

Tutorial 501

Chapter 501: So devoid of passion and genuine effort

POV Myrra

“Did it work, Lady Lissandra?” I ask after a minute.

The silver-haired young woman in front of me looks away from an empty space in the air and nods, “It works as expected. I should soon be able to do the same for you. Because we still have work to do on your status, we’ll be getting our own instance and waiting to synchronize with little pup once we’ve gotten you fully instated.”

“Sorry for the trouble and thank you very much.”

She waves it off and gestures for me to follow, and I comply, having grown accustomed to her eccentricities.

As we walk, I look her over once more. She’s shorter than me, with silver hair, and a pretty, if stern face, but most of all, there’s this aura of confidence around her—as if nothing can stand in her way. A fact I’ve seen bourn out time and time again.

When we visited a ruined continent to recover the remains of an Absolute's heart. When she combined said remains with the heart of the Champion. When she spent months working on her new heart and then tore open her own chest to implant it. When she then pierced it through with that orange eyed bone dagger to reignite it.

The first beat of that heart was nearly powerful enough to render me unconscious before she took control. And it only took a second for her to do so. Now I’m having trouble imagining just how powerful she might be, despite her insistence that she’s still far from attaining her original power and will need years to recover and adapt to her new body and heart.

She calls her body unsatisfactory, she says her heart is weak, and she’s always complaining about her skills being rusty. The knowledge and skills she’s honed over the millennia now feel too vast for the fragile frame she currently inhabits.

The sky in this place is covered in clouds of dust which settle overnight to reveal a stunning view of a brilliant night sky.

And now we stop—a desert full of white sand in front of us.

“Are you sure, Lady Lissandra? That man in the Last Rest said the desert was made by an Absolute a long time ago.”

“Little kitten.”

“I'm sorry!”

With that, she takes a step through that invisible border and steps onto the white sand, which doesn't react to her at all. It doesn't so much as twitch even as her new heart continues to generate that incredible mana.

I've seen what happens to the people thrown into the desert by the competing groups that rule this place; I've seen what it can do and how it reacts even to the slightest bit of mana. I watched as a swarm of brilliant white particles tore them apart.

Lady Lissandra stands silently, bending down to scoop up a handful of sand, and letting it slip through her fingers.

“I've suspected this for some time now, but it seems like modern Absolutes and Champions aren't what they once were. All these trinkets, arrays, and emblems... leaning so heavily on the system's gifts without ever truly understanding them.”

The last grains of sand fall to the ground as she turns to me, her silver hair flowing in the gentle breeze, “It all feels so detached, so devoid of passion and genuine effort.”

The words come softly, yet they have a strange sort of weight to them. “Little kitten.”

“Yes!”

“Follow close behind me.”

Without another moment’s pause, she takes a step forward, heading deeper into the desert.

I follow close behind, stepping onto the white sand without a hint of hesitation or worry.

As expected, the sand doesn’t react to me or my mana, and I continue along her path.

POV Nathaniel

Please pick two skills from the following list to combine.

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

Warning! Combining incompatible skills may result in worse skills.

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

List of skills available for combination:

Perception - Lvl 54

Resonance - Lvl 60

Mana Domain (Pride) - Lvl 57

Infusion - Lvl 49

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 60

Bone Knitting - Lvl 24

Okay, I have an opportunity to repeat what I've come to think of as a pro gamer move and a big fuck you to the system. I can combine [Mana Manipulation] with another skill and regain it later.

The question is if I want to with the primary class upgrade looming so close. I know that primary class offers active skills as well, and it seems to be the only way to gain active skills other than learning them, evolving skills, or combining skills.

I'm sure the system has ways to deal with it if I happen to have filled all my slots, but do I really want it? With all my preparations, my primary class offerings should be goddamn good, so I will probably get some kind of amazing new active skill. Something on the level of [Focus], [Redistribution], [Mana Crown], or [Ley Line], which for the time being aren't among the skills available for combination.

But [Resonance] and [Mana Domain] are, and they weren't an option for the previous skill combinations, meaning this token is of a higher tier than previous ones.

So the options are:

[Perception] and [Resonance]

[Perception] and [Mana Domain]

[Perception] and [Infusion]

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[Perception] and [Mana Manipulation]

[Perception] and [Bone Knitting]

[Resonance] and [Mana Domain]

[Resonance] and [Infusion]

[Resonance] and [Mana Manipulation]

[Resonance] and [Bone Knitting]

[Mana Domain] and [Infusion]

[Mana Domain] and [Mana Manipulation]

[Mana Domain] and [Bone Knitting]

[Infusion] and [Mana Manipulation]

[Infusion] and [Bone Knitting]

[Mana Manipulation] and [Bone Knitting]

Then there are my personal favorites.

The first on the list are [Resonance] and [Mana Domain]. Given the way they appeared in the list of options for my prior skill combinations and I've just acquired a higher-tier token, it means they're high-quality skills, and logically their combination should be stronger—if they make for a good fit, and I think they might.

[Perception] and [Mana Manipulation] could also be pretty good, but I suspect the skill would be similar to my trait, which I think will just end up being stronger, especially now that it's gone through a second round strengthening with assistance from my new passive. And I still think I should skip using [Mana Manipulation] this time in preparation for my primary class upgrade.

Then there's [Resonance] and [Infusion]

Leaving this decision to the future me, I lean back in my manabloc chair and open the Beyond Community. It looks like the cockroach is curious and talks to people there.

Hadwin -I'm not the man called Hadwin.

Gareth -Then why do you have that name? You even belong to the same group.

Hadwin -I don't understand why I should explain it to you, child.

Noname -You should be able to change your Community name to match your real name. Apparently, it's possible to change it but only once and only to your real name.

Hadwin -Little pup, are you dumb? The only reason I can talk here is because the system thinks I am that person. How would it make sense for me to change to my real name?

Noname -I hadn't thought of that.

Gareth -Noname, are you ok? Little pup? Are you getting bullied?

Noname - Yes.

Hadwin -Is there any difference between this and other Communities?

Noname -Not much. Just the degree of censorship on certain information, and we can communicate across the floors.

Tacita - \ (— _ —) /

Hadwin -What is that?

Noname -I... I don't know how to explain.

Tacita - (¢ _ ¢) /

Hadwin -Whatever it means. I will be leaving now. Also, little pup, I have kept my promise and gotten ahold of that heart for you. I hope you kept yours.

With that, she is gone.

Tacita - (¢ 5 ¢)

In the real world, I turn towards Lily, who's sitting nearby in the same style of chair as me, examining a set of healing marks she's placed on a range of different materials to see what happens.

“Lily, Beyond Community.”

She looks quickly up at me and then stares into the empty space in front of her, reading the messages.

Grumpy - (づ ³ づ) づ

Tacita -

Tacita - C= C= C= C= C= (; ¢ ω ¢) ^

Noname -Gareth, how is your group?

Gareth -We are still on the 6th floor, but we have a plan. It's probably going to take anywhere from a few weeks to a month or two if everything works out. We're proceeding slowly and safely. What about you guys?

Noname -You know it, every floor is easier at the start.

Gareth -I can only agree with that. A few days ago I tried asking Savant where he is, but he didn't answer, and getting that kind of information from Tacita is...

Tacita - \ (`д'*) /

Gareth -I apologize! Anyway, as I told Sset, I should be there at the scheduled time, Noname. See you then!

With that, I close the community and check the numbers.

Easy difficulty 1159/2000

Normal difficulty 842/1000

Hard difficulty 223/500

Hell difficulty 36/250

Beyond 9/10

Easy difficulty has lost about 200 people since the last time I checked. Adjusted for the ones who already used their difficulty change token, which is surprising, given that people don't tend to die as much nowadays.

People in Hard difficulty seem to be theorizing that some of them may have already cleared the tutorial and gotten out, but it's hard to confirm. Even now we can only communicate with people from other difficulties only when they're on the same floor as us. That's why I haven't seen Channeler for a while along with some of the others. Beyond is the only exception to that.

It's an interesting thought, leaving the tutorial after clearing the 13th floor, and I'm curious to find out if I'm still the only one who knows the exact number of floors. So far estimates have ranged from 10 to 20, to 50, even a hundred floors in some cases, and it's hard not to feel a bit smug about that.

As for the other difficulties, Normal is only missing around 20 people who likely died, Hard lost 20 or so as well, and Hell lost three. I even think some of that may account for casualties in Gareth's and Brainiac's group, but I haven't asked.

Two days remain until the Beyond expedition, and preparations are in full swing.

Setting up a safe house.

Collecting information about the new floor.

Healing marks, items, mana batteries, charging our crowns, sacrifices for Lily in the form of my severed left arms stacked in her armory.

My training with Whitey and my decision not to hold off beating him before I proceed to level 300. If the situation allows, I will reach level 300 within Beyond and continue down the path of mana.

I've been thinking about it, and I think my pride may have gotten the better of me, making me want to defeat him with kinetic energy alone and at a lower level than him.

That in and of itself may as well have been a slap to the face, almost like I was looking down on him—a man in as much awe of kinetic energy as I am when it comes to mana. I can confirm that just from seeing his memories and the way he fights.

I've been too greedy, but it's not all bad, I have learned a lot in the process and will continue to do so. But my path is the pursuit of mana and always will be. Everything else is supplementary.

Once again, I look over the options.

[Resonance] and [Mana Domain]

[Mana Domain] and [Infusion]

[Resonance] and [Infusion]

I think I'll keep [Mana Domain] as it is, focused solely on mana. I like using it on my body alone, almost as if I'm declaring it my personal domain of mana, making it even harder for someone to disrupt my body's flow of mana. That leaves me with one option.

Congratulations, you have successfully combined [Resonance] and [Infusion]! A new skill has been created.

You have acquired [Eclipse].

[Eclipse - lvl 0 > Eclipse - lvl 8]

Chapter 502: Again into the Beyond

With the acquisition of the new skill, my preparations for the primary class upgrade are complete.

I have acquired as many powerful passives as I can, I have strengthened my traits, and I have plenty of powerful skills, all at high levels—not to mention the body modifications Lily and I have been making. Then there are all the feats I've accomplished that should factor in, like killing—with a significant amount of help—a Champion.

This upgrade better be good.

As always, the system offers no description for the active skill, so I conduct my tests, checking whether the effects of previous skills are missing or have changed.

“Hey, Maya, create some weapons with [Armament] for me.”

She gives me a confused look and creates a dagger, and at my signal, she throws it at me.

My skill activates and my eyes do as well, scanning for the information I need. I use [Eclipse] and take over as I would with [Resonance].

The effect is mostly the same, and yet somehow it feels different. Instead of altering and modifying my mana to connect with it, it feels as though I’ve simply taken control. There’s a stronger sense of ownership.

Looking at the dagger now, it doesn't seem all that impressive or useful to take it over.

With a sigh, she uses her skill again and starts forming weapons, which take their places floating over her shoulders. Using the new skill, I connect to them, resonate with them, and take over, while Maya finds herself cut off.

I stare at that. Once again, not very useful.

“Barrier?”

“Nat, I fucking swear if...”

“Please.”

“Damn it,” she curses but brings a spherical barrier into being around her body.

My skill activates again, and I push my hand through her barrier with ease, adapting to its frequency.

I keep trying to grasp that feeling. The best way to describe it is that my control seems to overshadow hers as I infuse myself into the skill, resonating deeply with its inner workings.

I still have a sense that I could disrupt her control over mana just like I did before. Even at this low level, it feels almost strong enough to rival the previous version. However, there’s something different about it now, and I’m finding it difficult to fully grasp.

I’m sure the skill will truly shine in combat. However that also means more testing, and I feel that familiar rush of excitement I get whenever I get a new toy... or, in this case, a new ability. I’ve thought about it a lot recently, mulling over the difference between using upgrade tokens on my skills and acquiring new ones with combination tokens, and I’ve come to a conclusion—there is a difference.

Upgrading a skill feels almost like cheating, taking the easy way out. But combining skills to create a new one is different. Sure, at first, I let the system guide me and show me how to use it, but I always strive to master the skill on my own and push it to its limits. With more powerful skills, this approach can only grow more valuable over time.

As for [Eclipse], its name feels odd—almost like Savant’s [Dawn] or the [Regalia] I had before. It’s enough to make me wonder about the naming of skills and how their names are decided.

Thanking Maya, I move back to my corner and increase the output of my Restrictive Training Emblem for now, putting off my testing of [Eclipse] for the time being.

It only takes me a few hours to finish the mana stone I’ve been working on and now it’s fully inscribed, containing all the training regiments for the seven stances I got from Whitey, starting with basics while keeping the more advanced stuff locked behind mana locks that will require a certain degree of mastery over mana to get through.

That should ensure that my minion doesn't jump head first into the dangerous stuff without working on her basics first. And prevent her from forgetting her mana training.

My Mana Wavelength Iris activates again, and I stare at the stone in the palm of my hand. I watch it very closely, observing the mana wavelengths around it and their movements, while [Perception] works at full force to supplement my efforts.

Only then do I say, "Send this to my disciple using the token meant for that."

I don't even have time to blink before the mana stone vanishes. It disappears in that crazy scary way the system likes to make them disappear. The way where I can't sense anything at all.

But I will get there.

Then, while RTE continues to crush my body, I grab my mana and start moving it using Mana Cycling.

It's the hour of our Beyond expedition, and everyone's gathered in the room. On purpose, I have not examined this floor too much, knowing that it would only make me curious the entire time I found myself in Beyond.

So that's where I rely on Tess and others to make sure it's safe for us to keep going for the next few days. And I'm especially sure that Sophie made every possible effort to ensure that her sister would be safe.

I wait for the others to say their goodbyes and return the ones I get.

With that, I use my token and the others as well, all of us moving to our handlers.

POV Maya Jones

The moment they disappear, Biscuit opens his eyes and yawns. He turns to Izzy, who carefully sets him on the ground so that he can stretch as he yawns once more.

"W-what?" Kim stammers, his tone echoing my own state of confusion.

“It's fine! Biscuit was just pretending to be asleep. He woke up just after we came to this floor!” Izzy says, hints of joy leaking into her voice, as she kneels down to let Biscuit sniff her hand. “Isn't he cute?”

“You knew, but why would he...” Kim doesn't have time to finish his words before Biscuit looks at him and floats into the air, coming to a stop in front of the boy.

Biscuit moves through the air much quicker than before, and honestly, seeing a two-month old pup float through the air like that is just way too cute. His fuzzy tail trails behind him and his legs hang down.

Biscuit starts sniffing curiously, but we don't get the typical message we've come to expect.

Izzy explains, “He just likes it when Nat carries him around, pets him, and takes care of him. That's why he was pretending to be asleep! Though he's been having some trouble getting used to some of his abilities and can't talk at the moment.”

I want to shake my head, say something, but I can't.

What Izzy said right now makes a lot of sense, and I find myself thinking that it just about fits with the rest of this crazy situation.

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

POV Nathaniel

Once again I meet my handler sitting in her wooden chair, behind the same wooden table.

This time I move closer and shamelessly take one of the papers laid out across its surface, curious about its contents.

The paper is blank.

When I put it back on the table, the text appears.

So I lift it again to look at it, and it disappears again.

I put it back on the table and then lean closer until I can just about make out words, only for it to go blank once more.

I step back, and even though using mana like this isn't my specialty, I strengthen my sight and stare at it, only for the paper to grow indistinct as the text vanishes yet again.

"Annoying, isn't it?" my handler watches it all with curiosity.

Instead of answering, I reach to grab one of the mana stones but find myself unable to lift the table no matter how much I try. Even as I try to peek in, it seems empty.

Disappointed, I create a manabloc chair and sit down, "Any news?"

"It seems like you've already been warned about the guest in your mind. Other than that? The Enforcer's Guild came looking after you over that contract you signed but they stopped after a few months—mostly because it didn't seem like you were the one who broke it, and the people who died weren't really all that important, and it wasn't a very high tier contract to begin with."

"That's good."

"They're just leeches, so if they start to get on your nerves feel free to fuck them up. As long as you haven't signed an A or S tier contract with one of the top guilds, they won't even bother sending anyone all that powerful. Currently, they have two or three such people, but they won't move for such low end contracts."

"I'll keep that in mind. I probably can't ask much, right? About Beyond?"

"It would get censored, though I'll still tell you all the important bits and leave the rest up to you. The rest of the information allocation I'm saving for the big ones like that little tidbit I gave you before. You liked it, right?" She interlocks her fingers and rests her chin against them, a bright smile on her face. "Do you have any theories as to who the Rulers could be?"

"Well, for the First, Cinderbear, for third, I wouldn't be surprised if it was one of those damned sparrows, otherwise Edwal, or the King even though they seem unlikely, getting stuck at the same city over millennia, so maybe the Saint somewhat?"

I look at her, trying to read something of her expression. I even use kinetic energy to track her movement, but she notices it well. She doesn't block my probing, but there is absolutely nothing I could track.

Her smile widens, so I continue, "Fifth, I don't know. Gaiathra? Niall? Some other Champion I may have missed? And as for the Sixth, there are too many possible candidates to guess."

"No guess for the second floor?" she asks.

"There is no need, am I right?"

"I see, I see," she nods with a smile, "In exchange for satisfying my curiosity, allow me to tell you about something exciting to watch out for..."

"So being polite pays off?"

"Rarely," she responds, shaking her head in amusement, as I feel myself begin to fade.

This person really seems to like to time our conversations that way.

She waits a second longer, "Starting now you can take Beyond quests, I'll tell you more next time we meet."

“Sounds cool?”

My handler shakes her head, her red tinged black hair flowing around her, as she watches for my reaction, the information must have really been juicy for her to even bother.

“Beyond quests will allow you to leave the tutorial for a certain time, usually a few days, to work on a quest commissioned by someone on the outside. I’ve even gone through some of them; there are a few you might like, all with really nice rewards. The higher the rank you reach in Beyond, the better the quests you’ll gain access to—and trust me, some of them are truly fascinating. These could include anything from quests that no Beyond attendee has completed in a hundred years, thousand-year-old challenges, and many more.”

Well, she got me again.

She seems to notice it as well as I watch her smile brighten, just in time for me to disappear, finding myself back on the entrance floor.

The price to use the teleportation array to different Entrance Floor’s outposts is 10,000 shards. After you do it, that entrance floor becomes your “starting” floor the next time.

That’s why it sucks to be Lily and Tess, both of them having to use their shards. Lily at least, should have plenty because of the item selling spree we went on back in the mana desert, but it must have set Tess back quite a bit.

It would seem that even if you do happen to be from the same group you may not appear in the same outpost and instead find yourselves split in between god knows how many others. I thank Duncan for this information, along with the Coordinates or address you might say, for our current outpost—never mind that he charged me 1,000 shards.

I guess the grind just never stops for that man.

After meeting up with Sophie at the smithy, where I told her to wait if she arrived first, we make our way over to the teleportation array.

When Lily and Tess rejoin us, I'm already there to cheer them up again.

This time they get to pay for their own identification tokens.

Truly the authentic Beyond experience. A first impression is important, so they must realize how this place is.

I teach them how to activate their identification marks, and when they do, my ivory white C rank contrasts nicely with their obsidian black D rank. Not wanting to show off for too long, we head to the spot where our Earth expedition formed the first time around while ignoring the others around us. And we find a group of people already waiting there for us.

The winner of the 1st round's 1st tournament, CarrotCake aka Jean. The big bulky mountain of muscles with that annoying little jerk sitting next to him, aka Lucien, though I still have no idea how he passed through Beyond's trials, being a healer without any obvious fighting capabilities.

The mountain of muscles seems to be training or something as we watch his skin stretch over his body and tear while a focused expression continues to dominate his face. And I can still feel that immense sense of danger radiating off him.

My respect towards the guy grows seeing the damage he causes to his body.

Meanwhile, Leticia jumps to her feet with a happy smile, "Noname! I thought you would make it! Luna, you owe me 5 thousand shards!"

Leticia stops in front of us, the golden retriever following behind her while complaining, "First impressions are important, Leticia, please tone it down and don't embarrass me."

The golden retriever takes a quick step and grows till her head sets at the height of Leticia's chest and shoves her to the side while coming to a stop in front of Tess. "I apologize for my companion. You three must be Noname's friends, so allow me to introduce myself. My name is Luna, and that silly woman over there is Leticia. She may get like this sometimes, but she's generally more reliable when things get dangerous, I promise."

With a laugh, Leticia jumps on Luna's back and wraps her arms around her neck, forcing Luna to grow even bigger.

“Four people out of the same group in Beyond is crazy,” Leticia says, nodding seriously.

“That’s just how it worked out. I’m Sset, it’s nice to meet you Leticia, and Luna as well. This is Grumpy and Soph.”

As they focus on introducing themselves, I notice Jean bringing his training to a close and placing the whole of his attention on Sophie.

There are no extra senses involved, no perception, or anything of the sort. If I had to compare it to anything it’s more like the instincts of a wild animal. The longer he looks at her, the more his expression contorts.

I let kinetic energy and mana collect in my body. An amount that leaves my capacity before I acquired my new mid-arcane passive. My mind handles it all with ease, even as the roaring forces threaten to destroy my weak body, only held at bay by my own self control.

Jean moves at the same time I do, and before he can reach Sophie, I’m there, standing in front of him, absorbing the incredible power of his attack with Counter Flow and the effects of my unique passive, adding a huge chunk of mana to my Mana Reservoir.

He moves his hand and grabs me in an attempt to throw me out of the way, but I bury my feet into the ground, move my body, and strike his chest with my palm, putting the force of the kinetic energy I absorbed into the attack while adding a bit of my own.

A short shockwave reverberates in the air, as the man staggers back.

Unfazed, he shakes it off, the sense of danger rolling off him increasing as he does so, and his face grows darker, “You know about her abilities.”

“Yes.”

“People like her need to die.”

“That's your problem. She's part of my group.” I emphasize the word 'my', making sure he understands.

Jean observes me for a moment as if confirming my words and then nods in acknowledgment.

I raise my energy at the same time he does as we both prepare for battle. Sophie, Tess, and Lily are getting ready as well, while Lucien channels his healing to Jean.

But before any of us can move, Jean and I both freeze. My eyes shift at the same moment as his, landing on the figure that has suddenly appeared to his left.

A young woman with messy brown hair, a thin frame, ragged clothes, and a small backpack slung over her shoulder.

She holds a dagger in her hand, its tip gently piercing Jean's chest, just above his heart. The young woman is much shorter than the man, so she has to lift her arm to do so, yet she's still smiling.

None of us sensed her appear. Not even Luna. Not even Sophie. Not even me with my improved sense of movement.

Tacita smiles brightly and waves at us.

Chapter 503: Expedition like ours

After Tacita waves at me, the field around her reverts to something closer to the one she used back during the tournament. The one we used for more playful forms of training when we weren't going all out, that same old game where she tries to hide herself and I pierce through the field around her.

Yet, she still managed to hide from me. Quite easily too. It looks like someone didn't like nearly dying during the tournament and went on a training spree.

Jean swings his arm at her, but she vanishes, reappearing on his opposite side with incredible speed, her dagger raised even higher, aimed directly at his eye.

The man freezes at that moment, and I see his muscles tensing. But Tacita doesn't follow through, rather she takes a step back, putting the dagger away and lifting her empty hands, still smiling. She ignores Lily, who's been waving at her frantically, and instead moves to the side to take a seat, pulling her knees up to her chest and watching us with curiosity.

Before Jean can do anything, Leticia jumps down from Luna, who shrinks and moves towards him, cursing at the man and calling him a fool.

"I could have stopped him," Sophie notes as I move to stand next to them.

"I saw him move too, Nat. I don't think I would've lost against him." Lily states, tapping the blade of her axe and finally pulling her eyes away from Tacita.

"It's fine. I'm the one who organized it all, so it's only reasonable for me to be the one to stop him. And you shouldn't underestimate him. He won their tournament for a reason."

"I'll talk to him," Tess says, stepping away from us. "Everyone knows how Sophie's abilities are perceived so his reaction really wasn't all that surprising. I'll make it clear—if she ever uses them against any of us, she'll answer to me first."

"Nat, do you think I could win a fight with Tacita?" she asks curiously.

"Honestly? She would probably kill you in nine out of ten fights."

"That many?"

I nod, confirming my statement, and take a moment to give the mute young woman a quick look. I wonder if I might be able to see through her field with my strengthened eyes? It seems likely.

Well, if it isn't yet another great start to the expedition.

As Tess and Leticia talk to Jean, who has that young jerk near him at all times, it's Luna who returns to speak with us, having returned to her original size.

"You humans are so dumb sometimes." Once again, I find myself amazed that she managed to create an organ to project vibrations through the air, much less properly form words. However when she "talks," her mouth simply hangs open unmoving, creating quite the eerie effect.

"Can I pet you?" Lily asks, finding herself unable to resist the temptation.

"No."

"Oh." There is a lot of disappointment in her voice.

Luna observes her smartly. "500 shards for one stroke," she offers.

"That's too much!" Instead of being surprised, Lily starts bargaining. "Two hundred and you let me pet you for five minutes."

"What do you take me for, young girl? I only offered because you seem nice, and I thought it might make you more willing to heal Leticia or me in the future. But two hundred? That's like pulling my whiskers out!"

"I would've helped you regardless."

Luna looks between me and Lily and then turns back to Lily. "500 and three minutes."

"500 and two times two minutes! Two minutes now and the second set later."

"Deal."

The shards are exchanged, and Lily, with a big smile, reaches her hand out to Luna, who sniffs at it and then slightly bows and closes her eyes as Lily puts her hand on top of her head and starts petting her.

Seemingly unbeknownst to the golden retriever, her tail starts wagging slowly from side to side.

(Yo,) Sophie sends through a private link established through her web.

I can only sigh. (I know.)

Tess, having finished her conversation with the others, moves with the others towards Tacita, who stands up and rushes to find somewhere else to sit, clearly showing no interest in the conversation.

(So we have that guy who wants to kill me, the boy you said was a jerk using said man as a shield. A weird woman and her talking dog. And a mute girl following us like a curious cat.)

(Don't forget Gareth. Tess said he was going to be here. That man has to be secretly evil. And at this point, it looks like we are missing Savi and one more tournament winner with his wifey.)

(Well, at this point I'm happy Savant isn't here. I don't think he likes me either.)

(It must suck to have such a scummy ability. How was your handler?)

(Surprisingly normal. He gave me some warnings about hiding my ability and he told me to pretend it only works on monsters like some sort of tamer if I get caught and then he told me a few more useful things. Stuff like don't go to the surface. If you go to the 1st floor, make sure you only go with a group, and beware of groups and contracts and more besides. What do you think the handlers are?)

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(I think they're either Champions or Absolutes. My handler mentioned there weren't that many of them and each one has dozens or hundreds of people they are handlers for and are using some kind of item made by Diligence to make it all work assuming they don't have the ability to do so directly.)

Luna barks, finally prompting Lily to stop petting her and offer thanks instead. The retriever manages to somewhat keep her dignity intact and moves over to Leticia, a mere 500 shards richer.

Maybe Lily really isn't great with money or shards. I know she got plenty from selling the items I made, but this? And then there are all the clothes and trinkets she picked up in Hollowhole, she was even trading valuable metals and mana stones for them.

When Jean starts moving towards us, I bring my attention back to him even as Tess gestures that it should be fine.

Instead of going to Sophie, he simply gives her a disgusted look and comes to a stop in front of me.

"Don't stand in my way ever again, do you understand?"

He really is looking for a fight.

Even though he's much taller, I step closer, stopping just an arm's length away, a range that should play more to his strengths and abilities.

"No, I don't understand."

Somewhere in the background, I hear Tess groan as Leticia grabs Jean's arm, but he pulls it free with ease as if she hadn't been holding it in the first place and pushes her away.

"I understand loyalty to your friends, and I even respect it. But Noname, as long as I'm breathing, I'll do everything I can to kill people with abilities like hers."

Each of his words is calm and stated with utmost clarity, giving the impression that he means each word. But my decision is simple.

"Got it. But I don't care. Lay a hand on anyone in my group again, and you're dead."

Jean nods in acknowledgment, saying nothing more. But even that makes it clear—if it comes down to it, he'll go through me to kill her, even if it means taking me out too.

Like me, he seems to have his own set of rules to live by.

Gareth shows up a bit later and apologizes profusely while introducing himself.

As always he looks like some sort of hero. He has his shiny armor, a well-kept short beard and hair, a muscular and fit body, and despite being between 40-50 years old he maintains that youthful edge, energetic and fit.

Without any trouble he accepts the presence of the talking dog, greets Tacita, and shakes hands with Jean, all while being pleasantly nice and keeping his voice firm and friendly.

The man is evil, I can tell. Other than being somewhat interplanetary-xenophob-ish there must be something else. Humans aren't meant to be that friendly and that... well put together.

"After we reached the safe zone Savant left and I haven't seen him since. While Derick and Noelle seem to have done something similar," Leticia explains.

That leaves us with ten people, even though I have trouble including Tacita in that count. She's just, well... too unpredictable.

"Aren't healers supposed to be rare?" I ask Leticia.

"They are, extremely so. I've met a few other groups and they never seemed to have one. Are you talking about our group?" she smiles, quickly understanding why I asked. "If so then I don't think most of

them would consider Lucien or Gareth proper healers. Lucien is either capable of healing only one person at a time or doesn't have the desire to do more, and Gareth can heal more people at once but his healing isn't really all that strong."

At that, I look towards Gareth, who's laughing, caught up in a conversation with Jean. Is that silly man already talking about his abilities? Is he dumb?

Waving, Leticia heads over to join Tess and Luna, who are already working on organizing our formations based on our abilities. Meanwhile, Lily stays near Tacita, who eyes her like she might swat her away in a bout of irritation at any moment.

I really do have to wonder if the other planets have expeditions like this too.

We enter the 1st floor not much later.

Right away Leticia weaves something out of her mana, something fairly similar to Sophie's web, though it covers a bigger area and it's not quite as useful. The only thing it does is detection. Sophie deploys her web as well and Tess stays near her while Lily moves a bit further ahead staying close to Gareth.

At the front of our little pack is Luna, already the size of a horse with Leticia riding on her back, with Jean to keep near watch.

Tacita, after curiously looking around for a while, vanishes from our sight.

When it comes to distance I'm not just talking about a few steps either. Many times we find ourselves separated by the length of multiple football fields. A distance that at this point is nothing to us. We can perceive across those distances with ease, we can communicate without obstruction and we can move to help any of the others within a few seconds.

Tess, Sophie, and Lily are careful and curious. The new environment clearly leaving them nervous and intrigued at the same time. Even though I told them as much as I could, they don't really know what to expect.

I, on the other hand, have experienced this a few times at this point so I'm not that surprised when five lurkers pop up ahead with a warning from Luna.

Before we can even reach them Jean jumps in and kills two melee fighters, each with a single hit.

One of the three remaining jumps into the air, fleshy wings growing from his back and a mana spear forming in his hand, the spear is about twice as long as he is, with a blade burning with blue flame.

Before he can attack, three javelins trailing lightning shoot through the air heading right for him. He blocks the first one with a barrier, but it cracks. The second javelin strikes the exact same spot, shattering the barrier and hurling him backward. This opens the way for the third javelin to pierce his chest with precision, driving straight through his heart.

He falls from the sky motionless.

I look back and with my normal sight, unmodified by mana, I barely manage to see Tess as a small figure way off in the distance.

The two remaining lurkers move to the side, speeding up to avoid Jean as much as possible, only to crash right into Gareth who charges them with his shield at the fore, bashing one with the blunt instrument, followed by a blow from a mace surrounded in that silver light of his.

Lily moves in that direction herself, a quick change in trajectory, straining her body just to stop the inertia, and when the 5th lurker tries to stop her attack by positioning his swords out in front of him and surrounding his body with armor made of stone, she adds more strength and her axe smashes through, breaking arms and denting armor.

Her feet move quickly and she swings that giant axe again and again, using it more like a hammer than the bladed implement it is—I guess she's still working on actually sharpening it.

When Gareth finishes dealing with his lurker we move again, quickly.

A minute later we find a group of lurkers. Six of them, all dead without any sign of struggle. As if they just stood there and got attacked before they could muster any sort of defense.

Two of them have stab wounds through their hearts, one of them clearly fell victim to decapitation, and the remaining three look like someone scrambled their brains through their eye sockets.

All their equipment is still there, and it honestly reminds me of a pet proudly dropping a dead bird at its owner's feet.

Chapter 504: Deeper Into the First Floor

We split the loot from the lurkers well and head deeper into the 1st floor. The blasted environments and high ceilings beginning to feel familiar, but I don't let it lull me and stay attentive.

At some point, two lurkers finally manage to reach Sophie—something Tess lets happen—and Sophie takes control of them. One a vyssari man with flame attacks, and the other a human woman with some sort of domain that serves to reduce the effectiveness of healing skills.

Around that time, we reach our first named lurker—of the same race Rat used to be, the name of which I still don't know. It's a humanoid with gray skin and long, slim arms and legs.

[Reanimated Corpse - lvl 307]

I reach him before Jean can, and activate my Mana Wavelength Iris. The ever-present mana moving around the creature making itself known to my sight. I feel like I can see it all. I see the ambient mana floating in the air, mana seeping from the bodies of the people around me, the structure of the skill the lurker's trying to activate. The amount of information that strained me before, even before undergoing the strengthening process, now flows smoothly into my brain, which accepts it—all with an ease that feels almost like cheating.

The lurker uses my shadow which expands, becomes three-dimensional, and takes on a shape unlike any animal or monster I've ever seen. Its eyes glow red, and six powerful limbs reach out to grab me.

The mana in my crown spins and destabilizes, releasing a disrupting pulse, returning my shadow to its normal state. At the same time, all the shadows around me erupt with monsters, wolves with six legs

and no tail, humanoid figures with snake heads, lion-like animals with elongated maws and six eyes. Each one a pitch black shadow given form by mana.

Another wave disrupts them all.

I weave a javelin from my mana and launch it at the lurker, who bursts like a bubble in a flash of shadowy substance.

I form a barrier in front of me, incepting a barrage of attacks, ripples of force rolling through the surface.

More and more of that shadowy substance leaks from the lurker in an attempt to encapsulate the area around me. It floats like water, covering an area wide enough to take out a city block and spinning like a whirlpool, sharp edges grinding the surroundings to dust: whether it be the remains of buildings, trees, or stones.

I create a projectile and launch it through, piercing his defenses with ease without slowing down in the least and opening a gaping hole in his barrage. The lurker's barriers crumble under my attack, and he finally stumbles back missing the left half of his body.

Every shadow in the area moves like a living thing, surrounding him—and giving form to a pitch-black figure the size of a multi-story building. Its head looks like a lizard's and it has four arms, two thick legs, and a long tail to top it all off.

Each step is fluid, the surface of the lurker's creation rippling as it moves forth. The huge figure opens its mouth, and pours forth a white flame, quickly narrowing the stream until it's condensed into a beam about as thick as my arm crashing against my barrier like a laser. That flame roars as it pierces through the air, burning everything in its way; without even sparing the mouth of the shadowy black creation before me as the shadow substance evaporates into nothing.

I give it a bit longer, but the lurker doesn't seem to have any secret trump cards in the mix.

Overall, I'm pleasantly surprised. That kind of skill combination would've probably managed to wipe out a big city or two, and it's somewhat fitting for someone at level 307, I think.

My own mana explodes from me, surrounding me in armor the size of the beast facing me. The barrier disappears, and the white flames crash into the chestplate of the blue armor I've enclosed myself in, right in front of me.

I weave it denser and denser, until I feel happy with the integrity, noting that it's not even putting any strain on my mind. Kinetic energy explodes from me, and my armor moves faster than ever before.

The shadowy figure gathers the surrounding flames into its hand, a sword made of white flame forming there as it swings against me.

I further weave and compress mana and let the sword crash against my forearm.

There is no damage, and the sword breaks into flames which rapidly dissipate into the air.

Before it can move, I take a step. My eyes locate the body of the lurker, and I burrow my arm into the mouth of the shadow from whence the flames emerge, grab the lurker, and squeeze.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 307]

[Lvl 297 > Lvl 298]

Right away, I pull the mana back into my crown, and over where the head of my mana armor was, a barrage of stone javelins passes. I boost myself towards the ground and use Wraith Dance to move towards where I see pulses of mana.

The ground in front of me explodes, and a huge arm made of stone reaches towards me. I dodge it, and another is there, and then more. Dozens of arms, some of them not much bigger than mine and others as thick as trees.

Boosting myself into the air, I fly in the direction of the attacker. Whitey's favorite, Resonance Flow, surrounds me, and every projectile entering my perimeter slows to a stop in mid air as if frozen in time. Hundreds of them follow suit, immense amounts of kinetic energy collecting inside of me.

The figure disappears underground, and I crash into the surface where it disappeared, releasing all of the kinetic energy into the ground below, reverberating through stone and soil.

My eyes read the movement, and [Ley Line] stretches down after him, teleporting me into a room just big enough to take a few steps in.

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The vyssari lurker, even emotionless as they are, seems to show shock seeing me here and turns to attack me.

I release the mana orb I've been making—a compressed mess of thermal energy, kinetic energy, and a lot of mana. Before it explodes, I teleport back to where I was, the ground under my feet shaking.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 291]

Three more lurkers attack me all at once, two of them go all out to disrupt my mana and the last one prepares to deploy a domain that I can feel hanging patiently in the air, all the while firing harpoons made of mana at me with chains tied to them connected to a wildly oscillating circle behind his back.

[Eclipse]

The world loses more of its color under the influence of [Eclipse], and only mana keeps its color. It's something that happens from the view of others as well—not dissimilar to the effect of [Focus].

[Eclipse - lvl 8 > Eclipse - lvl 9]

[Eclipse - lvl 9 > Eclipse - lvl 10]

[Eclipse - lvl 10 > Eclipse - lvl 11]

The domain the lurker was preparing to deploy destabilizes and deactivates, unable to penetrate the effects of my [Eclipse], which simply overpowers it—my mana resonating at frequencies that counteract and disrupt its structure.

His mana harpoons crash against my bare body, dissolving into a mist of fine particles in the process.

Mana threads swirl around me, growing denser and denser and weaving together as they move through the air behind me, forming a circle of inscriptions.

The harpoon lurker tries to move away, but a javelin quickly forms next to me, connected to me with a thread of mana, much the same as the harpoons connected to the lurker. It shoots ahead, changing direction mid-flight as the lurker tries to dodge, only for the projectile to follow him. At times, bursts of kinetic energy pulse forth in time with a slight tilt this way or that, sending it in different directions until the javelin finally pierces the lurker and a kill notification rings in my head.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 289]

[Eclipse - lvl 11 > Eclipse - lvl 12]

The two remaining lurkers, a pair of similar-looking feylith figures, finally stop trying to get into my head and disrupt my mana.

Wraith Dance brings me to them before they fly into the air, avoiding my pulses of kinetic energy, and swiftly maneuvering their flight around me. The inscriptions made of mana threads I've been working on finally activate, attempting to mimic the thing the eye did that prevented me from flying.

For a moment, the two feylith stumble, and it seems like they will fall, but flaws in my inscriptions sabotage the attempt, allowing the duo to push through.

More testing needed.

I deactivate [Eclipse] and my mana threads before boosting myself into the air with kinetic energy and quickly catching up to the two feylith.

The highly specialized lurkers attack again, their mental attacks crashing uselessly against my passive, while my mana control is much too great for them to disrupt, allowing me to finish them quickly.

Two more notifications ring.

Quickly, I move from body to body, grabbing any useful items and reading through the descriptions.

Looking around, I don't find any lurkers nearby, so I teleport through the [Ley Line] connecting me to Lily and appear next to her, only to duck down immediately, as her huge axe passes over my head.

"I'm sorry! You surprised me!" Lily shouts and moves away at incredible speed.

Sensing mana, I look into the air and find a vyssari floating there, blue flames surrounding her with a crown made of fire floating over her head.

[Reanimated Corpse - lvl 313]

I quickly realize what Lily was escaping from. This fireball composed of blue flames with a white core as big as a small building.

Feeling the heat scorching my skin, I teleport again, reappearing next to Tess this time, after sending her a warning through our link of course. In the distance, a flash explodes into the darkness, as blue flames mixed with white burst into the sky, the heat serving to set the surrounding forest ablaze and evaporating anything in their direct path.

The shockwave and heat reach even us here, and I watch as the flames swirl and move like living creatures, merging into the shape of a snake seeking out a lonely figure.

Jean doesn't even try to avoid it, and I would bet he's smiling, even now. He throws a punch at the giant flaming snake, which promptly disappears like the flame of a blown-out candle. The immense pressure from Jean's strike blowing it away and tearing the ground apart around him.

Flame armor surrounds the flying vyssari, making her seem even bigger than Jean as she lands—burning blue armor surrounding her and two enormous gloves made of white flames.

She and Jean clash again, burns appearing on the man's skin, but the flames blowing off before reigniting quickly as Jean hits her once again.

The vyssari in flame armor is thrown through the air, setting anything she touches on fire and only coming to a stop after bulldozing through dozens of trees. Jean reaches her surprisingly quickly, his stomps blowing out the fire raging through the forest and then crashing into another battle with the armor which once again finds itself extinguished. He grabs the vyssari by the head and arm, ignoring the burst of white flames ravaging his chest, and pulls, tearing the small body in half.

The flames blaze up once more before the vyssari lurker dies.

Jean stands there with the flesh burned away from his chest, ribcage clearly visible, along with the organs inside his body, especially that big, powerful heart beating a surprisingly calm rhythm.

Slowly, his wounds begin to close, and I can tell Lucien isn't healing him. Even so, his combat abilities don't seem reduced in the slightest.

With all the lurkers dead, we exchange a few quick messages and loot the bodies, before heading towards the safe zone once more.

"So what do you think of Jean and Lucien?" I ask Lily, matching my speed to hers.

"I could beat him if I wanted," Lily immediately says.

Now that I think of it, that would be fun to watch, but I don't say it out loud and specify instead, "You know what I meant."

"Well, I can obviously heal better than that boy, I think. He hasn't really done much until now. As for CarrotCake... Jean... I can see why he won the tournament for his round. He might seem hotheaded and dumb, but he is surprisingly effective in a fight."

"It's called battle IQ," Sophie states, joining the conversation. "When it comes to combat, he's hyper aware of his positioning relative to his opponents, and to top it all off he's quick to grasp their abilities."

I don't even ask her why she's been observing him so much. She obviously wouldn't like someone like him threatening her life.

Chapter 505: Three ways to clear this floor

We stop for a short break after a few more clashes. At this point, we've all killed plenty of lurkers, so we're attracting a lot of attention. As always, the lurkers are going to be the most attracted to the people who've killed the most of them. Even so, the floor itself is huge, so we always have a few minutes before we make contact with another group.

Could we move without killing so many? Quite possibly, but even if we were to run into another lurker like Whitey, I don't think it would cause us much trouble.

Surrounded by a circle of trees, we stand there, taking a moment to eat and drink under the cover of multiple defensive arrays and sensory webs. That's when Luna decides to move in closer and take a sniff of my hand, her nose lightly brushing its back.

She opens her mouth, and the sound comes from it. "That mark, that scent has grown stronger, human."

"It's possible."

"Why didn't you bring the one who marked you as well?"

"He's currently pretending to be asleep. And I'm not sure if he could come to the Beyond."

"Why would he..." Luna shakes her head and growls as Leticia pulls her tail and joins us.

"Don't be rude, Luna."

"Why doesn't Biscuit talk?" Lily asks curiously. "I mean, he does, but not as much as Luna."

I shrug. "You can ask him if you want. I won't be telling it without him agreeing."

"So you know?!"

"Obviously."

It's fun to see Lily's expression. I wonder what she could be thinking.

"If you'll excuse me, I'm going to have a conversation with Soph. She made some really fancy modifications to her web, and it made me curious!" Leticia says, excusing herself, and Luna follows, her movements taking on a very protective manner—something she does every time Leticia decides to approach Sophie.

Taking her place, Tess comes closer after a quick conversation with Jean. "Half a day at this pace and we should reach the safe zone."

"Did you learn anything else in the meantime?" I ask her.

"A little. The first floor is shaped like a massive circle—emphasis on 'massive'. Thousands of tutorials, if not more, run simultaneously, and it's believed that there are tens of thousands of Beyond attendees at any given time—maybe even hundreds of thousands. If anyone knows the exact numbers, they're not sharing."

"Isn't that... too much?" Lily asks, glancing between Tess and me in surprise.

"Well, if we consider that every tutorial is connected to this single instance of Beyond, I wouldn't say so. Isn't that amazing?" Tess smiles. "Thousands and thousands of beyonders. You get 100 people at most

from each world's tutorial, and that means thousands of tutorials running all at once. Each tutorial only takes 5 years and then there is many more included that already ended."

"That probably means... there are a lot of planets already in the system," I reply.

Tess nods and asks with a smile, "The system is enormous and very old. Doesn't that humble you, Nat?"

"Why would it?"

"The fact that there are so many people so much stronger than you."

"Why would I care about that? Just give it some time."

"Boring," Tess complains and turns to Lily. "And what do you think?"

Lily glances at me and then back to Tess. "With my skills, I will probably outlive most of them, so I just need to learn how to help others to do the same." RáNÓBĚř

"You can be so cute sometimes, Lily." Tess swoons, pulling her into a hug before asking quietly, "Remind me, how old are you?"

Lily once again glances at me and then back to Tess. "Eighteen, almost nineteen!"

That almost makes me roll my eyes and Tess notices, I'm sure.

"And I'm just a bit over twenty," she notes.

"It's still hard to believe that Sophie is older than you by two years no matter how often I hear it."

"That's rude, Lily. Look at Nat, for example. He's older than me too, but going by our behavior, who would you say is older?"

And at that, our healer, rightly, decides to stay quiet, much to Tess's amusement.

"Min-Jae will be turning eighteen sometime after the second tournament, so don't forget, you need to start thinking about the right gift," she reminds me, before hurrying over to Sophie, who gestures a signal about something triggering our detection arrays.

A minute later we are on our way again.

The 1st floor is enormous, just as Tess said. You can move for days at our enhanced speed and just manage to reach the first safe zone. After that, you head even deeper towards another safe zone. That one is closer, but the danger increases; there are fewer lurkers but they tend to be stronger, and for the first time, you get to meet the true monsters of this floor.

According to the information we've managed to gather, they mostly tend to be the millennia-old reanimated skeletons of the monsters that lived here when people first entered the 1st floor before they ended up reanimated much like the lurkers did.

Something, or someone, makes it all happen, and even if someone did happen to know the hows and whys, the censor keeps them from sharing the information even here.

So that leaves us with the question of how to progress to the second floor?

The answer, as it turns out, is quite simple.

You reach the first safe zone. And then you make for the second safe zone. When you get there then you have three ways to clear the first floor and enter the second.

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First, you look for a reanimated lurker or monster who may, on exceedingly rare occasions, have a special crystal that's formed inside their bodies. These crystals basically act like coordinates and, with some additional work and items, can create a temporary entrance to the second floor. They can apparently be bought, are single use, and sell for a lot of shards.

Your second option would be to find one of the permanent entrances to the second floor. All of them are hidden well and tend to be guarded by something like a raid boss—a monster even stronger than a lurker that usually takes hundreds of attendees to kill or distract it long enough to even have a chance of entering the second floor.

And then we have the third, head towards the center of the 1st floor where something awaits, likely whatever being causes the reanimation of lurkers and monsters. That being likely reanimates as well, and rumor says that it hasn't been killed in hundreds of years, and doing so is said to clear the floor. That's the reason why people on the lower floors of Beyond sometimes return to the first, to kill it in hopes of better rewards, and more often than not they die trying.

The sheer size of this floor means that each of these options will take some time, but with the right amount of luck, this floor could also be cleared in a matter of days.

I'm not going to lie, but there is one option I'm really fond of. It feels like a mystery and challenge combined, and how could I resist that? I'm sure that at some point I will attempt to pull it off, even if it isn't this time, but sometime in the future. Just the fact that 4th and 5th year attendees have been known to die trying to reach the center of the first floor.

The fact there are thousands or tens of thousands of Beyond attendees—the best out of everyone from their planets—and yet they still have trouble dealing with it, just makes the thought irresistible.

But I learned my lesson fairly recently. There is too much to be excited for to just... I stop myself there. Trying to gaslight myself into that kind of thinking has never truly worked.

Tacita does reappear every once in a while, often leaving a big group of dead lurkers in her wake. At this point, I don't even want to know how many she's killed, most of them seem to have been left in our path for us to loot—in this way, she almost seems like a mama cat trying to leave food for her kittens.

I don't know if I should consider it an act of kindness or if she just doesn't have any use for them and decides to leave the items where they are.

Or maybe it's just a payment for the bigger groups of lurkers she can't deal with and decides to pull our way.

But one thing has been confirmed for me: Tacita, with her extremely high Dexterity and that field is very terrifying, much more so than she ever was during the tournament. Even though her skillset isn't all that good against huge or flying monsters, she is very effective against anyone around her size.

Sometimes I move a bit ahead to finish off a group of lurkers trying to run away or prepare some grand attack, and in those cases, I can see her fighting. Even lurkers over level 300 tend not to notice her before their heads fly off. The weapons in her hands are extremely sharp, and the multiple daggers hidden across her body each seem to have their own very different effects, and she frequently swaps between them.

After one of these fights, I finish off two lurkers preparing a large-scale attack. Just as she finishes with hers and moves a bit closer, taking a seat on the branch of a nearby tree, watching as I cut a giant lurker apart.

The man seemed to have some weird-feeling way to move mana through his body, so I'm checking to see if it's at all similar to my Mana Circuits or something else I could use as inspiration.

A small stone hits the back of my head, and I look over at her.

She waves shamelessly, and a bit of mana glows at the tip of her finger. She moves her hand at an incredible speed, drawing an emoji in the air.

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"I'm learning stuff."

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"Sure, and why the hell are you even here? Were you spying on the Beyond Community so that you could join at the same time?"

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"So very sneaky, I'm sure it was extremely difficult to spy on us while we were chatting out in the open."

Another small stone hits the top of my head.

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"You can try anytime."

A flicker of interest flashes in her eyes, and she leans closer, her muscles twitching, eager to move, to attack.

Mana and kinetic energy do the same inside my body, my eyes activating, in a clear challenge to her.

A challenge I hope she will accept.

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Tacita disappears.

My body moves, and the Resonance Flow field surrounds me, slowing anything that moves within it by absorbing its kinetic energy.

Within it, Tacita's movements slow down, but with wild animal instinct rather than skill or knowledge, her field adapts and her movement returns to that same incredible speed.

I boost my movement more, and rather than relying on my eyes, I focus on tracking the disturbances in the air around me.

The dagger playfully moves toward my neck as I absorb my inertia, shifting in place, absorbing it again, and moving once more. I repeat this multiple times in half a second—something that would tear a normal body apart. After all, humans aren't meant to move like this.

As the dagger passes by me, my hand shoots toward her, kinetic energy flowing through my body and my feet sending a burst into the ground to move me to the side.

I miss, and so does her strike at my neck.

She pulls back, and I boost myself ahead in a surge of quick movement to follow her.

I duck under the swing and then use Wraith Dance to bring me back as the dagger passes through the space I once occupied three times in succession.

Tacita appears in front of me in a movement reminiscent of Wraith Dance. Her eyes shine under her messy brown hair, and her mouth curls into a smile. Her dagger crashes against one of my own woven out of mana, and I change its shape, causing it to coil around and grab her dagger. I boost my body back, and I drag her with me, trying to pull her off balance.

But she lets go of her dagger before I can do so. Her figure blurs and disappears, but I follow her movement and...

I release a burst of kinetic energy pushing myself back, then again to the side, and then Wraith Step to move even further away.

Another spike of danger raises the hair on the back of my neck, I duck and kick behind myself, weaving mana around my forearm in an attempt to deflect a dagger that seemingly comes from nowhere, managing to slice through my protections, drawing blood and poisoning me.

Thermal energy concentrates around the wound, and I let it burn the flesh, the golden flames surrounding my forearm and scorching away the poison in the process.

Tacita appears again, the way she was confusing my kinetic movement senses dropping as well. She smiles even more and happily waves the dagger with my blood on the blade.

Wow.

So that's how it is?

I let my heart beat without trying to calm it down. Armor covers my left forearm once more, and a dagger forms in my right hand again.

Part of my Burden Enhancement Inscriptions dissolves, and the kinetic energy immediately starts moving so much easier through my body.

This time I allow much more of it to flood me, nearly emptying my Vortex Core, and I take a stance, deactivating my Mana Wavelength Iris and solely relying on my kinetic and thermal senses —not to track her, but to watch for the slightest change in the air around us.

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Tacita pulls daggers into each of her hands. One of them has a transparent blade made of crystal and the other one is made from a black metal with blue veins running through it. She lowers her body, taking on a stance more reminiscent of a wild beast than anything a human would take.

I know she's getting more serious too.

Before either of us can attack though, a powerful shockwave washes through the area, followed by three more in quick succession.

Then I get a hurried message from Sophie. (Nat, we might need help here.)

(Oh, come on.)

Tacita notices my hesitation, and her daggers disappear back into her clothes.

She rolls up her sleeve and flexes her biceps, showing off the small peak of muscle victoriously.

"That's not it," I correct, trying to defend myself, but she's already gone.

For a few seconds, I stand there, motionless.

With no other options, I move toward the source of the explosions.

Chapter 506: Lake City

Even though I don't have time for a full lesson, I make sure to visit the guest who's taken up residence in my mental space.

This time I find Whitey seated in a well-kept garden, surrounded by towering, elegant bonsai-like trees. Nearby, cherry trees scatter their pink petals. In the distance, the bamboo thing fills with water before emptying itself with a rhythmic thunk as its base collides with the stone beneath it.

The scream of cicadas even serves to round out our exceptionally cliché environment.

Additionally, Whitey's dressed in a white and black kimono. And even these clothes seem to fit him very well, as always.

"Are you having fun going through my memories?" I ask, sitting next to him, wondering exactly what anime, movie or show he got it from.

"At least as much as you are going through mine. By the way, that human girl, I like her."

"Tacita?"

"Yes. She moves very well, and even though her technique is lacking, her instincts balance things out favorably. Back then you would have lost against her with kinetic energy alone, you know."

"Bullshit. So why don't you point out what I did wrong."

"First, she is, in fact, using some sort of 'field' as you refer to it, but until she deploys it over a wider area, there still should be signs of movement. Look here and..."

A few minutes later, I open my eyes and nod at Lily, who's been keeping watch over me, and she nods back, unable to say anything as she continues to stuff her mouth with some sort of dried fruit.

"Noname, I was asking the others, but how many Stay Tokens do you have?" Leticia asks, taking notice of my freshly opened eyes.

"I could stay longer than the others if I wanted, but we'll see. We just started the 7th floor, so I'm still curious about that. So I'll probably only stick around the next 3-5 days, same as them, and just hope we reach the second safe zone."

"Seventh floor is pretty good! Luna, I, and the rest of our group are still on the 6th! I think Jean and Lucien are still on the 6th as well."

The aforementioned CarrotCake doesn't seem to be disappointed, and in fact, chooses to clarify. "There are a lot of fun opponents to fight. Plus there is nothing I can do about the Floor Quest, so the others have to deal with it."

Lucien, the annoying little twerp, also seizes the opportunity to speak up. "Jean just likes to punch people. And that's not going to help him get out of the Astral Prison."

"That's true," Jean doesn't have a problem acknowledging that and grabs the back of Lucien's neck, shaking him. "That's why I have you and the others, right?"

"Fucking brute, let me go!"

That causes Jean to shake him even more.

Leticia turns to Gareth. "And you?"

"We are on the 6th but might be able to clear it soon. I would love to tell you more, Leticia, but I worry the system would only censor it."

I don't say it out loud but I bet Gary here is busy performing countless human sacrifices to free the eye and to escape the floor or something. He might've even joined the Mind Mages willingly or started bringing deathtraps full of people into the Mana Desert to feed to the thylarin Champion and his bond.

"Noname," Lucien calls out to me, seemingly from nowhere, once Jean finally lets go.

"What?"

"Did you meet Lissandra Hawthorne back on the 2nd floor?"

My state of disinterest up til now vanishes, and I give the boy my full attention.

That seems to be exactly what he wanted, as a smirk tugs at his lips. "I've met her too, and I had a feeling you had as well. The way you move your mana feels distinctly similar to hers." $\mathbb{R}^n$

His voice dies off a bit and his hand trembles for a moment. Something most probably wouldn't have noticed, but I sense it nonetheless. His left eyelid twitches, and his toe shifts nervously inside his boot.

"You don't look like someone with much interest in mana," I note.

He shakes his head but stays silent, clearly trying to get under my skin. "I'm curious - how did you manage to draw her out? Until now, I haven't met a single person who's encountered her face to face."

"What? Was she some kind of rare native?" Leticia asks curiously, sliding closer to the boy and prodding him to answer.

"Apparently," Jean waves it off. "She took a liking to one of Lucien's skills and made him do some tests for a day or two before throwing him away."

"You dumb brute. Do you not know when to keep your mouth shut!" Lucien says moving away from Leticia to start pounding on Jean's shoulder, who doesn't even seem to notice.

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I squint my eyes and observe the boy with more attention. For The Cockroach to take interest in his skill, it must really be something else. Like really something else. It might be part of the reason he passed Beyond trials. Is there anything else?

Also, for him to recognize the similarities in our use of mana even at this distance is weird. There's barely any connection.

Lucien notices me looking at him and his frustrated expression disappears, and he smirks again, probably knowing what's going through my head and the frustration I feel for not knowing the answer.

"You will fail, do you know that Noname?" he says leaning back, arms crossed over his chest. "You will never be like her, no matter how much you imitate her techniques. You will never be as strong as her."

That confuses me but I stay quiet, and while we all stand up, preparing to move again, I think.

Why would I be doing all this, only to become as strong as she was?

Before we finally reach the safe zone I have an opportunity to watch Sophie use Golem Heart, the damaged arcane item I left with her long ago.

She's already made her own modifications, and even though she hasn't used the grains of white sand I left with her on the 7th floor, it's still stronger than it was before.

Now, if she wants to improve her control she can infuse her bond into the creation, such that when the earth rises up her shadow connects to it, making the golem faster and more reactive while Sophie works to keep the frame of the golem strong, changing it according to the situation.

It can be humanoid, it can crumble down, and deep within that mass, a smaller wolf-like figure acts as a skeleton making it seem more alive. But most of all she uses it to protect herself while she does her own thing. There are even still two lurkers under her control fighting in her stead.

There are weaknesses I'm sure she knows about but there are strengths as well.

As far as I know, she still hasn't fully tested the limits of her ability. Just how many lurkers can she control and imprint with her [Geas]?

Another thing that interests me is Gareth and his silver crown. I remember seeing it back during the tournament all those months ago, yet I still have no idea what crown it is, much less what that damned silver light around him could be. But his abilities are undeniable, I know he doesn't have to "tank" and that he can move much faster, yet he doesn't do it.

So we fight one more time and reach the safe zone.

Simple as that.

There are no more crazy strong lurkers standing in our way and now we're just a few steps away from the safe zone.

There aren't any random guild of thugs sniffing around to get our equipment either.

Just like that, we reach the place, and I have to wonder if I really had an authentic experience with my previous expeditions or if we just got lucky or our party was just too strong this time.

The safe zone we find ourselves in is simple.

An island on an enormous lake full of dark water, too murky to see past the surface. Despite that, something does seem to be swimming beneath the waters, and when Sophie makes her lurkers move closer, the surface ripples, and whatever it is pulls the lurkers down below.

We had already heard about it from Leticia, given that she and the others had already made it to this safe zone, so it should be safe - but still, let them move in first. They also mentioned something about fish or fishing, but I'm not sure how that connects to anything.

Leticia takes a step onto the surface of the dark, almost black lake, and stands on the surface of the water, ripples of blue light pooling under her feet. Jean takes a step as well and confidently continues to walk, his ripples much bigger, reflecting his weight.

It's not them using an ability that makes it possible, but rather one of the lake's properties.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch movement - a slim figure darting across the surface like one of those crazy lizards back on Earth that run on water. The lake is massive, and the island lies far off in the distance, yet Tacita crosses it swiftly.

Something in me wonders if she could pull it off just as easily even without the strange effect that allows the rest of us to cross.

I let my eyes activate and take a step, watching the ripples of water, mana, and moving mana signatures under the surface. No monsters attack us, and despite the fact that we've been walking for a few minutes, no lurkers try to approach. The contrast with the situation, even a few moments earlier, is striking. And it's taking us a while to get used to not constantly feeling lurkers prowling just out of sight.

"Given the number of attendees and the first floor's size, there's quite a few safe zones. This one is called Lake City," Leticia starts explaining.

"That's very original. It also seems too small to be called a city."

"I know, Sset," Leticia flashes her a smile. "There are fewer people inside than you might expect, probably a few dozen at most. Though sometimes that number rises to just over a hundred. It changes according to 'season,' and more natives and attendees come to this safe zone when it's time to 'fish.'"

Tess asks, "How do natives get here and what are they fishing for?"

"Once or twice a year they pay a lot of shards to the top 100 guilds who send them a few B or A ranks who help them fish and to get here safely. They even share part of the catch."

"Are you going to tease me longer?"

"Hehe, it is fun, Sset." Leticia ignores Luna who quietly bumps her leg. "They're hunting for a fish that eats mana. These fish also tend to eat weapons and items from the lurkers who get pulled into the lake, but more importantly, when they eat mana it crystallizes inside of that fish's belly and makes mana stones favored by the larger guilds!"

"Is the fish tasty?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know, Jean."

"I understand."

"By the way, Sset, are you guys planning to join any guilds? Luna and I are still on the fence, and we've got a few offers, but we might also be waiting a bit longer for a better one. Apparently, the better guilds don't tend to bother with newbies until they've made it to the second floor. It's pretty rare for them to take an interest in anyone from the first."

"We're going to wait and see as well. Is there any reason to? Noname told me a few things, but he only had one source so I want confirmation from someone else. I remember something about longer stay tokens, better prices, and salaries."

"Well, that's mostly it," Leticia giggles. "Top 10 guilds can double the duration of your stay tokens and top 3 can probably triple it? But don't quote me on that. Then there's the salary, you can join Beyond

events as a guild member, better prices in certain shops, you can also find new party members and get information on the floors which can help you a lot, and they usually keep things restricted to guild members only. Bonuses, salary, items. And occasionally they run expeditions to the surface as well."

"Thanks for telling me, Leticia."

"No problem, Sset! I'm sure you'd do the same for me. And no matter how grumpy Luna can get, she'd share too, right?"

Luna stays quiet, glancing away without denying it. Then lets out a bark as Leticia tugs on her tail, which only makes the young woman smile even more.

Chapter 507: Fish

Lake City turns out to be quite basic. There are no walls or protections, there aren't many locks on the houses though I do spot a few rudimentary arrays to prevent break-ins. It seems like no one's even considered the possibility of a lurker attack or an assault from the monsters in the lake.

All of the houses are made out of a material reminiscent of ice, but it's not cold and there are no sharp angles. Instead, it feels oddly comfortable and warm to the touch.

Some of these houses are unlocked, likely serving as lodgings for the attendees, while the locked ones probably belong to the assorted guilds and natives who move in for the local fishing and trade seasons.

You have reached a safe zone! Congratulations! The next time you enter Beyond you will appear here instead of the Entrance Floor until you reach a different safe zone.

Looking to the center of the city, I also see a teleportation array and two thylarin, likely natives staying in the small house nearby.

"Let me guess, the guild runs the teleportation array and charges 10k to move to the Entrance Floor," Lily notes with clear annoyance, likely already missing the shards she had to pay just to reach the same entrance outpost as us.

Just imagine how many pets she could buy from Luna with all those shards.

"Yes. Starting now you can teleport to this safe zone or out of it... if you have shards," Leticia confirms.

As we pass by, Luna growls at the men.

After a moment of looking around, we split up, Tess, Leticia, and Lucien heading to the merchants to find out what they can get for the items we got from the lurkers and if we might get more selling them to the system shop. There we even have a couple of damaged arcane items, though nothing to really hold my interest.

Meanwhile, the rest of us follow Luna, who has been leading us towards one of the bigger houses, which we enter.

An entire wall on one side is transparent, opening out on a view of the dark lake. The view isn't perfect but it's certainly better than nothing, and I create a manablock chair and sit there. Lily and Sophie also get one each and sit nearby.

"What's your problem with me?" Sophie asks Jean out of nowhere.

The bulky man looks at her. "You're nothing more than a temporary nuisance."

"Do you think I mean to simply hide behind Noname? If you come at me, I'll be the one to fuck you up."

At that, he shakes his head. This calm, focused behavior runs completely at odds with his prior demeanor.

"You have no chance against me," he says and turns to point at Lily, "you have no chance against me." Lastly, he points at me, "If we fought, you would lose. I hold myself back because of the promise I made to Leticia, but even if I don't kill you now, the opportunity will come in the future."

"Even if you do hate mind mages, Soph hasn't done anything to you, you know that," Lily says in an attempt to defuse the situation.

Instead of Jean, it's Lucien who answers. "Don't bother, once he gets like this he won't change his mind."

Sophie doesn't answer, but I can see that look in her eyes. If it comes down to her survival, she won't hesitate to play dirty or even kill him before he can do the same. I know she won't.

Then there's the other thing I've noticed: Luna's been avoiding Sophie as much as possible. It seems like even the others from Earth are learning to fear and hate mind mages, which I consider very reasonable.

Sensing a familiar presence outside, I stand up and make my exit through the door.

As expected, it turns out to be Duncan, the young man carrying the massive bag on his back, following close behind a small group of natives and attendees. I do take notice of a few Royal Blue B-rank identification emblems on a couple of the attendees. Demons. The group seems like a powerful one, likely visiting from a deeper floor.

A few eyes glance my way, towards the crown especially, but no one tries to probe my body's mana capacity or anything like that, given the offense it would cause. Though one of the demons does try to probe my heart but he doesn't linger on it for too long.

Duncan looks towards me as well, but overlooks me for a moment before his eyes snap back to me in surprise and a big smile takes over his face.

He quickly makes some excuse to the native next to him and leaves the group to come rushing my way.

"Noname! I didn't expect to see you in Lake City! Congratulations on reaching the safe zone. It's been a while since I saw you, so I thought you might have died or gone deeper."

"Hey. That's just how it worked out. We just got here a little while ago and now we're planning our expedition to the second safe zone."

"Oh, you seem to have found a nice group this time," he then looks around as if he were worried about being overheard.

I form a barrier around us and add [Eclipse] to the mix, making sure no one can eavesdrop.

"You always were quick to understand," he smiles. "Listen, I've got some pretty nice info, 1,000 shards and it could be yours. If, after a while, you find it has some value or leads to some nice earnings, you can tip me, so you could even say I'm being generous. What do you think?"

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I guess the grind really never stops with this guy.

"Sure," I reply, transferring the shards.

"You probably have heard about fishing here, right?"

"Just a little bit."

"So, the group I joined has a few fresh B-ranks looking to make some shards. Usually, you would want A-ranks, but it's not the season so the pale purple, white, and golden fish won't be around. But, if you know where to look, you can still catch some, and even though they're not as valuable they are good enough for a few B-ranks."

"Continue."

"Obviously I can't tell you much more about their plans; I have my reputation to uphold! But from my own experience, I know that once you start fishing using a lure, plenty of smaller fish come to the surface all over the lake. The bigger ones will stay near the lure so the B-ranks will get their stuff, but if you get lucky you could catch one or two of the smaller ones."

"That does indeed sound interesting. How would one go about luring these smaller fish?"

Duncan smiles brightly and taps on his backpack.

With a sigh I ask, "How much?"

"Five thousand shards! I promise it's worth it!"

"Here."

"Thank you!" He quickly sets the bag down while explaining, "Of course, the proper lures are much more expensive and you'd need a specialist to make them, but I have some of the materials they use to make them. Not much, but it should be enough for the smaller ones."

He hands me three small grape-like things. They're red and the surface is shriveled, and they have a strong scent to them. It's not unpleasant, but it is weird and hard to describe.

"You need to crush them all at once and mix them with a bit of mana, as concentrated as possible. Someone with Mana Potency would be great for that! It will strengthen the effect! See you back here in a day?"

"I'm not sure about that, but I will find you here before we leave."

"That works as well! Good luck!"

As he leaves, I cancel out the barrier around us and walk back into the house looking over the three weird fruits.

I smell them again before carefully stowing them in one of my pockets.

Let's do some fishing.

We're now all gathered around the lake, surrounded by a mass of other people. Likely accounting for the full population of the outpost. In the distance on the opposite side, the group of attendees and natives are making their own preparations for fishing.

Everything in Beyond moves quickly. They do not rest or slack around. Just an hour after arriving they're already on the move, ready to fight again.

"So we're going to do some fishing of our own?" Leticia asks, her voice full of childish excitement.

This prompts Luna to poke her with her nose, but Leticia doesn't let that stop her.

"Are you excited for the fish, Luna? I thought you didn't like fishes," Leticia teases playfully.

"Leticia, each day you get closer to confirming my theory that I'm the real human and you are the golden retriever."

"I wouldn't mind!"

"Leticia."

"I love you too, Luna."

"Silly girl, I love you too." The sigh sounds very weird from the golden retriever.

"Done planting death flags?" Lucien gripes, impatiently interrupting the pair and turning to me. "So you want us to help you fish?"

I nod. "I paid five thousand for the information and ten thousand for the lure. I also made it all possible, so I'll be taking 50% of whatever we make. The rest can be split among the group."

"I'm up for it," Tess replies before Lucien can interrupt, and when he looks at her annoyed, she shrugs and smiles. "Soph, Grumpy?"

"I don't mind."

"I don't mind either!"

"Luna and I also think that's fair."

"Leticia... we could get more, you know," Luna complains.

"It's fine!"

Seeing that Jean doesn't complain, Lucien just sighs. "Fine, damn it."

With that last confirmation, we watch as the group sets the lure. Even though I'm not using my senses to the fullest, I can feel them compressing mana, likely in an attempt to increase the lure's efficiency.

It feels lacking.

After a minute of tense waiting, the surface of the lake near them ripples, and a blue light flows through it. They make a formation, allowing the natives to move out of the way. There are 3 fresh B-ranks and the other 6 consists of D- and C-ranks.

The dark water erupts, and a fish climbs out onto the lake's surface. The lake's unique properties allow it to stand on the surface, just as we do.

And yup, climbs.

The fish is reminiscent of a salmon with three pairs of human arms. It's about the size of a small house and its scales are gray with pale blue edges.

"Oh, they got pretty lucky," one of the natives nearby mutters to the man sitting next to him.

"Looking at that color, I would guess 80 years."

"At least 110! Just look at the size and the length of the arms!"

"There is no way..."

I observe that monstrosity as it uses its arms to maneuver across the surface of the lake and uses jet-like water based attacks.

"No, even kids know the fewer colors there are and the paler the fish is, the older and stronger it is!" the native raises his voice at his friend.

As I move, the rest of the group moves as well and we break out into a run across the surface of the lake.

When I think we are far enough, I pull out the weird fruit, Within my arm an orb compresses, its color turning dark blue really quickly, and soon a mix of light blue and purple flows through—a tricolored, very densely compressed mana.

I stare at it for a moment.

Then I shrug and push further, turning the orb pitch black as it begins to reverberate in my hand, struggling to escape my control.

I squish the fruit and the juice within reacts to my mana; flowing around and encapsulating it, before shining a brilliant white and dropping to the surface of the lake.

It only takes a few seconds for the vibrations to roll through the surface, the ripples rebounding all the way to the opposite side.

Something moves under the surface at an incredible speed and an arm pierces the surface. Human-like, enormous, and thin as a spire.

The fish pulls itself out—revealing another salmon-like creature with six pairs of red eyes and three pairs of these creepy arms.

That fish is twice as big as the one the others lured, and its scales are of a single color only: pale blue.

[Fish - lvl ???]

Chapter 508: Our fish

Even before it fully climbs out, I find myself sliding into [Focus] as [Eclipse] activates, reaching out for the fish while Ley Lines crisscross their way through the area, the pressure just feels that strong.

Sophie deploys her webs; Luna grows to the size of a horse, nudging Leticia and prompting her to climb on her back as she begins to form a bow of mana in her hand.

Lucien quickly repositions, and Tess grabs him as she runs by, both of them keeping their distance.

Gareth steps forth, his armor taking on more bulk as the silver light condenses around him. He lifts his shield just in time as a stream of water erupts from the fish's mouth, striking the shield as if drawn to it, though it's difficult to tell whether the effect originates from man or fish. Gareth holds his ground, using both hands to fend off the assault.

Jean runs by him, and the fish turns to shoot that stream at him, but in quick succession, multiple lightning-charged javelins pierce it and make it miss.

In one smooth movement, Jean reaches the body and strikes the fish, only to be thrown back with incredible force, his body skipping across the lake's surface like a stone.

I immediately recognize the skill's similarity to [Reflection, and lift myself higher into the air before launching a few mana javelins at it, which hit the body. Does that mean it only works on physical attacks?

Lily reaches the same conclusion, so the axe stays on her back and coats her fist in [Disintegration] instead before throwing a punch of her own. The attack would almost seem gentle were it not for the gray mana eating a huge hole in the fish's body.

Moving surprisingly quickly given its huge size, the fish turns to her, swatting at her with one of its arms, only to be struck by a series of lightning javelins moving at incredible speeds, throwing the attack off course as Lily's punch takes a huge chunk out of that arm.

Seizing upon the opportunity offered by the immobilized fish, Leticia showers it in a barrage of arrows, leaving some kind of corrosive effect in their wake, and Tess does the same with her javelins, both of them focusing on the eyes.

The surface of the lake moves unsteadily, a huge wave rising in the wake of the fish as it moves, turning its jet-like stream on Sophie, only to be blocked by Gareth once again. This time I notice the attack bend slightly in the air as if pulled towards the man. That same stream eventually moves up, targeting me, but I form a shield to intercept the stream in its entirety.

Having finished my preparations, compressing a projectile as long as a bus and as thick as a tree — woven from condensed mana and kinetic energy.

It erupts forth at high speed, piercing through the monster's skull, gouging out massive chunks of flesh, leaving a big hole in its wake, wide enough to see through.

The creature's blood begins to drip onto the surface of the lake and for a moment the fish wavers, just before its six arms reach out to stabilize it.

With incredible speed, the wounds heal—except for those inflicted by [Disintegration]

Two more pairs of arms emerge from the fish's back in an eerie sort of twisting motion. Then they clap, sending vibrations through the air along with a powerful disrupting wave, weakening any mana-based skills in the area.

Not mine, though.

[Mana Domain] protects my body, and [Eclipse] drains the color from the air, making the varied hues of mana even more vibrant by comparison.

At that moment, Jean reaches the fish again, and I launch more projectiles its way, which pierce through its body, tearing the arms from its back.

Then Jean punches it again in an even greater show of strength than before.

This time, he isn't immediately thrown back. A wide grin spreads across his bloodied face as the fish's skin ripples at the point of impact, inflicting a fresh set of wounds—before Jean is hurled away with even greater speed and force than before. **RÅNoBĚS**

As the fish regrows the arms and claps again, I release more of my mana, countering its attempts at disruption with [Eclipse], as more and more of the surrounding colors fade away under the spreading effects of my skill as it envelops the area.

Six huge arms form from the mana surrounding me, each extending forth and reaching down towards the monster, reaching out to me in turn with the pair on its back.

The six of my arms grab these two arms and pull them off, the blood exploding from the monster. Then the arms grab it to hold it in place.

The water swirls around us as another wave prepares to wash over the group, but Sophie moves her arm, causing the water to follow the gesture and roil in place before bursting forth in a series of pressurized streams, bombarding the fish with a myriad of imitations of its own attacks.

Three more javelins pierce its body, Tess's primordial lightning seeming to slow the healing a bit.

Striking from underneath, Lily attacks the head, her punches sending threads of gray mana through the body of the monster, stopping the healing fully.

Then Jean is there again, delivering another punch and stripping a fifth of the monster's body to the bone, blowing the flesh away in an explosion of blood. He isn't thrown away this time either, apparently

having changed something in his approach. A roar of satisfaction erupts from his throat, and he throws another punch, stripping more of the monster's body spraying blood and flesh everywhere.

Gareth and Lily are blasted away in the aftershocks, sent tumbling and sliding across the surface of the lake.

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One of the fish's arms moves to meet Jean's fist, only to be blown away, with the second following close behind.

The water that Sophie and Leticia have been holding back stops spinning and drops back to the surface of the lake, falling like a quick summer's rain.

As Jean moves to deliver another attack, two of the remaining four arms, connected to mostly bones and pieces of flesh, move and slap the surface of the lake. Like an enormous geyser, water under the monster explodes in swirling patterns, cutting into Jean's skin and pushing him away.

Then, behind the shroud of water, a light begins to shine forth.

I notice Tess lifting her hand high towards the sky and pulling it down, and as if she had drawn it with the stroke of a brush, a huge red and white bolt of coiling lightning crashes down from the sky, assaulting the shroud of water.

The fish runs from its cover, mouth wide open, sending a thick stream of water crashing into Jean. Three more jet-like attacks focus on Lily, who simply deflects them with her bone axe, and two of the monster's arms grab Gareth.

Luna starts running even faster, picking up speed as the water under her starts exploding into geysers, tracing her path as she does. Tess isn't doing much better.

It seems like we've come to the final stage.

Satisfied with what I have learned about the abilities of other members of the expedition, I pull my mana back to my crown. Mana starts spinning inside of it, ready to destabilize as I modify the frequency according to the fish's mana.

Then I notice the first expedition moving closer. All of them seem to be in tip-top shape, seemingly having had an easy job with their fish, which seemed much weaker.

I don't like the way they are looking at us, so I use one of my Ley Lines to appear between them and the fish.

Our fish.

POV Duncan

"That should be as far as you go," Noname says as he appears in front of us. His voice projecting the permanent calm reflected in his expression.

It's dark down here, but his crown throws a bit of pale blue light across his face. It might just be me, but the colors in the area around him seem almost washed out, aside from the pale blue of his mana.

Myrril, the leader of our expedition, steps forward, coming to a stop in front of him, and as he does so, I hear one of the other B-ranks snort in amusement.

"We came to help you. Looks like you were unfortunate enough to attract one way too strong for you. We won't ask for much—70 percent should be fair for our assistance in taking it down, right?"

It's unfortunate, but this isn't the first time I've seen something like this. Attendees tend to get this way when they find themselves dealing with people from other planets and guilds. Especially now, granted, they seem to recognize the strength of Noname's group, but at the same time, they won't hesitate to take advantage of their exhaustion from the fight. Myrril stands out as particularly strong, a cut above the other B-ranks, ranking somewhere in the lower mid-tier of B-ranks overall.

The fish Nona's group lured must be at least 200 years old, judging by the color. There is no way Myrril will let the opportunity pass, especially when it comes to a group of rookies with nothing beyond a few D-ranks.

"It's fine," Nona rejects him anyway.

"You seem to misunderstand, human. It's only because we lured our fish that you got lucky." Impatience laces his voice—typical of Myrril. He is, after all, a demon, and demons have never been known for their patience.

Even then, Nona doesn't seem to hesitate or be worried, "I don't know, man, you might just suck at fishing."

Like most of our group, I can hardly believe this blatant provocation. I try to convey with my expression that he should stop, that provoking the demon like this is a bad idea. Nona, however, simply glances at me before turning his attention back to Myrril.

"Your heart is weak, too," he adds.

As he says this, his expression remains blank, only making the words hit harder.

"I bet baby demons have stronger hearts. Yours is probably worse than the pets of the royal ladies."

Ripples spread across the surface, and the fish being fought by the group battling in the distance is all but forgotten. Myrril's smile widens, his eyes glowing a darker shade of red as his black hair rises, fanning out around his head. A powerful thump echoing through the area, resonating from his heart.

I take a step ahead, just to try, "Myrril, can—"

The words freeze in my throat, my movement held at bay, and I find myself unable to move—not to blink, not even to breathe.

"Damn, the little baby demon got an ouchie. Did I hurt your feelings?" I would've expected Noname to at least change his expression or even to smirk a bit, yet his face remains the same, and that only makes it worse.

Myrril takes a step towards him, and incredible vibrations rumble through the area as his powerful heart generates an incredible amount of energy.

"Human, I will enjoy this very much."

"Sure. If you take another step, you will die."

The confidence in Noname's words makes Myrril hesitate for a moment, but he simply smirks and takes another step. "What now?"

Noname shrugs. "Kill him."

Before anyone can react, another figure appears by Myrril's side—a human girl, slim with eyes peeking out from under her brown hair.

That powerful demon heart only manages to beat a few times as Myrril turns towards her, energy exploding around his body.

Then, it falters. The energy dissipates, and the demon stumbles. At that moment, his head begins to slide down his neck, falling toward the water's surface landing with a splash before coming to a stop. The light in his red eyes slowly begins to fade, surprise etched in his expression, and as the last glimmer of light vanishes, his head sinks beneath the surface.

I lift my eyes to look at the woman once again, but she is gone.

A panic ensues in the group as they stand in formation, skills deploying around them. The two remaining B-ranks separate from their formation, coming to a stop beside Myrril's body and grabbing it before it can sink beneath the surface.

Both of them are demons. The one who grabs the body is K'len, and the other, Janryc, activates his mana, leaving a tracery of blue tattoos in its wake as it crawls across his skin, eventually reaching his horns and illuminating them in its pale blue light.

K'len stretches and looks towards the group still fighting in the distance. "Which member of your party should I kill first?" A lot of anger seeps into his voice. He and Myrril were close and he doesn't seem to be thinking straight at the moment.

Then Noname's own heart releases a loud thump, much like the demon he just had killed.

K'len and Janryc both take a step forward, their eyes filling with bloodlust as their mouths twist upwards in a pair of dangerous smiles at the obvious challenge.

Wave after wave of kinetic energy radiates from Noname, along with his mana. It increases more and more, the crown over his head spinning slowly as a golden shine appears in his eyes.

The amount of mana pouring off him is incredible, crashing over us in waves, flickering around his body, emitting its signature blue light as the pressure around us increases, and this time, I'm sure, the colors are losing their hues, making his mana shine.

No more words pass between them, and K'len attacks first.

Chapter 509: Pale blue

I hope I'll never be as easy to provoke as this guy. Now that their strongest member is dead, this should be doable without losses on our end.

I sidestep using Wraith Dance, bringing myself in line with the path of the demon carrying the corpse of their leader. I switch to Breaker Style and release the kinetic energy I've been collecting.

He, in defense, thrusts the body he holds into the path of my attack, and with its lowered natural defenses it explodes into flesh and bones but blocks most of the force.

The demon grabs a thigh bone and a rib bone into his hands, oscillating mana coating them in addition as he uses kinetic energy to move towards me.

My crown releases a pulse, disrupting all his mana, and before he can reactivate his skills, [Eclipse] cancels them out. The bones in his hands find themselves colliding with a pair of daggers woven from my mana and boosted with his own kinetic.

Two arms made of mana take shape, extending from my back and reaching out to grab him, but he moves incredibly quickly, avoiding them and attacking me again.

I dodge with Pulser Style, and he takes the opportunity to pursue the group still fighting the fish.

I teleport through one of my Ley Lines and then use Wraith Dance, catching up to him and absorbing the kinetic energy of his movement. But he modifies the field protecting him and pushes through, turning his attention back to me after launching one of the bones at Lily, who simply raises her axe to deflect it as I send her a warning through our link.

I grab the demon's wrist, kinetic energy roaring through my body as I pull him to me, and my knee crashes into the arm he lifts in defense.

Time after time, I forgo efficiency, disrupting his skills before they can fully form, my reserves showing no sign of strain.

He hisses, and something pierces the hand I use to hold his wrist. There are sharp bones growing from underneath his skin, stabbing into my arm.

I hold on tightly and pull closer, driving my knee into the arm he raises to block the attack.

His skin ripples as sharp bones begin erupting from his forearms, knees, chest, and shoulders. He strikes again, using his own bones as a weapon, eventually managing to pierce the hand holding him in place.

I slam my head into his nose, breaking it and drawing blood.

But that makes his smile broaden as he licks away the blood pooling on his upper lip and spits it in my face, making me move to avoid it.

He makes another desperate attempt to activate skills in a last ditch effort to unleash something powerful, at least going by the way he tries to manipulate the structure and flow of his mana. But I don't let him; I ruthlessly push through his natural defenses, destroying them, obliterating them with the sheer amount of mana I use.

And as for his kinetic energy, It's nothing I can't match. He doesn't even come close to the white-haired demon I normally spar with.

Gradually, armor starts to form around my body, woven from dense threads of mana that his bone attacks just can't seem to pierce.

His arms, pierced with extremely sharp and durable bones, keep slamming against me, breaking and healing, each attack showing incredible physical stats, regeneration, and bursts of kinetic energy.

And yet I maintain my grip on his arm and grab the other as well. With a strong pull, I grab it and tear it off. His desperate attempts at activating whatever strong skill he may possess intensify. Even in this state seems to be cycling through all his options, running through every skill he has.

But there's nothing he can do.

[Eclipse - lvl 12 > Eclipse - lvl 13]

His mana pool can't compare to mine, and I'm drawing on it like a bottomless well, with no concern for efficiency, just to disrupt even the earliest sign that he might be activating a skill.

I pull off the other arm as well, and he staggers back.

Even now, he fails to show even the slightest hint of hesitation and continues to laugh, even with the situation. Instead of restoring his flesh and bone arms, he skips the flesh entirely, choosing instead to weave a web of bone from the ends of his stumps.

He doesn't run; instead, he attacks me again to the same result as before. Before his arms can regenerate, I pierce a hole in his chest with kinetic energy, his own failing to counter the strike.

As he stands there dying, he doesn't lose that maniacal look in his eyes. "That was a beautiful use of kinetic energy..." he coughs up blood, "For a human."

As his eyes glaze over and he falls, he steals a final glance at the remains of the demon Tacita killed, sinking into the lake. Fixating on that sight, he takes his last breath.

[You have defeated Bone Reaver - lvl 315]

[Lvl 298 > Lvl 299]

I support his body with my mana so it doesn't sink and look over at his group. The last demon stands back with the group of C and D-ranks. Even though he used his skills, he didn't attack unlike the demon I just killed, and instead moved back to the group.

And now he stands smiling shamelessly at me. "I didn't like that guy anyways, but he and Myrril were pretty tight, so there was no way he wasn't going to attack you, human."

"That's not the kind of behavior I've come to expect from demons like you."

"So what? Given the way, you guys killed Myrril so quickly, even if we did manage to wipe out your entire group. However, I'd likely die in the process since you'd target me, leaving these assholes behind me to get all the loot. Miss me with that shit."

I can't deny that logic.

[You have defeated Fish - lvl 368]

With that, part of my group moves closer, Lily joining me by my side, the axe threateningly in her hand. There are some parts of it that are damaged, but looking at it, it's from [Disintegration]. She might have tried to channel through the axe rather than the fish.

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I don't even have to check; I trust Tess to watch my back, and Sophie's probably making her own moves somewhere in the distance.

Jean is doing his best to keep the body of the fish from sinking into the water with some help from Gareth and Leticia, who's created a set of chains from her mana mana for the men to use.

Luna joins my side soon after, the biggest size I've seen on her yet. Her legs have grown longer, and her face has elongated into a gaping maw filled with teeth and covered in blood.

Once again, I observe the group arrayed against us. A B-rank demon, who probably saw what I did and the way I fight, and another eight C and D-ranks.

I don't think we would lose; I'm even fairly confident I could take on this demon, maybe even easily and on my own if my skills counter his in a similar way to the demon before.

"Human, don't even think about it," Janryc interrupts, bringing my attention back to him. "I have no interest in fighting you or the girl, no, I'll simply avoid both of you, and trust me, one or two of your team members will die in the process, and what for?"

His words still make sense, even though I think he's still underestimating us.

But what for?

Without saying a word, I simply turn around and head back to the others. He doesn't say anything either; I sense his group leaving, returning their attention to their own fish.

Meanwhile, I send the body of the demon I fought to the house we've been staying at.

Even as Gareth continues to help Jean pull the fish towards the bank, I notice him releasing that wide-area healing aura of his, increasing our regeneration. Jean is already fully healed, thanks to Lucien, who refuses to heal anyone else, so Lily starts making the rounds, checking on everyone and healing even the smallest of wounds.

"Human, you might not be as crazy as I thought you were," Luna says by my side. "I expected you to attack them."

"Well, we'd better leave here quickly in case they come back with reinforcements. I'm guessing that this isn't the kind of fish that should be appearing out of season."

"It's our fish, human; we will defend it, for it was our prey," Luna growls with a dangerous glint in her eyes.

Cute. The doggo likes her fishie.

I reach out and give the side of her neck a scratch, taking advantage of her currently huge frame.

She then rushes towards the others, grabs one of the chains in her teeth and starts pulling alongside them, her tail swinging excitedly, almost as if she were playing tug of war.

We struggle to skin the fish for over an hour, looking all the while for any interesting materials we might use, but it's a messy process all around, all of us clearly lacking the necessary experience. That's why I go to the outpost and bring back Duncan along with a few of the other natives. Each of them pulls out a set of specialized tools, making us help all the while, given the way our skills allow us to make sharper tools and serve to make us stronger.

First, they dig through the chest and head for the bulk of the innards, and soon, they pull something free.

Pale Blue Core (Arcane)-A spherical core within a fish's body that pulses with mana. This core serves as the source of its power, capable of amplifying mana fields or fueling high-tier constructs.

Some of them shout in excitement, and the older ones start bickering about when the last time they saw such a big Pale Blue Core was.

Apparently, there are even bigger ones, but they tend to be different colors. For example, one can also find Pale Purple Cores, Pale Golden Cores, and Pale White Cores, which seem to be the rarest.

This one still has a lot of value, though, with Pale Blue Cores tending to go for around 200-500 thousand shards, depending on size, age, and other parameters.

Not bad at all.

There are also some upper epic materials—mostly the flesh, tendons, scales, and bones, plus more besides—but there are a few more valuable ones as well.

Pristine Mana Stones (Arcane)-Naturally formed gemstones found within a fish's stomach and refined by its unique processes of mana consumption. They are highly sought after for their purity and potency.

Reflection Membrane (Epic)- A layer of semi-transparent tissue near a fish's torso that reflects physical and mana-based attacks. Ideal for crafting shields and defensive barriers.

Energy-Hardened Skeleton (Epic) - The durable skeleton of a fish, laced with absorbed mana. Its fragments can be used to craft high-tier weapons and mana conductors.

Overall, our fish is estimated to have a value somewhere between 300-700 thousand shards at most. For a converted value of 3-7 low arcane weapons or 1-3 mid arcane.

For a fish.

Sure, it took ten of us to take it down, but I'm sure we could pull it off with less, and if you could catch a few in a row, you would certainly end up with a decent amount of shards.

And from what I've heard, some of the more powerful B and A-ranks have been known to take out similar fish on their own with minimal effort and damage to the materials.

The problem is that even Pale Blue fish are extremely rare, not to mention the higher "tiers" of them.

I want to see it. I want to fight more of those guys. I want to try hunting a fish on my own.

And now we find ourselves standing around that loot, splitting the parts amongst ourselves based on their potential usefulness. I even got some Pristine mana stones and a few pieces of membrane out of the deal, and Lily got some more bones, as usual. She also got the body of the demon I killed, along with a few small pieces from the other demon's body.

That makes me wonder if a lurker could still grow from the pieces left behind after we take our share with us when we leave. Is there a minimum amount of material required for the process to take place? Or does the process start the moment someone dies? I'm not entirely certain it's the latter—that would probably be governed under the authority of the system, that means that whatever's in the middle of this floor probably needs some pieces left over to rebuild a body in the first place.

As usual, the questions never end.

Jean juggles the Pale Blue Core in his hand, it being as big as a basketball, and tapping on it with the tip of his finger. "So how do we sell it? I did my part, so I better get paid."

Leticia takes it from him and holds it for a moment, seeming surprised by its weight. "If it sells for around 400 thousand, that means Noname gets 200, and each of us will get around 20 thousand. When we factor in the other items, it should climb to somewhere between 30 and 40 thousand each while Noname will get away with around 300 to 400."

"He didn't even help that much in the fight against the fish; he just floated there and attacked a bit! I saw him watching us," Lucien complains.

I'm almost amazed by the degree of his shamelessness; this little shit barely did anything and basically just focused on healing Jean toward the end.

Gareth steps forward. "We made a deal, and it would be dishonest to change the terms now. Think of it as an extra influx of shards you didn't even expect in the first place. As for Noname, without him, we wouldn't have even attempted this. He even held the other guys off while we fought."

Lucien just snorts in response, but he doesn't complain anymore.

So this time it's me who grabs the core and puts it into Duncan's hands, but it falls to the ground as the native finds himself too weak to even hold it.

He giggles nervously and quickly rolls it closer to him while checking for damage. "It's nice."

After that, he attempts to roll it to me, but I stop it with my leg. "You sell it and the other items. You can take five percent for your trouble."

For a moment, a look of surprise flashes across his face, but then he smiles. "Ten percent, or you can do it on your own."

Chapter 510: Reanimated Remnants

Duncan starts ordering some natives around and threatening them not to steal anything. He promises them bonuses paid in shards or materials, all drawn from his 10%, which will also cover various fees along the way.

It all seems too easy. He smiles, he curses at them, he threatens and offers bonuses—all while quickly reacting to anything the natives have to say. He even uses the presence of our group to his advantage.

I think they might be scared of Lily, who is already digging into the body of that demon. Even so, extroverts sure have it easy. I think it was Tess who told me that some people actually gain energy from interacting with others rather than being drained by the experience.

I can see it, I can understand the theory, but I don't get it.

"Does Hadwin's presence in the Beyond community mean trouble?" Gareth asks, moving in closer, scratching his well kempt beard as we watch the natives move.

"Yup. But I'm also sure the First Beyonder is a lot of trouble, so what's one more on the pile?"

"I meant for us. For Earth."

This is something I have already thought about for a while, yet even now I'm not sure. What if that crazy cockroach really does get out of the tutorial? What if she ends up on Earth?

"I don't think she'd go out of her way to kill the weak, but she probably wouldn't lose any sleep over it if something were to happen. It's difficult to say."

"I guess. But she might be a bit of a special case. She's the kind of person you tell stories about to scare Absolutes and some of the weaker Rulers, that's what we'll be dealing with once she regains her powers."

"Haaa," Gareth exclaims, letting out a noise somewhere between a sigh and a huff. "We better work hard to keep up with the others. It's our planet, so it's up to us to defend it, right, my friend?"

My answer is somewhere between a nod and shaking my head.

POV Myrra

The tunnels are enormous and continue their downward path just long enough for me to start getting bored.

"Little kitten, your orbs."

Quickly, I refocus my attention in a rush to keep the terrifying things from exploding in my face. From previous experience, I know how rarely she gives warnings. And just how close I must have been to putting myself in a dangerous situation. Were they about to blow me apart?

I feel cold sweat running down my neck.

"I'm not so old that I don't understand the youths' desire for excitement—to discover something new, to fight, and to have fun. But such a loss of focus is inexcusable." ~~AN~~**obES**

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. Do better. I promised that I would declare you a Champion candidate. A true candidate, not like the pathetic imitation you were before. And, little kitten, never in my life was I wrong when I made the declaration. You lynthari like to mess around, so you have to demonstrate the proper dedication before I give my approval."

Knowing she will only get annoyed if I apologize again, I simply nod and return to my training.

The monsters here aren't even bothering to attack us, or maybe they are and Lady Lissandra is just killing them before I can notice. But after what seems like days, we finally reach the bottom of the tunnel, and the area around us changes.

We stop in front of a very long bridge, and she steps onto it, walking with confidence.

I feel my heart beating; I can hear whispers and movement below us. I can feel vibrations rumbling through the hair of my ears and tail.

Am I scared just because of some height? A bit of darkness?

All of my emotions feel amplified, and my memory of them feels stronger, especially sadness, anger, and fear.

I accept them all, I feel them, but I don't let them control me. They are mine, and that means I have to control them. Eventually, I even begin to enjoy them. The taste of my fear, and that sense of desperation I felt when the matriarch died, and I knew my world would never be the same, or the

beautiful expression of happiness on Nathaniel's face when we fought juxtaposed with the despair of being left alone on my dying world until this human woman came along and saved me.

The bridge comes to an end sooner than I expect, and she looks back at me and nods in acknowledgment. Then she reaches into the air and grabs a patch of pure darkness hanging in the space beside her.

For a moment, something screeches, and then there is silence.

A pulse of mana erupts from her, scattering the material darkness that once resembled smoke, leaving it lifeless and hollow.

Without a word, she continues through another bridge until we reach a platform framing a deep hole at its center and find a blue skinned thylarin man, missing five of his arms, at the bottom.

We find him down on his knees, head lowered, and he seems almost hesitant as he rises from his bow.

"It is an honor to be in the presence of such power as yours."

Even in this state, my instincts are screaming that he's still oh so very dangerous. I can see it in his eyes; all my senses are warning me to stay away from him. Even imprisoned as he is, he's still a threat.

As always, Lady Lissandra dismisses his attempts at flattery with a wave of her hand, and after a moment, she opens her palm, letting a small handful of white sand drift down into the hole.

"No!" the thylarin screams, leaping to his feet and pressing back against the wall.

The sand descends slowly, almost seeming to float, as Lady Lissandra channels mana downward. A portion of which charges the white sand, while another continues on towards the thylarin. He seizes it, using it to hold off the sand, activating a shifting field of mana in an instant.

It's a breathtaking display of skill. With such a small amount of mana, he crafts something so remarkable. His field even manages to hold the sand back for a moment, frequencies shifting at a speed far beyond my comprehension. His arm moves frantically as he begins drawing symbols in the air and on the walls of his prison.

For a moment, it almost seems like he might succeed. But then, a single grain pierces his field—and his body.

The thylarin Champion ignores the wound, ramping up his efforts as sweat beads on his forehead. Another grain passes through, then another, and another. The sand begins to swirl wildly, tearing into his body with relentless precision, driving him to his knees.

Gradually, the symbols he's drawn start to weaken, their glow fading until they vanish entirely. When he collapses, the light in his eyes fades as well, leaving nothing behind.

I tense, bracing for the entire desert to come alive and rush toward us, just as that man in Last Rest had warned. But the silence stretches on.

"So disappointing," Lady Lissandra mutters, turning to leave. "And don't be foolish, little kitten. Obviously, I stripped these grains of the function that would trigger the desert's protocols."

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"I'm sorry! Are we leaving?" I ask, hurrying to catch up to her.

"Yes."

"I... I understand! Where are we heading this time?"

"The central region. There are a few places I want to visit. And one more thing, little kitten."

"Yes?"

"Lately, you've had too much free time to talk and let your thoughts wander. I'll be increasing the difficulty of your training."

"Lady Lissandra."

"Yes?"

"I understand why Nathaniel kept calling you a 'cockroach' and all those names."

For the first time in weeks, the corners of her lips lift into a tiny smile. "The difficulty has increased again. Was it worth it?"

Already stuck dealing with the orb, I barely muster the energy to nod. It might be just a play of the shadows, but she might have smiled even more at that.

POV Nathaniel

Once we've completed the bulk of the work of breaking down the fish, Tess takes it upon herself to help Duncan deal with the people of Lake City, though I still feel like calling it a city' is an exaggeration. Apparently, the natives who do live here do so with the support of one of the top 50 guilds, and they handle the fish business mainly during the season, but a few remain even now. And they're perfectly willing to lend a hand with any trade in the resulting materials, and the guild's support generally means there shouldn't be any funny business.

Though they do take a cut.

Of course.

Truly an authentic Beyond experience.

Part of me wonders how I would've dealt with it on my own and how much energy I would need to spend. Part of me trains, and another part notices Lucien watching as I do. Little Spacewolf is suspicious, certainly more so than CarrotCake, who is a clear meathead but who seems to be the kind of person who just can't hide his intentions and feelings.

But ever since Spacewolf mentioned it, I've had to wonder what kind of skill he has for LissLiss to take an interest in him. Even though she ditched him, unlike me, there has to be something.

Would he answer in exchange for an upper epic item made by the famous Tent Creep?

Annoyed, I turn to Luna, standing nearby. "You said there was a mark on me, scent-based or something. Not long ago, two Champions said they felt a different mark on me, but they didn't seem to sense the one you do."

"What's the problem, greedy human?"

"I'm not greedy; I deserve all the shards for the fish. So, I tried and I couldn't sense these marks myself."

"Give me a bigger share of the shards; I fought hard. And how could you even hope to see something only Champions can see?"

"No. And it's a mark someone left on me; I should be able to sense it. I'm not some kind of marking pole. You didn't answer my question."

"I'll tell you for five thousand shards."

"Thievery."

"Leticia is terrible with shards, so I'm the one taking care of finances."

"I can believe that."

"Yes."

Not long after that, we leave the safe zone, making our way through the slowly changing scenery.

There is less damage to the surroundings, and it opens up more, with fewer ruins around. The land is mostly grassy flatland with hills once in a while and tall forests in between. The rock covering the ceiling changes as well, becoming lighter in color with enormous crystals giving gentle, pleasant light.

Once in a while we encounter enormous stone pillars connecting the ground and ceiling which seem to provide support as well. The sizes range from the width of a football stadium at the smallest to truly incomprehensible monstrosities. Apparently, they often have caves and, rarely, veins of precious materials.

Tess flies up in the air, trying to map our surroundings and compare it with our simple map.

Like any other place in Beyond, the gravity here tends to be stronger than it is on, let's say, the 7th floor. I also feel a constant pull on my mana, dragging it downwards towards something at the bottom of the First Dungeon. Sometimes my curiosity takes over, and I let it happen, watching the way my mana gets pulled away and study the effect that causes it. I compare it to other skills I've seen that were capable of absorbing mana and to the effects of my black mana.

The black mana wins for the time being. That insane thing actually managed to nom on the mana of a quarter-Champion eye, so obviously it would. But how will it compare as we reach the lower floors of the dungeon?

Looking at the rankings, it would seem that the only person to reach the 6th floor in the past millennia or so was that guy Adrien—at least since the last reset. I have seen some of the memories Whitey had of the guy, but they only come in short flashes as the demon refuses to show me more of them. And even that much makes me very curious.

It doesn't take us too long to meet our first enemies: skeletons of monsters that used to live here and that millennia and millennia ago the first attendees—maybe even Rulers themselves—killed, and since then they are reanimating.

[Reanimated Beast - lvl 326]

[Reanimated Remnant - lvl 311]

[Reanimated Remnant - lvl 320]

[Reanimated Beast - lvl 310]

[Reanimated Beast - lvl 291]

They're all built from skeletons that clearly can't have belonged to anything friendly, even in life, and they move with unnerving ease, their bones grinding and shifting as if they still bore some semblance of intellect—but they don't. Whatever force animates them is giving them a strength far beyond anything those brittle bones could handle on their own. They charge with brutal efficiency, no hesitation, no fear—just pure, mechanical intent to kill.

The beasts' jaws snap closed with a terrible sound and enough force to crush metal, but it's not just raw power. Their movements are precise, almost too precise for something so clearly dead. I can't help but wonder—how much of the original monster remains?

Remnants are different. They aren't whole monsters, not even close. Each one is a unique patchwork of skeletons, cobbled together like some child's nightmare of a puzzle. Each step they take is jerky, almost clumsy, but there's a disturbing unpredictability to them. A spine from one beast fused to the ribs of another, claws that don't match the attached limbs. It's like something threw them together in a hurry and still made them work.

Fortunately, we learn about them long before they get close, so we're ready when they do. Gareth and Jean taking the front, while Sophie, Leticia, and Luna handle the defenses, and Lucien cowers behind Tess. That leaves Lily and I to do whatever we see fit, and Tacita... manages to be somewhere else once again.

As the highest-level beast in the approaching group attacks, it tears through Jean's body, freeing his organs and taking a piece of his leg with it before Gareth bashes into the monster.

Jean heals incredibly quickly thanks to Lucien, but dark-red scars trace paths across his skin, gleaming wetly as the wounds reopen despite Lucien's efforts.

As Gareth finds himself tossed aside, Sophie steps in to halt the monster in its tracks while Lily moves in with an incredible burst of speed, intercepting one of the beasts trying to outflank us, and Tess bombs each monster in turn. Stones are torn from the ground around her, each thrown at incredible speed at the monsters.

Jean, having finally recovered, lets out a hearty laugh and rushes back into the fray with glee, muscles bulging dangerously under his skin.

The fight takes much longer than expected, but after what feels like an eternity, the reanimated monsters finally lie dead, leaving our small group to lick its wounds which still refuse to close, the attacks of our opponents leaving behind red scars even with healing.

Despite expectations, the bonk strategy seems to work, and Jean finished the level 326 Reanimated Beast all on his own without outside help aside from the healing he got at the start. I also went hard and helped to kill the remaining monsters.

I can even happily say that without me it's highly possible that somebody would have died. I even get recognition in the form of a word of thanks from Leticia and a happy tap on the back from Gareth.

It feels awkward so I ignore it and they leave me alone.

Another day passes, marked by countless clashes with the monsters. I push myself to kill as many as possible on my own, testing the limits of my mana and my new skill.

There are a few things that give me an edge, but these creatures are formidable nonetheless. They're incredibly durable, and their razor-sharp attacks easily pierce through barriers, plus, they have some kind of anti-healing effect and even employ their own scouts to track us.

Still, after the first few battles, things do get slightly easier. We start adapting to their fighting patterns, and losing a limb or two feels like a small price to pay for such excellent progress.

Though at some point, something inside me starts to wonder if Jean might be level 300, but I don't quite think he is. But it wasn't so long ago that I was saying level didn't matter much.

Well, I might have lied a bit, because right now, I care a lot.

For one simple reason.

[Lvl 299 > Lvl 300]

Well done! You have successfully reached level 300. You may now select a new Primary Class. Available classes and their rarity are based on your actions and performance up until now within the Tutorial.

Specifically this system message and the five options it's currently presenting.

Let's see what the system has for me.