

## Tutorial 471

### Chapter 471: One Hundredth Time

Even though the metals Dennis and Aaron brought back are only epic rarity, I'm happy with them. I've long since learned that sometimes a nice complementary metal with good properties is better than something with a higher rarity. Sometimes.

The lights around me flicker back on, coming from a dozen thermal cubes lighting up my underground lab. My crown hovering over a metal bust inlaid with a range of inscriptions moves, floating across the room until it takes its rightful place over my head.

My baby, my precious. The crown has become a deep shade of blue, marbled with faint traces of pale blue.

The amount of mana stored in it is probably enough to destroy... I don't know what, probably something very big. Without further testing and experience, it's hard to guess. It will probably also be difficult to channel that much mana, but hey, it's what I'm good at.

I drop the metals on the table next to a short sword in a sheath that obscures any mana signature that might be emanating from the blade. The sheath is made of an alloy of a dozen metals: shades of copper, black, blue sheen gray, are blended throughout, alongside tiny bits of blue and white crystal, complemented by the densest and most complicated inscriptions I've ever made.

My Mana Wavelength Iris activates again, and as always, I feel the gradually increasing pressure on my mind. It's doable, but doing so any longer will cause problems, even with my goddamned arcane passive.

I get to work, radiating heat, and melting the metal in my hand, moving thin strands of material with my mana, as I hammer it with kinetic energy. Reaching the required consistency, I move the molten metal to a set of pre-prepared grooves on the sheath while reaching into the back of my mind, where I've kept an inscription structure prepared just for these situations.

It doesn't take long, and after performing the requisite checks, I absorb the heat from the metal, while making a few finishing touches with my kinetic energy before it hardens.

I give the sheath a few more checks, but the seals and inscriptions for suppression, protection, camouflage... and other things, seem to be working better now and the signs of degradation I saw mere moments ago have been rectified.

Lastly, I take a sheath wrap I made out of the leather of a level 350 manta ray I hunted in the Mana Desert not long ago and apply it, finishing the protections.

For a while longer, I examine the hilt of the sword and guard. Both have been made from a single piece of molten alloy, combining arcanite alloy, amberlace, tiny bits of voidcopper, and a few other materials I got from scrapping some of the damaged arcane weapons I had. Combining them into a dark gray alloy, with mottled hues of black and light gray and streaks of copper running through the metal like a spiderweb of cracks.

There are some imperfections here and there, cracks even, and shapes that feel off. To be honest, it's every bit as ugly, as my fellow group members have pointed out several times over. But it's my other precious, and I carefully put it back on the table and activate the defenses I've placed around it.

Not so much to protect the sword, as to protect us from it.

The thing is just evil.

I send a signal through a Ley Line connected to Lily and receive her confirmation, then use it to teleport over to her.

Unlike me, she doesn't need an underground bunker lab as she didn't have an accident that blew up her lab and took an entire fortress with it. The sort of thing that could've happened to anyone. Even to the best of us.

Lily likes to do her training and experiments in the confines of our walled yard. She even made some of the guys plant some nice trees here, which they had to get from one of the dangerous forests that litter the central region.

The result is trees with white bark and leaves that produce a shade of green unlike any we've ever seen on Earth.

There she sits on the bench with the axe she made on her lap. An axe she grew from her own bones. Its handle is only half as long as Lily is tall, but I've seen just how quickly she can make it longer if she needs to. The axe blade is single-sided and likely has a surface area nearly as great as that of Lily's entire body.

This weapon is something she's been growing for months already and started doing so after I made her level up as much as possible to reach level 250 and get a body upgrade that was a massive power-up for her. Growing the axe from her body also made it stronger than it would have been before level 250. R'

"It seems to be nearly done," I note and sit on the ground opposite her. In an attempt to avoid slacking off, I create one of my evil cubes and start training.

She smiles softly, "I'm happy with the shape, and I changed the handle a bit, so I can grow it quickly if needed. Now I just need to keep working on strengthening the blade while I experiment with infusing the blade with [Disintegration]."

I long since gave up being surprised at the terrifying ideas the members of group 4 tend to come up with.

I stop for a moment and examine her. Lily is still very pale, and her brown eyes seem lighter in this light. She also has her hair tied up in a simple ponytail with her trademark bangs falling across her forehead. She also seems to be growing more athletic by the day.

Her shoulders are a bit wider now, and she packs a hint of muscle, bringing to mind an amusing memory of a time when she refused most forms of exercise, worried that she was going to turn into some kind of muscle monster.

And the twins threatening to call her "muscle mommy" didn't help much either.

But in the end, she's still just as petite as ever. A tiny killing/healing machine.

"How's the Skele-Suit coming along?"

“Nat, please, you at least, should stop calling it that.”

“What about calcium-cage?”

“Another one? I’m going to beat the snot out of those two little assholes.”

I don’t think I’m going to tell her that the last name was my idea.

Lily points at the tree, against which she has lain a chestplate made of the same pearl-white bone as her axe. “It’s hindering my movements. Sure, it can hold some mana and block attacks, but my bones can do that just as well. I’ve already got some designs with platings that should make the armor much easier to move in.”

“How about making chainmail, and using your bones in place of the iron rings?”

“Huh, that’s not a bad idea, but now I feel like going to sleep and procrastinating just imagining how much work that would take.”

“I already tried making something similar from manabloc, so you can bet on my sympathy.” A memory from a few months earlier flashes through my mind, and I shudder. Then a thought comes. Could I one day replace mana rings with Ley Lines? Wouldn’t that be too strong?

“How did it go with Gravelhand?”

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“The twins triggered a trap, and their Champion Candidate appeared. The information about him being out of the city seemed to be wrong.”

“I’ll talk to the informant about that. Any trouble?”

“By talking to him, do you mean engaging in intimidation and knocking some heads together?”

“What else? I’m not Tess,” she says, smiling playfully, despite the horrifying implications of the statement.

“As for any trouble that might cause, it shouldn’t be anything major, and don’t worry, I’ll speak with the informant. We’ll just need to be more careful when we visit Hollowgate for a while, that’s all. Hey, what have you done there?”

Proud of me noticing, she excitedly moves closer, hefting the giant axe in a single hand and shoving the blade within an inch of my face.

Before I can complain, she proudly points out, “I finally succeeded, and I think I’ll be able to ‘heal’ the axe if it gets damaged. Of course, it shouldn’t be all that easy to damage it in the first place. Between the effects of my constitution, body upgrade, and trait, my bones are extremely tough as it is, but it could still happen! Now it almost feels as if it’s part of my body! I told you that growing it out of my own bone rather than using those of a Champion or some powerful monster would be better!”

“It’s pretty cool,” I agree, “I just still think it would be super strong if you did.”

"It would take much longer to grow it from a Champion's bone. But don't worry, this one will grow along with me, and I'll be able to keep strengthening it." She says, pulling the axe back.

Some time ago, I held that weapon and was surprised by its weight. Sure, with the increase in my stats from using the Restrictive Training Emblem, I could hold it and even swing it, but could I have done the same with a single arm, with the same ease as Lily? She swings it through the area around her, taking swift steps and manipulating the axe as if it were no heavier than a normal splitting axe.

And the fact that it’s a petite black-haired girl doing it feels especially weird.

“I’m almost caught up with my work here, so we’ll leave soon to regroup with the others.”

“How about that place?”

“The Hoarders are preparing an expedition to the mines in a few days, so we’ll join them. I already had Dennis enlist us while you grew that monstrosity, and by monstrosity, I mean it in a good way,” I add before she can complain.

Lily laughs shyly as if I had just given her a massive compliment. “If you’re right and one of the Containment Cells is down there, it will be a truly fun expedition.”

I can only agree with the sentiment.

Later that night, I close my eyes, appearing inside of my mind, where, as usual, the area has changed.

This time it’s a view I saw a long time ago on TV. Whitey and I stand on the surface of the Moon and look out into the pitch darkness that almost seems to swallow the Earth in the vastness of space, making its troubles seem small and insignificant by comparison.

The gravity is normal, Earth-like. All of this is from my imagination, a combined image made from a collection of images and videos I saw on TV and the internet.

As I sit down to enjoy the view for a moment, Whitey moves closer, sitting next to me and tapping my shoulder. He holds a tablet in his hand, playing a video of me fighting the Gravelhand’s Champion Candidate.

“Here you were slow to absorb your inertia,” he says, touching the screen and scrolling, “here you could have moved to the opposite side. The way you destroyed his barriers went pretty well, but there are still a lot of ways you could improve. Instead of concentrating on such a small surface and delivering equal power, you should spread it out, make it more powerful in the middle, and weaken it as you move towards the surface.”

I grab the tablet and replay it, “Wouldn’t that make the aftershocks weaker?”

“Ha!” He exclaims, snatching the tablet away. “Quite the opposite. The gradual separation would strengthen the pulses, and while it would be a bit weaker it would also make the attack more efficient. Even better would be releasing a timed series of pulses, but you suck at it.”

“Bullshit. Show me.” I stand up and create an exact copy of the barrier the other man used.

Whitey jumps to his feet as well and does just that, a single tap on the barrier, releasing a series of three pulses. Each comes at a different time, in a pattern that doesn't seem to make any sense. Yet I watch as each pulse meets, crashes into, and strengthens its predecessor. Instead of spreading further around the spherical barrier, they make for higher frequency “waves” in a smaller area, destroying the barrier even more quickly.

Knowing what he wants to hear, I sigh, “I know shit all about kinetic energy.”

Whitey smirks, “I wouldn't exactly say it's shit, but yeah, it's pretty bad.”

Having spoken his piece, the closest he's ever gotten to giving me praise, his stance changes. Breaker Style.

Gone are the smile and careless bearing he displayed before. As always when it comes to fighting, his eyes seem to flare a deeper shade of red and the atmosphere around him grows that much more dangerous. Joviality is replaced by the presence of a cruel, and dangerous predator.

I mimic the stance, and the rhythm of my heartbeat changes, matching his. Pulsing in slower, more powerful beats.

He takes a step forward, and using the force of his entire body, thrusts his open palm towards me, surging forth behind a brutal, and heavy burst of kinetic energy.

Taking a similar step forward, I stomp, releasing a similar burst with what I might otherwise think of as perfect timing.

The moon dust flies into the air and covers the area, but eyes in a fight against kinetic energy don't matter.

His next strike erupts from behind the veil of dust, followed by another, hidden in its shadow. Increasing my output, I attack three times, each burst sending more dust flying into the air and producing an audible disturbance, almost as if someone were banging on a massive drum.

After a few more exchanges I sense a change in his heartbeat, replacing the prior rhythm with a quicker, erratic, and more chaotic one.

Needle Point.

Thin bursts of kinetic energy, as narrow as my fingers, shoot toward me, forcing me to dodge again and again. Instead of slowing down, the attacks come faster as time goes on, several times per second, leaving me no time to strike back and demanding every ounce of my focus just to react.

But unlike our Challenge, I can actually sense them with some degree of accuracy, boosting my body to react with a near sense of ease.

Duck under, jump over, move to the side, twist my head. I sense each and every burst.

Then they stop.

And immediately after, a dozen more fire off almost simultaneously.

I manage to dodge the first six, amazed at my ability to do even that much, but the rest pierce my body, perfectly anticipating my movements.

My knee explodes, my shoulder gets pierced, the fingers, on one hand, find themselves reduced to mush, one of the attacks even punctures a lung, while another destroys my ankle.

With the next step, the cloud of dust is blown away, revealing Whitey in Wraith Dance. He appears in front of me, followed by a switch to Pulser Stance.

He avoids my attacks with excessive ease, simply ripping the ground apart around him with Breaker Style as he deflects the rest. He grabs my arm and tears it from my shoulder, spraying my blood across the surface of the moon.

He dodges again and continues to deflect my attacks as I switch to first stance, then he kicks me, caving my chest in and causing blood to seep from the corners of my mouth.

"Your heart's output has greatly improved as has your efficiency," he says, examining the arm he tore from my body.

"Is it?" I hiss, blood flowing from my mouth.

"Yes." He says, throwing my arm somewhere behind him, having lost interest. "Your detection is also starting to get pretty good, so I'll start adding in feints the next time we spar."

"Lucky me."

"Indeed." Whitey squats in front of me and touches the wound on my chest with his slim, pale finger, "It's already been five months since we started this training. I mean, it was fun at the start, but it's lost some of its charm. Do you feel like giving up yet? You could spend more time on your mana, that's where your true talent lies."

"I liked you more when you talked less and beat the shit out of me more."

He stands with a smile. And I notice that here, on the moon, surrounded by scenery devoid of color, his eyes seem especially red, and his white hair seems to shine against the void.

"You aren't half bad, for a human. This makes the hundredth time I've killed you." Whitey muses, then stomps on my head.

I open my eyes back in my lab and stretch on my bed before closing my eyes and replaying the fight.

It could be said the kinetic training has been going pretty well.

Chapter 472: Not a very reasonable person

Our fort is a nice place, not far from Hollowgate. After making a few modifications to one of the walls of my room, I now have a window with a nice view of the city as a whole.

I'd even say it's quite pleasant, especially at night, with the purple nebula and countless stars above and the city lights below.

This place used to belong to a group called... I forgot. Anyway, it's Angry Kittens now, a small group made up of a few dozen members with a suspicious degree of wealth. After we took over, almost everyone who had objections tried to kill us, while others left and those who stayed, are currently being paid for their services.

Their salary comes in multiple forms: items I've made, food, water, a safe place to sleep after we killed any monsters within several miles of the base, and a number of other fringe benefits. In exchange, they collect information for us, or in Lily's case, they bring her a few trees in exchange for bone spears they can't place the origins of.

Obviously, there were disadvantages to it, like being forced to deal with people, but Lily and the twins usually take care of that part. After all, it's only right that they take care of such minor annoyances in exchange for my teachings.

Though they're not high-level extroverts like Tess or Gareth, so they do have some difficulties, but that's a sacrifice I'm willing to make.

As I mull these facts over in my head, I turn my attention back to the Beyond Community and read the last message.

Sset - We located two and now that you've located one as well, we're getting close to the end. We've already started moving, and we can meet at Soph's location after you guys are done with your stuff.

Grumpy - I miss you all, guys!

Tacita -(×\_×)

Grumpy - I miss you too, Taci! (

Tacita - 。 。 。

Grumpy - You won't run away!-≡Σ(

Sset -Just please don't push it, Noname.

Noname - You know me.

Sset -That's why I'm worried.

Noname -It will be fine.

Sset -I always get chills when you say that.

Tacita -/∨/Ꞥ(☹

Grumpy -

Noname -Just don't forget our schedule in case something screws up.

Sset - I would not forget. I got to go, see you later. Stay safe.

Noname -Stay safe.

Tacita -(☹ o ☹)Ꞥ=[]:.....>

Grumpy -(’•

After closing the Community, I use one of my Ley Lines and appear in the Common room with a few of the original owners. They immediately jump to their feet in a rush to greet me.

I just gesture in acknowledgment and check the pile of materials they’ve piled up to see if I can find anything interesting. Disappointed at not finding anything, I move to teleport away when I get stopped.

“Boss!” one of the men calls.

“Yes?” I ask, turning to him. His face seems familiar, “Oh, you are... E... B-something.”

“You’ve already forgotten my name three times, so what’s the point of trying at this point?”

“Oh.”

“It’s fine! I just wanted to report that I saw a few members of a neighboring group sneaking around, just outside your defenses.”

“Are they strong?” I ask with interest.

“They outnumber us five to one,” he notes seriously, “and they have experts on destroying defensive arrays. Before you... ehm, took over, we tended to have trouble with them.”

Oh boy, I would love to see them try to do something to my [Ley Line] based defensive array.

“Just ignore them. If they attack, let Lily know, she’ll take care of them.”

Teleporting away, I find myself in Hollowgate, the thread I set easily reaching across the distance without being noticed. Though if I'm being honest someone may have noticed and found they couldn't disrupt it.

Without my crown, I feel naked, and with Sneaky Mode deployed, my mana feels foreign, but it's useful and little bother if it means not dealing with the annoying people who tend to swarm me.

Relying on my memory, I weave through the crowds, breaking the arms of two pickpockets, as I continue deeper into the nicer parts of the city.

Using Wraith Dance, I leap to the roof of one of the nicer houses, send a ripple of my mana through the barrier, and pass through, leaping into the massive yard where a gathering is already underway.

Everyone's levels are much higher than the random people outside, and I get a few curious looks of my own. As I push through them, one man tries to grab me, but all it takes is a single burst of kinetic energy to send him rolling to the ground.

This time I don't even have to repeat the demonstration, and I make my way over to a pair of guards, both of whom are uncommonly bulky. One is a thylarin with four swords, and the other is a feylith with a lazy smile.

"The boss is waiting inside," the feylith says, gesturing as the door unlocks, and allows me to pass through.

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

The house opens up to a series of dark hallways lit by a number of yellow flames floating in the air like ensconced torches. Passing by them, I come to another door and enter an office dominated by a huge table seated before a massive window. That window offers a stunning view into a beautiful garden on the other side.

With a cough, the man behind the table grabs my attention. A thylarin in expensive clothes, specially made for a member of a four armed race such as the man before me. His clothes are a stunning shade of white woven through with golden threads, making for a nice contrast against his pale blue skin.

“I heard someone offed Ellan yesterday,” he says in a deep, slow voice.

“Who?”

“Thylarin mage, no. 10 in all of Hollowgate?”

“Oh, that guy.”

“Yes, a 200-year-old Champion Candidate. A man who spent the last 50 years here in Astral Prison. The man they used to call Mage Bane.”

“The one who was supposed to be out of the city for a few days?” Instead of grabbing one of the chairs, I make my own, reliable, monobloc chair with its classic nostalgic design and sit down.

“Yes. Someone who, according to all information, should have been far away from the city and very unexpectedly wasn’t.”

“Quite a bad piece of information,” I nod. “I can imagine that such bad information could have easily cost the lives of... let’s say two brave ‘collectors’ who were relying on that person being far away from the city.”

“Things like that just happen sometimes.”

“Not when it comes to my people, Fynn.”

There is a long moment of silence and I notice a growing tension in the man’s face.

“Nathaniel, I would very strongly recommend that you be reasonable and consider what you are about to do right now.”

“I’m not a very reasonable person, Fynn. You know that.” As he stares at me, I add to the statement, sensing the movement of his arm under the table, “If you raise the alarm, I will blow your entire guild off the surface of this prison along with that shitty array of yours.”

I sense him freeze in place, and he very carefully pulls back, all four hands placed on the table for me to see.

“There will be an expedition into the mines in a few days,” I start again.

“Yes, the one being led by the Hoarders with The Witch in it. One of the largest in the past ten years.”

“Yup, that one. We already applied, so make sure we pass and they don’t do too much of a background check on us. If you do that I will forgive you for passing on such unreliable information.”

“That’s going to require a lot of effort.”

“That sucks.”

“It really does, but fine. Consider it done. And I mean really done, no mistakes this time. I will personally make sure of that.”

“Sounds good!”

Jumping to my feet I take a step towards the shelf and grab a mana stone carved into the shape of a hollow cube with some kind of weird inscription that gives off a nice light.

“Is it fine if I take this?” I ask the man, already putting it into my pocket.

“I... do you even... haa, yes. Please consider it a gift from me, Nathaniel.”

“Thanks, you truly are a nice guy. See you later.”

As I make my exit through the door, one of the guards blocks my way. It's the bulky thylarin with four swords. He and his partner seem to be highly trusted, demonstrated by the weird connection they have that allows them to listen to what's happening in the room.

"Mais, please let him go," Fynn calls from inside.

The guard doesn't budge, channeling kinetic energy through his body using a trait I noticed long ago. I've wanted to fight this guy for a while—Mais, also known as the Spinecrusher, ranked No. 7 in Hollowgate.

I take a step toward him, releasing an amount of kinetic energy to match his own, feeling the weight of it building in the air. Mais responds, increasing his output as the tension sharpens to a razor's edge. His hands hover closer to the swords at his sides, the flicker of violence rising in his eyes. The space between us tightens, energy crackling between us as though one wrong move could set everything off.

"Mais! Stop before we all fucking die here!" This shout is much louder and more desperate, catching the attention of the people around us.

Only then does the guy manage to calm himself and take a step back.

I feel the pressure begin to dissipate as he pulls back, and I make one last corny attempt at baiting him, hoping to amuse myself with a decent brawl, "Yeah, Mais, be a good boy."

To my disappointment, he doesn't bite. Sure, he seems to be more pissed off, but that's all.

As he steps away, I pass by and wave at the second guard, who waves back at me with a smile, his eyes and hair blazing a happy shade of red along with the small wings flickering on his back.

Melo, also called The Nightmare, no. 5 in Hollowgate, the kind of person even Fynn rarely gives orders to.

After jumping across a few roofs and a quick teleport later, I visit a few shops and return to the fort we lord over as Angry Kittens, directly jumping into the room this time. Here, in relative safety, I put more effort into the training that's been going on in the back of my mind the entire time.

Separating a small part of my mind, I form a simple evil cube and wonder over it. It's an upgrade I made by modifying the orb after becoming familiar with the shaping exercises Lissandra gave me.

Lissandra has amazing mastery over mana, and her flow is smooth, perfectly controlled, and sharp.

My style of control is more chaotic, and it's something I'm starting to account for with my shaping exercises, especially the 1st one, where I'm constantly having to control multiple frequencies and manage an ever-changing set of mana requirements just to maintain the thing.

Changing the shape to a cube allowed the mana inside the shape to bounce more chaotically and made its movements nearly impossible to predict. Even after a few months, I'm still not sure what I expect to get from it, but I've decided to continue. Lately, I've even started changing the shape into a pyramid, which made it even more difficult, the mana inside the shape bouncing and swirling even more unpredictably.

Someone smarter could probably explain the reasons behind it since I expected the cube to be more chaotic—but not me.

With a wave of my hand, the cube disappears, and I bring my mind back to the previous method of training, leaving just a tiny bit to continue thinking as I throw myself back onto the bed and stare at the ceiling.

“System, show me my level.”

Lvl 291

It's pretty, and I'm fairly certain that even with as much effort as I directed to training at the expense of leveling, I'm probably one of the highest levels in our round. Perhaps even the highest. And I'm just nine levels away from my Primary Class upgrade. I'm really curious how the system will deal with it, given

that I already have all ten of my allotted active skills, and the Primary class always seems to bring more along for the ride.

“System, order me pizza. I will pay 10,000 shards.”

Nothing changes, obviously. Looking at the terrifying number of shards I currently possess, I don’t think I would miss those 10,000.

It’s really tough out here.

Lastly, before settling in to sleep for the next two hours, I decide to check on Biscuit.

(Food.) I send through the link the twins created. The one that works despite Biscuit’s current distance.

(Food,) he sends back mysteriously.

(Food food?) I ask.

(Food!) he answers right away.

(Asshole!) I send back.

(Gone. Food. Food.)

(Food,) I confirm, and over the next few exchanges, I tell him about our plans, until we finally say goodbye, focusing my attention back on the ceiling.

Damn, I miss that corgi. It’s already been a few months since he went on his secluded training like some hidden master, and after not being able to boop that nose for so long, I’m starting to get close to my limit.

[Bone Knitting - lvl 18 > Bone Knitting - lvl 19]

Finally, the skill levels up, and I take a break from my efforts. The bones, which had been itching until now, finally settle, and the mana threads dissolve, the energy returning to my pathways to continue cycling through my body.

Only then do I close my eyes and allow myself to fall asleep.

Chapter 473: The Witch

Days pass by quickly. Filled with mana training, getting taught and then killed by Whitey, and giving pointers to Lily and the twins.

There isn't any talk anymore about making them change difficulties. Even when they're not combining forces to fight, they're still dangerous. They don't flinch anymore when they get hurt. They're quick to learn and much more experienced when it comes to combat. They're surprisingly patient and don't hesitate to stretch out battles as needed, gradually building up an advantage.

Their projections are amazing, to be honest. Mimicking mana signatures, and heat, while imitating the vibrations of true motion. I can see a lot of potential in these projections of theirs and I've worked hard to help them improve.

Honestly, I'm capable of doing something similar myself. And with my superior control over mana and the proper application of kinetic and thermal energy, it even comes fairly easy. But I'm the type that prefers dealing damage to such trickery, so I don't spend much time practicing myself—it's just something to do when I feel bored. So their projections are currently much better than mine.

[Connection] is a straight-up broken skill, much like [Resonance]. The things we've come up with lately are... scary at times. In a good way. Like I always say, if you can hurt yourself with your own skill it's a bad sign for your opponent.

I don't mean it in a maniacal way of course. Your body naturally adapts to your skills, allowing you to endure their use. So, in theory, using a skill that causes damage to yourself should hurt your opponent even more. For example, Lily's body and bones can withstand [Disintegration], but if she were to use it on anyone else with the exact same stats and traits, they'd be completely wrecked.

Even though we both tried, even working together, we couldn't figure out exactly how it works or how skills influence the body, but it's something we'll definitely return to later.

As for the twins, my instinct to push them into training their mana proved to be an excellent decision—as always—and even though they currently need to combine their minds to take over most skills, they now have a clear path ahead of them.

I don't think they'll ever be the strongest 1v1 guys, but 2v1 they are scary, and in cooperation with people like me, there's definitely hell to be made.

Two days before the expedition, Biscuit also returns.

An unidentified floating object appears on the horizon. It's shaped kind of like a burrito and it moves surprisingly fast. That floating object just so happens to be on the list of exceptions to my defensive array and therefore passes through easily, slowing to a stop over the garden where all of us happen to be.

Announcing his majestic presence with a loud cry of (Food), our future overlord slowly lowers himself, landing on the ground with a cute surprised noise as he lets go of his levitation a bit early and falls a bit further than he expected.

It's been two months since I last saw him. Calculating the 10 boops per day I usually did, that's 600 boops I've missed out on, and they still need to be delivered.

Ever since the Golden Retriever accident, we've made some changes, so Biscuit ignores others and stops in front of me.

I immediately lift him to my chest, reveling in the familiar feeling, weight, and scent of the best corgi of the 6th floor. He boops my nose with his paw, I caress his tiny head, and let him happily lick me while he wags his short tail, taking the rest of his body along for the ride with sheer inertia.

Only then do I release him to greet the others.

I'm allowed to pet other animals, and Biscuit is allowed to be pet by other people, but he will be my number one, and I will be his. With that simple deal, the dark times brought about by the Golden Retriever incident have finally ended.

I would love to know what he's been doing to train, given that I only ever get flashes of memory, but I suppose time will tell soon enough. It's about time something went wrong and threw our plans into disarray.

Those near-death experiences I've had over the past five months just don't feel the same as they used to. Lily and the twins probably wouldn't agree, though. There was that time Dennis got cut in half by that one guy, Lily got trapped under a mountain while she was hunting a high-level monster, and Aaron was poisoned and got paralyzed for three days before we finally figured out a way to cure him.

Things like that are just things I've accepted as part of life in the tutorial. If they don't like it, they can switch to Hard difficulty, where they'll probably have no trouble clearing each floor on their own.'

The old pre-tutorial me would probably be a bit shocked by that way of thinking, but what can I do? Screw that guy.

That thought also makes me curious to know how he would react and what a conversation between us would look like.

"You are free," I tell the man whose name I've already forgotten.

"I... why are you giving me an old sock?"

"It's a custom where I'm from."

"Oh, sorry, I didn't want to insu—"

The genuine version of this novel can be found on another site. Support the author by reading it there.

"It's fine. As I said, we will leave the rooms unlocked, and we're leaving some stuff behind, so you guys can sort it out, kill each other over them if you like, or settle it some other way."

"Oh..."

"You also mentioned that neighboring group that was sneaking around, right? Lily checked on them last night, and I don't think they'll be making trouble anymore. If you are lucky, you might even take over what's left. But don't expect any fancy items or materials, we took them all."

"If she's the one who went there, there won't be many people left alive to conscript. But thanks, we'll—"

"Sure," I say, waving him off and teleporting away, reappearing in my underground lab.

The only way to get here is by teleporting through the Ley Line that leads here. Otherwise, the lab is deep enough to be almost perfectly shielded.

I did have some trouble getting breathable air down here, but I solved it with a set of mana stones—inspired by the one that the blacksmith gave me back on Beyond's entrance floor.

Right now, the lab feels unusually tidy, gone are the chaotic piles of items and materials that were scattered all over the place. The best and most useful items were packed away in our bags, and the rest were either sold to the system shop or left up in my room, which I'm sure is already in the process of being looted.

The only thing of note remaining in the lab is the inscribed bust with my crown hovering over it. The bust serves to stabilize the crown so it doesn't lose mana while it's not over my head.

With the bust currently charged, the crown should be able to remain there for two or three weeks without any trouble, and the Ley Line thread connected to it makes it possible to summon it to my location.

To avoid annoying questions during the expedition and to avoid immediate conflict with a certain person, I plan to leave it here and summon it at the first sign of trouble, which I'm sure will happen soon enough. Until then, I at least won't be bothered by these people.

I mean, I could probably just take over the expedition at this point, but that would be too annoying.

Giving my precious crown one last look, I teleport to the door to Lily's room and knock.

"Come in!" she calls a few moments later, and I enter.

"You should have been packed an hour ago," I note looking at her messy room.

"I know, I know!" She deflects, turning to me and holding a dress in front of her. "What do you think?"

The dress is a pale shade of blue, with a skirt that comes to an end just over her knees. The design is a bit weird.

"Huh, no good." She mumbles, reading something in my face I didn't even know was there, and throws it on the ground, quickly choosing another in its place, this one is a very dark shade of red. "This one?"

"So, that's where your pocket money went?"

"This one's no good either, huh," she sighs, throwing it aside. "And yes! I'm a young woman, of course, I like to dress well. Though, other women probably wouldn't care about clothes in a situation like this, so maybe it's just me, but you know what I mean!"

Lily picks another dress, this one dark blue with thin shoulder straps, "This one?"

"That one looks the best so far. Do you think you'll be using it anytime soon?"

Happily, she throws it on the bed and starts folding it carefully before putting a small mana stone on it and stowing it in some kind of protective bag, before adding it to her other things.

"I don't think I'll be needing it, that's why I'm only taking the one and leaving the rest. Before you ask, the mana stone is supposed to help keep insects, dirt, mold, and other stuff away from the cloth. I don't have very many, so no you can't have one—you would just break it to see how it works."

"That's a terrible accusation. If that happened, I would make you a new one."

"Sure, sure! And then for some unknown reason, you would add in an additional function that would cause it to overload with mana and explode. Do you remember that mana stone that was supposed to keep my clothes smelling fresh?"

This time I can't help but defend myself, "That bullshit stone was clearly a scam and didn't work to begin with."

"So why did it explode?"

"It had an interesting structure that gave me an idea so I modified it a bit and... that's not the point! Are you ready?"

"I guess." After shrugging her bag on, she takes a few steps, grabbing the massive ax made from her bones, and a nostalgic smile crosses her face as she looks over the room for the last time. "I think I may have gotten a bit attached to this room. I think I might miss it for a while after this."

"I can understand that."

"These past few months have been great, honestly. It's been really fun having all of us together, and I'd love to keep that going. Hopefully, we get to spend more time together like this."

"Nice jinx. The expedition will go great."

After a short laugh, she tightens her posture, gray mana swirling around her, in the shape of a mantle.

"Everything will be fine, you'll see. I'm here," Lily says, full of unwavering confidence.

We find ourselves in the same yard where the twins got themselves caught not so long ago. Despite losing one of their strongest, The Gravelhands have managed to hold onto their fort, which stands tall, guarding one of the largest entrances to the mines beneath Hollowgate.

There are probably a few hundred people all told, and going by the results of past expeditions, only around 10-50% will return. Between the monsters, other members of the expedition, battles for resources, and unresolved disputes it would be fairly easy to disappear down there.

So while Dennis is speaking with a smaller group of leaders, we wait off to the side, while I observe the people around us.

One of them is the no. 1 leader in Hollowgate, a thylarin woman known as The Witch, and she clearly has a [Mana Crown] floating over her head. I would recognize it anywhere.

[Terra Shaper - lvl 306]

There's a rumor going around about the Witch. Some say she only ever joins an expedition once every ten years, then retreats to her manor, spending the following years charging her crown for the next journey. That's why her crown is such a deep shade of blue with streaks of light purple and pale blue swirling across the surface.

The sheer amount of mana it holds can't be hidden—just being near her feels like the air itself is growing heavier as if the immense power she's carrying could crush everything around her.

Then there's my good friend, the thylarin with his kinetic energy and four swords quick to hand. For some reason, it seems like he's decided to join the expedition. He isn't looking at me, but I'm sure he knows that I'm here, and he's standing close to The Witch—as if he intends to serve as her bodyguard.

Well, color me surprised if this expedition won't be fun.

## Chapter 474: Relentless passage of time

There are still a few payments to be made, along with the final checks, and last minute confirmations—just the kind of annoying tasks the twins insisted on handling themselves.

After that, we pass through a door carved into the rock trailing behind the main group and enter a wide tunnel with a low ceiling. Soon though, the space opens up, revealing a massive hollow within the mountain.

That hole is about as wide as a city block and has a set of stairs carved into the side that spiral down. The staircase is wide enough for two people to walk side by side, and there's obviously no railing to be seen. A single misstep would be enough to send the average person plummeting to their death.

I'm sure we have plenty of members who could survive the fall with flight, or teleportation, if not through the use of some other fancy skill. Hell, some of the races we've seen can fly as is. But I'm also sure some would die from falling down, and that's because of the glow that can be seen deep below. A molten river of lava swirling and flowing through the caverns beneath us.

"We're not sure what it's made of, but for those who haven't heard, there's a river of molten material flowing through here," one of the leaders says, informing the rest of the group. "Some of you might think you could survive falling into it, but let me warn you: that river moves fast. It will drag you under and carry you deep beneath the rock, far away from here, to wherever it leads."

He grabs a small stone and throws it down, the stone falls for almost twenty seconds before it hits the surface. And I estimate that the river sets about a mile below us.

"This expedition is headed to the lower floors of the mines into a tunnel that runs along that river of lava. If you want to complain, complain to the leaders of your parties. Everyone was informed. Let's move !"

There's no organization, no elaborate planning—there's too little trust for any of that. The group will rely on the sheer force of numbers when danger arises, and everyone knows it. It feels less like a unified expedition and more like a number of large groups that just happen to be moving in the same direction.

The first group begins descending the stairs, slowly making their way down. No one flies, teleports, or moves quickly. Instead, they choose to walk, and as our turn rolls around, I think I might understand

why. The molten materials that make up the river below generate some sort of field that seems to have a disruptive effect. While the stairs seem to be somewhat shielded, the exposed chasm to our side is filled with a constantly fluctuating disruptive field.

As for the stairs, even though they are undamaged, it's weirdly fun to walk on them while watching the glow of the river deep below given that the stairs are basically just stone plates sticking out of the wall, with holes in between each step.

(It feels like we are descending to hell,) Dennis grumbles, issuing our first complaint.

(Food?)

(Nat?)

(He's asking if there is food in Hell.)

(I don't know, Biscuit,) Dennis answers.

Biscuit seems to be disappointed but continues to look at the people walking behind us. He is currently held in my arms, my hand supporting his backside, as he rests his chin and neck on my shoulder, looking behind me.

While we are descending, I observe the effect of the river on the mana I radiate into the air and listen to some of the guys talking behind us.

"First number two died a few months back, and I'll be damned if I wouldn't have sworn the man was too angry to die. Then a month ago number eight went down, and just a few days ago we lost number ten. Is there someone hunting these guys?"

I notice the twins stiffen when number eight is mentioned.

(No worries, I cleared the tracks you made.) I inform them, sending it through our link.

(Yeah, I know. It just made me remember that guy. I swear, Nat, he popped up out of nowhere like some fucking scout selling cookies,) Dennis shivers.

(He also cut you in half as he was dying,) his brother reminds him.

I redirect my attention back to the guys talking behind us.

“... and what if they’re gunning The Witch or Spinecrusher? And don’t forget Babyface, there are three of them.”

“I don’t know about Spinecrusher or Babyface, but wouldn’t The Witch just fuck up anyone who tried to go against her? It’s been ten years since she went anywhere. At this point, she might as well be sweating mana, I swear.”

“What do you think would happen to all that mana if someone killed her?”

“The mana would be fine, we would be beyond screwed.”

“So damn funny. Ha ha. And fucking hell, don’t push me! I almost fell.”

“Just look where you’re stepping.”

As the conversation begins to deviate from anything resembling an interesting topic, I stop listening and notice that Biscuit is curiously sniffing at the shortsword in the sheath on my waist. It doesn’t seem like he can actually sense anything from the weapon itself, after all, I’m sure I sealed it properly.

The story has been illicitly taken; should you find it on Amazon, report the infringement.

We would know if it wasn’t. All of us would know.

(Nat, I've been wanting to ask for a while, but why did you shape that thing like a sword?) Dennis asks through our network.

Their interest peaked, Aaron and Lily rush to listen in too.

I step to the side for a better view below. The glow from the river of magma below us cuts through the darkness around us, aided by the few lights others have brought. The enormous size of the hole brings my adventurous spirit to the fore. The only thing we're missing is an old note from a dwarven expedition lamenting that they dug too deep.

(I thought about a number of shapes,) I send in a response. (It could have been a staff, javelin, spear, axe, sphere, cube, and more, but the sword felt like the most familiar and easiest thing for me to move around. It's as simple as that.)

Dennis, who likes his shortsword and dagger, adds happily, (Swords are cool! Elegant, slim, and they don't tend to draw too much attention, unlike Lily's ax, which is bigger than she is.)

His brother adds, (I don't know, man. I'm pretty sure they're not just staring at Lily because of the axe. She is quite the looker you know.)

([Surgery],) Dennis says smartly.

(Wasn't it [Plastic Surgery]?) Aaron asks.

(It evolved.)

(Oh!)

(You two know I'm also here right? Should I leave you cut in half next time, Dennis? Oh, and do you remember that toxin, Aaron?)

Aaron energetically shakes his head. (Lily, I know Dennis. If you leave him that way, each half will regrow, and you'll have two annoying jerks to deal with instead of one. You really shouldn't let that happen, for all our sakes.)

(That's true,) Dennis agrees in a serious tone. (And I saw Aaron eat terrible things back on Earth. He's the kind of guy who drinks orange juice after brushing his teeth. Some random toxin would mean nothing to an abomination like that.)

The conversation continues as we continue our walk down the narrow stairs projecting from the walls of the hole. It's all friendly banter, and it might feel careless, but I know very well that all three of them are on their guard even though they're acting like this.

It's a habit I've worked hard to instill in them over the past months.

When we finally find ourselves just over the molten river and the expedition starts funneling into the target tunnel, I pause, bringing the rest of my small group to a stop with me.

(I bet he wants to jump down there just to see how the disruption effect works and if proximity would change its effect on him.)

I decide to ignore the heinous message and focus on the river. Curious, I activate [Ley Line] and toss the thread down, tied to a piece of metal I pull from my bag—a metal I know won't melt anytime soon. Before it's completely dragged under and carried away, I anchor it to the wall.

The river does nothing to it. Ley Line holds like a champ, without losing a hint of integrity. I leave it there and head into the tunnel, with two more threads following me, both connected to the surface.

Not too far into the tunnel, we come across some abandoned machinery—rusted, crumbling, and long forgotten. Each piece is intricate, covered in strange, unfamiliar inscriptions that give hints at their original purpose. There are empty slots where mana stones should have gone, likely to be used as power sources, but now nothing remains. The machines themselves are varied in design, each one seemingly tailored for a specific task, and all of them equally fascinating even in their state of decay, resting against the walls or buried under rock.

One machine is particularly large, with gears that no longer turn, and metal joints crumbling with age. Another is smaller, more delicate, almost like it was meant for more precise work. The inscriptions, though alien, almost look familiar to me in a way I can't quite place. I stop for a moment to study them, my fingers touching the patterns etched into the surface. Then I spot a piece of strange alloy, something that catches my eye, and pocket it.

The group ahead continues moving and there is no more time to linger. With a final glance at the abandoned machines, I quickly catch up, knowing they won't wait for us.

At the front of the expedition, fights break out as monsters begin attacking the lead members. The creatures are dealt with quickly, their ambushes barely slowing our group's progress, but judging by the reactions of the people around me, it's clear that the danger's only just beginning.

I can sense monsters burrowing through the tunnel walls, slithering beneath our feet, and moving just above our heads, hidden in the shadows. Their movements are subtle and unmistakable, like the tremors and heat generated by their bodies, or the hint of mana they leave behind them.

For now, there are only a few dozen, but even at this distance, I can feel the presence of hundreds more lurking far beyond.

Waiting. Preparing.

Further into the tunnel, we come across several old campsites littered with broken tents, abandoned cooking implements, and some empty crates scattered around. These are all very old, likely not from any recent expeditions.

If someone were to tell me they were leftovers from before this moon was turned into a prison, I would believe them. All of these remains crumble to dust with the weakest vibrations or the simplest touch.

It's thrilling to imagine that hundreds of years ago, there were people walking these same tunnels—living, eating, and interacting with each other—never thinking that centuries later, there would be people like us staring at the remnants they left behind.

And a feeling not unlike nostalgia captivates me.

If I die, sometime far in the future, will someone one day have the opportunity to look at what I've left behind, unaware of my thoughts, hopes, and struggles? Will the name Nathaniel Gwyn be forgotten, along with everyone who ever knew me, and will all these adventures we've been through be erased by the relentless passage of time?

It's both fascinating and a little sad.

Before we move on, I offer Lily a bottle of water, and she takes a sip with a thankful smile. I insert a lame joke into the twins' conversation, give Biscuit a quick pat, and then we leave the place behind.

Chapter 475: Know your place

(Why are the monsters not trying to cause a cave in? So deep underground we would be screwed,) Dennis wonders as we find our path blocked by yet another cave-in.

(They are. There are monsters trying to weaken the rock around us right now, but the Witch is preventing them from succeeding by solidifying it,) I reply, as I look back at another molten river we just passed over. It moves just as quickly as the first one, and I think I may have noticed something suspicious about its shape.

(Huh, but wouldn't that be too much effort?)

(Not really. I don't think she's even touched the mana in her crown yet, and trust me, she has a shitload of mana stored in it.)

(More than you have in your crown?)

(Ten to thirty times more than is currently in my crown.)

Are you serious? You aren't joking, right? You aren't making fun of me?)

(I'm not.)

(Isn't that too OP? With that much mana...)

As I say this Aaron decides to chip in, (So she has a big bottle of water and can only take small sips of it?)

I shake my head, (It's more like she has a flamethrower. You can use it in short bursts and you might get your hair burned, but you'll be fine. But if you let it overheat, you'll set yourself on fire.)

(So you need to make your body powerful enough to endure the flames... or mana?)

(And your mind.)

(Your metaphor sucks, Nat. A flamethrower wouldn't burn your mind.)

(So what? Come up with a better one if you want. But overall, I'd say there's a reason they only come this deep once every 10 years and always bring her. Her crown and the way she handles the stone is a perfect combination for the dangers down here.)

(Is she stronger than you?)

The question makes me think for a moment. (I don't think so? At least not with what we've seen from her so far. My skills seem to be more geared towards combat, and she's the kind of person who relies on her mana and crown. People like that are kind of screwed against me.)

(And Lily? Do you think she could take her?) Aaron asks as well.

(I think Lily would have a good chance against her on the surface, but she would need to be very quick and go all out from the start. Here underground, she would have to be very, very quick, otherwise, the Witch would just bury her.)

(Tsk,) our healer grumbles.

(No worries, Lily! You're still our favorite terminator!) Dennis quips, smirking as he turns to me once again. (What about me and Aaron?)

(I think you two would be screwed.)

Aaron sighs. (Well, that's it. Hard difficulty, here we come.)

For a moment, that seems to scare Dennis, who examines my expression for a moment before quickly turning to Aaron and punching him in the shoulder, followed by a quick private exchange of messages between them.

Aaron catches my eyes and smirks at me.

(I've noticed it before, Nat, but you seem to take more of a passive stance during expeditions like this.) While the brothers fight, Lily comments, taking a step closer to me.

(What exactly have you noticed?)

(A lot!) She quips, fixing the giant axe on her back, the weight not seeming to bother her much. (Most of the time, you let people around you do their thing. You even tend to let them push you around, and sometimes even screw up, and you wait until things go completely off the rails before you jump in.)

(Is that a bad thing?) I ask curiously.

(I wouldn't say it was bad per se? But it might be better if you shared your knowledge right from the start and helped more, don't you think? The expedition would probably go much smoother as well.)

(That would be annoying.) I say, stopping her before she can continue, (Before you call me an asshole for thinking that way. It would be different if it was another member of group 4 or, let's say, someone from Earth's tutorial.)

(You didn't say anything back in the Mana Desert, but that was a favor you were doing for Tess, right?)

(Yes. Can you wait a bit?) I ask, tapping Biscuit on the back, his chin still resting on my shoulder, as he looks at something behind me. (You're sniffing a lot. What have you noticed?)

(Food!)

(Translation, please.) Dennis asks, apparently done arguing with his brother, joins.

(I think we're probably right, somewhere deep below the ground here is another Containment cell. And if Biscuit is right, the prisoner is of... the edible kind.)

Stolen story; please report.

(Food! Food!) The corgi shouts in all of our minds, his tone full of excitement.

We find ourselves under attack by exactly the kind of monsters one would expect in the environment we're traveling through.

They're slim, with only two front limbs, each ending in a sharp set of claws, and their bodies continue on behind them ending in long tails. They tend to be covered in spikes and use toxic attacks, they try to cause cave-ins or break through the walls to grab unsuspecting people.

[Caveproowler - lvl 222]

[Caveproowler - lvl 241]

[Caveproowler - lvl 221]

And as we head deeper, their levels only get higher until we encounter one of the most dangerous creatures we've seen so far.

[Rotling - lvl 302]

[Rotling - lvl ???]

[Rotling - lvl 310]

These ones generally don't get much bigger than a fist, much less as long as a forearm. They're usually tiny insect monsters with dozens of long legs and antennae, and their mouths though small are full of tiny, sharp teeth.

I watch as one jumps at the man next to me, and without the slightest hint of resistance, it starts chewing through his sword, which is coated in mana. Long, sharp legs flickering around the weapon, trying to pierce the man.

I take a short, quick step, and release a blast of kinetic energy just a moment before actually touching the monster. It flies off the man, crashing into the wall without showing any sign of damage.

Someone else tries to smash it with a big hammer, but the Rotling quickly avoids it, its long sharp legs clicking against the rock, leaving a line of grooves in its wake as it rushes to attack someone else.

Another one pierces through the wall behind me, jumping for my head, but its movement slows, and the monster starts floating in the air, each of its attempts at further motion filling me with kinetic energy.

It's surprising how much strength that tiny body packs.

I quickly create and compress a spear, stabbing it at the monster. It resists even that and starts grabbing at it, its mouth extending to gnaw away at my mana.

Pulling the spear back, I strengthen it more, resonating the blade, and stab again.

[You have defeated Rotling - lvl 303]

Boosting my movement with kinetic energy, I reach another man, grabbing the insect from his back and throwing it to the floor. My heartbeat changes, slipping into the rhythm of Breaker Style, and I stomp the monster, releasing some of my collected kinetic energy in a localized fashion. The monster bursts open, without leaving so much as a crack in the rock below.

[You have defeated Rotling - lvl 304]

Another quick movement, and I move my head out of the way, just as another one passes by me. Twisting my waist, my left foot buries itself in the ground, and my hand extends, as I release energy through my palm.

[You have defeated Rotling - lvl 301]

At that point I spot one as it leaps from the ceiling, diving toward a woman who's apparently dumb enough to start casting a fire spell.

A burst of my mana disrupts her skill, shock, and horror taking over her face as it deactivates, and she watches the monster fall toward her. The monster and the woman stop mid-motion. The beast's thin, long legs reaching for her fear-stricken face.

I create a javelin, which bursts violently forth, piercing the monster and pinning it to the wall, where it twitches until it finally stops moving.

[You have defeated Rotling - lvl 310]

[Lvl 291 > Lvl 292]

With that, the fight slowly comes to a stop, no more monsters are coming in, and the ones that initiated the attack are dealt with.

(Can I heal the wounded?) Lily asks through our connection.

(Do whatever you want.)

She seems surprised at my answer but smiles and rushes off to help the most heavily injured with a nod, closing mortal wounds with ease, without using much mana or resorting to [Sacrifice].

There are a few weaker healers, each with half a dozen guards, but none can compare to what Lily does, and I can see the shock etched on their faces.

“Hey, do you think this is a good idea?” Aaron asks, coming to a stop by my side and whispers so only I can hear.

“There are only three people in this expedition you should be worried about. The Witch, Babyface, and Mais. As long as you don’t get jumped or stabbed in the back, the others shouldn’t bother you at all, even if they attack in large groups. So, you look after Lily, and I’ll keep an eye on the other three.”

Both of us look toward The Witch far ahead. As usual, she says nothing, standing off to the side, her people dealing with the small annoyances around her.

She’s just a bit shorter than me, with the typical light blue skin of a thylarin. Unlike most of her kin though, she has six arms instead of four, slim and tucked away under her robe. Her short brown hair frames the pale yellow eyes that are quietly observing everything around her. Her crown floats lazily above her head, spinning slowly. Its design, much the same as my own, though hers has three distinct colors.

“And be very careful of that woman,” I add quietly. “She’s much more dangerous than I thought.”

“What happened?”

“She used mana from her crown to blast one of the monsters attacking her.”

“Sorry, Nat, but I don’t get...”

I interrupt him and explain, "In our previous conversation I mentioned that the crown has a weakness if you want to call it that. To expand on the metaphor, imagine the crown as a full water tank instead of a flamethrower, and you can expand that tank at will. It can be as small as a water bottle or as big as the reservoir behind a dam."

"That doesn't seem that bad. So what's the problem?"

"The hole you use to access that water doesn't change. If your container is small and you want to let out some water, you don't have a problem. The problem starts when the container gets really big. Every time you twist that valve to get water, there's an immense amount of pressure from all the stored water trying to get out. The size of that valve, at least for [Mana Crown], doesn't change."

"I think I'm starting to get it... and did you say her crown holds 10 to 30 times more than yours?"

"Yup, and she opened that valve and was able to take a tiny amount of mana just to blast a small monster away from her. I would have understood if she had channeled it for a while to power some powerful skill or release enough to make everyone here vomit their organs out. But no, she held all that mana at bay and, through that tiny valve, took just the tiniest wisp to deal with a nuisance."

"Is it me, or do you seem happy about that, Nat?"

I wave him off, my mind thinking it over. What I just described is a definite weakness of my crown and something I don't think that's unique to me. It means the more mana you store in your crown, the more difficult it is to use.

If you open the valve too little, less mana will flow out, but the pressure will be higher and more intense, making it harder to control the flow of mana without getting hurt.

If you open the valve fully, vast amounts of mana wash over you at once, emptying the crown much faster, as you risk drowning in the sheer amount of mana assuming you don't end up wasting it.

That's just how scary what she did is.

Finally, she notices me staring and turns her face toward me. Her yellow eyes radiate calm confidence, the kind that says she can handle anything—with an obvious hint of disdain.

What she did earlier was a warning, a deliberate display of skill, likely meant for me—no doubt a response to something Mais told her about me, and after sensing me observing her.

To me it's a single, unmistakable message: know your place.

Chapter 476: About time to leave

A few hours later we enter one of the bigger tunnels after the Witch punches a hole through one of the walls revealing it, and allowing us to sidestep the cave-in. The resulting hole is about the width of a football stadium, and I watch intently as she works, Mais quietly keeping pace behind her.

She stops in front of the wall and taps on it with a finger, sending ripples through the stone. The affected rock almost seems to melt, behaving like water as it bends to her will. It moves to the sides, it swirls, it compresses all around her, all while she calmly advances like some unstoppable force, the stone clearing a path for her under the influence of the mana from her crown.

Once she's done, she steps aside, and the quasi-leader rushes in with a few more guys to run checks.

"As promised, we've reached one of the smaller mining outposts, and this one isn't on any maps, nor has it been visited before," he shouts, his words quickly spreading. Yet everyone waits, and no one rushes in.

Only after everyone's finally passed through does the Witch close the hole.

The man continues, "Three hours. Rest, eat, look around and loot. But let me give you a warning! If you want to fight amongst yourselves, that's fine, but if you take things too far, you will be dealt with. Go!"

His words have barely left his mouth by the time everyone disperses throughout the massive cave, their skills lighting up the area as their overlapping scans trace every inch of ground.

There are a few dozen small buildings off to the side: smithies, piles of rock, old broken crates full of refined metals and crystals. More seems to be hidden in the houses and other places. This is what most

of these people are here for. Just a few handfuls of the right metal has every potential to make one very rich on the surface.

(Nat, please recharge the creepy box; me and Aaron will do some looting.) Dennis states, handing me the small box densely inscribed and plated in voidcopper. After that, he and his brother disappear, more excited over the experience itself than any items they might find.

As I sit on the ground, Biscuit moves closer and lays his head on my leg while Lily takes my other side.

(It needs recharging already?) she asks.

(It seems so.) I quickly check the inscriptions on the box, and all seems to be fine. (Can you check inside?)

Lily takes it from me, carefully opening it and checking the bone she grew from her own finger and the grape-sized gray orb it contains.

(The bone is already slightly worn down. I really need to work harder to keep it stronger, even when it's separated from me.) As she says this, she uses her healing skill, adjusts the gray orb slightly, and then closes it.

(It's fine. Items like these are just for fun and experimenting.) I slide one of the panels a bit, revealing the mana stone inside, and touch it to charge it with my mana, topping off its flagging supply of mana.

Without it, to power the container, the shielding and inscriptions on the bones inside would fail.

(But we spent so much time on that box,) Lily complains.

(Yeah, and you've learned a lot from it, just like I have.) I say, staring at the box in my hands. (But at the same time, it can be discarded and made anew.)

As I store it away, Lily glances at the sword on my waist. (Even the sword? If you'd like, I can take a look, just to see how it's holding up.)

I glance at the sword and touch the hilt. (No need; it seems fine for now. My main goal in having the four of us work on the sword was to evolve my skills. I even partially succeeded, but otherwise, the sword is a failure. A few months, maybe a year? It won't last beyond that. Until then, I'll learn as much from it as I can.) Ñ

(That seems like a kinda sad way of thinking. It's something all of us made with a lot of effort. Of course, you did most of the work, but you know what I mean. It would be nice to have it as a reminder.)

It's amusing to watch her try to avoid getting tangled in the conversation, and I say, (I value these memories and knowledge more. Given the dangerous nature of our current expedition, I might be jinxing it, but we've already created a few items together—so there's nothing stopping us from making many more in the future.)

A slow smile spreads across her face. (I loved working on that sword too, but yes, if you keep jinxing us like that, we might all end up dead.)

About three hours pass and the twins return. Their clothes aren't damaged, and they look clean, but I can feel that they've been in a fight. It's like when you use the engine for a while and turn it off—it still radiates some heat. That's what I feel coming from their bodies right now.

(We managed to get a few bits of voidcopper and voidsteel. Aaron picked up some weird-ass crystals. People seemed happy, but I don't think it's anything special. Do you think we're getting spoiled? Are you our sugar daddy, Nat?)

(Please never say those words again.)

(Did saying that increase the difficulty of our future training?) he asks.

(Yes.)

(Screw you.)

(If you really want to complain, get stronger and beat me up.)

(You know, Nat, after these months together I can really see why the system offered you Patience, Greed, and Pride. You can be surprisingly chill when someone bothers you, patient, even. Savant would be proud.)

(Yo, don't push our luck.) Aaron snaps, nudging him a bit too firmly as he hands me some mana crystals he found.

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All of them are epic rarity, but they're a kind I haven't seen yet, so after a quick examination, I pocket them.

Neither of the twins complain or asks for anything in exchange. They never do, but owing them would feel weird, even though they claim that my training is payment enough.

So I make equipment for them every once in a while.

(Recharged,) I say, handing the box to Dennis. (Don't lose it.)

(I love how he says it every time,) Dennis sighs, looking at his brother.

(Should I remind you how many shards I could get for the value of the materials in that box?) I ask him.

(Please don't. I will cry. Also, Aaron and I have noticed something really fun. I'm sure you'll like it, want to hear it?)

(Tell me.)

I then feel multiple checks of the links between us, as the twins focus on strengthening them so no one can listen in. With growing curiosity, I do some checks of my own, and for a moment deploy the array structure stored in the back of my mind, creating a field around us.

With a big smile, Dennis says, (The Witch is connected to someone deep below us, likely so that she can communicate with them. And we're heading in their direction.)

The little jerk knows me all too well. A couple of ideas immediately form in my head as I start coming up with reasons, ideas, and countermeasures. The tips of my fingers tingle, and the background noises fade away as a new mystery takes over my mind.

With it comes a bit of annoyance that I had not noticed that connection. Sure, the twins have a skill called [Connection] and they've spent more time training it than I have with my [Perception], rather I've been focusing on my other skills. There will always be people better at certain things, at their specialties, than I am, but...

(Are you thinking what we're thinking?) Aaron asks. He says "we," but knowing the brothers, Aaron's the more thoughtful of the two, and he probably came up with the idea before Dennis.

I agree with a nod, (It seems like her goal isn't much different from ours.)

POV Sophie Martinez

I pass through a gate that closes behind me, the guards redeploying the defensive array after greeting me. Gesturing in acknowledgment, I keep my mask on and walk the tree-framed pathway leading to the tower made of white stone.

As I walk, I do checks of the array around me, deploying my own locks on top of the guards'.

I stop in front of the door and close my eyes, doing checks of my mind, looking for any signs of foreign mana, mind parasites, influence, trackers, all of it. Lastly, I deploy a cleansing structure, and only then do I pass through the door that I open for myself.

Another set of guards greets me, these ones with a deep bow.

My assistant Mila hurries over. 'We've received messages from the Archon and the Circle. The Archon requests your presence at a gala dinner in a few days to celebrate a new addition to the Circle—it's Orik, just as you predicted.

"Please confirm my attendance. Now what's the message from the Circle?"

"The monthly maintenance of the Framework is coming up, and this time you've been invited to participate!" Her eyes sparkle with excitement. "No one as young as you has ever been invited before!"

"How did Beatrice react?"

"I..." Mila hesitates. "She wasn't too happy, so I assigned more guards to your sister and ran background checks on them."

"Good. Check the arrays as well and do it yourself—use the structure we practiced a few days ago."

"As you command. Shall I have dinner ready in an hour?"

"Yes," I say, continuing on my way, as Mila turns to head down a different pathway.

There are no elevators, I had them removed, so when I reach the spiraling stairway piercing through the middle of the tower, it takes me a few minutes of walking to reach my floor. I feel the barrier deploy, and multiple checks press against me as I pass through.

Finally, at the top, I stop by the window and look out over the city where I've been spending the past few months.

It's not very big, nestled against the bank of the nearby lake, but nearly every building is a tower. The city forms an almost perfect circle, every stone structure placed with intent. Everything about the

buildings is carefully calculated: their height, width, materials, and density, right down to the number of windows.

Cobbled streets weave paths between the towers, bordered by metal frames. At the center of the city stands a short, perfectly circular building with a roof constructed from mana-conductive metals, linking it to the rest of the city.

With a sigh, I turn away and once again go through all the checks, and only when that's been done do I knock on the door. A skill reaches out from within and connects to my emotions, and another one pulls a wisp of my mana, testing it. Only then do the doors open, allowing me to slip inside before closing them behind me.

The expression I've kept on my face until now crumbles, and I allow myself to relax.

"Fuck, I hate this place."

"Language!" Shouts a voice that brings a smile to my face.

"I'm the older sister here, so I can do whatever I damn well want." I throw my robe aside and rub my shoulder. "How have you been?"

Moving through the hallway, the big, cozy room opens up—so warm and welcoming it feels like I could relax just by collapsing onto the floor.

Izzy sits in the corner, her head resting against Noodle, whose body is currently thicker than hers and probably about as long as six of my little sisters lined up end to end.

Using her as a scale cheers me up, and I throw myself down next to her, hugging her small body which is warm as ever. Both Izzy and Noodle are staring at a book that Izzy has lying open in front of them, and their eyes move in perfect sync as Izzy reads, mouthing out the words.

That feeling of connecting to me reaches out again, and I don't block it, not even for a second, and let Izzy read my feelings like an open book.

Sensing what I want, she acts annoyed and shakes her head, but with a sigh, she taps the top of my head.

"Is it about time to leave?" she asks.

"Yes. I finally got access to the Framework and I'll be near the Archon in a few days. If everything goes well, we'll be done here within a few weeks."

"Soph..."

"Yes, Izzy?"

"I want you to be careful and call the others to help." For the first time I can remember, Izzy looks serious going so far as to her book away. "Can you do that for me?"

"I..."

"Soph," Izzy says quietly, and this time her feelings rush into me, and in much the same way she felt mine, I feel hers.

The hesitation, hope, worry—the fact she hasn't asked me that, not even once since we separated from the group. She's been waiting this entire time for the perfect opportunity, for my feelings of anger to weaken. I can sense that, but I can also feel why she did, along with all the feelings of loneliness and fear.

There is no way I can say no after feeling her heart.

"Okay, we'll call them and ask for help before I go all out. Yes, even Tess." I concede, feeling defeated, but as she hugs me with a big smile, despite feeling like a loser for being the first to forgive, I also feel good.

“Love you, Soph.”

“I love you too, Izzy.”

“And I like Noodle and Blackie as well!” She declares and rests against Noodle once again, who flicks her nose with his tongue, making her giggle.

My shadow perks up at the announcement as well. Confused, incapable of feeling things like love, and lacking the capacity to understand them.

The last surviving fragment of a bond without its master, now resting in my shadow.

Chapter 477: Green acid

The Rotlings are a constant reminder of the dangers of the mines we’ve found ourselves traveling through. The deeper we delve, the more of them appear, and I could almost swear they have some sort of Hive Mind or skill-sharing ability.

If you kill one with lightning, the rest become that tiny bit more resistant to the lightning.

Of course, each one might have a different level of resistance, and I could be wrong. But I prefer to assume the worst, so that’s the option I’m going with.

It’s at this point that we see the first deaths among the expedition crew, as the Rotlings begin to coordinate, attack in larger groups, and single out specific targets. I’d like to think it’s just a coincidence, rather than a display of greater intelligence, but they’ve begun to focus heavily on Lily and the other healers.

That’s why I’m watching closely now, as Lily steps forward deeper into the large cave we’re passing through, her axe flashing as it cleaves a Rotling in half. She shifts her stance, takes a few quick steps, and slashes into another. Using the flat of the blade, she blocks three Rotlings in quick succession, delivering a few swift kicks in the process.

As they scramble to put distance between themselves and Lily to reorganize, she takes another big step, extending the handle of her axe, and brings them into her reach, one Rotling isn't quick enough to avoid the attack and dies with the next sweep of her axe.

A dozen or so creatures burst from the ground beneath her, leaping at her legs. Their small mouths, filled with sharp teeth, bite into her flesh—which is highly durable—and yet they still manage to tear chunks out of her legs.

The axe flashes as Lily cuts through her own legs, in the blink of an eye growing new ones in a flash as she stomps and slashes away at them.

Not even for a moment does she seem to need even a semblance of help, and she quickly massacres the rest of the monsters.

After checking on us, Lily turns back, healing her own share of the injured.

With the way she's been leveling her [Reconstruction], she doesn't even need much mana and her natural regeneration readily handles the demand.

"Are you planning something, letting her heal all these people?" Aaron asks, coming to a stop next to me while his brother keeps pace with Lily, keeping an eye on her.

"Not really, it's just something she wants to do."

"What if she spends too much mana and needs it later?"

"Then it'll be a learning experience for her and she'll have to decide what she takes from it herself," I reply, shrugging off his concerns. "By the way, I think Biscuit's been sniffing in the direction you mentioned seeing the Witch's connection. So that's probably where the prisoner really is."

(Food.) Biscuit confirms as he takes a seat on the ground next to us.

I look at him, as I continue my conversation with Aaron, “That silly corgi just refuses to tell me more about what he’s found. It’s highly suspicious.”

Biscuit gives me the side-eye, something he doesn’t seem to realize only makes dogs look silly, and then looks away.

“The Witch is planning something, you’re planning something, even Biscuit’s planning something, and Mais probably has something up his sleeve as well,” Aaron sighs. “Nat, I swear, we haven’t had a single normal expedition. The old capital on the fourth, the Mana Desert before, and now this.”

And honestly, I can’t help but agree with that. I just don’t tell him it might be something I prefer.

Hours pass, and we nearly get buried a few times, only the Witch’s quick reactions stop me from needing to step in, as she solidifies the rock around us or creates holes through the wall leading to yet another cave with a small outpost.

The timing is extremely suspicious, and we reach these places every time the other members of the expedition start complaining too much. It’s like she’s dangling all the shiny rewards in front of their faces to make them forget the dangers and let their greed take over.

Then there’s the way she looks at humans, it makes me think she might be a little bit... Well, racist? Even a few of the human leaders, and the feylith or vyssari members of our expedition, get the same dirty looks—the only exception seems to be the thylarin.

She also knows I’ve been watching her, and it seems to annoy her. Not to the point that she’s willing to deal with me herself and risk a clash down here, but I can see it in her bearing. ʔ

Still, I continue to watch as she uses her skills, manipulating the mana from her crown. I rely only on my regular senses, certain it would be unwise to provoke her by using any of my mana based senses. Even so, it’s fascinating enough.

I’m also curious as to why she has six arms. The only other thylarin I’ve ever met with six arms—though five were missing—was Caisus, the trapped Champion. The Witch isn’t anywhere near his level, hers

barely passing 300, while Champions seem to start around 500. So, being a Champion has nothing to do with it.

Maybe it's some kind of rare mutation? Or perhaps the number of arms varies in the same way as a human's skin color. Is it the result of a trait? Is it something some thylarin are just born with? A skill? I'm curious.

Then there's the trouble with Babyface, number 4 of Hollowgate, and one of the other members, leading one of the bigger and stronger groups who've joined up.

It could be said that the entire expedition has split into 4 factions.

The first one is the Witch, Mais, and the other loyalists.

Another is Babyface, his group members, and a few additional people.

The biggest group consists of a bunch of random people who must have been collected to be used as fodder. And they know it too, yet they've decided to risk everything in hopes of getting their hands on some rare materials. Likely having heard about the dangers and opportunities from the veterans of the previous expeditions.

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Our small group of five is last, positioned for our sheer strength comparable to any of the other groups.

As for Babyface, he's a tall, muscular man wearing leather armor and fighting using a crystal dagger alongside a weird skill that allows him to create crystals, not unlike Myrra's Aurora Glass. Judging by his nickname, I would've expected a different kind of face, but the man is extremely... well, he's not exactly nice to look at.

He has a broken nose, a meaty scar that goes from his left cheek to his clavicle, he's missing his left ear and has a huge bushy beard.

He relentlessly bombards Lily with invitations to join his group as a healer, and the Witch's group has been making similar offers. Shamelessly, right in front of me, they're trying to take Lily away.

If we weren't so deep underground, if Lily weren't so strong or important, and if I were weaker, I'm sure these "invitations" would be taking a very different form.

Around that time, the acid rivers start appearing as well.

Unlike the rivers we encountered before, filled with their weird combination of molten material, these tend to be much smaller. The streams of green acid circulate through the walls in separate tunnels, probably as big as a bus.

Sometimes monsters redirect small streams at the cost of their lives, slowly filling the tunnels we're passing through with the acid, such that it follows us into the depths, thus avoiding the Witch's attempts at diverting them.

These streams of green acid begin to evaporate as well, filling the tunnels with a vapor that moves far quicker than the liquid form.

Before we learn to block them and expand our senses, they reach us two more times.

The first time, a group of twelve dies almost instantly, as the vapor melts through their skin, flesh, and lungs within moments, before the rest manage to push it away with a wind-like skill. The stream producing the vapor arrives quickly, dissolving the twitching bodies on the ground in seconds, and breaking through the mana barriers we've created.

It even melts through my tricolored barrier, partially dissolves the reinforced stone the Witch created in front of it, and effortlessly evaporates any weapons that have been left on the ground.

Instead of blocking it, I switch to Breaker Style, using a controlled burst of kinetic energy to form a ditch running the full width of the tunnel, allowing the acid to flow down and fill it as we make our escape.

Joining in, the Witch deepens it, creating a gutter that leads it somewhere else into the wall.

As the guys with wind-type skills keep the vapor away, I watch the expressions of fear solidify on the faces of the majority of the remaining expedition members.

Of course, that's when Lily gets closer and sticks her finger into the green acid and when she pulls it out, it's gone—bone, flesh, tendons.

As it starts regrowing, she seems to recover slower, much slower than usual.

(If it takes me this long to heal my own body, I would recommend that you guys avoid it rather than relying on my healing marks,) she notes, the look of fascination never leaving her face.

Then she goes back to it and, much to the shock of the people watching nearby dips her entire hand into it.

An hour later, and we have another wave of looting, this time in a small mine we found. The timing is perfect, given the way people started to panic when we got attacked with streams of acid multiple times. For a short moment, the fears are replaced by greed, and I'm sure around this time the Witch is thinking of just splitting off from the larger group.

I would probably do the same in this situation. The big groups of people are more of a hindrance than a help faced with the acid, rather than the monsters we were dealing with before. Of course, there is always the chance that if she does so, the monsters will start attacking normally again. Sucks to be her.

Taking the time to rest, I rely on Lily, waiting nearby, to keep an eye out, and I close my eyes, finding myself in an empty metro station, with electric lights shining from the ceiling and an empty train passing by.

That train slows quickly until it comes to a stop, Whitey's standing on the platform. He's wearing a black suit that fits him very well, and even his hair is a bit shorter and tied back into a neat ponytail draped down his back, the hairstyle still emphasizing his horns.

I know I've said that Channeler is one handsome mofo, but Whitey is on an entirely different level...

The view on one of the screens changes from an image of the train schedule to footage of me stomping to stop the stream of acid.

"It's been a long time since I've seen someone so proud over something performed so poorly." He says, stomping in imitation of my own movements, and a crater forms in the ground beneath him.

This one is perfectly circular, the released kinetic energy is reabsorbed, reused, and sent back like a wave, clashing with the first shockwave and deepening the crater two more times after the initial impact.

"How the hell were you only level 301?"

The question seems to make the demon happy, and he smiles. "The others might have focused on useless leveling, but I trained to improve my control of my abilities."

I mumble, "While you were partying, I studied kinetic energy. When you were having premarital sex, I mastered my skills. While you wasted your days leveling in pursuit of vanity, I cultivated inner strength."

Despite having spoken under my breath, Whitey catches on and nods energetically. "Yes, just like that. I quite like it!"

Without warning, he appears in front of me in a flawless display of Wraith Dance, and I mirror it, my movement taking me to the other side of the metro as I sense him moving behind me.

I time my attack, tracking his presence, but when I turn to face him, he's gone, leaving only a disorienting afterimage in his place.

Instead, he strikes me in the side with an open palm, and I switch to Counter Flow, absorbing the impact, circulating it throughout my body, and switching to Breaker Style, adding my own energy to the mix and releasing it at Whitey.

He also switches to Counter Flow and does the same, absorbing it all with ease and throwing it back at me.

I mimic him, and he then mimics me.

We stand there, throwing kinetic energy at each other, absorbing it, adding more, and throwing it back, the power level ramping up very quickly.

“When it comes to moving large amounts of kinetic energy, you’re getting quite good,” Whitey nods, satisfied, and takes a step toward me, his body so close I could punch him.

As the distance closes, his speed increases, giving me less time to react. The jerk begins subtly shifting what I think of as the frequency of his kinetic energy.

My absorptions are rough, bits of energy escaping around me, cracking the floor, while when Whitey does it, not a single hair moves in reaction.

Dozens of quick attempts later, I fail to keep up, and before it all explodes, I release it in the direction of Whitey, who absorbs it again and throws it back, the resulting explosion smashing me against the wall, as the metro explodes around us.

Only the last-second absorption of my impact stops me from dying right here and now.

Blowing the dust away, Whitey stops in front of me and nods, satisfied to see that I’m not dead yet. “Tell me, why don’t you use mana? Why don’t you level up and get your Primary Class upgrade like I did? Wouldn’t that make facing me easier and a bit more fair? It’s something you could have done at any point.”

I fall from the wall and dust off my clothes. “Because I don’t want to.”

“There’s Pride, and then there’s just being dumb.” Whitey takes off his jacket, unbuttons one of the buttons on his vest, and starts rolling up the sleeves of his white shirt.

Standing there tall and proud, he moves a strand of hair from his face, the mellow atmosphere around him changing.

The lights above, damaged by the explosion, flicker, throwing shadows across his face, and his red eyes glow dangerously as his expression slowly grows more serious.

“If you land a hit on me, I might finally tell you my name,” he offers playfully.

“Must be a terrible name for you to hide it for so long.”

His teeth show in an irritated smile. “... you little shit.” With that, he disappears, and the fight starts anew.

Chapter 478: The pain... it’s unbearable.

After getting stomped by that demon, I remain seated, replaying our fight and taking notes on a mana stone I brought with me. Some of these things will be very useful for my minion.

While doing this, I reflect on our situation, trying to recall and visualize all those rivers of molten material. There is a suspicion I have and if I'm right, there are big channels in the rock around us through which this molten river, or rivers as the case may be, flow. I’ve also confirmed that some of them are thicker, while others tend to be a bit smaller, and some even move at different speeds. It’s still a mystery to me what actually keeps them moving, but I think they’re serving as a form of inscription.

Molten material flows at high speeds, generating a field that merges with those from the other channels moving at varying speeds, combining into a unique effect. The scale of such a formation would have to be massive, and I can't even fathom the effort required to create something like that so deep underground, at such a size, and then to maintain it for hundreds of years.

We’ve already walked for days, yet the number of rivers we’ve crossed has not decreased.

It certainly makes for a fascinating theory, and knowing what to look for, I’ll definitely be keeping an eye out.

Is it possible that the acid rivers are also a part of this systems, what about the veins of metal running through the rock?

(Nat,) Lily warns me.

(I know,) I send back and focus back on my surroundings, watching the Witch and Mais, also known as Spinecrusher, moving closer.

With curiosity, I look at thylarin woman. Wondering what's made her decide to break her silence and what she wants with the hypothetical prisoner she's been communicating with.

As we speak, Lily is already standing by my side, and I notice the twins return, taking a position a bit behind the duo.

Ignoring Mais, I turn to the Witch. "Is it the prisoner you're after?"

She doesn't let any surprise show, nor does she even seem to be trying to hide it. "You may call them a prisoner, but the being trapped down there is more than that—a great presence, suffering in its confinement for millennia."

"And you intend to save it?"

"What I do is my business, human," she says with disdain. "Shall you and your healer go with us, I can promise there will be material rewards along the way. Enough to satisfy even the deepest greed. I do not care for any of these things."

"Sounds good. When are we leaving?"

"Five minutes." With one last look, she turns around and leaves with her bodyguard following her.

Little does she know I would've continued even if she'd turned away and returned to the city even if there was no Containment Cell in the end.

We leave quickly, through a tunnel she creates, leaving the rest of the group behind. I'm sure most of them can get back the way we came. There are others who can do much the same things with stone that the Witch has, they just didn't bother because they had her around. Or maybe they'll still try to go deeper and find more riches. It's their life and their decision.

Our new group only contains about twenty people. The Witch, Mais, and even Babyface are here, along with a number of the stronger members from the larger group, some of them carrying interesting things in their backpacks.

I shrug a bit as Biscuit's whiskers tickle against my neck and put the corgi down. He sniffs towards our destination with such interest that he doesn't even seem to mind despite needing to run by our side to keep up with our walking speed on his short legs.

Because our group is so much smaller now, the fights become more difficult as well. I was also wrong. The acid attacks don't stop with the increase in monster attacks. Instead, we get both.

The most common problem is the constant flood of Rotlings, who have been attacking six to a man. After killing them, the Witch has to foil their attempts to cave the tunnels in around us in or pour acid on us through holes in the ceiling.

Sometimes they even combine multiple streams and try to fill the entire tunnel, forcing us to dig through the wall, thankfully though the stone seems to be capable of resisting the green liquid.

One of the guys gets trapped behind us as a small river of acid washes over the wall the Witch was using to block the tunnel. There is no regret or pity on her face, just for a moment she stares toward the wall, her mana senses reaching through it.

When the man's mana signature disappears, she turns around and we head in again where another group of Rotlings lies waiting.

Lily rushes in first, her axe slashing out in a big sweeping motion, carving through several of the little monsters.

A few of them jump towards her, but the twins are already there, cutting into them and easily avoiding the others, who seem to be terrible at seeing through their illusions. '

I, meanwhile, move into one of the side tunnels and stand there, waiting.

I create a small crater in front of me as a preemptive measure, and a moment later, a dozen or so Rotlings fill the tunnel, their legs piercing the walls and creating footholds for them to climb on.

All of them freeze and stop moving. Some halt in mid-air, others are caught mid strike. Their tiny bodies fight against the hold I have on them, and more and more kinetic energy flows through me the more they try to move.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

I concentrate, and my heartbeat changes to a more erratic and unpredictable pattern as I swap stance to Needle Point, one of the stances I've always found difficult.

Moving the kinetic energy as I've been shown so many times before, I launch the first projectile. It's not perfectly smooth and it's thicker than a finger, but it reaches the monster, and instead of piercing through its body, it hits its leg.

Using kinetic energy attacks like these at such a long distance still proves difficult. Arm's reach, or even a few steps in from me is fine, it's something I've been doing for a while now. But at this distance? I'm just not there yet, but I'm still much better than I was even a few weeks ago.

"Still avoiding killing too many monsters?" Lily asks, coming to a stop by my side, axe resting along her body, her movements still energized from the fight she's just been through.

"Yup, want them?"

"Sure, why not."

As she says this, I release the monsters, and after waiting a few seconds to minimize my assistance, Lily rushes at them.

An hour later, I think we are getting closer. The fights are growing more frequent, there are even smaller streams of molten metal rushing through the walls, and the Witch starts saving up more of her mana, as if she doesn't want to use too much of the mana in her crown.

Like she needs a specific amount of mana to do something.

The field surrounding us is growing stronger, and some of the weaker members are struggling to use mana for their skills due to the interference. It's fascinating, especially given that I'm certain that this field isn't even directed at us, more like it's being concentrated elsewhere. I've gathered this mostly from mapping the three-dimensional network of rivers and streams around us and examining the structure in my mind.

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The inscriptions are fairly simple, so I can guess their purpose even without a complete picture. The power source behind all of this is still a mystery to me, but then again, my passive skill's mana reservoir is also being stored, who knows where, outside my body while remaining connected to it. I can easily imagine someone doing something similar, actively concealing the power source in the same way.

Obviously, it still annoys me that I'm unable to locate it.

"Nice eyes you have. Is it a trait?" Babyface, seeing as he's struck out trying to convince Lily to join his group again, he must have decided to bother me.

"Yes."

"Look, I hope you don't mind I talked to your healer and tried to get her to join my group," he smiles, the act somehow making his face even more ugly.

"It's fine. If she wants, she can join you."

“Oh, how reasonable. The problem is that she doesn’t want to. Healers as powerful as her are very rare. To be honest, I’m surprised those mind manipulator dickheads haven’t snatched her up yet, let alone some other powerful group. You guys must be still be quite new here.”

“Yes, we’ve only been here a few months.”

“I guess that’s why. What did you do to get thrown here?”

Continuing to examine the structure in my mind, I think for a moment before just shrugging and staying quiet.

“It’s fine, friend, you don’t have to tell me,” he smiles. The whole time he speaks, even though he comes off rough, like someone one might expect to be impulsive or aggressive, he actually manages to control himself pretty well.

Izzy could probably tell me his true feelings, but to me, he looks like a reasonable person at the moment. He talks with an easygoing voice, gestures in a non-threatening manner, and doesn’t try to get too close or use excessive amounts of mana to come off as aggressive.

Of course, I’ve already seen the way he acts in fights and how he treats the weaker members of the group, so it’s a bit late for him to be acting like that.

Coming to a conclusion, I ask, “How much has Mais told you about me?”

I watch with a hint of amusement as a flicker of hesitation flashes across his face before he masks it with a smile. “Sharp, aren’t you?”

I don’t even think something like that deserves a compliment, but I see it as yet another communication strategy. Everyone likes compliments, even if they’re empty.

His voice turns to a whisper. “Tell me, how the hell did you kill that guy? That maniac was someone even The Witch didn’t want to mess with.”

Annoyed with the exchange I tell him, “Not your problem. But there is one thing that’s been bothering me.” I say, bringing my voice down to a whisper as I take a step closer. “My healer has turned you down three times already, made it clear she’s not interested in joining your shitty group. So, don’t bother her again, and don’t even look at her in a way you think I might not like. Got it, friend?”

I lower my voice even further. “I won’t even waste my time dealing with you myself—I’ll just ask her to get rid of you. Now screw off; I have work to do.”

“No problem. Sorry for bothering you... Nathaniel,” he says with a smile, taking a few steps back while maintaining eye contact, as he leaves.

Before continuing with my work, I begin to wonder if it’s really normal to have all of our expeditions go like this and how much more different it feels when it’s just the members of Group 4 and I wonder if it would be the same in Beyond with a party composed solely of people from Earth.

I would like to think it’s just the system pushing these fakes, the natives, to deal with attendees with the intent to speed up our growth, but I know far too many people to think it could be that alone.

Especially here within Astral Prison, which some prisoners seem to have taken to calling “the trashcan,” the idea being that this is where people go when no one wants to deal with them.

A day passes, and even I’m being forced to fight now, even though it’s strictly a support roll, keeping my assistance as low as possible, I mostly just keep the waves of monsters from moving and release them one after another.

Most of the time, it’s Lily who takes them out then. When she finds herself faced with any monsters she can’t cut, she uses the axe still the same, wielding the blade as a hammer instead, squashing monsters against the ground with great force.

A few more guys die along the way. We lose one to acid, another to a cave-in, and a third just gets pulled away into the tunnels by a hoard of Rotlings. I’m not trying to save my body’s supply of mana, as it regenerates quickly enough to spare my Reservoir and I help everywhere I can.

Pushing monsters away, crushing them against the wall, holding them with kinetic energy.

The entire time I keep my eyes active and my senses firing off into the area, and I've been doing so since the start. A constant rippling of my [Perception] outward, keeping me ready to teleport my group away.

Not even once have I underestimated the danger of this place, I still remember just how dangerous Caius was, even crippled as he was, imprisoned within the Mana Desert.

Lily fights well, as do the twins—often alone, without cooperating, using even this as an opportunity to practice. And Biscuit... well, he waits, rarely jumping in, like he's been saving his energy for something.

As for the rest of the group, The Witch has been in constant communication with that presence I've finally begun to sense on the edge of my "radar," her expression changing from that cold glare to a look of hope, anger, sadness, and desperation. In a twisted blend of emotion.

Mais stays close, the four swords vibrating with kinetic energy as they rest in his hands, his movements reminiscent of Pulser Stance.

Other than him, Babyface is the strongest, no longer bothering us and staying close to the mentioned duo, his face sometimes taking on a weird expression not unlike the Witch's. It makes me wonder what originally brought him down here. Is it greed? Or is his purpose similar to the Witch's?

We stop by a small outpost, nestled against a wall with several veins of metal running through it. The place is dark and eerily quiet, small streams of acid run through the cavern, and the air is full of toxic vapor.

As far as I understand, this is the furthest any expedition has ever been, nobody's ever reached this place before, something or other always stopped them, whether it was a lack of mana, or inexperience, but the greatest factor was probably the confusing layout forcing them to wander for days under constant attack. But this time, unlike the previous expeditions, the Witch is following her connection and is leading us directly to the source.

The materials we find down here are well worth the effort. Metals up to arcane grade, pieces of amazing crystal capable of enduring the pressure of incredibly dense and power-hungry inscriptions.

There's a huge smithy carved into one of the walls, with an anvil as big as a car in the center and a piston-style hammer above it, both made from material that helps to reflect mana—so tough that even Lily can't damage them with her weaker version of [Disintegration] as she makes her surreptitious attempt.

There are a few golden hued fragments of chain that seem to be made from a similar material, despite their odd coloring and the additional effects granted by the inscriptions that have been etched into them through unknown means. These shattered chains are massive, each piece is as big as my torso and they're all very heavy.

Everyone takes some materials from the storage, careful to maximize value for weight, and when they are done, I step towards the anvil, activating [Ley Line].

All of the mana in my body disappears, along with the anvil.

A third of my Reservoir disappears, and the hammer with it.

The two remaining thirds of my Reservoir disappear and take the fragmented golden chains with them.

Using the last remaining bits of my mana, I touch a specific Ley Line, and within a flash, my [Mana Crown] appears over my head. The exact same design as the Witch's, just a different color.

My mana seeps into my body, filling it, and my reservoir as well, and I continue to send all the materials I can away, totally emptying the store room.

[Ley Line - lvl 38 > Ley Line - lvl 39]

My crown then disappears as well, returning to float over the bust far away and I face the shocked members of the expedition.

POV The Witch

Impossible. The space here is too unstable for long-range teleportation, yet he managed it. Even after the activation, I couldn't trace where he sent the materials.

And that crown too, it's a lot more full than I had expected when I sensed the familiar skill on him.

(Underestimate humans, Melel, and they'll surprise you. Always have.)

(I apologize.)

(No need. But please hurry. The pain... it's unbearable.)

(I will. Forgive me.)

The voice, echoing like a distant memory of my mother, murmurs, (Use that human and the weapon he carries. It can free me.)

(As we planned. I've marked it. He's still unaware.)

(You've always had a gift for this, my child. But beware of the small creature with him—don't let it near me. Eliminate it if necessary.)

The pain surges again. Turning away from Mais, I grit my teeth, fist clenched, waiting for the wave to pass.

(I'm sorry, dear Melel.)

(It's fine. It's my weakness for not being able to bear our connection.)

(Please hurry. It hurts.)

Her gentle voice fades into silence as I channel more mana to keep my body from fracturing, forcing myself into composure before turning back to give the next set of commands.

#### Chapter 479: Chained Beast

The feeling of danger keeps increasing until it takes on an almost physical aspect like I could reach out and touch it as it clings to my skin. It raises the hair on the back of my neck and sends goosebumps prickling across my forearms. The sensation is reminiscent of crawling into the cave of a beast, pulling yourself ahead on your hands and knees. Knowing you should turn and run, even as you continue, ignoring your scraped hands and knees and the blood trailing behind you.

As the fights grow ever more dangerous, we push on, and my wounds are beginning to add up, even with my enhanced body as acid drips from the ceiling, something even The Witch is incapable of stopping.

The rotlings double in size, as does the number of legs and the size of their mouths. Just a few seconds is all it takes for them to tear out huge chunks of flesh, and their coordination becomes better.

And in the midst of it all, Lily moves like a whirlpool. Her swings, though amateur, are swift and precise, cleaving through swathes of monsters. As dozens of them close in on her, targeting our last healer, her new skill envelops her body.

Her [Disintegration Mantle] rests on her shoulders, flowing down to her knees. It shifts in the air as if it has a will of its own or as if caught in a strong wind, yet it remains firmly within her control.

Its color is a graduated shade of gray, darker around her shoulders and becoming lighter at the bottom, where it begins to resemble smoke more than anything else. Any monster that touches it gets disintegrated, nothing seems capable of passing through as she rolls into groups of monsters without a care, swinging that bone ax of hers.

There are signs of her using it to attack as well, going by the way it's shifting and moving. Though she's still exploring the skill, even in this weakened form, nothing down here can withstand it, a fact clearly reflected in the expressions of the other expedition members.

My mind is also clear and sharp, the dangers surrounding us shaping it as I maneuver across the battlefield with kinetic energy, avoiding the Rotlings, and tossing them aside, so that I can finish them off with compressed javelins, boosted by the same energy.

Any monster that manages to get close is welcomed with a weapon made from manabloc that I've compressed to the point of near destabilization, as I alternate its shape between spear, sword, claymore, and ax.

Fighting through the waves of monsters, we eventually reach a dead end to the tunnel, and the Witch closes it off, soon after we hear the sound of acidic vapors and liquids slosh against the wall she's created. Without the slightest bit of hesitation, she and two of the other members of our group mold the stone, creating a way for us. We head through with hurried steps, rough breathing filling the tunnel.

I notice burns on my forearm, left over from a few droplets of acid I was unable to avoid. As we've seen before, it heals much slower than it should.

(We are close, Nat. I can feel her connection getting stronger,) Dennis says, gesturing at the Witch, who now has an absent, painful expression on her face.

Then we stop.

"Where is that creature?" the thylarin woman whispers to herself, slowly turning around as her face clears up and she asks louder, shouting at me. "Where is that creature!?"

Biscuit's not here, he left during the previous fight with a simple message to me.

"I don't know," I answer honestly.

At that moment, as we wait for the next monster attack, the atmosphere changes quickly. Some of the mana from her crown seeps into the air, the pressure nearly palpable, just a taste of the mana she has been collecting for 10 years reaching toward us.

"Where. Is. That. Creature," she asks, each word forced through her teeth.

My domain expands around us as I weave my mana, using just my body and reservoir to fight her pressure, while Lily and the twins struggle to catch their breath.

Mana Wavelength Iris glows in the dark tunnel, reading and observing the mana filling the air, while I continue compressing, strengthening, and weaving my domain, forcing her to release more of her mana. It reaches a point where, unlike my group within my domain, those around her begin to suffer as the emotional thylarin woman begins to lose control.

Noticing that she immediately stops, her face twisting in pain as she seems to be listening to something.

“Sword,” she orders in a raspy voice, and Mais vanishes, reappearing by my side with two swords drawn, slashing at me while two of his arms reach for the shortsword at my waist.

At the same time, dozens of hands made from compressed stone explode all around me, reaching toward me and my sword.

With a stomp, I release the kinetic energy I’ve been collecting, the modified vibrations destroy the stone arms and throw Mais to the side making him use his own kinetic energy to stop and rush again. R

Lily appears by his side, her hair shortening, and her ax swings toward his head, forcing him to dodge the gray mantle floating around her as well as the ax.

The thylarin man curses and tries to blast her away, but the attack is halted by the mantle, and then her axe collides with his sword. He stops it effortlessly, absorbing the kinetic energy from the strike and channeling it to fuel his own movement.

Lily lets go of the ax and moves incredibly quickly as well, her muscles healing even as they tear under the strain.

Mais tries to avoid her, but even with all the kinetic energy, he’s too slow to match Lily giving it her all, and she collides with him.

Rock bursts beneath her feet, stone spikes and arms reaching to slow her down, but Lily ignores the wounds, her mantle swirling around her body. Half of her face turns into a mass of bone and raw flesh, and one of her arms is nearly torn off, as Mais drives a hole through her body, fueled by kinetic energy.

Lily pushes through it all and, with an incredibly swift punch, sends a burst of gray mana through Mais's chest, evaporating half of it. Then his body drops to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

Pressure on my domain intensifies, attempting to tear it apart. The ground shakes, and the rock beneath us moves like waves, twisting, swirling, trying to press in on us.

Reaching through my Ley Lines, I connect to all of us, and even though The Witch tries to stop us, I teleport us away, back to the place we were a few minutes ago.

"Follow me," I say quickly, and three of them quickly fall in line behind me.

"Weren't we going to fight her?" Aaron asks hurriedly, joining by my side.

"It would cost too much mana, and that might just be what the prisoner wants. At this moment, it seems to be after my sword, and for some reason, it doesn't like Biscuit... wait."

We all stop, and as the monsters flood the tunnel, I draw on half of my kinetic energy reserves, adjusting its frequency and releasing it in a single surge through the tunnel without harming the walls.

[You have defeated Rotling - lvl 328]

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[You have defeated Rotling - lvl 309]

[You have defeated Rotling - lvl 316]

[You have defeated Rotling - lvl 333]

[You have defeated Rotling - lvl 323]

...

[Lvl 292 > Lvl 293]

Level up, so annoying.

With no presences lying in wait, we rush forward.

“Huh, she seems to be tracking us somehow.” Sensing movement in the rock surrounding us I activate our anchors again before the walls crash onto us and teleport us to another place.

Right away, I use Ley Lines and throw them as far in as many directions as I can.

“What are you...” Dennis begins, but I filter out his voice.

How did she find us? I erased any way she could track the Ley Line even if she could sense it. I didn’t feel any large-range scans either and was even prepared to counter them, so how?

Quickly, I activate my eyes again, observing Lily, Dennis, and Aaron. I look very carefully and deeply yet find no mark. It’s the same when I check myself. There seems to be no thread, no connection, no foreign mana, no skill I could sense.

Once again, I feel movement in the walls and, annoyed, switch my stance, absorbing the enormous kinetic energy of the moving walls and stopping them in place before they can squash us.

How is she doing it?

Ignoring the immense pressure, I do the scans again, this time slower and look deeper. Lily, Dennis, Twins. Nothing. Myself. Nothing.

I grab the line and teleport us again.

More monsters pop into the tunnel, and I release all the kinetic energy I absorbed, allowing it to rush forth like a flash before the surprised monsters can even react.

[You have defeated Rotling - lvl 319]

[You have defeated Rotling - lvl 326]

[You have defeated Rotling - lvl 341]

[You have defeated Rotling - lvl 333]

...

"How much did you [Sacrifice]?" I ask, turning to Lily.

"Just some hair, I still have plenty in store."

"Good, you two?"

"No problems here."

"I've still got a lot left in me."

They barely finish, and I start absorbing the movement of the walls around us, this time expanding even further.

“I think she marked the sword. She’s clearly after it, so it makes sense, but I can’t feel the way she did it, and my attempts to remove the mark failed.”

“We can just leave and return after she’s gone,” Lily shrugs it off.

“We would be leaving a certain corgi though.”

“Oh, right. Where did he even go?”

“No idea. Anyway, we have a minute. I might have to use the sword, so let’s do some additional preparations.”

“Fuck, when you use it you better keep that thing as far away from us as possible.” Despite his cursing, Dennis touches my right arm. He and Aaron connect their calculative abilities, and [Connection] activates at its full power.

What we are about to do isn’t necessary—I can use the sword without it—but we have protocols in place that should help me use the weapon to a greater extent and with a lesser degree of backlash.

[Connection]

Once they’re done, Lily places a healing mark on the back of one of the bones of my right forearm, of the sort that’s connected to her with the twins’ assistance. It requires more mana and doesn’t last as long, but it is much more effective.

Knowing my tendency to lose limbs, there is a necklace around my neck with a small pendant made out of her bone and coated in a mix of metals to strengthen the effects.

These preparations barely take us a minute, but having reached my limit, I use my Ley Lines and teleport us again, deploying a modified version of Sneaky Mode, which I concentrate around my weapon, just in case.

Not needing to follow the Witch anymore, I head toward that presence I feel far away, there aren't any more monsters in our way, but the density of the molten metal and acid rivers through the walls increases to the degree that I can barely sense any of the rock in between.

POV The Witch, Melel

"Melel, please, hurry."

"I... my head, it hurts so much."

"It's our connection, it's getting stronger the closer you are."

"It hurts so much. I feel like I'm dying."

"Yes, my dear child, you will die soon. Your mind won't be able to resist much longer if this continues. Hurry."

"I..."

"Please hurry, Melel, I'm scared."

"I..."

"They are already so close. Please. Save me."

"I... I don't want to die."

“Please, help me, my dear child. It hurts.”

“Who... who are you?”

“SAVE ME, MELEL.”

“...I... I’m on my way.”

POV Nathaniel

I teleport us across the molten river, and we jump over streams of green acid finally landing ourselves in a perfectly spherical cave.

The walls are smooth, as is the floor, divided by dozens of gutters leading outward from the center towards the edges. Through these gutters, acid flows through them, to be collected in the middle and sent to the edge to be circulated. The full force of disruption generated by molten rivers is stronger here. The field generates a constant sensation of pressure, threatening to take control of one’s skills. And we feel the incredible weight of its influence even though most of it is concentrated in the center, targeting the being chained there. Well, what remains of it.

It’s the skeleton of a monster the size of a small building, lying there, attached to glowing gold chains tied to the bones in four places, anchored to a plate with a metallic shine that covers the entirety of the floor. There were clearly two more at some point though now they lie broken, their pieces lying near the skeleton.

The bones of the skeleton shine a brilliant shade of white where they can be seen, but most of them are covered in dark red blood and the tiniest pieces of flesh that continue to move as the skeleton tries to regenerate.

But it can’t.

The constant, dense rain of green acid that falls from the ceiling, serves to dissolve the regenerated parts.

When an eye begins to form, the acid eats it; when a hint of flesh appears on long bones, the acid falls there as well.

It's a constant fight between the creature's regenerative abilities and the terrifying green acid, aided by the field of disruption, strengthened and delivered by the golden chains, preventing the being from being able to regenerate.

This is clearly more than a prison, this looks like torture, and yet the being is still alive.

Looking at the chains, I recall their durability from the pieces we found in the smithy, and a plan begins to take shape in my mind.

For a moment, I glance at the sword on my waist. Whether I rely on items or not, it may actually come in handy this time.

Fracture (Mid Arcane) -The shortsword is capable of devouring mana from everything around it. The moment it connects with an object or being, it disintegrates the material within, unravels all mana and connections, leaving nothing behind. The weapon flickers with instability, damaging anything it touches, including the user. Fracture grows stronger as it feeds, but its insatiable hunger also turns inward, siphoning power from its wielder. With each encounter, the weapon becomes more powerful, yet its defective structure strains under the immense energy it consumes, becoming increasingly unstable. The longer it is wielded, the more it seems to break apart, its power twisting and spiraling out of control, threatening both itself and its user with destruction.

Chapter 480: Breakfast of Champions

Lily and the twins scrunch their faces, twisting them into expressions of pain. Their posture breaks, and their control over their mana wavers, caused by a combination of the effects of the disruptive field and something else.

My domain encompasses them, smaller and more powerful than usual, declaring the mana within to be under my control.

Lily's the first to recover, groaning "It's trying to communicate with me. It sounds just like my dad..."

The twins regain their composure a moment later, working together to shake off the foreign influence. Watching them do it, I figure it really must have been an attempt at communication rather than an attack, something they probably could have handled even without my assistance. Probably. But I'm not going to risk it. I reinforce my [Mana Domain] in response and tailor it to counter skills like the twins' [Connection].

"To me, it sounded like our mom when I was really young... it's disgusting." Dennis spits out these words. "It speaks with her voice, begging, and crying."

I nod. "It's been down here for centuries. Judging by the state of this... prison, its mind probably isn't in the best shape either."

"Prison..." Lily repeats, adjusting the ax on her back as she studies the skeleton. "I don't think it's sane anymore."

The green acid rain from the ceiling keeps falling and splashing against the bone, sizzling and melting away the creature's flesh, even as it regenerates.

That's when the Witch decides to appear, forming a tunnel in one of the walls, as she enters the cave just opposite us, placing the bound skeleton between us. The only remaining member of her crew is Babyface who's holding a crystal dagger covered in blood. The erratic, and desperate behavior she showed us before is still present, in fact, it may even be worse now—pain writ across her face, underscored by the dried blood under her nose, and crusted in the corners of her eyes.

I take a step, mirroring her movements, striding over to meet her, with the members of group 4 close behind. It's quiet here, other than the sound of the molten rivers roaring through the walls, the sound of dripping acid, and our steps echoing off the walls.

A minute later, she stops, and I follow suit, leaving just a few steps between us. Standing up close like this only makes it easier to see the hint of craziness in her eyes, her forearms covered in bloody wounds where she's been gouging her own flesh with her nails.

"Give me your sword," she demands, opening the conversation.

"It will kill you if you try to use it."

"I... just give me the sword."

"You didn't come here unprepared. Why do you need the sword?"

Instead of an answer, more confusion appears on her face, and I can see her struggling to put together a coherent thought.

I push, "Did you break the other two chains? Do you even remember doing it? Just how long has this thing been messing with your mind."

Her mouth opens and closes, and in that fraction of a moment, my domain encompasses her as well, as I take another step closer, "Just how much longer can you endure like this before your mind breaks under its influence? Are you really ready to die here?"

The same pressure that connected to Lily and the twins before tries to connect to me, but it can't. It can't because I've put too much effort into ensuring that I wouldn't allow myself to be controlled, and it can't because my arcane passive insulates my mind from outside influence.

I continue, "It knew you wouldn't be able to keep returning every ten years to break another chain. So, when it saw this sword, it wanted you to use it to release it in one go, even if it were to cost you your life."

She neither confirms nor denies my theory, but a sudden pulse of mana bursts forth from her crown, tearing through the portion of my domain that had reached her. I intensify my efforts to keep it contained around the four of us.

The Witch moves her six arms, spreading them, four opening their palms, mana seeping out of the crown and floating in the air around her. Stone rises up from the ground, forming two long spears which she grabs in the other two hands. Mana swirls around her, dangerously, threateningly, yet even now

serving as an amazing demonstration of her level of control. Even with her mind confused, and the pressure of the field around us.

Her eyes clear, and her posture straightens.

She declares, “I am Melel, a Champion candidate, and I challenge you, my equal in title. The wager I propose is...”

The challenge fails. So she tries again.

And it fails again.

And then she tries once more.

She is unable to issue a challenge, likely because the system does not deem her in control of herself enough to do so.

Melel laughs desperately, as if finally confirming something, her connection with the being intensifying as the look of pain deepens across her face. I can see her straining to break the connection with everything she has, even if it means dying in the process. R

Babyface forms a dagger in his free hand, and armor made of crystal encloses his body, as a ring of similar material forms around one of his fingers. He moves in very quickly, dagger thrusting at her head. His face is blank, save for the same expression of pain she wore on hers.

Even in this situation, Melel takes notice—stone arms emerging from the ground to grab him. He dodges a few, but then a stone dome forms around him, trapping him inside.

When the dome finally shatters, the only thing remaining inside is a body torn to pieces.

Melel, still partially under foreign control, attacks me. Huge stone arms move toward us, but I freeze them mid-air, absorbing their kinetic energy. The pressure from her crown squeezes down, only to be countered by my domain, and yet she keeps pushing relentlessly.

Well, that should be enough.

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

With my left hand, I grab the sheath of the sword, and with my right, I grab the hilt and pull the blade free in one smooth movement.

Lily and the twins immediately put distance between us as the blade shows itself to the world.

[Resonance] activates at full strength even before the sword is out, focused on keeping all the distinct forces working together. Without it, the sword would break almost instantly.

The blade itself is made out of a hollow shell of molten white sand and bone. Enclosing a combination of gray and black swirls, seemingly alive.

Immediately, the palm of my hand starts disintegrating, and my mana gets sucked into the sword and there's nothing I can do about it.

In an instant, nearly all my mana drains and I use Wraith Dance, dodging the stone arms, projectiles, and slashes tearing through the air, and swing, severing the Witch's connection to the skeleton.

Then the backlash hits her, making her groan in pain as she staggers back. Another step, and I reach her, the sword's tip piercing her crown and breaking the surface with ease.

I feel the pressure alleviate for a moment as the sword focuses on the crown, but it immediately comes back even stronger with all the mana it absorbs.

[Resonance - lvl 58 > Resonance - lvl 59]

The entirety of my right arm disappears in a blink, along with a piece of my shoulder, leaving behind the skeletal remains. Bones endure longer thanks to [Bone Knitting], and the dense mana threads woven through them for added strength.

My arm immediately heals, Lily's mana flowing through my body, and I increase my efforts to keep [Resonance] running at full power.

I can't even use mana, as all my focus is bent on keeping myself alive, even as the sword becomes stronger and stronger, gray and black swirling inside the blade wildly, adding more and more cracks to the glass holding it in check.

When Melel tries to stand up, I kick her, the blow slamming into the side of her head, making her stagger to the side, and I try to pull Fracture away from her crown, figuring that I've done enough.

The sword refuses to move.

More cracks appear on the surface, and a wave washes over me, disintegrating all of my arm, half of my chest, part of my leg, and face, leaving the bones in place before Lily's healing restores them in a blink.

And once again, more mana from my reservoir gets sucked in along with the rest of her crown, the hungry weapon refusing to let go.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 59 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 60]

Finally, Wraith Dance pulls me away from the others, bringing me over to the skeleton. Lily and the twins immediately find themselves locked in battle with the confused, absentminded Melel, who attacks them the moment I'm gone—but I trust them to handle it.

Kinetic energy rushes into the area above me, encompassing me, stopping the acid rain from falling, and leaving it floating in space. A shockwave throws the acid away from me, and the monster, without the constant downpour of acid, quickly starts to regenerate.

Tendons, veins, flesh—all rush to cover the skeleton. Now that there are muscles covering the bones, the monster moves for the first time, golden chains ringing as it rises, scattering its blood throughout the room in the process.

Fracture smashes against one of the four remaining chains, disintegrating the material, severing its connections as the mana within unwinds connections.

The monster moves again, its body now covered in flesh.

Another step, another chain destroyed—along with more parts of my own body—the only thing allowing me to wield the weapon with as much mana as it's absorbed is Lily's healing. But cutting the chains requires an immense amount of power, and Fracture starts to weaken, leaving the third chain only partially damaged as I slash against it.

My crown appears over my head, and its mana gets absorbed as well. Allowing me to destroy the third chain.

Brown fur covers the flesh, and the monster finally stands on all four legs, releasing a loud roar filled with hate and madness that makes my eardrums burst and heal moments later and then burst again.

Its attempts to connect with my mind grow more determined, and I feel the pressure increase as antlers start growing from the monster's head. The longer they are, the stronger the feeling is. But they stop growing—before the beast can be fully healed or regain its original power, the thickest golden chain still managing to hold it back.

(Free! Free me, human. It hurts. I'm scared. Please. Help me, child, brother.) Its words finally sound in my head, taking on a voice that sounds like a combination of my mother and Victoria.

Words repeated without any real understanding of their true meaning.

(Help me, my child. I'm dying. It hurts so much.)

Clearly, the mind of this being has broken under the torture it's suffered over the centuries and millennia. What was once a majestic beast, has now been reduced to a mere shadow of itself—frantically repeating words with the briefest flashes of clarity, focused entirely on the manipulation of others.

This being won't help us. It can't be bargained with, and it mustn't be set free.

The sword in my hand pulses for the last time, and I slash toward the monster's neck, all the remaining force I'm capable of containing breaks free, ravaging my body, and the monster with it.

Connections are severed, mana is unwound, and flesh and bones disintegrate, without healing.

With great effort, I push Fracture back into its scabbard, feeling the pressure ease, even as it leaves me with a strong reminder of its presence. My entire right arm, though healed and restored by Lily, continues to bleed, left horribly torn and scarred, the healing coming much slower than before.

And the monster still lives.

(Hurt! Save! Victoria, please...Nathaniel, my beloved.)

It keeps pulling at my mind, but it staggers back, its legs burrowing into the floor as it pulls on the chain with great force. I can feel its attempts to access its mana, even as they continue to fail.

Then it stops moving, its eyes expanding, as the barrage of words ramps up as purple tentacles reach from the ground and grab its leg, slowly climbing higher and higher.

(Die for me! Protect me! Heal me, Lily, my child! I always hated you, Aaron. You will never amount to anything, Dennis. Melel, my beloved.)

Over and over again it screams as a dark shadow surrounds it. A flickering mass of something huge covering it in darkness until the entirety of the monster disappears. From the darkness, comes a dark growl, as two huge glowing purple eyes open wide, just at the height of the trapped monster's neck.

The golden chain stretches into the darkness ringing out as the tentacles drag the monster deeper into the darkness, followed by the screeching of the tied monster and a crunching bite. The entire cave starts shaking, as all the rivers of molten metals and acid are redirected, rushing to bury the monster held by one last chain.

Again and again, the monster screeches, trying to escape, its mind attacking everything around it. Until finally, the psychic messages end.

Then there is silence, filled by the sounds of the cave breaking apart.

[You have defeated Nightwraith Stag - lvl 471]

[Lvl 293 > Lvl 294]

[Lvl 294 > Lvl 295]

[Lvl 295 > Lvl 296]

[Lvl 296 > Lvl 297]

I'm unable to hold it anymore, and the acid starts falling again as I take a step toward the shadows that have already begun to fade. Pulling Biscuit from within, who seems to have passed out or fallen asleep. I use Wraith Dance and move over to Lily and the twins, who are already ready to leave.

"Nat, please, bring her with us!" Lily shouts, pointing to the unconscious thylarin woman they defeated.

Meeting Lily's eyes, I disrupt the natural barrier around Melel, and with the last dregs of my mana pulled from the surrounding area, I use my [Ley Line] and teleport us away.