

Tutorial 631

Chapter 631: The last Candidate

“What do you mean by that, Assistant Professor Gwyn?”

“Exactly what I said. I do not think you are a Candidate, Ari.” I say.

More than anything, I think she would be killing many more people if she were a Candidate. Only Examiners are restricted to Candidates if they want to avoid death.

Ari looks around, and because we’re standing in the middle of the garden, there are some students, servants, and even a few Assistant Professors passing by. So far, no one gives us much attention, but I can see how much it irks her to break her schedule this way and lose control.

Even then, she just smiles with her hands playfully put behind her back. “Let’s talk about this later, okay?”

As she moves to leave, I let my mana seep out until even the people around us begin to notice and start looking our way. That makes her stop.

She’s still smiling as she says it, but her voice is quiet and sharp. “We made a deal.”

“I would’ve probably kept it if you weren’t such a liar. So, Ari, if that is your true name, tell me. Was there ever more than one Examiner?”

Gradually, her expression changes from blank indifference to settle into a smile, and she sighs. “You know it’s pretty rude to meet me so early after the start of a loop without giving me the chance to prepare any countermeasures, especially for situations like this, right?”

“Indeed,” she nods. “So what now?”

“I’m a curious person, so I’m going to let you continue preparing that array you want to kill me with or use to escape. In exchange, keep telling me interesting things about this record. If you lie, I will kill you.”

“So rude. You’d really kill a young girl like me?” She asks, flashing a cutesy smile and adding in a quick, playful bow that somehow still looks elegant.

“I don’t think you’re really that young.”

Her eyebrow rises, and I can almost hear her calculating how far she can push me and stretch this conversation. The entire time, she weaves arrays around her.

When it comes to skill levels, mana, stats, and traits, she has nothing that could compare to me. She doesn’t even have that many items on her, since we haven’t gotten all that far into the loop. I’m sure that if we’d waited just a bit longer, she would’ve acquired some fairly powerful ones. But so what, even if she did? I could still face her.

Instead of using items, Ari uses the little mana she has and years’ worth of knowledge and preparation to create an incredible set of arrays. Even now, I’m getting lost in them. They are stunningly mana-efficient, and I’m sure her skills are leveling up like crazy as she continues to weave them.

“Like you said, I’m an Examiner, the only one. My master sent me here. Just like the Ruler’s Candidates, I’m being tested too.”

“Oh?”

“Oh, yes. My master is the Absolute who worked with the Ruler to create this. Twisted little shit, isn’t he? But can even he compare to the Ruler who threw kids without proper training into a record like this for me to hunt? Wouldn’t you agree it’s a terrible way to find a successor?”

“I agree.”

At this point, some of the students begin to notice something strange, and even two Assistant Professors nearby seem aware of the arrays Ari’s been weaving. Still, they don’t react. To them, it probably looks like I’m testing one of the students.

“Did you find out who the remaining Candidates are? I didn’t lie about the number, but I think a few loops ago, someone killed the eighth. I promise it wasn’t me.”

I nod. “I think the remaining ones decided that they’d had enough and decided to push for an end to this.”

Ari sighs. “And you ruined it. Between me and them, we could’ve had a halfway decent clash of wits, even if I didn’t expect much, given that they spent most of their time hiding.”

“You think so?”

“Isn’t it true?” Two of her arms spread wide, while the other four twitch their fingers in a manner that seems to help her focus on the arrays she’s weaving. “I was the one who hunted them down like mindless animals.”

That wild smile stretches across her face. “Ah, if you knew how much fun I had. One tried to use a ‘bug’ against me, but I turned that same ‘bug’ back on them. Another one found out my identity and tried to connect with another Candidate he’d located. Only later did he find out I had found her first and cooperated with her. We killed him, and then I killed her as well.”

She giggles, and her speech quickens along with the twitching of her fingers. “Then there was that little piece of trash who kept hiding. I knew he was from my class, but I couldn’t tell who it was. And you know, I really didn’t want to die. Can you guess what I did?”

“I don’t. Please tell me.”

“I pretended to break down and started crying in class. I kept mumbling things only the Candidate would understand. I made myself look small and weak. Scared.” She laughs again. “It was a risk, but I’d become quite the risk-taker about a year into the loops. Still, it worked. He found me after class and revealed himself. He pitied me. After a year alone, he was just glad to find someone else like him.”

She steps from side to side, almost dancing as she remembers what happened.

"Back then, I wasn't as strong as I am now, and he was careful even after revealing himself. But slowly, I made him fall for me. Would you believe that?" She chuckles out loud and covers her mouth with two hands. "THAT DUMBASS FELL FOR ME."

When she puts her hands down, the smile is gone. "I killed him that same loop."

"You seem to have had a lot of fun, Ari."

"A bit," she nods. "Do you enjoy my information, Assistant Professor Gwyn?"

"Somewhat. Anything else?"

"May I ask who the remaining Candidates are?"

"Oh? You think you might kill me and want to find them after?"

"Yes."

"Wouldn't killing me kill you, too, as the Examiner? Or is that something you lied about?"

"Please don't worry. Bugs are excluded from that rule. As long as you're looping, you're fair game."

"That's good for you," I say.

"Yes. So, please? Who are your suspects?"

"I wouldn't call them suspects. I'm sure of who they are. I also wouldn't say I'm the smartest person, but it's quite funny that I found them before you did, even though I did my share of messing around. But I guess I did have a lot of help."

For the first time, the pace of her weaving falters, but she quickly recovers and continues as if nothing happened. But I noticed.

“Do you know Vance?”

Ari blinks. “I was fifty-fifty on him. What gave him away?”

“Well, he wanted to blow up the entire Academy to wipe out all the Candidates and you all at once. It's possible he was trying to set something up that would bring all of you into the Academy in case some of you were scattered around the region, but we forced his hand, and he had to rush.”

“That’s surprising. How was he planning to do that?”

“That’s partly my fault. The guy’s a kleptomaniac and couldn’t help stealing from me. Even so, it’s impressive what he managed. All this while acting like a cliché young boy just spying on the girls, all so he could keep making items to hide himself, sneak around, and track down the other Candidates.”

“I would have dealt with him.”

“I agree with you on that. And by the way, this is an impressive array. Honestly, even as it is now, it's probably enough to kill me. But I don’t get that other thing you're doing in the background. The part you're using the array to hide. Are you searching for something?”

“Thank you. I’ve been working on it for years and poured a lot of drachen, along with help from many people, to develop it. Yet, you seem confident. Are you not worried?” She ignores my question.

“Not really.”

“I think we could have been good friends if we had met outside.”

“I don’t think so.”

"So, who is the last Candidate?" she asks.

"You've been doing a good job of making me monologue."

"I know, but you're enjoying it too, aren't you? Please, don't lie. I can see that you're the same as me in that way. So, where is your pride? Show it to me. Give me all the cards. Allow me to try my best and still defeat me."

"Which Ruler's been messing around here?"

"I don't know."

"I see. You know what's funny, Ari? You would still lose in the end." Her eyebrow twitches, and the rhythm of her heart shifts a little. I continue, "It's Tyven."

She stops entirely, no longer working on the array, and instead takes a step forward. "There's no way."

It almost makes me laugh, and I can see she's noticed it.

"There is no way," she whispers, her eyes hazing over. She snaps back to reality. "There is no way "HE" is a candidate. There is no way I would lose against SOMEONE LIKE HIM!"

She makes quick changes to the array. It becomes less stable and more dangerous at the same time. Damage starts piling up across her body.

Somewhere in the distance, I notice the Academy arrays twisting into a defensive cupola around the place where Vance had been working on the thermonuclear warhead. An alarm reverberates through the Academy.

The movement of mana around Ari stops, and she looks at me. "I finally found it."

Her killing array fires at me, and while I'm busy blocking it, she does something else. Then the loop resets, and I find myself back in the starting room with the rest of Group 4.

Without hesitation, I break the wall of the room in a blast of kinetic energy. As debris rains down to the ground, I fly through it and lift into the air. I send a pulse of detection through the Academy and push against the first attempts of the Academy's arrays to suppress me. Within seconds, I locate Ari heading toward the library.

I form a javelin and shoot it at her, but it gets blocked by one of the Professors who appears to defend her. Ari continues heading toward Tyven, mana twisting around her and damaging her body as she overextends her limits, and prepares to kill him.

The Professor, one I haven't met before, uses his skill, and I feel myself pushed back, constantly being restricted. Another Professor starts twisting the Academy arrays to aid them.

I create an [Empyrean Lance] and shoot it at Ari again, piercing through the barriers and nearly catching her. At the last moment, she turns her eyes toward me, and the loop resets again.

I send the message to everyone, break the wall again, and fly into the air. An orb of black mana forms ahead of me. I feed it a good chunk of my mana and launch it forward to distract the Professors.

I spot Ari again and start heading her way, but I stop mid-flight as pressure fills the area.

Slowly, I turn my head and look toward its epicenter.

In the air, near my orb, stands a figure. The selari Champion who moved there from miles away in less than a second. With curiosity, he observes the black orb that's been sucking in surrounding mana and tearing apart the defensive arrays.

Then he grabs it in his hands and closes it into a tight fist.

An audible thump echoes through the academy, breaking all the windows and blowing away the arrays as if they were normal spider webs caught in a hurricane.

Champion Dion turns to me and opens his fist, from which tiny black particles fall like sand.

All of my defenses are blown away as if they didn't exist. I watch that incredible mass of mana head my way.

Lily reaches Ari, and the loop resets again.

I blow the wall of the room apart once again and continue on foot, sending a quick scan to locate Ari. The rest of Group 4 follows. Tess acts as a distraction and flies to the tallest tower, her primordial lightning cracking around her.

Finding Ari, I notice she's searching for something. The way she does it is extremely specialized, unlike anything I've seen before. I halt for a moment as her senses lock onto a small pen in one of the classrooms. She immediately places some sort of mark on it.

When I break through the window and come to a stop in front of her, Lulu appears nearby, flying in through another window. I hear the footsteps of the Vice Director behind me as her arrays and mana spread through the area.

My teleportation fails, disrupted before I can even move, and the Vice Director's mana pins me in place. Tess' lightning javelin then pierces through the wall and strikes near the Vice Director, and forces her to defend against the next one.

I push against the restriction and move toward Ari.

She triggers her mark and destroys the pen.

The loop resets.

We rush out of the room again, some toward Tyven, others to distract the Professors. I go after Ari. She once again searches for the item, which I realize must be the core of the Record. Her constant search for

it must mean it keeps changing, and it does. This time, it is a necklace worn by one of the students, and she places a mark on it as well.

In an entirely different area now, Ari stands not far from where we appeared, but as I reach through the air toward the mark she placed, something disrupts it.

From behind the trees, Professor Elian appears. His Mana Wavelength Iris glows deeply.

"Assistant Professor Gwyn, what is the meaning of this?"

I ignore him and shoot an orb of black mana at him while simultaneously using Wraith Dance to reach Ari. Using speed against mana-specialized opponents like him should...

My body slams against a barrier in front of Ari, and it doesn't even budge as I throw the full power of my disruption against it. Ari grins widely from behind it.

"Student Ari, what are you grinning at?" Elian snorts beside her and keeps reinforcing his barrier as I turn to my left. "You have a lot of questions to answer. Both you and Assistant Professor Gwyn."

There, the black orb I shoot at him floats in the air, surrounded by a spinning square cage of multilayered mana.

An overload of information makes me stagger. My Mana Wavelength Iris deactivates, and I fall to my knees.

"What an interesting thing," sounds a voice from behind me. When I turn back, selari Champion Dion is standing there as well, placing me between him and Professor Elian.

A chuckle escapes my mouth at the insanity of the situation. Before my connection to Group 4 disappears, I send information about the necklace on one of the students.

"Dion, may I ask what you are doing here at this time?" Elian asks in his usual nonchalant, arrogant manner.

Instead of answering, Dion points at the black orb trapped inside the cage, "That orb."

"All of this has happened on the grounds of the Academy, so please exclude yourself from the situation."

"In that case, keep that thing. I will be taking this guy with me," Champion Dion says, and the pressure around me disappears as he steps forward and counters the Professor.

Elian doesn't even blink. The golden circles around his pupils seem to burn a hole into reality itself as mana rises around him, sending a shockwave through the area. Above him, three cube-shaped objects appear, glowing with a bright mix of golden and white light trapped inside each of them.

And I realize that any one of those cubes is enough to destroy not just the Academy, but the entire region the 8th floor encompasses.

Then Dennis catches up to the girl and breaks the amulet, and the loop resets.

Reappearing again, I search the area the same way Ari did. I mimic it. I remember those waves. That weird frequency spreads through the area, nearly undetected, and I locate an apple. I extend toward it, place a mark on it, and teleport it into my hand just as Ari finds it as well.

Her run slows into a walk, and she changes direction. Tears begin to fall from her eyes as she grabs a passing Professor by his jacket and points at me as I enter the same hallway.

Wraith Dance brings me closer. Before the Professor can even move, I slam my palm against his chest, releasing a blast of kinetic energy. His chest bulges open and explodes, spraying the wall with blood and his insides before he collapses.

Behind me, I sense more presences coming.

Ari opens her mouth to say something, but a shimmering blue lance with a core of white and golden light pierces her chest and pins her to the wall.

She coughs up blood, but as her eyes begin to lose their light, she says with a smile, "How rude of you, Assistant Professor Gwyn...."

I release thermal energy around me just to be sure. The entire hallway burns, along with the arrays and the mana in the air. My body takes damage in the process as I lift two seals on the Ignition Heart. Then I squeeze the apple.

The loop resets, and I appear in the same starting room, surrounded by everyone else.

Congratulations! You've successfully completed the 8th floor's main quest. An entrance to the ninth floor has been created.

Chapter 632: Without looking back

POV Kim Min-Jae

Even after the reset, the portals to the 9th floor remain where we stood when the quest was completed. They didn't reset with the loop. Mine is near the Library, which is where I'm currently headed. As I reach it, it stands there with jagged edges, revealing a view into a completely different area. A green rainforest lies beyond, and the portal floats in the middle of the hallway, framing it like a picture. I notice something strange about it. When I connect to the link I share with the others, I realize they've noticed it too.

The portal is shrinking slowly. At this rate, it will become too small to pass through in a mere five minutes.

Before the sense of loss hits me, I, and everyone else, move to gather the things we want to take from the Academy. And just like that, a choice lies before us: stay here, likely trapped until the end of the tutorial, or head to the next floor.

Greeting the people I meet along the way with a smile, I hurry and enter the Library. Even now, the natives are moving as if nothing's happened.

There, in the Library, Tyven is already waiting, even though, according to his schedule, he shouldn't be here.

"Hello, Kim," he says, greeting me with a smile. Septa sits on his shoulder, wobbling from side to side while keeping her many eyes on me. This time, she has all eight of her legs.

For a few seconds, I just stare at him.

Then, even though I have only a few minutes, I take the last few steps and sit opposite him.

"Yes."

"H-ho..." I start to say something, but stop. Instead, I ask, "Did you try to kill Nathaniel and Tess?"

"I'm sorry. Are they friends of yours?"

"Yes, they are. So why?"

"They seemed like they might be working with Ari, so I tried to either remove them or create leads that would point them and Ari toward Vance. Unfortunately, you all missed the hints I left at the scenes of the attacks. To be honest, you and the others aren't very good at this, Kim."

I can't help but chuckle and bury my face in my hands. "Why haven't you killed me? Why didn't you kill Ari?"

Tyven reaches toward Septa, letting her playfully nibble his finger. "Killing you would have drawn too much attention. But mainly, I enjoyed watching you, Kim. You might not believe it, but after three and a half years of doing the exact same thing, it gets boring. You even didn't notice when I'd occasionally read a different book than in the previous loop. But that's not surprising. I was careful and always swapped them before you made your way to the Library."

He smiles, proud of his little trick. It's that same slightly shy smile he's always had.

“As for Ari, she was very useful. I just needed to be sure she never suspected me. As an Examiner, she couldn’t risk killing a non-Candidate, because doing so would’ve killed her too. That kept me fairly safe. Besides, she was good at hunting the others.”

He notices me looking at him and shifts slightly. When I glance at the place where his missing arm is, he adjusts his uniform to cover it. He’s always been sensitive about it. As a thylarin, he isn’t one of the rare ones with six arms, and even being one short of the usual four leads others to look down on him. I’ve noticed that.

“What now?”

He shrugs. “The others are dead, Kim. I won. I’ll become a disciple of the Ruler if they think I’m a good fit for their subclass. If not, I’ll probably die the moment I leave this record. Until then, I’ll study here freely, without hiding. As for you... you’re a bug. You’ll disappear with the next reset. I’ve seen many like you, so I can tell.”

Without any warning, something shoots toward me. Ready for it, I use [Telekinesis]. Just a short distance from my neck, it stops, a dart. No, not a dart. One of Septa’s legs. Now she only has seven.

“Impressive. I never thought [Telekinesis] could catch it. I figured you’d try to use a barrier like everyone else.” Tyven drawls, still looking calm, as if he were waiting for something.

But that something doesn’t happen. For the first time, his expression shifts.

One of the nearby walls explodes, and an alarm pierces the silence. The missing wall reveals a view towards my portal to the 9th floor. Through the falling debris, Nathaniel steps into the Library.

“Yoo, I thought we were stealing this Library,” he says, and I sense him placing defenses around the area.

Tyven looks at him, and Nathaniel returns the gaze without hesitation. He even lifts up a piece of paper.

“You already marked and just kept trying to break the Core to reset the loop, right, you little shit? I always thought it was weird how Ari started using the Core so late. Seems like she couldn’t locate it before the end, and it was you resetting the loops, wasn’t it?”

Then, ignoring the future Ruler, Nat turns to me.

“Are you still thinking of staying here?”

“I... yes.”

“You know you could die, right?” He gestures at the spider leg still floating near my neck.

“I know. But there’s so much I can learn from him.”

“Oh.” He gets it instantly. As lazy as he can be, Nathaniel picks up on some things incredibly fast.

Then he nods. “It’s your call. Normally, I’d give you a smack in the back of the head and stop you if I thought you were about to do something this stupid, even if you hated me for it. But not this time. If it’s a mistake, it’s yours to make.”

Relief washes over me at his words, and I watch as dozens of mana arms start tearing the Library apart, throwing everything through the portal into the rainforest beyond. At the same time, he connects with me and shares the method he used to locate the Core. It’s incredibly complex and yet laughably easy once you know the trick.

As he heads toward the portal, he turns back to me and declares, “I’ll be stronger in the future than he ever could be.” Then he looks at Tyven. “I thought I recognized those orange eyes of yours from somewhere.”

There’s a lot hidden in those words, and then he disappears through the portal, which continues to shrink. The storm in my head won’t quiet down while the countdown ticks away.

The portal shrinks, every second shaving away my chance to act. And still, I can't bring myself to move. I've gotten used to this place. I like the Academy and the Library. I like being a student, learning without the weight of my family's expectations.

Here, I get to be someone. I'm more powerful than most Assistant Professors, and so many people look up to me. That, too, is holding me in place.

Then there's Tyven. Even though he's just a Candidate for now, he's someone who will become one of the most powerful people to ever live. Just how much could I learn just by watching the steps he takes and the decisions he makes?

But maybe that's just the excuse I need. A way to justify splitting from the rest of the group before I make a decision I'll regret, one that might break what we've built. I know how I feel. Lissandra saw it too, and there's no way Nathaniel hasn't.

Yet...

As the remains of Nathaniel's barrier begin to crumble, I activate my skills and move in the way I prepared so long ago. I shift gravity so the portal becomes the floor, and books and mana stones rain down toward it. I help them along, breaking the defenses just as the twins and Sophie taught me. I locate the hidden rooms full of rare books Nathaniel told me about.

A few seconds later, I pass through, without looking back. I don't even ask why he tried to kill me, I already know.

POV Nathaniel

Congratulations! You have cleared the 8th floor of the Hell difficulty tutorial. Welcome to the 9th floor: The Pit.

You have acquired:

Passive skill combination token (up to low arcane)

14 Day Beyond stay tokens x2

100,000 shards

Trait strengthening token (up to 2nd stage)

I get the rewards first while observing the area around me. The dense greenery of a jungle surrounds me. The air here is humid and hot, I can feel it as I breathe. Sending out a series of scans, I confirm the lack of enemies in the surrounding area, and Tess does the same.

Finally, a lot more books start pouring through the portal, and Min-Jae quickly passes through the entrance between them and steps onto the hundreds of books and mana stones piled up all around the entrance. The others are much the same, each bringing their own hoards of items.

Surprisingly, even Biscuit is here, holding in his mouth a huge cooked something that looks a lot like an animal leg, likely stolen from the kitchen. His tail wags proudly from side to side. He must have heard us talking about stealing things from the Academy and decided to steal something as well. I even get the sense that he's looking down on us after seeing the things we've stolen.

Materials, items, food, and water supplies, enough to last months. Someone even threw in some mattresses, cabinets, and a few piles of clothes. The sheer combination of things piling up around us is impressive.

"Everything that wasn't glued to the floor," Dennis says.

"Yup," Aaron confirms.

Looking away from them, my eyes meet Min-Jae's. His normal brown right eye and the yellow Gravitational Wavelength Iris in his left. He looks at me for a moment without averting his gaze, only looking away when the twins start making their way over, talking about how he really wasn't joking about stealing the entire library.

While doing yet another scan, I think about it. Min-Jae is what, now, 17-18 years old? Damn teenagers. I can't have been like that, right?

I could also blame it on the tutorial. I might do that later.

For now, I open and check over our newest quest.

Floor quest:

Survive for one year

Rewards:

???

???

So mysterious. And I had hoped we were going for record time, reaching the 13th floor. One year... that's quite a long time. With the current countdown, we'll finish this floor with one year and seven months left and four floors to go. Still, probably enough time to clear them all within the five-year time limit.

A part of me wonders what this floor could offer to justify such a long duration. But from how it looks now, it's more about survival and leveling up rather than some kind of murder mystery like the last floor.

Of course, that's assuming we weren't just thrown into some giant area littered with dozens of random cities.

It also brings up the interesting problem of what to do with all these things. At least for now, Sophie has already started creating some small buildings, manipulating the trees around us, and weaving them into structures. Branches grow into walls, and the earth lifts up beneath them.

Tess and Min-Jae quickly begin moving all the stuff. Group 4 is indeed full of beautiful loot goblins. I remember the stories I used to hear when I was young. The prince saved the princess from the dragon, and the dragon's cave collapsed behind them, burying all that gold. Or some archaeologist discovering a set of long forgotten ruins filled to the brim with treasures and jewels, and after killing some sort of mummy mage, the ruins get buried in sand.

All these situations likely carried a lesson about letting go and focusing on what truly matters.

Well, not on our watch. I'm sure the people here with me would immediately focus on digging out the dragon's treasure in spite of the many tons of rock. Hell, some of us would probably dig it all out to get a hold of the dragon's corpse instead, just to study it.

Another question. Do dragons exist in the system?

I want to know.

System, tell me. I promise not to make fun of you the next time I regain [Mana Manipulation].

There is no answer, as expected. But it seems like my good mood has returned, so I force myself to calm down and help the others set up defenses around our base.

A few days have passed, the way the early days on each floor usually do. We do encounter some danger, but it's relatively safe, by Hell difficulty standards. This floor, this world, as far as we've observed, seems to be one huge jungle. Even Tess couldn't find anything else, no matter how high she flew or how much she strained her [Farsight].

The density of monsters here is also pretty high. An assortment of snakes, red monkeys with two tails and four arms, living trees pretending to be normal, weird vines with surprisingly resistance to fire, all that good stuff.

One strange thing is that there are barely any flying monsters. Even if they can fly, they don't go above the crowns of the huge trees here. So after Tess's first flight, we decide not to fly around either. At least not until we figure out whether there's some kind of dangerous monster scaring the other flyers off, or something else entirely.

Nobody makes much of a push for hunting, either. Instead, we've been focused on regaining skill levels, buying passives, and working on the builds we had worked out back on the 8th floor.

Even though our skill levels reset, with some effort, it's possible to level up fairly quickly. We just need to prove our qualifications.

So even after just these two days, my status is looking pretty nice, especially with my new skill locked in.

Name:Nathaniel Gwyn

Title: Champion Candidate

Difficulty:Hell

Floor:9 - The Pit

Time left until forced return: 2y 251d 16h 15m 33s

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

Lvl 309

Strength: 241

Dexterity: 231

Constitution: 430

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1633 + 1633

Primary Class: Mana Weaver (Unique Arcane)

Sub-class: [Adept of Pride]

Active skills (8/10):

Focus - Lvl 66

Perception - Lvl 64

Redistribution - Lvl 64

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 68

Ley Line - Lvl 56

Eclipse (Pride) - Lvl 40

Empyrean Lance - Lvl 24

Manifestation - Lvl 1

Constructs:

Reinforcement

Mana Regulator

Mana Sovereignty Mantle

Kinetic Mana Heart

Sealed Ignition Heart (Fully Sealed, 3/3)

Passive skills (5/5):

Mana-Kinetic Conversion Reservoir (Unique Epic)

Mana-Fortified Mind (Low Arcane)

Mental Attunement Loop (Mid Arcane)

Mana Wavelength Tyrant (Mid Arcane)

Subdermal Combustion Weave (Mid Arcane)

Tokens:

Beyond 3 day stay token

Beyond 1 day stay token

Passive skill combination token (upper arcane)

Communication with your disciple for 10 minutes

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

Beyond 30 day stay token

Beyond 30 day stay token

Beyond 14 day stay token

Beyond 14 day stay token

Passive skill combination token (low arcane)

Trait strengthening token (up to 2nd stage)

Shards:1,139,631

To create it, three skills were used: [Knitting] as the main one, with [Mana Domain] and [Mana Crown] as supportive.

With that, the effect of Pride is no longer tied to the non-existent domain, and I've placed it on [Eclipse], which I need to test more thoroughly later.

Of course, I also think I'll gain a few more levels in some of my other skills over the next few days, once I catch up on everything I've been doing inside the loop.

For now, I'm just sad.

[Mana Crown], especially, is something I'll miss deeply. I didn't want to use it for a combination, but in the end, I gave in. Please, forgive me. The crown barely made sense anymore, considering how full my mana reservoir usually is. I rarely used it. Another problem was the attention it drew from others when it was active.

But!

There's already a plan. With my new skill, I totally plan to manifest the crown on my own.

[Manifestation] sounds powerful. I mean, just reading the name gives that impression. What's strange is that it started at level 1, while most other skills at least began around level 9.

There were other skills I liked, of course, in this order: [Conduction], [Ur Line], [Foundation], [Framework]. The rest weren't really worth mentioning.

[Manifestation] sounds stronger than all of them and is likely the hardest to level, by a wide margin. That could be a result of its power, or maybe I just lack the talent or connection needed to make full use of it.

There are skills I am sure I'll be able to push past level 80, where Champions typically have their abilities. A few, I believe, could even break through level 90 and enter the realm of Absolutes, and then further. [Manifestation]... I'm not sure. At level 90 and beyond, that skill must be insane.

But we'll see. For now, I'm already preparing mental structures to try my hand at manifesting my [Mana Crown], and I couldn't care less about any trademarks or copyrights the system might have on it.

With this skill, I think it's possible. I've used and examined the crown enough to understand how it works. Trying to manifest it should also help me better understand the skill itself. In some way, this skill is certainly easier to understand than some of the others I've tested.

For example, [Foundation] and [Framework] allowed me to gradually build something. I could start with a physical structure and add to it over time. [Manifestation] feels completely different. It requires the entire structure to be prepared in my mind from the start. It's extremely unforgiving. The design needs

to be nearly perfect. Even the act of manifesting is tough, it requires a lot of mana and involves significant resistance.

Maybe at higher levels it will get easier. Maybe I'll eventually be able to keep building on what I've already manifested. But right now? No chance. The skill doesn't even want to level up, no matter how many mana weapons I create.

At least the weapons it creates are strong. They should be, considering how carefully I have to prepare their structure. The downside is that they don't last long, and they disappear after a few minutes. That's another thing I hope changes as the skill levels up.

At least that cursed skill that I was sure would evolve into [Crocheting] or [Sewing] is finally gone. [Mana Crown] was a steep price to pay, but I'll get my baby back soon. And once I learn to manifest crowns like that, what's stopping me from manifesting crowns for thermal and kinetic energy? Imagine it: three crowns floating over my head, stacked one above the other.

Ah, what a dream.

I also need to deal with my tokens. I have way too many. The passive skill combination token up to low arcane could probably be used, but I'd need to figure out whether I can combine it with my unique epic passive. Maybe sell Mana Fortified Mind, buy something else, and then combine that with the unique epic. Or reverse the process, sell the unique epic and keep the other.

I refuse to use a passive combination token for upper arcane just to combine a pair of mid arcane skills. That would be dumb. Same with using a 2nd stage trait strengthening token on a 1st stage mana physique. That would just be wasteful.

It's all just one more thing I'll have to deal with. Not a bad problem to have, but hey, why not complain a little about how tough my life is?

But seeing this Floor quest also means one thing. I might finally get a chance to use these 30 day beyond stay tokens.

Chapter 633: Just bad luck

[You have defeated Spineback Ape - lvl 319]

[You have defeated Spineback Ape - lvl 315]

[You have defeated Spineback Ape - lvl 330]

[You have defeated Spineback Ape - lvl 301]

...

I create [Empyrean Lance] and shoot it through yet another Spineback Ape.

Even now, I'm only able to create one lance at a time. Would the skill need to be called [Empyrean Lances] for me to make more? It's still fun, though.

Sensing vibrations of kinetic energy, I track the incoming attack and jump to the side. A primitive spear made of some sort of very heavy and durable black wood hits the tree behind me, pierces it, and flies further. A few more follow. I weave between them while firing back my lances, which are much faster and rarely miss.

[You have defeated Spineback Ape - lvl 321]

[Lvl 309 > Lvl 310]

My mood immediately improves as I put more stats into mana. Like a dose of endorphins I've been starved of for so long.

Maybe because of that, I attempt to use [Manifestation]. The image of a long javelin weaves into existence, accompanied by a dark hum and pressure every time I use the skill. A multicolored light shines weakly and briefly as the javelin forms over my shoulder. And a noticeable chunk of mana disappears.

The structure I had in my mind is gone, too, requiring me to rebuild it again.

I bend kinetic energy around it, and the javelin launches forward, only to miss the ape by the tiniest bit. It bursts into particles of mana after hitting the boulder behind it.

[Manifestation - lvl 1 > Manifestation - lvl 2]

Slowly, but surely.

Then I get back into the fight, even though I know I'm making it worse. The more apes we kill, the more of them appear to fight us, as if they were being drawn in by the deaths of their kind.

They throw themselves at us without hesitation or fear. Izzy thinks they may have some sort of primitive hive mind that drives them. And the longer it goes on, the more evolved the Spineback Apes seem to be. Min-Jae says he saw one with tree bark that had been worked into chest armor.

Otherwise, they are unassuming. They look more or less like normal apes, just as tall as we are, with grayish fur and orange eyes. They're very strong and durable, but at the same time, they're not all that fast.

Other than some kind of shared domain that becomes stronger the more of them are nearby, they don't seem to use any skills. That domain of theirs is interesting, too. It's a restrictive field that tries to suppress mana and physical stats.

So far, we've moved three times, but they follow us every time, somehow managing to pinpoint our location by some unknown means. Izzy doesn't notice anything. Sophie and I find two mana-based marks. Biscuit and Noodle can't sense or smell anything.

These damned apes must have put an airtag somewhere in our baggage.

Other than these annoying monsters, there's something else the twins have noticed during their scouting. Because of the dense foliage, Tess can't really see that far. We don't fly high to scan the area, and so far we've avoided large-scale scans. So the twins, with their variation of Sneaky Mode being more hidey-oriented than mine, are currently the best suited for scouting.

It will be a sad day when that leads the system to offer them a class with Phantom in the name. I'll have to beat them up then, even if it's just out of principle. No way am I letting those two smug bastards get away with something like that.

On one of their scouting runs, they found a small village full of demons. Just those words are enough to give most people headaches. Demons are lunatics, and none of my experiences with them so far have shown me otherwise. My expectation is the same for these as well.

Dennis and Aaron observed them carefully. They know demons can sense hearts really well, and that much like me, they might have thermal or kinetic senses. They are excellent at detecting movement or heat. I also wonder: would a primordial lightning demon be able to sense the electricity in neuron connections? I mean, I'm no scientist, and maybe that's just bullshit, but I don't care. I like being paranoid. There's just something comforting about assuming the worst.

From observing the demons, the twins learned quite a bit. There are about 100 demons. Rather than a village, it seems more like a tribe. They wear animal skins, though they are well processed. Their weapons are made from bone, monster teeth, processed crystals, and roughly smithed metals. There are bows, javelins, and other ranged weapons as well. Of course, there are skills we have to worry about, too, and primordial energies.

Interestingly, they live inside one of the massive trees, hollowed out likely with some skill. The entrance is masked and guarded. It's to the point where I'd call them elves rather than demons. But I remember what Feran told me. Some demon groups just like to find a rough environment, settle in, and force themselves to adapt or die.

What a bunch of lunatics. I bet these ones are like that. Either they're the descendants of such demons or some nomadic group that just moved into the area, maybe even to this planet, whatever it might be. Not like the name of this floor gives away a lot.

We don't know exactly how strong they are, but to survive here, I'd have to guess that they're somewhere over level 250, with some possibly ranging into the 300s. Dennis and Aaron are probably lucky to have gone unnoticed. Still, it's an interesting find, and sooner or later, we might still run into them.

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

Possibly, there are more such tribes. Or maybe it's one large group, split into smaller bands so that survival doesn't become "too easy".

I know I play with stereotypes a lot when it comes to demons, but damn, so far I haven't seen so much as a single speck of a reason not.

Two days have passed, and I've had to endure the constant screeching of Spineback Apes. At this point, I'm sure we've killed thousands, and more still keep coming. Like ants, they wipe out all the monsters in the area. And interestingly enough, the other monsters rarely attack them. Instead, they try to escape without fighting back.

"I'm done waiting. I'll just bomb them out. Tess, I swear I'll burn this jungle to the ground. I don't care if this place is humid, I'll generate so much heat it dries up and burns like kindling." I tell her.

Tess resolutely shakes her head. "No fire."

"I can bombard the place. I could use kinetic or tricolored orbs. Say the word and I'll carpet-bomb this place until it's finally quiet and I see no more apes. Mana bursts, projectiles, lances, I can even make everything oscillate until it turns to dust. I have enough mana. I want silence so deep it echoes."

"No large-scale damage."

Instead of arguing with her, I turn to Izzy, who sits next to Sophie, who's currently braiding her hair.

"We shouldn't do it," she confirms when she catches my gaze.

Sophie, from behind her, adds, "All the monsters avoid using fire skills or causing too much damage to the area. They're afraid of something. The same goes for flying."

"I can deal with any monsters that get unhappy with it."

“And if it’s Champion rank?”

I’m about to groan when Izzy waves for my attention. I look back, and she smiles at me. “Just for now, please.”

Her sister smiles, whispers something to her, and hugs her from behind. Izzy leans back into the hug and giggles while still looking at me.

“You guys have a lot of tokens, right? Just go to Beyond for a day or two to check on things there. Maybe try to fish again. Meanwhile, we can explore the area. It’s not that dangerous so far. It was you and Sophie who killed most of the apes, so we might lose them when you leave,” Izzy says.

Tess also seems to agree. “It’s not a bad idea.”

“We could go tomorrow, just for a day, maybe two? We’ll appear in that Spherical safe zone, right?” Sophie asks.

“As long as they haven’t changed the rules, then yes,” Tess nods. “But we need to make some preparations first.”

“Do you want to meet that demon tribe?” I ask.

“I think we should leave them be for now. The ones staying can deal with them if we need to, or at least escape. But so far, it looks like everyone is avoiding this area, even the demons. Probably because of all the apes.”

Maya snorts from where she’s lounging near the edge of the clearing. “Even those frogs we saw the other day were smart enough not to kill any of the apes. We’re the only ones who screwed up.”

“I wouldn’t call it screwing up,” I mutter. “I’d call it clearing space.”

Maya stretches her arms overhead with a groan. “Yeah? Space for what? More apes?”

I shrug. "Could've been worse."

Tess tosses a small stick at my thermal cube as it floats in between us as if she were throwing kindling on a fire, "Anyway. Beyond."

The way she says it makes us turn back to her, and we return to the subject.

As I enter Beyond, I find myself in that familiar area with my handler. It seems to be around midnight, and I'm standing on polished, perfectly smooth black stone that stretches on forever.

Even now, there's nothing as far as the eye can see. No hills, no trees, no mountains, no clouds. Just flat, polished black stone. Only broken by the sky, glimmering and sparkling above with a vast array of stars and nebulae.

My handler sits behind her old wooden table, piles of papers and mana stones stacked in front of her. This time, she doesn't even bother to look at them. Her expression is more serious as she watches me. Her hair, black with bits of red mixed in, looks redder today, and her brown eyes seem lighter in color.

"Congratulations on being one of the last tutorials to experience this version of the 8th floor," she says.

"How come?" I ask.

"Little Tyven died not long ago," she says, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms. "And I still don't know if I should find it funny, considering everything it set off."

"Is it ok for you to talk to me like this? It'll only allow me to confirm my suspicions."

"I don't give a fuck."

"In that case, tell me more."

She snorts. "You've already collected enough information to piece things together, and lately, things really aren't going the way I'd like. Too many old monsters are coming out of seclusion. Ambition, vengeance, the thrill of battle, sheer spite, oaths that have yet to fade, and those still chasing meaning in a world that moved on without them. Some only want to blaze once more before the end. Things that should happen once an eon now feel like they happen every year."

"So the Ruler of Envy is dead."

"Yes, and already, several of the strongest Masters of Envy are fighting for his position. Envy having one of the highest numbers of Masters is both fitting and amusing, considering his subclass."

"Who did it?"

"Guess."

"Holy fuck."

"Holy fuck indeed."

"You have to go now, but I want to give you a warning. As much as I can work around the rules, there are limits. I can't help you or tell you more, doing that would only make things worse. I just wish you and the others hadn't come to Beyond today."

Something in her voice catches me off guard. It makes me uneasy.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm sorry. The timing is just too bad. It's too early for you to meet people like them. Please remember that. This isn't anyone's fault. It's just bad luck."

I start to feel a pull as her words hit. They cut deeper than I expected, especially coming from her. My vision begins to blur as I start to disappear into Beyond, no matter how hard I try to resist.

"What do you mean?!" I repeat.

The last thing I see before I'm gone are her eyes. They look more yellow than brown now.

"Just don't break," she says.

Chapter 634: 23 hours

I appear seated on one of the stone benches arranged around the sphere at the center of the cave, where the water continues to swirl endlessly in an unpredictable dance of motion. Tess, Sophie, and Lily are nearby.

Other than us, there are only two more people. A feylith woman and a thylarin man with four arms.

Something about this meeting seems to unsettle the others as well. I notice them putting up their defenses and making themselves more alert. Lily shifts her huge axe and steps forward, Tess creates some distance, and Sophie narrows her eyes, steadying her stance.

My handler's last words echo in my mind, tightening the tension inside me. In the back of my mind, I already start preparing countermeasures after taking a moment to estimate the capabilities of the duo in front of us.

Noticing us, the feylith woman smiles and waves. She looks young, probably younger than me. Her hair and eyes are light green, but they keep shifting toward white and yellow. Like all feylith, she has small wings folded on her back.

Meanwhile, the thylarin is the tallest of his kind I've seen so far. He has four arms, and each of his forearms is covered in white, intricate, glowing lines through which light constantly shifts, sometimes deepening into orange. It feels almost as if a living flame is burning within them.

"Didn't expect to meet people from Earth's tutorial," the feylith woman says. Her voice is calm, unhurried. "But that's Beyond, isn't it? Full of surprises."

"And you are?" Tess asks.

"I'm Faora, and you must be Sset. The unfriendly-looking man is Noname, also known as Nathaniel. The tiny black-haired one is Grumpy, and the sneaky bitch over there is Soph. Is that short for Sophia or Sophie?" she asks with a curious smile.

"I see! Thank you for telling me, Sophie. And stop messing around with your mental abilities before I kill you. It probably feels pretty awkward for me to already know your names, right? I apologize. Luan and I had a long talk with someone from your tutorial not long ago. Right, Luan? So I remembered your names and descriptions."

She gestures toward the huge thylarin, who stays quiet.

Faora doesn't seem bothered by his silence at all. "This place is pretty, isn't it? I like to stop here when I go fishing to make shards. And who would've guessed I'd run into people from Earth? Please, sit down."

As she gestures at the benches near her, I tense up. This time, I let more mana seep into my body and push back against the pressure I've been sensing since we arrived. The pressure the massive thylarin is sustaining over the whole area.

"Luan," Faora says, and the pressure vanishes instantly.

(Should we...) Lily tries to send through the link.

(Don't talk. She's listening,) Sophie replies, then tears apart the web.

That only gets an amused chuckle from Faora. Her eyes and hair are both yellow now as she comfortably sits on the bench. She seems to enjoy the situation. Unlike her, Luan just stands nearby with his arms crossed.

Faora pats the bench beside her like she's inviting us to a picnic, not... whatever this is.

"I promise the benches don't bite," she says with a grin. "Though I can't vouch for Luan." She jerks a thumb toward the towering thylarin.

The thylarin doesn't react. He just watches us. The glowing lines on his arms shifting slightly, as the color deepens for a moment before fading again.

I stay standing. So do the others.

Faora shrugs like it's no big deal. "Suit yourselves."

She leans back with one arm resting on the back of the bench, relaxed. The kind of relaxed that only serves to make me more alert. Her presence doesn't press down like Luan's, but there's something else off about her.

"What do you want?" I ask.

"Want?" She seems to think it over, then smiles briefly. "A lot of things, but it would be boring to talk about that. After all, I just got to meet people from Earth's tutorial. You might not know it yet, but because of that man, there are a lot of people curious about Earth. Tell me, what floor are you on, Nathaniel?"

"Ninth."

"Oh? Not bad. You told me, so I'll return the favor. It's only fair. Luan and I are on the thirteenth floor. As for me, I'm only a few months away from the end of our tutorial, and Luan has a bit more time."

Her words confirm what I suspected. Both the thylarin man and the feylith woman are extremely powerful. Faora's unsettling presence and Luan's glowing lines don't feel like a good sign.

Why? Why do I feel this way? Are my handler's last words feeding the sense of danger? Is there something I'm picking up on that I can't explain? The others don't seem to notice it quite like I do. I'm sure they sense the danger and pressure more than I do, but they don't seem to understand.

That woman looks like a cat playing with a mouse just before it eats it.

"Well, it was nice talking to you, Faora. We already have something planned, so we'll be leaving now, okay?" Tess says, still trying to remain neutral.

At the front of our group, Luan walks from side to side. Lily stands in front of him, mirroring his movements. He towers over her, but she shows no hesitation.

Faora's smile grows. In some way, that smile reminds me of Ari.

"You guys are so clueless it's almost cute. Tell me, Sset, do you even know your planet is currently in the process of a Pairing?" she asks, resting her chin on her palm.

"Pairing? That shouldn't even be possible until we complete the tutorial, much less without an Absolute."

"I fully agree with you. It should be impossible, yet here you are. Progress is probably very slow right now, but it'll speed up after your tutorial ends. Then, five years later, Earth's non-attack phase will end, and it'll be possible for enemy Champions and Absolute to enter Earth. Luan, wouldn't you agree that Earth is screwed?"

As before, the huge thylarin doesn't even bother to answer. Instead, he faces Lily just as she faces him. Only two of his arms are crossed over his chest, while the other two hang at his sides.

"We'll be leaving now," Tess repeats, deciding that enough is enough.

In response, we get ready.

"Sset, I'd rather you didn't do that," Faora says, standing up as her smile widens more and more.

Her eyes and hair are now a striking shade of red.

"I don't like that mind mage of yours. I hate her. I don't like you, Sset. You're too calm, your hair is too pretty, I hate the name your healer chose, and the way she looks at me. But most of all, I hate that bastard standing there making his preparations. I hate that nauseating mana I can sense radiating from him and the fact that he has the same subclass as me."

The wide smile vanishes.

"Please, don't be sad. Even if you had done everything you could to please me, the result would be the same. I do this to everyone with the subclass of Pride." She fully turns to me. "Let's play and see how long it takes to break you, Nathaniel."

Everyone moves and attacks. Lily clashes with Luan. Lightning surrounds Tess, and the ground thunders as stones and debris begin to rise around her, falling apart under the pressure.

Without hesitation, I form the orb of black mana I've been preparing and-

This book was originally published on Royal Road. Check it out there for the real experience.

I find myself in darkness I cannot pierce, no matter what I try. No fire I conjure lights it up. I feel water up to my knees as I take a step, and around me, splashes echo as something moves in the blackness.

My mana, primordial energies, everything is completely out of reach.

Then, a faint glowing orb rises, revealing Faora sitting on a throne made of bodies and illuminating a small area around her. Each body is a version of Faora, I recognize. Beyond that light of the glowing orb, everything is lost in pitch-black darkness.

Even the splashes around are more Faoras. When the light reaches them, they begin to groan and flail. They try to climb out of the water, but every time they take a breath, something drags them under.

"Please, ignore them," Faora says, smiling. "They're parts of my mind that... well, let's just say if you push too hard, things start to snap. Welcome to my Mind Palace, Nathaniel. Oh, and don't bother. You can't use your mana here or anything else."

It is just as she said, but I don't wait for her to finish. I take a step toward her, then another, breaking into a run through the water, which I now see is red. Before I get too close, something far stronger than me grabs my feet and pulls me down, then lets go. When I rise and try again, it happens once more. It keeps dragging me back, further from her.

I search for my mana, for anything I can use, but there is nothing.

"Your mental defenses are impressive. I've only felt stronger from a rare few fourth-year attendees."

I keep jerking my legs to break free and kick at whatever is grabbing me, but that only draws more Faoras closer. They groan as they move. I see how twisted they are. Some have too many limbs, some too few. Some are huge, others are too small. Some are missing eyes, and others have far too many.

I fight them off, feeling blood trickle from my nose as my temperature spikes. A ringing starts in my ears, and the pain forces a groan out of me.

Still sitting there, Faora smiles.

"Finally. I was starting to worry your mind was handling this too well. You know, Nathaniel, here in my Mind Palace, time passes much faster than it does outside. Of course, it's not actually affecting the flow of time, it's more like thought acceleration, and there's always a cost. Most people die after just a few seconds, but you and Sophie are both holding up surprisingly well."

Once again, I kick away the corpses. I leap over one powerful arm and duck under another charging at me, only to be hit by that same dizzying lightheadedness.

"Oh, come on. This is getting pathetic, Nathaniel. But who told you to pick such a subclass? Wouldn't you agree that Pride is the worst option? All these weaklings pretending to be strong, just to meet the expectations it places on them. There's nothing better than beating them down and breaking them."

The dozens of broken and twisted fragments of her mind keep screeching around us.

"You might think I only know Sophie's name now, Nathaniel, but I now know so much more. Would you like to hear some of her secrets?"

My body rises into the air as one of the largest twisted versions of Faora lifts me up, holding me so I face Faora, still seated on her throne of bodies.

"Dear Sophie is scared all the time, yet she's pathetic too. Because of her sister, she tries to be a better person. She holds back, barely makes use of her abilities, dabbling here and there, and mostly on natives. That's why she didn't put up a better fight against me today," she laughs.

No matter how I twist or strain, I can't move.

The woman in front of me falls silent, her eyes glazing over as she focuses on something else. A drop of blood trickles from her nose.

Then silence falls. No splashing, no screaming.

And Faora says,

"Oh, I pushed a little too hard. Sophie might be dead, but it's her fault for resisting me so much. I..."

At last, I find a sliver of mana. Only one skill works here. I use [Manifestation], and a spear made of mana forms in my hand, piercing through Faora's neck as she screams.

The world around me vanishes, and I find myself back outside. My body wobbles, and my mind feels like it's about to shut down. I glance at the spot where I formed the black mana orb, but it's gone, and there's a huge hole in the wall.

It feels nearly impossible to reach for my mana, but I try anyway. Then something slams into my chest and sends me flying into a wall.

I try to move again, but that presence closes in. I barely dodge one fist, but the next two slam into my stomach, breaking both of my arms. When I try to rise and call on my mana, he doesn't let me. A punch to my chin nearly knocks me out.

Each strike leaves burning wounds, and I catch glimpses of the glowing lines on his arms, moving like living things. Shining brighter with every impact.

I release the heat building in my body and activate my passive to heal, but nothing happens. The burns from these blows don't respond to healing.

Still, more thermal energy flows through me as I force myself to fight, even as my brain screams in protest. My wounds recover slightly. Then Luan is on me again.

Barely able to defend myself, he breaks my knee and slams me to the ground. My golden flames burn brighter around him, but he ignores them nonetheless.

His glowing lines pulse again as he flicks his hand to deflect a burst of kinetic energy that destroys the area behind him. When I try to gather mana, he grabs me by the neck and lifts me into the air.

"If you fight back, she will kill your friends," he says, his voice ringing quietly for the first time.

Another fist crushes into my stomach, and he throws me down again.

Then I hear Faora screaming.

I lift my eyes from the ground. She's standing now. Her eyes are bleeding, her hair and irises burning in a deeper, more vibrant red streaked with white.

"Stop. You've done enough," Luan says to her.

Only that makes her stop kicking what I now realize is Sophie's body. Lily lies on the ground nearby with the same burning wounds as mine, covering her body. Her hair is short, she is missing her arm, and the axe next to her is broken. Tess is nearby, with one of her javelins pierced through her shoulder and pinning her against the wall, and she's covered in the same burning wounds.

"I will fucking kill them!" Faora screams.

"You've done enough, Faora," Luan repeats. "We don't know how that man is going to react to this, since they are from his planet. So let it be. Is that mind mage dead?"

"How would I know? That bitch pushed against me, so I pushed back, so who cares?" Once again, she kicks Sophie's body and then turns to me. "And you, what you did should've been impossible, how..."

Recovering a bit, I get back on my feet again. Luan also watches me, and so does Faora.

When I try to move to attack her, Luan is there again. I am unable to even compress my mana enough to do anything. My ankle breaks as I move with kinetic energy to dodge and attack him, but even then, he just grabs my fist. Then a punch sends me to the ground.

"Let the poor guy be, Luan. You can leave now. I'll take care of the rest. Don't worry, I won't kill anyone."

The thylarin looks at her, then at me, before slowly walking away. "You find too much pleasure in your little cruelties, Faora. It will cost you your life one day."

Faora doesn't say anything until he makes his exit and heads out through the tunnels. But only when he's gone does she drop that polite smile, and her murderous intent is finally directed toward where he left.

She then turns and reaches me with a few nimble steps, blood on her cheeks from her bleeding eyes. "If you use even a bit of your mana, I will kill your friends. You can check, but I have placed some really fun marks on their heads. But be careful, if you aren't, they will activate and..."

She drops to her knees, then stretches out on the ground, her face only a breath away from mine.

"I mean, if you're really that confident, go on and remove these marks. To be honest, it would be fun to watch. But you know, I'm kind of a mind mage like Sophie, so you might miss some of my traps and end up killing them instead."

I can feel her warm breath on my face. I see the color of her eyes, her pupils expanding. A single strand of hair falls down her forehead.

She moves even closer, and her voice turns to a whisper. "But if you don't do anything, they might still die. Luan's Fragment is really scary, but he held back, so who knows?"

After brushing away some dirt from beneath her chin, she places her hands there, rests her head on them, and watches me. "Obviously, if you attack me, if you move from the position you're in, if you leak too much mana or try to use your primordial energies, they will die. They will also die if you try to use that black mana. I don't know what it is, but Luan had a really difficult time getting rid of it, so I don't want to mess with it."

The smile that forms on her face is one I make sure to remember. Every expression. Every word. I burn it into my memory.

Almost playfully, she watches me. "You won't try anything? So boring. Say Please, don't kill them, or I will kill that blonde."

"Please, don't kill them."

Her expression shows a bit of surprise, but her eyes stay glued to mine. Then she bursts into a happy laugh. Her voice turns even quieter. "I lied. I wouldn't have done anything to her, even if you hadn't begged. To be honest, I don't know if they'll survive, but they've been wounded by Luan, so that's going to be on him, not me. I'm not sure about dear Sophie, though. Her mind seems to be gone."

[Focus - lvl 66 > Focus - lvl 67]

She pulls herself even closer and whispers right into my ear. "Nathaniel, I think I might have killed Sophie."

Right after that, she moves back quickly to watch my expression.

Not getting what she wanted, she sighs. "Boring. Maybe next time you'll be more fun? I know from Sophie's mind that you guys used a one-day stay token, so the traps should disappear a few minutes before it ends. Until then, just lie there and hope they survive, okay? Or try to remove my marks and help them."

Taking a few steps toward the same tunnel Luan left through, she turns back one more time. "How is your pride now?"

Without waiting for an answer, she leaves.

[Focus - lvl 67 > Focus - lvl 68]

For the remaining twenty-three hours, I lie there with my eyes closed, unable to even make sure they're still alive.

Chapter 635: Debts

POV Maya Jones

It is all one huge mess. Izzy sits hunched over her sister and clinging to her. The more she learns about her state through her ability, the worse her sobs become. Not once have I seen her like this. She's always been so cheery and so mature for her age, yet now she's like this.

Sophie herself doesn't seem to have any external wounds, but both Tess and Lily look to be near death. Like their lives are hanging by a thread. The wounds they have, these burns, just don't heal at all while we panic and move between them, trying our best to help.

We try to activate the healing marks Lily left for each of us or use any healing items that might help, but nothing seems to work that well, and the wounds barely improve by the slightest of degrees.

Even the twins, though clearly shocked, try to help for a while before I send them to guard the area, since they aren't helping much here and have only been making things worse.

I myself have trouble focusing as I see Tess lying there like that. She always knew what to do, took control effortlessly, and seemed completely reliable.

There is someone else who should be like that, but Nathaniel just stands there watching nearby, his face even more empty than usual, more devoid of any emotion. It's been a long time since I've seen him this deep in [Focus].

Currently, Min-Jae's the only person anywhere near him, asking question after question, and slowly, Nat begins to explain everything that happened. He speaks deliberately and calmly, as if it were all some distant thing, sometimes pausing mid-sentence to take a breath.

And gradually, I can see how much it irritates Kim. Minutes pass, and he keeps moving between Tess, Lily, and Sophie, desperate like the rest of us, and then back to Nat, whom he keeps asking even more questions.

Even now, he's overtaxing himself as he sets up additional defenses in the area around us. He doesn't hesitate to throw money at the system shop, but unfortunately, nothing like a healing potion exists, and the other items don't do any good.

Anything we try just doesn't work. These burns are pretty similar to [Disintegration] in that they are almost impossible to heal, and the wounds close very slowly due to the girls' natural regeneration having been weakened.

Then there's something entirely different wrong with Sophie. After a long time, Izzy finally lets go of Sophie and sits down. Her eyes are empty as she whispers these terrifying words.

"They did something to her mind, and I don't know if I can put it back together."

It gets hard for me to breathe, and my eyes grow blurry before I blink. A sense of lightheadedness hits me, and I have to sit down.

Min-Jae stares at Izzy as if he can't believe what she just said, before he swears and grabs Nat's shirt and shakes him, while Nat just lets it happen.

"You said you'd be stronger than anyone! You told me to follow you instead!" he screams, with a twisted expression on his face, "You were so confident!"

Nathaniel's shirt tears a little, but Kim keeps shaking him when he gets no reaction.

"Why do you just stand here. You lost, you got beat, but don't fucking give up now! Do something!"

"There is nothing I can do right now," Nathaniel answers with that controlled voice. "Nothing."

Kim screams in a burst of emotion I have never seen from him. He turns and swings his arm toward the rainforest in a wide, violent arc. A massive surge of telekinetic force crashes forward, ripping trees from their roots and sending them flying. The jungle reacts as if it had been struck by a giant, ancient trunks snap like brittle bones, and the ground tears open.

After hours of our friends just lying there like they could die at any moment, I can understand. If I didn't have my skill, I would probably do the same, or even worse. But I can't bring myself to do it now.

Then he starts hitting Nat's chest and shaking.

There's nothing he can do either.

POV Nathaniel

I watch as Min-Jae shakes me. From here, he looks like he is about to cry. A cold part of me wonders if he is like this because he still has a crush on Tess, or more likely, because three of his friends are lying there nearly dead. Meanwhile, after all the confident words I ever spoke and all the effort I gave, when it truly mattered, none of it meant anything.

He continues to shake me, and I think.

I know I'm not the most talented person here. My only true strength lies in channeling large amounts of mana and primordial energy, and the effort I put into everything. I also realize that I will become stronger than I am now. I know the winner is the one still standing in the end. I know that those people will die by my hand sooner or later, and only my death will keep me from seeing it done.

Situations like what just happened in Beyond are something I have, to some extent, experienced many times before, and I'm confident I can come out on top again.

But it also feels so different now, even through the thick layer of [Focus] that keeps me distant and allows me to think logically.

"They won't die," I say, and in a way it sounds like I'm trying to convince myself as well.

Finally, the boy stops to take a breath, the young man I've come to see as a younger brother.

I take a step toward Izzy and make sure she meets my eyes. "Sophie can be saved," I say as I kneel in front of her and take one of her hands. "She wouldn't go down so easily. So please, check her shadow and see if Blackie is still in it."

I always knew her as a mentally strong girl. The one who's supported us this whole time. It is safe to say that without Izzy, group 4 would be even more messed up than it already is, and probably nowhere as tightly bonded. If there is anyone who is the heart of this group, it is she.

"My abilities don't work that way, Izzy, and I'm really sorry. But I promise I'll try to help as much as I can."

"Please... can you leave me alone?"

"I will."

As I walk away, I stop by Biscuit. And when I'm sure we're far enough away, I ask, "Will you stay with her?"

This time, he doesn't say anything, but before leaving, he pushes his head into my hand until I pet him.

"I'm fine, don't worry about me."

Then, as he leaves, I sit down and once again strain my mind. After escaping Faora's Mind Palace, it feels like it's at its limit and screams for rest. Even the healing marks Lily left on me don't help, but I've long known that healing the mind or brain is very different from closing wounds or regenerating limbs.

In addition to that, there are these burns that spread from the points of impact where Luan hit me. They heal very slowly, and they even slow down my natural regeneration. To push against them, I have to use a lot of thermal energy. Even then, the results are poor, not to mention the pain that using it and straining my mind causes.

So for now, I ignore these wounds. I welcome the pain and continue to scout the area around us, setting up more defenses, constantly using my senses to check on the other wounded members of our party. Yet there's still so little I can do.

Faora. Luan. I think of these names and keep repeating them in my mind.

A few hours later, Lily is the first to wake up. Even though she was more damaged than Tess, her body is more durable, and her natural regeneration is far higher. With a loud gasp for air, she regains consciousness and lets out a painful groan, her eyes darting wildly.

It takes her a bit longer to piece things together. She searches for someone, her eyes spotting me and then scanning around until she sees both Tess and Sophie.

When Lily sees Sophie unmoving, something tightens in her face. Her breath catches, and for a moment she stares, frozen in panic.

But her determination takes over. She shifts, dragging her legs under her despite the pain.

She doesn't even think about taking care of herself. Instead, she moves toward the others. She staggers and almost falls, only to be supported by Maya, who wastes no time telling her to be careful.

I also move closer and stand over Tess as Lily begins checking her wounds. Unlike Sophie, she is someone Lily can help.

Her [Disintegration] rises up, starting to clash against the remnants of the wounds caused by Luan. They resist, but Lily pushes harder, erasing the aftereffects and restoring Tess's body where she can.

Sweat beads on her forehead, a mix of effort and strain are evident in every breath she takes. Her hands tremble as she refuses to give in despite the toll it's clearly taking on her. The burns, cuts, and internal ruptures on Tess begin to fade, although some deeper damage seems to be taking longer to respond.

She starts gasping for air when I coat my hand in oscillating mana and cut deep into my shoulder to remove my pale left arm, which I place in front of Lily. With the same hand, I summon golden flames to burn the flesh and heal it.

Down on her knees, Lily keeps looking at me. Even through all the pain, I activate my healing passive and let thermal energy seep through. Slowly, I start regrowing my left arm so I can cut it off again once it's restored.

Lily understands what I'm doing and nods. Grabbing my severed arm, she lets it disappear into [Sacrifice] and begins healing.

Then, for a while, she keeps pushing me to give her something to [Sacrifice] so she can continue. But in doing so, I also push her to keep healing, even in the state she's in. Maya tries to stop us, to get Lily to slow down, but I know she won't. Over time, I've learned to respect her determination, and now I'll make use of it, pushing her forward even though I know how much it hurts.

Lily does the same for me. When she looks up, there's no fear, no pleading, no request for permission. Just a silent command. Again.

She waits for me to regrow pieces of my arm so she can use them to power herself and heal Tess. It takes hours, but once it's done, Tess looks much better, even though she's still unconscious.

Lily moves to Sophie, kneeling beside her, hesitant now. Her hands hovering above her, then touching her gently. But there are no injuries to heal. Just the silence of Sophie's mind, refusing to return.

There is nothing I can do anymore. This isn't something I'm good at. My abilities aren't suited for helping others. In most ways, they've been honed for the sole purpose of making me better at fighting and killing.

And that's what I'll do. There's still a long road ahead, and I'm not where I need to be yet, but I will get there. Step by step. Without pretending I'm something I'm not.

There are debts that require more than screams and blood.

Chapter 636: Solo

Another week later, both Tess and Lily seem to be doing better, with only the burns on their bodies as a reminder of what happened. Sophie remains in the same state she was in when we returned. There are no wounds anywhere on her body, but according to Izzy, her mind has been broken and scattered.

In some ways, it could be said that Sophie is dead, but it's not that simple. Sophie can't save herself, but she's done something that might allow her sister to help.

Pieces of her mind are scattered in her brain, and then there's Blackie, still clinging to her shadow, with a few more pieces. That construct, created long ago by a Champion, now akin to an artificial bond to Sophie, holds what Izzy thinks are the most important parts of her.

Then there's something else. More than just memories or instructions, it feels like a fragment of Intent. A piece of guidance that could help, something Sophie must have put together when she was left with no other choice.

But even with all of this, Izzy can't do anything at the moment. She tries hard and pushes herself constantly. She hasn't slept or eaten in days and stays with her sister as much as possible, accompanied by Noodle and Biscuit, who quietly stay by her side.

And Izzy just keeps pushing herself more than I've ever seen before.

The image of her struggling is heartbreaking. She doesn't know if there's a time limit, if it's even possible, or if she's just clinging to delusional hope.

During that time, I can't even count how many times I've felt tempted to enter Beyond by myself and likely die trying to kill those two. But every time, I hold myself back. Oh, how much I dislike it. And I feel like a coward somewhere in the back of my mind.

Min-Jae's words still cut deep. That dark part of my mind, the one everyone has, keeps spiraling into those self justifying thoughts, the kind that come when you can't sleep and start reflecting on your life and everything else, always in the cruelest of ways. It keeps reminding me of what Sophie did to me on the 1st floor. It keeps telling me Sophie would've thrown me to those two without a thought if it saved Izzy. It just keeps finding ways to make me feel better about myself.

So I listen to it and continue to prepare, but at the same time, I grow more patient. I only have one life after all.

I'm not scared of death, but if I just run off and die, those two will survive. They will continue to live as if nothing happened, and, in a few decades, they might even forget what they've done or even about having met us on the first floor of Beyond in the first place.

How could I possibly allow something like that?

They will die, and I don't care how it happens. If I'm strong enough by the time I meet them, I will do it with my own hands. If not, I will use any dirty tactic I can think of to make it happen.

Over the next week, I try to help Izzy as much as possible. We get the twins to help, and everyone with even the faintest hint of mental ability. And we keep trying.

Tess, despite her wounded state, holds herself together really well. A part of me thinks she just sees it as another obstacle to overcome. Another part of me knows Tess, while realistic, tends to be optimistic. It's part of a more childish side of her, shaped by all the stories where the heroes always win out in the end.

She believes, even more than I do, that everything will be fine. The wounds she and Lily suffered will heal and become just faint memories, used only as fuel to grow stronger. And in the meantime, we'll find a way to help Sophie.

Everyone seems to believe her more than me. She smiles, knows exactly what each person wants to hear, and delivers those words with a weight that makes them stick. It's a little bit scary. Almost as if, by saying those things, she's convincing herself, too. Maybe it's not quite brainwashing, but a strengthening of her resolve?

Still, I can't help but agree with her somewhat. We have Lily. We have Izzy, the twins, and their [Connection], and Tess is even working on something with [Declaration]. Even if it takes time, I believe we'll find a way to help Sophie, and this will just be another obstacle we've overcome.

Meanwhile, I notice everyone stepping up. We had other moments like this during the tutorial, especially with Hadwin on the 4th floor. This is just another reminder to never underestimate this place.

Izzy, who always trained and worked hard, is now pushing herself more than ever. Min-Jae, with all his potential, is stepping forward too. And Maya, who felt so lost while Tess was out, now moves to scout the forest alone, sometimes for days, to level and train, and oftentimes she finds herself joined by the twins.

Like that, seven more days pass, and there is no progress at all. Lily has to forcefully put Izzy to sleep at some point. The rest of us also clear the area, and I erase any apes that appear.

Even though more and more keep coming after each one is killed, I deal with the huge swarms and erase them by the hundreds.

Meanwhile, one of the three seals on the Ignition Heart is entirely and permanently gone, even though I haven't been using thermal energy lately because I've been worried the fire might bring in monsters too powerful to face on a floor we still know so little about.

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At the same time, I abuse my body further. Lissandra's warning is long gone from my mind, and three more new constructs have been etched into my body. I'm sure it will make things difficult in the future, as they clash with my system-given traits, passives, body upgrades, and the small changes high-level skills are starting to make to my body. I've only just begun to notice them recently.

Still, even with all of that, I have three new constructs now. None of them is perfect, but as always, I'll modify them along the way. Each one is something I've thought about over time and planned to do eventually, though the timeline got pushed forward.

More than before, I realize these changes and the imbalance and interference they bring will either hurt me terribly or kill me sometime after the tutorial if I don't put a stop to it. Strangely, that realization calms me down. As if the effect of shortening my life and risking this much makes it feel like I'm actually doing something.

That feeling is like running downhill on a steep slope, where you have to keep going faster and faster, even though it increases the risk, because stopping would make you crash hard.

I just need to keep improving and find a way to fix things faster than I'm breaking them.

The first of my new constructs is the Mental Frame, it exists to aid me with my ability to split my mind with [Focus]. It's largely inspired by Logic Cores and my experimentations with [Foundation] and [Framework] in the Academy. It's probably the least developed of the three, but I like its foundation. I've begun layering subroutines onto it, using my previous experience and feedback from focus splitting. It holds at the moment, but only for short bursts. I'm aiming for longer durations, where I can maintain multiple thought tracks at once without degradation. It really is very similar to a logic core, just built around my mind to automate certain tasks while I train my mind to do it without the help of the construct.

It isn't perfect. After all, it's just an imitation of a passive mixed with an active skill made by me. I'm sure it's terribly lacking, even though I've been kicking around the idea for months. But at this point, I don't care about the damage to my body, and I'll continue to upgrade it as I go.

The second one is the Thought Maze Circuit. I've created it for a single goal: to improve my mental defenses by creating a sort of external maze that must be passed to reach my mind. It is also made of something akin to a Logic Core fused with part of my mind, now tied up to the construct to help keep it up and working.

The third one is the Thermal Flux Regulator. Similar to Mana Regulator, but mostly here in case I need to focus my concentration elsewhere instead of circulating thermal energy through my body, the way I circulate mana with Mana Cycling.

Construct compatibility remains a problem. Not a critical one yet, but the tension is building. My system traits are pushing back, if only slightly. The feeling is very subtle, mostly feedback resistance, and mana circulating slower through modified areas. I don't try to fix it yet, and instead, I watch. Knowing the pattern is currently more important than rushing to patch it.

I've also started working on control. Not just raw power, but on the level of precision and efficiency, I use my mana and primordial energies with. I've been experimenting with channeling traces of thermal energy through isolated pathways, something akin to test runs. The Thermal Flux Regulator stabilizes most of it, and while it's meant to be temporary, I've already started working on Cycling to eventually make it obsolete. It's just training wheels, after all. The goal is automation, promoting circulation without thought, more akin to muscle memory.

Later that night, it's just me and Tess at the top of one of the huge trees. Even now, it's still hot and humid outside, but at least the screeches of the apes sound a bit more distant from here. If I remember correctly, it's Min-Jae dealing with them right now.

"I think you should go," she says, legs swinging as she sits with them hanging over the branch.

After leaning back, I look up at the sky and start swinging my legs too, in the same childish way. Not like I ever cared how it looks.

"I've been thinking the same," I answer. "For the next thirty days or so, and then I'll return to check on you guys. Of course, we could also make a plan..."

Tess interrupts me. "No. Just go solo for a while, even if it's two months or longer. Lily spoke with Leticia and Jean during the tournament, and we have a way to try to get in contact with them. So if we go, we go with them instead."

"Oh," I let out, not knowing what else to say.

Looking to the left, I see Tess just nodding, then looking up at the sky again. I wonder what she sees with her [Farsight], and just how far she can really see.

"Got it. I'll leave tomorrow," I say in the end.

"Just don't get yourself killed," she says with a smile as a sudden gust of wind tosses her golden hair across her face.

"That goes for you guys, too."

The night feels quieter after that. Neither of us says much more.

Tess eventually leaves to get some rest. I stay a little longer, still sitting on that branch, watching the stars through the crowns of the trees. There's something comforting about being this high up, almost like I'm standing at the edge of the world.

I pack light the next morning. Just enough food to last for a while, some items I've been experimenting with, a few books, and mana stones from the Academy that might be helpful. I don't say goodbye to everyone, since not all of them are here. I just give a quiet nod to Lily, who still seems to be caught in a sour mood, a short wave to Maya as she returns from a hunt, and a glance at Izzy, still asleep beside Sophie.

Of course, Biscuit, as always, seems to know what I'm planning and sits there waiting for me. The fee for leaving is, of course, the rest of my dried meat. There's this feeling he sends me, like if I truly asked, he'd come with me.

I think about it for a moment, and even before I say anything, he already knows. He licks my face, then hops down and waddles off toward where Izzy is sleeping.

Truly the best corgi of the 8th... no, the 9th floor.

I'm sure they'll be fine without me for a while. They'll probably be much stronger by the time I get back.

After walking a bit into the forest, I activate the token. The shift is immediate. Just one step, and I'm once again in the same safe zone. This time, there's no one waiting to welcome me.

Without any reason to linger I immediately make my way outside.

Chapter 637: Meeting spot

This time I don't meet my handler. I just straight up appear next to the sphere. My best guess is that she either didn't want to or wasn't able to meet me. Part of me understands. It's not likely that anything good would've come of it anyway.

Now that I'm here, my 30 days in Beyond are about to start. All the meetings I had planned with Leticia, and maybe Jean, are a forgone conclusion because of the 8th floor situation, when we were barred from coming here.

The safe area I just left still lingers in my mind, there was no mark of what happened here before. Almost as if everything that happened that day was just a product of my imagination.

Fully exiting the safe zone, I head deeper into the 1st floor, toward one of the larger safe zones, based on the information and maps I got during the tournament and my prior visits.

This floor's quest is still just as dumb as always.

1st floor quest:

???

Rewards:

7-day Stay Token

It feels like its sole purpose is to push people to explore the floor and maybe share what they find. Handlers and Guilds seem important here, along with the dozens of outposts and safe zones you can visit to meet other Beyond attendees and locals, buy items, gather information, and so on.

I already know of three ways to clear this floor.

First, you can hunt for a rare reanimated lurker or monster. On rare occasions, they have a special crystal inside their body. That crystal acts like a set of coordinates, and with the right items, it can create a temporary entrance to the second floor. Sometimes, that entrance only allows one person through. Other times, it's more. The crystal can be traded, however, and tends to be fairly expensive.

The second way is to find one of the hidden entrances to the second floor. These are well hidden and usually guarded by a powerful monster, something stronger than the lurkers, even the named ones. Even so, I still think it's possible that there are very powerful lurkers. Maybe people from the 13th floor of the tutorial who managed to be assassinated on this floor just before they were sent back to their planet.

As for the monster guarding the portal to the 2nd floor, it usually takes hundreds of attendees to bring one down. Sometimes they don't even try to kill it. They just distract it long enough to rush through the entrance.

These hidden entrances tend to shift and don't stay in one place for long, maybe a few months at most. People are usually invited to raids like that, and often get through for free. Everyone understands the info was shared so they could help act as a distraction for the monster.

I doubt those monsters are Champion rank, but they're probably over level 400. I'm not entirely sure. I have a hard time estimating the power levels of monsters. Sometimes, it's possible to defeat a monster that's 100 levels higher because, even though it has incredible stats and abilities, it lacks intelligence. It doesn't use those abilities optimally or factor them into their tactics all that effectively.

I start to jog, weaving between pillars and scanning the area to keep my mind busy.

The average attendee on the 1st floor isn't very high level, and I'd say I'm on the stronger end. So maybe these raid monsters happen to be somewhere around Vice Director level, or possibly higher. I'm sure she could, with some preparation, take on dozens of people just entering Beyond.

The third option to enter the 2nd floor is to head toward the center of the 1st floor. Something's hidden there that causes the reanimation of monsters and attendees, turning them into lurkers. No one has made it there in the past few hundred years. That includes people from the lower floors of the Beyond dungeon and even attendees in their 5th year of the tutorial, about to return to their planet.

I also believe that whatever is at the very center of this floor is its main quest, which is currently marked only as ???.

On the edge of my scan, I catch a presence, and as expected, monsters start appearing soon enough. Not lurkers, though, this zone seems to be free of them. These are the skeletons of ancient monsters, long dead, maybe even entities that were killed by the first attendees or the Rulers themselves.

Their bones grind and shift as they move. Each one is unique. A patchwork of skeletons, cobbled together and moving in a jerky, clumsy manner. Some have fused limbs. Others have too many, with bones hanging uselessly. Many have multiple heads or mouths. Some even have mouths where their chests should be. Like something had thrown them together in a rush.

[Reanimated Beast - lvl 316]

[Reanimated Remnant - lvl 331]

[Reanimated Beast - lvl 346]

[Reanimated Beast - lvl 334]

[Reanimated Beast - lvl 326]

Their levels don't worry me, and I have fought them before, so I know what to expect.

The first lance fires ahead.

[You have defeated Reanimated Beast - lvl 346]

I land and use Wraith Dance to reposition, dodging a barrage of attacks. I rise again and fly around a massive stone pillar stretching to the ceiling of this enormous, cave-like expanse that comprises the 1st floor of the Beyond dungeon. More projectiles follow, always just a moment too late, slamming into the stone.

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Another [Empyrean Lance], another monster down.

Armor surrounds my body as I teleport along the line I created. The moment I appear, I launch myself forward and crash directly into another monster. It moves quickly, lashing out with the dangerous, sharp bones on its forearms, attempting to pierce through my armor. But I grab them with my hands and pull to the sides, powering myself further with kinetic energy.

The skeletal monster is torn into two pieces, each still moving and trying to kill me. A blast of thermal energy melts the surface of the bones, and I push further, redirecting some of the cycling heat into the area around me until the heat causes the bones to melt and drip like wax.

The bone projectiles that try to pierce me from behind meet the same fate, and I spot the attacker about half a mile away. I push further and finish off the monster I'm holding.

[You have defeated Reanimated Remnant - lvl 331]

My armor disappears, and I move again.

One Wraith Dance. Two. Three.

I use them quickly, straining my body with the pace of my movement, pushing myself as I push each leap to cover as much space as possible, a method I have been experimenting with for a while.

At the last moment, armor forms around my body again, and I slam into the Remnant just as it's about to move and reposition, and it seems to be caught off guard by my speed.

With a burst of kinetic energy flowing through me, I tear it apart. I stomp on the pieces and release a blast of kinetic energy that sends small earthquakes through the area, and debris flying into the air.

[You have defeated Reanimated Beast - lvl 334]

Before the debris and dust even settle, I charge out from the epicenter and rush toward another monster.

A day later, I'm sitting on a small terrace-like platform of rock jutting out from one of the humongous pillars. The first floor stretches ahead of me as I take a bite of a protein bar and sip on a sugar-free energy drink I bought during the tournament. The guy asked for an upper rare item in exchange for just a few bars and cans.

Quickly, I redirect my attention back to the area, watching a movement in the distance that turns out to be the wind knocking over a heavily scorched tree. I observe it for a while longer and cycle through my other senses, just in case it was meant to be a distraction.

Only then do I return to entertaining my own thoughts, while another part of my mind continues scanning the area and another modifies the Restrictive Training Emblem etched over my heart. I'm trying to make it more, well, restrictive, to increase my physical stats even further. I've kept that emblem active since before I left the ninth floor.

As for the items and their value, some people with an economics background tried to estimate the worth of each rarity tier during the tournament. Of course, it was all very rough estimates. An upper epic weapon, of the type that makes the difference between life and death, might be far more valuable to someone than a low arcane weapon they can't even use properly.

The current consensus in Earth's tutorial is that a new Champion typically has access to upper arcane items and often something from the next tier as well. Mid arcane items are considered a lucky find for even someone around level 400, while low arcane items are still highly valuable for anyone below that level.

That's all, assuming the system hasn't nerfed the items during the tutorial phase, so attendees don't get a hold of overpowered gear with the potential to trivialize the challenge.

There are a few cases that might support this theory. Take the Sword of Aeons, for example. It was considered one of the best items in Eladore. Even after it broke and was classified as a damaged arcane-grade item, but I refuse to believe something of that caliber could drop down to such a low degree of rarity. It had to be at least upper arcane or even a low-grade item from the next tier.

It's also possible that the nerfs are stronger on the early floors and only grow more relaxed as time goes on.

Even so, as of now, mid arcane items are estimated to have values in the billions of dollars. Billions, with a B. Yeah.

I don't even know what's happening anymore.

But I've heard people discussing the value based on more than just the rarity. They consider how usable the items are for the sort of regular people who might have that kind of money. I can imagine a normal or low leveled person dying just from getting too close to certain arcane items.

Some even argue that the real market won't be for the items themselves but for the privilege of hiring the attendees who own them.

All of that, of course, only works if everything doesn't go entirely to hell before we return to Earth. If the Pairing is already in progress, things might already be shifting. So, anyone saying that an upper rare item is worth half a million and an upper epic is in the tens of millions might just be talking nonsense.

Still, it's a fun thought.

I take the last sip from the can and throw it to the ground, littering the first floor of the Beyond. I watch as the now-empty can slowly sails through the air, twisting before it hits the pillar, bounces off, and continues falling.

If those wannabe economists are right, then each can I bought for an upper rare item is worth about fifty thousand dollars. One side of this trade got seriously scammed.

After looking at the can one last time, I leave my spot. I stretch a line forward and teleport along it, following up with Wraith Dance a few times. I cover a few miles before the can even hit the ground.

Later that day, I enter the safe zone I was looking for. It turns out to be carved into one of the massive pillars, forming a perfect cube-shaped space filled with hundreds of smaller buildings made mostly of wood. The entire place is softly lit by a variety of moss that emits a faint green glow.

It's surprisingly empty when I arrive. When I ask one of the locals if it's always like this, he tells me that most of the people here have made their way to the gathering space for an expedition. Apparently, they discovered a portal to the second floor, guarded by a powerful monster.

After paying him in shards, he gives me a bit more information.

He tells me where the expedition group is gathering and that they plan to leave for the portal in three days.

Apparently, most Beyonders just head to the meeting spot in the safe zone closest to their target, return to their tutorial worlds, and re-enter at the scheduled time to avoid wasting their stay tokens.

The date of this expedition has been known for two weeks now, which has allowed more people to prepare and gather.

I check the map he shows me, compare it to the area I've already passed, and estimate that I'll only need about a day to reach it, even if I get held up by monsters. I make sure to transfer the timing into my personal countdown so I don't mess it up.

After a quick look around the safe zone, I head back out to train and level up before making my way to the meeting spot.

Chapter 638: Beyond Diplomacy

POV Duncan

It's been months since I last saw Noname, and just like every other time I've met him, he looks even stronger now.

I watch him walking alone between the groups gathered for the raid. Unlike many of them, he has no visibly active skills, and I can't sense any mana radiating from his body. There's even less of it now than before.

He's wearing a white short-sleeved shirt and some weird pants that I guess must be from his world, rather than the tutorial. He has no weapon, no armor, or any items I can see. Just a small bag slung over his back.

Like a wild animal, he almost seems to sense my gaze, and he turns, and when our eyes meet, I can't help but shudder.

What a terrifying expression.

But maybe it was just a play of the shadows, because in the next moment it's gone. His face takes on that usual blank expression. He even waves and takes a step in my direction. And then his figure disappears, and the next second, he's standing next to me, finishing the step.

"Hey, Duncan. The more time passes, the deeper into the first floor I find you."

"It's partially thanks to you, you know. I made plenty of shards from our fishing expedition last time, and went got some additional certifications that allowed me to take better paying jobs."

"Yes. A few of the smaller groups joined forces and hired me as well. In exchange, I offer information, contacts, and coordinate with other Locals in the expedition."

He looks around for a bit, taking it all in. He doesn't rush, and for a moment, a flash of gold flickers in his eyes. Then he nods slowly, like whatever he's seen has confirmed something in his mind. I follow his gaze, trying to guess what he could be seeing, but it's impossible to tell.

Then he turns back to me. "Looks more organized than I expected."

"It's getting better," I say. "Still a mess in some ways, but people are trying."

"How many attendees?" he asks.

I take a moment to think. "Probably just over 100? Out of them, probably about 5 Locals. Mostly people from the first floor, but we've gotten a few helpers from the second. With these numbers, it should be doable. Based on what the other Local Guides are saying, I expect around 10-30% will die. The rest should pass to the second floor."

"That's a lot. Are they not going to kill the guardian monster?"

"It is always like that with the ones we don't have information on. Some might try to kill it, but without someone to counter its skillset and a fair bit of cooperation, it usually ends badly. This one's new, too. No records, no known abilities. If they're unlucky, everyone here could die."

As always, I try to catch the small gestures he doesn't realize he's making. When I mention everyone might die, he lifts an eyebrow slightly.

His next question doesn't surprise me. Have the other attendees been asking similar questions?

"You're not going to fight?"

I shake my head. "I'm not a fighter, and I have a family to care for. It's similar for the other guides. We'll lead you to the place, but when we get too close, we split and leave with our guards."

"Sounds reasonable. By the way, have you heard of a pair of attendees named Luan and Faora?"
Noname asks.

These names sound familiar, and I try to recall anything I might have seen in the rankings or heard from other Locals. Nothing comes to mind.

"I don't know them, sorry. Are they friends of yours?" I ask him.

And for the first time since I've known Noname, he smiles. It's the most beautiful and friendly expression I've ever seen on his face. Not the usual cold or blank expression, but a real smile.

It's warm, honest, and somehow makes him look completely different. All the coldness in his face disappears, and for a second, he looks genuinely kind. I'm not the only one who notices. A couple of nearby female attendees glance over and do a double take, clearly unable to take their eyes off him.

It slowly disappears from his face, but I can still see the remains of that smile in his eyes. It even lingers on his lips before slowly fading.

"I owe them quite a lot. In some ways, the bond we have feels even stronger than friendship. But don't worry about it, Duncan. Anyway, can you tell me a bit about the leaders of this raid?"

I nod quickly but put on my best trade smile before answering. "Information like that..."

"How many shards?" he interrupts without missing a beat.

"For you, just one thousand! Always a pleasure doing business with you!"

POV Nathaniel

I watch Duncan leave. He's a good man. Even though he might seem a little too shard-hungry, he's always fair, even when he could easily ask for more. The value he offers is fair, too. It's like anything else, why should he share information for free, information he must have paid for, risked his life for, or invested his time to acquire?

So I reach out with my mana and remove a tracking mark someone placed on his body, and another hidden on the huge bag on his back. The bag contains a number of items of decent value.

Both marks also have an effect attached to them that would've triggered paralysis and caused a lot of pain. They're a really nasty piece of work. It's obvious they weren't placed out of concern for Duncan's safety, and both were pretty well hidden. I don't think more than a few people in this group of 100 would have been able to notice it.

I activate [Eclipse] and overpower the connection linking one of the marks to a certain person, invade it, and then follow the trail to its source.

Passing between dozens of smaller attendee groups, I reach a group of three at the edge of the camp. Three men sit around a floating blue fireball, just like so many of the others, waiting for the raid to begin.

They're all human, and I wonder what their plan is. Maybe they're all part of the guard detail that will escort the guides to the safe zone once we're close? Or is it just one of them?

"Hey," I greet as I enter their small camp.

Aside from a few blank looks, they give no response. The man whose marks I erased hasn't even noticed the connection's been cut. I made sure to be subtle when I did it, but it's still disappointing.

I try to estimate which floor of the tutorial they might be on without aggressively using probes. The best clue is a dagger that reminds me of the kind the lumorans liked to use on the seventh floor.

"We're not looking for members," one of them says.

Even as he speaks, I notice all three of them raise their defenses. It's clear in the movement of their mana and the vibration in their bodies as they tense up their muscles.

"What was that mark you placed on Duncan for?" I ask, "Attacking a Local is still off-limits. That much, I know."

The man who spoke flicks a glance at his companions. It's a practiced, wordless exchange. The air tightens with tension. The kind that usually ends with blood.

"Don't know what you're talking about," he says. His voice is steady, but his mana curls defensively across his chest, forming a subtle barrier. One of the others begins to slowly shift his position, widening his stance just enough to give him room to draw his weapon.

"That's a really shitty lie," I say, stepping closer.

They attack immediately after, even surprising me with such a decisive reaction.

I step aside, and the blue fireball they had been sitting around roars into a stream of flames that explodes in my direction. The heat I sense from it is intense. The stream is focused, with white flames shifting inside it.

But it's almost too easy to take control of it with [Redistribution]. The blue flame swerves to the side, twists around me in a circle, and gradually takes on a golden hue.

It all happens in barely a second. Before the man who cast it can launch another attack, I compress the flames surrounding me. Then a single burst of golden fire shoots forward in a laser thin beam, no thicker than my finger.

Even though one of them manages to create a barrier just in time, it activates for only a moment before the flame burns through with ease. I move in a slashing motion, and the beam pierces another barrier surrounding the man who tried to use his flames against me. It cleanly severs his arm and slices through the huge boulder behind him. For a moment, the stone remains still, then half of it slides away in a smooth, silent motion before thudding to the ground.

Before I can focus on the next attacker, I notice the fire mage's wound closing. Steam rises around it as blue flames coat the area, forming themselves into the shape of a new arm in an instant.

Another man charges in. Mana surrounds his body, forming a glowing suit of armor. His movements are wild, like an animal's, and impressively fast. He comes at me from the side. Even then, I don't move and simply track the trajectory of his punch with my eyes.

Just before it lands, I activate [Eclipse] in a short, powerful burst that drains the color from the world. For this level of mana armor, I don't even need to activate my eyes.

His armor vanishes instantly, and his fist lands on my cheek with zero force. The kinetic energy of the attack is gone, absorbed entirely by me.

Our eyes meet.

I swing my hand in a backhand slap, redirecting the stored energy and adding a touch of my own. I watch the swirling energy inside me with interest as my hand moves toward his face. It's likely more than enough to kill him on the spot. A part of me really wants to do it. What these three were likely planning reminds me too much of what happened to us not long ago. But that part of me is buried deep. What I feel now isn't even proper anger. That's reserved for someone else.

Even though the consequences of killing him and the trouble it might cause are minimal, I decide not to risk it.

I pull back a bit of the kinetic energy, and instead of his head bursting open, his body is flung through the air like a broken doll. As he collapses to the ground, I use Pulser Stance and move in a disjointed rhythm, dodging explosions of blue flame from the fire mage.

I reach the collapsed man, who is already getting up, and deliver a kick to his chest. It breaks a few of his ribs and sends him flying again.

Even then, my leg is nearly torn apart by the kick. At the last second, he set up a nasty barrier that did a fair amount of damage.

Blue flames from the fire mage halt in the air around me, but I ignore them while I glance toward the man I just kicked, and who is finally unconscious. Then I look down at my leg, now nearly stripped of flesh.

I shrug. The thermal energy I had been circulating combusts under my skin and fuels my passive. The wound heals in a couple of heartbeats, and I turn to the fire mage. Even now, I continue to ignore the

third man, who from the start has been trying to disrupt my control over my mana. He also seems to be preparing some large-scale mana-based attack.

Wraith Dance takes me to the fire mage. I grab his remaining arm to pull him off balance, but to my surprise, it tears away. His physical stats and body reinforcement are weaker than I'd expected.

When I look at him, confused by the state of his body, he opens his mouth, and from it, erupts a blue flame, exploding toward my head. This one is much hotter than anything he's done before. Before I can properly adjust my [Redistribution], the flame strips the skin and flesh clean off my face, leaving only the skull and the barrier around my brain that I maintain constantly.

Even my eyes are gone, but I switch to tracking his heartbeat and the vibrations his body causes. I absorb the flames completely and turn to face him. I sense his heartbeat speed up as he takes a step back. Flames combust within my body, and my skin begins to regrow from the neck up, covering my face again before flames ignite beneath the surface to finish the healing.

I realize I've been careless. Still, I find it hard to really worry about it. Instead of cursing myself, I begin preparing measures to prevent this from happening again.

My eyes regenerate, and I look at the fire mage still frozen in my grasp, held as I absorb the kinetic energy from his movements. Once more, I release a laser-like stream of flames and cut off both his legs before turning to the third man.

Above his head spins a pale blue halo, with an orb at its center shifting between pale blue, dark blue, and purple.

He shouts something about how I should stop if I don't want everyone here to die. Before he finishes his sentence, I appear in front of him and kick him away while using my mana to hold the halo and orb in place.

The frequency of the orb's vibrations increases, and it pulses wildly in a steady rhythm. A high-pitched noise surrounds the area. Dust and debris lift themselves into the air as the air itself begins to shake.

I lean in closer to observe the orb. The halo fractures, causing the orb to spin faster and glow brighter.

Some nearby people from the expedition build a quick array around me and add barriers to contain the explosion.

My Mana Wavelength Iris activates, and I stare deep into the orb.

Just before it explodes, I reach toward it with [Eclipse] and take control. I overpower and suffocate it. The orb halts, then dissolves like a ball of sand. All the mana trapped inside falls to the ground, cascading in waterfalls of pale blue particles.

I glance at the surrounding barriers and array. I take a few steps forward and fluctuate the mana around me, passing through them as if they didn't exist. After a few more steps, I make my way over to the man who created the orb. He's already surrounded by others drawn here by the clash. He stares up at me from the ground, clutching the wound he got when I kicked him away.

A high-pitched sound rises around me. Two short bursts of kinetic energy pierce his defenses and explode both of his legs.

While he screams, I notice a Local Guide nearby and call out, "They placed some pretty nasty marks on Duncan. There are two on you as well, and at least one more Local Guide."

Without saying anything more, I walk away.

Chapter 639: Harvester

Most of the people here are C rank, same as me. Whenever a raid party, expedition, or whatever they're calling it is put together, rank is one of the things they check. D ranks are straight-up rejected, even though it's fairly rare for someone of that rank to get this deep.

The color for the C rank identification emblem is Ivory White. So far, I haven't seen anyone with the Royal Blue of B rank.

As our group of over 100 attendees moves through the first floor of Beyond's dungeon, part of me wonders what ranks Faora and Luan are. If they truly have reached the 13th floor of the tutorial, then that should mean they're probably at least rank A.

I don't think they were S-rank, definitely not Faora. She was strong and certainly skilled, and her mental abilities were undoubtedly useful, but she still felt lacking to me. I've met a number of people with the Pride subclass, for example, Jean's pride, though he himself is technically weaker, felt much stronger. Her pride just seemed a bit too... brittle.

Plus, from what I've heard, there usually tends to be only around 10 people at any given time with an S rank in the entirety of Beyond. Out of hundreds of thousands of people from Hell difficulty and tens of thousands in Beyond, the fact that only 10 of them ever reach S rank is insane in its own way.

Obviously, there are levels within each rank. It's nothing official, but there tends to be a huge difference between a fresh B rank and one close to turning into an A rank. But I gave up trying to classify people's power levels that way a long time ago. There are just too many factors to consider and too many variables that can change the outcome.

Our group moves deeper into the 1st floor, and once again, the monsters start attacking us. I move into position and use ranged attacks to bombard the skeletal creatures and deflect the strikes being thrown at us.

While we're not perfectly coordinated, our sheer numbers are enough to safely deal with smaller groups of monsters that move around here. Everyone knows our estimated time of arrival near where the portal was spotted, so as that time gets closer, the mood shifts.

The tension that has been there since the start grows tighter. The weak, almost nonexistent trust built on the simplicity of a shared goal is starting to show us just how fake it always was. Just a bit more, and everyone will become the same sort of sacrificial lamb. The others are willing to throw people at the monster just to slow it down and reach the next floor.

But I don't think I would have it any other way. It's weirdly comforting as it is now.

The area around us starts to change slowly. We pass over a small range of mountains and move through the dozens of valleys winding between them, all following the one local who knows the way. There are no breaks, and I don't think there will be any. People here are high enough level to push on like this for days without sleep or food, and that is exactly what we do.

The longer this goes on, the more I appreciate the old Local who's leading us. Not once does he use a map or any kind of sensory skill. He just guides us from memory until the point where he stops. And even then, he doesn't hesitate for too long. He pauses only when there's a split in the terrain, like he's taking a moment to recalibrate his internal compass. Then he moves again, always sure, always steady.

Later, I watch from a distance as he talks to the temporary leader of the expedition. Then, followed by the other locals and a few attendees acting as guards, they head back the way we came.

As their group passes by me, Duncan stops by for a few seconds and smiles, "Good luck. I'll see you later."

I nod in acknowledgment and follow our group, which now moves at a slower pace. Even now, no one uses wide range scans or tries to fly high enough into the air to scout ahead.

A scant ten minutes later, we climb to the top of one of the mountains and see the valley below, completely barren. Its sides and the surrounding mountains are scorched and cracked, filled with craters.

Two pillars are carved from the stone of the mountain, with a simple wooden door standing between them. A long pathway leads to the door, made of worn cobblestone with bits of grass growing through the cracks.

And in front of that door stands:

[Reanimated Harvester - lvl ???]

A twisted humanoid skeletal creature with no lower half, dragging itself with its long, uneven bone arms. Its spine and the bones beneath its rib cage dig into the ground as it pulls itself around. All over the valley and into the mountains, there are hundreds of ditches carved by its passing.

The monster itself is as big as a multi-story building, even without its lower half. Its head is skeletal like the rest of it, but the skull is unlike anything I've seen. It is humanoid, but there are no openings for eyes or ears. The surface is smooth, only leaving a few small openings where the nose and mouth should be.

And then there are the remains of what I guess would have to be a previous expedition. Dozens, possibly over a hundred, bodies litter the area near the portal. There is no way they all died in just that small place, so the only logical conclusion I come to is that the Harvester killed them and gathered them there.

It's becoming clear that we are not the first group to attempt this route to the second floor.

They could easily have numbered more than a hundred people, and just not left enough of their bodies behind for us to recognize. It's hard to estimate how long they've lain there. With our high levels, our bodies don't rot all that quickly, and I've long since learned that for some people with high Constitution, it might take years for the process to start. It is yet another reminder that maybe we really do stop being anything that could be recognized as human.

Of course, there are still monsters above monsters, like a certain Absolute Healer from the third floor. After thousands of years, she looked like she'd just fallen asleep, and even in death, the processes continuing in her body were enough to destroy the world.

I filter out these thoughts and listen to the conversation that erupts between the participants of this raid. Unsurprisingly, everyone is blaming everyone else. I mean, seeing those bodies lying around, is it really all that unreasonable to think that some of us might have been members of the previous expedition who survived only to bring more sacrificial lambs to slow down the Harvester while they make another attempt to enter the second floor.

Or maybe they discovered a weakness during the previous raid. They might be counting on this group to weaken it and slow it down. That way, they can exploit the monster's weakness, finish it off, gather the items already on the ground, and reach the second floor. Letting most of the people from this raid die would be the most optimal solution as well, allowing for a bigger share of the already existing loot and the additional loot from the people currently here.

At the same time, it is also obvious that there is no way the expedition will just be canceled after discovering this, and we will not simply head back. No, most of the people here are cocky enough to believe they can survive and triumph over the others.

I watch as, unsurprisingly, a few attendees begin moving away from the larger groups that have gathered to argue. These are secondary members of groups, trying to make diplomatic moves and join multiple groups in defense against the others.

A few of them even reach me, but I completely ignore them and continue to observe the raid monster. After a few attempts, they give up and leave.

Someone in the back whispers a theory that the monster may be using the bodies for energy or as a medium for some skill. Another suggests it might be feeding off them slowly, draining something from them over time.

One of the more aggressive factions tries to start a vote: who fights, who distracts, who pushes toward the door. It's a joke. Half the people ignore it, already beginning to form their own alliances, speaking in hushed voices, or exchanging dark looks.

Then someone laughs. A dry, joyless sound. It comes from a tall man in a patched brown cloak, standing at the edge of the group.

He points at the monster with one hand and says, "It's just bones. Big ones, yeah, but bones. Out of all the guardians I've heard about, this must be one of the weaker ones."

I almost admire the attempt. The stupidity. Or maybe it's simple bravado. Or maybe it's just plain greed.

Even after all of this, preparations slowly begin, but there's no clear command, no single voice giving orders. Just scattered murmurs and movement. A few begin drawing the lines of various inscriptions in the dirt with mana-conductive paint, pacing out distances, double-checking their items. Dozens of skills are used, and the mana signatures of over a hundred people begin to blend into one.

At this point, there is no way we haven't been noticed, but the Harvester still doesn't react.

The more organized groups start forming their own clusters, separating from the rest of the crowd. Some individuals keep themselves isolated, lingering near the back or choosing high ground. And everyone watches everyone else, making sure each person moves to attack and ensuring that there are no freeloaders.

There is a disadvantage to going in for a melee, but it also puts you closer to the portal. I, however, keep myself at mid-range. Not too close and not too far, it's the space I'm most comfortable in, where I can rush into close combat or pull back as needed.

The Harvester remains still.

I shift the movement of my mana, place my last few marks, and prepare to activate the structures I've created in the back of my mind.

Conversation almost grinds to a halt, and only a few short questions remain, mostly revolving around logistical issues. I filter even these out. The sounds around me fall into silence. The colors lose some of their intensity, and mana rages just below my skin.

Someone begins a countdown that echoes through the area. It isn't planned, but everyone seems to accept it and starts getting ready.

"Five."

"Four."

Armor surrounds me, more durable than I usually bother with, skin-tight so it doesn't hinder my movements. Even now, my subclass influences its shape, giving it that rough, elegant, and practical beauty.

"Three."

The colors around me drain further as [Eclipse] activates, wrapping me in a bubble where only mana retains its color.

"Two."

My Mana Wavelength Iris activates, locking onto the monster, which even now stands still, no longer dragging itself around. Its head slowly turns toward the largest cluster of people, and it lifts its skeletal arms.

"One!" the man shouts.

Dozens of people move. Attacks activate and fly at the monster. Some are surrounded by barriers, domains, or armor and move slowly, each step cracking the ground beneath them. Others are fast, barely more than a blur as they rush downhill, covering great distances in the blink of an eye.

Projectiles rain down. Mana, primordial energies, and enchanted items flood the space with death.

Finally, the Harvester moves and raises one of its arms into the air. Purple mana begins to seep out around it, slowly forming the shape of a strung bow. Its other arm shapes five arrows from the same mana and sets them in place.

Then, a pulse explodes with the monster at the center. It touches everyone in the area and leaves a mark on each one of us.

As the attacks start clashing against the Harvester, it releases the arrows into the sky. Trails of purple light remain in their trajectory. They twist midair like whips and dive downward.

These arrows, each one the size of a smaller tree trunk, pierce through people like they're made of paper. They track their targets like living things. They punch clean holes through mountains and catch even the fastest runners.

And as those arrows grind into nothing after killing half the expedition, the Harvester calmly nocks and releases five more, completely untouched by the barrage of attacks clashing against that bony body.

I watch as one arrow heads toward me and don't even attempt to block it. My eyes stay locked on it as I finally read the mark placed on me. My skills activate one after another as I unwind the mark, break it down to nothing, and dissolve it.

I shift my footing, then use a boost to move aside as the arrow tears past me, twists midair, and slams into another attendee to my left.

For a moment longer, I observe how my mana clashes against the Harvester's. I watch how it reacts to my skill and make note of just how useless my tricolored orbs are. Even the damage from [Empyrean Lance] barely registers.

Sensing it start to release another pulse to mark everyone all over again, I use one of my stored marks to teleport myself away, back to the top of the mountain where I had stood before. From there, I watch the Harvester send out a few more pulses, but none reach this far.

The bow and arrows disappear from its hands. Then it begins dragging itself forward with those bone limbs again, gathering what remains of the attackers around the door.

Now more than ever, it looks like it's setting out bait.

Giving it one last glance, I turn away and walk toward where the survivors have gathered.

Only nine of us remain out of over a hundred.

That clash didn't even last a few seconds.

Chapter 640: Mana Boy

In the small surviving group, there are no healers. Once again, it shows just how rare they are. But beyond the lack of healers, everyone here seems to have some weaker way to regenerate their wounds, whether it's passive, a trait, maybe an active skill that allows for a weak form of self-healing, or an item with even weaker healing effects. I once had an epic sword back on the 4th floor that could do that.

But the stronger you are, the higher your physical stats and the more body upgrades you've gone through, the more useless items like that become. They just aren't powerful enough to regenerate the body of someone at that level.

While the others argue and try to heal, I watch the Harvester from atop the mountain. It's back near the portal, dragging its body with its two arms as it moves around to gather the corpses.

Now, combined with the earlier expedition that discovered it, there are a lot of items lying around. I'd bet many are damaged low arcane, or even straight up low arcane.

I glance back at the surviving members and think.

Do I really have enough information to kill the Harvester on my own? Should I try to convince them, or force them to attack it again so I can gather more info?

Or maybe I just can't defeat it right now and should focus instead on entering the 2nd floor. It is something I think I could have done during the clash, but I didn't take the opportunity when it presented itself.

All because I believe my skillset could let me kill this thing, even though it's a much higher level than me. Even now, years into the tutorial, I still strongly believe that if a person has the right set of skills, traits, and passives, they should be able to defeat someone far stronger, even someone who should be able to kill them in the blink of an eye.

Let's say Tacita meets someone with weak physical stats and poor perception. Even assuming that person was 100 levels higher, if they grew too fast and didn't work on their perception, she could easily kill them.

And those are just examples that come to mind.

Simply put, this is a game of rock, paper, scissors, not just a straightforward difference in power levels.

I shift my focus back to the conversation as I hear something interesting.

"We should try it one more time," says the man who was most involved in organizing this. I remember him from the first clash. A ranged, sneaky type, using a fancy bow, I'm sure must be arcane, and arrows that are powerful despite being hard to notice.

"Are you crazy? That thing wrecked us when we attacked it with over 100 people, and now you want to kill it with just eight?" the vyssari man hisses at him.

Someone snorts from the side, a velnar with a huge hammer, clad in full armor. "How did someone like you even get to Beyond? The weak ones died, along with the impatient ones who attempted this too early. Now we know more about the monster, so we can prepare."

"Or we could just sell that information. It would go for tens of thousands of shards if we sold it to the right guild," the vyssari counters, ignoring the insult.

The man with the bow starts again. "As my tall friend said, we know more about the Harvester now, and I believe we can kill it with enough preparation. Of course, that doesn't mean some of us won't die. But if you were scared of that, you should've switched to Hard difficulty while you could, or given up your Beyond spot to someone else from your tutorial."

"Or," the vyssari replies, "and listen carefully, both of you, my brave human friend and tall velnar friend, we could return, sell the information, find some more Locals, and lead another expedition with what we've learned. All of us could survive that way."

As with the other members of his race, he's very short and mostly human-like, except for his scaly legs. I think I saw him using mostly earth-based attacks during the fight. Huge stone spikes and arms doing everything they could to slow the Harvester.

"Damn, it almost sounds like you were part of the expedition that got wiped out before us, and now you're thinking about putting together a third one just to get more loot," the velnar with the hammer says, smiling brightly as he stares down the vyssari, "We can kill the Harvester ourselves and split all the salvageable loot. Close to 200 people's worth of items should be enough. I remember a woman with an arcane shield who got her head blown off. I want that shield. I bet you could find something for yourself, too."

Someone off to the side laughs. "I say we share the portal's location with more people, without the other information. Then we wait for them to die, deal with the Harvester, and take the items."

I can see that the vyssari is still interested in that one, but the velnar and the human archer are contemplating too.

A few don't like the idea, but no one says anything. I stay quiet too, but I continue preparing a new structure in my mind.

"Hey, creepy mana boy, what do you think?" I hear the velnar say, and only after a moment do I realize he's talking to me.

I look away from the Harvester and meet the velnar's gaze. I keep looking until he breaks eye contact, then turn away so he doesn't bother me any further.

That human archer talks again, "We could gather another expedition if you want to wait another few weeks, assuming you're still too scared. As for me, just killing the Harvester and taking the items on the ground is enough. Honestly, I'm fine with just heading to the second floor. I'm sick of this one. If you're part of the greed subclass and can't control yourself, maybe you should just screw off right now."

These words piss off the vyssari man. I can sense it from his heartbeat.

The archer continues, even though he possibly noticed it as well, "There are eight of us here. Each of us was able to get rid of that mark or avoided having it placed on them in the first place. Just work on a way to do it again, and the danger drops a lot. Surely there will be more skills for the monster to throw at us, but you would be dumb not to expect it."

He looks around and smiles. "I'm sure some of you have noticed this: our bony friend's senses are mana-based, and the only part of its body it protected from the attacks was its head."

The feylith woman with the crown that looks like it's made of water floating over her head snorts from the side, "We also have noticed how little damage we dealt to it. That man you called mana boy probably did the most damage with his Emphyrean skill."

I turn around and look at her, to which she shrugs and asks, "Can you make a stronger one?"

"Yup," I answer.

"But if you tried, there is a high chance the Harvester would sense it and focus on you?" she asks.

"It's likely. When it uses that pulse to mark people, those marks were placed on the people who were radiating the most mana first. The arrows also targeted the people who either used the most mana after that or caused the most damage first."

My answer excites the archer. "Exactly! So, mana boy, why don't you draw its attention? You can remove the mark quickly enough to dodge the arrows while we close in to kill it. This time, I'll make sure to put an arrow right through its head, and the others can strike through the opening. I think the rest of the team will agree with me, but how about this: you take 30% of the loot for the risk you take, and the seven of us split the rest?"

That makes the velnar laugh out loud, "That was your plan? Fucking ridiculous. As if..."

"Why not," I say.

The laugh cuts off, and eight pairs of eyes turn to me.

The archer talks first again, "Great! Let's prepare then."

No one says anything for a while. I can feel the weight of their eyes on me, waiting to see if I happened to be joking.

I wasn't.

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Then I move a few steps away from the group and sit down on a patch of solid rock with my legs crossed. I start modifying the structure in my mind further. I'll need stronger mana compression, faster deployment, tighter control. Nothing I haven't done before, but this time my margin for error is much smaller.

Behind me, voices pick up again. There is less shouting now. Instead, they seem to have focused their conversation on strategy. Everyone starts working on suppressing their mana as much as possible. A

skill. An item. Some quick paintings on the skin. Others just do something with a distant resemblance to my Mana Cycling with the intent to keep as much mana inside their bodies as possible.

No one questions the plan directly, but it's clear they're all adjusting their own priorities. They're not worrying about me. They just want me to draw enough attention so they get a chance to either kill it or slip through the portal.

From the corner of my eye, I spot the velnar hammer-user tapping his foot, shifting weight back and forth like he's already halfway through the fight in his head. The archer is the opposite, still, calm, running calculations behind that steady gaze. The others are a mix. Nervous, angry, impatient.

The Harvester, meanwhile, keeps pulling itself around the battlefield.

A few times, I'm forced to join the conversation, but not too much. Seeing what happened in the camp and probably noticing my lance made them put some trust in me. It obviously isn't a blind trust. Everyone here is surely expecting to get screwed over.

We move thirty minutes later.

I walk in first, stopping at about the same distance I did last time. Out of curiosity, I keep circulating mana inside of my body to lower the leakage as much as possible, and the Harvester doesn't even react to me. It probably also annoys my trusty teammates, who seem to think I may have changed my mind.

Taking a few more steps, I stop and let mana seep out of my body, and finally, the Harvester reacts. It stops in place and turns in my direction. A single powerful pulse rushes through the area, and I don't fight it when the mark is placed. It still makes me curious how it manages to bypass my defenses.

While I observe the mark, the same as before, the Harvester reaches towards the sky, and a beautiful purple bow forms there out of that mana. It then creates five arrows and lodges them in place.

[Emptyrean Lance]

The longer they fly, the more speed they pick up, taking the shortest way possible to get to me while fully ignoring anything in their way.

Removing the mark is easy this time, and I just take a few swift steps to the side, and all the arrows pass by and bury themselves into the ground as if it were no harder than foam.

I raise my mana again and continue to feed the lance, and another pulse is sent through the area, and five more arrows head my way. The mark this time is different, and right after another pulse bursts forth, placing a second one, and then a third, making big changes to each of them.

Finally, the others move as well and rush the Harvester from the nearest mountain, using nothing other than the strength of their bodies.

One after another, I break two of the marks, but the third's difficulty spikes too much, and despite my effort, I fail to remove it before the arrows reach me.

I lean in and explode into motion, the world around me blurring as I do so. The arrows follow my twists and turns, trailing me perfectly while I continue to work on the mark.

Then, five more pulses are sent from the Harvester, each placing a new mark, no matter how much I try to avoid it.

So instead, I focus my attention on the arrows. I break the first one easily with a disrupting wave, but the moment I do so, the second one changes to counter it. I still break it, but then it doesn't work on the third arrow, and the Harvester shoots another five my way. This time, a total of eight arrows trail me, already starting to catch up.

The others reach the huge skeletal body of the Harvester. I catch a glimpse of the velnar man swinging his hammer, which shines with white light, towards the head, and the archer standing atop the skull, shooting an arrow made of what feels like a dozen colors.

Two deep vibrations shake the area, and the arrows trailing me falter for a moment before picking up again and continuing to head my way. Three of them split up and head towards the group.

I absorb my movement and stop on the spot, turning to the five arrows. My mana swirls in front of me into the shape of an orb and then compresses further before turning black.

It then feeds on my [Empyrean Lance] and absorbs it completely.

Each arrow is ripped apart by the pull of the black mana and vanishes into it. For a moment, I struggle to keep the orb under control, which shows just how much mana was packed into the arrows it absorbed.

The Harvester, which was about to deal with the group, turns its head towards the black orb, even though it has no eyes. The three arrows twist, change direction again, and head back my way, combining into a single arrow that compresses further. Even as three of them combine, it shrinks from the thickness of a tree to the thickness of my leg. A core of white mana glows inside the resulting arrow.

Taking a deep breath, I push more mana into the black orb, which expands with a thump and moves in front of me.

It clashes with the arrow and devours it in the same manner as it did to the ones before.

Handling it becomes even more difficult.

Pressure from the Harvester increases further. Purple mana surrounds it, and where its forehead is, a mark starts glowing, and inscriptions spread from it, creating a circle around the skull.

The bow it holds expands in size, compresses, and becomes slimmer and more deadly looking. Then the monster reaches out with its other bony arm and pulls out another arrow from what looks like a hole in space.

That arrow burns with white light, and its light illuminates the entire valley and the sides of the mountains before it dims down, and the monster nocks it to the bow.

That also happens to be when the male archer releases another arrow, and it finally does some damage. Made of multicolored light, it pierces through the skull of the monster only to exit on the other side and

deep into the ground. The velnar slams his hammer down onto the damaged area while the others continue doing whatever they were doing.

None of it helps, and the Harvester ignores them entirely.

In quick succession, a dozen pulses expand from it, and each places three marks on me, each more intricate and powerful than the previous one. Not a single mark is placed on the other attendees.

At the same time, it continues to draw the bow in an unhurried manner. The glowing white arrow radiates an immense degree of mana radiation, nearly disrupting the bow and damaging the immensely durable bones of the Harvester. Even the remaining attendees begin to suffer. Blisters rise on their skin, and blood seeps from their eyes, noses, and ears.

I don't even blame them as the seven make their way toward the portal, grabbing whatever they can from the ground before rushing into the portal.

Only the archer turns back before he passes through and shrugs apologetically.

Looking at how slowly the Harvester prepares its attack, I could probably escape as well, yet I'm here. As threatening as it is, it also feels like a challenge. The two of us clashing against each other. And here at least, I don't think I'll lose.

I grab the ball of black mana with my hand and force it to change shape, all while letting it feed on more of my mana. It stretches to twice my length and takes the shape of a javelin while I let collected kinetic energy run wild through my body as I take a stance. One of my legs slides back, and I lower myself in preparation for a throw. A knot of compressed energy halts the core of the javelin to give it a further boost after I throw it.

I can't allow myself any distraction, so I use no thermal energy and let my new thermal construct deal with it as I delicately control the kinetic energy tearing through my body. The memory of Lioren using it to move my body keeps flashing in my mind.

The white arrow and black javelin launch at the same time.

Two sonic booms echo off the mountains, and by the time the shockwaves ripple through the air, it's already over.

And I'm alive.

As I start walking, I get my mana back under control and start combusting thermal energy under my skin to heal the damage while suppressing the pain as much as I can.

The Harvester still stands there, wobbling from side to side, but there's no mana around it at all. The bow is gone, there's no sign of any arrows, all the marks placed on me are gone, and even the mana radiation that once surrounded it has vanished. There's a wide trail with an area entirely devoid of mana, even the ambient field has been disrupted, and it continues to stretch far behind it into the distance where the black javelin flew.

In the center of the Harvester's head, there's a hole through which the black javelin flew. As I come to a stop next to it, the body finally collapses, falling and ending just a step away from where I stand.

[You have defeated Reanimated Harvester - lvl 398]

[Lvl 316 > Lvl 317]

[Lvl 317 > Lvl 318]

[Lvl 318 > Lvl 319]

[Lvl 319 > Lvl 320]

[Lvl 320 > Lvl 321]

[Manifestation - lvl 2 > Manifestation - lvl 3]

[Manifestation - lvl 3 > Manifestation - lvl 4]

[Redistribution - lvl 65 > Redistribution - lvl 66]

I look to my right.

[Perception - lvl 64 > Perception - lvl 65]

A pulse of my mana disrupts the camouflage of the lynthari man standing there with a dagger in his hand, and surprise evident on his face.

He moves quickly, but I'm long since prepared. A Needle Point explodes his knee, and before he can move again, I'm standing in front of him. Another powerful pulse of my disruption cancels out his strengthening, and my hand, coated in oscillating mana, cuts through the dagger he lifts in defense, and then pushes through his head.

[You have defeated Fade Stalker - lvl 310]

"You thought I didn't notice you like the others didn't?" I say to the corpse of the opportunist.

Then I scan the area to confirm I'm alone. Only then do I move to start gathering all the items littering the ground.