

Tutorial 771

Chapter 771 - Today

POV Nathaniel

Raw mana rips outward all at once, flattening the canyon in a single violent surge. Stone vaporizes, trees are uprooted, the air shakes. More stone fractures and is launched hard enough to shatter again midair. The shockwave slams into the cliffs, rebounds, and collides with itself, grinding rock into dust.

I absorb what I can, my boots skidding back through broken stone as the ground peels away beneath me. The pressure drop yanks debris inward, folding dust back toward the blast.

When the dust clears, the canyon is nearly gone.

Morwag is embedded in the far wall, his armor rippling even now.

I step forward, and a blast of my kinetic energy clears the dust in a single shockwave. My mana stabilizes as I continue to charge it.

The red armor with Morwag inside moves, and he slams his hand holding the Spine Chain into the wall.

Once again, the weapon creates a wave of enormous chains.

Multiple layers of spherical barriers surround me as chains made of water, air, and rock coil around me. They move more agitated than before, stretching further and further. The barriers I've made start cracking one after another as I make my preparations, ignoring the attack against me.

High in the sky, one of my arrays is already deployed, and I've made some last minute changes to it. Ley Lines stretch and draw, nearly invisible to someone like Morwag. They're entirely mana based and almost too thin to see. And most of all, they're durable. There isn't a single simple mana thread between them. Through the efforts of my vessel, the whole thing's been constructed from Ley Lines.

Morwag tries to pull me out, his signature showing him to be somewhere in the area my attack erased. I almost entirely ignore it, absorbing the momentum and holding myself in place, so he starts running up one of the enormous chains to reach me, unbinding every barrier in his path.

Just before he reaches me, more mana floods into me from the vessel, and an orb forms over the palm of my hand. It glows brightly with tricolored mana, with a small core of gold and white. As I watch the demon charging toward me, I tilt my hand and let it drop, falling through the air toward him.

I teleport away as Morwag reaches me and, landing on the ground, I take a few steps, using pulses of kinetic energy like a sonar and my other senses to orient myself. The explosion in the distance washes over me and makes me stumble a little before I raise the barrier and absorb the heat. When the mana disrupting effect washes over me, I barely notice it. Not a speck of my mana escapes my control.

No new wounds tear through me. And though Morwag is mostly protected by his pristine armor, he is wounding himself. Unfortunately for him, these wounds are being taken by my vessel, to which I've shifted his binding. And though I've already figured out how to erase it fully, I haven't done so yet, and instead opt to observe it with a different part of me, even as most of me focuses on this fight.

Even now, I don't reach into the mana I have been storing for the last three months, I just continue to use what I generate.

I open my eyes, which have already regenerated, and activate the inscriptions I have drawn in the sky. The circle they create shrinks, and a beam of mana shoots from it. The core of that beam glowing with white and gold, the result of all my experiments designed to mimic what I saw Professor Eliau do and my own observations of my Empyrean skill.

The chains of Morwag's weapon twist through the air and shoot toward it, all three at once, as the beam continues to move, locked onto Morwag, who I've tagged with one of my marks, which he still hasn't figured out how to unbind.

Enormous chains break one after another, even as they try to stack themselves to protect Morwag.

This is where the difference between our reserves begins to show. I've also decided not to face him up close anymore, where he is much more dangerous. I've already had a lot of fun, and now it's time to set some clear lines between the two of us.

The beam pierces through all chains and slams against the arm Morwag lifts to protect himself. His binding energy continues to flare up in front of him as he faces it head on.

Then I gather and throw another wave of raw mana at him from the side. I concentrate it more this time, reducing the size of the impact by half, and he's thrown through the air, crashing through the remains of the canyon into the next.

Ley Lines I set in the air spin around and stretch down towards me, and after a quick teleportation, I send them at Morwag. There are already two more spine chains made of rock moving through the air, but my Ley Lines swirl around them, materialize and pull, slicing through them cleanly.

Morwag dodges the [Empyrean Lance] I send his way, but then my [Redistribution] holds him in place, powered by nearly all of the mana I'm channeling through my vessel. I continue to raise it up more and more, constantly shifting and modifying it as Morwag modifies his unbinding. My mental processing is much faster than his, relying on my split mind and all the training I've done, with just a little reliance on my skills.

Ley Lines coil around him, strengthening and concentrating, focusing on his left arm. There, they tighten around his elbow and start cutting into the armor. The surface of his armor ripples as it feeds on Morwag's Demon Heart, the red tingeing bloodier and rippling more frequently.

The amount of energy my [Redistribution] holds is getting scary at this point, but there isn't any sign that my vessel is close to being undone. My pristine passive helps me to endure it all, and instead of my usually damaged body, I'm almost fully healed, leaving me just as I was before the fight.

I push myself further, eyes wide and focused on the Ley Lines, and with one final, powerful effort, they finally tighten, and Morwag's left arm, just below the elbow, is severed.

Flicking my hand, I use one of the Ley Lines there and bring that arm to myself, and I start taking the Obsidian Spine Chain off of it. Once in my hand, I push through the binding he's placed there and use it. Not as fully as I would like because of the connection to Morwag, but enough.

Just like when he used it, an enormous chain appears, but this one is made of my mana. It coils around me, expands, and grows while I study the item.

I allow my heart to beat more, to generate more thermal energy, which I turn into mana until the spine chain is three times as long and thick as anything Morwag did. Its color is dark blue with purple and light blue swirling inside as I experiment with the low pristine weapon. I'm well aware this isn't even close to its full capabilities, but it should be enough to send a message.

I let go of Morwag, and he doesn't charge me right away as I would have expected. He stands there, facing me and the mana spine chain, and fixes his posture. His heartbeat changes once again, and the red armor turns white, transparent, now with red veins flowing through it as if mirroring where his normal veins would usually be.

When I move the Spine Chain to attack him, Morwag steps ahead and meets it in an impact that tears apart the area. For a moment, he endures and even pushes back at me before his legs slide under the force, and he gets pushed into another cliff in an explosion of dust and rock.

A powerful punch from him sends a shockwave through the area and clears out some dust before he appears from within, running around the chain and streaking towards me.

I move it. The chain shrinks, splits into three, and all attack him from different sides.

Morwag deflects one, avoids another, but the third throws him away before they all attack him once more. I focus on him with the chain, layering attack after attack, and never once do I feel my mana falter.

When I feel it's a good time, I drop the Obsidian Spine chain and pull all that mana back into me. Then I turn it to the Ley Lines, which swirl around me, taking the shape I force them into. They activate one of my oldest arrays, forming an armor around me. The one I still call Regalia.

It is entirely made of materialized Ley Lines. Like a sleek medieval age suit of armor mixed with something more modern and further influenced by my subclass. My Kinetic Mana Heart switches modes as I regulate it, and instead of mana, it generates kinetic energy that flows through the threads of my Ley Lines.

Each of my heartbeats sends more of it through me, and my vessel dissipates just as I reach Morwag. The armor around him is transparent white with barely any signs of red, and I punch through it, my fist crashing against his cheek and sending him crashing through the ground.

Synced with my kinetic energy, Regalia amplifies my movement. After a burst of speed, I come to a stop in front of the demon as he rises from the punch. He lowers himself, aiming to gore me with his horns, but I dodge to the side, grab the nearest horn, and slam his face into my knee, shattering the helmet.

I don't allow him to get knocked away and absorb his momentum, so he freezes in the air, and I punch him again to send him to the ground.

He rises quickly and takes a battle stance. "Why did you come down here, Nathaniel? I thought the sky was safer," Morwag snickers, spitting blood, before dodging another punch and landing one of his own.

Ripples are sent through my Regalia, but I absorb most of the impact, and his unbinding just cancels out a few threads out of the many, and they quickly weave themselves back together.

"I did fly to tire you out and because I decided not to be stupid. Reasonable, right?" I punch him again and watch him stumble.

His eyes still shine brightly, but it's his body that's beginning to give in, not his mind.

"That's the right choice. I would have done worse," he laughs shamelessly.

Then the ground under my feet bulges, and three spine chains made of rock coil up across my body and hold me there. With a burst of movement, Morwag reaches me and pulls back, gathering as much force as he can into his fist to punch at my face.

His body halts mid-punch in the air, and a burst of kinetic energy tears apart each of the chains holding me. I take a step forward, grab one of his horns, and swing him down, burying his head into the ground, where I hold it in place as I release my kinetic hold on him and further power my armor.

Morwag doesn't move or try to get away. He just twists his head slightly to look up at me, "You are weaker than Nyssa."

I don't let it affect me in the slightest, "But I'm stronger than you."

That answer stops him for a moment, "That doesn't mean much beyond today."

"That is true. But I'm still stronger, so I want to ask. Do you accept it?"

He stares at me with one eye, unblinking. Not smiling in a demonic way, but not angry either, before he says, "I can accept it. It just wasn't my lucky day."

Instead of letting him go, I release the pressure around me. I lift the third seal on Ignition Heart just a tiny bit and let all the power of my mana flood my body. Unlike when channeled through the vessel, damage starts appearing, but for a while at least, I can channel it.

All that mana blazes around me, suffocating the demon below. The ground trembles violently, cracks racing across the canyon as my mana radiates outward, becoming visible to the naked eye like a living fire. It pulses in sync with my heart, creating arcs of pale blue light that dance across the canyon walls.

Tiny sparks shimmer around us in the currents that surround us, all bending to my will and twisting in patterns changing too fast to see. The air hums with its presence, dense and heavy, pressing against us as if it has physical weight.

And through it all, I ask once again.

"Do you accept it?" I don't speak loudly, but my words are clear, leaving no doubt about what will happen if he says no.

His gaze narrows, and this time he answers, "I accept it."

Only then do I let go of him, and mana flows back into my body as everything else clicks back together.

"We'll be heading to the 5th Beyond Floor after I complete the 9th floor of my tutorial. So be ready."

Morwag climbs to his feet, already healing and recovering all the mana and primordial energy he's lost.

As he nods in agreement, there is still a fire in his eyes, and I begin to more clearly understand why they call him the most demon demon to ever demon. There's an acknowledgement of me somewhere in there, and the same as me, he knows I wasn't close to going all out. But he also has confidence in himself, and I know the moment I show even a hint of weakness, he will be here to challenge me again.

Chapter 772 - I'm just me

Leaving him behind, I teleport towards the Megacity, and outside of it, I pass through the gate. Two guards move towards me, but the air around me drains of colors, and all their skills fail to activate. Wraith Dance brings me through the city towards the Headquarters of Primordial Knights. There are multiple guards around here as well, and their leader gestures for them to step back.

As I walk past him, he stares at me the same way as I do him and steps to the side to let me pass. Meanwhile, I check on the level ups I ignored during the fight.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 77 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 78]

[Ley Line - lvl 73 > Ley Line - lvl 74]

[Manifestation - lvl 38 > Manifestation - lvl 39]

[Current - lvl 37 > Current - lvl 38]

[Current - lvl 38 > Current - lvl 39]

Pushing the screen away, I walk through the destroyed buildings and pass by the guild members moving all over the place, and enter the main building. Once there, I head upstairs towards the office of the vice guild master. His doors are wide open as he waits for me there.

The oldest demon I've ever met, and likely the only one capable of keeping lunatics like the Primordial Knights and their guild masters somewhat under control.

"Nyssa left for the fifth floor to kill a different Champion than we'd planned for, and if she succeeds, she will move on to the sixth floor, where she will remain until the end of her tutorial," I say before he can shout at me.

That causes him to go quiet, and for a long moment, he just stands there. Then he weakly slides into his chair and closes his eyes, "Fuck all of this."

"I agree," I say as I sit opposite him and give him time to process it all.

"I give up. I'm done being vice guild master. Should have done it long ago." He opens his eyes and says, "I would've expect what happened from Morwag, but you as well? I had some hopes for you."

Looking at him, I just shrug and tell him, "I will be taking her place as guild master."

His words cut off again, and for a while, he sits there before coming to the decision, "Do whatever you want. Good luck with all that. I'm done with this mess of a guild."

"No. You're not," I say.

When he looks back at me, I return his gaze, "You could have quit long ago, and I'm sure you have many very good reasons to sit back and fill a book. You can pretend and complain as much as you want, but you don't care about shards, prestige, or any of that crap. You've stayed because this 'mess' is the only thing keeping you entertained, and you'd rather be angry than bored. You are a demon," I say as if it explains everything.

I stand up, "If you still want to quit, do so. Watch me use what you've worked so hard to build for so long to my advantage. I will abuse all these resources, take them for me alone, and continue to grow the guild so I can get more. I can do it all without you, even if it means stomping the other guilds into the ground. I'm not like Nyssa."

Something comes to mind, and I give a little smile, "I'll even rename the guild to Primordial Kittens, and you would be stupid to think I wouldn't do it."

"I would prefer if Weslin became guild master. I always thought that out of the four of you, he was the most reasonable."

"The others wouldn't accept him. Weslin is someone I'd proudly call my friend, but he wouldn't be able to force all of them under his control. Not for a lack of power either, that's just not who he is."

"Yes. Yes, that's it. You caused a lot of trouble today, but nothing that I won't be able to fix. But expect that we'll be owing a thing or two to certain people."

"I'm okay with that. After I return from my tutorial, we'll be going to the 5th floor and proceeding with the plan. So get everything ready."

"I will. Guild Master Gwyn... you sometimes make Morwag look human by comparison. You're more of a demon than many demons are, and I think the others may have realized that before I did."

"And that's where you're wrong. I'm not a demon. I'm just me." With that, I leave the office.

After that, I meet a few people and sort out a thing or two. I pick up some of the materials, pack up, and then, when my Beyond Stay token ends, I return to the 9th floor of the tutorial. I decide not to go and meet Ruby as I feel like I've had enough of these lunatics for a few months.

And anyway, the floor quest that requiring us to survive a year here will be ending in a week or two.

"Here we go, the only person we know with the constitution of a hummingbird is back," Dennis smirks the moment I reach the tree of the Dusk Horizon tribe.

"Show some respect to the guild master of one of the top guilds in Beyond," I attack back and stop by him. We're both standing off to the side, trying to avoid the gazes of the demon children that would surely come to attack me en masse if they noticed me. That's why I'm in my Sneaky Mode now.

"Damn, I lost the bet. I thought you wouldn't accept it, no matter the rumors Lily and others heard."

"Who won?"

"Tess, everyone else bet against it." He sighs and moves some of his blonde hair behind his ear, "I already let the others know you're back, so they can say their goodbyes to the demons and move out. We're all packed, and we have a hideout ten miles to the north where we can go before the floor ends and move all the stuff to the next floor."

"Got it. Any changes?"

"As always, when the floor is getting to the end, it starts to get more dangerous. More and stronger monsters appear, there are fights all over, and the other demon tribes move through the forest. Tess even said she saw a monster flying through the sky for the first time ever here."

I gesture at him, and we move behind the tree and stay there as two demon children pass by, laughing and punching each other with the sort of force that would kill the average human male back on Earth.

We stay silent, and then Dennis says in a quiet voice, "Your Floor Quest rewards are going to be shit. You spent most of your time in Beyond."

"Wanna bet things turn so fucked up that I still gather enough 'performance points' to have better rewards than you?"

That causes Dennis to go silent and sigh, "Damn it. Fuck you. I bet you will. Everyone agrees with me that the objective is to survive one year here, so your spending all that time in Beyond shouldn't count."

"The world is a cruel place, and we, Beyond attendees, are just the nobility being fed with silver spoons. What about Biscuit's friends?"

"That T-Rex is still here, and once in a while, I see that fucking spawn of Satan ferret thing. The others stopped showing as of late."

"Fucking ferret. Why can't something just eat it?"

"I know, right?" Dennis nods solemnly and listens to a message sent to his head, "Okay. The others already said their goodbyes and left gifts. Lily is kicking the ass of the daughter of the tribe's leader for the last time, and we can go ahead and meet them first at the hideout."

"Let's go then," I agree.

We slide into the forest, and I follow Dennis, matching my running speed to his. As I tend to do, I observe his perception and the movement of his mana so I can give him some feedback later. After we spent months together on the 6th floor, where I sort of trained him and his brother, we're still used to it. And he doesn't seem to mind.

So close to the tribe's territory, there aren't too many monsters, and Dennis avoids most of them. It doesn't even take that long to reach our goal, where we finally come to a stop. It's just an unassuming spot in a small circle of trees, but deep in the ground below, there's a chamber formed of metal and hardened rock made by Sophie where we've chucked a bunch of our stuff. Things from Earth, food, our loot, materials, beds, clothes, and more. Things we don't carry around that often.

The two of us sit down on some manabloc chairs I make and fifteen minutes later, the rest of the group arrives.

The best corgi of the 9th floor and in all of Beyond is the first to welcome me, sensing me earlier than the others. He arrives in his adult form, with eight purple human arms made of mana growing from his back, he moves like an eldritch abomination. A corgider, and something in the way those human arms twitch and move to propel him while his short corgi legs hang in the air is deeply unsettling.

Biscuit wears a cute vest, one of the ones I brought back from Earth that Izzy's put even more pockets on. These pockets are already filled with rocks, crystals, and, strangely enough, even leaves.

(Right neighborhood motherfucker!) He shouts and jumps at my chest, the human arms dissolving mid-jump, and only a burrito-shaped corgi lands into my huff.

He twists in my arms, pushing himself closer to my face, licking it, and booping with his cold nose against my cheek while I hold him tight, absorbed in petting him.

"One piece of deer jerky if you tell me who taught you that," I say, and Biscuit freezes, caught in a deep dilemma.

To betray, or to perish of hunger. That is the question.

He gives me a side eye, (Food?)

"What do you mean, what do I mean? You know what you said."

(Food! Food!)

"Don't try to bullshit me!" I shout, lifting him higher, holding him under his front legs' armpits in a way he enjoys, leaving his hind legs hanging. I then shake him, which turns his expression into something that reminds me of a smile, and his tongue lolls out.

(Friend. Not Food.)

"Yeah? But I'm sure a true friend wouldn't want you to die of hunger," I say and watch as my words cause him to hesitate, and for a second, his eye glances to the left at Aaron before he turns back to me.

(No,) He says simply with determination.

"Then I guess we'll never know," I sigh and let him fall to the ground. "By the way, some of the demons were asking when you were coming back. They've been calling you a demonic beast and all that. What have you done to them?"

(Help friends. Food. Horn friends. After.)

"Makes sense," I agree, and look at the rest of the gang. Most of them carry a bag or two and some weapons, but all seem lightweight. Not like we wouldn't be able to carry more. Even my body could handle that, but it's just annoying to do it.

"Welcome back," Izzy says as she welcomes me first. Unlike Tess, Lily, and Sophie, she has been staying here, and we didn't meet in Beyond, so it has been a long time.

She is once again a bit taller, and Noodle has shrunk down and coiled around her arm. Somewhat awkwardly, I wave and gesture before she chuckles and pulls me into a quick hug.

I greet Min-Jae and Aaron and notice Maya started growing longer hair, and her tattoo-like inscriptions on the skin now also go around her head as if a diadem is resting there.

Once we're done with the formalities, Tess finally speaks, "Once everyone places their marks on this spot, why don't we set off and head north to explore this place before the floor ends? I've been hearing about an old demon that lives alone, not that far from here, and he's rumored to be one of the oldest on this planet. So let's learn a bit more about this place."

Chapter 773 - Name for the Nameless Tree

As we make our way through the forest, I let the others deal with the monsters and scout ahead. Since they actually gave a fuck about this floor, unlike someone who spent all their time fighting with severe mana deficiency, they're even quite good at it. Especially Izzy, Maya, the twins, and Min-Jae, who've been living here for the last year.

Now that I think about it, isn't it the longest time we've spent on a floor by far? Izzy is 13, as much as I still refuse to see her as anything other than the 10 year old girl who used to cling to me like a baby koala back on the third floor.

So let's say she is truly 13 and not beholden to my mental image of her. Humans barely remember anything until they're what? 4, 6 years old? Even then, they forget most of it. So let's be generous and say Izzy started "living" around 5 years old. That is eight years until now. With the year she's spent on this floor, that means she's spent over 10% of her life on this floor and almost half her life inside the tutorial.

How weird that thought is, and I wonder how important all of this seems to her right now. In the future, as she becomes stronger and reaches the age of 100, 200, or even older, it will be nothing, just a fraction

of the time she's lived her life. Yet, she's spent a good portion of her adolescence on this floor, and her most formative years have passed in the tutorial.

Of course, she's still Izzy. As much as I'm sure the experience will change her, she's a gentle person overall, unlike most of us here with our screwed up tendencies. And most of the other children trapped in the tutorial won't be the same. And the same goes for people on the newly awakening Earth. Even I likely had my part in it with the way my visit must have caused millions of people to awaken.

I glance to my right at Min-Jae, who even now is spinning orbs made from my mana and assorted metals around him.

Noticing me looking his way, he turns to me. "Yes?"

"How has the 9th floor been for you?" I ask.

"I thought you would be in your focused mode. All dark and concentrated and not in the mood for conversation."

I lift my eyebrow. "Am I that easy to read?"

"Not really, but it's been getting easier. We've known each other for over 3 years at this point. I've spent more time with you than I ever did with Kevin, and he was my best friend. And that's with all the times you went off on your own and disappeared to beyond," he says with an expression that suddenly seems ever so slightly sad before he pushes it away.

"That's true. We've spent months at a time seeing each other day after day. As for your question regarding my mood, I've done my preparations and will continue when I return to beyond. I'm also sure I can do my part here and push myself. But at the same time, I'm curious, and I genuinely want to know the answer, and I have no reason to be all broody and mysterious. For now."

He smiles. "I like this floor. I got to spend a lot of time with the twins and the girls, and I've gotten to know them much better. We saw amazing places, met a lot of demons, and put our lives on the line many times across a range of fights," Min-Jae pauses. "Izzy says that Tess wants us to go through the danger together. She believes that people who experience things together, the sort of things other

people wouldn't understand, are bound to create a strong bond, and I think there might be something to it."

"So it was all rainbows and sunshine?"

"Not a chance," he chuckles. "Maya spent a month fighting with Izzy because she decided to be a brat. I also had Dennis determined to beat me in a duel, but he kept losing and got annoyed at me for flying and wouldn't talk to me for a while. Noodle broke the gaming console you brought back for Aaron."

After looking around to ensure no one is listening, he steps closer and whispers, "I also think Izzy's reached the age where she's started to notice boys and might be crushing on Aaron a little bit, and she's been avoiding him because of it. I think she's been doing her best not to read his feelings."

I blink a few times.

Seeing that reaction, Min-Jae nods. "Then there were these fights where Izzy almost got killed, and scared the hell out of Maya, and then she got really angry and wanted to keep her somewhere safe. I also disappeared for a week at one point on a hunt and didn't let them know in the Community, so I got screamed at for that."

He shrugs awkwardly and tells me a bit more about their time here. All the good and the bad. He also talks about the tribes they've met and the places they visited, the sort of things that feel like they could only have happened in a book.

As he talks, I reflect on what I've seen as well and how, as of late, I started to accept certain things as normal.

For example, the Megacity that honestly reminds me of Minas Tirith in a way. The fact that I've been traveling to other worlds for beyond quests.

The fact that I have a disciple. Me. A disciple that isn't even fully human, part of a race of demons that was created an incomprehensibly long time ago by a guy everyone wants to kill for some reason.

A black hole with a ring of flesh the size of planets circling around it, made from a single person's body. The fact that I flew through space on an asteroid that was turned into a spaceship by an Elf.

How insane all of that is if I think about it for a while.

"I had hoped you would bring your Nameless Tree here. I wanted to see it, and it could've helped us with the floor," Min-Jae says as we stop again while Tess and Maya head ahead to deal with a group of monsters that remind me of monkeys mixed with wolves.

I observe the fight while I answer, "If I need to use everything and even the Fragment just to clear this floor of the tutorial, I might as well just lie down and die."

"Nice jinx."

"I know," I agree. "But I've been thinking. I want to make it so the leaves and maybe the trunk can absorb heat from sunlight and turn it into thermal energy. It could also take kinetic energy from wind and earthquakes. Or I could plant it in water and harness the waves."

"Or you could absorb the momentum of the planet as it spins around its orbit or circles around the sun," Min-Jae jokes. "If you want to absorb sunlight, maybe turn the leaves into a magnifying glass? Or you could make them black?"

"It needs to look cool. A pure black tree would look weird."

"It needs to?"

"It needs to," I confirm.

"How about planting it in a volcano? That's a big source of heat. Do you want to focus on kinetic energy or thermal? Or knowing you, both?" Sophie, who's listening in nearby, asks, joining the conversation.

Seeing her here, I notice Lily coming closer as well.

"I would like both," I say.

"That might be less effective than focusing on the one," Sophie says.

"If it became too strong, wouldn't it eventually turn Earth into a frozen planet by absorbing too much heat, or cause some other disaster by stilling the waves? Wouldn't that be bad?" Lily asks.

"You. Have you been listening all this time? You were pretty far away." I face her.

"I've been working on improving my senses!" she answers happily.

"Could you put it on the moon? Without an atmosphere, you could absorb more heat, and the temperature when the sun shines on it will be, what, around five times more than the hottest deserts on earth," Min-Jae continues to theorize without a thought for the petite invader of privacy. It worries me.

"Can't you plant more trees?" Min-Jae asks again, before I can express my worry, so I just stare Lily down until she turns away.

"Just one tree," I say. "The moon idea sounds cool."

"Because it'd be more effective, or do you just like the idea of a giant tree growing on the moon?" Sophie snorts.

"Yes."

Laughing at my answer, the bulldozer continues on with a more serious tone, "It will need a good name. It can't remain the Nameless Tree."

"Greg."

"Fuck off, Dennis," I say reflexively.

"World's Okayest Tree," he tries again.

"How did you manage to join the conversation so fast, anyway? And no."

"I started listening in through Min-Jae when the Ruler of Lust joined the conversation."

I turn to the aforementioned Korean boy. "Doesn't that violate some kind of privacy law? Or at least basic human decency? Shouldn't there be a blinking red light in your eyes when you let someone watch through them? Maybe a warning label. Or a consent pop-up."

"No such regulations exist," he answers immediately, completely straight faced. "There was a discussion once, but for some reason it turned into an argument about whether telepathic surveillance counts as eye contact."

"What? We seriously need to talk about that." I say.

"Leaf Me Alone."

"Okay, Lily, while I do think that's funny, and I bet if I let you, you'd make a case for why a name like that fits considering my personality..." I pause and think of it again. "It really is funny," I mutter reluctantly.

That seems to make the bulldozer happy, and Izzy promptly offers another name, "Colossal Ordinary Rooted Green Individual."

"I see what you did there. Did your sister help you come up with that?"

"Yup!"

"I thought so. There is no need to think about it anymore, I've already chosen a name. I will call it the Mana Tree."

"Nat, you can't do that. It doesn't fit with your desire to use it for gathering primordial energies." Min-Jae seems bothered, as if I've offended his OCD or something.

"But it is accurate," I defend myself. "In the end, all those primordial energies will be converted into more mana."

"I should have fucking realized it would end like this. Let's go, Izzy. I sensed Biscuit heading west, and I feel the signature of that T-Rex friend of his as well, so we may as well go check on it," Sophie huffs, dragging her sister away like I'm some sort of weirdo.

Meanwhile, I explain to the rest of the people around me, "It will be like a node of my domain, and I will connect Ley Lines to it so I can spread them all over the Earth to build myself a permanent teleportation network. It will gather primordial energies and turn them into the mana I'll need to power it all. And I'll improve on it too. Like some defensive arrays, or something to strengthen my [Eclipse], mana batteries, and stuff like that."

"Mind if I offer a counterargument?" Min-Jae asks, and I can see how much the name bothers him.

"Sure."

"You know what solar panels are, right?"

"What do you take me for? Are you looking for a beating?"

"No! I was just asking. Okay, so hear me out. Solar panels absorb sunlight, right? That sunlight gets converted into electricity, and yet we still call them solar panels, not electric panels. In your case, you might be converting thermal or kinetic energy into mana, but by that logic, it would make more sense to name it the Kinetic Tree, the Thermal Tree, the Thermokinetic Tree, or even the Primordial Tree, rather than the Mana Tree, if you want to keep the name simple."

"In that case, solar panels are poorly named, and I refuse to make the same mistake."

Dennis throws an arm around the Korean boy, and I notice he has to reach up a bit, as Min-Jae is starting to get pretty tall. "Leave him be, he won't change his mind."

Min-Jae sighs, rubbing his temple. "I know. I just feel obligated to try."

Both of them leave soon afterwards, Dennis walking a step ahead while Min-Jae follows, still shaking his head as if replaying the argument in his mind.

For a while, Lily and I walk side by side, and I keep expanding my senses to watch the surroundings and observe how the others fight. I also keep an eye on where Sophie and Izzy went and where I can sense Biscuit and his T-Rex friend with its mana crown as they start moving towards the main group.

All the while, I keep gathering more mana. I accumulate it in the crown floating over my head, where my mana constantly moves in ever changing currents. The more I do, the more I find myself comfortable constantly moving mana rather than letting it sit still, as I continue to experiment with Mana Cycling, [Current], and Thermal Cycling.

There's a lot I have already gathered and bound to myself like this, but everything from the past three months has been collected for the fight against the mana-specialized Champion. It will be needed, even more so now that we don't have Nyssa.

Maybe, for the first time, I will see what Lissandra mentioned long ago. That even beings a grade above me, should they be reliant on mana, will find themselves weak against my black mana.

I push these thoughts to the background and glance over at Lily, walking next to me. She surveys the area, a soft smile on her face as sunlight passes through the giant trees and warms her features.

Unable to help myself, I whisper quietly, "Leaf Me Alone, really?"

As expected, she hears me, and turning her face to me, she smiles brighter than the sun shining on her face.

Chapter 774 - Vegetarian

When Biscuit returns, he's floating at the side of the T-rex. And he's in his adult form, and in comparison to the dinosaur with its [Mana Crown], he looks tiny. Yet the T-rex is very calm. I haven't met him directly yet, but I've observed his fights from a distance, and I know the sort of brutality he's capable of.

In a deep growl, the dinosaur greets Tess and looks over the others, having an almost regal bearing. When he notices me, he hesitates. He lowers himself, and a deep growl that vibrates the air comes out again as he stares my way and sees the crown floating over my head.

I return that gaze and stay where I stand.

The growl sounds again, and the [Mana Crown] over his head starts spinning as the dino takes a step forward in a threatening manner. Mana rises up around him in a way that I rarely see in monsters or animals. While it isn't exactly comparable to humans, lumoran specialists, or other sapients, it's a clear sign of higher intelligence.

Though maybe not that much of an intelligence.

Before the T-rex can take another step, another growl sounds, but this one comes from Biscuit, who floats now behind his back. It causes the enormous monster to lower itself even more and slowly turn to the corgi. I almost expect him to tuck his tail in between his legs.

Even seeing that, Biscuit faces the dinosaur for a while longer as if to confirm the understanding, and only then does the mood shift. The T-rex straightens up again and playfully boops Biscuit with his nose while not even glancing my way again.

All of this doesn't matter all that much to me as I continue my search for that spawn of Satan. For now, there are no signs of the vile ferret. Though it can hide itself pretty well, I should be able to spot it if I try.

My senses expand far into the area, and I notice clear signs of heightened activity, especially when we move through areas with lingering mana radiation, like the one nearby where that old demon lives.

The other members of Group 4 have mostly put the pieces together. This floor, called the Pit, is indeed a sort of trash can where someone, for some reason, has been discarding the bodies of Champions and

perhaps even Absolutes. They're the sort of beings that poison huge areas around their remains for hundreds of years, with the mere remnants of the power they once held.

Min-Jae especially has been making his own observations and came up with plenty of theories on how such bodies can force different types of evolution and changes in the organisms around them. He looks at it from an observational perspective and has studied a number of the changes.

Meanwhile, I just think it is cool.

I'm a simple man. The kind of man who always secretly thought it was cool when the main character stayed behind at the canyon to hold back the hordes of evil just to give his family time to escape.

So how can I not find this just as cool? A body that carried power so great that even years and years after its death, some of it remains. Imagine an Absolute dying and, twenty thousand years later, some level 10 human finds the skeleton of its body, unable to even scratch the bone. Or maybe such an Absolute would be perfectly preserved, seeming as if they'd died mere moments ago.

I want to find such a thing, and it is one of the reasons I was excited to return here for the end of the floor. There are materials that could be gathered from such a body. Inspirations to gain. All that fun stuff.

I'm also curious about the reason these bodies are being thrown here. Is this planet really just a trash can, or is there a bigger reason? I'm sure we'll learn more in the following days as the difficulty ramps up. The System likes to trick people into letting their guard down before throwing them a curveball.

Focusing my thoughts on the information Mapthaniel's been gathering and mapping out an area, I take some notes on it. Then I confirm Redactthaniel is still safe and ready to serve the purpose of spreading the true name of black mana, which is black mana. Though the chance is tiny, it is possible the old demon might recognize my black mana.

There are also some parts of me that I still haven't named, but they do equally important things. There is one experimenting with images of Escher's Cube, the Penrose Triangle, the Klein Bottle, and the Möbius Strip in my mind through which I continue to try to simulate moving mana, no matter how much mental damage I'm taking.

Or the submind doing mental exercises that I call Parallel Mapping, Load Rotation, and Sequence Pinning, which have continued to improve my use of subminds.

Lastly, there is also a smaller part I'm still a bit ashamed of. It is a base I've been planning to use for the Red Heartstone and for the Chestplate. It's something like the base of an Ego item. That part has hints of consciousness and can talk to me a bit.

It is all still me, and it's just an experiment, though our plan for an actual Ego is something else. Yet, it feels weird. A Florida man giving himself a mental illness so he can talk to himself. That kind of stuff.

(I'll get the ones on the right side,) I say in the group link when I notice a stronger presence approaching.

(Got it. Maya and Min-Jae left side, twins front with me,) Tess adds just as quickly.

Using a [Ley Line], I teleport there and find no visible monster, as it senses my appearance and stops moving. I find it amusing and take a step under the tree while looking around this ancient-feeling rainforest.

When I stop under one of the smaller trees, it bursts into a rush of motion that feels just wrong for a tree. The branches swing towards me, roots pierce the ground, and wood creaks. Leaves shake as well, sending down a rain of poisonous particles.

Mana spins around in a current that I sharpen and oscillate. It crashes against the trunk, which flashes in a defensive barrier before I break through and cleanly cut it apart. Kinetic energy blows away the particles, and multiple Needle Points stab through the tree where I sense the most mana and vital parts.

Lastly, all of the branches reaching for me halt before even touching me.

[You have defeated Blightwood - lvl 378]

Glancing at the notification, I absorb some of the momentum of the falling tree and let it hit the ground almost gently before bursting into movement with Wrath Dance.

The movement brings me further away to where a leopard lurks, its skin matching the color of the leaves. It's been observing the fight the entire time. The leopard notices my appearance, and its yellow eyes snap onto me, its claws slide out as it attacks in a leap.

My projectile pierces the body, flying through the air, but it passes through as if the creature were made of smoke. From my left, another leopard jumps, but I ignore it and concentrate more on my senses. While a smoke-like illusion almost crashes against me, I form a barrier to block it, noticing that it seems to be poisonous, as I locate the main body.

Another burst of movement puts me up close just as the leopard starts to run away. My projectiles stab into the tree branch below as it dodges in a way that feels like living water. [Redistribution] fails to grasp it, so I increase the number of projectiles, forcing the leopard to dodge.

Waiting for the right moment, I move and appear right in front of it, holding a long spear made of dark blue mana with an oscillating tip. The weapon skewers the monster. It thrashes on the blade, pulling itself closer to bite at me before I send a burst of kinetic energy through the weapon and let it explode within the monster's body.

[You have defeated Mirage Leopard - lvl 384]

Tilting the spear toward the ground, I watch the body slide down and fall.

In just a few seconds, a large number of insect monsters, each as big as a small dog, appear and start biting into the carcass, attracted by the blood.

After returning to the group, I get a question from Tess. (What was out there?)

(The tree and one of those creepy leopards that like to stalk you for days at a time, trying to poison you and attack you while you're sleeping or taking a poop.)

(We got one of those trees, and a teleporting spider. They didn't used to appear this close. However, we were expecting that. We'll be splitting into multiple groups now, as far as we know, Skippy is in the area, and he's attracted to the bigger groups,) she says.

No one disagrees with that, and soon enough, we are split. Tess moves with the twins, Biscuit, and the T-rex. Sophie goes with Izzy, Lily, and Min-Jae, and I'm left with Maya.

For the most part, Maya deals with the monsters. I only jump in if the fight would be too draining on her mana reserves. Otherwise, I keep my guard up and keep scanning the area.

I don't need to level up all that much, and my plan remains to kill the Champion on the 5th floor, and only then will I push for level 400 to get my trait. This way, the "achievement" will be included in the calculations, coming together with my status as an Absolute Candidate, body upgrade stuff, miscellaneous traits, and all that good stuff.

It's even possible that killing the Champion will push me over 400 and get me the trait right away, which would probably be one of the best results.

Not that long ago, I asked around and found out that level 400 is rare for an attendee, even in Beyond. Even some S-ranks never reach that kind of level before ending their tutorial, so it will be yet another advantage for me. With a year and a half or so still remaining in the tutorial after that, it'll put me in a really good position.

My chosen method of combat, reducing the entire area to rubble and calling it strategy, continues to be embarrassingly effective when it comes to levelling up.

To keep up my humble facade, I turn my attention back to Maya and watch as she continues to use her claymore made of tri-colored mana to face down a group of three of those leopards that seem to love using illusions. Her movements jerk in sudden bursts of speed as she uses [Boost], her armor only materializing when she needs it. Her weapon switches forms faster than I remember: sharp and dangerous.

She's also pretty dangerous to face in a drawn out fight, as her [Compounding] continues to stack up the damage on her opponent. The only weaknesses I can think of are a slight lack of long-range senses, the fact that her mana reserves could be higher, and she doesn't like to attack at long range. But at close to medium range, she's fairly good, be it against human-sized opponents or creatures as big as a building when she forms her [Armament] into big armor.

I am just starting to relax when the familiar pressure brushes against my senses. I register the approaching presence before Maya does and almost groan. I had hoped something had eaten it.

In front of that presence, another one is bulldozing through the trees. Soon, a boar with red fur and massive tusks comes charging through the forest, as if fleeing the devil himself. It notices Maya and me, but instead of attacking, it heads straight for us, its eyes wide with what seems to be sheer terror. It is as if it wants its hunter to shift focus from it to us.

Another tree falls as the boar bulldozes through it. Then it stumbles and falls as a flash of golden fur streaks through the air. The boar, as big as the trucks used to haul ore in the largest of mines, twists desperately, trying to move. It squeals loudly, fountains of blood spraying from its severed front leg. The forest around it explodes and twists, and golden fur flashes a few more times, tearing off more limbs and wounding the boar.

All of it takes much longer than it should. A single accurate attack would be enough to end the boar, but its hunter seems to enjoy its suffering.

My [Empyrean Lance] pierces the head of the boar, and the body finally stops twitching and moving.

The cause of these twitches reveals itself as the source of the golden fur appears again. The red fur of the boar bulges over the belly and moves as if something has burrowed into it just before it bursts open, and reveals a ferret with golden fur and black eyes. It is just about the size of an otter, tiny in comparison to the boar.

Of course, this spawn of Satan knows about us, but it decided to torture its prey instead. Now it squeaks happily while blood soaks into its golden fur and flows down its body.

This thing. This spawn of Satan. This vile little nightmare with its filthy paws. This tiny golden demon from hell itself. Sniveling, squeaking ferret composed of fur and malice.

After a quick greeting, it then moves and burrows once again into the dead body, which starts moving and twitching, where the ferret passes under the flesh and proceeds to burrow more holes. The next time it pokes out, it's looking at us through the skull of the dead boar, bloodied even more than before, as its cute, tiny eyes look towards us as if inviting us to join.

The ferret hasn't taken a single bite. I've actually never seen it eat anything other than grass, fruit, or seeds.

The damned thing's a vegetarian.

Chapter 775 - Trade

I gesture to Maya, and we start walking away, but a few seconds later, the burst of movement returns, and that ferret spawn of Satan appears at our side. It stands on its hind legs, golden fur matted with blood, and looks at us in confusion before letting out a cute squeak.

"Yeah, he's nearby," I say.

The evil little thing doesn't even try to shake the blood off itself, it just seems happy. There are still bits of brain stuck to it as well, which it ignores. With its front paws, it stands on the eye of the boar it dragged here as a trophy. I watch the dead pupil as the ferret's tiny nails carve deep lines into it.

Then it squeaks a few more times.

"No idea," I say.

When the ferret moves again, most of the blood slides off its fur, and it disappears into the distance, leaving the eye behind.

"What did it ask?" Maya asks curiously while watching where it went with a furrowed brow.

"How would I know? It always wants to find Biscuit, so I guessed that was the first question. The other is usually a request to kill something, or some statement of its desire to bathe in the blood of a hundred starving children or something similarly vile."

Maya shudders. "I swear I've never seen such an evil being."

"Yeah, vegans tend to be that way."

She almost bursts into a laugh, but holds it back. “Veganism doesn’t have anything to do with it. I have trouble trying to estimate its strength. Do you think I could deal with it?”

I give it a thought before shrugging. “Probably? 50/50? It’s worse than that T-Rex, at least that guy seems to like mana.”

Both me and Maya get messages through [Connection] and adjust our course.

Though I take a bit of a detour and move closer to one of the dangerous areas than I should. I shield both Maya and myself from mana radiation over the next ten minutes as we approach one of the areas that most of the demons we’ve met tend to avoid as much as possible.

We recognize it by the way the trees start getting shorter and shorter until, on our right, a view of the wasteland opens up. It’s an area in the shape of a perfect circle that no greenery will touch, and it’s, at least by Tess’s estimations, somewhere around 100 miles wide.

I can’t see it all that well, but Tess scouted it out with her [Farsight]. According to her, the exact center of the area is what seems like the corpse of a monster no bigger than a mouse. Not some giant building sized mouse from the tutorial, but an actual earth sized rodent. From her description, the thing is blue and lizard like, entirely covered in scales, with four legs and a single eye in the middle of its head, which is now closed.

It is also one of the few zones that even I’ve decided not to enter. By my estimation, that thing was at the level of a powerful Champion, approaching Absolute level, and it might actually be one of the “freshest” additions to this place. The problem is that within that huge area, everything seems to break down sooner or later, and all healing slows down massively. It might be one of the monster's more powerful traits causing the effect, or maybe even a fragment similar to Luan’s.

I want to go there to check it out very much, but the one time I went in, it didn’t end very well. It ate part of my head and damaged my eyes for days after just a few seconds of trying to push deeper into the area, and that was still miles away from the body.

Though even the sight of this area is interesting, and while I’d like to compare that tiny body to what remains of Septa on Earth’s moon. Both of them are powerful Champion grade beings, especially Septa,

who served as the Ruler of Envy's vessel and bond. Yet, that blue scaly corpse is something I could hold in my hand, while Septa is bigger than a country.

"Why didn't they chuck the body into a star?" I ask Maya, as she stands by my side, likely having similar thoughts as she looks into the area. "If they just wanted to get rid of the body, wouldn't that have been easier?"

"Maybe it's simpler to create a portal to throw a body through or move it onto this planet rather than trying to get it to the sun? I mean, back on earth, there are plenty of trash cans and yet people will still just throw their trash on the ground because it's easier," she says.

Not taking my eyes off it, I nod in agreement with her logic while I continue to think of it. Maybe this floor really is a show they've put on to teach us not to litter, the work of one of the more environmentally conscious Rulers. Yet I don't think that's the point. There's something more fucked up going on here, that's for sure.

The Spawn of Satan himself picks that time to appear again. In swift, jumping movements, the ferret comes to a stop in front of Maya while standing on its hind legs. It tilts its head, and its big, black, beady eyes look up at Maya in the very picture of cuteness.

For a while, I compare it to All Berries Fen'Thin Veal Corn Del Velveeta en Rice Pasta Val Carb Marinade and wonder how long it would take for this vile spawn of a creature to murder that spoiled noble lady's pet. Probably between one and two seconds. In a way, this thing is more fitting for the role the Cockroach likes to babble on about so often.

"What do you want?" I ask, and its attention shifts from Maya to me. In two jumps, it reaches my feet and puts its front paws on my shoes while looking up at me.

Of course, it doesn't answer, but it starts gently scratching the tips of my shoes. I know it can tear them apart, but it doesn't do that, instead, it just tries to get my attention.

I sigh and say, "Same trade as before. And you first this time."

It squeaks in joy and bounces away at high speed.

"That thing creeps me out," Maya says, something I have heard her say many times before.

"Wanna bet it's one of the current Rulers?" I joke and start walking again. Soon, we're back in the forest and out of view of the area that holds the last remains of that lizard.

"What a disturbing thought," Maya shudders in reaction, but she doesn't have time to do more as she finally notices the three presences I've been feeling for a while.

She steps ahead, her armor surrounding her, and faces down all three boars, each one as big as a truck, all on her own.

When she is back, she says similarly to what I said before. "Wanna bet these are the babies of that colossal boar the ferret killed?"

"Seems that way," I nod.

The golden ferret returns ten minutes later and stops in front of me straight away while entirely ignoring Maya. In its tiny paws, it holds a shard of metal ore and drops it near my feet, but continues to hold it with one of its paws.

Even as I bend down and start picking it up, the ferret excitedly moves around and helps me, even pushing the piece of metal into my hand. When I straighten up, surprised how light the ore is, it starts jumping excitedly in circles around me while I check the description.

Volarite (Arcane) -A pale blue, porous ore that's lighter than air when exposed to light or heat. Volarite also generates lift as it absorbs heat. Veins of this ore are often found on the ceilings of sunlit caverns, and if a piece is broken off outdoors during the day, it will simply float away into the atmosphere.

"Interesting, but not really all that useful for me. Though it should be useful for Min-Jae's floating island. Next time, try harder if you want more," I say. Then, under the impatient eyes of the ferret, I cut off my left thumb and throw it to the ground.

In a flash of golden fur, the ferret grabs it. I watch it for a while, even as Maya says something behind me.

The ferret presses the still warm finger against its face and rubs its snot against it. It spreads bits of blood over its face as much as it can before it starts stripping the skin off the finger. It snuggles against the bare flesh and then, after stripping the flesh down as well, against the bones. When it's finally done, it leaves a mess on the ground, at which point it flops back and starts twisting its golden furred body to rub itself against the gore.

Meanwhile, my finger nearly fully regrows in that time, even with the slightest bit of thermal energy combusting under my skin. My left arm always healed faster.

Maya says something, but I gesture for her to stop and face the ferret, who's finally stopped moving. Those tiny eyes glow excitedly in a deep state of happiness, but then it looks at what remains of my finger, and sadness mixes in. It jumps around a few times and, with tiny paws, scratches at the ground and the pieces of bone.

Then, very slowly, it sniffs and turns to me.

It stands on its hind legs, tilting its head slightly as its tiny tongue flicks out, then drops back onto all fours.

The creature explodes forward like a railgun, barely more than a blur of golden fur, but I'm prepared, having gone through the same thing once before.

[Redistribution] encompasses the area and then narrows to affect its tiny body only. A good chunk of the mana I gathered after "the trade" channels through me and powers the skill. The small golden body appears frozen in the air, just an arm's reach away from me, just a fraction of a moment away from burrowing into my stomach.

The amount of gathered kinetic energy I absorb from its attempts to move is comparable to nearly any A rank I have met so far, and its speed is easily on par with most S ranks.

Slowly, I say to Maya, "If it ever offers you a trade like this, reject it. Never take anything it brings you, even if it's just a piece of wood, or a leaf, or something seemingly small."

Taking a step, I move over to the ferret while I continue to restrain its movements. I do so until I feel no more attempts to move, and only then do I let go.

The ferret drops to the ground in an almost comical way and squeaks in surprise. It jumps around a few times in what seems like a distressed manner and even lies on its back, cutely showing me its belly and squeaking.

Then it jumps away again, rushing off into the forest, just like before, as if nothing ever happened.

Watching it go, I wonder if I should kill it. But just like many times before, I decide to continue placing my trust in Biscuit.

The old demon whose house we've finally reached lives in a small cottage that stands under an especially old-looking tree with white bark. The said tree is shorter than most, and its branches are twisted in ways that look almost creepy, extending far away. There are no leaves on these branches at all.

The air here smells weird, and we haven't seen any monsters in the last five miles. Even the T-Rex and the ferret stayed out of the area and refused to follow us in. My theory is that there's some sort of domain here that isn't mana-based, or perhaps there's some sort of item responsible. Maybe it is even one of the demon's active skills. Honestly, there are just too many options.

As we were told by the Dusk Horizon tribe, only the two of us move ahead while the rest stay behind. Me and Tess walk side by side until we come to a stop near the house at a place marked by a pile of rocks, where we take our seats on the ground. Tess puts a few items on a metal slate nearby. She sets out some food from Earth, clothes from Earth, a few miscellaneous items, and even some books and mana stones. Nothing too powerful, just interesting things that the old demon might not have seen yet.

Then, after a few moments, the inscriptions on the metal plate start to shine, and all of the items are teleported away. Then we wait.

"He'll make us wait for somewhere around one hour," Tess says.

"Nah, he's never seen stuff from Earth. He even teleported them instantly instead of waiting. I give him ten minutes at most," I give my counter-bet.

"If you win, I'll join the Primordial Knights and deal with all the people stuff in your place. If I win, you will have to wear that gecko shirt for the rest of this floor."

"Deal."

Almost exactly an hour later, the old demon steps out of the house.

Chapter 776 - Important things

[Thorncrown Tyrant - lvl ????]

The old demon doesn't even bother to unwrap the chocolate. He just bites straight through the foil, spitting the shredded plastic onto the ground like trash. There's something about his expression that irks me. I find myself hoping the chocolate bar missed quality control. I hope it's loaded with lead or whatever other fancy toxins Earth can cook up.

The demon is exactly as expected: old. He looks even older than the vice guild master of Primordial Knights. His horns are among the longest I've ever seen, growing from his forehead and twisting to the sides before curving back. He walks slowly, slightly slouched, while resting against a staff taller than him. His staff is made of white wood, which splits into branches at the top, similar to the tree over his house.

Tess tries to say something, but he smacks her on the head with the staff at a speed that neither of us is able to react to. For a moment, I deeply enjoy the expression she makes. Her gleeful amusement from winning the bet vanishes, replaced by surprise at the action.

"I'm not interested in what you have to say," he says, spitting out a piece of the chocolate wrapper in a disgusted manner while looking at her. "I have nothing to say to the sort of trash that uses Primordial Lightning."

Tess's expression twists again, and I'm unable to take my eyes off it. She doesn't even look my way, surely knowing the glee I'm feeling.

Then, the staff hits the top of my head as well. "What are you snickering for, boy?" the old demon snorts. "A thief with a heart not his own."

He muses for a second. When I try to speak, he smacks me again, then hits Tess again for no damn reason. While I have my mana crown active, Tess has her [Lightning Crown] out, so he just continues to bash at the sides of our heads.

"No talking from you two," he says, then pointing toward the group. "Send in those twins of yours to tell me what you want. The rest of you, stop being a bother and wait somewhere out of my sight."

Without even waiting for us to react, he hits Tess's head with his staff one more time, turns around, and retreats back into his house.

Group 4 has a quick, hurried meeting as we gather around the twins.

"Are you sure you don't have some sort of hidden primordial energy? Maybe a fragment?" I ask them, "Maybe that is why he called you two in."

"Maybe he thinks they're the dumbest and therefore easiest to get answers from?" Maya muses.

"It could be connected to their [Connection] and [Sensory Deception] skills. Maybe it has something to do with his domain?" Min-Jae guesses.

"Maybe we just don't act like dicks like most of you," Dennis counters.

"Yeah! Apparently, we have faces that inspire trust," Aaron adds. "Handsome, too, they said."

"I didn't feel any ill intent from him," Izzy says.

“He’s a Champion or something close to it, isn’t he?” Sophie asks.

“Probably,” I agree before turning to the twins. “Ask him if he heard about my bet with Tess and decided to wait an hour just to screw me over.”

“He could probably take all of us out without having to resort to these sorts of tricks,” Tess says, ignoring the confused expressions Dennis and Aaron make at my request. “But the risk is still there.”

“Let’s send Biscuit with them,” Maya says, and all the conversation stops before all the heads look down at the corgi in his adult form. Biscuit senses the gazes on him, so he stops sniffing the weird stone on the ground, looks up, and tilts his head.

“Maya, are you some sort of genius?” I ask, looking around at the others. “This should be enough.”

All agree, and soon after, the twins leave with Biscuit floating by their side and knock on the door, which opens on its own. Then all three of them are let in, and the door closes behind them. Only then does the group relax somewhat, but most of us keep an eye on the house and just enough mana flowing through our bodies to burst into action if we need to.

I’ve always found it fascinating how we can be talking and joking one second, yet be combat-ready and prepared to fight for our lives the next. Most of the people from Hell difficulty are like that. Joking, laughing, eating, but if something happens, just a split second is enough for them to burst into a fight. It provides a stark contrast, even compared to people from Hard difficulty.

Turning away from the house, I watch Tess as she rummages through one of the bags. I stay still, just observing her. I continue to stare at her even as she stands up, smiling happily as she holds a t-shirt in her hand. When she turns and notices me looking her way, she flinches in surprise, but then her smile widens even more.

Of course, I know why she is doing that. Plenty of us feel tense because the end of the floor is coming, and the experiences we’ve had with previous endings. So she likes to throw in jokes every now and then to make the others ease up a bit. I think they’re especially effective when it comes to me, and that’s why she does it so often.

As she throws it, I catch the short-sleeved shirt and look it over. It's black, covered in dozens of light brown geckos. One on the left side is printed to look like it's peeking out from the chest pocket, while the others are scattered around in various funny and cute poses.

I let go of the shirt and absorb its momentum, causing it to halt mid-air while I go and pull my current shirt over the top of my head.

Tess lifts her eyebrow at that. "Still a lot of scars," she says.

"Yes," I agree with her and look down. A diagonal one across my chest, some on my side, a crossed one on my shoulder, and some on my forearms as well. Then there is the unnaturally pale left arm starting at my shoulder, and many more. Even my body, while muscular, is slimmer now after the body upgrade. As if it had grown denser.

I move my hand and touch the scar on my chest. "Lily tried, but she couldn't remove them either, so I guess they are part of me now."

"Maybe it is a mental thing. There are theories that the way you see yourself can affect the way you look. Similar to how my perception of a [Sacrifice] can give me a bigger boost," Lily says from the side.

"That gives more of an advantage to fucked-up people, right? Just don't perceive things in a logical way, think in the way most advantageous to you," I say and put on the gecko shirt.

"Well, guess who ended up in the Hell tutorial?" Tess says as she sits down and once again turns to look at the cottage. Her javelins continue to float near her with bits of Primordial Lightning flickering on their blades.

The twins and Biscuit return two hours later, with Biscuit carrying what looks like a big bone, which he chews on happily.

Dennis scratches the top of his head, and as his hair shifts, I catch sight of bruises on his scalp. Meanwhile, Aaron has none and seems quietly pleased about it.

"We haven't learned that much, but there are a few things you'll like! Oh, and before we forget, send back a few more chocolates. We told him about light chains that work on solar panels, so include one of those too. And a telescope. He said we have ten minutes to send it in before he comes out and deals with us," Aaron says.

"I see," I nod. "And did he say whether he waited an hour just so I'd lose the bet..."

I don't get to finish as Min-Jae asks, "Whose theory was right about the floor?" while Maya and Sophie move to gather the required items, listening to the twins speak.

"No idea," Dennis shakes his head and turns to whisper, "That guy's a dick. Told us we had an hour to leave, but gave us a map marked with interesting places and regions where some of the older Absolutes' and Champions' bodies are, so we might be able to gather some stuff."

"He wasn't that bad," Aaron disagrees. "He told us a bit about the planet, too. He also knows it as The Pit, and apparently, it's not even that big, possibly smaller than our moon."

"What about the gravity?" Min-Jae interrupts. "It should be much weaker than this, but it's stronger than Earth's. Though it's hard to estimate with the stats we've got."

"Nat? What does your hummingbird constitution say?" that asshole Dennis asks.

Knowing why, though, I shrug. "It feels stronger than it did on Earth when I visited."

Min-Jae turns to me. "I wondered. Your Strength and Dexterity are decent, though, so how much does Constitution even influence the sense of gravity for you?"

"Not much, but sometimes I like to check things like that. I think it changes based on the settings of the floors. Otherwise, I don't think we'd have been able to move very much on the second floor. Eladore was one of the most powerful planets in the system, so I bet even a level 0 baby there was probably physically much stronger than a common adult Earthling."

"I never thought of that!" Min-Jae says excitedly. "How is it in Beyond, then?"

"Gravity there feels stronger than any of the floors we've visited so far, and the lower the floor, the stronger it gets. There's also a pull on your mana towards the deeper floors, so it forces better control and..."

"Okay, how about we return to the important things?" Sophie says.

"We are talking about important things," Min-Jae says, voicing what I'm thinking.

Aaron then picks up the conversation and shares what they've learned. "He didn't tell us what this planet's here for, so as to 'not ruin the fun of finding out.' He said we'll get to see her in a week when something called the Cycle ends, and the Harvest begins."

His brother nods. "He warned us to be careful, or we'd all die, though he said we should be safe because that 'creepy eyed asshole' should be able to protect us if we don't stick our noses where we shouldn't."

"It's a bit rude for him to talk about Nat that way, but he has a point," Izzy says.

I am amazed by the certainty with which she knows it was meant to be me. Meanwhile, I'm fighting between annoyance and the fact that the demon also likely meant it as a compliment. In a strange sort of way.

The others begin to talk and pull more information from the twins while I turn to look toward the cottage. If that guy was just a bit weaker, I'm sure I could do something petty, but it doesn't seem to be an option.

Wrapped in what we've learned, there is also a warning, and the danger level's been emphasized, especially regarding the harvest that's due to start on our last day here. Harvest... I think of that word. With the connection to what we have seen, it starts to form an idea, though there are still options and some new questions.

I won't even pretend I already know what it's all about, I'll just have to wait it out. That's what I like to do. Let others run around like headless chickens, slowly put things together, gather mana, and then, as

Minion would say, kaboom. So that's what I'll continue to do, after all, it's worked out so far. Gathering more mana while partially listening to the conversation.

It is obvious that the start of the Harvest and the end of the floor coinciding isn't a coincidence either, and then there's that part about how we should be safe if we don't stick our noses where we shouldn't. But what if I don't mind some danger? What if I want to get my grubby hands where they shouldn't go? But to do that, I'll still need to make sure the others are safe. After all, I can steal things and abuse the system for thousands of years to come, but there's only one group of assholes that's somehow managed to become my friends.

Slowly, I switch on some combat minds and combine others. The flow of my mana changes as well, and certain constructs ramp up their activity. My emotions cool off a bit, and I suppress them slightly, just enough to avoid being overtaken by my curiosity and tendency to throw myself into danger.

I can go on for over a week without sleeping, so that's exactly what I'll do, and just to feel better about myself, I open my status to glance at it before closing it.

Name: Nathaniel Gwyn

Title: Absolute Candidate

Difficulty: Hell

Rank: S, Radiant Gold

Guild: Primordial Knights

Floor: 9 - The Pit

Time left until forced return: 1y 261d 17h 3m 46s

Traits (2/3): Preeminence Eyes 1/4, Mana Physique 2/4

Lvl 388

Strength: 371

Dexterity: 349

Constitution: 115

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1870 + 1870

Primary Class: Mana Weaver (Unique Arcane)

Sub-class: [Adept of Pride]

Active skills (9/10):

Focus - Lvl 77

Perception - Lvl 73

Redistribution - Lvl 76

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 78

Ley Line - Lvl 74

Eclipse (Pride) - Lvl 67

Empyrean Lance - Lvl 39

Manifestation - Lvl 39

Current - Lvl 39

Constructs:

Physical Fortification Matrix

Mana Flow Control

Mana Sovereignty Field

Kinetic Mana Heart

Sealed Ignition Heart (Partially Sealed, 1/3)

Combat Cognition Frame

High-Density Thought Network

Thermal Flux Controller

Passive skills (5/5):

Mana Kinetic Conversion Reservoir (Unique Epic)

Mana Wavelength Tyrant (Mid Arcane)

Subdermal Combustion Weave (Mid Arcane)

Mana Wave Predation (Unique Arcane)

Cognitive Hyperprocessing Vector (Low Pristine)

Tokens:

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

Passive skill combination token (low arcane)

Beyond visitor token - 1 year (unlocked after tutorial)

Beyond 7 day stay token

Beyond 14 day stay token (x 24)

Shards: 6,139,706

Chapter 777 - A silent acknowledgment

We leave the area just a few minutes before reaching the end of his time limit, and once we reach the borders of his domain, we are rejoined by the T-rex that's been lazing around and biting into a giant snake he's killed.

The area is trashed and burned in a weird way. Out of curiosity, I touch one of the trees that seems normal from the outside, and my hand goes right through the outer layer and through to the inside, where all is ash.

Quietly and suddenly, that tree collapses under its own weight, and the ash doesn't even try to drift into the air, collapsing directly into a heap on the ground.

I catch the gaze of the T-rex and, as before, return it while my brain processes the amount of information my Preeminence eyes are gathering.

That amount of information is gradually increasing, and everything in this never-ending jungle seems to awaken as more ambient mana fills the air. But for now, it won't be a problem for me, not after Beyond and not after managing to handle the amount of information from danger zones on this floor around the bodies of Champions.

I look away from him and flick my hand, and mana crackles across it. It is beginning to form an [Empyrean Lance] which I've been learning to control better. Instead, I halt it halfway through. Before the skill can fully turn my mana into a lance, I grab the transformed mana and force it under my control.

Though it was difficult at the start, once I discovered the trick, it became much easier. In the end, it's far simpler than handling black mana.

So that's what I've been doing. I don't know if I should call it Empyrean mana, much less if such a thing exists, or if it is just a partially-formed lance, the result of a skill that I've bent to my will.

For now, I can force it into cubes or streams of mana to make these attacks that much stronger. And even now, it is just a start. There is so much more that can be done.

That mana flickers across my hand. Pieces of the lance slide over my skin and are trapped inside a cube I form around them, where they continue to bounce within.

A step teleports me through the [Ley Line] I've stretched through the area, and a burst of movement carries me further towards a group of wolves the size of planes. There are five of them, the largest of which is a gray-furred individual with an additional eye in the middle of his skull.

Before they can move, I absorb their movement, and another step teleports me onto the head of the gray wolf. The cube in my hand elongates into the shape of a bullet and pierces through the wolf's skull, where I release my hold over it and allow it to explode.

[You have defeated Skalvyr Wolf - lvl 381]

I release my hold on the other four wolves, and two of them reach me in a burst of powerful wind.

Like the pitch of a jet engine, a stream of thermal energy shoots from me and quickly narrows, cutting off the head of one of these wolves, and as I sweep it at another one horizontally. The wolf jumps over that stream, but it takes pieces out of its legs, and as his limbless body twists on the ground with his maw wide open and biting. An [Empyrean Lance] stabs through his head.

[You have defeated Skalvyr Wolf - lvl 365]

[You have defeated Skalvyr Wolf - lvl 351]

One of the wolves is running away, while the last remaining member of its pack is shooting projectiles made of lightning shaped mana at me. They crack and cut through the air, and the air seems to be seething as they travel through it.

Yet, all of these attacks get disrupted, then dissolve, rendered harmless before they reach me. They dissolve into mana particles, swirling around me as currents of my mana spin around them, grabbing them and forcing them under my control.

Another lightning attack comes, but this one comes from our group. A javelin, nearly impossible to track with the naked eye, surrounded by red and white lightning. It flies in a perfect trajectory from two miles away, not touching a single branch, not disturbing a single leaf until it pierces through the wolf's head, killing him in a single attack.

I move through Wraith Dance that flares up multiple times in succession. The fleeing wolf forms a barrier at his back. Multi layered, dark blue with streaks of light blue that form the shape of a wolf's head that opens up as if to roar.

[Empyrean Lance] tears through it as if nothing's there and pierces through the body of the wolf, who staggers to his feet before more of my projectiles smash through the hole in the barrier and finish it off.

[You have defeated Skalvyr Wolf - lvl 346]

I boost myself up into the air and in between the branches forming the crowns of the trees, and turn the movement into flight as I rise above the tree line.

Even just a few hours here can fill a human with a claustrophobic feeling, never mind a full day. The never-ending forest just barely allowing sunlight to pass through the leaves of the looming trees to reach the ground.

When I try to fly a bit higher, I get that feeling as if something far too vast is becoming aware of me. It's hard to describe. The higher I fly, the more I feel that my eyes can't comprehend or can't process it all at their current level of enhancement. At some point, the forest below me begins to shake, and monsters in a wider area screech, roar, and start running away.

Then I lower myself, and that feeling gradually, almost unwillingly, fades. The entire time I continue to hover down towards the trees, more and more it feels like a trap, as if I'm descending into a wide-open maw of a beast.

Teleporting myself again, I appear at the side of our group and match my movement speed to theirs as we run and jump through the forest. There are multiple monsters following behind us as well. Not to attack, rather they're currently under Sophie's control. Each one is well into the 300s as she's been focusing more on quality and singling out the stronger ones.

Every once in a while, a javelin bursts out from behind Tess, only for it to quickly return covered in blood. It's interesting to see her still making herself effective even though the dense forest removes one of her biggest advantages in her sight.

I match my speed with Maya, who's carrying Biscuit in her arms. His flying speed, though impressively high for a burrito-shaped blimp, isn't quite enough for him to follow us, and I guess no one wants to see him moving around on those purple humanoid mana arms.

"You should send your friend home," I tell the corgi.

With his ears flopping up and down as Maya runs, Biscuit gives it a thought before nodding and drifting out of her hands to float to my side.

"We'll rejoin you later," I tell Maya, and she continues to run behind the others, leaving me and Biscuit behind.

The T-rex stops as well, splitting from the group of monsters Sophie took over. He takes steps that feel slow but are incredibly long, lowering himself slightly to keep his eyes on the same plane as the floating corgi. There is a conversation between them with possibly an entire novel's worth of words being exchanged. Biscuit stays at the size he is now and floats closer, booping his nose against the enormous dinosaur's, who closes his eyes in response as he does so.

Before leaving, the T-rex moves to the side to stop in front of me. Lowering himself, he tilts his head and turns one of his eyes, bigger than my entire torso, towards me. In it, I see my reflection. I can feel the presence of this enormous body and the quiet hum of mana stored in the crown floating over his head.

The dinosaur feels very old. Maybe ancient even. His body bears many scars, his mind sharpened by years of combat, and I wonder how many Cycles he's lived through. How many Harvests has he witnessed?

Unexpectedly, he lowers his head in what almost seems like a bow and tilts his head, which causes his floating crown to move and slide off, moving through the air before stopping to float over me and my own crown.

No words are spoken, but his gesture and the look in his eyes make his meaning perfectly clear.

I accept the gift, and my crown starts spinning faster. The mana inside of it bounces off the walls and continues to speed up as the currents gather more and more speed.

[Eclipse - lvl 67 > Eclipse - lvl 68]

[Current - lvl 39 > Current - lvl 40]

The area around us drains of color, turning the darkest black and brightest white, with the dark blue color of the two mana crowns glowing brilliantly. The look of my eternally-active trait pierces through the huge [Mana Crown], and within my [Eclipse], I take over. Like the moon covering the sun, my control over mana overshadows the crown, even though it's much bigger.

Within my presence, it starts breaking apart as its intense mana rises through the area and piercing through. The currents of my crown spinning at incredible speed create a sort of whirlpool of mana currents, which take it all in, absorbing the mana being released.

I don't even need black mana. It's difficult, and yet so easy at the same time. In a way, it's beginning to feel simpler than breathing.

I take that mana, cycle it, and force it to join my own, and gradually it does so until the big [Mana Crown] is no more and all of that mana is mine. Still bouncing and spinning in my crown, but taken over.

Looking away from it, the colors return to the area, and the color of my crown becomes an even darker shade of blue.

I look up at the T-rex and raise my hand toward him, bits of my mana seeping out as I hold my palm open. There, above it, a tiny orb begins to form, fragile and trembling at first. I focus, pressing it together, squeezing the raw mana tighter and tighter, feeling the weight of it folding in on itself.

The bright white light inside the orb dims as pressure builds until, at last, it becomes pitch black. A perfect, compressed sphere of black mana hovering over my open hand.

The T-rex opens its enormous maw in what seems like a soundless laugh before lowering his head again. This time it feels like a true bow, a silent acknowledgment of respect, during which he closes his eyes.

After standing up again, he glances at Biscuit one more time and then unhurriedly leaves, every movement still feeling regal and full of dignity. Over his head, a new [Mana Crown] begins to form.

(Friend,) Biscuit sends.

"I agree," I answer and open up my arms for Biscuit to shrink into his puppy form and fly into them. I put my arms around him and examine the amount of mana in the crown, which has tripled. "I agree," I repeat and start running to rejoin the others.

Chapter 778 - Danger zones

As we fight our way through the forest, I continue to work on handling the increased amount of mana in my poor man's [Mana Crown]. I use [Manifestation] to further strengthen it and make any needed modifications.

The longer I have to deal with it, the more I appreciate what the skill called [Mana Crown] actually did. It isn't as simple as creating storage and letting all the mana in. The crown must have been modifying itself according to the volume of mana while keeping it from spilling or constantly radiating like a lighthouse.

Of course, there was a problem with the original skill, just as there's a problem with my homemade version. The more mana there is in the crown, the more difficult it is to take out.

I think that applies to all crowns, no matter what kind of energy they store. At some point, the internal pressure becomes so great that you can't simply take a thread of stored energy and use it. Every time you reach in, a valve opens, and if the pressure is too high for your capabilities, you have no chance of stopping it. It would likely melt your brain or rupture your body, and all sorts of fun things.

I also remember that bodyguard guy from the Mindblender City. I think he used to have an [Impact Crown]? He couldn't even use it at all, he just kept storing more and more energy inside, serving as a weapon of last resort. His mindblender master used him as a deterrent with a dead man's switch. If his master died or commanded it, all the energy his bodyguard had stored over the years would've been released all at once, ruining the day for everyone in a huge area.

I think it is safe to say my crown now holds much more energy than his ever did. After all, I've been feeding it a constant stream of mana for over three months now, with the addition of energy from my Ignition Heart, thermal energy being converted into mana with two out of three seals lifted. Basically, a Champion's thermal heart working at 30% or so, as the last seal does most of the work restraining the heart's output. By my estimations, the first seal is 10% and the second one additional 20%.

That amount has now tripled thanks to my new best friend... no, not just a friend, my brother, Rex Gwyn. May he terrorize this floor for as long as possible, and may I meet that glorious beast outside of the tutorial.

I know it, and everyone knows it, but somewhere in this universe, there must be people who've been storing their chosen energy in a crown for millennia. I am even willing to bet all my mana stats on that.

There's just no chance someone didn't get the very same idea I've had so many times. I imagine some old guy with a Level 90 [Fire Crown], holding so much stored fire that he can't use it anymore. And when he dies one day, he'll take whatever planet he is on with him, such a crown would have to contain more than enough fire to do that and, for a brief moment, would turn it to a small sun.

"We are still just small fries, aren't we?" I whisper to Biscuit, whom I continue to carry.

(Food?)

"Not the edible kind of fries. I meant that we're still weak."

(Food.)

"Well, sorry for giving you a craving for fries now that I've reminded you of them. Where would I get them from anyway?"

(Friend. Help. Would.)

"True. But a true friend isn't the one who feeds you fries, but the one who carries your lazy, snuggly ass around. Show me antlers," I say.

In reaction to that, Biscuit, in his puppy form, grows out his tiny antlers of his and looks up at me. (Not biting? Let friends bite?)

"They can easily handle this much. You and I are here for bigger fish. And before you ask, not an actual fish. We know how these floors work, so things are about to get dangerous. You try to stay with the others at all times. I'll be moving around as needed."

(Maybe meet deer,) Biscuit says and stares at me with a question.

I sigh. "If we see any, you can go after it, and then I'll stay with the group."

Almost shaking in excitement, he presses against my face, poking me with his antlers and nose while licking my skin.

According to the map, we're approaching one of the danger zones. As we draw closer, a distant sound presses through the forest, carried easily between the larger clearings. A strong wind moves through these pathways, carrying that sound, a constant pitch that shifts just enough that it's impossible to get used to it or let it fade into the background.

Everyone's getting more irritated, even as it all begins to feel like some sort of alien music. It feels like constant pressure on our minds, so Sophie takes the lead by sending the monsters she's been manipulating ahead of us.

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During that, I notice that Tess has become better at locating phantom, camouflaged, and straight-up invisible monsters. Of course, with my hatred toward anything so unnatural and the months I've spent improving my own senses, she can't match me, but she's still getting really good. I'm certain she can even see mana signatures through the trees, and I mean dozens of them, and pretty far into the distance.

I've always found her optical senses interesting because they don't require her to send her mana ahead to scan and locate someone. She just sees.

Yes, I'm sure there are some scary assholes who can sense if you even so much as look at them, but since looking gathers less information, I think it's better for scouting without the risk of being detected.

Some time ago, I think she mentioned that she'd improved her sight with a passive and a supporting skill. Every once in a while, I find myself wondering how she sees the world, especially at night when I see her sitting quietly, her gaze fixed on the stars in the night sky.

I cut those thoughts short when one of Sophie's monsters halts. It's one of the leopards, and once it's stopped, it starts swaying from side to side, almost like it's vibing to some sort of rhythm we can't hear.

Sophie furrows her brows and tightens her control over it. The leopard takes a few more steps before stopping entirely.

"There are thousands of monsters like that," Tess says, putting her hand on Sophie's shoulder. "Within a certain distance from the centre of this danger zone, they just seem to stop. The more powerful ones are still standing there, likely for months, maybe years at a time. There are also thousands of corpses from the ones that died in that trance."

"It shouldn't break my control like this. I took over their minds entirely," Sophie says.

I can see she is trying and trying. Sophie is steadily raising the pressure she's exerting on the leopard she's been manipulating, pouring more of her will into it as if brute force alone might push it forward.

Almost in reaction to her effort, the leopard stops swaying and then lets out a loud, sudden, aggressive noise, so distorted and unnatural that I am sure its throat must have torn itself apart.

The leopard twists around, its body breaking in the middle with an audible crack, and its ribs pierce the sides. More muscles and bones tear as it charges toward Sophie. Each leap breaks more of its body, causing it to run on freshly revealed flesh and bone while its organs burst from its torn belly. Its maw opens so wide the jaw dislocates, and blood flows out over the fur.

It continues to screech as loud as it can while moving with a burst of speed that's surely killing it, but it's many times faster than anything it should've been capable of.

Rising up from the ground, rock spikes pierce through the middle of its body, but the leopard continues to push. Its eyes burst open with blood flowing like tears as it strains, tearing its body in half and leaving the back portion behind as it pulls itself forward with what remains of its front legs to crawl toward Sophie.

A massive hand made of rock forms, trapping the creature inside and squeezing it with a sickly crunch. For a moment, there's nothing but silence, and then we notice the back half of the body moving, twisting in the same way to reach us until another stone hand squishes it.

I don't think I have ever seen such a pure feeling of hate. Even though it was many times weaker than the stronger opponents I've faced, the feeling I got from it unnerves me more than many of them.

No one says anything for a while until Izzy's Fragment of Eternal Fire moves. A flame made of green, blue, and purple colors moves across the ground like a living snake and quietly burns what remains of the monster.

"Please, let's not go there," our empath says quietly.

Thinking it over, Tess glances at me with a lifted eyebrow in a silent question, and I nod.

"Let's leave," Tess says, and there's no one willing to disagree with her.

There are a few demon tribes we avoid along our way further north. Unfortunately, we don't find any deer, but the danger zone we find ourselves in this time seems less dangerous than the previous one. Though there's still the possibility that we can't even sense the thing that's threatening us and are thus being hurt in some way we can't fathom. This is where we find ourselves relying on Lily, who doesn't seem to notice anything and continues to monitor the situation.

As with many of the other danger zones, this one is marked by a clearing. There are fewer trees, and even monsters seem to actively avoid it until we reach a center that's just a mile wide and cleared of all growth. At the center of that space lies the body of a demon. It is a man who's had both of his horns sawn off in a way that looks like it must have been done after his death. A hole's been burrowed through the entire length of his chest, where we can see that his demon heart is missing.

So far, it looks like one of the oldest bodies we have found. The skin is even paler than the usual demon pale and shriveled as if shrunken. The body that used to be muscular is now thin and fragile looking.

Our healer is there first before anyone can stop her, putting her hand on the corpse's shoulder. I watch as Tess lowers the hand she's lifted to stop her and turns to our healer, who is already examining it.

Lily then says, "It's hard to say how old it is, it could be anywhere between a hundred and a thousand years. He didn't seem to have had any mana based traits, much less a mana-conductive body, opting instead for body strengthening. Probably a kinetic heart, too. The bones are still very durable. Like, very, very durable. Even the rest is in a surprisingly good state. I don't think any normal monster would even be able to take a bite. I also think there's a trait that might be meant to redirect any kinetic attack back into the attacker, but I'm no specialist when it comes to kinetic energy. I think even rain or strong winds could trigger the trait. With how powerful the storms can be here, it is probably what cleared out the area."

Tilting her head, she lifts her hand and moves it down to tap the corpse's arm. She does it in a gentle way, like she's gently smacking an unruly child in the back of the head.

Following that, she is thrown away. Her entire hand evaporates into a pink mist, and the entire front of her body and face are stripped down to the skin and flesh, and I quickly absorb as much kinetic energy as I can before it can cause any more serious damage.

Lily doesn't even collapse after all of that, only slides backward as her body regenerates with a speed that is difficult to track with the naked eye.

When everything is back in place, she quickly turns around, and we look away while Tess brings her new clothes. When Lily is dressed, Tess doesn't even shout at her, though our healer likely expects it.

I watch as the tall blonde just looks at her with an expression that mixes strong fear of what could have happened with anger and disappointment. I think it is the last one that makes Lily feel the worst. She would've probably preferred the screaming.

Chapter 779 - Level 1

"Well, if that wasn't just a tiny bit stupid," I say to Lily. Both of us are standing beside the body, looking down at it while the others secure the area.

She doesn't even try to argue and just says with resignation, "Thanks for helping me."

"I'm sure you could've endured that much, but there was no need for me to just let it happen." Waving it off, I do a similar thing to what she did. Extremely gently, carefully, like a feather touching skin, I tap the body with the tip of my shoe.

As before, the body absorbs the kinetic impulse completely, pulling the kinetic energy inward. It is trapped there, captured within and channeled through muscle, bone. Quickly enough, it begins to rebound, the trait forcing the kinetic energy to ricochet again and again through the internal structure of the body. Every rebounding wave compresses the energy further, stripping away waste, tightening it, refining it.

Frequencies shift as the energy cycles, climbing from a weak physical impact into something sharper and resonating. All this happens in a fraction of a second, and the internal pressure reaches its threshold this amount of kinetic impact causes.

All of that energy is released at once. Magnified many times over, focused, accelerated, and thrown back in my direction in a defensive burst.

Waiting for it, I absorb all of it, channel it through my body, and release it into the sky with Needle Point.

"Imagine if someone like Jean punched it," Lily whispers after confirming that I'm still okay.

A sudden shudder washes over my body at the thought. He and Morwag are the two people capable of dealing the most powerful physical blunt damage in Beyond that I know of. Jean, because he's a single-stat enjoyer like me and Tacita, and Morwag, because he constantly overclocking his body with only his binding energy to hold it together. Oh, Victoria could probably overclock one of her duplicates and punch with similar strength, though it would tear said duplicate apart.

Musing over it, I say to Lily. "Imagine if we got one of the bigger bones from this guy and turned it into a gauntlet, then gave it to Jean to punch people. The impact would bounce and strengthen his punch many times over, causing some really nice explosions."

"I don't think it would work. The trait seems to require most of the body to bounce and echo kinetic energy. Just a single bone would either function at a lower level or not at all."

"I know," I agree with her, disappointed. "Kinetic absorption isn't very good against sharp items, so we can still, carefully, cut off a few pieces for you to examine."

"After what just happened, I would rather be careful about that. At Champion level, it might work differently with sharp items, and I wouldn't want Tess to get angry at me again."

"Are you scared of her or something? You're still pretty young, so go on and rebel, don't let her hold you down."

"Tess is scary when she gets angry. Right now, she's in what Maya calls her quietly vicious mood. If I push any further, I know Tess will make me pay for it later when we spar."

I tap on the body again and gather the kinetic energy once more, observing how the trait works in case I can find a way to mimic it. Though so far, it seems like it'd be impossible without making some big changes to my body that would clash with its function as a true Mana Temple.

"Can't you just kick her ass? What with all that Terminator of Lust stuff, and your bulldozer magic?" I ask.

Lily looks around to see if Tess isn't close and even then whispers as she leans in, "Sure, up close, I win most of the time. I've improved a lot, so close combat does work out to my advantage."

"But?"

"But when Tess gets annoyed, she doesn't play fair. She knows to a hair's breadth what my range is and stays out of it while tiring me out. If she gets especially annoyed, I won't even see her or her attacks. Some time ago, the twins and Min-Jae were asking her how long her range extends, and she had no idea. She said in a year or two, she might be able to shoot the moon. Nat, I don't think she was joking."

"A little bit of pettiness never hurt anyone, there's no need to be such a baby about it." I tap the body two more times and observe the process while firing off more kinetic energy into the sky.

"Can you stop doing that!" Lily shifts uncomfortably.

"It is fine," I wave it off. "So, what piece do you want?"

"Maybe don't take it entirely apart, you two," Sophie says as she approaches. Her sister isn't with her at the moment, and her green eyes look at the body with great interest as she cuts straight to the point. "What would you think about me using Blackie to control this body?"

"Can you do that? You said there tends to be resistance, the more powerful a body is. It should be even worse with one on this level." Even as she says so, I notice that Lily seems to be excited at the thought, and already seems to be thinking of what she'll do next. "Maybe we could bring it to the next floor."

"That's what I was thinking," Sophie confirms.

"Aren't you just straight up a necromancer at this point?"

"Honestly, Nat, I think I would prefer that over being a Mind Mage. Even in Beyond, I've had plenty of people trying to kill me. Do you even know what it is like to have them constantly trying to send you to hell and spitting at your feet?"

"Because you let them. Just break their jaw and punch out their teeth so they remember next time."

"Not everywhere can be as simple as it is in the Primordial Lunatics," the mind manipulator sighs. "I've been thinking about it, and I don't think I'll be able to take control of the body on my own. I'll need the twins to help out with [Connection]. Even then, it would take too long and be too dangerous with our current timing, so we'll also need to rope in Maya and do some Thought Acceleration. What do you think, Nat? Would you like to see how far we've progressed?"

"Now that's a silly question."

At that, she only smiles. "Then let us gather them."

Our small group of necromancy and mental magic enjoyers gathers in a circle around the body of the demon Champion. Sophie, Maya, the twins, and me, with Lily on standby in case something goes wrong. And for some reason, Biscuit's here as well, dozing off in my lap while Sophie explains.

"I thought we would've made more progress with Thought Acceleration by now, but it's proving more difficult than expected. Especially with how weak some people's minds are." Sophie pauses, as if wanting to let us absorb the insult. "So, for now, we'll stick to Level 1. I think 30 minutes should be within the safe limit. To explain it in a way 'that a 5-year-old child would understand,' since Nat enjoys that: 30 minutes outside equals, by estimation, around 50 hours within the mental space I accelerate and Maya compounds."

"If you can't explain it simply, it just means you don't understand it enough."

"Thank you for your wisdom, Nat."

"You're welcome, Sophie. But yeah, I agree, your mind and the others are quite weak."

"Oh, even mine now?"

"You've been getting too cocky lately with all your mindblender mumbo jumbo. Even in my guild, I've been hearing how a few of the demons have been wanting to go on a hunt to challenge the 'mind mage witch bitch' that's been scaring people on the 4th floor."

"My mind is much more powerful than it ever was. You have no idea what I'm capable of now."

"Yeah? Go on then, prove it to me. Test my defenses."

"Forcing an attacker's mind into manifesting itself within your mental space and then turning it into a fist fight while calling that strategy: 'Oh, You Dumbfuck Actually Walked In' isn't something that should ever be called a mental defense."

"Maybe we should start?" Aaron asks somewhat awkwardly. "You know, time limit. Champion's body. We're risking our minds, which could overheat and melt like Dennis's old laptop trying to open his homework folder."

"Oh, come on." Like the snake she is, Sophie turns to the twin. "I'm making my mind a central node, and I would rather it melt before any of yours."

"Sophie... that's the sweetest thing you've ever said to us," Dennis says with a serious expression. "But what if Maya fucks up? Compounds it too many times or something?"

"That's a good question," Maya herself says, causing heads to turn toward her. She shrugs. "Look, I'm here for the sole purpose of blatantly being used for my skill, which I only ever thought I would use for combat. I have no idea how any of that works. I might [Focus] too much, compound too much, and might even add [Boost] by mistake."

Observing the conversation, I let them talk it out while doing my own preparations. There are already plenty of barriers stacked up around us, and within them, a few more have been built up around the body. I don't think we want a sudden gust of wind to crash against the body and evaporate half of our group while performing some sort of cursed mind magic. That would be a very unfortunate end to group four.

Blackie's already waiting. The piece of the Champion's bond, now belonging to Sophie, reaches out from her shadow and moves curiously toward the body. Well, as curiously as it can. In the end, it's only a construct, just a set of rules and preset reactions, yet its behaviors make it feel alive. And who the hell knows, maybe in a way Blackie is alive, just waiting to fully awaken one day to take revenge on us for the name Izzy gave him.

Gradually, the bickering group calms down, and we finally get to it. It begins with Blackie sliding into the body of the Champion and seeping in entirely. Sophie does something afterward to try and take over, while the twins join in with [Connection]. They continue to do so for a good thirty minutes, mostly in an effort to gather enough information. Looking with my Preeminence eyes, I gather some of my own as well.

Lastly, when the first step is done, Sophie creates a mental space for us. We lower our mental defenses and let her take us in one after another. The twins strengthen the [Connection], then Maya joins in with her skill until the five of us find ourselves in the space they've created.

Said like that, it might sound too easy, but it is anything but. I don't think there are many people capable of doing something like this during their 5 years in the tutorial.

Once inside that mental space, I look around and realize it's not that bad. Most of all, it seems like we're in the penthouse of a skyscraper planted in the middle of the Italian countryside. There isn't a single

other building or human made structure around, just miles upon miles of beautiful nature providing us with an amazing view, further strengthened by all the walls around us being almost entirely made of glass.

"Okay then, why don't we start?" Sophie claps her hands together.

Then a new voice asks, "Start with what?"

At once, all of us turn toward the person who hadn't been there a moment ago.

A muscular demon stands there now, his back to us, one finger tracing the glass as he gazes at the countryside. In the reflection of the glass, I see his deep red eyes.

"Please don't move," he says shortly. He taps on the glass a few times without even bothering to turn around, and we stand there frozen, gathering our mana for a possible clash, one that I have no idea how to approach.

Then the demon turns around. Short white hair, red eyes, and thick brown horns. He's smiling gently, and unlike the body we found outside, this version bears no signs of damage.

He claps his hands together, similar to how Sophie did before, and the act of it vibrates the air and rattles the entire building.

"Well then, let's see who's been meddling with my poor, lifeless body."

Chapter 780 - A bit of a problem

"If we'd known someone was home, we wouldn't have touched the body," I am the first to speak, gesturing for the others to keep quiet.

"How polite of you," the demon says. He continues to smile, but the expression lags behind his words. His jaw stutters in a rapid, mechanical vibration, flashing a dozen different expressions in the span of a second. "[IMPRINT STATUS: ACCEP-P-PTABLE]... But unfortunately, as you said, n-no one is home. What you are speaking to is an imprint of my mind, placed here for mental defenses with the help of my disciple. The highest directive would be to destroy you all, but that changes a bit now that my host is

dead. Honestly? How stupid can you be to invade the body of a Champion even if they are dead, without proper..." he pauses for about ten seconds, "...precautions?"

These words, though mimicking the personality of someone long dead, bear no true emotion, interwoven with a flat voice glitching out.

"If we were caught up in being worried about everything, we would just sit at home and suck on our thumbs." I scratch the side of my face while watching the demon, who continues to smile in that creepy way, and I try not to show anything more than I need. I continue to think it over, comparing the power of my mind to what is a mere imprint. For now, I hold myself back and resist doing anything rash.

"What happened to me?" The demon gestures for us to sit, and when we do, he continues to stand. Still near the window. As his hand moves, the air around it ripples and pixelates.

"No idea, we found your body on the planet called the Pit," I answer

"That is very unfortunate. I wonder who killed me, that bitch Florian or... [ERROR 356: DATABASE CORRUPTION]. Don't you hate those flying mage types who constantly fire off pathetic mana attacks, hoping some of them actually hurt you while actually causing more damage to their city than you?"

"They are the worst," I nod.

The imprint nods eagerly in that creepy, twitchy movement. "They always thought themselves safe from me until they saw the speeds I could fly at, with their fields and domains helpless to disrupt it. Ah, the good times."

He taps his knee with a finger, but I'm still sure that even if he is just an imprint, he's continuing to examine what's happening in here. Not that I'm not doing something similar. My mind is currently being pushed to the utmost maximum.

Then the tapping stops, and the look in his eyes changes, and for the first time, he looks directly at Sophie. "[REDUNDANCY CHECK FAILED] It seems like the main protocols still remain even as the host is dead. I will now proceed to destroy..."

The demon's imprint stops moving entirely, and Sophie is back standing with her hand extended towards him. One of his arms twists and breaks, and a crack appears in the side of his head from which no blood flows. By then, I am already in front of the imprint, a sword manifesting in my hand and cutting into the imprint's neck, where it lodges itself and stops as the imprint moves and swings his hand against my head.

The mental space around us twists and changes, and we find ourselves outside, standing in the grass.

"You three run!" Sophie shouts at the twins and Maya. "Your mental defenses aren't good enough, and your attacks won't do much. Nat, we need to slow it down so I can unwind the mental space and..."

She doesn't get to finish. From the skyscraper in the distance, all the thousands of glass windows burst one after another, and in a blur, a figure shoots from there at us.

I don't think the imprint is anywhere near the level of the Champion. It's grown weak after hundreds of years, the owner of the body is dead, and it's still within the mental space Sophie and the others created. Yet it's still scary.

Armor manifests around my body as I crash against him with a powerful impact just before the imprint reaches Sophie.

The punch almost throws me away, but I grab his unbroken arm and pull him back towards me. My armor groans as the imprint's sheer presence tries to erase the idea of 'me' from this space. My grip on his arm begins to liquify, my fingers turning into smoke. I have to pour all of my concentration into keeping my hands solid and holding my [Manifestation] together.

The demon almost doesn't seem to notice me and just shoves me away, eyes locked on Sophie. It doesn't even react as my punch caves in his head, cracking it, and with my next attack, I break one of its legs.

Then I feel my movements halt. Everything stops moving. The grass, the leaves in the trees, and the fake wind of this mental space all seem frozen in time. Walking past the frozen me, the imprint with deep red glowing eyes moves towards Sophie.

But before it can take another, a new presence appears. With a shout, a young boy appears behind his back, holding a folded steel chair high over his head and slams it against the back of the demon's head, causing the imprint to stumble and fall to the ground.

With that, the boy disappears in a flash of a torn and bleached red blanket cape around his shoulders.

Finally piercing through, I take partial control over the mental space Sophie created, and as if flipping a switch, all the colors of this mental world disappear, leaving only shades of black and white. Within this new space, I free myself, appearing in front of the imprint and stepping on his head, caving it in further and then do it again. A sword manifests in my hand, which I use to cut off his head before my movements halt again.

The body of the imprint ignores the severed head that stays on the ground and stands up to begin to move towards Sophie again.

Both twins move nearby at a burst of high speed, about to attack, before a hole made by Sophie appears under their feet, causing them to drop down just as the imprint swings a hand, and everything in their direction explodes in a glitch like wave reminiscent of kinetic energy.

"Be careful!" Sophie shouts again, but her words stop as the demon comes to stand in front of her and his hand pierces through her chest.

Her face shows shock, and large tears of pain appear in her eyes.

Maya flickers from the air like the twins before, a blank expression on her face as she swings her glowing sword down, cutting off the demon's arm entirely and leaving him with the broken one. As the severed arm falls down, Sophie disappears as the twins' near-perfect illusion is gone.

The imprint's body turns in place and looks somewhere far into the distance, where it locates the real Sophie. Exploding into a charge, his body entirely shatters like shards of glass mid-movement.

For a moment, these shards hang glittering in the air before finally dissipating. Then there is only silence.

Finally able to move again, my senses begin to wash over the area to confirm my initial scan didn't trick me.

I take a few steps and stand next to an emotionless Maya, her sword ready to attack if needed. With a flicker of the air, one of the twins appears next to us as well, breathing heavily, not from the exertion, but from the tension of the situation we just went through.

"That wasn't so bad," I say. When I get a blank look from who I guess is Aaron, I add, "All things considered."

The space around us shifts again as we reappear in the same space as before, the top floor of the tall, undamaged skyscraper. Once there, Sophie tiredly slouches in the armchair with the rest of us standing nearby.

"I was careless," she says straight up, face pointed down at the floor. "I didn't check it as deeply and carefully as I should have because I didn't expect any notable reactive mental defense from a demon. From my experience dealing with them, they usually defend their minds actively, through willpower. We were lucky this imprint was almost out of mana and damaged to begin with."

No one says anything as we, one after another, sit in our own chairs around her. Even I can't find too much excitement in myself to tease her. I can probably excuse myself by saying this wasn't a mental space I created, and that's the only reason I wasn't able to manifest much of my strength, but that's it. Even if it is true, it still feels like an excuse.

"Over the next day, I'll be spending my time looking out for similar traps, more imprints, or the possibility of the one we met reactivating itself. Only when I'm as sure as I can be that there are no more surprises like that will we continue," Sophie thinks, then sighs. "...If that's even necessary."

"Good. Lessen your hold over the mental space a little so I can take over a little," I ask of her, and she meekly does so right away.

"Your usual mental space won't be compatible with what we're doing, so you'll have to make changes. If you mess with it too much, you could break this place apart and throw us out. If that happens, we could all take damage and..." She stops talking. "...Just be careful."

The following silence is awkward as both Sophie and I split and work on different things, while Maya and the twins are left to wait here, useless for now.

Once I'm done taking over different parts of the mental space, just a few hours later, I stand up and head over to the window. To test things out, I make a change. One of the mountains in the distance crumbles, and rocks fall down to gradually reveal the shape of a glorious sleeping corgi carved from the entire mountainside, stretching a mile or so tall.

Both twins stop by my side, wordlessly staring at the beauty as I tell them, "Sophie might keep beating herself over the head for what just happened, but don't let pity stop you. Keep reminding her of it."

"It would feel better if we'd been able to do more about it," Dennis says.

"So what. Be unfair. I didn't do much either, and I'll still tease her for what happened. Because it was mainly her fault, and it will remind her of the mistake. If I do something similar, do the same to me," I say simply.

"Sure. By the way, that boy with the steel chair..." Aaron begins.

"Secret weapon. Can't tell you more," I cut him off.

"He looked a bit like you..." Dennis stops talking and shakes his head. "Whatever. Want to spar a little before Sophie finishes up? Maya said she'll be joining us as well."

With nothing better to do, I agree, and we move to the rooftop floor, where we spend the next day sparring.

Within the mental space, the use of mana can be weird and sometimes just straight-up doesn't work, at least not for the three of them, so we go for hand-to-hand combat mostly.

While weird, it does make for an interesting experience. Our physical stats don't match the outside world, some sensations are also off, and so are our senses along with them.

Still, I might cheat a little and make my physical stats just that tiny bit higher when I start losing against the better trained Maya.

Once the day has passed, we surround Sophie again, and she tells us what she found.

"I'm as sure as I can be that the imprint is done. While I was at it, I confirmed that it must have been seriously damaged. I dated it at 441 years old, while the body has been dead for 435 years. I won't bother you too much with details, but it was set to be a simple scan and copy of the Champion by a mind mage who then created an imprint of the mind. That imprint was kept functional by a trickle of mana from the Champion that was cut off after his death, so it began degrading. It's a miracle it was still functioning somehow."

Even after all of this, Sophie keeps some of her arrogance when it comes to mental stuff, as she says. "I can't say it was a bad job, but it wasn't anything too impressive either. The mind mage did an amazing job at creating the imprint, but not so good a job of setting up the rest. But that aside, I have a bit of a problem which I've tried to fix," she says, as she finally stops delaying and gets to the point.

Sophie pauses and takes a deep breath. "When I unwound the imprint, I had to use Blackie, and to do so quickly, he was forced to integrate more deeply into the body of the Champion. I kept trying, but I couldn't get him out anymore, he's stuck inside. That alone wouldn't be terrible, but another problem is that the imprint left a mark on Blackie. While he is still my bond, I can sense it changed him in a way I can't stop or revert."

"Is he going to turn into the Champion? Will it take over?" Maya asks, giving voice to what the rest of us are thinking.

Sophie shakes her head. "Nothing like that. It's... it's like he gained more consciousness... individuality. He almost feels like a child now. It's really hard to describe. You'll see it for yourselves once we make it back outside, which we can do right away if you don't have any more plans here."

We look at each other, and no one seems to be against the idea, so we slowly get to it. We take apart the mental space, throwing us back outside, where probably only around 10 minutes or so have passed.

Right away, my eyes turn to the body of the Champion, and so do everyone else's.

Sophie's bond, now trapped inside it, awakens. The body moves after 400 years of lying here dormant. The shrivelled arms move and gently press against the ground for the body to slowly stand up, swaying but straightening up, even with that huge hole burrowed through the entirety of its chest.

With Sophie wearing a difficult to read expression on her face, Blackie takes a step closer to her. Though a few people around panic at that, aware of the possibility of what its powerful traits can do, Sophie doesn't move at all. She stands there, looking toward the reanimated dead body.

Blackie reaches toward her, and for a moment his face almost twists into a childlike smile, grotesque on that shrivelled face, before his hand stops just short of her and he pulls it back.

His arm lowers, stopping halfway, then fully drops to his side. He tilts his head, the movement stiff and uneven, with eyes constantly gazing across Sophie's face and then past her.

Blackie shifts his weight, almost losing balance, then corrects it with a clumsy step. He looks down at his own hands, flexing them once, watching the motion closely, as if confirming that they belong to him.

When he looks back up at Sophie, there is something expectant there, but Sophie just stands silent, not knowing what to do.