

Tutorial 781

Chapter 781 - The Tower

I watch as Blackie stands there, looking at his hands and often letting his eyes drift toward Sophie, as she stands next to me. In front of him, Biscuit and Noodle are both fighting for his attention, but they don't make any attempt to move closer, and neither does Blackie. Izzy is also nearby, looking him over with curiosity.

"I don't know what the fuck to do," Sophie continues to complain to me. "Blackie was and still is just a construct made by a Champion. A set of rules with preset reactions. No, he was never even a full construct, just a fragment of one, further broken when that Champion died. He only mimics normal behaviours and decides based on a set of rules. Even mixed in with that imprint, it's still the same. I think Blackie, as a construct, absorbed parts of the imprint we faced to use to fix himself, strengthen, or even evolve. Something."

"So you have no idea?" I ask.

"I have many ideas, but I'm just not sure. These are Champion level creations we're talking about, there are a lot of things I still don't know. I just know my bond with Blackie has weakened and been enhanced at the same time. Like hell that makes sense. At least he still listens to me like before." Once again, she shakes her head. "This is a pain in the ass. A malfunction eroded his rule sets, leaving him vulnerable to stimuli that might alter him at a deeper level. I won't bother you with a more detailed explanation."

"You know how dangerous it could be if he charges at Izzy. Even a hard fall nearby could trigger the trait and kill others in the area."

She turns to me, annoyed. "You don't have to remind me! I saw what that trait could do. In the worst case, I can leave him on this floor as we go to the next, and trust me, if I need to, I will do that. Otherwise, I'll be stuck having to deal with the fact that even a strong gust of wind could cause an explosion of kinetic energy. If someone jumps to attack me and he takes a punch, the defensive blast of kinetic energy could kill me as well. Rain probably would too, or if he trips or bounces against a tree. Not even mentioning that demons will likely eat me alive if I try to take him into Beyond, yet I can't leave him behind with Izzy."

Rubbing her temples, she groans, looking at Blackie, who looks from Biscuit back at her. He looks at her for a moment before it is Sophie who first breaks eye contact.

“When you get to Beyond, go meet Silverweave at Crimson Forge, tell her I sent you,” I tell her. Don’t let them trick you into overpaying. With the right offer, they’ll work for free. Have them build armor for Blackie that’ll absorb kinetic impacts. There’s a material we’ve been experimenting with that could work. It is heavy and expensive, but you should ignore that for now. Tell them to fully clad Blackie with it. Also have them include a release mechanism so the armor can drop away when he needs to move freely.”

Sophie looks at me, thinking of what I said before nodding. “I’ll need to have a talk with Frontier and change my schedule a bit to do that, but if they decide to be dicks about it, I’ll just leave.”

“I would be careful about that. They’ve invested a lot in you with the goal of beating the 5th floor.”

“I’m well aware of that.” She waves her hand, and a stone under her grows in size, smoothes out, and forms into a seat she sits in like a tired old man. “I’ll probably check in with the Doc as well, maybe there’s an implant that can help control the trait. Then I could talk with Lily about fixing up that body a little, though I don’t know how far she can go when it comes to modifying or healing something at the level of a Champion.”

“That sounds like a good plan,” I say, and leave her to deal with it.

For a while, I observe Blackie and wonder if they’ll be wanting to give him a new name. I also think of how much interesting stuff there might be to find on this floor. Maybe I made a mistake ignoring it this much. Still, I know I’d just repeat my choices, even knowing what I do now.

Then a thought flashes through my mind, something I curse myself for not thinking of sooner, before I quickly open the Beyond Community interface.

Noname -Savi, you gluttonous, cowardly asshole.

Savant -what do you want.

He reacts immediately. I must have caught him during his daily community checks, a habit everyone seems to have.

Noname - Tell me, how many things have you gobbled up on the 9th floor at this point?

Savant -Why would I answer that?

Tacita - | · ω ·)

Savant -Another reason for me to say nothing.

Tacita - ($\overline{\lambda} \overline{\nabla} \overline{}$) $\overline{} \overline{} \overline{}$

Noname - You have a gun?

Tacita - $\backslash (\overline{} \overline{\nabla} \overline{}) /$

Noname -You do not have a gun.

Tacita - ($\overline{} \overline{} \overline{}$)

After that, she doesn't answer anymore, leaving me and Savant behind.

Noname -Where would she even get a gun on the 9th floor? And how useful would that even be for someone like her?

Savant - Honestly, I don't even care. By the way, how have you been dealing with that... what are you guys calling it... maybe the "colossal jumping asshole?" That sounds like the type of name your group would come up with. So, how did you deal with that monster?

Noname - Oh, you mean Skippy? We're avoiding him.

Savant - ... Of course... Skippy... Whatever, I have to go. And stop selling information on me to Brich.

Noname - You already sold some on me.

And of course, he doesn't answer anymore, like a true drama queen. Turning off the community interface, I observe Blackie, who starts walking a bit. His steps are slow and awkward, but he improves quickly, literally in just a few steps, his balance shifts, he moves more smoothly, and his strides grow longer. Then he falls as he steps into a small hole and loses his balance. He regains composure, but instead of fully falling, he braces himself against his outstretched hand.

Even that is enough to trigger the trait. The absorbed kinetic energy ricochets through his body until it explodes, throwing him into the air. He hits the ground again, causing an even larger explosion of kinetic energy that sends him tumbling and sliding.

Each roll triggers one blast after another, but with each one, his movements become more nimble and his landings softer. The explosions slowly grow smaller until he finally lands without one, standing up in what looks almost like a proud posture.

Around him, there are half a dozen craters and cracked ground. Group 4 is staring him down like he's a walking bomb that could be set off at any moment.

I wish Sophie the very best, and head over to where I can sense Tess approaching, likely heading over so I can replace her on guard duty, and so she can get back up to speed. We meet on top of the branches of one of the giant trees, and I watch as she stops in front of me. One of her arms is hanging along her body, torn, wounded, and bitten into. There are similar wounds all over her.

Noticing where I'm looking, she smiles. "Some of the monsters here are quite fast, attack in groups, and have good senses."

Her words make me wonder how many times someone from the group might have almost died. How many times have they bled or fought with their lives on the line?

Of course, the high level extrovert seems to know what I'm thinking, and she says softly, "How many times do you think any of us almost died, be it here or in Beyond? Or even somewhere just out of sight of the others?"

"Probably more than I'd been thinking just a few moments ago."

"Probably," she agrees. "I can heal myself by using Lily's healing marks, but I prefer my wounds to stay for as long as possible, or let my natural regeneration handle it. The pain and restrictions serve as a reminder to not over-rely on our cute little healer and to not get careless."

"I always knew I was the only normal person in Group 4."

She laughs and uses her right hand to poke her damaged left arm. "This wasn't my fault, I can tell you that. The monsters that attacked me were twenty strong, and half of them split off to move toward our group. To keep them from passing, I had to move into closer quarters and engage in melee combat rather than killing them before they could so much as see me. They were fast, organised, and each one was over level 350, and a few of them were closer to 400. I did my best within my current capabilities, and next time I will do better."

Her expression is firm and confident as she says it, so I just nod. "Putting more stats into mana would go a long way. By the way, how are things in the Silent Veil? I don't think I asked you."

"They keep asking me to lure Tacita into the guild. They keep asking about Lily. They want me to abuse my relationship with you, as the Primordial Knight's rumored, now confirmed, guild master. They even want me to push Sophie into spying on Frontier, and so on. They offer a lot in exchange for information. And to top it all off, I don't think Lyraen likes me very much."

"With the 40 wives that guy has, it must be tough, so I don't think he is ever in a good mood."

Tess chuckles. "40 now?"

"Could be 50."

"I guess it could, but I think he just doesn't like me because my range is longer than his, and the moment he uses his white lightning, I can see him. I learned to spot it thanks to my cute little disciple. I think my eyes are pretty sharp." She flicks her blonde hair over her shoulder in a mockery of arrogant behavior. "But he and I are pragmatic people, so we've been cooperating pretty well so far, and who knows, I might abuse my relationship with you guys to improve my position in the guild even further. Anyway, thanks for volunteering for guard duty."

With a wave, she jumps off the branch and turns into a streak of red and white lightning that zigzags unpredictably through the air as she moves toward the group.

Sensing more signatures closing in, I head in that direction to deal with them. On the way, one of the skills I've been constantly working to train levels up. It doesn't even happen during combat, as it usually does. Seeing that level, I think that lowering my Constitution may have been worth it. The skill has settled comfortably within me, making my body even more attuned to it.

I wonder how many people in the tutorial have reached that level.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 78 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 79]

POV Earth

It is a bright afternoon when the Swiss Alps begin to tremble.

At first, it feels like distant thunder, a low, deep vibrations rolling through stone and ice. Then the clouds part. Sunlight pours down, and within that brilliance, a figure glides through the air, arms spread wide as if to embrace the sky itself.

Behind him, something mimics the gesture. A towering crimson red presence with a humanoid torso. The figure's four massive arms open wide, mirroring his pose on a much larger scale, and violent mana flashes through the area, filling it with a deep hum.

Deep below, the mountain peaks begin to shake and crumble. Rock and snow alike form a gigantic landslide, while the deep, foreboding rumble is audible throughout the entire country.

Slowly, from within that destruction, a tower begins to grow. Smooth, elegant, pearl white, and golden.

Beautiful.

The tower is as thick as the mountains it replaces, its surface flawless, unbroken, without a single window. It climbs past the ruined peaks, past the clouds. And continues on further. Growing to tower over the place where everything almost ended for the man hovering in the sky.

The growth stops only once the tower is taller than any mountain existing on Earth. And there it stands, its surface shining under the light of the sun, casting a shadow that stretches far into the distance.

At last, the surface near the top cracks, and from its back, something reminiscent of wings extends, made from the same white golden stone as the tower. Two bigger ones on each side and two slightly leaner ones below. Four wings, each spreading a mile wide.

It has taken hours and many more weeks of preparation, but now that it's done, the red figure behind the man disappears. Unhurriedly, the man descends.

He ignores the door at the top of the tower and lands directly on the top of the tower itself, where a throne awaits, perfectly centered.

The moment he sits down, his senses connect to the structure. The tower awakens, powered by the man's mana heart. His senses flood outward from him, spreading first through the entirety of the country, then into neighboring ones, and then further, crossing oceans without resistance.

With just a few more modifications, all of Earth will be open to his senses. And with the correct materials and further enhancements, that reach will extend even beyond Earth itself.

Chapter 782 - Goruk

I watch as Blackie runs through the forest. His movements, even as they continue to improve, are still somewhat clumsy, and there's barely anything reminiscent of the martial arts in his movements. Most of the time, monsters just attack him only to be torn apart in the resulting explosion, or he simply runs into them. Be it a monster of similar size or one many times taller than him, those under level 300 or close to 400, all end very similarly, turned to shreds or grievously wounded, at which point he usually moves closer and begins to punch them, awkwardly.

I think it is because of how stats work, but his speed isn't all that high, nor is his strength. It is as if his body was mostly built on Constitution and not so much of the other stats.

Sophie says that it should fix itself with time, as he'll probably get part of the experience from the kills, and it will likely be funneled into his stats, provided he has a leveling system like us. There is also a question of how much of that Sophie will get.

That kind of combat he puts on display also tends to attract more monsters, and that's what we want for now, as we cycle through a new danger zone and use Blackie to attract the attention of the monsters we need to kill before proceeding deeper. It's also fun to see just how unkillable he is, and it makes me respect the Champion a bit more. It also makes me wonder whether he had any control over the trait, or if he chose it knowing he couldn't and would have to live with it forever. Since it was a demon, it's highly likely it was the latter.

Once the main group of monsters is dealt with, Sophie calls him back, and the others head in to clear out the rest, while Tess and I stay behind to keep an eye out and make sure we're ready to move in if a more powerful one approaches. There are still plenty of stronger ones remaining, and the closer we are to the end of the floor, the more of them appear, as if forced to get out of their holes and fight.

Even Biscuit floats alongside us, creating purple mana projectiles that he fires off at all the monsters. Explosive orbs fly, and when it comes to the bigger ones, massive purple tentacles pierce the ground to hold them in place for further attacks.

When he gets annoyed at more durable ones, he grows in size to match them and fights them up close. If he gets especially annoyed, he shrinks to the size of a puppy and disappears into a pool of dark shadows from which a primal growl sounds, as that shadow encompasses his enemy, a crunching ensues, and soon, silence.

There hasn't been a monster that didn't try to run away after seeing that. Without a speck of doubt, he is the best corgi of the 9th floor. The best corgi to ever put its paws on the 9th floor of any tutorial.

The twins so far have a perfect score, too, and no monster's been able to locate them. Instead, the beasts just keep attacking their illusions. Currently, they seem to be having fun by grafting all their stats onto one of them, who then moves and attacks with impressive stats that are likely the highest of anyone from group 4, though there are limitations to it. Their enthusiasm is clear as they fight over who

gets to be the one with all the stats, measuring in seconds how long it is before the other one asks for a switch.

Apparently, they haven't fought anyone from group 4 while doing that, and it makes me wonder if they are only doing this in hopes of managing to curbstomp Lily or possibly Min-Jae, who I've heard has been winning in duels against them, even 2v1.

Both Dennis and Aaron are at the same level, 337, and for me, it is hard to say if it's high or low. Knowing what lunatics group 4 members can be and remembering what they have done to the others from Hell difficulty, I would say it is high. It's just that, unlike mass-destruction enjoyers like me, they can't level up on such a mass scale. I'm already starting to lose count of how many times I've gained a dozen or so levels by blowing up an entire tunnel. It's always tunnels.

So the twins don't have their body upgrade yet, but after I shared my positive experiences, they might be waiting to gather some achievements. Min-Jae is close to his body upgrade, just a few levels off, thanks to his easier method of killing more monsters. Maya is at a similar level to the twins, and Izzy just passed level 300 not long ago.

Sophie, Tess, and Lily all got over 350 in the past month or two. For now, I remain at the highest level and would likely be over 400 if I hadn't waited so long for my body upgrade, and if I didn't want to take down the Champion before the trait at 400.

There's no need to be competitive and watch our levels and constantly compare ourselves.

It is fine.

So, once again, the twins, with level 337 times three, that's over 1000 in stats just from that. Count in the extra stats your class gives you, some stats from training, and from the group 4 variation of Burden Enhancement Inscriptions or Restrictive Training Emblems I modified for them, and each of the twins has around what, 1600 points in their stats? One or two hundred less or more. Unfortunately, neither of them went for an Attribute upgrade that would double their chosen attribute.

I have 2700 or so, and an additional almost 1900 from Vast Mana.

That said, if they continue to improve sharing stats and their handle over it, one twin could enter combat with stats close to someone at level 400 who abused the fuck out of getting free stats. Not to mention the shared mental processing they have.

I almost feel a smile force its way onto my face. No matter how many months pass, I always find myself fascinated by the many ways the system can be used. On the one hand, it appeals to my curiosity, on the other, it's a reminder that I can do better and attempt to abuse it more. After all, everyone does it.

Seeing that we have begun to move, I join the others as they head deeper into the Danger Zone.

This one is once again different from previous ones. Where before the area started clearing, this one is getting denser and denser with vegetation. At one point, Blackie stays behind, given that he can't move between the trees without bumping into them.

Using our senses, we search for a way between trunks and branches, often squeezing in between them. The space becomes more claustrophobic, quieter, and darker. Mana radiation begins to fill the air, even as far out as we are, it begins to reach the level of skills like [Dawn] when someone like Savant uses it.

It's time for me to take over. My own [Eclipse] flares up just enough to surround our group, draining the color from the area while I deal with the radiation within its bounds.

The trees become weirder, their trunks sprouting eyes that track our movements but do nothing else. Many others grow limbs of many kinds, taken from the monsters we've met.

It is as if the forest itself devoured them and made them into part of itself, or perhaps it all mutated together. Those arms and legs move, reaching towards us as we squeeze between the trunks. There are some trees entirely devoid of leaves, replaced instead by patches of fur. In other places where a bit of grass still shows, teeth are growing from the ground next to it.

My use of [Eclipse] continues to ramp up, now powered by nearly the entirety of the mana I generate each second. I start thinking about when I'll need to either reach into my reserves or lift the seal on the Ignition Heart further.

It becomes more difficult to breathe for some reason, even though none of us really needs all that much air. The silence puts everyone on edge, and only the strengthening mana radiation shows us that we're heading in the correct way.

Mile after mile, we pass hundreds upon hundreds of twisted, nightmarish trees and a myriad of watching eyes. At this point, I lift the seal slightly and generate more mana to avoid reaching into my crown, continuing to open it further and further, just that tiny bit more.

Like that, we push ourselves through the branches and trees and eventually reach our goal.

At first, it looks like we've finally reached a bit of open terrain. The mana radiation there is no stronger, but it feels tired. Old. Like it's been recycled way too many times.

Then something exhales.

The monster is asleep, or something close to it. Its body is fused with the forest floor, half submerged in layers of bone fragments and pieces of fur. What should be the torso of a monster reminiscent of a monkey, but stretched beyond proportion. Its ribs are on the outside, growing into branch-like structures. Over its body, a multitude of extra arms and eyes grow, all degenerated and twisted. The lower half of its body is way too thin, just bones covered in bits of skin and fur to be dragged along with the rest.

Below it lies the corpse of a Champion. A blue tiger, perhaps, long ago, it was a glorious beast. Half of it is gone, slowly eaten down over decades, maybe hundreds of years. Layers have been peeled off carefully, muscles separated from bone over years of effort.

The sleeping thing is eating it slowly even now. The arms, even the mutated and twisted ones, move constantly, applying effort to pull off the fur to reveal more of the skin. Bones poking through the skin of its fingertips continue to painfully and slowly cut into the flesh.

This thing was clearly never meant to consume something that powerful.

[Goruk - lvl ???]

One of the eyes growing on its cheek is open even now, it sees us and doesn't like it. Gradually, more and more eyes open. The arms stop picking at the corpse of the tiger.

Goruk wordlessly moves its long arms to pull itself free from the ground, then begins to drag itself toward us, its back legs trailing behind.

In quick succession, Tess's javelins shoot forth like railguns, Min-Jae's projectiles accurately bombard the head, and my [Empyrean Lance] pierces through it. Izzy ignores the rules of the jungle, which have never seemed to like flames, and her Fragment blazes forth in a stream that encompasses the entirety of the mutated monkey.

The monster pulls itself out of the bombardment, dragging its body forward in a hurried, frantic scramble. New holes and damage cover it, but new flesh sizzles up and regrows over the damaged parts, restoring it to its mutated form as the mana radiation intensifies.

Maya and Lily both move ahead. Sophie forces the surrounding trees to push outward, splitting them open to create more space. More colors drain from the area just as Lily's [Disintegration] begins to flash as she pushes the attack on Goruk. Maya crashes against it in her armor, and the twins move to attack from behind. Biscuit joins the fray, too, creating the eerie feeling that Goruk might be facing something even worse than itself.

Even now, Goruk doesn't make a sound, even as its body is constantly damaged, restored, pierced by projectiles, torn apart by purple tentacles, or burned. It heals through [Disintegration], though that becomes slower and slower as Lily modifies her skill to face this specific opponent.

Over time, the mana radiation forces me to put more effort into stopping it, and I even begin to pull from the Crown.

Step after step, the monster gets pushed back, swaying its arms and dragging itself through the fur and bone shards on the ground. Its blood is thick, sizzling, and disgusting, forcing Sophie to use wind to blow out the fumes and Lily to heal the others damaged by the spray.

Pushed into a corner, Goruk begins to throw fragments of bone which shoot ahead like projectiles, piercing through the barriers we set, through the bodies of even the most powerful group members, and sliding past my kinetic hold.

Lily regenerates herself, but Maya sways with so many holes punched through her, and I hear Sophie scream as she grabs a wounded Izzy.

Our healer passes by me as I move ahead. A dozen lightning projectiles blast past me, piercing through the monster. With a loud thump, gravity increases, breaking the ground and the trees nearby, but Goruk pulls itself through even as my attacks begin to bombard it: lances, flames, mana explosions, and projectiles.

The monster drags itself onto the tiger's corpse. Its lower half is gone, severed by our attacks, the spine left exposed. It rolls behind the body of the tiger, and wet, disturbing noises follow.

All of the mana radiation pulls back and disappears at once.

Then, the body of the blue tiger moves. It sways, twitches its legs, rolls to put weight onto itself, and stands up.

A big part of its belly is missing, half of its face has been eaten away, along with both eyes and parts of its back. There, on its back, Goruk is sitting, damaged and further mutated, with its spine piercing into the gouged-out portion of the tiger's back, connected directly to the body of the Champion.

Defending its prey, Goruk screeches loudly for the first time, the sound spreading through the forest.

The mouth of the tiger mimics the movement.

I let out a burst of kinetic energy, sending anyone who doesn't move in time flying back, just as the forest erupts in a shockwave, followed by a wave of mana radiation, the edge of which washes over me.

Blood starts dripping down my nose, and as I wipe it off with the back of my hand, I allow more of my mana to flood my body.

Chapter 783 - Fuck that creepy monkey, fuck the tiger, fuck Skippy

Biscuit grows in size to match the Tiger, crashing against it as they push for dominance. His primordial energy expands into the area, devouring the mana radiation that had begun to swell again, causing parts of my [Eclipse] to flicker.

From the back of the tiger's corpse, Goruk moves its long arms in an attempt to attack the corgi, but before any hits land, Tess's lances pierce them through, and the limbs are forced to regenerate before they can attempt another attack.

The Tiger's head snaps at Biscuit, but two arms made from purple mana manifest from the corgi, catching the jaws and forcing them open. Instead of biting, the tiger's head shifts, with a roar, another explosion shoots toward group 4, only for the target to be revealed as illusions the twins have created. The forest behind is obliterated instead.

Monsters across the larger area start screeching, and it feels as if the entire forest is shaking. The weird pull I felt when trying to fly begins to manifest even down here. Blackie begins to move as well, as I sense the bursts of kinetic energy where he's bulldozing through the trees to rush toward us.

My lance stabs into Goruk's skull. And more mana surges through the [Ley Line] connected to it, causing the lance to swell and explode just as I send off a message to Biscuit telling him to jump back.

The body of the tiger remains undamaged, but the Goruk at the top is half-obliterated, only for more flesh to sizzle and start regrowing in the next instant. Another [Empyrean Lance] shoots toward the tiger's head as a test, but it barely scratches the skin.

I compress a thin stream of flame and move my hand in a slashing motion. It sweeps across Goruk to cut it from the body of the champion. Most of the Goruk is severed, but I fail at the final mark, and it manages to stay connected.

Izzy, healed by Lily, attacks again with flames of her own, and Noodle expands in size, slithering behind it with a dark expression in its six green eyes. Colorful flames burst from its open maw, almost liquid in form, like long range flamethrowers spewing burning fluid that ignites the air itself. The instant they fall upon Goruk, they burn even hotter. Blue, purple, and green fire sizzles against flesh and sends the temperature soaring, nearly stripping Goruk to nothing.

Everyone else sees it then: pieces of whiter bone that make up the Goruk's body, centered around the spine, chest cavity, and parts of the skull. These are bones it has devoured from the blue tiger.

Tess's attack stabs through the eye cavity of Goruk's skin and bounces inside the brain, sizzling and burning the organ. Even then, Goruk continues to sway and screech as more flesh regenerates. Its movements are slower now, and the eyes show even less intelligence than before as they reform.

The monster sways, its arms digging into the tiger to feed on more of its flesh, while the tiger opens its mouth to roar again. The shockwave is now omnidirectional. Everyone is forced into a defensive stance as the forest around us explodes.

Trees further and further out are uprooted, blasted away, and the ground is torn open as a new wave of mana radiation spreads. Without even using [Eclipse], I gaze at it, filling my eyes with mana. The radiation reaching us begins to break apart. Those dense wavelengths unwind, dissolving into particles that fill the air like falling ash.

New lances break apart into glowing mana with a white and golden core, mixing with the power I release like a torrential wave against the monstrosity.

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 39 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 40]

It crashes against the tiger without causing any damage, but climbs up toward the Goruk, stripping the monster of its flesh even as it regenerates in constant explosions of mana. I detonate it in an attempt to sever the connection at Goruk's spine. Lily lands there immediately after, her body moving with such strength and speed that I can be pretty sure she sacrificed some of her fake organs. In her hands, she holds an axe grown from her own body, gray mana dancing across the blade as she swings it down. One of the arms moves to strike her, but another lightning javelin hits it, causing it to miss, and Lily cuts deep.

(Skippy is coming!) Tess shouts through our connection, and I send my senses further, feeling the presence closing in.

Cursing, I send a message back, (I'll slow him down. Finish this quickly and take anything useful you can find!)

I split from the group and push myself over the trees, flying toward the approaching presence. On my way, I sense constant bursts of kinetic energy and trees exploding as Blackie, piloting the body of a Champion, forces his way toward the group.

The pressure that seems to hate anything with the audacity to fly intensifies, forcing me to put up more effort to stay in the air. I gather more mana and boost myself toward the ground, coming up at the impact that blasts the earth away, and immediately fire an [Empyrean Lance].

That lance just sizzles through, barely causing any damage. Of course, there isn't any damage.

[Apex Slime - lvl ????]

Skippy is massive, but he's not tall. He has a wide, heavy presence that spreads instead of rising. His body is perfectly smooth, faintly transparent, with colors slowly shifting inside like light moving through deep water. There are no bubbles, there's no debris, and no body parts inside. Everything taken in gets corroded and entirely absorbed.

As it comes to a stop, the mass looks calm, almost lazy. Skippy stands there, not wobbly at all after the last ripples from my lance piercing him stop. Then the mass redistributes instantly, pulling itself forward in a smooth yet powerful surge. The slime compresses and then releases, bouncing up toward me.

I dodge to the side, and the mass passes by me, absorbing anything it touches before coming to a stop with a wobble. All the trees and rocks it took in have already been dissolved. A needle point the size of a tree trunk slams against it, making the entire surface ripple, but nothing else.

Skippy turns toward me, eyeless, yet unmistakably aware. Then, in the center of that body, a small green ball made of liquid forms.

The world around me slows down as I enter deep [Focus]. From the ball, a stream of that liquid shoots forth just as I burst into movement, jumping, running, and teleporting all over the place, moving only in directions where group 4 isn't.

The green, water jet like attack cuts through everything in its way with such ease that it feels ridiculous. Trees, ground, stones. The jet stretches for miles and miles, perfectly straight, neither weakening nor

slowing down as the slime sweeps it all across the battlefield. Anything cut by it begins to sizzle and corrode as the liquid melts it down, spreading further and further through the area.

More of my lances pierce the monster. Explosions tear through the area around it. Flames burn. Waves of mana clash against its body, a blast of raw mana powerful enough to wipe out dozens of A-ranks at once. None of it helps. None of it damages the monster or stops that jet of the green, corroding fluid.

Then another green ball forms, and another jet begins to follow me.

Then a third.

All moving at different angles from one another, sometimes crossing paths with impacts that send green droplets flying. They sweep through the area, destroying everything in their path while spreading their green toxin everywhere.

The world slows further as I overclock my mind, gathering and processing stimuli faster. Not once do I try to put up a barrier against it, not even [Ley Line].

My heart beats wildly as I duck, teleport, run, jump, fly, and roll through the debris, scuttling away on all fours just to avoid it. A single mistake and I will be cut through as if I weren't even there, and I'm sure of that.

Even so, I don't slow down. I continue to move faster, searching for a rhythm in those chaotic attacks. I calculate trajectories and watch the signatures of group 4 to avoid the attacks shooting their way. I listen to the conversations in our [Connection]. At the same time, I cycle my mana and thermal energy, dealing with the crown so it doesn't explode.

My mind splits and combines. New thoughts pop up for a second to deal with a problem before disappearing. And I gather more mana.

[You have defeated Goruk - lvl 432]

[Lvl 388 > Lvl 389]

(We're done here! We're about to be running,) Tess sends.

(I'll join you.)

Getting the confirmation, group 4 gathers and begins to move quickly, following behind Blackie as he makes his way through the forest. Skippy turns their way, perhaps preparing to sweep a slime jet at them, and I immediately release and detonate two mana orbs. They send a shockwave through the forest, spreading outward like ripples on the surface of a calm lake.

Even so, there isn't the slightest visible hint of damage as the slime turns back toward me. It shifts its mass, shrinks, and then explodes into a powerful jump. My attacks bombard it as it passes, golden flames blaze across its form as it rolls through debris, pulling everything in its path into its body.

Another [Empyrean Lance] pierces through, stopping in the middle of its body where it explodes, only to be suffocated like a small air bubble bursting in the deep sea.

Giving Skippy a final glance, I teleport away and fly into the sky. I head toward the group, moving in a trajectory that ensures any shots Skippy takes at me will miss them.

As it turns out, the precaution wasn't needed. Skippy tries to lazily follow for a minute before giving up and turning back, likely heading toward the next fight it senses. Weirdly, it never goes after the bodies of Champions or Absolutes in an attempt to absorb them.

The forest opens up, and I push myself between the trees. After a few more teleports to the marks I connected to my projectiles, I reach the others, who've recently come to a halt. Lily is moving from person to person, healing them in spite of any protests, as is the case with Tess. All things considered, they look better than I expected, though everyone's suffered their own share of wounds. Despite being healed, there are bloody patches on their clothes and skin. By reading their mana signatures, I estimate who spent the most and learn how much this skirmish truly cost us.

Blackie stands off to the side, holding what looks like Goruk's spine and skull, both partially formed from bones it devoured from the tiger. There are more bones scattered about, alongside pieces of flesh still clinging to blue fur.

"You've been wounded too," Lily says, stopping in front of me. For the first time, I notice the cuts on my side and back. They are wide and partially corroded. I must have subconsciously used thermal energy to burn the flesh off before the toxin could spread further.

I allow her healing mana to restore the wounds before sitting on the ground with the others. We sit in a heavy, tired silence.

"Where to next?" I ask after a while.

"Fuck that creepy monkey, fuck that tiger for not staying damn dead, and fuck Skippy," Dennis says, shrugging. "Further north? There are three more danger zones, and two of them should belong to Absolutes. Optimal for more 'fun' that's even worse than what we just went through."

(Food?) Biscuit asks.

"What did he say?" Dennis asks.

"The ferret lives farther north," I sigh, lying flat on my back. I look up at Biscuit in his adult form. From this angle, he looks massive and majestic. I see his chest, his chin, and then his eyes as he moves his head to look down at me. "Let's go north," I say. "Not much time remains on this floor."

"Does everyone agree?" Tess asks.

Slowly, everyone mutters their agreement without hesitation or fear, despite the fact that the danger will likely be even greater than what we've just been through.

Before the group settles into their short break, I ask a question, still staring up at Biscuit. "How possible do you think it is that there is a being nearly as big as a small planet? Or a being that hides inside the planet and, every once in a while, eats almost everything on the surface?"

In the silence that follows, no one answers, so I ask another question.

"And how far do you think I would need to fly into space for the System to acknowledge that I've seen enough of it to show me a name and a level?"

Chapter 784 - Never enough

I find it kind of creepy to see Blackie watching the twins and Maya, as they spar off to the side during one of our short breaks. The shriveled demon body with the hole through its chest and its sawed-off horns just stands there unmoving without taking its eyes off them.

None of us actually needs these breaks, or at least not to this extent. Sure, it gives us a chance to recover energy and take a breather, but it feels more psychological, even though it runs counter to the idea of conserving mana. However, none of the three is using much mana, just going through the physical motions instead.

The rest of my mind, not busy with thinking how creepy Blackie is, goes over my theory. I try to think of how likely it is that the small planet we've found ourselves on is either growing on top of a monster or that some enormous creature has settled in and spread through the core. In such a case, would throwing the bodies of Absolutes and Champions into the depths serve as disposal, or would it rather be a form of feeding? If so, for what reason?

Then I notice Biscuit passing by on his short legs. Like a snake attacking, both of my hands flash through the air. I wrap them around his sides and swiftly pull him toward me, causing him to let out a surprised squawk as he tries to dig his paws into the ground to hold himself in place.

Realizing what is happening, he calms and opens his mouth, sticking out his tongue as he breathes and looks at me.

"What's going on here?" I ask, even shaking him slightly. "And why are you so silent while you keep glancing off toward the north?"

Biscuit looks around as if worried someone might be listening before answering in a voice quieter than usual.

(Deer.)

I squeeze him more and shake him again. "More info."

His form shrinks, and tiny antlers pop up on top of his head. (Sustenance deer. Food deer. Smell. Sense. Nomnomnomnom.)

"The hell was that last one?"

(Nomnomnomnom. Deer.)

"You're hiding something from me," I say. As I hold him, I turn him clockwise until his head points at the ground and his hind paws point at the sky. His ears flop down, with his mouth open, and his tongue hangs down, pulled by gravity.

He finally gives up. (One and one deer,) He says, even quieter than before.

With a sigh, I let go of him and gently set him on the ground. "How many deer is one plus one?"

(Eleven deer!)

Moving my hand like an attacking cobra, I grab him again to lift him right in front of my face. There, he just hangs happily and wiggles his short tail. With a sigh, I put him on the ground again. "One plus one is two."

(Eleven!)

"Sure. How much is nine plus ten?"

The corgi blinks a few times, confused, before I answer seriously, "Twenty-one. Remember that. No matter what anyone else says, it's twenty-one."

He nods just as seriously and then moves to his spot, where he sits, staring in that one direction in which we begin to move.

During our travels, earthquakes have become fairly common, though they haven't been all that powerful so far. At first, it starts off as a rumbling, deep underground that barely affects anything on the surface, but gradually they've been growing more noticeable, though they're still only happening once every few hours.

The forest around us becomes less dense the further north we go, and more sun passes in between the leaves of the still-giant trees. That allows for more diverse plants to grow, such as flowers, and the landscape becomes more colorful. Though in exchange, more of them seem to be poisonous, as if they were building up defenses to avoid being eaten.

Monsters now move through the forest much more frequently than before, as if in anticipation of the Harvest, or like they're being driven by some primal instinct, telling them that they need to search for a place to hide. Or maybe they're just looking for one last snack. They more actively search for prey and attack, even the ones that would usually avoid groups of multiple beings like ours.

In one of those areas, we find Biscuit's eleven deer.

Just like that, they stand there, majestic, drinking water from a small river nearby, almost as if they're entirely unaware of us. The two deer are bigger than the biggest moose you would ever see on Earth, at least 50% bigger. Both of them are covered in white fur and have a set of antlers that stretch wide and have a gentle brown color.

[Dusk Deer - lvl ???]

[Dusk Deer - lvl ???]

Noticing us, they calmly lift their heads and look toward our group with soft, untroubled expressions. One of them raises its head and lets out a majestic sound that almost resembles music. Afterward, it leans in to rub its head against the other in a slow, affectionate gesture.

"Aww," Maya says.

"Burn those fuckers immediately," Izzy says, spitting the words out like poison.

That leaves everyone shocked, and before anyone can say anything else, both deer lift their heads toward the sky and bleat in sync. The sound at first seems normal, but it continues to stretch on for way too long. Their mouths start opening wider and wider. The corners of their mouths start to tear, splitting open as the skin gives away. The tears in the skin ooze blood that stains the beautiful white fur, the split continuing down the entirety of their necks. Those enormous mouths gape open to reveal uneven sets of jagged teeth.

Colors drain from the area. It's not like my [Eclipse], it's more like the space is becoming darker and darker, until the only color that remains is a dying mix of orange and yellow shining in their eyes and outlining their silhouettes.

The maniacal deer don't seem to care about the rules of this place. Within their domain, they begin to use another skill, and sickly red flames explode from them, burning the forest and blazing up toward the sky. Both of them call out again and split up, one running left and another right in elegant deerlike movements that now feel entirely predatory. Everywhere their hooves touch, the ground begins to burn, and their mouths keep snapping open and closed.

Izzy's flames surround us and block the fires they're sending our way, while Tess's projectiles stab through both deer. They begin to heal immediately, and they heal faster and faster as the temperature in the area rises.

I can sense multiple powerful signatures attracted by the fire, creatures that the deer don't seem to care about. An earthquake hits the area, and this time, it feels like no coincidence that it happened here and now.

Biscuit, unable to hold himself back, pushes through the wall of flames and rushes the deer on the left. His body expands in size to match the monster, but where before his proportions always stayed corgi-like, they're slightly different now. His body is more nimble and slimmer, his maw has grown longer, and his teeth sharper. Budding antlers crown his head, and eight large, human-like arms formed from mana extend from his back, not to aid in his movements, but to aid in his attack.

He unleashes a mental attack in the form of an immense amount of information directed at his target, causing the deer to stumble under the sudden overload. The corgi catches up and crashes against it.

Both of them roll as purple mana arms move against the deer, holding it, punching it, and tearing out its teeth. Sickly red flames continue to burn there, but Biscuit's shadow devours them easily, and his skin forms a purple barrier anywhere the deer tries to bite him.

The other deer tries to run over and help, but Lily gets in its way. She avoids a charge and grabs the horns, pulling the deer to the ground even as her hands burn to the bone from the heat, and the mouth bites at her. More projectiles from Tess pierce it through. Then Min-Jae uses his eyes and moves the gravitational waves. As he closes his fist, the side of the deer's head explodes, revealing the brain and the part of it that the attack destroyed.

It starts burning in red flames and regrowing, but Min-Jae repeats the motion and erases it entirely. The body falls to the ground, but there it twitches in creepy movements before climbing back up. In a burst of red flames, the deer regrows its brain and head, restoring some of the wounds, though not the ones caused by [Disintegration].

(The two of them are connected. I don't think either can die while the other is alive!) One of the twins says, sharing the information.

Not listening to it anymore, I move to a branch of the highest tree around. My [Empyrean Lance] shoots into the distance, through the trees, accurately hitting one of the signatures coming closer. No notification pings, but I hear an angry roar from the distance.

Using that as my signal, a barrage of mana javelins boosted by kinetic energy tears through the forest in front of me, bombarding the area.

[You have defeated Night Bugbear - lvl 392]

Blackie charges through the gap in the forest. He pushes through the mana-based bombardment to reach more monsters, causing explosions of kinetic energy behind him that are stronger than ever before.

The forest begins to shake more as group 4 prepares to kill the deer in sync with Biscuit. At the edge of my vision, I notice a flash of golden fur moving around, murdering every monster in its path.

[Great Hunting Dog - lvl ???]

[Great Hunting Dog - lvl ???]

[Great Hunting Dog - lvl ???]

...

Dozens of these monsters enter my view, and I teleport further to reach them. Each one is as tall as me, sickly, slim, and each has five eyes. Two on either side of their heads, and the one inside the mouth along the roof. Combining their mana into some sort of domain attack, they strike at me while I observe them for a while, avoiding the attacks by using my kinetic movement.

Some of them move through the ground as if it were made of water, others grow two more pairs of legs and speed up their movements.

Once I get bored, an explosion forms with me at the epicenter, throwing all of them away, and releasing enough mana to make their senses unreliable. Moving through the chaos, I easily locate each of them, and a matching number of mana javelins stab into each one, carrying more mana within, before exploding and causing even more damage.

A few are more resilient or heal faster, and a few more javelins follow to finish them off before I teleport back to the group. They've just finished off the deer, if the pyromaniac lunatics can even be called that.

Sophie moves from the ground, taking the swiftly growing number of monsters under her control and sending them to fight the even larger group that's incoming. I, meanwhile, help Izzy handle the flames. Min-Jae has an interesting expression as he stares down at the ground, tracking where the earthquakes are coming from.

Meanwhile, Biscuit grows further in size, curling around himself and one of the deer, which he devours right there, hidden from our eyes. As that cloud of shadows shaped as a myriad of tentacles disappears, he looks at me. (Smoke deer,) He says, as he gestures at the other one.

"But you carry it," I say.

He tippy-toes happily, growing more mana arms and grabbing the corpse and lifting it carefully onto his back.

An earthquake shakes the area again, stronger than before, and cracks begin to open, spreading miles long. A disgusting amount of mana and pressure radiates from these cracks as they spread wider and wider, causing entire colossal trees to fall. Even now, Min-Jae stares at the ground at his feet as we begin to move again, vacating the area. Blackie and Sophie rejoin us, and every once in a while, I notice a flash of golden fur close by.

"I think you were right," Min-Jae says as he matches his speed to mine. "There is something down there. Big. Like planet big."

As we continue to run, I begin to think. I have many ideas, but one of them just keeps coming back. The only question is, do I dare go through with it, and is it something that would be possible to survive?

My line of thought is very simple.

If there is something down there that keeps eating the bodies of Champions and Absolutes, it should also mean one thing. The best stuff is likely deep below. The body parts, whatever is down there, either couldn't be digested or haven't had time to do so because of how powerful they are.

And I wonder, on a scale of one to ten, how good an idea it is to go straight there.

POV Kindness and Greed

"I know that fucking expression. That lunatic wants to go straight into the belly of the fucking Mass," the redheaded woman cries, letting out a groan and leaning back, smashing her head against the headrest of her chair.

Next to her, a beautiful blonde woman just smiles gently at that and continues to look at what seems to be a hologram of people running through the shaking, breaking forest. More tears open all over the place, and constant waves of monsters attack.

"Why the hell are you smiling? You know who else is in there. I swear, sometimes I wish to just grab him by his scruff and throw him in front of Pride right now just to see what would happen. Just look," the redhead wildly gestures at the group of people. "When was the last time you saw a group like that? Hell difficulty doesn't exactly tend to favor ordinary people, but this group... It's been a long time since I've seen such a bunch of absolute lunatics. They move like locusts. The floor that's meant to be cleared by a single person with just the right strategy turns into an adventure into the belly of the Mass."

Kindness continues to smile as she says, "Locusts... yes. A fitting name for us, is it not?" Her eyes haze as she thinks. "We kill, we take, we search for more, and continue to evolve just so we can kill more and take more. The system itself awakens mana in us, not for wisdom or mercy, but to sharpen us for just that purpose. Locusts. Parasites on this universe that wants to reject us. How many have fallen beneath us, I wonder? Gods. Elves. The Fae, and countless others whose names are now dust. The system continues to spread from the Center of the universe, and we follow it, drifting from world to world in search of more. Because there will never be enough."

"Quite brave of you, talking about greed in front of me," Ruby grumbles.

Kindness bursts into laughter, as if only now realizing what she said. She moves and sits on the lap of the red-haired woman and presses her forehead against her. "Out of the many Rulers of Greed I've known in my uselessly long life, you are my second favorite. If only your Greed were aimed at killing me instead of him, you would've been my favorite."

To that, Ruby stays quiet, her lips parting as if to retort, only for the words to die before they ever leave her mouth.

After smiling at her for a moment longer, Kindness moves back to her chair, where she continues to watch the end of the 9th floor for group 4.

Chapter 785 - Descent into Ruin

When I explain my plan, my brilliant idea, to the rest of the group, I'm not surprised by their reaction. I'm scared. None of them seems to mind. Some even seem to think it's a good idea and start beating themselves up for not thinking of it sooner. Where my idea was just that, an idea, they start coming up with a plan all their own. They set protocols to follow and countermeasures in case something gets fucked up.

Sophie, the twins, and Tess even enter Thought Acceleration Level 1 with Maya's help. Tess and Sophie spend four days or so planning, while only half an hour passes for the rest of us outside.

Such dedication makes it seem even more real. I gradually give up on trying to protest and go along with their plans to head into the center of this planet. We still need to time it properly, as that'll be a vital part of the strategy. We are about to pull what I've taken to calling the Nathaniel Special. It is the strategy where you use system-given timing to your advantage.

If you need to steal something from a dangerous place, you just estimate the amount of time you need to grab it and sync that with the moment the system teleports you away. Then you can just rush in without worrying about how you would otherwise escape. If whoever is responsible for the system hadn't meant for us to abuse it that way, they wouldn't have put it in.

I also set up a long-range teleportation array connected to our cache of items in an underground cave. I am worried that we might not get a chance to return or that the cave might be destroyed during an earthquake or the progressing Harvest.

Most of us agree that the Harvest is just the actions of whatever's waiting inside the planet, or the planet itself, devouring everything it can on the surface. I begin to think that the bodies of powerful beings left there are likely being used to feed it, like someone's raising an animal. I just don't know what this planet's being raised for.

Currently, we have been sitting in a cave for a few days as guests of the literal spawn of the devil. The golden ferret keeps bouncing about as if it doesn't know what to do with so many people there. The cave is big enough to fit a small building and is suspiciously clean. There are no bloodied walls, no bones of prey, and no great mob of ferrets that would likely be enough to destroy the world.

It is just this single right hand of the devil ferret and assorted piles of interesting things. Often they tend to be pieces of shiny stones, wood, or plants. Plenty of them are of Arcane rarity, and I suspect there's a place with better-hidden ones of an even higher grade. I notice a few items that were clearly stolen from us, yet another evil deed in a vast sea of those already committed.

While I use the long-range teleportation array to move all of our supplies from the original hidey-hole, I watch the ferret carefully. It often moves close to Biscuit and stares at the body of the white deer. I bet the ferret would be best friends with that pyromaniac lunatic.

Once we finish talking through the most important points and final preparations, I, still in my gecko t-shirt, look at the piles of items we've marked for teleportation but should be able to leave behind if needed. Surprisingly, the ferret does something similar. It wears a clumsily made vest assembled from pieces of leather. I suspect it made the vest itself, copying the one Biscuit has, and it stuffs it with stones and bits of metal. It also runs around, hiding some of its other treasures when it thinks we aren't looking.

As we delve back outside, it follows us, and we follow Min-Jae, who uses his eyes to navigate toward the deepest crack we can find. Most of the forest around us is damaged, trees have been uprooted, and monsters are fighting everywhere, many of them having stronger signatures. There are rarely any demon tribes, making me think they've likely retreated to a somewhat safer place or went all out to have the best time of their life somewhere.

Then a thought comes to me. Did someone throw the demons into the Pit, or did they come here on their own, seeking out the most dangerous environment they could to allow them to grow in strength?

I shake that thought and place multiple long-lasting teleportation marks, some anchored to mana stones I place on the highest tree. Others in the group who can do something similar do the same, and then we jump into the widest tear we can find. We fall through the air before sliding against the wall and jumping down from stone platform to platform.

Vines as thick as my body stretch all through the place. Plenty of plants and even trees seem to exist down here, even as it begins to grow darker. Almost as if they don't need much light, if any at all.

Once again, the pressure and mana radiation begin to rise. It feels as if it's moving through the space in rivers, which I can faintly see with my Preeminence eyes. The further down we go, the more noticeable it becomes, rivers of mana radiation lighting up our surroundings. At first, it is visible only to me, but later, the others come to see it as well.

Beautiful pale blue, dark blue, purple, and green lights fill the area, revealing old structures and fauna even more gigantic than those on the surface. We pass through caves enormous enough to fit entire cities, and as more cracks open, we follow Min-Jae.

Hours pass, and another enormous structure appears, a building made of stone and metal, bigger than mountains, possibly older than a few of them. It's grand and enormous to the point that we can't even

see most of it through the darkness. The river of mana radiation lights only a third of it. As we pass, it disappears behind us, taking its secrets and mysteries with it, possibly never to be seen again.

The monsters here are twisted and dangerous, as though there was a reason they haven't been allowed out into the sunlight above. Some we run away from. Others we fight head-on in combat that sometimes runs into the tens of minutes as we move across terrain that continues to crumble around us.

One of these is a flying red eye with a spine growing from its back that hangs down beneath it. And from it, thousands of what look to be veins and nerves spread into the area. Every time any part of it touches anything, that object falls under its control and tries to attack me.

Split from the group, which is dealing with another threat, I finally push the eye against the wall with a constant barrage of kinetic energy. I hurry to rejoin them, sensing some of their signatures fading.

For a moment, my thermal cube lights the area, revealing dozens of pyramids in yet another cave as big as a city and as tall as a skyscraper. The golden thermal energy bounces wildly inside the thermal cube before it passes by, lighting a nearby pyramid and slamming into the eye. It passes through the hole my lance made and burrows deep inside, sizzling as it goes.

Like a flamethrower, the golden flames burst from the eye, pushing it further against the wall like a jet engine. The flames light the eyeball from the inside, the surface of the eye magnifying any light passing through, and the cave is lit to a greater extent, revealing the shadows of monsters at the edge who pull back as if they've never experienced light before.

[You have defeated Spinebound Overseer - lvl 421]

[Lvl 391 > Lvl 392]

[Redistribution - lvl 76 > Redistribution - lvl 77]

My teleportation fails as a new river of mana radiation breaks through the wall, disrupting the mana in the area and the marks I've placed. Switching to kinetic energy, I land on the ground and move in a burst of Wraith Dance.

One of the presences reaches for me, and for a moment, I let my mana rise to fully reveal itself. In that flash, I see the enormous shadow pull back into the shadows and let me pass.

Rejoining the group, I find Lily unconscious, being carried over Tess's shoulder, who is missing one of her eyes. Her blonde hair is tangled and streaked with blood, and with a single eye, she watches the battlefield coldly as her javelins fly toward the oncoming monsters. Her crown flickers, dying as its reserves run out.

I check everyone's signatures and rush to Izzy and Maya, who are barely on their feet, facing a monster, a golem of raw flesh with green bones, whose sheer strength makes me wonder how they've managed to stay alive.

The golem sways and falls down, and its terrifying mana signature finally dies off. Its body riddled with dozens of holes that seem to have killed it. Something with golden fur crawls out of its mouth before running away in a burst of movement. With a shout, Izzy gives chase, and I gesture at Maya, who nods and runs to join the others, while I quickly move to follow Izzy.

I find her and the ferret in a small cave where she barely fits. The ferret is lying on the ground, its body torn all over and broken, breathing raggedly and grasping for breath. It looks as if it finally found a quiet place to die.

Izzy moves closer, even as the ferret tries to pull away, yet she still reaches her hand toward it. With an expression I cannot discern, the ferret looks at her before moving. It twists its head and takes a small, bloodied stone out of its vest. With one of its paws missing, it takes a clumsy step toward our empath and, in a desperate trade, shakily pushes that stone into her hand. It looks at her, almost scared of what reaction will follow.

Then Izzy accepts the stone and the trade.

I almost shout when the ferret jumps at her in a burst that takes the last of its energy, but Izzy gestures for me to hold back. Instead of burrowing through, the ferret lands on her chest gently, and she carefully puts her arms around it. Shaking, the ferret snuggles her. What before seemed so creepy now looks like a desperate search for warmth and affection. At first, it looks unsure of what to do, but as Izzy hugs it, the creature gives in and presses against her, and rubs its small head against her cheek.

After a while, the ferret stops shaking, and a few moments later, it doesn't move anymore.

"Even Lily wouldn't have been able to help," Izzy sobs. "It saved me, and I could never read its emotions until now. I always knew Biscuit liked it, but I was always scared. Nat... it only ever wanted some warmth. It was so alone."

"We have to go, Izzy," I remind her gently as the place around us continues to shake.

She sniffs one more time. "I know."

Gently, she places the ferret down. It looks so small and fragile now with all the wounds and its missing paw. Izzy doesn't take any of the valuable stones or metals from the vest. She just keeps the one stone that was pressed into her hand and, for the last time, gently pets the golden fur.

We hurry back and rejoin the fight. Lily remains unconscious, and no one knows how badly she's been hurt. The twins barely drag themselves along with almost no mana remaining, and we're left with no other choice but to push deeper with only an hour left.

The floor beneath us collapses, and we plummet in a freefall that lasts for minutes. Even as we fall, I keep raising my mana to shield us from mana radiation, fending off the monsters attacking us.

Flashes of our mana and skills light up the rushing walls, emphasizing the speed of our descent.

Only when we are close to the bottom do I absorb our momentum, our group slumping against a ground that seems far too smooth.

There, lights turn on one after another, revealing an enormous chamber lined with pillars that stretch so high their tops disappear in the darkness. When the last light flashes on, it reveals what would seem to be a throne.

A figure sits there. A velnar man, tall and muscular like the rest of his kind, and even seated, he towers over all of us. His eyes are golden, and his long hair is pitch black.

He wears gray robes reminiscent of a Roman toga, his chest exposed, and stares at us with his chin resting on his fist.

[Lycan of Ruin - lvl ?????]

Chapter 786 - The Lycan

"It has been three thousand three hundred years since I last saw a human. It was my intent to stay here for a while without being interrupted. Yet, here you are, a group of humans finding their way into the depths of the Mass, during one of the Harvests, even."

"We didn't expect anyone to be here. We can leave as quickly as we came," I say as I step in to speak on our behalf.

I think that out of everyone here, I have the most experience dealing with powerful people, and this entire adventure has been my idea. So if anyone has to die because we pissed this guy off, it should be me.

"Leave..." the velnar mutters and slightly shifts on the throne, "but that would likely only lead to your death. There's no need to be scared of me. I have no desire to kill people as weak as you without a good reason. You can move to the corner and sit there quietly in fear, or have a conversation with me. I don't mind either way."

"We had hoped to find parts of some powerful monsters down here, the Mass, as you called it, may not have digested yet. And what even is the Mass?"

The velnar looks my way only while answering, "The Mass is, well, a rare species of monster that feeds on corpses, items, and fragments, growing stronger as it consumes them. If I am not mistaken, this one belongs to the Elf." He waves a hand, and the raw momentum in that casual motion would be enough to turn my brain to slush if I tried to channel it. "The Elf is either trying to raise it to replace the Ruler of Gluttony, as he so often does, or to use it as a planetary scale weapon. Tell me, are you Kindness's spies?"

I blink at the unexpected question. "We are not."

"Huh, you don't seem to be lying." He scratches his chin. "I was sleeping until a few months ago, when I was awakened by her presence on the surface, brief as it was, much like the life of the demon she took over. Still, I am the last one who would blame others for the whims of the Rulers. Your question regarding the Mass should be answered by now, and you might also be curious about the demons on the surface. They come from nearby solar systems and began moving here after discovering this planet, drawn in by their hunger for danger. They're cute little things, aren't they?"

"I agree," I nod. "Is there something you want to ask me? I don't want to annoy you by asking too much."

"I don't," he answers simply and stares at me.

The silence begins to stretch, awkward and uneasy, as he calmly rests his chin against his fist. Somewhere behind me, I sense Izzy moving to pick up Biscuit, who is beginning to realize his friend is dead. Though saddened and held in Izzy's arms, I can sense through our connection that he is ready to fight if anything happens. It's the same for everyone here, and it annoys me that I don't know if it's the right action now that we're standing in front of this velnar.

Does he prefer honesty and straightforward conversation? Would he prefer for us to stay quiet and try to leave? Would he even let us leave? He said he's been hiding here, after all. Would he get annoyed if we grovel and totally give up? Or would he get angry if we show even a little bit of willingness to fight?

These questions burn in my mind as the time slowly ticks down. Too slowly for my taste, and the velnar doesn't even for a second take his eyes off me.

"I have changed my mind," he says out of nowhere. "You bear the mark of your bond. And there's also the faint scent of one of the Rulers, but it's the last presence that makes my blood boil. Not even a Ruler, but an Absolute, your master. Tell me, human, who she is, and I shall reward you."

My hearts are about to thump wildly as I imagine how the conversation might be about to unfold, and what could happen if I mention the tutorial and trigger the natives' censorship, but I have no choice. None at all. I take my time answering, stretching the remaining time on this floor as long as possible before we get our portals out.

"It's a mark that was placed on me by Lissandra Hawthorne... it's very complicated."

For the first time, interest flashes in his eyes, and a bit of his presence seeps into the area.

Before I even realize what is happening, I am on the ground, my head bouncing off the hard rock before I can regain control of my body or my senses. I brace myself with one hand, then retch. Food, water, and blood spill onto the floor, and I cough again as I force myself back to my feet.

I keep just one eye open, trying to stave off the overload of information. Watching the wavelengths of mana, I see that this entire room, the throne, and god knows what else all serve to suppress his power and hide his presence.

Politely, though with little genuine concern for our lives, the velnar says, "I apologize for the slight lapse in my control. As for your answer, I cannot understand how that is possible. The Absolute has long been dead, and I personally witnessed the battlefield she left behind after her duel with Pride. I would also have heard rumors had she returned or left behind some kind of replica. From what I know, she would never permit such a thing, and Pride is certainly not known for leaving his work unfinished."

My eyes sweep back to the group. Most of them are still sprawled across the floor. Lily remains unconscious, while Sophie kneels over Izzy, who's still spasming and groaning in pain. Nearby, Biscuit stands his ground, primordial energy rising as he growls at the velnar.

I look away from them again and toward the man on the throne. "I met her during my tutorial, where she left her mark on me."

He furrows his brow. "Once again, you don't seem to be lying. I, of course, know about the second floor that Greed has set up. Now that you mention it, the Ruler's mark on you might be hers. It would make sense for her to show an interest in someone her master has marked. But there is something off. The tutori..."

His words cut off mid sentence, his expression going blank as every trace of movement leaves him. The silence that follows feels wrong, while beyond us, the world continues to shake and vibrate as Mass carries on with its Harvest.

One second passes, and the Lycan continues to talk as if he didn't even notice the pause. "You answered my question, so tell me, what would you want?"

"Let us go," I answer simply.

And he talks just as simply. "That's something I cannot let you do. Though you are no threat to me, and will likely die outside, there is a small chance some of you would make it through the Harvest. Then, you would be leaving with information about my presence here. I went through much effort to set myself here in the ruins of one of the elves' planets, which the Elf has converted into the Mass. All these restrictive arrays, and even the Mass itself, devouring some of my presence, it is not as simple to find a combination like that."

"So much for not killing people."

His mouth twists into a smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "I will not kill you if you don't give me a good reason. I just won't allow you to leave." As he talks, I begin to realize more strongly how differently someone at this level thinks in comparison to us. "With your levels, none of you will live long enough for it to trouble me. A few hundred years of your presence, I can endure. And if, at any point, you decide it's too much, just tell me, and I will end your lives painlessly."

Once again, silence settles between us, and I allow it to linger and stretch for a few minutes.

"I see," I answer before asking to change the subject, "And what is that?" I ask, gesturing at the pile of items near the throne and the body that's been lying just behind it this entire time. It is entirely covered in light blue scales, the shape of which slightly reminds me of a lizard.

The velnar does not even turn around as he answers me. "That is one of the Elf's experiments, left to grow in one of the facilities. He was likely hoping that the Mass's presence would hide it. And if I'm not mistaken, he was unsuccessfully trying to replicate a Wyvern. I killed it on the day I arrived. As for the items, some belong to me, while others are ones I found in the facilities during my early years here. You don't need to ask. Feel free to satisfy your curiosity and examine the corpse or the items."

"I would thank you, but..."

"There is no need for politeness," he cuts me off and stays quiet, his eyes moving away from us.

Organizing through the [Connection], which he must know about but doesn't seem to be listening to, Group 4 gets to their feet. At least those who can. Speaking through the [Connection], we exchange messages meant to trigger a System reaction and blank out the velnar if he were to overhear them. We talk about the tutorial and other things to test it, but the man doesn't react in any way, confirming he either isn't bothering or can't listen.

Her eye even now continues to bleed through the cloth she's kept on it, but Tess stays with Lily, and Sophie remains with Izzy. Meanwhile, the twins, Biscuit, and Min-Jae move toward the corpse, while Maya and I head toward the items.

Under the velnar's watchful eyes, I wonder how we must look. Greedy for items even while Lily remains unconscious, and Izzy just weakly rests in Sophie's arms with Noodle as well, because of their bond? Does he look down at us? Does he find us pathetic, thinking about what we could even be trying to do, since we'll be spending the rest of our lives here?

Maybe he pities us. Maybe he just doesn't care.

I know what we're doing is logical, and that there's nothing we can do for Lily right now, much less Izzy, or Noodle, yet I myself find it pathetic in a way, and it angers me.

Time passes, and Maya and I locate the most interesting items. Between them are many upper arcane items and a low pristine one, a small ring made of many-colored metals. The others make a plan regarding the corpse. Given its size and how powerful the body seems to be, they decide to take some loose, almost fallen scales and are going to attempt to stand close when the portal appears to try to pull through a leg or a part of it.

Meanwhile, my eyes keep drifting toward the last few items resting against the side of the throne, just an arm's reach from the velnar. Our gazes meet, and a cold feeling coils inside me. That feeling isn't just coming from him, it's directed at me, the situation, and that is mostly because I very strongly realise how much worse this could be

Congratulations! You've successfully completed the 9th floor's main quest. An entrance to the 10th floor has been created.

At the same moment, all the portals appear, each near every one of us, and the velnar, for the first time, straightens up on his throne. His golden eyes look around, and for a moment, he looks like a wild animal sensing something amiss.

He watches Tess as she takes a step and passes through the portal with Lily, a portal he cannot see, and his eyes widen in surprise before his face turns blank. When his reason returns, he looks away from that spot only for the same thing to happen as he sees Sophie and Izzy disappear, and he blanks out again.

When he regains his senses this time, a slight hint of anger he doesn't understand remains. That anger grows further as Maya disappears with some items. The twins and Min-Jae pull one of the wyvern replica's arms through their portal just as it closes, cutting the limb cleanly off.

The velnar, smelling blood, sniffs the air and closes his eyes in deep concentration. He doesn't even glance toward where Biscuit stood before as he also passes through the portal.

The pressure around the Lycan begins to build, and pitch-black fur, the same color as his long hair, begins to sprout from his skin. His face elongates into the maw of a werewolf while the muscles on his body bulge even further. The entire cavern begins to shake, and the enormous pillars holding it up crack one after another, dozens of them at the same time, revealing crystal cores inside covered in inscriptions I can't even begin to fathom.

"We are currently in the tutorial," I say, just as that pressure threatens to kill me, and watch his expression.

It twists into shock, his golden eyes opening in a predatory look which then rapidly flares into a raw sort of anger that makes my chest tighten, so feral I can barely comprehend it. Then he blanks out.

My mana feels frozen and scared, unable to move at all in the presence of the velnar in front of me. Instead, I take a swift step, grab as many items as I can from the pile next to the throne, and jump back as quickly as my body allows. Just stepping that close to the man causes me to shake uncontrollably, and I barely contain the scream of terror.

As I step onto the tenth floor, I turn to watch the portal close and freeze in pure shock.

The portal is still there, being held open by two muscular arms entirely covered in fur. It's not the result of any understanding of magic, the system, or what's happening. The face of the Lycan I find myself looking at remains blank, almost unconscious.

No, what's controlling that body now are pure wild instincts and the sheer power of his flesh. The sight of that wolf-like face, its pitch black fur, blank golden eyes, and gaping maw, sears itself deep into my memory.

Then the portal snaps shut, severing one hand and four fingers from the other in a single, unstoppable motion.

Chapter 787 - The Nest

First, I ignore everything else. The fingers on the ground, the hand, the items, and the notifications. Instead, I expand my senses as far as I can, searching for any danger even though I know the floors tend to be the safest at the beginning. I repeat the scans several times, cycling through each sense, until I am satisfied.

Once done, my eyes are pulled to the hand and the four fingers. Even severed, they radiate a pressure that continues to ramp up as any restrictions that suppressed and hid the velnar's power cease to exist. The blood from the severed hand melts through the ground. It's already caused the grass to grow much taller around it, and at a speed visible to the naked eye, the tree nearby has also begun to change and grow.

The mana radiation from the hands is at the point I won't be able to suppress it anymore, and I know we're going to need to move away soon. I don't even think we have anything that could hide it, and I'm sure if there is any Champion in the area, they will be able to sense it soon. Possibly even the Absolute from much further away.

I look around one more time. The place looks like the countryside, and as far as my searches go, I can detect no humans, monsters, or animals. It's dead empty here, just a small valley nestled between a range of unassuming mountains, and the range stretches far beyond our line of sight.

"We have to move," I tell Tess as I move toward her. "Can you? And how is Lily?"

At this point, her left eye is covered by what seems to be an improvised eyepatch, which is held by a few threads coiled around her head.

"It'll be fine. I just messed up with my [Declaration], so it might be... a bit more difficult to heal. None of us has any healing worth mentioning, so I don't know how Lily is." In a gesture she does when she is frustrated, she moves her hair off her face. "Multiple powerful monsters attacked her at once, and I think the one that caused it used a toxin and sacrificed itself to make it stronger. I don't think it'll kill her, but I also have no idea how long it'll be before she can deal with it. Sophie said it isn't anything mental and that her mind is okay. How about the hand?"

Tess gestures toward the sizable hand covered in black fur. Right now, it is barely visible through the vibrant grass, flowers, and trees that have begun to grow around it.

I shake my head. "There is no chance we're taking it with us. In a minute, it'll get to a point where it'll kill anyone below level 100 who just happens to get too close, and in a few hours, it may even begin to affect people around our level, and create a danger zone similar to the ones we saw on the previous floor. We need to be gone long before a Champion notices it. If we were still holding it when that happened, it would be valuable enough for them to kill all of us without a moment of hesitation."

"Got it," Tess says simply. "I'll carry Lily and tell the others. Please check on Biscuit." She is already walking as she says the last words, putting her hand on my shoulder for a moment to emphasize them.

I watch her leave toward the group, and just a few seconds later, they start gathering all our stuff. Izzy is still hurt and having spasms. Tess is missing an eye, wearing an eyepatch. Lily is unconscious. Biscuit is mourning the ferret, even to the point of ignoring the deer he still carried through all of that.

Now I look at that deer's body. It looks majestic, white-furred with grand antlers. Those creepy mouths can't be seen from this angle. A monster created for the tutorial only to be killed and carried to another floor.

The face of the Lycan also flashes behind my eyes. That short moment of anger as he realized that all his thoughts and everything he thought were the memories of his life were fake. Only to be replaced by a blank expression as the System proceeded to reset it to fit within the constraints of the tutorial. Because this is what all this is. Even if it's Hell difficulty, we're still in a tutorial. There are rules we can abuse, things to learn, ways to cheat, and chances to survive where we would've died for sure on the outside.

There is no uncertainty in my mind about that, but if we had found the Lycan outside of the tutorial, we would've spent the rest of our lives trapped there. A hundred, three hundred, five hundred years, I have no idea how long we could live at our current levels and with our particular abilities, but that's it.

To someone like that velnar man, who spent over three millennia there, it would be nothing. Not even a bother. For us, though, it would be an entire lifetime, years in which we would grow old and die. All of it, just like that, because of a single wrong decision.

Just how scary something like that is. I wonder what pre tutorial me would've thought of that, how terrified he would've been.

I pass by the pile of items I took, among which I'm sure there's at least one ranked at low pristine. Right now, they feel like they're little more than trash in my way, entirely unimportant as I come to a stop in front of Biscuit and sit down before him. Even now, I'm continuing to suppress the quickly growing pressure from the Lycan's hand and fingers.

Gently, I reach out my hand and put it on the side of Biscuit's face. "I'm sorry about what happened to your friend."

Biscuit stays quiet and, unlike before, when there was a threat to deal with, he allows his emotions to affect him more. I can sense it through the bond we share. I also feel regret for not trusting him more about the ferret and letting my image of it influence me to such a degree.

I'm not someone who trusts easily, and I know how naive Biscuit can be. Unlike me, even after all that happened to him, he tries to see the best in anyone he meets. Where I almost always see a threat in someone who's equally strong or stronger than me, Biscuit doesn't care at all. For him, it's just another possible friend.

Maybe it could have ended differently if I'd allowed his feelings about the ferret to influence me more and if I had trusted him further.

(Friend,) He says quietly.

"Yes," I answer, carefully caressing him as he presses his face against the palm of my hand.

(Dead.)

“Izzy’s still alive thanks to your friend.”

He lowers his head further and stays quiet. I allow him some privacy as I weaken our bond for a while before I whisper very gently, “We have to go. I’m sorry.”

Biscuit looks up at me and then nods. With his head, he pushes my hand away and turns to head toward the rest of the group. The deer’s body stays behind, now entirely ignored by the corgi.

I rejoin the others as well, and we begin to rush away. The entire time, Sophie and I do our utmost to erase any signs of our presence, but we’re not naive enough to think someone much more powerful than us wouldn’t notice or be able to locate us. After a short talk, we leave some new tracks to make it seem like we might have passed by, noticed the severed hand of an Absolute, and fled.

We can only hope no one will notice before the end of the floor. After all, if you were an Absolute, leader of your planet and the most powerful person around, what would you do if you found the hand of someone of your level simply left lying on the ground?

As we move, I also shield the items we’re carrying, the pieces from the Elf’s experiment, along with all the other loot.

In the meantime, a small part of my mind reviews our notifications.

Congratulations! You have cleared the 9th floor of the Hell difficulty tutorial.

Welcome to the 10th floor: Wyvern Nest.

You have acquired:

Trait strengthening token (up to 2nd stage)

Two active skills combination token

The rewards are as expected, given how little time I spent on the floor, they likely could have been much worse. I close that window and open another one.

Floor Quest:

With people unaware of its true nature, the first Wyvern egg to appear in 100,000 years has been found on this planet and is currently located in the city of Hadon. It is set to be gifted to a local Champion in two months as the egg of a rare monster.

While no one knows of its true identity as a Wyvern egg, locate it, steal it, and keep it in your possession for three days.

Rewards:

???

Three active skills combination token

Even now I can tell what a mess this floor will be. I need to stay with the others at least until I'm sure they'll be somewhat safe, and only then can I return to Beyond to head to the 5th floor and face the Champion. After that, I might have time to go on that Beyond quest to get the Everwood. All that should probably take a week or two, and then I'll probably return to the 10th floor to help with the quest, which at this point doesn't seem as forgiving as the 9th floor quest.

As annoying as some parts of it are, I can't bring myself to feel much anger. It all could've been much worse.

After two days, we've made it hundreds of miles away from where we started. And we've seen a bit more of the 10th floor as we passed through a few cities and villages to gather more information, I can

say that this floor reminds me of the 2nd floor more than anything when it comes to the average levels of its people, technology, and all that stuff. The main difference is that the natives here are feylith.

They're a race with small wings, and eyes and hair that change color according to their emotions. They also often have a talent for mental magic, even if not quite to the same level of a true mind mage like Sophie. If you averaged it all out, they would likely have the most mind mages of any other race.

Thankfully, they aren't the only race here, so we don't stick out. We've met a lot of humans and selari as well, which makes me wonder if the System hasn't been making adjustments, and if a thylarin on the same floor would find themselves meeting other thylarin and selari in addition to feylith. It's a useless question at the moment though, yet I still have to wonder.

Now, according to the information we've been given, we find ourselves standing at the top of a mountain. In the green valley below, lies the city of Hadon, nestled right up against the shores of an enormous lake. The city itself holds a million people and features a grand sort of architecture. There are towers on par with skyscrapers, and trees that match them in size. There is a reversed pyramid that doesn't seem like it should be able to stand. Ships constantly move across the surface of the lake, some of them easily large enough to hold thousands of people, and every once in a while, a ship lifts up and begins to fly into the distance.

There are no walls around Hadon, just hints of an enormous defensive array surrounding the entire city, so intricate and laced with so many rules that it makes my head spin when I look at it too much. It remains mostly dormant now, using a myriad of sensors to gather information and adjust according to the rules stored in various nodes all over the place.

Tess, after moving closer to stand by my side, looks at all of it with a look of intense concentration on her face. I can almost hear her mind spinning as she thinks.

Even now, she still wears the eyepatch over her left eye. Other than that, Izzy seems better now and shows no more signs of further tremors or spasms. Only Lily, though breathing calmly and seeming healthy otherwise, remains unconscious.

Chapter 788 - Contraband

We are let into the city without trouble. There aren't even any guards. We each get a mark placed on us by the array. It reminds me of the Local King from Beyond, who did something similar in his tower, and it brings Spark, Marble, and Veil to mind. It also makes me recall the number of times they said they'd witnessed attendees tripping over their own feet while trying to look mysterious or intimidating in the past 500 years.

Even now, the answer continues to surprise me.

As Tess carries Lily, I do my regular check on the unconscious healer and pinch her nose. But there's no reaction, even after all this time.

Once we've made our way further into the city, Tess wordlessly hands me Lily and then gestures for Izzy to follow, at which point they split from the group and begin talking to people. With an Empath and a link through which Tess can communicate with her, combined with her extroverted nature, these kinds of conversations prove easy for them.

This time, Izzy seems to have no restrictions holding her back and makes no effort not to read the emotions of others. She uses her ability, and soon we find ourselves quickly being sent to the branch of the Information Guild that exists there. Tess and Izzy head inside together, while Tess takes some of the less valuable items and materials we have for trade.

Just a minute later, they appear outside. "They don't accept items, so I'll have to go and sell some for some of this planet's currency," Tess explains simply. She heads into another building before returning, handing us some money to buy ourselves food and drinks from a shop nearby. and then heading to the Information Guild.

The currency here is mana stones processed into coins with a hole going through the middle. Through which, people tend to run threads of textiles, mana, or valuable metals to let them hang from their waist, which I take to be some local way of showing off.

A bit of me wonders if the feylith are at risk of noticing that Izzy's an Empath, but then I push that thought away. Tess surely considered that and made sure Izzy understood the risk. Another thing is that I've only met two Empaths at this point: Izzy and Adrian. Even mind mages are more common than that, so Sophie probably has a higher chance of being caught than her sister.

We wait for an hour. As Tess returns, she first makes her way into a building nearby where she once again sells off some of our items, and then we follow her through the peaceful, albeit very busy, city. Feylith, humans, and selari move throughout the place, some in even worse states than we are, so we don't attract much attention. Everyone seems to care only for themselves at this point, so I take a moment to allow myself to take this place in.

With how different it is from any Earth city, I'm enjoying it and wondering how long it'll be before things like this become a common sight. After all, I spent 21 years on Earth, and I don't think any normal city there would excite me nearly this much anymore. Will the same happen in the System in the next 10 years, or is there just so much to see that it might take hundreds? Only time will tell.

After moving deeper into the city and exploring what seems to be the richer districts, Tess rents us an entire floor near the top of one of the towers, offering us a stunning view of the circular park that surrounds it while also granting us a 360-degree view of most of the city and the lake, with the flying ships passing through.

No one talks much as everyone settles in and takes the opportunity to take a shower and change clothes. It takes longer than usual, as if everyone's struggling to wash off the feelings of the last few days on the ninth floor.

Once clean, we settle in the common room, which opens onto a terrace overlooking a few enormous trees, more towers, and the distant lake. Food is already waiting, probably ordered by Tess again, and we begin to eat.

We're only halfway done with the food when Tess begins to talk. "There's only one healer in the city who could look at Lily. He's likely to be extremely expensive, but I don't think any of us cares about that."

She looks around and finds that it's just as she said. In a way, it warms my cold, arrogant hearts seeing that. I know they would do the same for me, and at the same time, I realize I would do so for them as well.

"But," Tess says, "there's also the chance she'll manage to handle it on her own and grow stronger for it. There is also a risk that the healer will recognize her as another powerful healer, which could lead to some serious complications, along with many other factors we'll have to take into consideration."

"Izzy and Sophie said she looks to be fine, so we could maybe wait a few days?" Aaron says, looking at Lily lying on one of the couches. "I mean, she's probably harder to kill than all of us combined."

"Before I go to Beyond, I will leave my left arm with her. Maybe it'll be something she can use if truly needed," I say.

"How romantic," Maya laughs from the side, then leans back in her seat and looks at the ceiling. "Once Lily awakens, she will get angry at herself for being, according to her, too fucking weak, and go on a new training spree."

"That does sound like her," Tess agrees. "As for the rest... I haven't asked for any information about the egg. This is where we'll need to be very, very careful. Any true, pure wyvern is easily a powerful Absolute grade monster once mature. I can see any Champion trying to get that egg in an effort to bond with the wyvern, or in an effort to use it for their experiments. There are many people jealous of the white lightning some vyssari possess from their bloodline."

"Now I want to do it as well," Dennis says. "But knowing how these quests work, there are probably protections in place, or some event from the real world that the tenth floor is based on, which would prevent us from keeping it."

(Food?)

"A wyvern is not foo..." I begin, then stop. Like everyone else, I turn to look at Biscuit, who starts to wiggle his short tail and, by extension, his entire butt under the sudden weight of our attention. "Or is it..."

"He ate that weakened Champion deer, right? You guys must remember it too," Dennis begins to talk excitedly. "That's how he got those tiny antlers of his and ended up in a food coma. Do you think he might get a cute set of tiny wings or lightning from a wyvern egg? We could time it so he eats it just as we complete the quest!"

"He can't just eat a baby that hasn't even been born, even if it's only the tutorial!" Izzy begins to protest.

"What if it is an evil baby wyvern?" Dennis asks her.

(Food!)

"You stay quiet and don't translate!" Izzy shouts, pointing a finger at me. She then takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. When she opens them, her voice softens, "I know it's all fake and that this is just the tutorial. But there are some things I just don't want us to do. I don't want us to get used to them."

"It's okay, Izzy. We'll make that decision later, okay?" Tess says gently, and when Izzy nods, the blonde continues, "Thankfully, there haven't been any rumors so far about the hand of the Lycan Absolute we left behind. I've also learned that the Absolute is not currently present on the planet. This is being handled by her disciple instead, a Champion who is far from this city. Hadon doesn't have a Champion here or nearby either. The city itself is very wealthy and famous for its auction house, the inverted pyramid we saw, and for the flying ships built here. And when I say rich, I mean rich. Some of the ships they build are capable of space travel between the planets of this solar system and their moons, while others serve as warships rumored to endure Champion grade strikes for several minutes."

When she looks around and sees no one is speaking, she smiles playfully. "What would you lazy asses do without me? I've rented this place for the next two months. I think I overpaid, but it was one of the few places that had a shielded lab available where we could hide the signatures of the items we got and that fake wyvern's arm. Tomorrow I'll visit another Information Guild for more information. We're rich enough for it. Another interesting fact: this planet has one Absolute and eleven Champions in total. The entire world is under the lead of that one Absolute, who's a Lust subclass, and the eleven Champions serve her directly."

In the silence that follows, Aaron laughs awkwardly. "I know it's lame to say, and maybe a bit dark because of the state Lily is in, but damn... it seems like we may have found her some competition."

Some of the group chuckle, others sigh, but I notice the gentle smile Izzy gives Aaron.

"This is a good start, and all the problems we have are things we can solve," Tess stands up energetically. "So, for now, Nat, don't worry. Go to Beyond and just try not to get yourself killed on the 5th floor. Sophie, you as well, or Frontier will kick you out. Meanwhile, I'll stay here for the next week or two. Oh, and Maya? How would you like to go shopping with me? I want to find a nicer eyepatch than whatever I have now."

Watching her, I realize how easy it was to forget she even had that wound. I could ask what she did with her [Declaration], but since she didn't tell me on her own, I think she just didn't want to. I might learn it later, though maybe not.

I could probably stay here a bit longer, but I feel a need to move and do something useful. Like throwing myself against a Champion. It's just the normal thing to do.

I am normal after all.

Before leaving, as promised, I stop beside Lily. I move the Fragment of the Nameless Tree from the back of my left hand to my right, then cut off my left arm and leave it beside her.

I let my passive skills combust and begin restoring the limb. It'll take some time, but it's not like I need it all that much. I've long since grown used to quickly rerouting my Mana Cycling to deal with missing body parts.

I look at our healer and wonder for a moment. She is so powerful, yet a thing like this happened out of nowhere. I didn't even see it. There was no build-up, no final boss that caused it, just a bunch of random, powerful monsters.

Before finally departing, I reach out, move a strand of hair off her face, and flick her nose. Then I move to the laboratory, which is, as Tess said, shielded and filled with equipment. It's clean, with sharp, modern surfaces and shiny metal. In one of the corners lies a light-blue scaly part of an arm, or a paw, whatever you'd call it.

It isn't even that big, maybe twice the size of a polar bear's paw, but even as a failed attempt at a fake wyvern, I'm sure there's power in it.

With a few more steps, I reach the table where the two pristine items we acquired are lying.

Ring of Preserved Stasis (Low Pristine) - A ring made of multiple interlaced colorful metals, with each section flowing into the next with precise symmetry. This ring can lock in any accumulated charge, energy, and stored effect in its current state. Charged energy does not decay, disperse, or destabilize over time. The wearer may hold fully charged techniques indefinitely until release.

Prism of Dimensional Friction (Low Pristine) -A cube that creates a field against interplanar jumps, teleportation, or phase-shifting abilities. Objects or beings attempting to cross space or planes using

these abilities are detected and their abilities disrupted. The effect becomes stronger and the scale of the field larger, the more mana is used to empower the Prism.

I'm confident it shouldn't be this easy to get Low Pristine items. It's possible that they represent the limit of what you can get in the tutorial. If my information is correct, newbie Champions begin with Low Pristine gear. Ten million shards, that's how much they cost at their cheapest in the System shop, and I haven't seen an item with a higher rating yet.

And yet here they are, two of them. Honestly, I just really don't want to deal with them right now. Neither would be useful to me for the upcoming fight, so out of spite for how much trouble they've brought, I flick them off the table. They fall to the floor and roll into the corner.

I say my goodbyes to everyone and ask Biscuit to stay with the others for now. It's partly so he can help them, and partly so they can distract him from what happened to the ferret. I give a last look at Blackie, who is just creepily standing in the corner, and make my way out of the tower using the elevator.

Without stopping, I head straight out of the city. After a few miles, I lift into the air, deploying Sneaky Mode and controlling my kinetic energy as tightly as I can. I shoot like a rocket toward where we came from, continuously increasing my speed and sending a sonic boom echoing through the area. A bit of my mana moves ahead, creating a transparent cone in front of me as I push myself even faster.

The country just flickers along below me. Only when I fly higher does that change even slightly, the countryside appearing to move more slowly. The flight likely takes longer than it could have as I fly over lakes, zigzag between trees at incredible speed, and move through and over clouds.

I don't think I'll ever get enough of flying like that, and I continuously channel kinetic energy to maintain it.

Only once I reach the place where we appeared do I shoot toward the ground, absorbing all my momentum and absorbing the shockwave. I come to such a sudden stop that I'm sure it would've been capable of evaporating someone with even higher stats than mine.

A few things are missing.

The severed fingers from the Lycan's left hand are gone. All four of them.

The Dusk Deer's body has vanished as well.

Lastly, the severed right hand is now surrounded by a forest stretching a mile wide, with a tree at its center already rising to the height of a skyscraper. The mana radiation seeping into the area is overwhelming, to the point that I can only consider it a small miracle no one's noticed.

Putting up my maximal effort from the start, I radiate my own mana to defend myself and fly toward where I sense the hand. Multiple trees get in my way as I reach that section, and I throw mana projectiles against them, only to be surprised. Some of the trees endure the attacks, while others begin to restore themselves incredibly quickly after being hit.

More of my mana seeps out of me and gathers over the palm of my hand. I begin to channel [Empyrean Lance], only to cancel it mid-cast to take over that mana and use it to fuel more powerful explosions. I throw these against the tree in the center and the many others surrounding it.

It requires half a dozen attacks powerful enough to hurt a monster between level 350 and 400, but I eventually carve my way to the hand.

There, even more of my effort goes into simply existing within reach of the hand. The air feels heavy, saturated with a mana radiation so dense my skin itches with the sensation of a thousand needles piercing it.

I manifest an arm out of mana, pouring every drop of focus into keeping it stable, but the moment the arm touches the severed limb, it begins to erode. I have to pump a constant stream of mana into the limb just to keep it from dissolving into nothingness.

As I finally grab it, the backlash is instant. A surge of raw power rushes through the mana arm, slamming into my own body. It feels like molten metal being poured into my veins. My vision blurs, and blood begins to leak from my ears, but I don't let go.

Clutching the "contraband," I use my Beyond Stay Token, and the building pressure disappears immediately with a sense of relief that makes me drop to the ground with deep, shaky breaths.

When I look up, I fully expect Ruby to be here with me. Instead, the one I find facing me is a huge ant with a black carapace that seems to absorb the light.

The Ruler of Diligence.

Destroyer of the Ancient Armory.

Chapter 789 - The new guild master of the Primordial Knights

"I know it's you spreading those false rumors about me throughout Beyond."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I want a 5 active skills combination token in exchange for the hand."

"No."

"Where is Ruby? I want to negotiate with her."

"The Ruler of Greed won't be present, and neither will the Ruler of Kindness. You're lucky the Ruler of Wrath didn't show up instead. I offer an upper arcane passive and 5 million shards."

"What a joke. Mid pristine."

"No way in hell."

"Low pristine passive and 5 million shards."

"No. Did you just use your trait strengthening token to strengthen your eyes to the second stage as we speak?"

"They might be useful soon, so there's no need to waste time. I can endure this much pain for the sake of our negotiations."

"You look like you're about to pass out and die. And I bet the pain is worse than you expected. That hand you were so lucky to get was about to kill you and a great many people in Beyond. You only survived because I stepped in, something you expected your Handler to do. The hand isn't as valuable as the Fragment from last time. Do not expect a similar value."

"Bullshit. To all of that."

"How rude. I offer a 3rd stage trait strengthening token. Plus a million and a half shards for each member of your group other than yourself. Any further offers will not include your people."

"You sneaky little... I want one finger to be cut off the hand and stored by the Ruler of Greed until my group reaches the 13th floor. It gets handed back to me then. Only then do I accept."

The Black Ant hesitates for a moment before saying, "One knuckle from a finger. Then it will be acceptable."

"Deal."

There isn't even a goodbye. I vanish from the space and reappear in my room at the headquarters of the Primordial Knights.

POV Talon

It isn't often you get to witness the crowning of a new guild master for the most powerful guild in Beyond by a wide margin. And I know the guy. If that doesn't help my prospects, I don't know what will. Well, maybe my charm or my handsome face. And my fancy primordial energy, of course. Stellar Wind still has a nice ring to it. But being in the position I'm in now, I always knew all my suffering with these lunatics would be rewarded.

The Null King Weslin and holy-fuck-it's-Morwag-RUN are both already here, as are all the demons with access to the 4th floor and Megacity. I even heard some were coming up from the 5th floor just to witness it.

Nyssa Volare is widely considered to be one of the most powerful attendees to enter Beyond in the past 1,000 years. After all, she killed a goddamn Champion. Alone. I don't think there can be any more guessing about who is more powerful between her and Lyraen. So, many people are curious about her successor.

The ceremony begins simply.

Drums sound from all directions in deep vibrations loud enough to feel through the entirety of one's body. The air shakes, windows rattle, and the drums continue. Beat after beat, slow at first but growing quicker and louder with each repetition. Many of the demons are beginning to shout in sync with the drums, and their hearts sync to the same rhythm. Slow at first, but becoming faster as time goes on.

The entire purpose is to rile up everyone here. To make the hearts of these lunatics beat faster and awaken that deep-rooted aggression that lies in the heart of every single one of them.

The drumming is nearing its peak when the hundreds of demons present move to the sides and clear a straight corridor between them. That corridor isn't very wide, just a half step or a generous arm's reach from the demon or person on the opposite side.

Once again, the drumming grows louder, and I can't tell what I'm hearing now, their hearts or the drums. That's when the doors open and Nyssa's successor enters and begins to walk through the corridor.

As he does so, all the demons are so close that his shoulders occasionally brush against them, as others reach out to touch him. Every demon standing there is watching with their red eyes wide open and hearts beating wildly. I can't help but feel some of that mood, and looking around, all the other nondemon members are the same.

Nathaniel doesn't seem bothered at all. The currently empty sleeve where his left arm should be hangs limp along his body as he pushes through the corridor. He ignores the demons pressing in so claustrophobically close and the corridor closing behind him. His steps aren't hurried, but neither are

they slow, and unlike the demons, I can't sense his heartbeat, much less any primordial energy radiating from him.

Then he reaches the five steps leading up to the podium and stops in front of them. From behind him, demons push close, and the drums are deafening now.

He takes the first step, and a wave of kinetic energy throws the demons behind him away.

The drums beat, and he takes the second step up, and the air around him shakes. All the beautiful stained glass windows in the buildings around us explode. The colorful shards of glass begin to rain down, only to be halted mid-air, and light shines down from the fake sky to the floor. It sends colorful reflections scattering all over the place as colorful rays of light pass through the glass to shine on the ground below.

Nathaniel takes the third step, and my teeth rattle. Both of his hearts begin to beat in sync with the drums and the other demons. More than anything, it feels like he's teasing them.

He passes the fourth and fifth steps within the beat of a heart and, standing at the top of the podium, he turns.

Everything else falls into shadow, leaving only the gleam of his eyes. A raw, unearthly gold flares with the intensity of a dying star, fighting to pierce the veil of his pupils, but with his chilling, iron willed composure, he suffocates it, bending it entirely to his will.

All the drums stop at once, leaving the space filled with the beating of hundreds of hearts as he waits there for anyone to challenge him. Someone to contest his role as the strongest in the guild and, by extension, the new guild master.

A few demons take a step onto the first stair, and then the amount of primordial energy Nathaniel's been generating increases at a terrifying speed no one here can hope to match. They get suppressed as thermal and kinetic energy seep out from him. A circle of golden flames forms behind him, its edges shaking as his kinetic energy seeps into the area with it.

All the demons that took that first step stagger back, but Nathaniel doesn't stop here. The amount continues to increase, ramping up until his heartbeat drowns out everyone else's.

Even now, his expression hasn't changed, he keeps that same emotionless visage that, in combination with his eyes, makes him seem so exceedingly arrogant. And he's challenging everyone here to face that arrogance, for them to prove it misplaced and brittle.

But no one can. Demons stare at him, they sense his challenge and face his will, but no one takes a step.

As quickly as they came, the primordial energies around him begin to disappear, pulled back into his body with ease, in such great amounts that it makes me shudder. Then, in their place, his mana begins to rise. Wild like a torrential sea, in unstoppable currents that circle him, moving around and reaching towards the sky and crashing all around him like waves breaking against the rocks.

Not for a moment does it seem like he's lacking in control as the amount continues to ramp up. It grows denser and becomes visible to the naked eye. It feels like I could touch it if I only stretched out my hand. Like I could smell it.

Nathaniel takes a step and faces both Morwag and Weslin in a clear gesture of challenge, but neither of them accepts it today. They lower their heads slightly in an acknowledgment of the power of the man widely known as the Mana Tyrant.

Hundreds of demons follow in the same bow as his eyes sweep over them.

Then, from behind Nathaniel, the vice guild master steps out with unhurried steps, stopping beside him and placing a mantle around his shoulders, made of a deep red fabric with fur at the top framing his shoulders, brown at the top and white below. A ceremonial item belonging to the demons and one of only a very few mid pristine items in Beyond.

Nathaniel reaches out his hand, and the tree that's been growing from one of the gardens, the one surrounded by restrictive arrays, begins to shake and shrink. It breaks down into a small piece of crystal that flies over to him and merges with the one on the back of his hand.

Standing with the mantle resting on his shoulders, he then waits for exactly ten heartbeats for anyone to challenge him.

No one does.

The new guild master of the Primordial Knights has been officially accepted.

POV Nathaniel

I've been to the 5th floor of Beyond likely more than any other attendee ever. That sentence itself sounds cool. There's no need to go into the reasons, though, using it to lower my constitution that way might sound badass as well.

As I stand here again, it all begins to feel more real. Our plan is to fight an actual Champion while none of us are anywhere close to level 450, meanwhile, the Champion is a four question mark monstrosity, likely between level 450 and 599. Actually standing here feels different than just talking about it. Before, it was just a "what if," a sort of game we played to kill time.

That reality is further emphasized now by the two places in the explorer rankings taken up by Christoph and now Nyssa. What a monster that demoness has turned out to be.

All of this goes through my mind as the wind pushes against me and I look over the plains of the 5th floor. I don't think I've ever seen this floor as anything other than a constantly cloudy wasteland, with those clouds hanging high in the fake sky. Like any other floor in Beyond, this one is also just a cave, enormous in scale, but a cave nonetheless, with the sun replaced by shining crystals on the ceiling.

Here, no one knows what generates the light, as rumor says that even S-ranks die should they fly into those clouds.

Vegetation is sparse, so it is mostly rock, often interwoven with various metals. I think someone said that out of all the Beyond floors, the metals here are among the most valuable and highest grades. If you didn't need to sacrifice 15 stat points or face such dangers, you could earn a lot of shards just by mining.

Actually, there is a single tree, the Fragment of the Nameless Tree, that I planted two days ago when we arrived. I've been feeding it to make it grow faster. The array I've been working on is connected to it, as is the natural connection that allows me to use it as a node.

And completing the image is a broad array of crystalline structures. Sometimes they're small, only reaching up to your knees, other times they're the size of buildings, almost coming together to form a strange sort of forest. Be it blue, white, or green, there are many of them. None are valuable as material, but they add bits of color to this bleak floor. Though sometimes, as winds pass over these forests, it does create an unsettling sound.

Inside one of the tents we've set up, I listen to Weslin go over the plan while Morwag just sits lazily nearby. Beside him is the low pristine armor he'll be using, as well as his Obsidian Spine Chain. Other than that, there are 14 hand-picked A ranks, mostly demons, but there is one lynthari, two velnar, and two humans among them.

Weslin continues to repeat things most of us already know, but this time, I don't mind. Just having certain information and a firmly set plan feels freeing.

"From the information we have, the thylarin Champion's passive detection range is 50 miles for primordial energies and 100 miles for mana. When he actively focuses on detection, that range multiplies by at least five, so not the greatest, but it's not bad either. His movement is fast, but that speed is reliant on mana-based body strengthening and a skill reminiscent of [Shadow Step] that allows him to move across an as yet unknown maximal distance, however, movement over 10 miles with a single leap has been confirmed. Active skills are all expected to be within the level 80 to 87 range. Only three skills are confirmed to have been recorded in the clashes from previous attempts: [Entity Tracking], [Mana Blast], and [Friction]. Suspected passives are..."

I filter out the rest of the words and, taking a few steps, I exit the tent. Looking into the distance, I detect a presence that's recently let itself be known to me. Using Wraith Dance a few times, I reach a place where a purple crystal pierces the ground at a 45-degree angle, resting against a boulder.

Near that boulder, a lumoran man stands. He has black skin, but those crystalline features that most of their race usually have are almost nowhere to be seen. Only a set of diadem-like protrusions poke out of his skin, creating a circlet around his head with a bigger crystal at the center of his forehead. His right hand is entirely made from transparent white crystal, and within it, his bones are visible along with the constantly moving mana that shifts within.

"I hope you don't mind. I just wanted to observe the mark she left on you," the lumoran smiles at me, even as his presence continues to choke me out, not even intentionally from his side.

"And how do you like the mark?" I barely manage to force out.

"It is indeed as ancient and impressive as I'd heard," he says with another smile. "While still surprising, it's beginning to make sense how she was able to kill Master Tyven, even as a mere shadow. But for now, good luck on your adventure. I won't stay, I worry my presence might harm you, despite my best efforts to restrain it."

He walks away with an almost playful grace, pausing to glance back one last time. "I considered killing that Champion you've been eyeing, but... that would be dreadfully childish of me. Still, I might have provoked it just a touch. If I were you, I'd hurry. It likely knows you're coming."

A short laugh escapes him, and then the newly crowned Ruler of Envy disappears in a movement I can't follow, continuing his passage through the floors of Beyond, a right he gained when he became a Ruler.

Meanwhile, I turn around and burst in as quick a movement as I can back towards the others, hoping it isn't too late. The mana in my crown compresses, all the energy I've been gathering, and turns pitch black as I reach for the arrays spread out and connected to the Mana Tree I planted.

Chapter 790 - Isn't it yours?

Flashback Nyssa Volare

If I were to be born again, I wish to be born into a simpler life. I would love to leave this all behind and perhaps grow a bit taller than I am now. If it is not too greedy, I would want blonde hair as well.

I would want to live a simple, if not too long life. Sometimes I feel lonely, so I imagine having a few siblings who love me and whom I'd love in return. I would be the youngest one, cute and pampered by everyone, always wearing clean, pretty clothes and eating warm food.

Living a normal length life would be amazing, or maybe slightly longer with good health. Not as a demon, but as a human. Maybe a hundred years? I'm not sure exactly how long humans without the system usually live.

I would want to have a spoiled childhood too, become an adult again, marry someone I would make fall in love with me, and die before them, or together, while surrounded by our family.

I don't like being Nyssa Volare, but it is not that I hate it either. I get to live and meet all these people and experience all these things. There are many things I've gotten to do and experience that others never will. For that, there's a price to pay, and I think it is fair that I do.

As I squeeze my fist, the cut on the palm of my hand opens more, and blood begins to drip and flow through my closed fingers. My blood. Primordial blood. The blood of the cursed bloodline, made to serve the High Lord, whom I will kill once I return to my planet. Until then, I wear his colors, and until then, I serve. I do not question.

[Weapon]

The blood that constantly burns within me, now flooding from my wound, heeds my command. It becomes the weapon I will it to be. A greatsword with a blade so broad it should be heavy, yet in my hands, it may as well be lighter than air. My body burns from the inside as the circulation of my blood intensifies, and I turn my body itself into a [Weapon].

The opponent I came to face, still far away, notices my presence and reacts in kind, getting ready for a fight.

I should die here, but I don't think I will.

If I were to be born again, I know that my nature would be the same. I can't escape who I am.

It saddens me a little bit.

POV Nathaniel

[Mana Warcaster - lvl ???]

The thylarin Champion is already there when I finally reach the group. His six arms spread wide open as he thrusts them forward. As if ignited by the pure friction of his limbs moving through the air, a flame of the deepest blue I have ever seen roars into existence. It ignites around him, shooting upward and spreading to his sides like wings made of fire.

That flame creates an enormous shape behind him before surging toward us, half a mile high, turning the ground to glass as it passes and causing the molten earth to churn like waves on the sea.

It feels as if the entire horizon has been blurred out under the heat of the air.

Shouting, Weslin and his subgroup in charge of our defenses activate their array, throwing all their power behind it. Nearly the entirety of Weslin's gathered void is used at once, along with nearly all the group's reserves.

The flickering void spins like a ring around two S-ranks and fourteen A-ranks as the flames scream past. Two of the A-ranks fall to the ground dead from the next attack, which pierces their defenses, and multiple others have begun to sway. One standing slightly too close is set ablaze; he burns in half a second, leaving nothing behind.

The air shrieks in pain as the Champion moves his arms again. And that blue flame swirls around the resisting void and pulls back to the Champion just as I reach the site, and he switches his attention to me.

The landscape around me explodes in a blast of mana that falls from the sky like the strike of a single, gigantic hammer. A shockwave tears through the area, creating a perfectly circular flatland of compressed dirt around me, pushed deep into the ground.

In the middle of it, I stand on the barely step-wide patch of ground that's remained unaffected. An enormous amount of mana from the attack floods into my crown, and my minds snap into complete focus. Arrays activate, and Ley Lines connected to the Nameless Tree manifest in the sky.

A vessel manifests behind me as well, and nearly all the mana I've gathered moves to activate a single skill. I use the Tree to keep it stable, channeling that mana through my vessel while my low pristine passive stops my mind from sizzling out of my ears.

I watch the Champion, and as if someone flipped a switch, all colors disappear from the space. The blacks become darker and the whites brighter as [Eclipse] encompasses the scenery in a sudden silence so deep it creates a high-pitched ringing.

The blue flames lose some of their color as well, spilling to the ground like pouring sand. Dangerous and searing, yet stripped of all control or intent behind them.

My [Focus] reaches its peak as I wait for his counter. The world feels as if it's slowed to a crawl while I push myself to the brink. I realize with brutal clarity just how powerful our opponent is and how much of this venture relies on me. If I fail, all of us will die.

The Champion moves to retake control of the flames, but I read his attempts, and my black mana devours any mana he sends out to reclaim them.

Tense to the breaking point, I watch him, sharpening my [Focus] even that little bit further.

Then he fails again.

How?

The Champion, similar to the lurker or the avatar, swiftly comes with a counterplay after realizing what my black mana does. His own mana begins to seep from his body, allowing me to identify him as a Regenerator. His mana crashes out constantly, powerful and seemingly never-ending.

It is an amount tailored to destroy my mind and overwhelm me while he begins to move, using the mana inside his body for strengthening, as the others move ahead to face him.

Just how?

Pouring from within his body, mana bursts out, sharp and dangerous, thrown against the people around him with enough force to kill. The moment that mana leaves his body and steps into my domain, it breaks apart into shining particles that crash against the demons like a sandstorm before disappearing, devoured, and becoming mine.

How are you so weak?

Why are you letting me take your mana away from you?

Isn't it yours?

The Champion attempts to rush me, but Morwag faces him while the pearl-white obsidian spine chain digs into the ground to tie him down, striking against the blackness. Not even they can use mana. No one but me and, to a small extent, the Champion can. But they have their primordial energies.

I am still not fully used to these eyes, but I've long since grown used to never running an optimal, properly planned-out fight. Even as they burn in my skull, I continue to observe the Champion, who, though he's clearly not close-combat oriented, possesses an impressive mana-based body strengthening.

You could be reading stolen content. Head to [NovelFire](#) for the genuine story.

He tears one of the demon's heads off. He pierces a hole through another. He punches Morwag in the face, cracking the low pristine armor and blinding one of the demon's eyes.

The friction of the demon's own heart beating generates blue flames, which he draws from his body to coat the surface, where he lets them blaze as they slip out of his control, burning the others before they can defend.

But the longer he faces them, the more desperately it feels like he wants to get away from them to attack me. Morwag, no matter how wounded, jumps into his way while Weslin and the others do their best to defend.

The battle moves all across the battlefield at a speed some of the A-ranks have trouble catching, but every single time, Morwag and Weslin put their lives on the line to stop him from getting to me.

The Champion bursts into a blisteringly fast movement and tackles Morwag away, his hands move behind his back, and he deflects Weslin while another hand punches the human attacking him. The entire time, gravitational energy continues to slow him, lightning crashes against his body, and the void attempts to pierce his natural barrier to fully cut him off and leave him with the stats of his body.

Morwag, most of all, even now, is attempting to unwind whatever it is that holds the Champion together.

Yet, that title is not easily given. Even stripped of his greatest power, the Champion is dangerous, but his movements are becoming heavy, and his rhythm is starting to break.

Before anyone else, I manage to pierce through his natural barrier. The area of [Eclipse] shrinks, and just as I devour the mana he's radiating to overwhelm me, I begin to pierce through his barrier. Hungrily, I reach in to take more.

And his body strengthening begins to fail.

His effort intensifies. Dozens, hundreds of techniques and abilities he attempts to use one after another. There isn't even a chance now for me to read and disrupt them all. Maybe in a few years, but it's still too soon. So I do what I'm best at: I brute force it, and I channel. I steal all his mana, taking it under my control and stripping it away from him, then I turn it against him.

It's... almost too easy.

I can take his mana from him. I can do it easily. It's almost laughable.

The intelligence was clear: the Champion is mana-specialized. He's a specialist through and through. Unfortunately for him, Lissandra was right. I'm a nightmare for this kind of opponent.

My vessel opens its arms wide behind me, and all that mana flows through it. Then, it's left up to my mind to keep up. My domain, combined with black mana, absorbs it all. It devours his mana, forcing me to channel it in order to keep it under my control.

For the first time since my body upgrade and the improvement of my Mana Physique, I see what it's capable of. I begin to understand that the three mora from Crimson Forge weren't joking when they said they had trouble finding materials more conductive than my body. My trait, my passives, my black mana, and my ability to channel make a joke out of such a mana specialized Champion. All these massive amounts of mana move by my will. They cycle, they swim in currents, they fill the black mana crown, and they power my domain.

One after another, all his attempts fail, and his body becomes devoid of all mana except the little he can generate before I take it.

My fragment, meanwhile, grows in size and regains some of its color. Unlike before, now, within my black and white domain, the tree looks celestial. The trunk is almost ethereal, a partially transparent white and golden light, whereas the crown of the tree has begun to look more firm and material.

The branches begin to shake along with the leaves, and then all kinetic movement within my domain halts. All the members of the guild, all debris, the wind, and even the dust.

The Champion freezes mid-attack, his momentum halted. He claws for a way out, first, an attempt to trigger a long-range teleportation to a pre-set anchor. Nothing. He tries to knit his natural barrier back together, then gather mana for one last surge, but it won't obey him. He struggles to shroud himself from my domain, his six arms trembling as two of them frantically gouge inscriptions into his own skin. He even attempts to ignite friction within his lungs with a sharp breath or to detonate the mana inside his own heart, prepared to ruin his body just to attack me.

Here, against me, all of that fails. With all the preparations I've made, he doesn't have a chance to gather a smidge of the mana that any of these require.

Excluded from the hold as I filter it out, the others begin to move and launch attacks on the motionless body. Everyone is experienced, so they don't throw weak strikes, they gather more primordial energy, and while the defensive group uses void and other fitting abilities, they all attack at once.

Even then, only some of them cause wounds that make the thylarin fall back. One of his six arms is gone, held by Morwag, who throws it aside and rushes the thylarin again. Then I notice the inscriptions he carved into the arm Morwag tore off are being filled by the blood from the stump.

The limb explodes into a burst of bones that glow in blue flame as they create friction through the air. The small pieces stab through everyone, most of them pierce Morwag's back and come out of his chest. For a moment, the demon staggers, but he picks up the movement and punches the Champion straight in the head with a shockwave that breaks the molten ground-turned-glass.

Some blood from Morwag's wound flicks from his body, through the broken parts of his armor, and falls onto the body of the Champion. It flows down his arm and onto another inscription carved into his skin by his nails.

And the Champion disappears, teleporting away.

[Eclipse] vanishes, and all the black mana swirls around my body and into the crown over my head. I ignore the shouts calling me to pursue the Champion and instead turn around to where he's stepping out from a camouflage field a mile behind me.

My vessel reaches toward the crown and pulls out a dagger made of black mana at the same moment the Champion snaps his remaining hands in a clap.

The air screams, and dozens of blue projectiles as big as buildings shoot toward us from behind his back, like falling meteors. He follows it with a downward swing of his hand, and a blast of mana slams down from the sky on top of me like a hammer.

Even as I'm pushed to my knees, and my crown begins to spin wildly, I stare at him and use the [Ley Line] I've tied to him to teleport as the meteors begin to explode in shockwaves around me.

Of course, he knows about it and expects it. He might even have left it there intentionally. The moment my teleport activates, an omnidirectional blast is sent through the area all around him, followed by screaming blue flames that tear through the air.

But I'm not there. Instead, it is my vessel that teleports through, holding the dagger of black mana in front of it to absorb most of the attack.

The Champion attempts to teleport, but Weslin reaches out with his void and messes with the connection. My vessel follows through, both of them teleporting just a few steps away to the ground. As

the Champion lifts his arm in defense, my vessel simply stabs the black dagger into it before another burst of blue flames erases it entirely.

The temperature around me rises, and the ground shakes under the impact of dozens of meteors. My skin burns even within my barrier, so I teleport away. No one tries to defend. Instead, everyone just tries to run away and avoid the fallout.

The Champion tries to pull the black dagger away, but he is too slow. Before he can, it seeps into his body, spreading through him, devouring his quickly regenerating mana and growing stronger to devour more.

A spinal chain made of glass crashes against the thylarin Champion, pushing him deep into the ground. Morwag falls nearby, his body and armor charred. He slams into the earth with full force, causing the ground to cave in and debris to explode into the air.

No inscriptions activate this time. Morwag slams him again and again. He stretches his arm to the side and binds particles of glass together into a dense dagger, which he stabs down toward the Champion.

Somehow, even now, that almost-dead thylarin fights back. His heart bursts open from the inside as he gathers just a little mana despite the onslaught of black mana. A blast of mana pierces through Morwag's stomach, but the demon continues the strike regardless, burying the glass dagger deep into the Champion's eye.

With the blade lodged there, Morwag twists it. The thylarin twitches a few times before all movement halts.

[You have defeated Mana Warcaster - lvl 501]

[Lvl 392 > Lvl 393]

[Lvl 393 > Lvl 394]

[Lvl 394 > Lvl 395]

[Lvl 395 > Lvl 396]

[Lvl 396 > Lvl 397]

[Lvl 397 > Lvl 398]

[Lvl 398 > Lvl 399]

[Lvl 399 > Lvl 400]

[Lvl 400 > Lvl 401]

[Lvl 401 > Lvl 402]

[Eclipse - lvl 68 > Eclipse - lvl 69]

[Perception - lvl 73 > Perception - lvl 74]

[Manifestation - lvl 39 > Manifestation - lvl 40]

[Current - lvl 40 > Current - lvl 41]

[Current - lvl 41 > Current - lvl 42]

[Current - lvl 42 > Current - lvl 43]

[Current - lvl 43 > Current - lvl 44]

Congratulations, you have reached level 400. You can now choose your final trait.