

Tutorial 461

Chapter 461: Allies?

“Is everyone from round 5 some kind of weirdo?” Spacewolf declares in an unprovoked attack.

That little jerk sure sounds confident hiding behind that mountain of muscle, and as we sit there and plan, he only grows more bold. He’s already been badmouthing the others, and now I’m his target.

Some of his confidence might be bought by his worth as well. He introduced himself as a healer after all.

I just look at him and don’t bother answering.

“You’re wearing that mask, Savant’s just sitting off to the side, and he hasn’t said a word since he arrived. And you haven’t made any attempts at speaking to him either,” the boy continues.

This time I glance at his bodyguard, wondering if I have a chance at sneaking in a petty attack on the boy.

The tournament winner seems to catch onto my intent and flashes a bright smile, placing his teeth on display. A clear challenge gleams in his eyes.

For some reason, that only makes me want to do it even more, and as carefully as I can, I start moving my mana toward the annoying boy.

“Spacewolf,” Leticia says in a gentle tone, “there are some people who just don’t feel the need to talk very much. Noname and Savant might just need some time to get comfortable with us, maybe they’ll be ready to talk then, so let’s not be rude, okay?”

As if she had something to say, the golden retriever Luna pokes her owner, and Leticia just smiles at her, booping her on the nose a few times.

Somehow that gentle-looking woman with her short black hair has taken on the role of a placeholder leader. At the very least she seems focused on trying to guide us to a shared goal.

At that point, I decide to ignore the fact that I was the one who called them all here and hope that no one remembers.

“Didn’t Noname call us all here? Shouldn’t he explain what this is all about?” Savant’s voice interrupts. I don’t even have to turn around to know that he isn’t even looking in our direction.

As eyes turn to me and I sigh. “It’s simple. There is a place I want to reach on the 1st floor. It’s close to a safe zone where you can find a ‘checkpoint’. We will be moving in that direction together, and when we get close I intend to split off from the group while you continue on to the safe zone. I’ll even finish off most of the lurkers to get them to focus on me and time the end of my stay token, so I can escape. That way you don’t experience any losses.”

“What if I want to go with you? It sounds fun,” the bald man asks smugly.

“Then the deal’s off. What’s at that place is mine and mine only.”

“And if I lie and follow you anyways?” he pushes.

“Then I will fuck you up.”

Leticia quickly jumps in, “Noname, CarrotCake, there’s no need to go that far. There are countless lurkers you could fight, even other Beyonders. There is no need for the people of Earth to fight each other.”

“I would like to remind everyone that each of us is wasting their stay tokens because of these two,” Savant follows up, throwing in some wisdom of his own, from his seat further away, probably so he can escape if things get too hairy.

“I agree with Savant,” Derick interjects, turning to me, “Did you plan this as an Earthlings only expedition? Or do you want to recruit others?”

"I had planned to go alone, but then I thought it would be better to have a few more people just in case I meet a powerful named one."

"Have you met any before?"

"Yes, Whitey."

That seems to catch Derick's interest, "I've heard of him. He's supposed to be one of the oldest."

"How does he compare strength-wise to other named lurkers?" I ask.

"Noelle, any idea?" He asks, turning to the woman next to him.

Her voice is quiet and soft, and very soothing, "As far as I remember, he's supposed to be a demon with long white hair and kinetic energy. He is one of the oldest, but not the strongest. That's as much as we know, Mr. Noname."

"That's about what I expected, he's pretty much just like you said. Wide-range kinetic energy field and excellent perception—there is no chance of hiding from him. The place I want to go is near his territory."

"How do we know you don't want to use us as decoys while you run away and do something else?" Derick asks me, curiosity evident in his voice.

"He won't do that as long as you don't give him a reason to," Savant says, much to my surprise.

Before I can react, Leticia joins in, "Luna and I have decided to trust Noname as well, and with three tournament winners accompanying us, I don't think we need to recruit any more attendees. If we hurry, we should be able to reach the safe zone, especially if Noname takes most of the lurkers on himself, and we ditch him once things get hairy." She smiles at me and winks as she speaks.

Leticia then talks to the others, her voice taking on a playful tone, and the entire time as she does, Luna watches me.

I really want to boop that nose.

“Noelle and I will time our stay tokens so they end sometime in the near future. If the expedition goes well, we’ll use another and try to reach the safe zone. But if everything goes wrong, we’ll just leave,” Derick says.

“That sounds like a good idea. How about we all do that? Spacewolf, CarrotCake, Savant, what do you think?”

Facing Leticia, Savant nods in agreement, and I would bet that was his plan all along, and he was already timing his tokens the same way.

An amusing thought comes to mind: What if everyone times their tokens that way, they leave, and I alone remain? I find the idea hilarious for some reason.

As the extrovert woman drills into the bald man and annoying boy, I stand up and walk over to Derick and Noelle. Judging by their posture and the way they speak to each other I’d say they were a couple, but it’s not like I’m a relationship expert either, so I could easily be wrong.

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“What’s the mask for?” Derick asks as I approach.

“It’s annoying, but I’m trying to obscure the nature of my crown. I had too much stored to just cancel it,” I gesture at the crown spinning over my head.

“I can understand that. What about you and Savant, is there any bad blood between you guys? It could drag us down during the expedition.”

Savant doesn’t seem to want to answer, unfortunately, so I have to, “It won’t interfere with the expedition.”

Derick glances at Savant, who nods ever so slightly.

“Fair,” the red-haired man says, seeming satisfied. “Want to exchange information, at least as much as the system will allow?”

“Sure, let’s walk and talk though. The others seem to be getting impatient.”

“It seems so.”

So far, Derick seems to be the most reasonable person in the group. Someone would probably pick Leticia as the candidate for the most normal-looking member, but there is something in me that just can’t accept friendly people.

But Luna seems okay. She’s a good girl.

I wonder if Leticia will let me pet her?

It doesn’t take much longer, and we find ourselves heading towards the entrance to the 1st dungeon floor. Just the seven of us, a much smaller number compared to the twenty from the last expedition.

I don’t entirely trust these people; any one of them could decide to throw me under the bus at any moment, but the same goes for me. Still, there is a little bit of trust, unlike the 1st expedition. All of us are Earthlings, and most of them probably had much the same experience I did.

It’s one of those things that just seems to repeat time after time. People get their start searching for attendees from their own planets. Later they join guilds where cooperation is required, rewarded, and often guaranteed by high-level contracts.

CarrotCake, the mountain of muscle, seems like a battle maniac. I suspect that he is a Strength attribute enjoyer, but soon I should know for sure.

Spacewolf, that annoying little shit, is CarrotCake's personal healer. Musclehead gets healing, and the boy can be a little jerk without having to worry about anyone slapping it out of him.

Leticia is probably a hidden evil mastermind or something. Gareth seemed perfectly friendly too, that is until we learned he didn't mind wiping out dozens of natives just for scraps of food to feed his group or anyone else he happened to encounter from Earth.

"Thinking?" Leticia asks, noticing me looking at her, she quickly joins me as we walk matching my pace, Luna nearby as always. And much like her owner, Luna keeps a close watch on me.

"Can I pet Luna?"

Leticia skips a step before returning to her normal rhythm, the look of surprise quickly disappearing from her face, only to be replaced by amusement as she turns to the golden retriever, "What do you think, Luna? Can he?"

Luna seems to think for a moment, her smart eyes looking between me and her owner before taking a step towards me and offering her head.

Sorry, Biscuit, I'm a weak man. I even pet Noodle from time to time when you aren't looking, and I'm sure you know that. I think that might be one of the reasons you enjoy bullying the poor snake so much.

I reach down and carefully pet the smart little golden retriever. Her eyes watch me patiently, and her head is bigger than Biscuit's, even her fur feels different. She lets this continue for a few more seconds before nudging my hand and returning to her previous position.

"Luna used to be my guide dog," Leticia says with a smile and starts to pet her. Unlike before, Luna even wags her tail and licks Leticia's hand.

"Aren't guide dogs supposed to be for blind people?"

The question seems to take Leticia aback, but she smiles softly, "You really don't have much tact, do you, Noname? Yes, they usually are for the blind or visually impaired, but that's not strictly the case."

We reach the entrance to the first floor and pause. At which point Leticia continues, “I was blind until the second floor, you know.”

Then she leaves to talk with Derick and the muscle man about something, and I watch her go.

Yep, I knew it. She can’t be normal. There’s no way anyone who survived a month blind on the first floor is normal.

Before entering the first floor of Beyond’s dungeon, we share as much information as we can—mostly about the first floor.

Then, we step inside.

Welcome to the 1st floor of the First Dungeon!

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

1st floor quest:???

Rewards:

7-day Stay Token

???

We find ourselves in a sickly-looking area. There are a lot of fallen trees, dried-up grass, water so stagnant that it may as well just be poison. A few old buildings made of crumbling stone bricks can be seen in the distance.

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

As before, the rocky ceiling looms above, reminding me of our presence deep underground. With it, the gravity increases, pulling more heavily on my mana, drawing it toward something far beneath my feet.

Looking at the power levels of the people here, I find myself growing more confident about this expedition than the one before. Looking back I don't think anyone other than the leader was noticeably stronger than any of us.

I also get rid of the mask made of mana and the fire effect around the crown. The mana signatures and presences of all the people around us disappearing is weirdly comfortable as we enter that destroyed environment of the first floor.

"You're actually quite handsome. This isn't how I imagined you, Noname. Though I noticed it even with your mask on—your eyes are beautiful. Heterochromia, right?" Leticia asks.

"Yes," I answer, my senses shooting into the area around us and as I do, I notice that everyone does something similar.

Not wasting time, we get to running in the direction I pointed out, taking a bit of a detour, to avoid Whitey, whom I intend to pay a visit on my own.

Luna runs slightly ahead of us, and even though I can't sense anything, I'm sure she's scouting ahead in her own way.

There is not a single presence as far as I can sense.

Nothing even after thirty minutes.

Going by the expressions on everyone's faces, even they find this strange, and I can sense them rushing to stack skills and effects around their bodies while keeping their senses sharp.

No one speaks anymore, but the bulky man seems to be growing more excited by the moment.

Despite all our scanning, we detect no presences—not even the slightest trace of mana or primordial energy. The place feels devoid of life both natural and unnatural.

Another hour passes, and still, we encounter no enemies.

We pass a massive mountain, its sides overgrown with unnatural vegetation.

We pass a lake with bubbling light green water.

We pass a city that looks like some enormous creature stomped it flat.

And yet, no one attacks us.

Chapter 462: Specter

The dreary silence continues even as we approach the halfway point nearing the area I think of as Whitey's territory.

There is no wind down here, at least not on this floor, leaving the scenery around us to settle into an eerie stillness that extends even to the grass and trees. Everything stands motionless, in a state of crumbling decay, overgrown by vegetation, or thrown all around by different kinds of attacks.

Luna continues to lead, the golden retriever moving with extreme grace and speed, her sharp eyes scanning the area as she takes the occasional break to sniff at some strange scent before leading us on.

Musclehead appears to be happy; there is an aura of exuberance around him, which seems to upset the boy though he's clearly learned to accept it.

Derick and Noelle stay together, neither one showing the slightest hint of unease.

Leticia constantly moves mana in the air around her, weaving something in preparation, and I watch with great interest as she does.

As for Savant, he stays off to the side of the group, seemingly unperturbed, his green eyes scanning the area. I bet he doesn't even want to be here, but his cold, calculating mind probably figured this would be a better opportunity to examine the first floor than mingling with random attendees.

When I try to find out how much mana he has stored in the broken Sword of Aeons on his waist, he deflects that attempt and continues to ignore me.

Everyone here is used to situations like this; it's almost commonplace. That calm before the storm, the feeling of your senses amplifying in anticipation of danger looming right around the corner.

So when the first attack comes, we're all ready.

Leticia shouts, and Luna stops, as the ground in front of her explodes, and the shockwave throws the golden retriever against a boulder nearby, and she lands with a whimper.

Leticia's barrier, which softened the initial attack, surrounds her dog once more, stopping another strike as an explosion devastates the area.

Noelle looses an arrow, and a barrage of white and red lightning pierces the sky—the same lightning Tess has. That attack crashes against a barrier created by the attacking figure floating high in the air.

[Reanimated Corpse - lvl ???]

The barrier glows in three different colors: pale blue, dark blue, and purple.

"Named one," Noelle whispers, just loud enough for everyone to hear. "Rookie Killer, mage, barriers, and mana-based attacks."

She doesn't get a chance to say anymore as the next attack explodes in our midst. The same as before, there is a brief moment where the Lurker's mana reaches towards us nearly imperceptibly and creates a tiny portal through which it launches its next attack. R'

The bright white explosion of compressed mana I know so well crashes against my barrier, and I reach out for the Rookie Killer in the same fashion, stretching my [Ley Line] out through the air and creating an endpoint next to him.

It seems to have an incredible perception, sensing my skill and attempting to disrupt it.

But nothing happens. The thread doesn't even react to the attempt.

Another barrage of lightning from Noelle crashes against the feylith lurker's barrier, and as it does, I teleport right in front of him.

He has a set of small wings on his back, and his hair and eyes, which should be changing colors, are now a deathly shade of white and his skin has shriveled as if with age.

Rookie Killer moves, surrounding himself with a huge amount of mana in an attempt to resist my rapidly activating domain, which is currently being strengthened by the effect of my subclass.

"We've got another named one! Specter!" Noelle shouts from below, and I sense the fight rage beneath me.

My body radiates more and more mana, ramping up the pressure and strengthening my domain as we face each other.

Hundreds of mana projectiles enter my domain, only to be disrupted by [Resonance] as I infuse it throughout.

[Mana Domain - lvl 46 > Mana Domain - lvl 47]

My own mana projectiles, boosted by kinetic energy, crash against that tricolored barrier, which deforms under the barrage but holds strong nonetheless.

I fend off a constant string of attempts to tear my domain apart, along with the projectiles. The lurker teleports away before I can stop him, leaving his barrier behind, as it shrinks to the size of one of his projectiles and turns bright white.

Rather than disrupt it and waste mana, I use my existing [Ley Line] to return to my original position, placing the fight at a distance where I see the orange light of Savant's [Dawn] and two more lurkers fighting the group.

Something about this group of three feels off. They're all too strong to be random lurkers, and even then, they're showing signs of damage —as if they had already been through a tough fight.

Another portal opens near me, and a barrage of attacks erupts forth, crashing into my hastily constructed barrier.

[Ley Line] activates again, and I throw a dozen or so invisible shimmering blue lines in all directions and shrink my domain to make it more potent. Another teleport gets me closer, and I boost myself with kinetic energy, closing the remaining distance, as I deflect the incoming frontal attack with my barrier.

The lurker attempts to open another portal behind me and launch an attack, but I reach towards it and tear it down before it can happen.

Then a mana projectile passes through my barrier, and just before it explodes, I disassemble it with [Resonance].

Another dozen or so attacks have modified frequency, ignoring my barrier and even partially disrupting my attempts to match the creature's speed, forcing me to come up with my countermeasures the same way Rookie Killer does.

Then, an animal I don't recognize forms from his mana. It looks like a wolf with long legs and two pairs of wings.

It passes through my barrier, becomes more transparent within my domain, only to be torn apart before it can even reach me.

I activate my Mana Wavelength Iris and weaken my domain as two more press the attack.

They phase through my barrier, better able to handle my domain, their frequency constantly shifting. One of them gets destroyed, and the second one I let bite my forearm, the being entirely made of mana bites into my flesh, and a powerful mana disruption effect rushes through my body. Then in a blink, the animal shrinks into an orb before turning bright white, and exploding, forcing me downwards, and throwing me onto the ground.

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

Just in time, I pop up a barrier around me, strengthening it as much as possible as dozens of attacks crash into the area around me.

Each of the explosions is big and powerful enough to wipe out an entire building, evaporating my surroundings into a cloud of dust and debris.

But that's it.

Disappointed, I stand up. Dusting myself off I activate my healing passive. Healing the assorted scrapes and bruises I've accumulated.

Rookie Killer floats there, hanging in the air, his small wings unmoving, as he charges hundreds of projectiles in the space around him, while more of these weird wolves take form by his side.

The lurker can teleport, send attacks through portals, and actually seems to have a decent amount of mana, or, more likely, a high rate of regeneration. His skill at disruption is amazing, and he can change the frequency of his mana to surprise opponents.

Most interesting though is probably the animals he creates with his mana, delivering a powerful disruptive attack and quick explosions. It'll definitely be something to experiment with in the future.

But that's it.

I teleport close to him, my eyes flaring into activity as my mind fractures into pieces, absorbing every detail. With a single pulse of disruptive mana, everything around us is torn apart.

[Resonance - lvl 51 > Resonance - lvl 52]

All the animals, all the projectiles, all the defenses, and portals disappear.

The lurker tries to move, but [Redistribution] holds him in place, and I send another disrupting wave at him, ramping up the effect with an excessive burst of mana and causing the air to reverberate under the pressure.

A single orb appears, forming over the tip of my finger, made from tricolored mana which turns bright white in the blink of an eye, growing to the size of a grape. I mold it into a javelin-like projectile and drive it into the lurker's chest.

The attack detonates, my barrier wavering as waves ripple through its surface, but it endures, withstanding the blast reverberating through the air.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 303]

[Lvl 276 > Lvl 277]

My Ley Line takes me closer to the group, and I fly the rest of the distance.

The orange color of Savant's domain surrounds the area, and the man's left arm hangs uselessly across his body, displaying a row of deep cuts, clearly meant to pass through his forearm only to stop at the bone. And the finishing blow that exploded his shoulder bone.

Savant swings the sword in his hand, and his opponent ducks under it, with incredible speed stabbing at Savant's chest three times in quick succession. Savant dodges all three attacks and kicks out at the lurker who dodges again.

The lurker's skin is even more cracked than usual, resembling the horrific burns inflicted by Savant's domain.

Derick reaches them, short bursts of disrupting mana flashing from his fists, as a skin-tight mana barrier flickers around him.

The lurker dodges, tanks one hit from Derick, and flickers, turning half transparent, as Savant's swing and Noelle's arrow pass through without causing damage.

Materializing again, the lurker moves incredibly quickly, parts of his body flickering in and out to let some of the smaller attacks pass through.

Repositioning, he attacks me, in a clear attempt to capitalize on my distance from the others.

This one's the same race Rat was. Humanoid, with gray skin and long arms and legs. His dead white eyes lock onto me, and I disrupt his attempt to mark me in some way.

Kinetic energy flows through my body, and I squeeze Flamebearer in my hand.

The lurker dodges three bursts of kinetic energy, he lets a barrage of mana-based attacks pass through his flickering body, my [Redistribution] slips off of his skin, and he stabs at me.

I teleport, and he immediately follows me, an aggressive movement that makes him look more like an animal than anything humanoid. He dodges a dozen arrows launched by Noelle in a single second and briefly clashes with Derrick before the red-haired man kicks him. The lurker lets the kick land, using it as a boost to launch himself back at me.

He dodges more primordial lightning arrows, he avoids Derick again by moving at much higher speeds, and he adjusts his barrier to weaken the effects of Savant's [Dawn].

My domain activates at full power, my eyes reading his barrier, and my disruptive attacks are at their best. And for that short moment, I cause his barrier to flicker and decide to face him head on instead of teleporting.

Kinetic energy supports me, my movement matching his for that moment, and I disrupt his barrier again, swinging my ax at his head while launching powerful bursts of kinetic energy to take a chunk of his chest, right where his heart should be.

And he dodges both.

His speed surges and the barrier around him reactivates as if I'd never disrupted it. The lurker reduced his speed. He even let me weaken his barrier.

All to lure me in.

His dagger stabs into my chest, as I pivot just enough so it doesn't pierce my heart. Some kind of poison is flooding in through the wound, along with a powerful disrupting attempt.

But I've seen it all before. Disrupting my mana just isn't that easy.

Kinetic energy boosts my movement and a barrier of mana forms over my forehead. I bring it down and smash it into the lurker with full force, with an audible crack from his head or mine. Or both.

He tries to take another step, but I wrap my arms around him, pinning his arms so he can't move the dagger he's managed to lodge in me. The direct contact makes it harder for him to flicker away.

Golden flames seep out of my body, surrounding us both. Healing me and damaging him.

I hold on to him all the while, disrupting his attempts at using that flickering skill of his, in a constant battle not unlike the orb-shaping exercise Lissandra left me.

But I love this. I reinforce the barrier on my forehead and slam into him again, shattering his nose and teeth.

Feeling that he's about to slip away, I boost my body and resonate my mana, removing the arm he stabbed me with, a split second before he flickers away.

He tries to grab the arm and dagger lodged inside me, but Derick smashes into him, and the lurker lets his body roll. Then in an incredible display of acrobatics, he jumps into the air, dodging an arrow, and tries to kick Savant, who deflects the blow and attacks in turn.

The lurker's body flickers, and he starts running at incredible speed.

I send a powerful burst of kinetic energy through the Ley Line I tied to him and the lurker reacts with incredible speed, flickering away the instant my attack grazes him, minimizing his injuries.

A weird dagger forms in his hand made out of an extremely pale, almost transparent form of blue mana, which he uses to cut away the Ley Line, along with the flesh it was attached to, before disappearing into the distance.

As the explosions continue in the distance, Leticia and two others caught in their own fight with the third lurker, I pull the dagger out of my chest, focusing thermal energy around the wound as I concentrate it and let it burn my own flesh to stop the spread of poison.

It hurts a lot, but I distract myself by thinking of ways to improve my [Ley Line] and make it harder to get rid of.

Even though that lurker was insane and likely one of the stronger ones, it shouldn't have been so easy to take it down—or even notice it. It serves as a stark reminder that no matter how strong I've become, these lurkers were once attendees, people who reached Beyond on their own.

I store the severed arm in my bag and glance at the dagger.

Nullstrike Knife (Arcane, Damaged) - The Nullstrike Knife is incredibly sharp, capable of slicing through the toughest armor. The poison it once held is nearly gone, but it disrupts mana on contact, hindering magical defenses. Occasionally, it releases a pulse that temporarily silences all spells in the immediate area.

It shouldn't be this easy to collect damaged arcane items.

"Good job. That was a bit of a crazy way to go about things, but hey, if it works." Derick says, as he approaches, glancing at the dagger in my hand.

"Thanks. Are you done doing the bare minimum so that you can observe our abilities?"

The red-haired man seems to be amused, and for a moment, a smile flickers across his face before it disappears. "Aren't we all doing it? Why don't we check on the others?"

"After you," I gesture.

Chapter 463: Lurkers everywhere

The muscleman, annoying boy healer, Leticia, and good girl Luna have all been marked by the fight. Well, other than the boy who looks like he came from a walk. The big musclehead has terrible burns across his hand and forearms, but he doesn't seem to mind, in fact, he's smiling brightly right now.

"What a fight! That little man sure packed some heat!" As he talks, I watch the burns on his arms heal even without any support from the boy.

His natural regeneration might be even higher than Lily's. However, I still don't think he comes anywhere close to matching her high Constitution, leading me to think it's some kind of powerful trait or skill at work, be it active or passive.

Leticia, meanwhile, has been blinded in one eye, a terrible burn taking up half of her face, and the golden retriever doesn't look much better. Luna is missing one of her legs with the same sort of burns surrounding the injury.

Noticing my look, the woman smiles, "I will be fine. That lurker was just faster than expected."

It's at this point that Noelle speaks up, joining the conversation, "Noname fought Rookie Killer. He's gotten quite famous for bombarding newbies and causing trouble for weaker expedition teams, but he's not that strong. We got attacked by Specter, one of the more dangerous ones, and he ran away. But I don't know the one who fought you."

"They fought a vyssari woman, another named one called Blazing Shortie," Savant speaks up, having already recovered, his wounds have closed at the very least, his bearing unchanged.

"That fits pretty well!" Our musclehead says, smiling, and shoving the boy next to him. "Go and heal her."

For a moment, I think the boy might refuse, but he just sighs and approaches Leticia, who thanks him and lets him touch her face.

The wound closes quickly, and it doesn't seem to cause the boy much trouble. The mana feels similar to Lily's. It's no different when he restores the golden retriever's missing leg, the bone growing in first, only to be quickly covered in nerves, tendons, flesh, skin, and finally, fur.

He doesn't seem to push himself, so it's hard to estimate how he compares to our petite maniac.

Then we continue moving on our way.

We pass by another small ruined city, a huge crater in the side of a mountain, and a big field filled with spikes piercing into the ground, and breaking the otherwise uniform surface.

When we eventually do meet two more lurkers, they go down easily, these ones having been much more in line with beginners who got in over their heads.

As promised, I'm the one to deliver the finishing blow, thus making future lurkers more attracted to me as time goes on.

When we meet three more, one of them dies near instantly, torn apart by a barrage of attacks from Noelle and me.

Leticia is great at manipulating mana. Her shields have perfect timing, and she forms them incredibly quickly. Even then, they're none too shabby, seeming more than capable of enduring even more powerful attacks.

However she hasn't really pressed the attack thus far, so I don't know what her full capabilities are.

As for the resident musclehead, I watch as he jumps in feet first to face a lurker in a set of heavy armor.

The winner of the 1st round's tournament is surprisingly nimble and doesn't face down attacks if he doesn't need to. His fights don't usually take long either.

I watch as he pounds the armor, denting it as if it were made of aluminum foil. And after taking a few quick steps, he follows up the strike with a knee kick.

The lurker in armor creates a greatsword with mana and takes a swing, which the bald man dodges nimbly. Then repeating the maneuver, his next hit strikes the flat of the blade, snapping the weapon in the middle, before the following kick sends the lurker flying, slamming it into a boulder.

Grabbing a stone from the ground, the man throws it at full force, the impact sounding like an explosion as the stone explodes into a cloud of dust from the sheer force, sending reverberations through the air.

"You can finish him," he tells me, sounding disappointed, no different from the fight before.

I let one of my javelins pierce the unmoving lurker, its armor rendered useless.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 253]

We start moving again, and as we progress, more and more lurkers head our way, attracted by the annoying mechanic that defines this floor. The more we kill, the worse it gets, and we aren't even halfway through.

As much as we can, we avoid killing them, often leaving lurkers behind crippled and missing limbs.

We could have done it before, but I think the others wanted to be sure I would keep my word. Just to know they'd have someone willing to serve as a decoy if needed, while they escape. I think it's only fair, and it's exactly what I offered to them.

Nearly a day passes like that as we continue on, setting a slower pace than my previous expedition. My stay token is about to end so before I can disappear back to the 6th floor, I use another 1-day stay token. Leaving me with two more 1-day stay tokens and one 3-day stay token.

We lower our speed as the others take the opportunity to acclimatize themselves and explore the floor and make themselves familiar with its dangers. We do some tests on the lurkers as well, curious to learn just how much of the original person remains in them.

Another half a day passes like that, and the more I observe this group, the more curious I am. We stand around, chewing our food, with a barrier surrounding the first somewhat stable house we could find. Taking a short break.

So, who other than me and Savant could be a Champion candidate? I can't sense the title from anyone else. If there does happen to be anyone else with the title, they're probably taking full advantage of the function allowing them to hide it.

As we eat, while Luna and Leticia keep watch, I get a great idea.

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

"Are you a Champion candidate, CarrotCake?" I ask directly.

His healer seems like he is about to spit out the food he is chewing, but the tall man laughs.

"I'm not. Some weird guy on the 2nd floor wanted to declare me one, but I rejected it because it sounded suspicious. Like, why the hell would I let someone declare me a Champion candidate or something when I don't even know who they are?"

Is he messing with me?

"Are you serious?" Derick also seems unbelieving.

"Champion this, Absolute that, Candidate non Candidate, Rulers, blights, radiances, and other bullshit. Who cares?" The bald man shrugs, his teeth exposed in a wide smile. "I let my group deal with all that so that I can just fight."

Huh, I could respect that. He might not be that bad.

An unexpected question comes from him. "And you, Noname? Are you one of those Candidate thingies?"

The question sounds innocent, but the way he's looking at me makes it clear that the way I answer will allow him to put me in a box. To understand me better.

"Yup," I reply.

Satisfied, he nods without pressing further.

He is also an Adept of Pride and the same as I can sense it from him, he can sense it from me.

"My name is Jean, and this is Lucien." He says, slapping the boy next to him with his massive arm, nearly causing him to choke on his food.

"You goddamn dumbass, tell him your name if you want, but why did you have to give him mine as well!" the boy complains without an ounce of hesitation.

"It's fine, it's fine. Don't worry about such useless stuff." He crows, adding in another slap before turning back to me. "During the second tournament, we will fight," he declares.

"Sure."

That makes me remember a certain cockroach who promised to join. That tournament will certainly be one huge mess.

"Luna says there's a group of 10 lurkers approaching; they're heading right for us," Leticia announces.

Jean doesn't even bother exiting through the door and instead opts to blow off the entire side of the house with a single punch, forcing us to exit before it caves in on us.

"Any strong ones?" Derick asks as we get to running.

"Two, maybe three," Leticia quickly announces and immediately stops, her feet burying themselves in the ground. "Twenty more approaching from the direction we were just running."

Oh boy.

"We could head in the direction we came from and try to get around them," Derick says, rolling up his sleeves, displaying a number of tattoos with designs I haven't seen yet densely covering his entire arms—fingers, palms, forearms, every inch of exposed skin. He then continues, rolling up his pants, revealing a similar set of tattoos covering his legs.

"That would make both groups join and follow us. Noelle interjects. Leticia, is Luna sure they are heading right at us?" Noelle asks, taking the bow off her back, as a string made of mana appears and bending the bow into position.

Her forearms, as it turns out, are covered in their own set of tattoos, which begin sparking with white and red primordial lightning.

“Yes,” Leticia confirms.

“It’s time to have some fun, gals and boys.” CarrotCake—Jean—seems to be getting excited as he turns to the boy. “Give me a mark, Lucien.”

With a defeated sigh, the boy slaps the enormous man on the back, and I sense a flash of mana and a healing aura, establishing some sort of connection between the two of them.

No one says anything, but all of us start heading in the direction of the smaller group.

“Noname, I won’t hold back this time,” Derick tells me, his tattoos radiating more and more mana with each step he takes.

“Sure.” He better not, we need to kill them quickly.

I take a few more steps and boost myself high into the air.

Even from this distance, a lurker manages to attack me, and I duck to the side, as a massive icicle sails off into the distance.

Someone touches my mind, but that’s it. My passive renders the attack useless, and I detect the attacker, deciding to deal with them first.

First, I shoot dozens of threads of [Ley Line]

As the group of ten lurkers enters my view, I dodge a few more attacks and block a few with my barrier.

The group splits up to cover a bigger area, some staying behind to attack from a distance while the others move into melee range. There is no sense of cooperation. Just like zombies, they just group together and attack similar targets.

My first tricolored orb explodes in the middle of a group of five melee attackers, throwing a few of them to the side while two manage to endure the attack. One of them, likely a named one, even shrugs it off, its armor made of mana absorbing the blast as he rushes toward Jean.

The huge man welcomes the lurker with a powerful punch that destroys the ground in a massive area, and tears apart the lurker in a single blow, leaving nothing behind.

With it goes most of Jean's arm, reducing it to a mass of ragged and profusely bleeding flesh, but the wound closes quickly. And I notice that not a single bone is broken.

Savant is already attacking the lurker I threw the orb against, his movements much more dangerous than they were during the tournament, without even activating his domain.

Teleporting through my anchor, I reach the lynthari woman who used some sort of mental attack before.

She attacks me and her mental assault crashes against me again, as she follows up with a wave of oscillating mana spinning around her and cutting the area around her to ribbons.

Mana armor forms around my body, taking deep cuts across the surface, but by boosting my body with kinetic energy, I manage to take a few steps. Foot burrowing into the ground, as I twist my waist, redirecting all the force through my body and releasing it in short bursts.

The lynthari's chest caves in, forcing her to stagger back, but there's no sense of pain in her eyes.

Another step and swing of my hand separates her head from her body.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 261]

I teleport away, and a barrage of attacks crashes into the place I was standing, mostly ice projectiles that seem to radiate immense cold into the area around them.

A pulse of mana erupts outwards from me, detecting the positions of my group and the lurkers, As I compress a huge amount of mana and send five tricolored orbs through my Ley Lines.

Five powerful explosions reverberate through the air, preceding a heatwave followed by a shockwave and an implosion.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 241]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 253]

[Lvl 278 > Lvl 279]

The air is still shaking, reverberating, when I sense one more signature heading from the direction of the group of 20 lurkers. A signature that moves at incredible speed, passing a distance that would take other lurkers at least a few minutes in mere seconds.

It lands in the middle of the group, the enormous wings made of mana on its back disappearing as the figure slows to a walk.

The figure is one of the races I met on the entrance floor, twice as tall as me, and while they still have humanoid proportions, they feel off on someone of this size.

[Reanimated Corpse - lvl ???]

Leticia shouts something, and Luna grows in size until the golden retriever is as big as a horse. The legs elongate, along with a maw that shows off a dangerous set of teeth. But before Luna can attack the lurker, the musclehead tackles her with his shoulder, sending the retriever to the side.

“Mine!” he laughs maniacally as the muscles on his body bulge.

His skin tears, the air around him seems to shake, and he crashes into the giant lurker with a huge shockwave.

Chapter 464: Luna

Everyone evacuates the area as the giant and Jean clash, reducing their surroundings into a field of craters in a storm of shockwaves.

Jean stands his ground this time, taking blows he otherwise wouldn't in order to deliver a few of his own. Each punch he throws tears his flesh, sending chunks of skin flying and blood spraying into the air as his body fails to endure the sheer power of his own attacks.

Surprisingly, his bones endure, without breaking even as the giant beats him down, and that's when I notice the barest hint of mana surrounding his massive fists.

Of course, Lucien supports him with an occasional round of healing, climbing onto Luna's back beside Leticia. While Luna keeps them out of harm's way, avoiding stray attacks from the few surviving lurkers, Leticia weaves mana around them to defend and attack doing so quickly and precisely.

Another powerful lurker crashes into Savant, who's been silently radiating his domain into the area, the lurker's body, already having taken damage from the deadly field, begins to break down even faster as it takes a strike from the sword Savant creates from said domain.

Noelle continues to avoid attacks while picking off the weaker lurkers, her projectiles bursting forth in a near uninterrupted stream.

But Derick seems to be having a bit of a problem. His opponent is a male lynthari dual wielding swords with a crown seemingly made of ice, floating over his head.

Neither Derick nor the lynthari move quickly, but their movements are smooth and dangerous. The area around them has also grown immensely cold, causing Derick's breath to mist in the air as the skin-tight barrier around his body freezes over.

With a boost, I land nearby, armor surrounding my body.

Then the immense cold hits me, freezing the armor around my body, and I find myself unable to move for a moment. Boosting my movements with kinetic energy, I take a step, breaking the layer of frost hindering my movements, and infuse thermal energy into my armor. The pale blue mana taking on a hint of the energy's golden hue.

That's when the lynthari reacts for the first time.

The crown over his head spins and expands, vastly increasing the influence of his cold. Even the ground glazes over with a sheet of ice that feels almost sticky, freezing to my shoes whenever I take a step. And Derick ignores it. Without armor to protect his body, or flames and heat to disperse the ice. Relying on nothing but his skin-tight barrier, glowing tattoos, and incredibly short bursts of mana that he uses to attack and disrupt incoming skills.

More thermal energy surrounds me and I shoot off a few mana projectiles, which freeze in the air, crumbling into fine particles as they make contact with the lynthari.

One of the swords swings my way only to be met with Flamebearer, flames warring with ice. I increase the output of the flames and boost my body to push back against the sword.

And my golden flames begin to die off, unable to resist the concentrated cold. Immediately after, a strong pulse of cold shoots into the area as I release my thermal energy into the area around me, letting it burn.

That cold stops Derick just for a moment and one of the lynthari's swords pierces his leg, the frost quickly spreading before the man frees himself.

An ice projectile that was about to pierce me evaporates just in front of my heart, meeting my forearm instead.

I have never felt so cold in my life.

Shrinking my domain, I stop trying to fight the cold surrounding me. Instead, I make my [Mana Domain] skin-tight, adding resonating mana into the mix. The armor around me disappears and I charge up heat just under my skin, and send a burst of kinetic energy through my body, as I move to attack.

With an almost lazy movement that feels perversely elegant, the lynthari meets my axe with his swords, with each clash my axe, coated in golden flames, evaporates some of the ice releasing a frozen mist to chill the air surrounding us.

The sword pierces through my foot and continues on into the ground. I duck and avoid his follow up, and take a step back, breaking my foot, leaving it behind, entirely frozen, little more than a block of ice.

I detonate the frozen stump and use one of Lily's healing marks, quickly restoring my foot.

In the meantime Derick takes up the lynthari's attention, the swords clashing against his form, as his tattoos glow brighter than ever. A few short exchanges and Derick staggers back, with the lurker pulling a sword from his chest, the blade coated in blood. R

A pulse of mana explodes from Derick and the frost-like effect fades from his body, but the wound remains as the red-haired man attacks again, working in concert with me.

My axe burrows into the lynthari's side, and Derick caves in the lurker's chest.

In the blink of an eye, the field around the lurker shrinks, condensing the area of effect and concentrating the effects of the cold. I can feel it in my chest, as my fingers start turning blue, even filled with my thermal energy. My movements are getting even slower and the mana around me keeps freezing and becoming extremely brittle.

Then the third person joins the attack.

Savant ambushes the lurker from behind. Striking with the broken Sword of Aeons, restored with the orange light of [Dawn], which actually seems to pressure the lurker, the mana poisoning doing its vile work, even here, the lynthari's skin already beginning to show the effects.

The orange blade clashes with the sword seemingly made of ice a few more times, and with immense effort I force myself to move even though my body feels ready to break with the slightest impact just like my foot. I swing my axe and bury it in the lynthari's shoulder, and I nearly empty my vortex core as I feed thermal energy into the lurker.

Derick grapples with the Lynthari, twisting one of its arms until it breaks, putting it into a hold, and forcing one of its swords to clatter to the ground.

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A burst of cold sends Savant staggering back before he can attack again, the sword in front of him glowing brightly in his defense. His green eyes shining dangerously from behind his guard.

Derick lets go to avoid a spray of ice projectiles and the other sword thrusts its way towards my head.

I teleport to the opposite side of the lynthari lurker having placed a Ley Line before and deliver another swing with the axe, a brilliant gold exploding into the area.

A wall of ice shoots up from the ground, and my flames crash against it, forcing me to pull them back into the axe so that I can reuse them.

The lurker ducks and Savant's sword passes just over his head. The crown disappears entirely, and with it, the lurker turns an even paler shade of white. Even his own body glazes with frost and as he takes his next step his arm and leg shatter into tiny particles of ice, but for that moment, the three of us freeze in place.

Thermal energy, kinetic energy, all my external mana are useless.

As the sword heads toward me, I activate the glove on my hand, copying the lurker's ability.

I make use of his ice skill and add that to the immense cold that's already serving to freeze the lynthari. And just like us, he freezes mid strike, standing there on a single leg and with a sword just a few inches away from my face.

The first to move is Derick. He takes one small step, followed by another, the ice beginning to fall from his body.

With the last step, he swings his arm, striking the lurker's head with an open palm, and forces mana through the point of contact, causing its head to explode into a cloud of frozen particles.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 321]

As if it never existed, the field of cold disappears, the air gradually heating up as normal air rushes to fill the area.

I let thermal energy surge through my body and still feel that mind numbing cold, even with all the heat I can channel now.

Barely a minute has passed since we attacked the group of ten lurkers and since the giant overtook us.

Jean is still fighting him and only two lurkers remain aside from the giant, and they're being dealt with by Luna, Leticia, and Noelle.

Meanwhile, the area around us is nearly unrecognizable. Gone are the buildings and the ground is scarred by long tears and craters. In the middle of it all, they continue to fight, the giant is riddled with bloody wounds, a broken arm, and the mana around his fists is flickering.

Jean seems just as enthusiastic as before. Blood covers his body and one of his eyes has been blinded, not to mention that a massive blow has clearly turned half of his face into a mangled mass of meat. Even so, he punches the giant's knee and it explodes into a gory mess, forcing the huge lurker to kneel. He raises his forearms to block, but Jean's immense strength blasts them aside, leaving his guard wide open.

With a jump, Jean reaches the giant's face and strikes.

At that moment, the lurker snaps its mouth closed.

He doesn't bite off Jean's arm, instead, it holds its ground, the giant lurker finding himself unable to shear through.

Laughing maniacally, Jean doesn't even try to pull the arm free. Instead, he swings his other one, his fist burrowing into the giant's eye, pieces of flesh and liquid erupting from the eyeball to cover him.

And he swings again and again until the giant stops moving and falls down.

The man then continues to punch the dead lurker's teeth until he breaks enough of them to free his arm. It's nearly devoid of flesh, connected to his body only by a visible section of bone.

"Lucien, my boy!"

"Got it, got it!" as if this were a common occurrence, the boy shouts and the mark he put on Jean's back activates, the wounds closing slowly.

"We have a minute before the group of twenty reaches us. Thirty seconds before the quickest arrives!" Leticia warns us, already going through the equipment that was on dead lurkers.

Even as wounded as some of us are, everyone immediately does the same, with the only exception being Jean, who stands there longingly staring at the body of the giant.

Ten seconds later, we start running.

After five minutes of this, I start checking out the ways everyone's been covering their steps, and I have to say that Leticia might be even better than me.

Whereas I can remove residual mana, she does so much more naturally, making it look almost indistinguishable from ambient mana or at least mana that had been fading for weeks.

I also have a strong suspicion she can reduce our scent and mitigate a few other lingering effects.

And when we reach the huge tower, we hide on one of the floors. While we wait, Lucien goes around healing everyone. He doesn't put in a lot of effort but no one complains. His abilities might be even more necessary later.

Luna, in her normal size now, keeps guard since the lurkers would be able to track anyone else.

Even though we killed a pretty large number of lurkers and should be easier to notice now, it may still be possible to hide here for a few minutes. Any longer would incur too much risk.

"Aren't named ones supposed to be rare?" Derrick asks, resting against the wall with Noelle next to him.

"Want to bet you just jinxed it, and more will appear?" Noelle jabs, playfully poking him in the side.

"Damn it. But since we started... When I get home, I'll open a nice café or restaurant. Oh, and by the way, these are my kids, aren't they cute..." He chuckles, miming taking a photo out of his wallet.

Noelle laughs and pushes him away, "I'm sure I'd know if you had any kids."

"I'm a handsome young man, women are throwing themselves at me, maybe something happened behind your back."

"If that were the case, then the lurkers would be the least of your problems, Handsome young man," she says with a final poke before turning to Leticia. "Luna scared me for a moment there, she grew so big."

"Right!" Leticia smiles happily. "She's really good at all of this, and sometimes I think she was the one meant for Hell Difficulty, and I just got caught up in all this with her."

Luna waits patiently as Leticia squats and squishes the golden retriever's cheeks together. Even so, I can see her tail wagging.

Somehow, I find myself disagreeing with Leticia. Just seeing the way she handles mana, it's obvious she "belongs" here just like the rest of us.

"Why are you so shy?" Leticia asks her golden retriever. "I think you could say something now."

"Leticia, sometimes I think it's me who's human. Maybe you were the real dog, and our minds got swapped when we were summoned."

Everyone stops what they're doing, staring at the retriever from whom the sentence came. It's not telepathic or anything. It's just a human voice reverberating in the air as the retriever opens her mouth. Her mouth isn't moving, in a parody of the act of speech. Rather, it just hangs open, emitting the voice from its depths.

The voice is womanly, very soft, and soothing. The kind one might imagine singing lullabies.

Leticia doesn't seem the least bit shocked and smiles even wider. "I wouldn't mind it at all! Should I try barking and asking for pets?"

"Please don't do that, Leticia, you're embarrassing yourself," Luna says, sitting down and lifting one of her paws, licking it while glancing at us. She reacts to the silence. "Really? This surprises you after all we've seen?"

Chapter 465: Challenge

Jean immediately takes a step forward and grabs Luna in his massive hands, lifting the golden retriever to his face so he can look her in the eyes.

Luna calmly returns that gaze. "You will either let me down, or I will bite you, smelly human."

Leticia rushes in, placing a hand on Jean's massive forearm. "CarrotCake—ehm, sorry, Jean, please let Luna go before she gets angry."

It's easily noticeable that Luna is already growing, and I remember her figure from when she was the size of a horse.

That makes me wonder how big she could grow.

"She really is talking," Jean says, shaking his head before he lets Luna go, at which point she returns to her normal size and sits closer to the window.

"Modifying my vocal cords to use human language wasn't that difficult. And please restrain yourself from bothering me; I'm keeping watch." Having said her piece, she doesn't give him more attention.

"Sorry! That's just how she is. I blame the lynthari; they really were fascinated by her, and she learned a lot of weird habits."

For the first time since I met her, Luna growls, "DO NOT TALK ABOUT THOSE DERANGED BEINGS IN FRONT OF ME, LETICIA! I still have nightmares about that golden-eyed, crazed cat human!"

"Say what you want, Leticia, just pull yourself together. You are shaming me."

"Sorry, Luna! Are there any lurkers closing in?"

"We will need to move in a minute or two. I'll let you know, so rest for now." Luna soothes, standing, and taking a few steps over to me before coming to a stop.

Because I'm sitting on the ground, her eyes are on the same level as mine. I lift my hand and put it in front of her, which she sniffs a few times, and I use the opportunity to boop her nose.

She pulls back a little, surprised but doesn't let it bother her.

"You've been marked by someone's scent, you crazed human."

"What makes you think I'm a crazed human?" I ask, curious.

I swear I have never in my life had anyone look down on me quite the way Luna is now.

She doesn't even bother answering my question. So I boop her nose, ignoring her quiet growl. So she can sense the mark Lissandra left on me? So far, only Caius managed that. That's surprising.

"The mark came from someone truly terrifying, and I'm struggling to decipher what it means."

Staying silent, I let her talk, and she sniffs a few times, her tail wagging seemingly without her knowledge.

Her tail's wagging picks up speed, rapidly crossing into frustration. "What it says, I can't guess. Companion? Sustenance? I'm not sure what it's meant to mean."

Oh my. I think I know where this is going.

"No, I got it!" Luna barks happily but quickly reverts to confusion. "Why does it say 'Food'?"

Biscuit, you as well?

Noelle nearly dies in one of our next fights.

Specter, the powerful lurker who attacked us before, appears in our midst, his transparent dagger stabbing into her back, the merest tilt of her body causing it to miss the back of her head.

Derick is there instantly, defending Noelle from further attacks.

The lurker runs away again, but before he can get far, Savant somehow forces him out of his strange flickering state and runs the lurker's body through with a sword he created.

With immense speed, they clash a few times, the lurker's strikes with his finding themselves deflected by an aura of orange light taking form around Savant's forearms. Then the lurker flickers away, disappearing before Savant can attack again.

I try to tag him with a Ley Line only to miss, the lurker flickering away before it can latch on.

Derick quickly pulls Noelle to Lucien, who says nothing, simply taking a look at her before healing her completely. Only then does Derick calm down, and Leticia holds back Jean, who moves closer, not liking the implied threat to Lucien.

I think Derick might attack Luna, who hadn't sensed the lurker coming closer, but he doesn't say anything and the tension slowly lowers.

That's when Specter appears again, without any of us sensing him.

This time it's my neck that gets pierced, the blade nearly separating my head from my body as it pulls across.

Startled, I lose control, and all my mana surges out at once. The full force of stored kinetic energy blasting the lurker off my back and hurling him through several buildings.

POV Noelle Kelley

I can still feel the blade that pierced my back, and even though the wound is already gone, I can still see my hands shaking.

"Thank you," I whisper to the young boy, and he nods.

Derick, more worried than me, stands concerned by my side, and I feel warmth inside. How can someone as powerful as him panic so much sometimes? We've been through so much worse.

"It will be fine," I whisper in his ear and give him a quick kiss on the cheek.

As he always does, when he finds himself in such a state, he nods solemnly, with a cold expression in his eyes.

I don't say anymore, knowing he's better off being left alone when he gets like this.

"What do you..." Words freeze in my mouth as blood shoots into the air.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a figure appear on Noname's back. The same lurker that just stabbed a dagger through my back mere moments ago repeating the act with Noname's neck.

The wound is huge and ragged, blood flowing from his body like a river.

A chill runs through me as my eyes lock with Noname's.

Derick's been reminding me ever since we first met him, but only now do I understand why he warned me never to anger the man when he's not around to protect me.

Even inches away from death, Noname's eyes do not bear fear. There's a moment of pure surprise, which is quickly overtaken by anger that fades just as fast.

The lurker is blasted away, the buildings shaking over our heads with the aftershock. Then an immense wave of mana seeps into the air all at once.

I gasp for air, reeling from the sheer pressure. It's more than I've felt from anyone else in our round. Not even during the tournament. No one was even close to it.

His mana pulses like a living storm, thick and oppressive, filling every inch of space around us. Its presence is raw and fierce as if the air itself were vibrating with barely contained fury.

Noname moves his arm, hooking his fingers in his mouth, before pulling his head back into place, and closing the terrible wound on his neck. The wound closes instantly, in a grand display of raw healing power. Then Noname spits, dislodging a clotted dark red mass of blood onto the floor with a sickening splat. His mana disappears as if it never existed, impossibly contained within that body of his.

I expect him to run out, to hunt down the lurker who attacked him.

I expect him to be angry.

But he doesn't, and calmly says, "I think we should reposition."

That calm, logical reaction is more unnerving than anything he's done so far.

POV Nathaniel

It's been bothering me for a while, but the lurkers seem to be moving in bigger groups than I saw in my prior expedition, not to mention that each group seems to contain a number of powerful, named ones.

When we run into a small group of 2-3 lurkers, they're always damaged, missing pieces of their or suffering from large, gaping wounds.

It feels almost like they're huddling into groups for safety, and the lone ones are the leftovers of groups that got destroyed.

There are a few things that could be responsible.

It might... I pause, catching myself touching my neck with the tips of my fingers. The skin feels so normal there, with exactly the same texture as before.

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Forcing myself to stop, I let my hand hang along my body and dedicate even that wandering part of my mind to my scans. This time I ditch everything. I do not scan for mana; I do not try to locate sources of heat or bodies nearby.

All of my effort is spent on locating signs of kinetic energy. Those little vibrations you would need to be monstrously skilled to erase.

I look for vibrations from footsteps, the air moving around invisible bodies, a muscle stretching to move.

There are so many of these signatures around me, and the sheer amount of information feels overwhelming. So I direct part of my [Focus] to filter them out.

I would like to use the entirety of it for detection, but that's impossible to manage as I am now. I need that part to confirm these vibrations belong to my group, and then to filter them out. Then the rest of my mind can search for any signs in the area.

[Focus - lvl 54 > Focus - lvl 55]

Doing it continuously for hours is difficult, and I have to ignore any conversations they try to pull me into, occasionally sparing part of my mind to check the state of our plan and point out any important landmarks from my memory.

Then when we hide from a group of 30 lurkers passing by, I continue.

I continue even as the group of lurkers passes the fallen cathedral-like building we are hiding under.

Looking. Searching. Preparing.

And then I finally detect that presence.

As I stand up, I feel as if a weight is falling from my body, and the remains of the fear and shock I felt when that dagger nearly severed my head are gone.

"Noname, when do you want to meet again?" Leticia says before I can take a step.

She's very sharp, isn't she?

Leticia smiles as I look at her. "Six months," I reply.

"Got it. Good luck! Boys and girls, it's time to go. Prepare..." she orders, but I don't hear the rest of her words.

Stomping on the ground, I bulldoze through the last remaining wall, and behind it, crash into Specter who's been sneaking around, and stalking us. Kinetic energy tears through my body leaving horrible wounds, but I activate one of the healing marks and push through, grabbing the lurker.

He tries to flicker away, but I disrupt his escape attempt with sheer force, unleashing a surge of mana that instantly grabs the attention of all 30 lurkers nearby. But, at that moment, I don't even register their attention.

Instead, I sink my fingers into his neck, ripping away chunks of flesh before tearing his head clean from his body.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 318]

[Lvl 279 > Lvl 280]

I stomp on his severed head, allowing the last bits of kinetic energy stored in my core to vibrate through the air, tearing the body apart. Then flames blaze around me, burning anything that remains. Only then do I notice the three stab wounds the lurker managed to deliver.

Another healing mark from Lily activates, and the wounds close and heal.

With this done, I proceed with my part of the deal, my body's mana blazing into the area like a lighthouse for every lurker to see. Throw in my kill count and most of the thirty immediately lock onto me, giving the others an opportunity to escape.

And then I run in the exact opposite direction from my group of fellow Earthlings.

This time, I redirect a decent chunk of mana to my heart, using it to generate kinetic energy for the first time since the start of this expedition.

My heart thumps loudly, each beat sending waves of kinetic energy through my body. As it does, I feel another beating far in the distance, and in response, I head off in search of the familiar presence.

As I rush after it, some lurker tackles me from the side, the burst of kinetic energy gets absorbed by my passive and converted into mana, which I use to disrupt the barrier around the lurker and pierce its body with a javelin before tossing it aside.

But as I do an explosion nearby throws me to the side, the heat gets absorbed but the shockwave still throws me to the ground.

Before I can even stand up, a huge lurker swings his massive hammer right at my head.

I teleport through my [Ley Line] and then boost myself high into the air, shooting more lines out in front of me, tied to a number of projectiles.

Some skill catches me, and I find myself being pulled to the ground. [Resonance] tears the skill apart, and I boost myself again, teleporting just before an invisible blade passes through the area.

A piece of my feet stays behind.

Not needing it at the moment, I resume my flight, teleporting once more, and then put my hands up, deflecting the thrusting blade of a lurker who was lying in wait. The poison spreads through my arm, and I burn my own body.

Yet it continues to spread, so I detonate that part of my arm with kinetic energy, staining the lurker with my flesh and blood.

Another pair of extremely fast lurkers reach me, and while I defend myself from the next attack, an arrow barely misses my head.

They attempt to stop me, but I fight through their efforts and teleport again. And before I can do so again, another arrow crashes into a hastily constructed barrier of my creation, a poisonous smoke flows into the area around me and begins melting the trees nearby.

I teleport, and it's more difficult this time, and they again track my target, and when I appear, water from a nearby lake shoots in a thin stream, cutting off one of my ears. I react just in time, managing to boost my body with kinetic energy just enough to avoid being sliced to ribbons and teleport once again, leaving a huge tricolored orb behind me as I go.

As I reappear in my new location, the orb explodes, the shock reaching me despite the distance, and I can feel the heat.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 270]

At that point a flying feylith approaches from one of my flanks, firing a round of mana projectiles at me.

In response, I launch a single boosted javelin in his direction, and his head evaporates as it connects, his body slowly falling to the ground, caught in the fading remains of his skill.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 261]

My next attempt at teleportation fails, and I duck to the side, taking the damage from the incoming strike on my shoulder rather than my head.

Flames spin around me, and the giant lurker ignores them, swinging his hammer at me once again.

I let it connect with my forearms, converting an immense amount of kinetic energy to mana, and staggering a few steps back.

Before I can return the attack, a fireball the size of my body crashes into the ground next to the giant lurker, and the flames envelop an area the size of a football field, turning anything in it into melted goop.

These flames disappear in a blink as I condense them down into a single orb the size of my fist.

The giant lurker with the hammer presses the attack again, his body sporting a number of terrible burns, displaying the bones under the ragged flesh, and I release the orb, the blast of flames burning even the lurker behind him.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 269]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 263]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 266]

Finally, I teleport again, breaking through every attempt to stop me, enveloping the area in my golden flames once more.

An arrow pierces my barrier and lodges itself in my body, the lightning within staggering me for a moment.

Seizing the opportunity, some kind of skill activates increasing the effects of gravity on my body, pulling me to the ground with a loud crash, breaking a few bones in the process, even through my passive.

A fireball explodes right over me, and I absorb the heat again, releasing it in a thin laser-like stream at a vyssari warrior wielding a shield.

The shortie blocks it.

Stuck lying down and unable to move because of gravity, a dozen more attacks head my way just as I manage to teleport again.

And then there he is.

He lands on the grassy field nearby, without creating the slightest disturbance as he does so.

Everyone in the area freezes, unable to even twitch a finger. His heart beats out an angry rhythm that only I can feel.

Whitey disappears from my sight, his white hair streaking through the air.

At that moment, it becomes obvious who the lurkers were trying to protect themselves from.

Even without the ability to think and deprived of their old memories, the lurkers keep some primitive instincts, and grouping up to defend against a powerful predator is one of them. But it's just not good enough for this one.

With a brilliant sort of beauty, Whitey moves from lurker to lurker, killing each one in a single hit. Heads torn free, chests caved in, bodies torn in half. He acts with extreme efficiency, wasting not a single speck of kinetic energy other than the field around him.

Every time he kills someone, body parts fly through the air and hang in place as if frozen in time. Chunks of bone, blood, and debris—all fly into the air and stay there.

The group that was causing me so much trouble disappears in a flash until I'm the last one left alive.

It feels as if it's very much on purpose.

My timer is ticking down, but I still have a few seconds remaining.

Yes, I've timed it oh so well. Even as angry as I was, I didn't let it get to me. Just a few seconds, and it will be gone, just like the first time.

I haven't come here just to die.

With an effort that would have killed me before I gained my newest passive, my body moves even through the field. My kinetic energy goes to war with Whitey's.

I step forward and declare, "As a Champion candidate, I challenge you, as a fellow Champion candidate. My wager is my life and my status. If I lose, they're yours—and you can reclaim your position as an attendee, with a chance of regaining your memories."

Whitey freezes mid-step, and I continue, "If I win, I want all of your knowledge on kinetic energy."

POV ???

"What's wrong with attendees nowadays," a voice resounds throughout the pitch-black darkness, sounding almost dismissive.

"Wait," another one interjects, joining him, quickly, as if to prevent the first voice from acting.

"What do you want, Greed?"

"I want you to help me accept that wager that Earthling made."

"That wager is nonsense, and you know it."

"Diligence, let's be honest. The system actually considered it for a moment before refusing. I just need you and a few of the others to nudge the system in the right direction. Here, in Beyond, we can make that happen. Then it'll be up to the system to decide what's fair once the challenge is over."

"You would need at least three out of five votes for that amount of interference."

"I already have Kindness. You know very well she will do what I ask."

"Yes, I know that all too well, Greed. But I refuse. Sometimes I feel like I'm the only one among the five of us who takes this Beyond cycle seriously. First Envy, then Wrath, and now you, Greed."

Another voice joins the conversation, "I'd be willing to help with that small bit of interference."

The reaction catches both voices off guard, and Diligence asks with a measured tone, "Envy, has something changed with you lately?"

Envy ignores Diligence, turning their attention solely to Greed. "So, do you want my help or not? Wrath isn't going to support you."

"No strings attached?"

"No strings attached."

"He won't die, you know that, right?"

"We will see about that."

"Okay, I'm in."

At that point Diligence interrupts, shoos both of them away. "Now that you are done, go away."

With that, the silence ensues again, and Diligence returns to their work.

The entire conversation didn't even last a second.

POV Nathaniel

I feel a sense of acceptance, and in that moment, I know my challenge and wager have been registered.

“Use Beyond 1-day stay token,” I declare, cutting off my only escape.

Chapter 466: All out

I don’t hesitate, not even for a moment, to go all out.

Ley Lines erupt into the area, deploying a structure I’ve been preparing in my mind ever since I returned to Beyond. Dozens of threads trace the battlefield, creating a three-dimensional web of pathways I can use to teleport and distribute mana.

All of the mana in my body compresses, turning black, the oh-so-familiar sensation flowing through my body. Something I haven’t felt in a while. Whitey doesn’t use mana, so it’s no good as a defense. Instead, I use it to strengthen my body, unfortunately, my kinetic energy still can’t produce the same effect.

After all those preparations, I let part of the vast store of mana collected in my crown flow into my body.

Whitey reaches me in the blink of an eye, his palm striking my chest, causing my unique passive to convert all of that immense energy into mana. Even then, the damage is severe, leaving most of my organs bruised or ruptured.

Another of the now six remaining marks left by Lily is used.

Five remain.

This time I find that I can move through his field and I attempt to grab Whitey, but he’s still much quicker than me. Before the second blow can land, I teleport, taking a moment to get used to my current state.

A white flash, not a bit of kinetic energy wasted, and Whitey is on me once again.

This time, when I move I strike with that much more precision. He dodges the attack, but the burst of mana evaporates the building behind him, leaving debris suspended in the air. It's a primitive use of mana, inspired by the training drills I endured under Liss's instruction—simple, but quick and dangerously effective.

I teleport again as he lets go of me, and when he charges again, another burst of mana explodes forth to welcome him, his body moving to the side almost fast enough to emulate teleportation.

I release an amount of mana equal to my entire body's reserve, without even needing to tap into my reservoir. The resulting blast tears a massive chunk out of the mountain beneath us.

I teleport, and my body moves much quicker as I grow accustomed to the effects of his field around me and the warring forces within my body. Even so, my body alone wouldn't be enough. So I have to abuse my domain, [Redistribution], and [Resonance] to pick up the slack.

My mind is fine, but taking stock of the damage this is causing my body, I decide to use another healing mark.

Four remaining.

I release two more bursts of mana, each with even greater output than the last. It's an extravagant waste—I could accomplish far more if I weren't using it in such a reckless, primitive manner. But the sheer speed is undeniable.

Whitey dodges both attacks, his field weakening as he redirects more of his efforts into enhancing his body. His movements grow sharper, and his stance shifts.

I teleport and try to move again, and for a moment, both my body and mana freeze, unable to move.

Despite all my preparations—the sheer volume, the immense defenses, and the countless calculations my eye trait and mind endure—Whitey still halts my mana in its tracks.

The monstrous kinetic energy user accomplishes it using nothing but that energy, even as blood streams from his ears, eyes, and nose.

Something like that shouldn't be possible.

A much smaller pulse of kinetic energy pierces my body. It's not blunt, in fact, it's very sharp, so my passive doesn't stop it.

My insides turn to soup, only my heart survives, protected by a barrier of mana I managed to create at the last possible moment.

Another teleport.

Two healing marks down. Two remaining.

A burst of my own mana explodes around me, but Whitey isn't there.

He remains motionless, standing in the same spot, staring in my direction. Despite the lifelessness in the lurker's eyes, a faint red lingers within them, and his demonic horns protrude just beneath his long white hair, the color of freshly fallen snow.

And his heart keeps beating. Steady, unstoppable. Like the perfect generator, an engine he uses to harness his power.

But even now, that's not what interests me the most. No, what truly fascinates me here is the way he wields his power, the mind he must have had to pull it off, the ability he's put on display. That's what I want more than anything else in his possession.

The kinetic field he's been maintaining until now disappears as if it never existed. My blood suspended in the air, the debris from my attacks, the corpses of the lurkers around us, all come falling down at once.

More and more of my Ley Lines erupt outwards, and I compress more mana, converting it into its black counterpart, powering my mind and body.

Whitey then changes stance again, and with it, his heartbeat changes. The rhythm becomes more erratic, its pace quicker.

All thoughts disappear from my mind, and I focus on the same method I used to locate Specter, I...

I drop my head down as the stone behind me explodes into hundreds of tiny shards, a hole as thick as my finger drilling its way through.

Another one pierces my chest right over my heart, a third destroys my knee, a fourth scratches my cheek, a fifth nearly scalps me.

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I teleport again.

Five more attacks shoot my way, I protect my head and heart, four more holes punch through my body.

I teleport again, accumulating three more holes in the process.

Another healing mark gone. One remaining.

I appear behind Whitey, my eyes wide open, my mind on the brink, focused on avoiding his attacks despite the lack of distance.

Another hole pierces through my body as I move to avoid further damage.

With it, the web I've been making with [Ley Line] is finally complete, half of that immense mana I've been storing floods its way through the shimmering pale blue lines, and [Redistribution]'s effects cover the entire area, directed and concentrated in a sphere around me.

It's Whitey who freezes this time, unable to move.

His field reactivates as well, and I find myself unable to move. Dozen more piercing attacks come my way without even a hint of movement from Whitey.

Half of them end up deflected by a tricolored mana barrier taking form around my skin. Others, in a show of concentrated fire, pierce my body in two places.

The last healing mark is gone, and with it comes the feeling of death's approach as I sense his attacks reverberate through the air, their source just a step or two away.

Five small segments of the tricolored barrier activate, blocking each of these attacks, and two more besides.

In exchange for two attacks piercing my body, I redirect a bit of my concentration from my defense to return the attack and focus the rest on upholding the web restraining Whitey. Another burst of mana explodes from me. It's even more primitive, less efficient, and less damaging than it was before. It's the simplest attack I can do.

It tears pieces of flesh from the body of the demon opposite me, revealing his bones in a few places.

Another wound to me, and another burst of mana.

And another.

And one more.

Until Whitey stands there, a ragged skeleton, nearly stripped of muscle, and I can see parts of his heart pulsing through his rib cage.

Then the half-skeleton moves.

There isn't much left in terms of muscle, just a few tendons. The only recognizable parts of Whitey's face are one solitary patch of white hair and a single eye looking at me. Yet he still moves, even under the influence of my field.

Another burst of mana explodes forth, along with three javelins, and a tricolored orb.

And he takes another step, just a skeleton, moving himself with kinetic energy alone.

I almost want to laugh when I see him move the bones of his fingers, clenching what's left of his hand into a fist in an insane display of control.

He can't even see me anymore, only sense my heartbeat and movements.

The same way I can sense his, each beat coming slower than the last, his damaged heart steadily falling out of rhythm.

Whitey, even now, holds me with his field, and for the last time, he punches the mana shield I've created. That barrier shatters, and one last burst of kinetic energy damages my body. Only then does the skeleton crumble, a fraction of a second later the notification sounds.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 301]

You have won your first Challenge. The contents of the wager will be delivered soon!

The only thing holding me upright disappears, and I fall to the ground. With no healing marks left, I'm forced to rely on my healing passive. For a while, I sit there, surrounded by the devastation, and replay

the fight in my mind. Move after move. Every mistake I made, every opportunity I missed, every time Whitey did something that surprised me.

While part of my mind scouts the area, I keep replaying the fight, over and over again, and with it, I'm already modifying the ways I'll use my kinetic energy going forward. Something I was once so proud of now feels inadequate in the face of the things I've seen.

Liss with her mana control. Whitey with his kinetic energy manipulation.

Amazingly, Whitey was barely over level 300. One of the lowest-level named lurkers, and yet he consistently wiped out entire groups with complete ease.

It leaves a bad feeling in my mouth, the knowledge that I only won because of the mana I had stored away, an amount great enough to power a city. Just trickery and taking every advantage against someone long dead, a lurker incapable of fighting to the full capabilities of his past self.

How fucking sad is that.

I want to fight him at his best, not as a lurker with weakened abilities, but as a living, breathing being.

The web of Ley Lines is useless now, so I start modifying it into a detection system, reducing the density and expanding the area of effect. My plan is simple now. I will try to survive as long as possible, probably find myself being hunted down like a rat. Then a few seconds before the end, I should reach the place I hid the items and materials from the expedition Whitey wiped out. The one where I found all those damaged arcane items with Shayna.

If I add in the items from the dead lurkers lying around me — killed by Whitey — it'll really be a lot.

That line of thought also gives me pause. For someone who doesn't care about items that much, I sure enjoy collecting them.

POV ???

A short man with a shaved head, wearing a simple uniform in a combination of white and pale blue, turns to the woman next to him.

"Nyssa will fucking love that guy. Do we grab him right away?" he asks as they continue to watch from a distance, observing the young man they just watched fight the named lurker known as Whitey.

"Not now. He probably timed his stay token so he wouldn't have to run from Whitey for more than a few minutes before it expired. He'll probably be leaving Beyond in a minute or two. Tell me would you have been able to kill Whitey?" the woman asks.

"I think so." He says before pausing in shock, "Is he collecting the items from the lurkers Whitey killed?"

"Looks like it."

Then they wait.

An hour passes, and the young man is still there, hidden away in one of the buildings, the other lurkers still too scared to enter what they consider Whitey's territory.

The man starts to giggle, shaking his head in disbelief, "Timed his stay token to be able to run away? Ha! That motherfucker is even crazier than I thought."

"Seems like it. He's got a decent handle on kinetic energy and with that mana in the mix... Nyssa's going to want him. We'll snatch him up when he hits the second floor."

"And if he refuses?"

"The Doctor can gather plenty of information from his body. There are groups of lurkers staying just outside his detection range. Stop them and let a few through every so often so he doesn't get suspicious. Don't reveal yourself, and remember his mana signature."

"I already have," the man snorts, then rushes away to complete his objective while the woman holds her position on top of the hill, observing the man far away.

Chapter 467: Knowledge

The feeling of pulling descends upon me, and I leave the 1st floor of Beyond.

With all the items I've acquired from the dozens of lurkers and the first expedition I joined, along with the ones Whitey killed before. There are so many I had to pile them up and lash them together with rags I tore from my clothes, plus some threads I made of mana.

Honestly, I was only able to do it because so few lurkers attacked me. At most they came in groups of three that I was able to handle with a bit of effort, sometimes they even came one or two at a time.

I find it suspicious that more of them didn't follow me, considering how much I should have been attracting them with so many kills. But I think it might have something to do with how scared they were of Whitey—if they even are capable of feeling dread. If not, it might be their survival instinct.

As I depart, I find myself in the area where I usually meet my handler, who's currently sitting behind her table. She doesn't even pretend to be working, choosing instead to stare at me.

"I swear, if you try to take these items from me, I will change handlers, even if you name every single fucking Ruler," I tell her right away.

My handler glances at the items and then back at me.

If she won't talk, I will. "And what do you want? I thought I could only 'visit' when entering Beyond."

"Yes, such 'visits' are required, but I can 'summon' you on the way out too."

"Actually, yes." After waving her hand, a window appears in front of me.

Request to transfer +70000 shards. Confirm?

Yes/No

Quickly, before she changes her mind, I confirm the transfer, a sense of suspicion flowing through me immediately afterward. The number is almost too round. Did she by any chance take 30%? Do I even want to know? I decide not to ask and be happy for now.

“So what did I do this time?” I ask.

“I won’t even mention how royally stupid what you just did was,” the handler lifts one of the papers off her table, reading from it.

“It worked out in the end.”

“There are so many different ways you could have gone about it.”

“Yes.”

“Easier ways, less painful ways, ways with a higher chance of success.”

“Yes,” I confirm again.

“Damn pride maniacs. After seeing it work the first time, you might just get the idea to challenge every lurker with an interesting skill or ability on the 1st floor to gain knowledge and rewards.”

That surprises me. It’s exactly what I was thinking.

My handler, seeing my reaction, taps on the table, her frustration evident, “It won’t work a second time. It shouldn’t have worked at all in the first place.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“No. It is not.” She pauses as if listening to something. “We’re almost out of time. Before you go, here—your identification emblem, updated.” She waves her hand.

There’s a burning sensation on the back of my left hand, and my D-rank Obsidian Black shifts to C-rank Ivory White.

I take a moment to admire the new emblem and remark, “That was an easy jump from D rank to C rank.”

“It was not.”

“I see., I say, deciding not to argue. “One last question. That deer... was he really...”

For a moment, she looks confused but quickly remembers, a quiet laugh escaping her lips. “Of course not. The ruler from the 1st floor was a phantom goblin.”

She meets my gaze, and, disappointed by my lack of reaction, simply smiles playfully. “Information like that is extremely valuable, certainly not something you should possess yet. It’s nice that you want to know, but don’t be too... greedy.”

As I get pulled away, she waves, “I shall see you later.”

The first to meet me is Biscuit.

I still plan to have a talk with him about the mark Luna sensed on me, the one I think other animals can sense as well. Maybe even Noodle can sense it, hell maybe Biscuit marked me because of Noodle.

Seriously though, what’s with the people and animals around me? I got a mark from Lissandra, and a mark from Biscuit. What’s next?

Biscuit is lying next to the place I teleported from, my pile of items nearly falls on him, leading him to quickly stand up, his eyes full of sleep. Biscuit shakes his head, and gives a small yawn mixed with a welcoming bark, before rushing over to me, his borderline nonexistent tail wagging.

As he gets close though, he slows down. A few more steps later he stops, his nose constantly sniffing.

I take a step forward and kneel, reaching my right hand towards him. I don't pet him right away but I let him sniff my hand—something he likes to do sometimes.

After sniffing it, Biscuit barks. When I extend my hand toward him, he barks again and bites me. Even then, he's gentle about it; it doesn't even hurt.

Turning around, he leaves, totally ignoring me, not even bothering to create a telepathic link between us.

He doesn't look back even as I try to tempt him with offers of Archdeer jerky, and I'm left there alone.

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An hour later, Lily returns from her hunt, but the twins are still nowhere to be seen.

"Nat!" She cries, with a happy smile, and uses the opportunity to sneak in another hug.

After scanning my body, she heals the remaining wounds in one fell swoop, regrowing the bits of my limbs I've lost, and quickly placing a few healing marks in the process.

"So, it went well?" she asks.

"Pretty good. I'll tell you all when the twins get back so I don't have to repeat myself. How did things go here?"

"A few powerful monsters showed up, and a day later, some native tried to kill us. Aaron and I nearly died, but I got us patched up. He felt like he was close to three question marks." She touches my arm again. "You used all the marks."

"Yup. I wouldn't have been able to do it without them. My passive sucks."

"I told you!" She seems to be giddy, knowing that she was able to help me in that way.

What a silly bulldozer-like healer.

"Yes, yes," I respond. "Now do you want to help me sort out the items I got?"

"Sure!"

I watch as she reaches one of the piles, and generating just a bit of that gray mana, she cuts the threads of my mana that keep it all together. She even glances at me while doing so.

Is it some strange new show of dominance?

Just you wait. I already have an idea to improve my mana in all sorts of ways that'll make it difficult even for [Disintegration] to damage.

Sitting on the ground next to her, I start going through the items as well, separating them into separate piles.

One for the items I intend to sell. Another for items I want to disassemble to learn something. A pile for the strongest items, I'll figure out what to do with those later. A pile for materials, and a pile for miscellaneous items.

"Should it really be this easy to get damaged arcane items?" Lily asks, holding the staff and dagger I got from my last adventure.

"I keep asking myself the same thing." I take the items from her and put them into the pile of items I still need to decide what to do with. later

I could sell them in Beyond, to the system shop, maybe rent them to someone from group 4, or I could just take them apart for materials and to gain experience for making an arcane item of my own.

Eldertree Staff (Arcane, Damaged) -Once capable of summoning ancient forests, this staff could bring entire woodlands to life. Though weakened, it retains the power to invoke powerful roots and thorned vines which will erupt from the ground, briefly ensnaring enemies and causing significant damage to all caught within its grasp.

Nullstrike Knife (Arcane, Damaged) -Nullstrike Knife is incredibly sharp and capable of slicing through the toughest armor. The poison it once held is nearly gone, but it disrupts mana on contact, hindering magical defenses. Occasionally, it releases a pulse that temporarily silences all spells in the immediate area.

Looking at them now, they aren't that bad. As their rarity would imply, they are much more powerful than upper epic weapons.

"Any idea why we keep finding so many damaged arcane items? I would expect them to be more durable." Lily brings up a good question.

"It could be the system messing around for the purpose of the tutorial. Weakening arcane items to give people an easier time learning to make arcane items or to help them get used to their power."

"Wouldn't it make more sense, in that case, to create a rarity between epic and arcane?"

"I don't think the tutorial is capable of twisting things that much. You could just as easily say that these items have had their power sealed, and it'll take some effort to get them back to their full power."

"So outside of the tutorial, there won't be so many damaged arcane items?"

"Possibly."

“Yup! Also, look at what a nice piece of metal this is.” Lily chirps, handing me a piece of black metal with a coppery sheen.

Voidcopper (Arcane) - A dense, jet-black metal with a faint shimmer, Voidcopper is known for its ability to deflect magical interference. It's favored for crafting shields, amulets, and armor due to its capacity to absorb minor spells, lessening their impact before dispersing the energy harmlessly.

“Yup, it will be useful, but check this out,” I say, throwing her a ball of thread that's probably got me more excited than anything else.

Amberlace (Arcane) - A warm-toned, honey-gold fiber that is both durable and flexible. Amberlace has an innate ability to stabilize nearby magic, allowing it to withstand complex enchantments without losing structural integrity.

Lily reads it and then rubs it against her cheek. “It's weird. It feels like metal, but it's kinda warm and also... soft?”

I catch it as she throws it back to me and immediately stow it away, “It's a shame there wasn't more, but I can probably use it for some decent stuff.”

“Is it common to get so many items from one or two Beyond expeditions? Isn't it too... easy?” She asks, gesturing at the piles of upper epic items, I intend to sell later, and some other stuff.

“Easy...” I say, stretching the word. “It was doable.”

“How many times did you almost die?”

That requires a bit of thinking.

As I think it over, I count on my fingers, “I'll only count the serious ones. So first would probably be when Specter cut my throat. I could've probably died fighting that icy lynthari too, if I had fought him alone, but honestly does that even count? I joined to help Derick, and Savant joined in too. Don't tell him, but

his domain was a bit of a help there. Then I almost died fighting that group of lurkers before Whitey came. Lastly, there were a few times during my fight with Whitey. If I hadn't had mana stored up beforehand or your healing marks, I would've probably died anywhere between two and five times."

"So, that's what you call doable?" she asks.

"Yup."

"I'm already curious to find out what happened there." She stands up, glancing at the piles of items one more time. "It wasn't just for the items, right?"

"Nope, but it's a nice bonus. If it had been too much of a bother, I would've thrown them away in a heartbeat."

"So what was it you went there for?"

"I'll tell you after I check it out myself. Could you go check on Biscuit? I want to try something in the meantime. If you can get Biscuit to forgive me, I'll let you choose an upper epic item as your reward."

"Only one? You do have over 20 of them."

"Maybe two if you teach him to stand on his hind legs."

"And walk while asking for sustenance?"

"Please, no."

She giggles. "Okay then, good luck."

As she leaves, I rest my back against the boulder nearby and close my eyes with every intention of checking on the results of my wager. I don't know what to expect, certainly not how the system would

even go about delivering this kind of knowledge. Will it be a book? Or a mana stone inscribed with the information? A feeling? Will the knowledge just flow into my mind?

Sensing my intent, the system just seems to know what I want, and I find myself in a different place. I can still feel my body sitting in the same spot when I try, so I figure this place is likely somewhere within my mind.

A desolate hill stands before me. The landscape is hauntingly barren, the ground is cracked and dry ground with jagged rocks jutting out from seemingly random points making the entire scene feel alien.

The sky is a swirling mix of gray clouds that only serves to make the place look even more bleak, bordering on post-apocalyptic. And the dim light that barely manages to pass through the clouds only adds to the feeling.

There, at the top of the hill, stands a white monobloc plastic chair, and in that chair sits a tall figure. With long, beautiful white hair flowing down from his head, and I can see his black horns, even from here.

And the figure is watching a TV set on a cheap Ikea-style table.

Chapter 468: More fitting expression

I take a few steps closer and move off to the side, and finally catch sight of the scene on the TV. It's a replay of my fight with the lurker Whitey, taken from my perspective.

"Just come here and sit, don't sneak around," the demon says, waving his hand at me. I take notice of just how slim and smooth it looks.

After hesitating for a moment, I finally reach the edge of the hill and just as I begin to think about creating a chair of my own out of mana another white plastic chair appears next to the first one, so I take my seat and look to the left.

Whitey isn't very different from what I remember of him from our two prior meetings. Tall, and slim, with a handsome face. Though this time he isn't a lurker, so his eyes aren't pale red but of the proper red color demons have. Even his hair looks smoother.

He's wearing black clothes and sits there in an extremely easygoing manner.

"Look, do you see this crap?" he says, pointing at the TV as the video pauses.

The scene we've stopped at displays the moment he pierced me with a multitude of ranged attacks and forced me to use two of Lily's healing marks.

"You should be dead twice over! How the fuck could his aim be so bad!"

"Isn't that your aim?" I ask.

The screen starts playing that video again, and Whitey watches it with apparent disdain, "It's like someone gave an amazing weapon to a newborn demon. No, even a newborn demon would've done better."

Whitey waves his arm, and the screen starts changing rapidly, "Here, terrible placement. Here, that should've hit. Here he should have pushed you more. Here, that movement was trash. Here, why did he dodge instead of deflecting the attack and getting a hit in? Here, he should've deactivated his kinetic field much sooner. Here, he should have gone to 3rd stance instead of going to 5th; that would've confused you as well!" And he goes on, in a manic furor, pointing out every flaw he can find.

Annoyed, he waves his hand, and the screen disappears. Whitey stands, turning his chair to face me, the plastic legs scraping against the rock below. Then he sits back down, folding his arms across his chest, giving me a slow once-over.

"What year is it?"

"No idea, how would that help?"

He hesitates and nods, "Is Adrian still first in Individual and Exploration rankings?"

"Yes."

“When are the rankings due to reset?”

“There’s a reset?”

He blinks, “Please don’t tell me my lurker lost to a goddamned newb.”

“I just started my second year of the tutorial?” Satisfied, I almost feel like smiling as I lean back in my chair.

“You smug little shit,” Whitey snorts. “Individual and Exploration rankings reset once every millennium, and Guild and Craft rankings reset every year.”

“Thanks for the info. This could help; someone told me you were one of the oldest lurkers around.”

He nods, “The 1st floor should reset with the rankings, so I probably died somewhere around a thousand years ago? For sure over 500 years. Damn, and no one got deeper than fucking Adrian.”

“Yeah, he’s the only one who’s made it to the 6th floor.”

“That makes me curious how that asshole is doing nowadays. If you happen to meet him by any chance, punch him for me.”

Feeling bold, I decide to poke Whitey for more info, “Was he stronger than you?”

“At least learn to mask your intent when you decide to ask such blunt questions.” He gestures at my eyebrow, “It moved when I mentioned Adrian. Your jaw too, the muscles twitched. Now your pinkie is tense, and you’re getting ready to attack. Your heartbeat changed a bit too.”

He shifts his position in the chair and watches me, “Adrian was stronger than me, but he did everything he could to avoid fighting me.”

I let the silence stretch for a bit longer, and when the time feels right, I ask, "So what is this place, and where did you get the TV?"

"You tell me. All of this was made using your memories." He smiles, red eyes glowing, and when he stands, the plastic chair he sat on bursts into black particles before disappearing. The same happens with mine, and I jump to my feet before I can fall to the ground.

Whitey is slightly taller than me and slimmer. He looks like he has barely any muscle. Which I'd originally thought was a result of being a lurker back during our meeting, but looking at him now, I guess that's just how he looked before he died.

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"I will tell you one thing, human: it's fucking unfortunate that trashy lurker made of my body didn't win; it would've been nice to be able to walk around again. I'm not even going to pretend to understand how that challenge even got accepted, but someone either hates you a fuckton or the opposite. But a wager is a wager, and I lost."

"So, you are..."

"Probably just a construct, like the natives of the floors."

"That sucks."

"It really does. So, you foolish little human wished for my knowledge of kinetic energy, and now you have it. It's safe to say that I will, for a while at least, remain part of your memories, and this is just the form they take."

"Wouldn't it have been easier for the system to simply transfer the knowledge?"

Whitey doesn't even bother answering.

“Yeah, I got it.” Obviously, the system is an asshole.

Curious, Whitey takes a few steps around me, poking my arm, my back, and my chest, just over my heart. “Tell me, why do you want kinetic energy so much?”

“Is this a test or something?”

“Just answer the fucking question. You have a lot of mana, and from the way you fought, it’s clear how much time you’ve spent mastering it. There’s no point lying; it’s something I know very well. You also have access to thermal energy. There are a number of things to divert your attention. So why kinetic energy?”

“I don’t want to show off, but I could do almost anything I want with mana. I could focus on detailed manipulation, I could focus on compression, I could focus on ranged mana abilities, or melee. Or I could just spend all my time crafting. The same goes for thermal energy. I could spend more time making it as strong as possible. I could also try to come up with more ways to use it for healing.”

“That’s a lot of options,” he nods. “So why kinetic energy?”

“Because I want to.”

Whitey shows me a wide smile and gestures to continue.

“It will cover for my weaknesses in the future. Kinetic for body strengthening and close-range combat. Thermal for healing, and mana for everything else.”

This white-haired demon keeps nodding, his bearing now so different from the way he fights. He is weirdly easygoing.

Clapping his hands together to recapture my attention, he says, “A loss is a loss. I’ve never taught anyone before, so this is due to be an interesting experience. There are seven stances I’ve put together and made my own. Some I learned from other demons I met in Beyond, some were drilled into me

before the tutorial, some I gained on the floors, and some I came up with myself. And you will learn all of it.”

My interest only grows as I quietly listen to the words of this demon who came so close to killing me so many times.

It’s unnerving to see him move so casually, and sometimes I notice my body twitching, expecting another attack. And I’m sure he’s noticed as well, but he kept quiet so far. Likely finding it amusing.

“First is Pulsar Stance.” Whitey takes a short, quick step, his movements boosted by a burst of kinetic energy, and delivers a quick punch to the air, causing it to reverberate in a concentrated pulse of energy. “It’s quick, and disorienting, focused on efficiency and accuracy. You stay in constant motion, confusing your opponent with erratic movements, absorbing and adding to your inertia to outmaneuver them.”

He shifts back into his original position and smirks, “You were trying to do something similar, but I’ll still need to beat some bad habits out of you.”

Once again, he changes his stance; it becomes wider and heavier. “The second is Breaker Style. It’s brutal, relentless, and relies on raw kinetic energy to overwhelm the opponent with powerful, heavy attacks. You crush, you shatter.” His movements are heavier now, but each one is full of purpose, and each strike he demonstrates sends powerful waves radiating outwards.

“Third is Wraith Dance.” He stomps powerfully, but there’s no impact; instead, he vanishes, moving so quickly it almost feels like he’s teleported. His heartbeat echoes erratically, sometimes from places he’s already left, leaving fake signatures along his path. “It’s all about rapid, long-distance movement, afterimages, and individual bursts of swift, extended motion.”

The more he shows me, the more I realize just how lacking his lurker was when it came to the intricacies of his abilities.

“I will show you the other four later, but they are called Resonance Flow, Needle Point, Counter Flow, and Steelroot.”

As he comes to a stop, I ask the question that’s filled my mind since he began, “How did you die?”

The moment these words leave my mouth, his mood changes. The Whitey's expression, which had felt so forced until now, crumbles, growing dark. His eyes seem redder now, and the beating of his heart grows even more oppressive.

I like it more than this weird kindness, so I pile on, knowing my next question will hurt.

It's meant to.

"How many times has your lurker been killed?"

Whitey moves impossibly quickly, in a burst of movement more like teleportation than mere footwork in an amazing show of the third stance he demonstrated just moments ago.

I lift my arms in front of me to block, but he shifts at the last second, landing a hit on my chin instead.

Louder and louder that demon heart beats, and I freeze mid-air, held in place before my body can even start to fall, and he grabs my leg, pulling me back and smashing me into the ground. He finishes it with a kick, sending me crashing into a rocky wall nearby.

It's surprising how much it hurts, almost as much as it would outside, and I stumble to my knees before pushing myself back to my feet and glance at the demon who's staring me down with a more fitting expression on his face.

Not like a puppet content to deliver information, but more like a living being.

He might be a fake, perhaps he's just a snapshot of his memories from the moments before he died, or maybe the system prepared something else entirely. Still, I much prefer this over that fake eagerness from before.

Laughing quietly, Whitey sweeps his hair from his face, his red eyes fixed on me. "Killed by betrayal, hundreds of years as a fucking lurker, and then I get challenged by a fucking human just to end up like this. The Rulers must be shitting their pants with laughter right now."

My movements halt again, and I don't even try to fight back as Whitey uses Wraith Dance to appear in front of me.

"Worst of all, I have to teach a human," he says, pressing a finger against my chest. "Even though you've won fair and square in my eyes, what can you do? As a human without a proper heart, you will never master everything I can show you."

As he lets go and steps back, I answer, "I hear that a lot. Show me the first stance."

At that moment I decide to abandon any further attempts at explaining; It's not like I was ever any good at it anyway, and I know my actions will convey what words cannot.

Chapter 469: Awakening

After Dennis and Aaron return, I give everyone an explanation of everything that happened while I was gone. Lily listens with a singular degree of focus as someone who will soon enter Beyond.

It's impossible to tell her about the trial itself, given the way the system censors any attempt, but general information regarding Beyond seems ok, so I tell her what I can.

"So you still don't know how to clear the 1st floor of the dungeon and enter the second?" she asks as I finish my tale.

"Yup, no idea at all. The current plan is to reach the safe zone and try to gather information and continue from there. We should be able to do it in three days when you and Tess get your stay tokens."

"Won't we need a bigger group?"

"Possibly, but Tess said Gareth promised to join. If it doesn't work out, we can just reschedule it for six months from now—when I'm due to meet up with Leticia and the others. Or I could just go back for a day or two and leave another message so that we can try sooner."

Tapping on the armrest of the manabloc chair I made for her and the twins, she smiles. "I'm so happy I don't have to think about these things! Just point me at the monsters."

"Is she cosplaying Nat?" Dennis quips, poking Aaron.

"Remember we read that article that said that one of the easiest ways to pick up girls was to imitate them a bit? Like mimicking their movements and behaviors would help make you more endearing. Maybe she read the same article," Aaron nods seriously.

"Totally like Nat."

"Yes. At this point, it has to be intentional."

"And now Nat's going to increase the difficulty on that cursed orb of his."

"Well, we were expecting that. Bring it on!"

I listen as they babble for a moment, then do just that, and for a while at least, they don't have the focus to spare on idle chatter.

I turn to Lily. "What do you think of Specter's arm and the pieces of Whitey's heart?"

"They're in terrible shape and weakening fast. They'll probably crumble to dust soon."

"Either it's the system messing with us or that's just how lurkers work, maybe they just crumble to dust so they can be recreated in a year. Though I'd think it'd make more sense to just fix the body over the following year and reuse it."

"Maybe that is how it works; perhaps in this case the arm has been marked as destroyed?"

"Could be." After weakening the orbs so the twins can focus, I address the entire group, "In three days we'll be heading deeper into the central region. With any luck It might finally complete our side quest, and we can start working on our information gathering in the process."

As I return to thinking about our plans, I spin the newly shaped thermal pyramid floating in the middle of our group, having moved on from the cube, each face shines a different color, ranging from pale yellow to dark gold, and each one emits a different amount of heat.

The way it spins has an almost hypnotizing quality to it, as I continue, "We'll take over one of the smaller groups, so we have a good place to sleep. Preferably somewhere with a good view. Before you ask, yes, you can call it Angry Kittens, I don't even care anymore. The training will continue for you two and Lily too. We don't need to sleep much anymore, and we're going to find out how far I can push you guys before you start hallucinating."

"What?"

"[Mana Manipulation] will be our main focus, and we'll work on improving [Connection] after. Lily's going to focus on body modification and [Disintegration]." I say, and begin to put my plans into words, in an attempt to make everything easier to schedule, "I'll work on improving [Resonance], and practice the stances for kinetic energy, and I've got a great idea for a new mana technique, with Lily's help, I think I could get a new skill in the process."

Eventually, I start to feel like a single thermal pyramid isn't enough of a challenge and create multiple evil orbs, making them spin around me while I deal with their effects, "I will disassemble most of the damaged arcane items and sell a few. My end goal is to build a facility to create arcane items with the materials at our disposal."

Biscuit approaches, and I watch as he lays on the ground next to Lily, putting his small head on his front paws.

"I will try to come up with ways to modify and recreate the Restrictive Training Emblem and Burden Enhancement Inscriptions so that you can make use of them as well. I just need to find a way to keep them from stopping your brain from functioning, or your heart from beating, or preventing your chest from moving and suffocating you."

"WHAT?"

I'm really going to be busy I realize, saying as much as I do, "You know that feeling when you think you have a lot of free time and then you start going over everything you need to do and find you don't have near enough time to fit it all in. Anyway, over the next few weeks, I think my priority will be mana and kinetic energy, in that order. I'll just have to find a way to fit the rest in somehow."

"What about things like the Floor quests? I mean, we've already been here for quite a while and we still haven't figured out how to leave," Dennis says, reminding me.

"It'll probably end up being something as simple as helping one of the beings from the five, now four, containment cells escape and then letting them deal with the rest," I say, yawning as I increase the speed of the spinning pyramid.

"You mean beings on the level of Champions?"

"Yup," I nod. "You remember the 4th floor, right? Our quest was to kill one of the Calamities, and the biggest part of the solution was to pick the one you could face with your group and abilities. This floor might be the same, we might just need to choose the right prisoner to release. Though that dickhead Champion from before clearly wasn't it."

"Do you really think that alone would be enough?"

I shrug, "If it's not, we release them all and let them break this prison apart and sneak out when they do."

"Yeah, I hope Tess's or Sophie's group finds out more," Aaron says, not seeming to like my idea for some reason. Well, I don't mind the lack of trust, but in my experience, the simplest methods often work the best.

I lean back in my chair and open up a pouch of deer jerky, and taking out a piece, before taking a bite and chewing on it.

Somewhere from my right, next to Lily, I hear a quick, surprised movement.

I take another bite.

(Bitch!) Biscuit shouts, using a word I haven't heard from him in a long while. I think he must have learned it from Lily.

I take two more bites, and Biscuit quickly appears right in my face, floating and clearly angry but finally giving me his attention.

"I'm sorry," I say sincerely, apologizing for cheating on our future Overlord, as I put my hands on my lap and return his gaze. "But, Biscuit, haven't you been letting other people pet you as well?"

That seems to shock the corgi as if the thought hadn't occurred to him, and he avoids my gaze.

Reaching into the air, I grab him and pull him into my lap. He lets it happen, his nose constantly twitching as he sniffs at the pouch of deer jerky.

I take out another before closing the pouch and offering the piece to him.

He hesitates for a bit, but after glancing at me, he starts carefully chewing away, trying not to touch my hand.

The next day, we get some more detailed messages from the others.

Tess, Min-Jae, and Maya are heading deeper towards the center of the region. They can't share more with the system's censorship, but I think they learned a bit more about the remaining containment cells and decided to head over to one of them.

Izzy sends a message of her own as well, confirming that she and Sophie are safe and heading west. She mentions people with abilities like Sophie, bringing to mind an image of the closed-off city of mind mages.

It's an area even people outside the central region seemed to scorn. And as we've asked around we've learned that most people with such abilities tend to gather in a single place. Either for protection or to accomplish a shared goal. For some reason, Sophie and Izzy have decided to head in that direction.

Though I have something I would just love to ask Sophie.

The others might have forgotten, but I haven't. The Champion Caius's bond didn't die back in the containment cell in the Mana Desert. And I've really been thinking about it too. The thylarin brothers died, so they were unable to carry the parts of the bond Izzy sensed, but what if that asshole Champion tricked me? What if he expected those pieces to be discovered, or prepared another, just in case, a much smaller and weaker fragment he kept well hidden?

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There is even a chance Sophie already knows about it. When it comes to these things, she could almost be considered my equal, and in some situations, she even does better.

But the biggest confirmation of all is a feeling I get in a flash of shared memory I had with Biscuit. The corgi refuses to share more, but it's clear that he's made some sort of deal with Sophie to stay quiet about it.

Our newest Beyonder and her little sister, heading for a city of mind mages, carrying a piece of the Champion's bond with them.

Sophie sure is working on some interesting stuff.

A day passes, and I appear in front of Whitey again. The area around us this time is the 1st floor; more accurately, it is the clearing with the bus we arrived in.

Whitey stands in front of it, tapping with the tip of his finger on the side of it, each tap sending audible vibrations through the air.

Curious, I observe him as he does. He seems to be concentrating on something, examining it deeply. All while his heart beats in slow, powerful, bursts.

“Got it.” He says, nodding, apparently satisfied, before tapping on the side of the bus one last time.

In an instant, a surge of concentrated kinetic energy explodes outward. In an incredibly focused burst of force, sending a perfectly round shockwave through the metal, as the point of impact collapses inward as if it had been struck by a meteor, sending a series of ripples outward in a visible wave.

Each part of the bus caught in the wave is thrown back violently, but the energy dissipates just past the bus itself, leaving everything beyond it completely untouched. The roof compresses, the windows shatter inwards, and the entire vehicle collapses into itself, forming a deep, circular indent exactly where Whitey’s finger made contact.

In the next heartbeat, the bus releases all the built-up energy in a single blast. The side panels explode outward, flaring out like petals. The energy transfer is so precise that even the ground beneath the bus is untouched.

Whitey steps back and turns to me, “That thing is made of some interesting materials.”

He stomps, sending a single wave of kinetic energy blasting outwards from his body, bending the grass, and for a moment, the wind stops blowing, encompassing us in deep silence before it returns. His eyes glow dangerously, the look more reminiscent of the lurker that tore people apart rather than the man I met a day ago.

“I’ve been thinking, human. I even respected you for a bit given the way you defeated me, but the thing you killed was nothing more than an empty puppet. A fucking disgrace to all the effort I put into developing my abilities.”

Another gentle stomp sends everything around us floating into the air. Pieces of the bus, the bus itself, stones, pieces of wood. He levitates all of it, holding the mass of debris frozen in the air with his ability.

“You want my kinetic energy? The result of my blood, sweat, and tears, the culmination of my heart’s purpose? The very thing I threw everything away to pursue. Fine! That was our wager, and I’m someone who always kept his word.”

More and more energy radiates from him, his eyes growing a deeper and deeper shade of red. Whitey begins to feel taller, and slimmer. His white hair whips about in the air as if it were caught in a hurricane, and his black horns start feeling like they’re absorbing the light. Just the beating of his heart generates enough energy to slowly push me away.

More than any time before, he feels like a demon.

“You don’t have a proper heart, you’re only human, and your talent is the worst,” he says, a dangerous smile crossing his face, almost like he’s recalling an old memory. “But maybe, just maybe, there’s something here I can work with. You’ve got guts, I’ll give you that. If you’re ready to get broken down and put back together, I’ll teach you.”

Whitey steps closer, his eyes glowing with a fierce intensity. “I’ll show you what it takes. You’ll understand what it means to let every heartbeat become a weapon, every pulse of blood a force that could crush mountains.”

He pauses, letting his words sink in.

“You already said something similar,” I say in response.

Even though he is smiling, it feels very dangerous, almost like I’m poking a sleeping bear while being locked in a cave with him. A bear with a mini nuclear reactor in place of its heart.

“I don’t expect you to understand or think the best of me right away.” I say, rolling up my sleeves and shaking off the tension in my arms and legs, “Words are cheap, and your actions tell the greatest of truths, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes,” he answers simply.

I nod, "Not long ago, I had the benefit of learning from someone not so different from you. And she's the most powerful person I've ever met. Certainly far more powerful than you."

Closing and opening my fist, I think back on everything that's happened since I found myself here. There are things I still need to improve, but if there's one thing I can say about myself.

It's that I take pride in my efforts and progress.

I look back at Whitey, and speak as a sharp smile climbs its way onto my face, "She didn't know me as well as she thought she did and pushed too much. I will take what I want from you, along with what I've won. I don't care if you beat the shit out of me; I don't care if I have to bleed and crawl through the dirt, as long as I can get it."

"You would make a decent demon."

"My disciple said the same."

"Let us begin then."

"Yes."

POV Earth

"It's exactly as we feared, director. The animals are getting bigger. That polar bear in South Hudson Bay is three times the size of any polar bear ever recorded. An impossibly large moose was discovered in Newfoundland, and a giant lynx is hunting grizzlies in the Yukon."

"Sometimes I just wish I didn't have to deal with it, damn it. Prepare a report, and I'll go over it before passing it on to the higher-ups."

"Should we pass it on to the Department of Public Safety and the Armed Forces?"

“Yes. They can deal with it just like everything else.”

“Got it, director!”

POV Earth

“Sir, the situation in the Pacific just got a lot worse. There’s a shark out there—it’s the size of a cruise ship. They spotted it near the Mariana Trench.”

“A shark? That big? Are we sure?”

“Yes, sir. It’s already disrupted several shipping routes, and a couple of research vessels have gone missing. Satellite images show it circling, almost like it’s guarding something down there.”

“Great. That’s just what we needed after that damned spider showed up. Send out an alert to the naval forces and tell them to keep all civilian ships out of the area.”

“Understood. And should we inform the public?”

“Not yet. Let’s just keep this between us and monitor its movements.”

POV Earth

“So, we’re just all gonna pretend there isn’t a giant spider hanging out on the moon?”

“Oh, yeah, it’s totally normal. It’s just a massive spider, chilling up there like it owns the place.”

“Honestly, at this point, I kind of have to respect it. It’s been up there for over a year and hasn’t moved an inch. Probably just waiting for us to get comfy.”

“Yeah, it’s like a horror movie villain on a coffee break. Just taking its time, and plotting its next big move.”

“Right? Meanwhile, we’re all down here hoping that just maybe if we ignore it, it’ll go away.”

“Hey, maybe it’s just shy!”

“Or maybe it’s sizing up the planet like, ‘Alright, if I ever need a snack, I’ll just reach over. Not today, but someday.’”

“Yeah... let’s just hope it stays on break.”

“Just look at it. We all know it’s just a matter of time.”

POV Earth

"Ever since its appearance over a year ago, the 'Moon Spider,' as it's been dubbed, hasn't shown any signs of movement or aggression. It's just... there. Clinging to the surface of the moon, The size of the entire state of Colorado, with its many legs spread across the lunar surface, all visible from Earth. For the time being, it's remaining completely motionless. There's no observable activity, no indication of feeding activity, or even the most basic of life functions. We've been monitoring it around the clock, trying to understand what it is, how it got there, and why it's been so eerily still. Initial scans show an incredibly dense biological structure, unlike anything we've ever encountered. It doesn't fit into any known category of life as we understand it. The spider is silent, and despite all efforts, there's been no response to any signal or attempt at communication. But the question remains: why hasn't it moved? It's been over a year, and it hasn't so much as twitched. Speculations range from theories regarding a deep hibernation state to the idea that it's some sort of cosmic warning. The public at large, after an early outbreak of panic, has finally gotten used to the spider's presence. Even though it still remains a threat, no one knows if it's content to simply watch... or if it's just waiting for something. That was until about two weeks ago."

“What happened?”

“A group of a few dozen people appeared near a collapsed tunnel in Osaka, Japan, and the Moon Spider showed signs of movement, just a slight turn in the direction of Japan. The individuals that appeared in Japan were later identified as members of a group of people who were presumed dead in a tunnel collapse a few weeks before the Moon Spider appeared.”

“Continue.”

“Yes, thank you, sir. Reports indicate that these people possessed... unnatural abilities. Physical and mental capabilities that defy our understanding. The Japanese government and military have done their utmost to keep this under wraps, and most of these people have been cooperative, freely sharing information after their return. Japan has recently decided to provide us with some of this information. They’ve suggested that more individuals like them may appear and they’ve noted that those who’ve returned so far are what they refer to as ‘Easy Difficulty’ participants.”

“You said most cooperated. What happened to the rest?”

“Two refused and attempted to flee. One was subdued with the assistance of the other returnees. That’s what the Japanese have taken to calling them, sir, and we’ve decided to adopt the term as well.”

“Understood. What happened to the last one?”

“Kazuki Sato, twenty-three years old, was neutralized using an anti-materiel rifle. Prior to that, he survived an anti-tank missile strike and eliminated a twelve-member team from Japan’s Special Forces Group. We’re awaiting further reports, including photo and video documentation.”

“Please continue with the briefing.”

“Thank you, sir. Since the arrival of the first returnees in Japan, a range of animals in the area where the returnees appeared have exhibited remarkable growth in both physical capabilities and intelligence. Holographic windows have begun appearing before people who come into contact with the returnees. The returnees refer to this phenomenon as a ‘system message.’ It’s incredibly infectious—proximity alone is sufficient to spread it. Those affected have shown signs of what the returnees call ‘awakening,’ allowing them to access a ‘status window’ displaying a numerical representation of their abilities and granting them two so-called ‘skills’.”

“What does the message say?”

“It reads: ‘Congratulations! The earliest participants of the tutorial have completed their induction, and Earth will begin its awakening. More information will follow once the tutorial concludes! Welcome!’”

Chapter 470: Gravelhands

POV Dennis Dalton

Using [Haste], I reach the top of the building where Aaron is already waiting. Like me, he’s wearing clothes woven with experimental threads made from an alloy of metals that Nat spun together. These threads apparently help us hide our mana signatures more efficiently while disguising our heat signatures and dampening the signs of our passing, from our footsteps to the air disturbed in our wake.

Just these damned modified clothes qualify as mid-epic rarity, much like the masks we’re wearing, the ones that don’t even have holes for our eyes while still allowing us to see.

(Clothes alone might not be enough,) Aaron sends with a sigh.

(Sneaky mode?) I ask.

As I wait for an answer, I glance at the city stretched out below us. The place we’ve spent the past five months. Hollowgate is one of the three biggest cities in the central region, well-known for the mines it stands atop and the ancient ruins within.

Thousands of prisoners move through the city, weaving between the vast multitude of buildings dotting the landscape. Some structures look to be on the verge of collapse, while others resemble fortresses, sprouting directly from the streets of the city. A few tall towers rise above it all, while a deep pit—apparently dug by one of the groups occupying the city—tears a massive gash in the land, and a tall mountain dominates the landscape of the city, with a small fort nestled against its base—which we’ve decided target this time.

(Sneaky mode,) Aaron confirms.

After that, we tune our mana emissions like Nat taught us and circulate it throughout our bodies with a few slight modifications. In combination with the clothes, our presence becomes almost imperceptible. Adding [Sensory Deception], Nat says we should be able to easily hide from people up to 50 levels higher, with a few rare exceptions.

Our first obstacle is the outer circle placed on one of the walls in our path, so we approach one of the designated anchors. There on the wall, is an intricate set of inscriptions, engraved in molten metal and requiring a key tied to the user's mana signature.

We already stole a key; so the hard part is going to be using it.

(Together,) Aaron says through our link.

I send my confirmation, and through [Connection], we combine our minds' processing power, to work on decrypting the key, connecting it to ourselves instead of the owner. And just like that, a task neither of us would have been able to manage alone has been accomplished almost without effort, and we pass through the now worthless defenses with hastened movement.

There's barely anyone around at this time of night and we've already noted the positions of the guard posts we're now in the process of avoiding. Eventually, we enter the building, breaking through its protections in a similar manner, quickly running through the hallways made out of white stone with black floors. Our steps echo off the empty walls, and I feel my heartbeat quickening.

The same feeling I'm getting from Aaron.

Using the same method, we once again connect to another door, opening it together before proceeding deeper inside once more.

We avoid a few guards, while others pass us by, oblivious as we blend into the furniture. Occasionally, a scan from the protective array sweeps over us, but it always passes us over, thanks to our masking. We're not even using the key to impersonate the guy we robbed at this point—he probably didn't have access to this area anyway.

Then we find ourselves stuck, in front of the final door, deep inside of the fort. The door is made out of beautiful silver metal with intricate engravings on the surface, as beautiful as they are functional.

(Even he wouldn't be able to open this.)

(Please don't say things like that, he might show up and smack you in the head, before opening it up, all while practicing with those evil cubes of his.)

(Fuck, that could really happen. Creepy orb?)

(Yes, but be careful, and please, don't lose the box this time. He'll be furious if it happens again.)

(Don't even remind me.)

And with that final confirmation, I reach into my pocket and pull out the small box densely layered with inscriptions and made of some of the most durable metals we could find, all covered in a thin layer of voidcopper.

I unlock it with my mana signature, and it opens up, revealing a gray orb, about the size of a grape that almost seems to be made out of smoke.

Inside, the box is lined with a layer of Lily's bones, which bear their own set of inscriptions. Even now, I don't dare try to touch it with my fingers, choosing instead to bring it closer to the door, extremely carefully blowing into it while deactivating the inscriptions.

The gray smoke flows through the air, meeting the silver door, before disintegrating the metal at the merest touch, eating through its defenses as if they weren't even there.

That's how Lily's [Disintegration] is.

We watch the process from a good distance away, waiting for the smoke to disappear entirely. Even then we wait a bit, just to be sure.

Only then do we move in, pushing on the door and entering the room.

It's a storage facility belonging to a group called the Gravelhands, in fact, we are currently visiting, one of the best vaults in the entire city.

(Quick.) Aaron says, throwing a bag at me, which I grab, before piling materials inside. Some metals, some threads, scales, weird leather.

Meanwhile, Aaron moves over to the corner where the more valuable items seem to be.

(Fuck, that's a lot; I bet we'll get some nice shards out of this too!) he says in between looting the various items around us.

(It would be nice if he made us an arcane item.)

(Dream on; you saw how many different items and materials he needed just to make one, and it still blew up our old base.)

A case of content theft: this narrative is not rightfully on Amazon; if you spot it, report the violation.

(Angry Kittens are indeed a menace.)

(For Angry Kittens!) Aaron cheers, his hand wrapped around some weird metal.

We both giggle for a moment before receiving a signal from one of the traps we left behind us.

(Not good.)

Time and again, our traps go off, followed by multiple scans washing over us, the defenses in the room trying to reactivate without any real success.

Without any need to talk, we pick up everything we collected and rush outside, reactivating Sneaky Mode and [Sensory Deception].

We pass through the first wave of guards easily, none of whom directly notice us, then we avoid another by going through the window.

Then one of the guards does notice us and does something to strengthen the defenses in the area around us, destroying our camouflage. He attempts to disrupt our mana, but we resist and disrupt his instead, then he rushes us, his immense mana flaring up around his body, and creating a set of huge mana arms.

(Teleportation?)

(Teleportation outside from here is still blocked.)

We've done any number of runs like this. I guess it was about time one of them went belly-up, especially considering the value of the items we took and the power of this group in particular.

Our [Connection] activates, and we connect to the skill of the man attacking us. Our minds come together to bear the strain of the calculations, as we take over the skill, one of the huge arms punches its creator and three more start tearing a hole in the wall.

As the man gets thrown by his own arms, we pass through.

I receive a warning and move to the side without pausing to check and send a similar warning to my brother, causing him to duck under an arrow. Another man and woman attack, but we get rid of them quickly, and a few more afterward. Just a few months ago, they would've been a lot of trouble, but now it seems way too easy. For now.

Finally, we reach the place we passed into the inner layer of their defenses and come to a stop.

A blue-skinned man with four arms stands there. In the darkness, only the flashing of security lights and their piercing sirens serve to break the silence. But the moment he stands before us, the alarms fall silent, as do the men and women who were pursuing us.

There is no need for them to hunt us anymore. The man in front of us is a Champion Candidate, the most powerful thylarin mage in the Gravelhands and one of the top 10 in Hollowgate.

(Together we can take him), I note.

(Not quickly enough. They're already building up defenses around the fort.)

(Well fuck, I'm sending him the signal,) I say and pull the thread tied to us and leading back to our base.

(This is going to be a mess.)

(It already is.)

"Tell me, are you the ones who've been stealing things all across Hollowgate over the past two months? From the Voidstriders? From the Veiled Claw? What about Goldmere?"

"Also from Shadowcliff," I note with pride. It was the most difficult one so far.

The thylarin Champion Candidate lets out a boisterous laugh, his blue skin shining in the dim light around us, and his four arms moving lazily. "You mean that old fuck Drek covered it up? Was he too ashamed to let people know?"

He doesn't say more, opting instead to release an immense amount of mana from his body, it flows from his heart, through his chest, and into his four arms which hold it, molding the energy, and creating a number of wisps that glow in the air around him while he radiates a scary amount of pressure.

“Now, I’ll be taking your masks and cutting off your limbs, one by one. Then we’ll talk. What do you think, my new friends?” he says, his tone dripping with menace.

Before anything can happen, I feel a mark on my forearm burn. It’s his anchor, connecting us to that invisible thread of his.

The protections around the area are suddenly ripped apart from the outside, as if that monster were forcing his way in, ignoring all their defenses against teleportation. Then, without any warning, without so much as a whiff of mana, or any sign of disturbance, he appears at my side.

He doesn’t even have that crown of his floating over his head, he’s left it behind in our base, clearly feeling that it wasn’t needed. The same goes for that terrifying weapon he made.

His black hair is messy and his clothes look like he just woke up and threw them on. Obscuring his face is a mask similar to ours, hiding even his eyes and muffling his voice.

He takes quick stock of the situation, his stance lazy, seeming almost careless.

Maybe he really did just wake up.

“Let’s do this quickly, okay? Clean up the fodder; I’ll take the boss. No witnesses,” he finishes that with what sounds like a yawn.

In a blink, he disappears, suddenly standing in front of the thylarin Champion Candidate. It’s not even teleportation, he’s just that fast.

Layers of shields stack in front of the thylarin, and Nat twists his body, in a smooth, almost lazy movement, tapping the first layer which ripples like the surface of a lake before bursting open. And the other barriers quickly follow suit.

The thylarin moves the disrupted mana, tendrils with glowing white tips making an attempt to run Nat through, who’s begun moving from side to side in a twitchy, and chaotic pattern of movement that seems almost impossible to predict.

One of the thylarin man's arms gets torn off, one of the left arms, it holds its position in mid-air, floating there as Nat bulldozes through barriers and continues to fight the man.

Then I run out of time to spend watching and use [Haste] to avoid an attack. Multiple projections of me appear in the area around me, each possessing its own mana and heat signature, they even produce a small kinetic signature. Aaron does the same, and we rush the men and women surrounding us.

I hold a short sword and dagger while Aaron favors using a single dagger.

Whenever we find ourselves faced with an opponent that's more difficult than the others, we opt for a quicker way, often swapping places. Aaron is better at facing certain builds, and I'm better at fighting others. The sheer surprise each time we do is just a bonus.

No one here can match our speed, even with their higher average level. Plenty of them have trouble even detecting us or find themselves confused by our projections, so with the exception of two of the more powerful members, where we end up needing to combine our minds to disrupt their mana, we deal with them easily.

When it's all over, we return to Nat. He stands there, and I can sense him deploying his web to erase our signatures and anything else that could be used to track us.

I add him to our link, and he asks, (Done?)

(Now that everything's in chaos, do you want to go loot some more?) I ask in return.

(Maybe next time. I'm currently blocking three of their defensive arrays and disrupting their attempts to teleport in. Probably around a hundred people?)

(Well, fuck.)

(It's fine, they suck at it.)

His mana touches us, and at the same time, I feel a pull on that thread and anchor tied to us, spiriting the three away while the thread dissipates in the air as we vanish, without leaving anything in the way of a traceable signature.

We appear back in our base's living room and throw the loot into yet another pile nearby before Nat quickly goes through it finally settling on a pair of weird metals, and seeming satisfied.

"Just what I needed," he declares and then, without fanfare, disappears again, probably returning to his underground lab, leaving two evil orbs in his wake.

As we exchange glances, I send a message, (Lucky us, we didn't get yelled at.)

(Yea, you think so? Check the orb.)

As I do so, I can only let out a deep groan at the new structure. It requires us to break through defenses and is filled with dozens of traps that punish each mistake, mimicking the one we missed that triggered the alarm.