It's not because of the mana, no, it's something else entirely that I can't quite understand yet. Out of all of the things here, I'm probably the most curious about that hole.

"Mind telling me your name, oh Lord Champion?" I ask as I take a seat, and the bond lets me.

"My name's Caius. What betrayed the presence of my bond? I thought she'd hidden perfectly."

"Izzy told me," I answer without concern, having already confirmed their status through the Community chat.

"That's curious, we've been listening in on your telepathic communication and my bond should have been well hidden, even from her skills."

But not the system channels, I want to say, but it's not like he would hear me.

"She's more talented than you would have expected. So what was the twist? We made a deal that I would come back later to free you, but there you are, sending your bond and trapping me here."

He isn't sitting anymore, and his eyes are constantly on me as if he's reading something in my posture, taking each of my movements into consideration.

"So there was never a chance for us to free you?"

"People tend to be easier to manipulate if they think they have something I want. They barter, they feel safe, and they tend to be easier to push in the direction I want. None of you, Nathaniel, could get me out as you are now."

"That's unfortunate."

"Indeed."

"Can I ask a few more questions?"

The darkness that was about to surround me pauses, and followed by the feeling of it looking over at its master, and waiting for his orders.

Caius smiles and gestures with his arm, "Please."

"You said I'm already taken, what did you mean by that?"

"It's not complete, but there is a mark left on you by someone very powerful. To put it in more barbaric terms, the message goes something like: 'This is mine, I found it first.' Marks like this are very archaic, a relic of the Absolutes and Champions of old. Nowadays, things work slightly differently."

As the presence reaches to me I ask one last question, "Do you remember what I said to you before? When you asked if I wanted to kill you."

"Yes, you told me that you would kill me." Caius smiles, and the pressure around me increases. A feeling that his bond is about to tear me apart.

Then I take a step and jump into the hole.

There is nothing stopping me. You can enter, but you cannot leave.

The sheer surprise on the Champion's face as I land next to him is fun to watch.

My vortex core is full of primordial energies, and as Caius throws a punch my way, all of the kinetic energy in my body rushes out at once in an attempt to push him away and strengthen my body.

Even crippled and despite having never been specced for close combat in the first place, the Champion moves with incredible speed. The arm I use to block his strike evaporates into nothing, even after being bolstered with kinetic energy. Even with my unique passive.

But emerging from all that gore is a single shining white speck, almost seeming to float out into the air between us. The small grain of sand seems to be even more visible in this hole that serves as the Champion's prison.

All the mana I got from my passive explodes from me, and the grain of sand becomes charged, swirling around crazily while Caius rushes to dodge. It also pierces through my body, drilling holes into it as it moves erratically through the confines of the hole.

From down here, I hear the Champion's bond for the first time. It screeches, and the black smoke throws itself into the hole, rushing to save its master, even knowing that it'll be trapped.

My body crashes against Caius, and a swing of his arm opens my belly, spilling my intestines into the open air.

It's worth it though; just that short moment of imbalance causes him to miss, and the white grain of sand touches him. The tiniest touch on his skin. Barely a split of a second as it passes by.

And it's over.

He stops moving. The bond stops moving. And I push my organs back inside of my belly.

The air vibrates and starts shaking, and an eruption of sound pours into the chamber from all sides. Tons upon tons of white sand rushing into the cave around us.

Somewhere hidden in the desert, huge reservoirs of mana explode, dozens of them, the explosions of such enormous amounts of mana can be felt even down here. Likely having been set for the sole purpose of serving to charge the sand that now, charged, rushes down there through three huge tunnels.

Caius and his bearing change, as if he can't believe what just happened. Anger appears on his face, the anger of a powerful man, as he takes his next step towards me, arm lifted to deliver a finishing blow.

He doesn't say anything about me dying here with him, but I can't help but tell him, "I told you I would kill you."

These words make him pause for a moment.

I use that opportunity and say, "Use 1 Day Beyond Stay token."

Before his blow lands, I disappear. I feel my body and mind spinning and the area surrounding me changes.

It seems to be somewhere around midnight, and I stand on the polished and perfectly smooth black stone that seems to stretch on forever. There's nothing as far as I can see. No hills, no trees, no mountains, no clouds. Just straight and perfectly polished black stone flooring. The sky is full of beautiful stars and nebulas.

My heart generates mana again, and I revel in the sweet sensation as it begins to fill my body.

Once again, my handler sits before me, in a chair set behind an old wooden table stacked high with papers, plenty of mana stones, and a number of items I fail to identify.

She moves a thread of her red tinged black hair to the side and looks at me with her big brown eyes, "You're in a bit worse state than I left you."

I follow her eyes and look at the wound on my belly. It's closing slowly, but at least my organs aren't spilling out.

"Will I still get notifications here?"

"Yes," she confirms, likely knowing what I'm waiting for. "You know, you might not be nearly as normal as you think."

Huh? There is no way that's true. She should take a closer look at the rest of group 4.

In the end, I still nod, it's better to agree with crazy people so they leave you be. Then I wait. And a moment later, it comes.

[You have defeated Grimshaper - lvl 495]

[Lvl 263 > Lvl 264]

[Lvl 264 > Lvl 265]

[Lvl 265 > Lvl 266]

[Lvl 266 > Lvl 267]

[Lvl 267 > Lvl 268]

[Lvl 268 > Lvl 269]

[Lvl 269 > Lvl 270]

[Lvl 270 > Lvl 271]

[Lvl 271 > Lvl 272]

[Lvl 272 > Lvl 273]

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[Lvl 273 > Lvl 274]

[Lvl 274 > Lvl 275]

Worryingly, there's no notification about the bond. I'll need to warn the others as soon as possible; there's a chance we missed something.

I then invest the stats gained into mana.

“Happy?” she asks me as I close these notifications.

“He was a Champion, I should get more levels,” I complain regardless.

“Oh really? Do you truly believe that?” My handler smiles, leaning back, and watching me from behind her desk.

I don’t bother answering. It’s more than clear that I abused the environment, and Caius was weakened so I get an ‘assist’ at most. But that doesn’t change my opinion of the system being an asshole, especially after stealing so much XP from me.

“You know you could have died. What if the transport to Beyond hadn’t activated?”

“Why would it not, it activated before with Whitey.”

“The system might have disabled it after you abused it.”

“As if I’m the first person to ever abuse it like that. If the system didn’t like it or could, it would have been changed hundreds of years ago,” I just wave my hand.

Overall, my plan was simple. The guy couldn’t sense the grain of the sand hidden within my body. I even tested it a few times, I even sent away all the spears to get him to lower his guard.

I’m also not too proud to not accept that I would have died without the Beyond entrance token. But why wouldn’t I use things like the Community and the items awarded by the system to my advantage?

As for the Beyond entrance token, I got it from killing a thousand monsters over level 200. It worked nicely, the guy probably thought it was because of my amplified emotions.

"I'll get back to you in a minute," I tell my handler.

Then, while she sulks, I open quest notifications, starting with the oldest.

Congratulations, you have killed 1,000 monsters over level 200.

You have received a Beyond 1 day stay token.

Congratulations, you have reached level 275.

You have received a Beyond 1 day stay token.

Congratulations, you have survived.

You have received:

Beyond 3 day stay token

Active skill combination token

Yeah, that seems about right.

I look at my handler, "Hey, isn't that reward too much?"

"What did you get? Let me check." She grabs a paper from the table and taps on it a few times, "Oh, active skill combination token? It's fine, survival quests can be like that, especially with personalized rewards, plus even though he was crippled and trapped, you did kill a Champion, so it's a pretty big achievement."

"I can live with that."

I ignore my handler again and, for the first time in a long while, I open my status. My eyes first head toward my stats to check the results of the restrictive training emblem.

Strength: 141

Dexterity: 137

Constitution: 309

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1131 + 1131

I then close the window and open it again. It's still there.

Yeah, it's not bugged. My new training method has gained me 25 levels' worth of stats. Around 20 in Strength and Dexterity and over 30 in Constitution.

If Lady Lissandra continues to give me such fine things, I might fall in love with her. I think I should probably apologize to her; I've treated such a fine Absolute far too harshly.

She might give me something even better if I beg hard enough. Buying her a gift or two could certainly raise her opinion of me. So what might so fine woman as her like?

I lovingly check the useless stat increase. Sure, they can't quite compare to the glory of mana, but getting them for free like this means I can put more stats into mana.

As if I wouldn't have done it anyway.

I also know that at some point the rate of improvement will slow, and the emblem will need to be adjusted, or I'll need to use significantly more mana. But that's something I can work on, after all, I

already have plenty of interest in emblems. Plus, I can probably store a LOT of mana in the crown and use that to power the emblem in addition to the reserves in my body and reservoir.

Seems good.

I then open my entire status.

Name:Nathaniel Gwyn

Title: Champion Candidate

Difficulty:Hell

Floor:6 - Astral Prison

Time left until forced return:3y 308d 16h 06m 11s

Traits (2/3):Mana Circuit 2/3, Mana Wavelength Iris 0/3

Lvl 275

Strength: 141

Dexterity: 137

Constitution: 309

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1131 + 1131

Primary Class:Focused Channeler (Epic)

Sub-class:[Adept of Pride]

Active skills (9/10):

Focus - Lvl 53

Perception - Lvl 50

Redistribution - Lvl 50

Resonance - Lvl 51

Mana Domain (Pride) - Lvl 45

Tether - Lvl 40

Infusion - Lvl 37

Mana Crown - Lvl 39

Mana Manipulation - lvl 54

Constructs:

Reinforcement (Construct)

Thermokinetic Mana Heart (Construct)

Mana Regulator (Construct)

Mana Sovereignty Mantle (Construct)

Vortex Core (Construct)

Passive skills (4/5):

Arcane Resilience (Mid Epic)

Phoenix Embrace (Mid Epic)

Cognitive Fortress (Mid Epic)

Mana-Kinetic Conversion Reservoir (Unique Epic)

Tokens:

Trait strengthening token (2nd stage)

Beyond 1 day stay token

Beyond 3 day stay token

Active skill combination token

Shards:149,748

I could live with that. Yup. Not bad at all. Just wait for me, Whitey. I'm gonna kick your ass very soon, I just need a few months, and you are done.

Well, for the second time, considering you've already been killed once. What a loser.

In a much better mood, I turn to my handler, "I would like a different handler."

She tilts her head to the side and smiles, "Would you?"

"Yup. Someone more useful and cooperative. How does the thing with handlers even work?"

"Oh, it's quite simple," she doesn't even seem insulted, rather she answers my question with forthright honesty. "When you first enter Beyond, every handler has a chance to pick you up. If only one is available, they will get you. If there's more than one, they either bid on the opportunity to represent you, or the other handlers will back off based on prior deals and coercion."

"How many handlers were after me? And how much information do they have?"

"Quite a few wanted to get a hold of you, but there were others from your planet who drew a lot of interest, especially that man. Before you ask, I won't tell you more. As for the information, just the basics like your status, excluding the most powerful skills and traits. Then they get a sample of the records of your performance across each of the floors. As for the full records, only the Rulers can see them... and maybe a dozen others. Then, of course, your handler once they're assigned."

"See, that's actually pretty good, why couldn't you be more cooperative before. So I want to ask..."

She lifts her hand to stop me from talking, "Your time here is limited and we're nearing the end. In a few seconds, you'll be sent to the Entrance floor. If you still want to change your handler, you can do that; just say 'I want to change handlers,' and the system will offer you some options."

Finally, she stands up and moves around her table, stopping in front of me. She has the look of an adult playing a trick on a dumb kid.

“Both you and I know you love to gain power and information on your own. You have that insatiable curiosity and weird sense of pride you’re building. You complain, you curse, but the feeling it gives you is something you are addicted to.”

She lifts her finger and waves it from side to side, and I can’t help but follow it with my eyes, much to her amusement.

“But just this once, allow me to give you some information few handlers can give you. Information you can’t talk about outside of this place.”

My handler moves her face closer and whispers, “There are 13 floors, each tied to one of the Rulers. This was something Greed wanted. Through her immense power and trickery, she persuaded the other Rulers to agree, and they altered the previous version of the tutorial.”

Her voice becomes even quieter, and I feel her warm breath on my ear as she whispers, “Only one Ruler refused, and no one was crazy enough to try to force him.”

The next few words reach me, “On each of the floors, if you're lucky, or unlucky enough, you can meet a Ruler from some point in their past. The floors are made from their planets or places important to them. This is my gift - an answer with many more questions.”

She is smiling as I get pulled away to the Entrance Floor, her brown eyes glowing, “Tell me, do you still want to change handlers?”

Chapter 450: Hiding under blankie

Changing my handler? There is no fucking way.

Lady Handler is someone I will stick with until the very end, yup.

I was fed up with her? When? Who? That’s such bullshit, I would never.

Anyway, I take a few steps and rest against the cold wall, having found myself back on the Entrance floor.

It's better than being on the 1st floor, especially since I didn't reach the "checkpoint" though that does mean that I'll have to start over.

I slide down to the ground, and much like my 1st visit, I find a wide range of people glancing over at me with interest, but most of them are on a time limit, so they quickly go about their business.

Who cares about a bloodied man with a shattered arm? Blood covers my entire front side from my prior evisceration and a few more minor wounds that would certainly have killed a horse and most monsters of equivalent size.

At least my mana is coming back, and the feeling is even better than I expected. That desert truly was a godforsaken place. Another reason to work on ways to counter that. I wouldn't want to end up like that blue guy and his bond.

With one day remaining, I don't see any point in trying to extend my stay and decide to spend the next hour collecting my mana, assessing damage, and moving my heat across my body to heal the more severe wounds.

Sure, there is a small chance the system will teleport me to the surface, but yeah... who am I even kidding? I'll probably end up caught in a bubble of space of the System's making just before I get buried. Hell, I might find even more bullshit thrown my way.

Especially since the system doesn't seem to mind people using Stay tokens as a get-out-of-jail-free card, I can't help but find it suspicious, it's almost too abusable. Just spend 10k to buy yourself a free escape?

There has to be a problem with that.

I might also have to worry about trouble from the enforcers here. Apparently, they're the guild that oversees the execution of contracts, and even though the one I signed before going to the 1st floor of Beyond was one of the lower tiers, it could cause some degree of trouble. Probably nothing too serious, given that no one's left to report me, and I can blame it on Whitey.

As I recover my mana I convert it into primordial energies and store them in my vortex core. If I'm to have any chance of surviving I need to get rid of all my mana before returning and rely on my store of primordial energies.

As I stand up and begin to walk through the crowds of people, I let a bit of mana seep into the identification emblem, and the letter D appears on the back of my left hand. The color is the usual black. How did that woman describe things before? Obsidian Black for the D rank, Ivory White for the C rank, Royal Blue for the B rank, Shimmering Silver for the A rank, and Radiant Gold for the S rank.

After looking things over a bit longer, I let it disappear and reach the area surrounding the center of the outpost. The place with the bulletin boards.

I speak to the merchant nearby and spend a few hundred shards to buy a single sheet of paper and a pen. It's the one with the option to keep the message longer; in this case, it will take a month before the message will disappear and the paper will burn.

It cost me almost a thousand shards.

I definitely got robbed.

Nevertheless, I take a pen and start drawing. Scrawling out a picture of a bear meant to be Cinderbear from the 1st floor. Vic always said that I had no talent for drawing, but it looks just fine to me.

Just in case, I write a message below the image reading: Fuck Cinderbear.

Seriously, fuck that guy.

Then I write some keywords like Earth, a few of the Continent's names, and similar keywords. I also draw some popular memes to spice things up.

Lastly, I mention that I'm looking to meet up with anyone else from the Earth's tutorial. I mention my intent to return to Beyond in a month for an expedition lasting a few days. I calculate when it should be

and the reading on the countdown to forced return so they can time it as well. Then I use the pen to pin it to one of the bulletin boards.

Satisfied with my work, I leave.

I'm not sure if Tess and Lily will be here by then; I'll need to ask, but in the worst case, I can come here on my own and return with them later - they shouldn't have many stay tokens anyway, so I could certainly show them around.

Going on my way, I find the blacksmith I spoke to before, he's probably the best smith in this outpost. As I enter his shop, he looks up from the ax he's been tinkering with. It's an annoyed look I know so well.

No one likes to be interrupted when they're having fun.

His eyes slide on my torn, bloodied clothes and still visible wounds. I also do not have any equipment at all.

"You're that crazy guy with the Flamebearer?"

"I'm the crazy guy with the Flamebearer," I confirm.

"I almost didn't recognize you. If you still have the ax, I'll offer you 20 thousand shards in exchange."

"The last time you offered 26 thousand."

"Yes, but it looks like you need the shards more urgently now," he says shamelessly.

I can't be even mad.

"Not selling, but listen to this. What would you do if, let's say, hypothetically, someone told you you would be teleported into a tiny chamber, deep underground, in a space that used to be a huge cave that

is now buried under tons and tons of sand. Some time in about..." I check the time, "21 hours. Hypothetically, of course."

Even annoyed as he is, this seems to amuse him and he immediately straightens up, scratching his beard, "What floor? Hypothetically."

"Sixth floor, Mana Desert."

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been unlawfully taken from Royal Road. Please report it.

His eyes shine at that, and he opens his mouth then closes it. Likely trying to figure out what he can say without triggering the system's censorship.

"I can prepare a metal sphere, it will be airtight and capable of enduring the pressure. I can offer a set of items that would allow you to filter the air, allowing you to hold out a bit longer. Either so you can make some preparations or wait for someone to save you, but with properties of that sand..."

"Hypothetically," I remind.

"Oh, sure," he nods quickly, "I would also hypothetically offer a lot of shards for that white sand. I've always wanted to try working with that material."

"Sounds interesting. So what would be the price of that sphere within the necessary timeline?" I ask, already expecting an outrageous sum, but somehow it turns out even worse than I expected.

"Five thousand shards. Net. So it will be 6 thousand so Beyond can take its cut. I think it's a good price, and I have high hopes for our future cooperation."

Looks like I'm due to be robbed a second time today.

Damn it.

I swear I will do my best to use every single damn grain of white sand to make stuff to sell.

About 12 hours later, I wake up in a mild state of panic before remembering where I am and closing my eyes, as I pull my blanket over my head, and curl up.

I paid for this room with an extraordinary number of shards, so I better enjoy it for as long as possible. I did consider sleeping outside on a bench to save shards, but with all these people around and my luck, someone might have tried to kidnap my ass to use as a mana battery.

Moreover, I think I deserve a bit of rest, A bath, a freshly made bed, and some basic new clothes - all too expensive.

While I'm hiding under my new blankie, which I totally intend to steal before I leave, I open the system window and scroll through my status. It's so pretty, and I still have a skill combination token, and I plan to make use of it before I return. Just in case, I take a moment to check the timer, but I still have around 8 hours remaining.

It takes another half hour before I truly feel awake and refreshed enough to deal with the world and push the blankets off to the side with a big yawning stretch.

I take a moment to enjoy some of the food and water bought before turning in for the day and check the scar on my belly. The wound seems to be healed, but the scars always take a while to disappear. It should be gone soon though, and that brings an interesting thought to mind.

I lift my right arm and look at the inner side of my forearm where the scar should be, the one I got even back on Earth.

It's still there.

Lily could probably remove them with her [Plastic Surgery] skill, but they don't bother me at all. I also need to find someone who was old before the tutorial started. I saw a few during the tournament, but I didn't bother asking many questions at the time.

Honestly, I'm curious to hear how the system's affected them. My scars are still here, but it seems like having a higher constitution should fix all kinds of things like organ failure, heart problems, and disease? How does the system even know the difference between things like that and more cosmetic issues?

Now that I think about it I know just what I'll do. I'll send a message to Channeler, and he can find an aging grandpa to ask about it.

"I want to use an active skill combination token," I say.

You have used an active skill combination token. Please pick two skills from the following to combine.

Warning! Combining two skills will reduce the level of the acquired skill.

Warning! Combining incompatible skills may result in worse skills.

Warning! After combining these skills, it will be extremely difficult to reacquire the skills used in the resulting combination.

List of available skills to combine:

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 54

Perception - Lvl 50

Tether - Lvl 40

Infusion - Lvl 37

And here we go again, I got excited for nothing and got some cheap-ass low-tier combination token or something. Once again, some of my skills haven't made the list. [Focus], [Redistribution], [Resonance], [Mana Domain], and [Mana Crown].

Sure, [Mana Domain] probably isn't there because I boosted it with the subclass effect of Pride. I already got the crown I got from a prior combination, so that makes sense too, but there is no way [Focus], [Resonance]

I might really have to start working harder on combining skills on my own or evolving them on my own. I've never really stopped trying, but I've had no success so far.

I mean, I kind of understand; I'm just a newbie here, so it may take a few years, but that won't stop me from complaining about it.

I've already figured out part of what I want to do anyway. One of my options is [Tether], which I got from my Primary class at level 150. It's one skill I want to keep, so the resulting combination should be something that accounts for that. My primary class also gives me [Mana Domain], and I've strengthened it with Pride, so there's a high chance of that sticking around even after I change class at level 300. If not, I think I can get it back, unlike [Tether], which will be harder to recover.

So the question is:

[Tether] with [Perception]

[Tether] with [Infusion]

[Tether] with [Mana Manipulation]

It's not a difficult decision.

Congratulations, you have successfully combined [Tether] and [Mana Manipulation]! A new skill has been created.

You have acquired [Ley Line]

[Ley Line - lvl 0 > Ley Line - lvl 9]

Oh my, that sounds kind of mysterious. But before we get to testing that out, let's try something else.

I let five evil orbs form over my head, focusing on the excellent mana shaping exercise left to me by the amazing Absolute that is Lady Lissandra.

Now, let's see how long it takes to...

Congratulations, you have acquired a new skill!

[Mana Manipulation]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 0 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 49]

Well, that was easier than expected.

Warning, after combining these skills, it will be extremely difficult to reacquire the skills used in the resulting combination?

The system can screw off.