

Tutorial 491

Chapter 491: We don't talk about sparring with her

Back in my room, I take a look at myself in the mirror. My body is nearly restored. The right side, which was damaged by Fracture down in the tunnels, still heals a bit slower, the skin struggling to regrow as bits of bone peek through.

[Bone Knitting - lvl 22 > Bone Knitting - lvl 23]

For the first halfway proper test I'd say things went really well. Thanks to the number of healing marks Lily gave me, I could even let them hit me properly, and even though my flesh didn't endure due to my generally weak constitution, my bones did and sometime in the future, I'll even find a way to stop relying on them all together.

I got [Bone Knitting] when I was trying to create a healing skill. However, I went so long without results that I eventually just decided to go in a different direction entirely.

My thought line is very simple. As long as I don't die instantly, I can just wait for my thermal energy and any future healing passives to heal me over time. Flesh and tendons can be regrown, but bones take longer to restore, so the only reasonable course of action is to work on making them stronger.

Thanks to all of my experimentation during the tournament, the body modification data we got from Savant, and the samples I collected, bones of powerful monsters, and such, I'm getting pretty good at understanding them. I got the inspiration for weaving threads into my bones after acquiring [Ley Line] and developing Mana Weaving.

There are two vital points that I need to protect above all others: my brain and heart. If something happens to my brain, that's it. In theory, I could sacrifice my heart, but seeing how much trouble Lady Lissandra's been having with restoring hers and how much the system emphasizes the importance of Mana Hearts, it's probably not a good idea.

[Bone Knitting] strengthens my skull and ribcage the most, making it all the more difficult for attacks to breach them.

I consider it a very reasonable series of actions considering my apparent inability to acquire active healing skills.

Then I reminisce about feelings Izzy shared with me. The fear she felt for her sister. The horror as she watched Sophie slowly change, refusing to acknowledge the ways she might be being influenced, even forgetting their conversations. The two weeks she spent watching her older sister, pretending that everything was fine, slowly and carefully building herself up to ask Sophie to call us in, hoping that it wouldn't be too late and that Sophie wouldn't refuse.

That moment of realization when Izzy knew she wouldn't be able to do anything alone. Knowing that she wouldn't be capable of killing the man on her own and the despair of being locked in by her beloved sister, who didn't even fully realize why she had done so.

Shutting off the water, I step out of the shower and look at my reflection in the mirror until my expression returns to its normal state: the one that makes people want to punch me for some reason.

As I dry and clothe myself, I think about how easy it would've been for Sophie to end up totally enthralled, fully caught in the grasp of that man. Possibly dying, and taking her sister with her. All from the slightest misstep on her part, driven by her own overconfidence.

I believe it will be a great lesson for her, and I'll take it as a reminder for myself as well.

Sometimes, I might catch myself thinking I'm getting too strong for Hell difficulty, that only Beyond truly holds any challenge for me. It's a thought I need to ensure never takes hold too strongly.

Only when I'm fully dressed and check my expression again do I open the door.

Izzy stands there, where she's been waiting for me ever since I returned.

"I was so scared." Even though she's trying to control herself, and I notice her shaking, her body sending waves of kinetic energy through the air and floor as she does so, though she doesn't seem to notice herself.

"I know. It's okay now." I reply.

She shakes her head and looks down, staring at her feet, her black hair covering her face, preventing me from seeing the look on her face. "You said he didn't have any connection to her, but I'm still worried. How much did he manage to influence her?"

"Honestly? And you can connect to my feelings to confirm, I don't think he managed to do all that much. I killed him because I decided we wouldn't need him to undo whatever he did. He was the kind of guy who goes slow and steady, he was too weak to go against Sophie in a direct fight. Sophie might still want to keep you locked away for a while. She might decide she wants to control more mind mages or continue avoiding Beatrice and follow whatever other impulses he planted in her mind. But it won't grow any further because the man who did it is already dead."

As I'm saying that, I know I mean these words.

Stepping closer, I poke her forehead hidden under her hair. "I think the rest will be up to Sophie, to realize what he did as his influence wanes. There is nothing else you or I can do."

"Yes... Nat, please leave me and Sophie alone for a while. Now that he's gone, I want to do more to help her."

"Will do," I confirm, then squat in front of her, finally peering into her green eyes. "Don't worry, if anyone tries anything like that again, I will blow up this whole city, Framework or not."

"I don't even have to connect to your emotions to know you're serious." She quickly rubs her sleeve against her eyes before lowering her arm and returning my gaze. "Thank you, Nat."

"You are welcome."

Min-Jae dodges my attack, his body moving almost as strangely as mine does under the influence of kinetic energy. Though in his case, he uses [Telekinesis] and [Gravity Well] to emulate me. His movements are sharp, clearly meant to deal as much damage as possible. And to top it all off, the gravity field he's created around us slows me down, forcing me to use more and more kinetic energy while he continues to move unrestrained.

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Eventually, he fails to predict one of my movements in Pulser Stance, and I reduce the power of my strike, the punch connecting with his side and sending him staggering.

Gravity around me increases further, and he moves his body swiftly through the air.

He dodges my second blow; moving his body with [Telekinesis] rather than relying on his own muscles and reflexes, almost like he's puppeting his own body on a set of strings. It looks eerie and unnatural, but he's clearly grown accustomed to it.

I let his punch connect, and my unique passive transfers the kinetic energy of the attack into mana in my reservoir. Fairly surprised by the output, I let him punch me again, craving a more noticeable addition of mana to my reservoir.

"I know your movements are weird, but this is too much, Nat!" he shouts, attacking again, smiling, as his lean muscles stretch, propelling his body, as his wide brown and yellow eyes track my movements.

Once again, he dodges my attack, performing a maneuver that any acrobat would envy. And the whole time, he maintains the enhanced field of gravity around me, his Primordial gravitational energy serving to make the already strong skill even stronger, even in melee, and the boost to his mid-range attack is incredible in its own right. And I'm sure that with a bit more preparation he should be able to dominate long range as well.

We continue for another thirty minutes before finally coming to a stop.

As Min-Jae cancels out the gravitational field around me, I find myself feeling insanely light and wind up having to move carefully for a while, just to get used to the feeling.

"You didn't hit him as much as you hit us," Aaron notes, undistracted by the evil orb floating next to him.

"He comes to it more naturally than you, so there was no need," I reply.

“Tess had Maya beat me up though,” Min-Jae acknowledges.

“Oh.”

Min-Jae smiles. “It helped in the end, so I don’t mind, but most of my training went into [Telekinesis], and even though my output isn’t quite as high as Tess’s, my fine control is better. Plus, she rarely moves anything very big, she mostly just uses it to make her javelins more deadly.”

“What’s the biggest thing you can move?” Dennis asks, without pausing his training.

“Huh...hmmm, we once got attacked by a big monster next to some ruins, and I just threw a bunch of car-sized stones at it. So while it does take some effort, I can move multiple tons without issue. This one time, just for fun, I used [Gravity Well] and [Telekinesis] to lift a huge stone high into the air, then brought it down while increasing the pull of gravity. I swear it looked like a meteor.”

He turns to me. “Some time ago, you mentioned a thought experiment regarding a bunch of tungsten rods orbiting the earth and the idea that dropping one of them would cause about as much damage as a nuke, I think I should be able to pull it off sometime far in the future. I just need to find some way to keep myself connected to them, hold them in a semi-stable orbit, and do some calculations regarding the zone of impact, pull them out of the orbit, and boom.”

“And we can sneak around, make decent projections, and sometimes use your own skills against you,” Aaron mentions.

At that, Dennis shakes his head. “If you compare that to nuking the city, we seem to be lagging behind. Hey, Nat, why didn’t you teach us something like that? I want to nuke cities too.”

“Then get some skills that’ll allow you to do so. But I can tell you right now that even as you are now, either one of you could take Min-Jae in a fight.”

“Huh, really?”

"If I had your skills, I wouldn't have any problem, and as for you two... I would say you would probably win 7 out of 10 fights. And if you had the initiative that number rises to anywhere from 8 to 9 out of 10."

"Suck it, Kim."

"Yeah, suck it, Mr. I-can-nuke-the-city-maybe-in-the-future."

Knowing better than to encourage them, Min-Jae curiously asks, "What are my chances against Lily?"

I don't even have to answer, and Dennis, already standing, comes closer and throws his arm around the Korean boy. "Kim, buddy, my sweet delusional friend."

Aaron looks around, confirming Lily's absence, and joins from the other side. "We don't even talk about sparring with Lily."

Enthusiastically nodding, Dennis confirms, "Lily's picked up some terrible habits."

Aaron points at me. "We blame that man."

"I'm sorry," I agree.

Confused, Min-Jae keeps looking between us. "What happened?"

"That guy. " Aaron's voice becomes louder as he keeps pointing at me. "He taught us, but he also taught Lily. They spent most of their time doing some kind of crazy experiments, but they also spent a lot of time sparring."

"A ridiculous amount! Even though Nat likes to go kaboom, as that cute half-demon of his likes to say, he also likes to get in close and punch stuff."

"We have a theory he does it to vent."

“Plus, he’s kind of a battle maniac. But what’s important is that Lily really likes his style, and Kim, my buddy, that girl is even more talented than we thought.”

Once again, Min-Jae looks at me, and I repeat, “I’m sorry.”

Dennis shakes his friend. “You know how Nat fights, right? Losing limbs all over the place, taking ten blows just for the opportunity to get in one hit that will splat you against a wall? Tearing muscles, and breaking bones as his body strains to endure the strength and speed?”

“That really does sound like Nat.”

“Because that’s how Nat fights. Well, Aaron and I got to watch as Lily started picking up on that same style of combat, building on it more and more, mimicking those weird movements of his. Nat uses kinetic energy though, so you'd think it would be impossible with just your body, right? Well, Lily disagreed. Apparently, you can still pull it off—if you're willing to accept that your body will get fucked up in the process.”

“And you might try to say that she fought that way before, and you’d almost be right. But there was always a bit of hesitation there, and she was still learning martial arts from mana stones she got who knows where, but once she started sparring with Nat, she gave up.”

“That’s true,” Dennis confirms. “She strengthened her bones, she improved her constitution and did some nasty things with [Sacrifice]. Throw in her healing, and she wins 7 in 10 fights with Nat when it comes to melee combat.”

This is where I step in. “That’s not true, it’s 5-6 at best.”

"Even if she ditches the ax and uses the mantle?"

"Mantle doesn't count. If I try to tire her out, I win 7 out of 10. If I try to face her directly, she would win 7 out of 10 times."

They dive deeper into their theorizing, but I'm only half-listening. Even Whitey can't help but acknowledge Lily's close combat capabilities, so it's clear I'd have trouble if I faced her using only kinetic energy. But seeing how well I hold up, and considering that it's not my primary means of combat and that I can still win half the time, I don't mind all that much.

Really, I don't.

It's fine.

Chapter 492: Young white haired demon

My room has become an even bigger mess than before. Most of the furniture—aside from the bed, a few armchairs, and the sofa—have disappeared along with the carpet. The floor is now covered in deeply etched inscriptions, with some extending to the walls, accompanied by mana batteries to supply them with power and more.

The once-functional protective arrays have been reworked and Frankenstein-ed together to better serve my needs. And the same goes for the inscriptions that once covered the huge windows on the exterior wall.

At the moment, my room is being excluded from the tower's array and is under my full control. And I have multiple Ley Lines connecting my inscriptions to the Framework, which I'm constantly monitoring.

Then there are two blanks I've created using high quality materials I've managed to acquire, one for a shield and another for an ax laid out on the ground. Just the sheer quality of the materials should easily push them to upper epic rarity, but I've specifically decided to hold off on finishing them for the moment. So there they lie, half done, waiting as I work on advancing other plans.

In the corner of the room sits a box made of white glass, also awaiting my attention. Much like the ones I brought with me to Beyond not long ago, filled with the white sand from Mana Desert. Next to it, a few weapons from the Mana Desert as well. I still remember the promise I made to Sophie, that we would try to work the white sand into the damaged arcane weapon known as the Golem Heart that I gave her. By this point, I'm sure she's made her own improvements, and it might be possible to start experimenting with a grain or two of sand.

The only problem is that Sophie has been locked away in her room for the past few days already, and there are only two people allowed to freely enter and leave—Izzy and Tess.

Otherwise, it's been days since anyone's seen Sophie, and the only sign of her presence is feeling her going over the protective arrays and confirming her control over the mind mages she's enthralled. No one comes to visit. There are no attacks, and even the people who spent the most time spying on us seem to have backed off in favor of caution, confirmed by Tess, who's taken it on herself to keep an eye on such things.

The ignition of the Framework is getting closer every day, so it's been quite a mess considering that one of the most powerful mind mages has gone missing and the people formerly under his control have been freed. I'm also curious what happened to that vyssari with thermal energy and the second primordial energy she was rumored to have. However, my curiosity isn't tempting enough to lure me out to try and find out. She seemed skilled but she was nowhere near Melel's level nor was she talented enough to make me want to learn from her.

A presence appears in front of my door, and I activate the mana construct controlling them. They open on their own and close once my guest enters, the protections around them snapping back into place.

"Just in time," I tell the snake as I draw one of the orbs of mana floating next to me closer.

And Noodle patiently waits as I proceed to set it in front of him.

"So, sorry about last time. I thought the addition of a small amount of thermal energy would make the orb tastier."

The white snake calmly looks at me.

"It seems like you can only absorb mana and normal fire because of your bond with Izzy. I think that's the reason you got a bit... sick, she doesn't actually have her own thermal energy. So this time I modified the orb a bit more. The frequency of the mana, its density, and the amount within are different this time. So tell me, what do you think?"

His tongue flickers as he tastes the air in front of the orb, and only then does he open his mouth and gently take it from my hand.

The orb disappears into his mouth, and Noodle continues to stare at me with his green eyes.

Then he nods as he does, but only once.

“Hmm, so it’s not as tasty as the last time, but better than the one before?”

He nods again.

“I’ll modify the next version a bit more,” I promise the snake with a dismissive gesture, only for him to coil around my arm.

I allow my mana to seep through the skin of the arm the white snake has coiled himself around, and activate my eye trait to carefully observe him.

As he has so many times before, Noodle starts absorbing said mana through his mouth, causing it to disappear within the confines of his body without leaving any trace behind, all while I try to pick up at least a bit of what’s going on as it does.

The next day finds me standing over an inscription-covered circle that surrounds the two weapons I made but still haven’t finished. They took a lot of precious materials, but if my plan works, it will be well worth it. These inscriptions along with the circle surrounding the weapons, and the shield and ax themselves, have all been tied together with Ley Lines that are themselves connected to the main Line, which is further connected to the Framework.

Satisfied with the result, I leave it there and stretch as I rise to a standing position.

Min-Jae is sitting in one of the armchairs with Biscuit in his arms, and waves to get my attention.

“I went through the simplified blueprint of the Restrictive Training Emblem with the twins the other day, and I think you might be right. I should be able to make my own version to increase the weight of the person wearing it.”

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“But?”

“I’m not very good at this kind of stuff, so I can’t make it work passively and I don’t know how to apply it so someone else will be able to activate it on their own. And making anything a person could use their own mana to activate is only going to be more difficult.”

“That’s okay, I just wanted to give you some inspiration for the future.”

“I’m not complaining,” he says, nodding as he lifts a glass of juice from the table with his skills before lifting the liquid inside free as well.

That liquid spins slowly, pulling together into a floating sphere which Min-Jae promptly slurps down. “Do you have more blueprints or information regarding the Skyhold Islands? I’ve already gone through most of what you gave me.”

“Left corner of the room, on the green shirt, oval mana stone. Take the grape-sized round one next to it as well—it contains some basic inscriptions along with some exceedingly flowery theory on creating more durable constructs. You might need them if you want your own floating island.”

“Was I really that obvious?” he smiles in that typical shy way of his, and the stones fly into his hands.

“It would be a shame if you didn’t want something like that with your combination of abilities. You can ask Aaron and Dennis for more info; I drilled some of the basics into them, and they’re getting pretty good.”

“The infamous 2nd and 3rd disciples of Nathaniel Gwyn.” He snarks, gently setting the sleeping corgi puppy on the blankets bundled up in the armchair and adjusting them so that only his head can be seen.

As he leaves the room, I think about his last words but decide in the end to shrug it off and come back to it later.

Closing my eyes, I appear within my mind space.

This one is unlike any I've seen before, and I know immediately that the setting isn't from any of my own memories, it's not the first time it's happened either.

I look to the right at the white-haired demon standing next to me and follow his red eyes, to look in the same direction.

Within all the yellow sand surrounding us, is a beautiful oasis interrupting the scenery of the desert below us. A huge jagged rock has pierced the ground in the middle of the oasis, creating some much needed shade, and allowing a range of grasses, and trees to take root around it. The jagged rock itself has a bluish metallic shine, and even though there are no inscriptions, it feels almost like it does. And as we watch the oasis, we can see a few demons going about their daily tasks, each one tall and slim with horns not unlike Whitey's and the same red eyes.

And sticking out like a sore thumb is a single demon with long white hair, dressed in a set of ragged clothes, likely the worst in his community, and covered in wounds.

The demon is very young, likely landing somewhere between Vega and Izzy, just under 10 years old. The demon looks sickly, his heart beats weakly compared to the other demons, his limbs are thinner, and he even seems to be paralyzed on the left side of his body, his left arm moving slowly, and he's often forced to drag his leg behind him as he takes his clumsy steps.

"Demons can be born with as little as a single trait, and the more powerful ones have two. How does that work without the system?" I ask as I take a seat in the warm sand.

Whitey looks away from the oasis and sits next to me. "Some traits can give you access to primordial energies. Most of the demons are born with a heart that gives them access to one of those. Some are born without a demon heart and develop demonic eyes instead, or rarely both. I've heard of traits ranging from physiques to circuits and skeletal structures, and more besides. It varies a lot."

"Getting free traits like that should be cheating. So the system awakens mana?"

“From what I’ve heard, yes. There are also fragments of eternal fire, fragments of eternal wind, and more besides. There are also primordial energies and probably other things you can get without the system, but only the system can awaken mana.”

We watch as the white-haired demon slowly makes his way to the top of the dune. He almost falls a few times but slowly reaches us and sits an arm’s reach away from Whitey.

He clearly can’t see us; after all, he’s just a memory.

Calming his stuttering heart, he closes his eyes and throws a handful of sand into the air.

Most of the grains fall down, but a few stay put, floating. They move from side to side, they shake, and it looks almost like they could fall at any moment; and in the end, they do. Though the young demon smiles brightly and laughs with joy. He lays on his back, tired even after such a little thing, and wipes the sweat from his face.

Inside the oasis, little kids, probably half the white-haired demon’s age, do much the same, throwing two big handfuls of sand, holding the thousands of grains in the air with ease.

“He’s such a dumb little fucker, isn’t he? Damned untalented crippled freak.” Whitey says staring at the young demon, who, even in his malnourished state, bears a stunning resemblance to the grown demon beside me.

“I kind of like his spirit,” I reply.

“Yes, he was always a bit dumb. Some might call that having a strong spirit.”

Whitey stands in one smooth movement and stomps. Causing the entire dune we stand upon to explode in a great plume of sand before all of it stops hanging in the air. The yellow grains gleam as the sunlight finds its way in between them, throwing the most incredible shadows across the scenery.

“Out of the 7 stances I’ve taught you, there are a few that you clearly favor.”

Whitey's hair hangs, floating in the air, held there by the same force holding the grains of sand.

"Pulser Stance suits you well, and you're not half bad—you just need a bit more practice. The same goes for Breaker Style. As for Wraith Dance, you seem to use it more for movement than anything else."

"I'm agreeing so far."

His teeth show in a smile. "As if you could prove me wrong, you little shit. I know more about kinetic energy than you ever will."

I bow. "I apologize, master."

That makes him smile even more, and I know that when we get to sparring, his punches will hurt more than usual.

"Your Resonance Flow is powerful. And your ability to handle massive amounts of raw power is probably better than mine, but that's understandable given how accustomed you are to managing such a disgusting amount of mana. Your fine control, however, is a bit lacking."

Whitey pokes one of the floating grains of sand, and it slowly floats to the ground. "Your Needle Point is trash. Close to mid-range, you do fine using bursts of kinetic energy to attack, but your long range control is just abominable. Your Counter Flow is decent, and your Steelroot sucks."

"Sounds about right."

He smirks deviously. "Today, you'll be using only Needle Point, Steelroot, and Wraith Dance."

All the demons within the oasis, along with the young white-haired demon next to us, vanish like the memories they are.

The dune collapses in a cascade of sand, and we clash amidst the chaos.

Chapter 493: Logic Core

I've spent enough time in this damned tower to figure out a number of ways to temporarily take over the defensive array, especially now that Sophie has locked herself in her room and refuses to leave.

And I know I promised Izzy to wait but this is taking way too long already.

That's why I'm standing in front of the door to her room, taking control of the web and defenses to let myself in.

The door opens, and I enter. "I know you're personally invested in beating yourself up for allowing yourself to be tricked by that dumbass, but you promised to tell me about Blackie and about that Logic Core thing..."

My words stop there as my mind registers the sight of Sophie lying on the floor while Tess drags her along by the leg. Sophie looks... well... not great. Her hair and clothes are in a terrible state, there are big bags under her eyes, and I think I can see signs of dried blood under her nose. There's even a bruise starting to show under one of her eyes.

Tess looks even worse. Her forearms have been deeply gouged as if by claws, bites mark her body, along with the odd bruise, peeking out from under freshly tattered clothes.

"Hey," Tess chirps, smiling brightly. She follows my eyes to Sophie and shrugs, "Did you know that ever since she locked herself in her room a few days ago, she's been spending more time wallowing in self-pity than actually examining the state of her mind?"

"Fuck off, Tess..." Sophie curses, her voice hoarse.

"Sure, sure." Tess smiles, her grin widening, as she waves off Sophie's protests and continues to pull her across the floor, and Sophie, with her lack of investment in physical stats, just can't muster an effective resistance. Even the marks she's left on Tess are probably only there because Tess allowed it, after all, I'm sure she should be more than capable of pummeling that black-haired mind mage of ours.

Both of the girls disappear around the corner, and only then does Izzy poke her head out.

"Your work?" I ask.

"I asked Tess for help," Izzy confirms, and Noodle, currently the size of an anaconda, shrinks and rises to coil around her arm.

"Good job."

"Even though Sophie wouldn't say it, she..." Izzy whispers, lowering her voice conspiratorially, "She looks up to Tess quite a bit."

"Didn't Sophie give Tess that beautiful shiner back when we were still under the Mana Desert?"

"Yes, it's weird, isn't it?"

"People..."

"Yes, people!" Izzy agrees. "While you were messing with her web, she wanted to storm out of the room a few times and call you a dumb fuck, before she finally settled down and gave me a lesson on everything you did wrong."

"I've heard worse."

We step out into the hallway, the doors closing behind us as their protections flare back into activity. Together we make our way over to the terrace, where we each take a seat in one of the armchairs I stole from one of the other floors.

It's night, so it's cold, but Izzy doesn't seem to mind. Her body radiates an impressive amount of heat. Even so, I take it upon myself, and place one of my thermal cubes over the small table, generating soft light and radiating a comfortable and even wave of heat.

The view from the tower so high up is beautiful, even with the state of this messed-up floor. Lights shine down below, radiating from the windows of the tower's around us illuminating the night. There are even

some twinkling from the shores of the lake. And then, as always there's the purple nebula swirling through the sky amongst a myriad of stars.

It takes half an hour before Sophie and Tess finally join us, having both secured a change of clothes while their wounds have already begun to fade under the influence of their natural regeneration.

Tess rushes in first and takes a seat next to Izzy, which forces Sophie to sit in the remaining armchair alone.

The silence that ensues quickly grows awkward as it stretches on over the next few minutes as Sophie works up the courage to break it, "I think that fucker only managed to do three things."

For once, Izzy doesn't bother complaining about Sophie's language.

Sophie raises a finger as she begins, "He planted something akin to thought anchoring. The first one was to avoid clashing with him or his forces. He did it very covertly, and my mind made up the excuses on its own. There was also an impulse to even forget that I met him. This was the riskiest one and the one I was most likely to notice. But I didn't."

She lifts a second finger as she continues, "The second thought anchor was a desire to control as many mind mages as possible."

The last finger lifts, "The last one was the most open ended— a deeply ingrained desire to rely on myself, cutting myself off from the others, while focusing on maintaining things within the city. In the end, it was just a slight push in the direction he wanted."

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As she finishes her speech, Sophie buries her head in her hands and sighs, "Without him to renew and build on them, these thought anchors should dissipate over time, removed by my natural defenses, but... if it had gone on for even a few weeks longer... he would have been able to influence me more and more without me even noticing."

“He begged for mercy before he died. I’m pretty sure he cried as well,” I offer.

In response, Sophie looks up at me, and I return her gaze. “You fucked up,” I tell her.

“I fucked up,” she confirms.

“Really fucked up.”

“Yes, I guess I got a taste of my own medicine, didn’t I?”

“Yep, fuck mind mages. Anyway, what’s the deal with Blackie?” I ask, changing the subject, considering this topic settled.

“Nat, don’t you want to hear more about that thought anchor? You might be able to help,” Tess interrupts.

“What can I do? I’m not a mind mage, and it’s up to her to deal with that shit. If she thinks I can help, she’s free to ask anytime. So, Blackie?”

“It’s okay, Tess, I’ll deal with it on my own.”

“Don’t forget me,” Izzy reminds her.

And at that, Sophie smiles, gazing at her lovingly and nodding before turning back to me, “Blackie is all that remains of the desert Champion’s bond—a really small piece of it.”

Her shadow moves as if it’s alive and takes on a three-dimensional, amorphous shape that almost moves like water, smoke, or mist; honestly, it’s a bit hard to describe.

“A small piece escaped with us back then, and Biscuit wanted to eat it, but I made a deal with him before he did and let the bond attach itself to me. It was looking for a new master after the Champion died, and since I had [Manipulation], I was able to take it in.”

“Are you sure the Champion didn’t leave any bits of himself behind? Couldn’t it try to take over, or kill you, or something like that?” Tess interrupts.

Shaking her head, Sophie reaches toward her shadow, and it reaches back to her. “I, of course, can’t be absolutely sure, this is the Champion’s bond we’re dealing with. But I think it’s highly unlikely. Plus, it’s not very powerful without a connection to its master. I think that Champion was here because he was experimenting with creating artificial minds, and to that end, he was probably experimenting on entire cities full of people. Blackie is the result of that, an artificial mind with no emotions—a tool that grows with its master.”

“Can it think on its own?” I ask.

“It’s difficult to explain... I wouldn’t say it can think. Honestly, it reminds me more of an array that can react to specific stimuli—but taken much further. It is something akin to a collection of an immense amount of information, and behavioral patterns. A bit like a mix between a mind imprint and a program. Nat, you said Lissandra created a near-perfect copy of her mind. Well, I think that Champion was experimenting with learning how to do something similar, and his bond was just another step towards that goal.”

“But Blackie isn’t him nor does it have his memories?”

“No, but there’s a chance that in certain situations, for which I didn’t program or teach it, that it could act in accordance with the Champion’s programming, which is probably based on the way the Champion would react.”

Seemingly annoyed by the long conversation, Izzy butts in, “Blackie’s like a small pup that just happened to be raised by a bad guy. Then that bad guy died, and someone nicer took over, but that pup still has some of that bad behavior learned.”

I look at Sophie, and she hesitates a bit before sighing, “Yes. You could say that.”

A bright smile blossoms on Izzy's face as she stands and pokes Blackie. It pulls back quickly, its reaction seeming surprised or scared, and yet completely devoid of emotion. The black shadow swirls around Sophie before reverting to its normal two-dimensional form.

"More than a living being, it's a tool," Sophie concludes.

"What can it do?" Knowing it belonged to a Champion, I'm curious about its capabilities.

"Currently? Not much, and it will never be quite the same as the Champion's. It's bonded to me now, and our bond is fairly similar to the one between Izzy and Noodle, so it will be influenced by my growth and programming. But I have learned some things from examining it; the Logic Core is one of them."

At that, I straighten up in my armchair and listen carefully, ignoring Tess, who scoffs at my reaction. Sophie notices as well, and I see that annoying smirk twitching at the corner of her lips, but I decide to ignore that for now and listen carefully.

"I know you can 'program' your mana constructs a bit. To launch projectiles when something breaks a thread of mana, these orbs, and such. I also know how limited that is, and that you've been looking for ways to free up the bits of mental focus you have to devote to upkeep."

"And?" I ask, fully realizing that she's stretching things out on purpose. But those thoughts of self-pity she was having seem to have taken a backseat, so I decide to play along and let her have her fun.

"The Logic Core could be what you're looking for; it's the simplest version of an artificial mind. A process node programmed to kickstart specific tasks or alter behaviors based on outside information and your 'programming.'"

"I'm listening, Sophie. Please tell me more."

Her green eyes regain a bit of that glint, "Best of all, it's all mana-based, like a distant variation of inscriptions. Though there's a fair chance that I'll always be better at it because of my mind powers, but I'm sure you can imagine all the things you could do with that."

“We’ll see just who’s better at it.” Then, even though I already have a theory, I ask, “So what ideas do you have regarding using it to manage Fracture?”

“You told me how much concentration it takes just to keep it from breaking apart and limiting your ability to use it. With some practice and experimentation, a Logic Core could handle some of the menial tasks in the future.”

I look at my waist where the shortsword is hanging and give that a moment of thought.

Something excites me even more than the prospect of wielding this damned weapon: the thought of how much I’ll learn about using the Logic Core in the process and the possibilities it will open.

Instead of storing a bunch of simple arrays in my mind and maintaining them with [Focus] for deployment, maybe I could store a few Logic Cores—if I can find a way to deploy them. I don’t expect much at the start, but at higher levels, a Logic Core might be able to operate independently of me.

I like it. I like it a lot.

Chapter 494: Car ride

Retreating within my mind, we appear in my school this time.

Whitey is wearing the same clothes as my former P.E. coach. He’s got the classic look—plain gray tee, loose mesh shorts hanging just over the knee, white socks pulled up mid-calf and a basic pair of sneakers.

The worst part is that the damned demon still manages to look cool, even wearing that, in spite of his lanky form and taut, compact muscles stretched under his pale skin.

“Surprisingly comfortable,” he notes, taking a moment to stretch.

I let him live in his delusion, as we stare down on the scene from the top of a wall nearby, watching a group of four boys as they surround another. The boy in question is currently on his knees, patiently waiting while the largest of the boys pours a bottle of an unidentified soft drink over his head, causing

his black hair to cling to his face, and even then, his gray and brown eyes refuse to display any hint of rage.

“He creeps me out,” one of the boys says, laughing as he reaches over to squeeze the bottle in his buddy’s hand, encouraging the beverage to flow and redirecting the stream such that it sprays into his victim’s face.

The kneeling boy doesn’t so much as flinch as the others continue to laugh.

Finally, when the bottle is empty, they throw it in his face.

“It’s no fun if he’s not gonna react,” the oldest boy complains, kicking the kneeling child in the belly for good measure. “Let’s go.”

“What happened to these four?” Whitey asks, seeming curious.

“What do you think?”

Whitey smiles, his eyes shining with that demonic look of his. “Good.”

“I wonder if I should look them up when I get out of the tutorial. You know, for old times' sake.”

“I would tear them to shreds, for old times' sake.”

“Yeah, that’s how demons like to do things isn’t it.”

“Limb by limb, I would tear them apart. I would hold them with kinetic energy to stop their breath, only to stop as they reach the brink of passing out, and then I would repeat that. I would send pulses of energy through their bodies and break their bones, leaving their flesh and organs untouched so they’d have some time to think as they died.”

“Sure. Want to try something?”

Whitey, curious by nature, nods and follows me out of the school stepping into the empty city, reconstructed from my memories without the faceless hoard of people. A number of cars stand parked in the lot, and I choose one at random before breaking a window and crawling inside.

Almost like a scene from a movie, I find a key behind the sun visor and turn it in the ignition.

After watching me sit down, Whitey follows suit, taking a seat by my side, closing the door with a bit too much force, causing it to buckle.

“All the car buff fathers in the world are going to curse you if you keep slamming the doors so hard. You probably just killed the paint job or something.”

Unsurprisingly, he tries to open the door and do it again, but he can’t seem to figure out how it’s done, so he reacts by piercing it with Needle Point while staring me down.

“So very mature,” I note, throwing the car into gear and pressing down on the gas pedal.

The car roars and doesn’t move.

Under the confused expression, Whitey gives me, I take off the handbrake, and the car finally moves, only for the engine to sputter and die.

“Is this what you wanted to show me?”

“Look, it’s not like I had too many opportunities to drive a car.”

I repeat the process, and the car, throwing and jumping, moves again. We even scratch against another car before we get away from the parking place and onto the main road. There, I shift the gears and add the speed, moving on the totally empty roads. There are no other cars, no buses, nothing.

“When do we lift off?” Whitey asks after a minute.

“It can’t fly.”

“What a terrible means of transportation.” Even so, he sticks his slim pale hand out of the window and cups it in the air as we start moving at higher and higher speeds.

Air flows into the car through the broken window, causing his long white hair to flow in the wind.

“I always wanted to try to drive around just like this,” I note.

“Is it as good as you imagined?”

“Not really.”

“It never is,” Whitey confirms.

Both of us reach for a source of kinetic energy at the same time. Whitey for the one inside of him, while I absorb it from the moving car, which comes to a stop, almost on a dime.

A blast from Whitey sends the door flying off on his side, as he jumps out of the car and I do the same, only to watch the entire side of the car crumple under Whitey’s next punch. The car flies into the air, forcing me to dodge as it smashes into the building behind me, as the sound of broken glass fills the otherwise quiet city.

Wraith Dance brings me in close as I avoid his Needle Point attacks, and both of us switch to Breaker Style, the shockwave from our strikes colliding, with no one to absorb it. Instead, he uses Wraith Dance, and I do the same, following him. Whitey enters a shopping mall, as I follow, exchange blasts of kinetic energy along the way, destroying the place around us.

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The entire time I track the movement and frequency of his heartbeat, trying to predict any change he might make in his stance. Even so, I know he can be tricky and likes to fake me out when he can, creating fake vibrations to cover his true intent.

I stop in place as Whitey unexpectedly switches to attack in Pulser Stance.

As always, when that happens, I give up trying to predict his movement. It's just that impossible. There is no logic to it, no inertia to give away his movements. You can absorb it, you can redirect it. You can stop mid-air, you can halt your movement, and change directions at any point.

My instincts, honed in the hundreds of clashes we've engaged in, take over, and I deploy the hard won methods I've been developing while making sure not to fall into my habit of over relying on the moves I'm most comfortable with. Whitey is very good at predicting my movements based on the ways I've fought before.

Our clash gradually increases in speed, and the flooring continues to explode under my feet, placing my lack of control on display, as I release a bit too much kinetic energy.

Meanwhile, Whitey's form is perfect. Without the slightest bit of waste on his part. His movement feels like it wouldn't even move a falling feather as he jumps over the railings, using glass windows as footholds without damaging them. He then switches to Steelroot and stops, a clear challenge as his heartbeat begins to resound loudly, like a huge bell.

Once again, I switch to Breaker Style, and my body comes to a halt right in front of him. I twist my body, my feet burrowing into the ground, as kinetic energy explodes through my body, leveraged in an open handed strike.

With all the force I can muster, I launch a palm strike at his unguarded chest. He doesn't even use Counter Flow to absorb or redirect the impact. Instead, he relies on Steelroot's defense, causing the kinetic energy aimed at his body to detonate outward, tearing through everything around us.

A shockwave erupts through the area, shattering the glass on the floors above, which cascades down in a shimmering rain, drifting slowly downward like a downpour of falling feathers.

Whitey just stands there with his shirt torn and a big, blue bruise blossoming across his chest.

He glances down at it.

"Not bad," Whitey says simply.

Knowing what will follow I immediately switch to a higher gear and prepare to use Counter Flow, I'm more comfortable with that than Steelroot. My heart beats, pumping kinetic energy through my body at much higher concentrations than ever before.

My eyes snap wide open, tracking his every subtle movement, watching for the faintest trace of kinetic energy.

"Not bad," Whitey says once again, a maniacal grin spreading across his face, his red eyes locked onto me. "My turn."

Dead once again I open my eyes, now free of my mind space.

As a few times before I find myself hoping that my minion doesn't wind up like Whitey. Vega is perfect just the way she is.

Then I start replaying our entire fight in my mind. Every mistake I made, Whitey's every move. All the ways I can improve and the habits I need to lose. This process takes twice as long as our fight did, and only then do I bother pulling myself out of the armchair.

My room is even more different now. An array of invisible Ley Lines connect to the inscriptions on the floor surrounding my new ax and shield, and the wall, heavily scarred where I clawed away the stone and replaced it with a metal alloy made from two highly conductive metals, which I simply melted down and poured into the freshly carved grooves.

I also check the escape routes I've prepared, there are three of them for the whole group to evacuate through and two more they don't know about. Each one capable of taking all of us elsewhere.

There's also a powerful [Ley Line] connecting me to each member of the group, straining the skill to the fullest and making it nearly impossible for me to create more lines without causing the others to dissolve.

A part of my mind, separated by [Focus], keeps them in check constantly, ready to pull on them and get us all out.

Then there is also Tess, who has her own escape routes, and even the twins have something they've prepared with Min-Jae's help. Sophie is excluded from all of them, even now going through her mind, and trying to find any signs of lingering influence.

The Framework's ignition is set for tomorrow. Whether it will remove the spatial locks is a question for later. Constructing the array to transport us away is another matter entirely.

There is also a chance that reinforcements or prison guards will show up once they notice a problem in an effort to relock them, but there should be enough time. At least according to the mind mages—at least a week if it works—to escape, giving us enough time to visit the vyssari Champion Tess and others met. The Mind mages even have their own plans to escape the moon after breaking the spatial locks and we're currently trying to steal them.

But I'm almost sure of one thing. The Framework ignition would fail if not for me and Sophie.

During the maintenance, Sophie noticed a few things and came up with improvements. And I've been making some small changes of my own from the safety of my room, unnoticeable, even to the Framework's owner, who is probably the Archon.

That confirms, for the most part, that this was always meant to be one of the ways out for any of the tutorial attendees capable of escaping.

I sense Sophie's [Ley Line] shift as she nears the tower. However she rarely leaves now and never does so without Tess and Maya, and no one in the city seems to mind when she does. I suppose having a series of high-speed railways terminating directly at the heart of their towers just has that effect on people.

I hear a knock on my doors and let them open, allowing Sophie to enter, followed by Aaron and Dennis, who've come to help just as planned.

"I swear, this room gets more wrecked by the hour," she says, inspecting the wall I modified.

"Can you get any more Amberlace?" I ask in place of a response

"I tried. There isn't more of it in the city."

"This city sucks."

"Nat, I've spent nearly all the money I have to get you as much Arcanadium, Amberlace, Voidsteel, Endurium, and Heartwood as possible, and more besides."

"You were the one who said they owed me, not me."

"Usually, people are less... shameless about it."

"Don't you consider your freedom more valuable than..."

"I've got it already! I'll try to get you more, damn it."

"Thank you, Sophie." Then I turn to the twins. "Did you practice like I told you? And where is Lily?"

"We did, and she should be here soon," Dennis confirms.

His brother smiles. "It was nice to do something better than you for a change."

I let them bask in the glow, and in the meantime, I put Fracture on the densely inscribed table I've made entirely out of alloys composed of a number of valuable metals. The table alone took me days to fully

prepare, but it was fun, and I came up with a few more interesting applications for a few of my skills, which has always been the main goal.

“That table is worth more than some of the towers around here,” Sophie notes.

“Not in the system shop. I think the system thinks it’s too specialized, after all, the only thing it does is help manage Fracture and connect it with the Logic Core.”

“Sorry, I’m late!” Lily cries, rushing in as I open the doors for her.

"Let's get started, then."

It's time to create and connect the Logic Core for this evil weapon—which I fully intend to study and refine later with Sophie's guidance. Connecting it to Fracture will provide the perfect foundation for my future experiments.

My vision for the Logic Core extends far and wide.

Chapter 495: Framework ignition

We have [Manipulation], we have [Connection], we have all my skills, and we even have Lily to heal us if the pressure gets to be too much and hopefully stop a brain or two from melting. Mine should be fine, but I'm not entirely sure about the others.

After rehearsing the entire process a few times, we get to it.

Sophie, the twins, and I start working on the Logic Core, inscribing the base into the highest quality mana stone we possess. The mana stone is surprisingly small, only as big as my thumbnail, and its color is reminiscent of voidcopper.

For the first time, I also sacrifice some of the alloy Nevan left to me back on the 5th floor. As I melt and pummel it with kinetic energy, thin threads of the metal stretch into the air, connecting themselves to Fracture's crossguard as I work on preparing the setup. The heat I need to reshape Fracture gets pretty intense, so Lily helps by using [Disintegration] to make some space at the cost of destroying bits of valuable metal I could have reused, but I don't think it can really be helped.

Meanwhile, Sophie is preparing a basic structure for the new Logic Core, sketching out an outline for me to inscribe into the stone, though she's not very good at working with such high-quality mana stones. There's a certain degree of resistance you need to push through, and I'm just better suited to the task.

The twins wait patiently to play their part in the process to help connect it all, preparing to join their minds for that purpose.

My expectations aren't high. Even if we do succeed in creating a Logic Core and connecting it to the weapon, it'll still be empty, ready for me to work on as Sophie teaches me how.

The main objective is to add some new functionality to the sword—and it happens. For the first time in a while, nothing goes terribly wrong.

I inscribe the mana stone with a design that should allow the Logic Core to integrate with the weapon while leaving enough empty space in the stone for future modifications. Sophie then takes over, primarily working in a supportive role, meticulously addressing any minor imperfections.

It takes us quite a while, but by the time we're done, a copper cabochon cut mana stone adorns the center of the cross guard where it comes to a point just above the blade.

Contrasted with the blade and its mottled gray hues, and streaks of voidcopper, it looks surprisingly nice, even though the finished result is somewhat ruined by the imperfections I created when I was forging it.

"That was surprisingly easy," Aaron comments, staring at Fracture.

Sophie looks at him. "What did you expect, an explosion and mortal wounds?"

Dennis waves at her, and when he gets her attention, he just points at me.

Sophie follows that point and looks at me as well, her mouth wordlessly saying, "Oh."

Ignoring the heretics I ask instead, “The Champion’s bond before felt like it had emotions. Do you think a sufficiently advanced Logic Core could do that?”

“I don’t know, Nat,” Sophie shakes her head. “You said he called his bond ‘she,’ but I still think his bond was fully artificial, just taken to such an extreme that it might have felt like a living being, without truly being one.”

“If it had true sentience wouldn’t that mean the Champion basically created life?” Aaron asks, seeming genuinely curious.

I shrug as I think about the answer. “I would like to know. Did he create inscriptions, like a modified personality construct of his mind? Was his bond just another native of the floor, with a false semblance of emotion? Are the natives truly fake, like an elevated version of a Logic Core? Are they clones of beings that lived long ago with a predetermined expiration date? Lissandra made a personality imprint of her own, and now she’s messing with all kinds of things all over the place.”

“If so then maybe creating a living being isn’t as extraordinary as it might seem?” Aaron wonders.

“That would be fucked up though, wouldn’t it?” his brother asks, shoving him. “If that’s the case then what stops someone from cloning themselves and leaving a few thousand versions of them wandering around?”

“They would probably be subject to certain limitations or need to build their stats and levels on their own—if they could even connect to the system in the first place,” I reply, opening the door to my room as I finish sharing my wisdom, allowing the rest of group 4 waiting outside, to shamelessly jostle their way inside.

Maya pokes the table with the ax and shield on it. Tess lifts Biscuit from the chair and sits down, pulling him into her lap.

Izzy rushes over to Sophie, and Min-Jae joins the twins, who immediately start showing off as three of them surround Fracture and poke it careful to avoid removing the sheath.

Amazed by such shamelessness, I quietly move to the corner of my room.

It's the final night before Framework ignition. We spend the remaining time discussing our strategy, though I only half-listen. Once everything is organized, a few leave to get food. Stories are shared, and jokes are exchanged.

Knowing the danger looming over us tomorrow, everyone agrees to put their grievances aside for the night.

In the morning, Sophie leaves with Maya and Lily. Tess moves to the top of the tower, her eyes tracing their path as if she can track their signatures even through the heavily warded walls, with a large number of javelins surrounding her.

Dozens of them trace paths through the room. Another dozen have been weaved from my mana, making them extremely tough and durable. The kind that could probably last a year or two if left untouched.

Another dozen javelins have been made from Lily's bones. Knowing that they've come from the body of a person possessing [Disintegration], high Constitution, and a powerful healing skill, they cannot be underestimated.

Min-Jae sits next to her as well, surrounded by boxes, filled to the brim with orbs as big as my fist. Some are once again made from my own woven mana and others have been made from Lily's bones.

There is something weird about it, but at the same time, it has a certain kind of logic to it. The materials are just that good.

Izzy and the twins are on the lower floors of the tower, ready in case of attack. The sleeping Biscuit and Noodle are there with them.

Enjoying this book? Seek out the original to ensure the author gets credit.

All of us are connected through the web Sophie and the twins have provided, allowing us to communicate.

I, meanwhile, stay in my room, connected to the Framework through [Ley Line] and watching the entire process, all my preparations within the room ready to activate. [Focus] sharpens my mind, bent to the task of helping me process the immense amount of information.

As I wait the Framework slowly begins to activate.

At first, it's almost unnoticeable. Seemingly dozens of mind mages surround the main set of inscriptions, connecting their minds to the construct and gradually pulling in the minds of the people under their control and those of the monsters they've caught and locked up for this specific purpose.

Slowly, more minds are added, and mana batteries placed across the city are tapped as the city itself—acting as one big inscription—activates. Everything is calculated to help the process: the width of the streets, the height of each tower, the number of windows in the towers, their materials, and the very shapes of the walls.

It's an incredible piece of work that must have taken decades to build. Something I find hard to imagine a simple group of level 300 individuals devising on their own.

That unsettling feeling becomes more pronounced—as we feel a pull from all around us, enough to make a person dizzy. And even though we should be protected and excluded from it, we can feel it, and the others can probably feel it more than me.

Gradually, even the minds of the people walking through the city are taken over, no one seems capable of resisting, and all life stops as they halt their movements wherever they are, standing rooted in place, empty expressions on their faces.

Anxiety continues to build, intensifying as I glance toward the inscribed roof at the heart of the city, where everything is unfolding. The roof, covered in dense, golden inscriptions, radiates light with an indescribable hue. A powerful, concentrated beam shoots upward, piercing through the cloudy sky and beyond.

As I monitor the Framework, I sense hundreds, thousands—tens of thousands—of monster minds connecting, each one pushed to its limit, strained to the breaking point, and many ultimately die in the process.

The pressure continues to mount. Monsters keep falling, and some of the humans on the streets begin to succumb. Mana batteries drain at an alarming rate as an extraordinary number of calculations are rapidly performed in succession.

The immense power of these minds becomes a resource, directed by the city's inscriptions.

Then they succeed.

Something changes. Something invisible, yet everyone feels it. The very air seems different, and the stifling sensation of a ceiling overhead disappears. The pressure vanishes with a single audible crack—like the snapping of a twig—echoing across the entire moon.

The spatial locks are broken, and with it, the city begins to shake. A tear appears in the sky, and from it, a single giant eye emerges and looks down towards the city.

The eye looks human in structure but it's clearly way too big to belong to any human. The iris is black, and the pupil is golden-brown, while the sclera is weaved through with a tracework of bloody veins as it stares, unblinking.

It would seem like the spatial locks were holding one of the Containment Cells closed.

The Framework starts to die as minds begin disconnecting.

That's when I step in.

My mind shines within the Framework, and I feel all the presences within turn to me in an attempt to sever my links to the construct.

They cannot.

My Ley Lines aren't that simple to get rid of.

My mind is not that simple to overwhelm or attack.

All the inscriptions I've made, all the Ley Lines connecting me to them, activate, and my mana pours out of my crown as I take over the Framework and make use of that resource—that power—all these minds.

I'm not a mind mage, so it's not perfect. Over 90% of that power is wasted, but even that, even 10% of the processing power from those thousands of minds is enough. The inscriptions leading to the table holding the ax and shield activate. Everything has already been prepared and carefully planned, enabling me to accomplish something that would otherwise shatter my mind in an instant, if it didn't take me months to complete.

The surface of the table starts melting and cracking under pressure, but I hold everything together deep within my [Focus].

[Focus - lvl 59 > Focus - lvl 60]

[Ley Line - lvl 40 > Ley Line - lvl 41]

[Ley Line - lvl 41 > Ley Line - lvl 42]

[Infusion - lvl 47 > Infusion - lvl 48]

[Infusion - lvl 48 > Infusion - lvl 49]

[Redistribution - lvl 57 > Redistribution - lvl 58]

The immense power of that mind converted into a resource, flows through the Framework I've taken over, channeled via my Ley Lines and inscriptions, and guided by my will. The experience I gained while working with the twins on Fracture brought to bear as I apply the same techniques to the axe and the shield.

Healing marks activate one after another. My arcane passive safeguards my mind, though its primary function is to defend against mental manipulation—not against my own actions. Unfortunately.

Still, I hold on for as long as I can, pouring every ounce of effort into directing the power of these minds to aid in forging the items.

Finally, when control slips beyond my grasp and I can no longer regain it, the work is complete.

Before me lie two finished creations.

Ironbreaker (Mid Arcane) - Ironbreaker functions as an impenetrable shield, capturing the kinetic force of each attack within its dense layers, causing the energy to bounce back and forth, amplifying with each reflection. This concentrated energy can then be released in controlled bursts, resulting in powerful shockwaves that may be used to repel even the fiercest assaults. With each impact, Ironbreaker's internal structure temporarily reinforces itself, becoming an unyielding barrier capable of withstanding relentless physical attacks without compromise.

Mana Reaver (Mid Arcane) - Mana Reaver draws intensely from the wielder's mana, honing its edge to an almost unnatural sharpness that cleaves effortlessly through any magical defense. Upon contact, the blade releases a unique disruptive effect that interferes with the mana flow of anything it touches, suppressing skills and breaking through magical barriers. The wielder can channel additional mana into each strike, immensely amplifying the weapon's potency and allowing it to cut through even the most formidable magical protections.

Three healing marks from Lily activate, mending my body from the strain of crafting the items. I wish I could make more, but as expected, this seems to be my limit, even with all the help I've been afforded.

I immediately send an order through the system.

Do you really want to sell the following item for 135,600 shards?

Mana Reaver (Mid Arcane)

Yes/No

Do you really want to sell the following item for 129,900 shards?

Ironbreaker (Mid Arcane)

Yes/No

The offers are each lower than what I could get for Fracture, even in its imperfect state, but for now, it's enough.

"It seems like you will be staying with me for a while longer," I note, speaking to the sword as I confirm the notifications.

Then I make another choice.

Do you really want to sell the following passive skill for 9,110 shards?

Arcane Resilience (Mid Epic)

Yes/No

The window disappears, and I check my shards.

Shards:554,546

Finding myself with more shards than I had expected, I decide on a different passive, one I've had my eye on for a while.

"Buy passive skill Mental Attunement Loop (Mid Arcane)."

Chapter 496: Threads of the Devourer

Passive Skill: Mental Attunement Loop (Mid Arcane) - The user's mind functions in an unending attunement loop, immensely reducing the mental toll of continuous large-scale mana and energy usage, seamlessly sustaining even the most demanding skills and traits. This allows unrestrained mana and energy manipulation over extended periods without fatigue.

Almost five hundred thousand shards disappear, and the passive appears in my status. The description though simple is perfectly aligned with my ever-growing goals and the increasingly intricate ways I find myself using mana.

There were passives that could have offered more—for instance, those designed to help my body better withstand the strain of mana, others that would've enhanced my mental capabilities—but I chose to pass on them.

This passive is straightforward, and its simple description assures me that it will deliver exactly what I need. And the rarity only reinforces its effectiveness. Impressively so.

The pain immediately hits me, but this time I don't really have the luxury of waiting it out as hell descends outside, the eye maintaining its position high in the sky as threads resembling veins stretch their way down towards the ground, connecting themselves to the bodies of those who died during the Frameworks activation.

Their corpses twitch, bloat, and quickly grow in size until they stand towering over most houses—giants of exposed viscera with bones peeking through their bloated flesh and twisted expressions fixed on their mangled faces as blood drips from them every time they move, burning holes in the ground.

And the eye in the sky gradually grows stronger and stronger, despite its weakened state, creating more strands that seek out the ever increasing victims of the giants. They don't have any text over their heads, but the eye does.

[Bloodroot Devourer - lvl ????]

This prisoner doesn't seem like the type to hold a conversation.

(Sophie, have you gotten ahold of the off-moon teleportation array?) I ask.

(Beatrice escaped to the palace before we could get to her. She was extremely aware of Lily, and she was gone the moment Lily attacked.)

(I gave it my all.)

(I know you did, Lily,)

Our communication continues, question and response firing off at rapid speed in a rapid stream of messages as Sophie, Maya, and Lily make for the palace at high speed. And I take note of their movements, keeping tabs on them through the connections I've established with [Ley Line].

(So you recommend staying and trying to get there while the eye, which is probably a soon-to-be-full-power Champion, hunts us. Sounds good.)

(Dennis, don't talk to me like that. My sister's in just as much danger as you.)

(I'll hold it off.)

After sending my message, silence follows, and I'm grateful to finally be alone in my room. My hand rises to my lips, and I feel the corners curved upward. My rising heartbeat, confirming its presence.

The eye looms above all, towering over the chaos. People lash out at it with a host of powerful attacks, only to have them deflected by the once-human figures the creature has transformed into an army of fleshy golems—those with wings, fly around the eye as the main line of defense, while the others remain on the ground, creating more corpses.

It's still weak, far too weak to be called a Champion, but it's growing stronger by the second, making me curious if it was ever truly crippled or if it still has some hope of fully regaining its title.

(Nat, do you think you can fight a Champion?) Aaron asks carefully.

And I answer honestly, (No way. A Champion would beat the shit out of me in a second, but that thing—it's not it yet.)

And with that, I push the link to the back of my mind, monitoring for urgent messages.

"Use Trait strengthening token on Mana Wavelength Iris."

The pain from the application of my new passive intensifies as the strengthening token goes to work. Even though it hasn't been fully applied, the new passive should help with this damn powerful trait.

It wasn't long ago that I strengthened this trait for the first time, and it should have taken me another few months before I felt like I could do so again. But now? With my new passive?

I extend my hand, and Fracture rises to meet it, still in its sheath, pulled along by a [Ley Line].

The mana in my crown begins to spin, and I shatter the window in front of me with a surge of kinetic energy and leap out of the tower. Far in the distance, I notice a huge mana mech form—slender and deadly, equal in size to the towering flesh abominations. Maya fights to create a path for Lily and Sophie to reach the palace.

At the same time, blue flames explode around the tower, along with dozens of lifelike projections the twins are using to distract the attacking flesh golems.

I boost myself and fly into the air, heading for the eye, using Mana Weaving to create a huge projectile behind me.

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A few monsters attempt to block my path, but javelins streak past me at incredible speed, sounding off with a terrifying whistle. Red and white lightning arcs around them, annihilating the monsters in a single strike before the javelins pivot and surge toward new targets.

I launch the massive javelin at the monster, but the eye shifts focus to intercept the attack. Vein-like tendrils extend from it, effortlessly swatting both attacks out of the air.

As I form another weapon and battle the fleshy monsters, a constant barrage of javelins supports me.

The monster releases even more fleshy veins—hundreds of them—twisting, shifting, and forming a shape, an inscription. Then a single pulse of mana flows through them and activates it.

I find myself unable to fly no matter how hard I try. My kinetic energy is still there, but it's impossible to direct it in the ways I need to maintain flight.

My Mana Wavelength Iris takes in that incredible structure made by the fleshy things. Forming an immensely intricate design, capable of generating such complex effects with ease. The sheer knowledge and control needed for something like that—complemented by a beautiful movement of mana to put it into effect.

I stare in awe even as I make my forced landing in between the buildings of the city, absorbing the kinetic energy generated by my fall. Three fleshy golems charge me, blood dripping everywhere and melting anything in their path—stone, people, or metal.

Mana surrounds me, forming massive plates of armor around my body, and I allow myself to compress it more than I normally would. I incorporate more threads with Mana Weaving and allow the mana to flow from me in waves.

It hurts so much, with my new passive and trait still making their changes to my body, a process that will likely take several more hours. But over time the changes make themselves known.

Kinetic energy flows through my armor, and I tackle one of the fleshy giants closing in on me. The blow leaves the construct shattered and sends it slamming into the buildings nearby. My armor moves slowly, struggling under the strain of its own weight and bulk, so I pump more kinetic energy through, enhancing its movements before slamming into another fleshy golem. Grabbing its shoulders, I tear it in half and send the last one's head flying with a punch.

That done, my armor disappears, and I land, softly alighting on the ground, pulling the huge quantity of mana back into my crown where I set it to circle.

Three javelins, as long as a bus, form above me. Weaving themselves from mana, compressing, and filling with golden thermal energy. They shoot forth, sending a shockwave through the streets in their wake.

All three explode in the grip of the fleshy veins that manage to intercept them long before they make contact with the eye. A few of Tess's javelins meet the same fate.

At that point I get a message, leading me to teleport through a [Ley Line], ending near the palace where Sophie, Lily, and Maya should be. The huge armor forms around me again, and I find myself clashing with a set of fleshy golems trying to follow the trio. At the same time, Min-Jae, already here, starts throwing huge pieces of broken buildings at the monsters, each one the size of a car, allowing them to build up a lot of speed, obliterating the monsters.

Just as a test, I tear away one of the fleshy tentacles connecting one of the monsters to the eye, but the monster continues to move and attack despite the effort.

One of the tallest golems falls down, unable to stand within the field Min-Jae created around it. With a sweeping motion of his hand, Min-Jae brings down an entire tower along with the smaller one next to it.

With all of them dead, I teleport to the boy and gesture at the eye. "Throw me at it."

To his credit, Min-Jae doesn't hesitate, nor does he ask why. I lower my natural defense, and his skills envelop me, sending me flying right toward the eye at incredible speed.

Forming armor around my body, I pierce through any monsters in my way. When the fleshy tentacles reach for me, I increase the armor's size so they grab the armor instead of me. Though their movements are still incredibly quick.

The eye turns to me, looking, observing, its veins forming inscriptions once again. This time, I allow my Mana Wavelength Iristo take over. Observing it in the same way, reacting to the movements of its mana.

As the monster activates the inscriptions, I add a bit of speed to the rotation of my crown—an instability that releases a pulse of disruption, modified to counter the attack meant to vibrate my body and mana into a mist of bloody flesh.

My pulse and the monster's attack collide, disrupting each other.

And I live.

The eye blinks, and the tentacles form into another shape. More of them try to attack the armor around me, attempting to pierce or tear it apart with great force. For my armor to last this long really goes to show just how durable I've made it.

But the monster grows stronger at the moment. Its movements become quicker, the pressure it radiates increases, and it starts moving its mana at higher and higher speeds. Another inscription activates, and I barely manage to counter it—as half of my armor evaporates into nothingness.

A red and white lightning passes by me, destroying the fleshy tentacles in their way along with the ones that try to stop it, before nearly reaching the eye—only for a last-second mana barrier to stop it. And what a powerful barrier it is. With my eyes, I can tell right away that I won't be able to break it apart.

(Tess, there's a box full of sand in my room. Just throw it at the monster if it looks like I'm getting my ass kicked,) I send through the link.

Finally done, I let the mana in my crown cycle one more time, the resulting wave disrupting the effect preventing me from flying.

My armor gets pulled back into me, and the mana seeps back into my crown.

The monster, now feeling at least 50 levels stronger than me, moves. Its tentacles forming an ever-changing array of inscriptions that hurt my eyes—a terrible attack I'll have no way of withstanding.

At the same moment, an orb forms over the palm of my hand.

Light blue.

Dark blue.

Dark blue with wisps of light blue.

Dark blue with wisps of light blue and purple.

An orb on the brink of destabilization beginning to turn bright white.

Finally collapsing into another color.

An orb made of black mana. So domineering, and yet so calm here in the palm of my hand.

With my [Focus] and [Mana Manipulation] at level 60, with my body getting used to the strengthening Mana Wavelength Iris, and with the new passive still being applied, I connect the orb with the crown floating over my head.

Within a blink, the crown turns an inky black, the movement of the mana within coming to a halt in an instant. The stillness is unsettling, unnatural—yet it doesn't stop there. The crown begins to draw mana from me, pulling from my body and reservoir without hesitation, consuming all with relentless efficiency.

The air around me shifts, growing dense with an oppressive weight. The battlefield seems to hold its breath as my crown absorbs an endless stream of mana. Building a quiet sort of power, steady and unyielding.

This time, I might just be able to make it work.

Chapter 497: Clash with the Devourer

All sound fades away, replaced with a silence unlike anything I've ever experienced. I can't hear my heartbeat. I can't hear my breathing. Nothing. Colors fade to black and white, save the vibrant blue of mana.

In that world, the crown above my head appears darker than even the deepest shades of black around it.

My domain, enhanced by the additional effects of my Pride subclass, envelops me and the crown as I focus with absolute intensity. The crown absorbs all my mana, and I allow it to do so—but in return, I bend it to my will. Every ounce of effort and experience poured into making that happen.

I'm far stronger than I was before, and for that brief moment, the crown permits it. Because it's my mana. It's part of my skill.

The crown's effect expands even more, and the ambient mana gets drawn in from the air around me, the crown hungrily sucking it in like a whirlpool eager to devour everything. The shield around the eye dissolves into a cloud of mana particles, as even it gets siphoned away.

The eye's inscriptions fail to materialize as the crown begins drawing in all the mana the monster can produce. The sheer volume of mana is staggering, increasing as the monster steadily regains its original strength, and yet the black crown above my head continues to absorb it effortlessly.

No skill powered by mana is able to manifest within its reach.

The eye starts falling down, unable to keep itself in the air, and as it passes by me, multiple javelins trailed by lightning pierce through the eye, only for it to regenerate. Its fleshy veins drawing in materials from the flesh golems to close the wounds with the sizzling pop of rapidly molded tissue.

Every golem still on the ground quickly grows a new set of wings and heads right for me. Numbering in the hundreds in a matter of seconds, each the size of a multi-story building.

Breathe out.

Wait a bit longer, let your new trait enhancement and passive apply just a tiny bit more, just a little bit.

Good.

I reach out to my crown, drawing on the overwhelming power within to fuel my skill. A single pulse of [Resonance] radiates outward, crackling with the immense mana drawn in by the crown. The pulse surges through the area like an unstoppable tide.

In an instant, the hundreds of flesh golems closing in on me are obliterated, shredded into countless fragments, immediately reduced to nothing more than grains of sand scattering on the wind.

The pulse continues on, slamming into the giant eye. The attack digs into its body, tearing it apart, layer by layer, with a ravenous hunger. Half of the eye is obliterated under the relentless onslaught.

Then the backlash strikes, hitting me hard—the aftereffects of my skill, the damage from my crown, the application of my new trait, and the passive all take their toll at once. For a moment, I falter, dropping slightly before regaining control of my kinetic energy and lifting myself back into the air.

Three javelins of black mana take shape above me, hurtling toward the damaged eye and piercing deep into it. Blood pours down in torrents like waterfalls, glimmering as it cascades through the sky. Yet, even as it suffers, the remaining fragment of the beast's pupil fixes its gaze on me, emanating an inhuman, emotionless intelligence.

All of the creature's remaining veins burst into motion, forming even more intricate inscriptions. Just looking at it makes me want to vomit, and my eyes become hazy as the edges of the inscription blurs.

Even without mana, the veins form another inscription and it activates.

No, it would seem that even the tiniest fraction of mana the monster generates—just managing to escape before my crown can absorb it—turns out to be enough to activate them. The monster calmly works to bypass the threat presented by my crown, as if it were nothing more than another obstacle to be outmaneuvered.

The effects of the inscription are directed at the monster itself and the entire eye begins to blur, the javelins lodged in its flesh falling to the ground as the monster fades becoming transparent and immaterial.

Another pulse of [Resonance] passes through the monster as if it weren't even there. The same goes for any other attacks I fire off in quick succession, each fueled by that powerful mana guided by my body's capacity to channel vast quantities of energy.

The eye activates another series of inscriptions, its wounds sizzling and sealing until it is fully healed. Its mana surges, growing stronger with each passing moment, inching ever closer to its original power—a level where I won't stand a chance.

But the same goes for me. My Mana Wavelength Iris pierces through the veil and sees the place where the monster shifted itself.

The crown fights my control but I use its mana, and I resonate with it, adapting the frequency to the space the monster has sequestered itself. The crown then starts absorbing the eye's mana.

Behind me, threads of mana form, moving like the eye's fleshy veins, shaping into inscriptions. I try to mimic and adapt one of the monster's previous attacks, and when the preparations are complete, a pulse of mana from the crown ripples through the dense threads of mana.

The threads snap, crumble, and disintegrate, unable to withstand the immense amount of mana. The backlash is worse than I expected, and the difficulty of forming and activating the inscriptions is far greater than I thought.

Excitement stirs inside me as I make adjustments. I adapt the inscriptions to myself, replaying the monster's actions, alter the way I'm channeling my mana, and modify the frequency and quantity.

Then, I start creating the lines, weaving the inscriptions anew—using Ley Lines instead. The pain grows, and the eye increases its efforts.

Another inscription formed from its fleshy veins flares into activation, and a huge part of the sky turns dark red. Overtaken in its entirety, interwoven with the creature's veins, forming more inscriptions. Then the eye makes a change in the way it handles its mana changes as well, constantly deploying that field that makes the monster shift. All the while, that eye stares at me, a calm, alien intelligence glowing within.

My attempt collapses under the crushing weight of the oppressive force generated by the blood-red sky.

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Then the monster avoids another attack by shifting its position and turning transparent, all the while generating more mana and letting it be absorbed—amounts I haven't felt in a long time.

I know what it's doing, but I can't stop it. Even with the crown under my control, even with the monster's awareness, I can't do more. Right now, I lack the ability to use it to its fullest, I simply lack the capacity to face an opponent this powerful.

Finally, it reaches the point where I can't hold onto it anymore, and the incredibly charged crown slips from my control, failing to absorb any more mana. Immediately starting to break down as cracks of white spiderweb their way across its surface.

(You can throw the box at the eye.)

Tess does just that, the box of white sand crashes into the tentacles protecting the creature, immediately charging the contents to an incredible degree, and it starts flying around the beast like an enraged swarm of bees, piercing through the monster's skin with ease.

Even so, bleeding as the sand grinds it down to paste the eye starts to build up layers upon layers of barriers around my crown.

I know it shouldn't be enough. I know exactly how much mana the crown has taken from the monster and me. And yet...

(We are leaving,) I state, sending another message to the ground.

As I land on the ground, my legs give up and I fall to my knees, but I push through it, reaching through Ley Lines and connecting to the others.

Then I teleport us all away, dropping us at a point I set up near the abandoned fortress.

All of us appear here and check on each other, some of them are carrying items from my room and others have brought additional loot from the city—still visible in the distance.

The blood red sky stretches on for miles as the fleshy veins expand further. And amongst all that red, over the city, the black crown still floats, the monster's veins, barriers, and flesh continuing to surround it even while being constantly ravaged by the wildly swarming particles of white sand.

The dark red sky turns bright white for a moment. But I don't get any kill notifications.

Instead, all of my running skills fail as I feel a new pull on my mana.

And in the place where the crown was, there is now a black, siphoning all the mana from the area, siphoning away the barriers the eye is struggling to build around it. There are more and more of them, creating a thick layer and inscriptions activated by these fleshy veins. Even through all these efforts, the black mana keeps pulling on the mana of the monster. Not as strongly as it could as a crown, but it still does nonetheless.

I don't think that black orb will endure the monster much longer. Even now, the eye feels stronger than level 350, and my best, likely not accurate, estimate is closer to 400. Still far off from the usual around level 500 of Champions, but I have no intention of staying here and waiting to see if the monster can regain its peak form.

Having had a moment to recover some mana, I force my mind to work again, pushing through the pain and reaching through my [Ley Line] to teleport us once again.

A chill creeps up the back of my head, and I sense movement reaching toward me. But I'm too slow—far too slow to react.

An attack meant for me pierces Lily's chest. A blood-red vein spanning the distance between here and the city miles away.

The eye fixes its gaze on our position, preparing another attack. Simultaneously, it forms barriers around the orb, even as it's being relentlessly worn away by the white sand.

"Oh, you don't," Lily whispers. Gray mana seeps out around her arms, as she grabs the vein piercing her with a short scream.

Immediately, that gray mana disintegrates the vein at terrifying speed, devouring it like a fuse, tracing a path toward the source of the attack.

For a split second, the monster seems willing to let the gray mana reach it. But in the end decides against it, moving its other tentacles to tear it off.

I touch Lily's shoulder, replacing the [Ley Line] connection her attack removed, and teleport our entire group before another attack can reach us. Even so, in mid-teleport, something crashes into us. Doing so in a way I haven't felt before. It's not physical, and most of all it reminds me of when the thylarin brothers back messed with my anchor back on Deathtrap.

Then it's followed up by a second force that fights against it.

The [Ley Line] I'm pulling us through threatens to snap, and within that short moment, I once again force my battered body and mind into overdrive, relying on my strengthened trait to pick up the slack, just to hold everything together. Even now, I have no idea what such a terribly messed-up teleport could do.

At last, we break free, but instead of appearing near Hollowgate, we arrive in an unfamiliar place, scattered across the ground. Some of us are missing limbs, others are simply injured, and a few are even unconscious. All my items, all the items they looted, our weapons have been scattered across the area in much the same way.

With a groan, I remove the damaged [Ley Line] that brought us here and form a small orb of black mana to remove any residue that could help them track us.

When it's done, I force myself to my feet and stagger over to Lily, who lies on the ground, breathing heavily. The wound on her chest is covered by the red flesh of the monster as it tries to devour and turn her into another fleshy golem or something worse. Her gray mana keeps firing up around her heart to defend it and keep the infected flesh from reaching her brain, but Lily seems to have trouble focusing on removing it thanks to some side effect of the invading flesh. It spreads through her body, disrupting her mana, damaging her marks, and attempting to change her, to take control.

Lily meets my eyes and clenches her teeth, giving me a signal.

Kinetic energy collects in my body as I transfer what little mana I have left and let it generate a bit more. It comes forth in bursts, directed at Lily, concentrated as much as I can manage, turning the flesh surrounding her chest wound into a fleshy crater, evaporating the majority of the monster's red flesh.

Lily doesn't even groan in pain; instead, her eyes look scary as they remain wide open, observing my actions.

[Disintegration], now easier for her to use, activates, obliterating her own body. It takes her right arm, the right side of her chest near her heart, and even a part of her waist and neck, aiming at removing the remains of the red flesh.

When she looks at me I shake my head and point higher at her neck.

She repeats it, her eyes slowly glazing over as her broken body bleeds from open wounds.

I shake my head again and point at her belly.

Another part of her disappears. Bloody foam forms around her mouth. She doesn't breathe anymore. She can't, with most of her lungs and chest missing.

I get to my knees and move closer to her, and slap her across the face, forcing her dwindling attention back to me.

For a moment she closes her eyes.

Quickly I grab her head and shake it.

Lily opens her eyes, a bit confused but after seeing me she smiles and tries to say something.

The kinetic energy I've been collecting since the last attack bursts forth with an accuracy I didn't even know I was capable of. It obliterates the tiny remains of red flesh in multiple spots, hurting Lily further and making her body twitch as each strike makes contact.

"Heal." I don't even recognize my voice as I speak, simply repeating the word, "Heal."

Lily takes a moment, as if she were having trouble hearing me or as if she couldn't quite understand my words. Only after a while does she nod slowly, and both of her legs below her knees disappear with a quick use of [Sacrifice]. Her neck, her chest, her arms, and blood, begin to regenerate at incredible speed.

Then she takes a deep breath.

Chapter 498: Metal Cathedral

I sit in deep thought, watching as Lily goes from person to person, healing any serious injuries while letting our natural regeneration deal with the rest. Everyone is battered, and the snapping of my Ley Line has dropped us somewhere unfamiliar.

Tess says she might have an idea where we are and she's confirming her suspicions with Maya and Min-Jae, neither of whom has much mana left over from our fight in the city. The same goes for everyone else, whether they were caught in the fighting amongst the mind mages after the Framework ignition or dealing with the fleshy golems afterward.

My eyes continue to follow Lily, and I think back over everything again. I replay the fight and all the mistakes I made. How I let my excitement and desire for the experience of fighting a powerful being take over. Even to the point that I failed to go all out right from the start when the newly freed Champion was closer to my current level of strength. I didn't even use Fracture and make no mistake, that was a very intentional decision.

Could I have killed it then, if I had gone all out from the start?

It's possible. But it's also more possible the eye had more cards hidden up its sleeve, much like I do, and perhaps it still could have endured long enough to regain its full power.

The problem here is that I didn't even stop to think about it and that nearly cost Lily her life.

I lean back and let out an annoyed groan. Then I jump back to my feet and rejoin the group.

All of our items have already been collected in a big pile: my golden chains, a selection of stolen weapons and materials, even some equipment the others managed to loot during the fights. Plenty of them have already sold their spoils, though they seem to have left the most interesting ones, either for study or use.

Izzy looks to me first, with Biscuit cradled in her arms. I feel her touch and used to not hiding it from her, I let her for a moment feel my current emotions.

I oblige, joining everyone else as they take their own seats, forming a circle, this time it's Izzy's blue flames gathered in a sphere, cracking and providing a steady stream of warmth.

"I think we're just a few days off from the Containment Cell holding the primordial lightning vyssari," Tess starts with that.

After a moment of silence, it's Sophie who finally breaks down and says what we all are thinking, "That is too lucky, isn't it? It's exactly where we wanted to go. Nat's [Ley Line] didn't even go in that direction, quite the opposite in fact."

"I can't deny that," Tess confirms. "But what should we do? Do we really think that thing meant to send us here when it disrupted Nat's skill? Could it really all be luck?"

"Maybe it was affected by the array around that floating island that holds the vyssari Champion and it acted like a magnet and pulled us towards it?"

"I think it was the vyssari Champion who caused us to come out here." I say, following Sophie's line of logic and all eyes turn to me and I continue, "The Bloodroot Devourer, the eye thing, was trying to tear us apart when it interfered with my teleportation. Certainly something much worse than what ended up happening. There was a second force trying to help me. I think that while I did manage to keep us from dying, that second force helped bring us here. I don't know how capable that vyssari is, but every Champion seems to have some sort of influence on the world outside of their cells."

"Well, whatever it is, we'd better decide fast, shouldn't we?" Aaron says, seizing our attention. "If that thing becomes a full Champion, it'll be powerful enough to destroy the whole continent. Hell, that Tristan guy back on the 2nd floor destroyed life on an entire world."

"Any idea how long it might take that thing to regain its full power?" Tess asks.

I think about it for a moment before saying. "This is a rough estimate and I don't have much experience to back it up, but if things continue as they are now, it should reach somewhere around the rank of Champion within a few hours. If it slows at some point, then maybe a few days. Assuming it even can regain its powers and it wasn't crippled like the other Champions."

"Got it, even that's better than nothing," Tess nods. "Sophie, did you get everything you wanted?"

"Beatrice and Archon escaped in the end, but we got one of her vassals and I got as much as I could from his mind. The array is fairly basic, but most importantly, I managed to obtain coordinates to the planet we are orbiting. With the spatial locks removed, all we need to worry about is building it up and powering it."

"How much mana?" I ask her.

"A lot. You should be saving as much as you can as should everyone else. I'll prepare the structure of the array in my mind in the meantime and we can work on building a basic platform to anchor it just long enough to teleport us. It's possible this is still a way for us to clear the floor, so the mana requirements might not actually be as high as if we were actually trying to move between planets, that would be crazy."

"Will do. As soon as my body and reservoir refill, I'll start filling the crown. Do you think working with Archon and Beatrice was supposed to be one of the ways we were meant to escape?"

"Highly likely—if you happened to be capable of keeping yourself from falling under their influence. Another way to escape would probably be to wait for guards to show up to put the prisoners back under lock and key and escape through the way they came? Maybe we could coordinate with some other Champion and hope for mercy? I think the one back in the Mana Desert would've been capable of escaping if he had been freed."

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That reminds me, "What about the last Containment Cell, Tess? You said you located the last one as well?" I ask, turning to her with the question.

"Let me guess, it's deep underground," Dennis grumbles before she can answer, which gets him a curious look from Min-Jae, and I sense them exchanging messages as he explains.

Tess shakes her head, "The last Containment Cell should be somewhere far to the north of here, beyond the central region. Surrounded by a wall of millennia-old ice and blizzards powerful enough to threaten and perhaps kill us, even at our level."

"We are not going there, are we?"

"No, we are not going there, Min-Jae," Tess confirms. "While Nat and Sophie prepare our way out, we are going to head over to the vyssari Champion and see if we can get her to declare more Candidates. If Sophie and Nat can get ready before then, we will leave right away, even if we have to forgo meeting her."

Tess gestures towards the blood-red sky far in the distance. The color deepening as it gradually takes over larger and larger portions of the sky. "I don't think we should stay on this floor much longer."

Looking at it, I nod along with her, my mind elsewhere.

We move quickly for the next day or so. We don't even stop to sleep, deciding to push through these last few days on the floor. When we meet monsters, we either avoid them or let the others deal with them, allowing me to save my mana.

At the same time, Sophie's working on the teleportation array and often finds herself asking for help as she feeds me the specifications for the base I will need to anchor it.

During the few short breaks along the way, I melt the materials and form the base to save time later.

As I work on one of the mana stones we're going to need, I get a message through a private link in my mind.

(It sucks, doesn't it?) Sophie asks.

(What?)

(You've barely said a word since Lily almost died, and you keep staring at that red light in the distance, Nat. It's not exactly hard to figure out what's on your mind—I don't even need Izzy's skill to see that.)

(I guess.)

(As you are now, you can't do shit about that monster. You went all out and you still had to run away, and now it's even stronger than it was.)

(Sophie. If you are looking for a fight, just say it to me directly.)

(I understand how you feel, you know. I've got my own unfinished business with Namior. He completely outplayed me, and then you went and killed him—stealing any chance I had at revenge.)

(I see.)

(Yeah. It sucks ass.)

I confirm, (It does in fact, suck ass.)

The Containment Cell holding the vyssari Champion floats over the mountain range.

Well, at least what remains of the mountain range. A near-constant barrage of red and white lightning tears through the air around it, many of the bolts continuously striking the mountains and tearing chunks free. Some of the tallest mountains have been stripped of half of their mass, the lightning tending to cause landslides, though even now each of these mountains is tall enough to tower over anything we have on Earth.

And there, amid the jagged remains of mountains, floats an island. Its base forms a perfect half-sphere, with a single cathedral-like structure resting at the top in a towering crown of spires. The entire building appears to be made of metal, and the lightning seems to be emanating from it rather than striking it.

I try to throw Ley Lines towards it but fail to reach the island. The moment they cross a specific point, a barrage of lightning targets my invisible Ley Lines and destroys them.

I always knew they could be destroyed by someone with the right level of skill. There is a reason why skills need to be mastered and leveled, and [Ley Line] is no exception. But for them to be destroyed by some automatic defensive measure... strikes me as particularly messed up.

So we fly there. Everyone capable of flight stopping to help those who can't, while we squeeze in as close as possible. Tess flies a ways ahead, her crown glowing brighter and brighter as her own white and red Primordial lightning crackles through the air around her.

Any lightning that would otherwise strike our group finds itself directed at her instead, occasionally injuring her in the process, when it doesn't fly directly at her crown.

As we pick up speed, the lightning grows denser, yet Tess, despite enduring dozens of strikes, guides us safely through. Only once we've reached the island does she allow Lily to heal her, explaining that healing anyone along the way would've disrupted some kind of ritual of passage.

From here, the metal cathedral looks even bigger especially as we walk through its big open doors.

There are no cells for us to search through, no holes, no circle of containment, and no massive chains to hold the vyssari Champion in place. Instead, after walking a scant ten minutes we find her in one of the towers. In a room spanning the full width of the tower.

The only bits of furniture in the massive room are a simple bed, a wooden chair, a table set, and a dresser stand near one of the large glassless windows. The rest of the room is taken up by books. Thousands of them piled everywhere we look.

"If you damage any of my books, I will beat your ass." The vyssari Champion says, sitting in the second chair on the small balcony connected to the room. Looking out, we see a view of the destroyed mountain range and the constant barrage of lightning responsible.

That vyssari woman is just as short as the other members of her race and her scaly legs have a gray metallic shine to them. Her hair is blonde and her eyes are gray. Though the most eye-catching detail is the slim metal choker around her neck, seemingly formed of the same material as the cathedral itself.

Other than that, I make note of the ring on her finger, which looks like it's made out of pure lightning, constantly moving and swirling.

She lifts her eyes from the book in her lap and looks right at our group members, "Tess, I thought I told you to leave me the fuck alone."

Chapter 499: Vyssari Champion

"I'm sorry!"

"Sorry won't cut it, Tess."

"I can clean your room if you like."

"Fuck off. If you so much as move a single book, I'll burn your ass so badly no healer will be able to fix it for the rest of your life. And why the fuck did you bring so many people here?"

"You're using the word 'fuck' too often. Reduce it a bit, please."

"Fuck off, Tess."

"I'm sorry!"

The short vyssari jumps to her feet, carefully putting the book down before moving between stacks of books taller than she is before coming to a stop in front of me.

I return her gaze as she stares at me. "Fucking hell, man, what kind of fossil left that mark on you? That shit was old school millennia before I was born."

"Hell no." She says, smiling brightly with a wave of her hand. "But still answer my question before I kill you."

The aura around her shifts, her expression growing serious.

"Anger wells up inside me, but I shove it aside. 'Sure. I met her in one of the worlds we visited before coming here. Later, we crossed paths again, and she named me a Champion candidate after I passed her tests. As you can probably sense, read, or whatever it is you're doing, she is—or was—an Absolute. It's... a bit complicated.'"

"See, it's not that difficult. You guys came to my house, perhaps even to ask a favor. So tell me, is it wrong for me to expect to have my questions answered without having one asked back?"

"When you say it like that, it sounds very reasonable."

"I know, right?" She says, pacing in front of us before coming to a stop in front of Sophie. "If you hadn't come here with Tess, you would've been dead already."

Before Sophie can respond, the vyssari comes to another halt in front of Izzy, who stands just slightly shorter. Izzy's cradling Biscuit in her arms, with Noodle, coiled around her arm, as always.

The vyssari looks from Izzy to Noodle, and then to Biscuit, whom she observes a bit longer. Then back to me from him shaking her head as she does.

Without a word, she moves over to the twins. She gestures for them to lower themselves and pokes at their cheeks, pulling them while observing their faces.

"Handsome," she notes, touching their blond hair and looking into their blue eyes.

I notice right away Dennis opening his mouth to spew out some stupid joke, but he stops himself at the last second, remembering exactly who we're dealing with here.

But the vyssari Champion notices and turns to him. "Tell me what you wanted to say. If you lie, I will beat you."

Dennis looks over at Tess, who smiles gently and nods.

He turns to the vyssari. "Declare me a Champion candidate if you think I'm so handsome. I'll even flash you my best smile—free of charge."

Oh my.

The moment the words leave his lips I get ready to fight, and I notice the other members of our group do the same.

The vyssari blinks a few times, staring at Dennis before a laugh slips out. A light, cheerful sound, and as it fades, she shakes her head in disbelief. Then a sudden crackle of lightning flares behind Dennis, zapping him square in the ass and drawing a startled squeak from his lips, more an expression of surprise than pain.

Without a word, the vyssari moves along, coming to a stop in front of Lily, her eyes tracing a path from the huge bone axe to Lily's face.

Her expression takes on a more serious bent than before, "Tess, where did you find this one?"

"She's my friend."

"Your group surely has more than its share of monsters," the vyssari says, shaking her head but not taking her eyes off Lily. "I declare you a Champion candidate."

She says simply, as she turns around and heads back to her chair with a book in hand. Glancing at Tess, she asks, "Happy?"

"Thank you very much!"

Lily looks around a bit confused, but I can see her reading a message invisible to us, and her title is something I can feel now.

Tess moves closer to the vyssari with a big smile. "Can I do something for you as thanks?"

"How about you just shut up?"

Tess smiles even more, still happy. Gesturing for us to stay quiet, we leave the room.

Before we fully exit, the Champion calls out, "Tess, come back in an hour. I'll show you how to properly use that Primordial lightning of yours."

“Sure! Thank you, ma’am!”

“Yes,” the Champion replies, waving her hand to dismiss us.”

As we leave I check a few of the titles on the books.

Postcards from Eternity

The Cartographer’s Lover

Echoes of Forgotten Cities

Through a Thousand Sunsets

A Court of Starlight and Shadows

I notice her watching me, so I stop reading and quickly make my exit.

We move a floor lower, entering another room, almost the mirror of the one we just left, with the exception of actually having nice furniture in it.

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"Congratulations, Lily!" Tess shouts, hugging our poleaxed healer.

"That was... simple?"

"That’s just how she is, don't worry about it. For now, we'll stay here a while to avoid annoying her further—otherwise, she might snap. In the meantime, we should be safe. Speaking of which, how's your progress, Sophie?" Tess asks, leaving Lily for the others to congratulate.

"It'll be done soon, but..." Sophie gestures out of the window.

Far in the distance, the blood-red sky can be seen, gradually expanding further.

"Domain?" Tess asks, this time looking at me.

"It's probably something like that," I confirm.

"How bad is it?"

"No idea, to be honest, but I don't want to stay on this floor long enough to find out."

"Did you want to go back to your old base and get some of the materials you left there?"

"Yeah, that huge anvil and a few more golden chains, plus that massive hammer. I also wanted to go to the Mana Desert to get some more sand. But I got most of the valuable metals here, and Sophie bought and looted more for me, so it's fine—they're just items anyway. I've still got a small box of the white sand left over, at least that's something."

"The items and materials we got from Archon's palace should be well worth it. You should thank Lily; she stole anything not bolted to the floor and broke into several vaults," Sophie notes.

At this, Lily smiles shyly. "As you said, take anything not glued down."

"...anything not glued down," the twins say, mirroring Lily in perfect harmony.

Min-Jae looks between them, confused.

I continue my work on the base for the array, modifying it to Sophie's specifications. It's reasonably similar to the one I used to evacuate the others from the mana desert, though this one's much more intricate. I guess it makes sense, given the way it's meant to allow movement between moons, planets, or wherever else it's supposed to lead.

What I don't like is that Sophie has the coordinates and something akin to an activation sequence, especially since I don't think I could replicate it on my own, and neither does Sophie.

It's basically a code we can only use once, if only because we don't understand it enough to replicate it.

The best we can guess these sequences—the coordinates themselves—have to be tuned to pass through things like planetary defensive arrays, spatial locks, and other such mechanisms. It only makes sense for most of the planets capable of such travel to have those defenses in place.

This is just a floor quest though, so I think all we need to do is activate it to fulfill the requirements and open the entrance to the 7th floor. But outside of the tutorial, it would probably be more difficult. I mean, how can you guarantee the coordinates won't teleport you to some empty spot in space?

I think it should be possible to gain some information from the coordinates themselves to make sure that doesn't happen. Sophie also theorizes it should be possible to perform something like a "connection check" before deploying the activation sequence. The problem is neither of us knows how. This sort of thing seems to be ridiculously advanced, and we're still at the level where we can just barely remember the text without fully understanding it.

The main thing I noticed, after going through it all, is that the system seems to have simplified things for the purpose of our escape if only to make it possible at our current level of ability and mana control. Situations like this have come about before, and since it's a tutorial, there's bound to be some logic to it.

During that time, the blood-red domain—or whatever it is—expands even further, filling the entire horizon and stretching far into the distance. Tess says she can even see some of the fleshy veins stretching across parts of the sky, shaping a number of enormous inscriptions.

And I can confirm it won't be anything good. My eyes and senses can easily detect the amount of mana collecting in the distance—the Bloodroot Devourer is likely approaching its power as Champion.

The vyssari Champion continues to sit in her wooden chair, occasionally glancing toward that blood-red patch of sky. But the spread seems to stop and doesn't seem to be trying to stretch its way any closer to the floating island within the storms, so she doesn't seem to care.

She merely continues to give her lessons to Tess and read her books, content to be left alone.

But that all changes when we go to visit the vyssari for the first time in two days.

The inscriptions far in the sky activate with a single powerful pulse of mana, and its effects wash over the surface of the Astral Prison. It reaches us in an instant, and our mana briefly goes out of control, destabilized as the wave continues to spread at incredible speed.

A sudden thud echoes as the book slips from the vyssari Champion's hands, falling to the floor.

The lightning surrounding the floating island is gone—the very same weak residual lightning she was allowing the prison to siphon off to defend the area. Without the constant barrage of thunder, the silence is eerie, as the sound of crackling lightning begins to emanate from the vyssari instead and her hair stands on end, caught in the static.

There is extreme rage in her eyes as she stares in the direction of the blood-red sky.

"How dare you." The words themselves are calm, unlike her expression, almost unbelieving.

The metal choker around her neck pops open with a sharp click and falls to the ground, its effects nullified by the eye's assault, only to be torn apart by the lightning surging around her.

"How dare you," she repeats, her voice taking on a dangerous edge. She leaps from her chair, the ring on her finger sparkling wildly, lightning crackling through her hair and flashing in her eyes.

Her words carry a weight that seems to travel for miles. They aren't loud, but they hold an edge of authority laced with a dangerous undertone. And something answers—a pulse of mana rippling from within the blood-red sky.

"As you wish then," she says solemnly, her voice steady as the air around her thickens with an almost tangible tension. The mood shifts sharply, like a storm gathering strength. She steps forward, her presence commanding, "I call upon the ancient right. By my will and by my strength, I stand against this insult. Let power itself decide our fate." Her words reverberate, carrying a weight that seems to press down on all who hear them. The sky darkens and in that moment of silence she says, "I challenge you."

I'm certain these words can be heard across the entire surface of the moon. They are not loud, they do not cause pain, and they are not meant for us. Yet, they reverberate through the air, inviting us to witness this Champion's challenge.

There is no wager, there are no rules. Just a challenge between equals.

And the Bloodroot Devourer rejects that challenge.

"Coward," the vyssari declares and lifts her arm toward the sky.

A single lightning strike crashes down, blinding us all and seemingly tearing through the air rather than simply passing through it. It strikes her arm with the ring on it and lingers there, like the purest form of lightning suspended in time, stretching to the length of a spear.

(We are leaving! Nat, right away!)

Something in Tess's voice makes me listen, and even though I continue to stare at the Champion in front of me, as I throw a [Ley Line] as far away as I can.

With the prison's locks in shambles from the eye's escape, it's simple.

The vyssari takes a step, pulling her leg back and preparing to throw the thing cradled in the crook of her arm. White and red lightning cracks around it, shattering the air itself in its wake.

I teleport all of us as far away as I can. Immediately using my mana to form a barrier around us. Sophie strengthens it, the twins cooperate in an attempt to shore up the gaps, while Tess and Min-Jae create shields of their own. Maya creates and boosts her own barrier. Lily's healing skill floods the air, and she

cuts off one of her arms, forming the bone within into a hemisphere, enclosing us inside as her blood drips down on us.

Even here, I can sense the crazy reverberations, as our barriers break one after another under sheer pressure until nothing remains.

Our view opens up again.

The once dusty sky is clear now that the miles of dust that once blocked it have been blown away. A single star shines through the hole—harsh, cold, and strange. Its light is a pale white streaked with faint crimson. The glow cuts through the cleared sky like a blade, casting sharp shadows across the broken ground.

The floating island is gone in its entirety, and where it once stood, a small figure floats—the blonde vyssari with lightning flowing through her hair and crackling around her ring. Her small figure is bathed in the star's light as she hovers in place.

There is a trail of lightning hanging in the air, stretching on for miles in the direction of the blood-red patch of sky.

The mountains that once seemed to graze the sky have largely evaporated, only to be replaced with a great yawning crater.

Chapter 500: 7th Floor

I blink, and the Champion is gone. Reappearing to stand next to us, and all that remains of our defenses crumbles. She looks to the sky, as the dust begins to fill it once more, cutting off the light of the sun.

The vyssari stops and looks at Tess for a moment flashing her one last smile. "Good luck to you and your party, Tess."

With those simple words, she disappears again, moving at speeds too great for the eye to follow, leaving a trail of lightning in the air as the only sign of her passage.

Just a few seconds later, lightning streaks across the blood-red sky, visible even from this distance, signaling the fight's renewal. Hundreds—thousands—of bolts crash down in rapid succession, and it takes several seconds before we hear the first thunderclap, a stark reminder of the distance between us and the battle taking place.

Then we begin to feel tremors too—a constant barrage of vibrations from the shockwaves generated by the distant fight.

The air grows noticeably colder, and a blizzard appears on the horizon approaching from the opposite side of the Champion's lightning storm, stretching nearly through its entirety.

"Did that eye just free the remaining prisoners? The lightning vyssari and whatever it was in the north behind the permafrost?" Min-Jae asks, unable to take his eyes off the clash far in the distance.

"It seems like it. Nat, Sophie, we might need to hurry, like really really hurry. I don't think we're quite far enough away to survive as they increase the output and that last prisoner might actually be worse than the two of them combined," Tess says, finally managing to pull her eyes away from the blizzard.

"I should be done," I reply and immediately start laying out the parts of the array. "You two, help."

Izzy's flames surround us, blue and warm, warding off the increasing cold that's already coating every exposed surface in a layer of frost and causing snowflakes to fall gently from the sky. Izzy's blue flames press in close against us without burning, providing us with a gentle source of warmth.

Noodle expands in size, growing as thick as a tree and coiling in a circle around us with his mouth open as he devours the mana radiation gradually encroaching upon our space.

The others chip in as well, doing their best to set up defenses while the fight in the distance gets worse and worse. The sky grows a darker shade of red until it feels almost tangible. High in the sky, fleshy veins grow within, resembling both vegetation and inscriptions.

Just the fact that we can see them from so far away tells us something about their size. Just how big might they be? Miles upon miles tall and wide.

They form into the shapes of inscriptions, generating fields, attacks, and defenses that crash against that small figure that flew there specifically to fight the one who freed her.

Within the blood-red sky, red and white lightning crackles relentlessly, unleashing attacks that obliterate the eye's creations. These strikes form colossal lightning weapons, each as big as a mountain. Explosions ripple through the air, scattering the dust and tearing through the red domain of the sky, allowing shafts of light to break through.

And approaching from the other side is a blizzard making its way ever closer, an unknown presence within. And the closer it moves, the more sluggish my mana feels, as if the cold were slowly freezing it.

Once I finish setting up the array, I move over to help Sophie. The twins connect us together, allowing us to combine our efforts, and we push ourselves to make everything work. And all the while, the moon, the Astral Prison around us, starts breaking apart, as a little part of me watches it all happen.

The anger that has been simmering within me resurfaces. The realization that there is nothing I can do here at this moment. There may “only” be a 200-level difference between me and the Champions, but that gap is still immense. I don't try to push this anger away; instead, I let myself feel it. I let it flow through my body and make sure to remember everything I feel right now. My weakness and powerlessness.

Then Sophie activates the array, finally pushing through with all her might before collapsing in concert with the twins, as the others rush in to catch them before they can hit the ground.

And I feel much the same as my entire reservoir of mana is channeled through my body to be sucked away by the array, but I endure. It's something I have to do.

One by one, everyone in group four passes through the array. I take a step forward and pause for a moment, turning to look back, engraving the scene behind me deep into my memory.

And only then do I cross through, and watch as the view shifts and the system's notifications appear before me.

Congratulations! You've successfully completed the 6th floor's main quest in the fifth round of the tutorial for Hell difficulty.

Welcome to the 7th floor: Battlefield.

You have acquired:

Active skill combination token

Epic-grade passive skill

5000 Shards

Communication with your disciple for 10 minutes

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

Increased daily Community limit

So Battlefield it is.

I force strength into my legs and stand upright.

There are dozens of people passing by us: lynthari, humans, thylarin, demons, people of all races. Everyone is dressed in full armor and we find ourselves in something akin to an outpost—surrounded by temporary buildings made of stone, wood, and some that seem to have grown from naturally occurring trees, along with others made entirely from crystal.

A constant barrage of words fills the air around us.

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

"... heard they need more on the 5th front, they say the pay is pretty good..."

"You won't catch me fighting with a demon at my side, those guys are..."

"They say there's a spy in the main camp, they're offering an arcane item to anyone who can bring them information exposing them..."

"... no, only Champions Safie and Feroy are taking disciples, and not just anyone either. Feroy especially tends to be... picky. Did you hear..."

"... so maybe? I heard a Champion-grade monster appeared on the 2nd front so you bet I'll be fucking skipping that place."

"... attacked the smithies. Weapons increased in price again."

"Nobody can get through that array in that cursed forest—not even Champion Owain. There's a rumor that he's planning to ask his master for help, but yeah, good luck with that. The Absolute is the only thing keeping us alive, so I'd say he's got his hands full."

And many more.

We seem to be ignored for the most part and people pass us by without noticing. Even the levels of all these people tend to match our own, rarely does anyone break level 300. There are some with levels just over 100, but I don't think I can see anyone lower. Most people seem to hover around 200 and over.

We grab the twins and Sophie, who have yet to recover, and pull them to the side, walking between the massive buildings until we find a quiet spot far from the crowds, just below a simple wall, made entirely out of wood. There are no joints, no gaps anywhere I can see; almost as if it were formed of one single piece of lumber.

Catching our breath, we sit quietly, each of us taking a moment to process recent events while Lily heals anyone who needs it.

I almost stop to warn her to hide her status as a candidate, like Tess and I, but I see that she's already doing so, likely Tess told her when I was busy.

"At least the rewards for the floor quest are nice, right? I got a passive skill combination token," Maya is the first to open the conversation. "And I can communicate and send some stuff to my disc..."

Her eyes move to the unconscious Dennis, likely remembering his disciple who died, and then she buries her face in her palms with a loud groan. "Fuck, I forgot."

"Be careful, please, he still gets upset about that sometimes," Izzy warns, gently tapping the boy's head.

"Yeah, I will," Maya replies, reading an invisible message in the air. "So the floor quest is..."

"We'll need to talk about it and decide what to do," Tess confirms. "This one is unusual."

Like the others, I open my notifications and reread them.

Floor Quest:

Survive as many waves as possible.

Note: You can leave at any time and head to the 8th floor.

Rewards:

???

???

Communication with your disciple for 10 minutes

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

While I read through everything, I randomly pick an epic-grade passive from my rewards and sell it for just over 10,000 shards.

I think it's reasonable to say the longer we stay and by extension the better we do, the better the reward will be. The question is how long should we stay? At what point do we say we're better off heading to the next floor rather than trying to maximize our rewards here?

Or more to the point, when does it become too dangerous—because I'm sure that's going to happen. Especially with all the talk of Champions, the frontlines, and mercenaries.

Wandering around the outpost, we collect a bit of information and let our bodies and mana recover. My crown is already over my head, ready to store any mana that won't fit into my body or reservoir.

The planet we find ourselves on this time is comfortably warm without being hot, almost like the last warm days of summer accompanied by a nice breeze. Looking at the sky, I see a few islands floating far in the distance, and I can sense something that reminds me of the Veil surrounding us. It's not as powerful as the one we encountered on the 5th floor, rather it's much more basic. There are a lot of triggers, so I don't bother connecting to it nor do I examine it too deeply.

Tess, meanwhile, manages to use some of the materials we have to pay for the rent on a small house near the edge of the outpost, near the wooden wall. The house is just big enough for all of us, forcing each of us to share a room with at least one other person.

We spend a few days without trying anything. Taking our time to train and heal, while collecting information, the Beyond expedition is coming up in just a few days. Me, Tess, Sophie, and Lily should all be able to go. However, that means leaving Maya, the twins, Izzy, Noodle, Biscuit, and Min-Jae behind.

So we do our best to make a somewhat safe base for the ones being forced to stay behind.

It's during one of these days that a message appears in the Beyond community.

Hadwin -Little pup, what floor are you on?

POV Earth

"Did you see? Some guy came out of nowhere and broke all the records like it was nothing."

"Oh, you mean that Italian with all those viral posts?"

"Yeah! He looks like he barely weighs 70 kilos and he managed to deadlift a full tonne then went for reps. The bar was bending! Then he ran 100 meters in five seconds, benched half a tonne, and..."

"My man, everyone knows it's all fake, don't let..."

POV Earth

"Yesterday, a video went viral, originating from Africa. A new type of ant has been discovered—and each one is about the size of a cat."

"Do you think it's connected to the phenomenon?"

"Yes, sir. There have been reports of a returnee group in Africa, they're likely responsible for or accelerating these changes. We're doing our best to keep it out of the public eye, but additional groups have been reported in Europe and China. Possibly even in Russia and North America. We're working on confirmation."

"What's the classification?"

"Still Easy-tier, sir. Estimates suggest all current groups will remain in this category. However, based on the information being shared by the current batch of returnees, we expect individuals from the Normal-tier to emerge within the year."

"Have you reviewed yesterday's reports and recommendations?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thoughts? Be honest."

"Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Granted."

"Honestly, sir, I don't like it. But I understand the logic behind it."

"Good. You'll be joining that unit as my intermediary."

"I... as you command, sir."

"Speak your mind."

"I agree that involving the families of suspected returnees is a logical next step. However, I'm concerned, sir. If individuals from Hell-tier difficulty finish their tutorial at Grade 5 on our temporary scale, even a simple conversation with their families could provoke a dangerous reaction. This is true regardless of whether the interaction is intended to bribe their family goodwill."

"Let me ask you this instead: what happens if we're left with no information or means to negotiate?"

The room falls into a heavy silence.

"No response? Then carry out the orders."

"Yes, sir!"