

Tutorial 801

Chapter 801 - You will be mine

The ship is currently drifting on the water, listing heavily to one side. A few feylith are moving about, using skills to regrow the wood that forms the hull, while others follow behind, strengthening the new growth so it matches the rest.

One man approaches Lily and, with a deep bow, asks her to follow him to heal a few people. Apparently, the captain requested her personally. There's no reason to refuse, so she goes, followed by Maya. Min-Jae, meanwhile, leaves as well to help with whatever's responsible for powering the flight of this ship.

I watch Sophie curse as she moves Blackie somewhere safe where he won't bump into anything. My eyes slide back toward the door of our shielded room where the cracked egg sits. It makes sense to think it would be extremely difficult to damage, or perhaps it was specifically changed that way for the floor quest, and yet it cracked anyway.

Maybe it happened because it absorbed bits of diluted wyvern blood from the pieces we had. Or maybe it just reacted poorly to being exposed to things from a different floor. I don't know.

The most annoying part is that we don't have a new floor quest, and the countdown from last time is gone. The Rulers are the sort of beings that can live for tens of thousands of years, so they might not be in any hurry to give us a new one. Honestly, who the hell knows what could be happening there?

Meanwhile, a damned Bambi Apostle, that reanimated creepy weredeer that even a sweet soul like Izzy wanted to kill immediately, is lurking around somewhere.

And what the hell is even up with that? Did that goddamn weredeer reanimate, only for the first idea that sparked in its mind to be gobbling up a bunch of random furred fingers just lying about in the mud, and then pick a fight with basically every member of the local Absolute's harem?

It's our fault, isn't it? We left the corpse of a deer near a finger, and then we left the egg near pieces of a fake wyvern. Some people just don't learn.

I force myself to suppress my anger and instead look out through the hole in our cabin. The sky is blue, and there's not a single cloud in sight. The sun shines gently, and all around us, the waves are constantly swaying, bringing in a light breeze and the smell of the sea. It isn't that bad.

Soon, my view out of the hole is blocked by the figure of a feylith woman who pauses in surprise as I sit there in a manablock chair right in front of the opening. She chuckles and waves at me, her hair and eyes turning a dark blue.

I wave back, and she begins working her skill, causing the broken shards of wood to slowly grow until they begin covering my view. Tess doesn't use the opportunity to get in before it closes, staying outside to keep guard instead.

Before the trunk is fully restored, the feylith woman peeks in one more time with a smile. "Sorry for blocking your view."

"It's okay," I answer, and then the hole is gone.

I sense more people beginning to work on strengthening the restored section and stand up, making my chair disappear. Fixing my glasses and this annoying gray suit with its yellow tie, I head to the shielded room and peek inside.

The egg is still the same with no noticeable change, and Biscuit is still sitting nearby with his chin resting on his front paws and staring intently at it. He's taking his role very seriously and doesn't even take his eyes off it as I enter. To show my appreciation, I pet him a few times. While he begins to wag his short tail, I close the door again.

There are already slight tremors vibrating through the ship, so I suspect we'll be moving soon. This is mostly proven by the time I leave the cabin and make my way outside onto the deck. People are moving about, but not many, which makes me think most of them are locked in their rooms.

"Sir, I must ask you to return to your-" one of the crew tries to tell me.

Before he finishes his sentence, I lift my hand and say simply, "I'm with the healer."

He looks confused, as if not knowing what to do, but in the end decides it would be too much of a hassle to press the matter and simply leaves me alone. I make my way toward Tess, who is resting against the railing with her single eye turned toward the east.

"Now that I think about it-" I begin.

Before I finish my sentence, she lifts her hand and says simply, "Yes, yes, I know. The eyepatch. I look like a pirate. On a ship, sailing the seas."

It amuses me, and I stand by her side, also looking in that direction. "Yup, that."

I'm not sure what she can see, but when I let my glasses slide down just for a moment, I can see the abnormal way ambient mana moves there. All wavelengths of it are moving in broken currents across the sky.

"By the way, you are getting more eerie," Tess says, still not breaking eye contact with that place.

"How so?" I ask.

"I almost can't sense any mana from your body. I know you've been using Sneaky Mode most of the time and circulating it to contain it within, but there were always some leaks I could trace or that most people could notice. But now? It is almost all gone. When just sliding my eyes past you, you feel like a normal human with no mana at all. Only your Ignition Heart or the moments when you're generating kinetic energy might betray you."

"Huh," I mutter, giving it a thought before replying. "The most likely cause I can think of is my blood. It takes my mana and condenses it, so it's probably drawing in the bits that escape my Mana Cycling and stopping them from seeping out."

"You would know better than me. The Captain said we'll be keeping to the sea and won't bother with flying anymore. He said it is possible the weredeer attacks everything in sight, so he hopes that the planet's curvature hides us."

"I wonder if we would be safer if we left now and dug in somewhere underground."

"It's always tunnels, isn't it?" Tess chuckles. "I think we should stay. The captain knows what he's doing, and from the members of the crew I bribed, I heard he used to be in a unit that tracked and occasionally fought against Champion grade beings. He also knows this planet's arrays and geology and can use them to our advantage. In the worst case, we can leave or have Sophie take over for him."

"Let's do that then," I agree, looking toward the west one more time. "It's unnerving, isn't it?"

Tess nods. "More than you know."

We're moving in a way that feels more like gliding than sailing, the hull barely touching the water. The captain guides us in what seems like a straight line, heading away from wherever the weredeer happens to be. All the while, I sense a steady pulse of connections anchored to one of the ship's masts.

Some of these connections could probably be traced by the weredeer if it were to have enough intelligence or the desire to do so, which is a risk. But at the same time, we seem to be receiving information that helps us stay prepared, so it's probably a fair trade.

No other Champions try to face that beast, even though six of them still remain on this planet. The other two are with the Princess. These guys here have likely judged the danger and considered a few options:

Either the weredeer is so strong that the six of them combined can't face it.

And perhaps the remaining ones aren't fully combat oriented, while the three that died served as the first line of defense.

Maybe they could kill the weredeer, but most of them would die in the process.

Or, possibly, the Princess ordered them to stand down.

It's that last option that feels most accurate, because about half a day later, something shifts, subtle but undeniable, and the planet itself begins to feel different.

Arrays that were dormant begin to activate, one after another, their light shining in the sky now without any clouds to obscure them. The western horizon deepens into a richer dawn, almost painfully beautiful, and in the air I can smell a faint trace of flowers. Even the colors grow more vivid, as if the world has quietly turned up its intensity.

Then, that beautiful voice speaks throughout the planet. "Have you been lonely without me?" The voice is soft, with no hint of a smile in it, yet it sounds gentle. "My heart aches for what you've endured while I was away. But you can breathe again. I am here now."

In multiple places in the sky, the array projects what may as well be a three dimensional screen, which seems to be projecting itself to every large group of people on the planet.

On the screen stands a feylyth woman of striking beauty. Her wings are larger than any I've ever seen on one of her kind, white feathers unfurled in a way that catches the light. She almost resembles an angel as she walks forward, the distant dawn behind her, showing the sun about to fall below the horizon.

She's dressed like a Greek goddess from the old classical depictions. Her build is muscular, and each step puts that on display. Yet it does nothing to diminish her distinctly feminine beauty.

The Princess smiles gently at all of us.

She turns around, and the view shifts around her as she takes a step. Everything becomes a blur, moving her hundreds of miles away as she heads alone toward the west and the dawn.

"I returned as quickly as I could," she says, taking another step that blurs the area around her.

When she stops again, her wings spread slightly. Her hair, eyes, and wings all turn a brilliant gold, and her presence radiates even more as she takes a final step with bare feet to appear near the forest.

"You don't have to be afraid anymore," the Princess speaks softly.

Each step she takes makes the grass grow and the earth itself pulse beneath her feet. The ground ripples beneath her feet as if the soil itself is trying to get closer to her touch. Massive and ancient trees groan as they sway to lean toward her, their branches weaving together to form a living canopy over her head.

The wind stops entirely, replaced by a rhythmic breeze that syncs with her breathing. Flowers that shouldn't exist burst from the soil in an explosion of color, blooming and dying in seconds just to carpet the path for her feet. Every animal, from the smallest insect to the largest predator, stops in a trance, turning to follow her in a sort of silent, mindless worship.

It's like she's the center of the universe.

The Princess reaches a small clearing, in the middle of which another being lies, resting or sleeping.

There, the Reanimated Dusk Weredeer rises to its feet. Its fur is completely black, with massive antlers and twice the height of the Princess. Thin and dangerous. Unhealed wounds cover its body as it stands there slouching, its front legs warped into long arms with claws at the ends.

Its lower jaw is entirely gone. It looks as if the deer we saw on the 9th floor had opened its long mouth, the one that went through the entirety of its neck, and someone simply tore the bottom part away. The upper teeth still remain, but now there's an empty hole where the rest should be, the bleeding even now seemingly refusing to stop.

Lastly, there are four furred fingers. Each of them grows from some part of the weredeer's head. One replaces the right eye, poking through the socket. Another shows only the tip from the left temple, the rest of it remaining buried inside the skull. The remaining two sit next to each other, growing directly from the forehead.

And the beast doesn't attack, it just hangs there, swaying gently from side to side.

"Oh, you poor, precious thing... Are you hurting, too, my sweet baby?" The Princess says, stepping closer hurriedly. She reaches out with her hand, gently caressing the weredeer's shoulders, ignoring the blood that stains her fair skin.

The weredeer continues to stand there, slouched over her smaller figure.

"You must be in so much pain. Is that why you've been so restless? Is that why you've been so very bad?" The Princess pets it, and the weredeer lowers itself so she can touch its cheek. More blood dirties her hand, some of it dripping onto her face and white clothes.

I can't take my eyes off the screen. It feels like I'm right there, also affected by the Princess's presence, watching the beautiful woman and the beast in the last rays of the dawning sun.

"You are breathtaking... and so powerful. You will be a worthy replacement for my precious Champions. You will be mine."

The last rays of the sun disappear behind the horizon, and the gentle orange light fades, changing the atmosphere entirely.

"You will be mine," the Princess repeats.

The weredeer lowers itself even more, and one of its hands moves, touching the Princess's cheek the same way she touched its own.

"You will be mine," the feylith woman repeats, her voice much firmer now.

The other hand of the weredeer moves, resting on the opposite side of her head, brushing her other cheek.

"YOU FILTHY ANIMAL, I SAID-"

She doesn't get to finish as the weredeer pulls all at once, tearing her head off her shoulders with the spine still connected. Before the screen in the sky disappears, I see the beast squeeze the head until it pops.

Chapter 802 - Quest objective

The moment the screen in the sky disappears, we get a notification.

A new objective has been given.

The Floor Quest: Kill the Reanimated Dusk Weredeer.

Note from the Ruler responsible for the floor setting: When I got called here, I expected something terrible, but what is this? I didn't even get to meet my baby, and the only reason I agreed to create this floor was so I could watch it happen over and over again whenever I willed it. It is truly saddening to see what has happened to my replica. So go ahead and kill that filthy animal. Avenge me.

And before I can process just how insane this is, a new notification appears.

The Floor Quest has been put on hold. The objective of the quest has been deemed inconsistent with the tutorial's intent and impossible to complete.

The Ruler of Diligence has called for a vote. The Ruler of Greed and the Ruler of Kindness have joined. The Ruler of Wrath and Ruler of Envy have abstained.

A new objective has been chosen.

The Ruler of Lust has voted against the new objective. The Ruler of Diligence, Ruler of Greed, and Ruler of Envy have voted in favor.

The rewards have been increased.

The new Floor Quest objective has been given: Survive for one hour.

The Floor Quest has been put on hold. The objective of the quest has been deemed inadequate by the Ruler of Envy.

The Ruler of Envy votes to increase the duration of the quest to one day.

The Ruler of Lust and Ruler of Envy have voted in favor.

The Ruler of Wrath abstained from the vote.

The Ruler of Diligence, Ruler of Greed, and Ruler of Kindness have voted to maintain the current duration.

Hehe, maybe next time. - The Ruler of Envy.

The Floor Quest has been put on hold. The Ruler of Greed has voted to reduce the duration of the quest. The suggested change is based on the assessment that the difficulty is excessive. The new suggested duration is 1 minute.

You fucking asshole, what do you think you're trying to do? Fuck off and enter the 12th floor already, and let's see if we end up with a second dead Envy within one year. It would be a record. - Ruler of Greed.

The Ruler of Envy, Ruler of Lust, and Ruler of Diligence have voted against the change in duration. The Ruler of Greed has voted in favor. The Ruler of Kindness and the Ruler of Wrath have abstained from voting.

The duration of the quest remains one hour.

The Floor Quest has been put on hold. The quest has been challenged on the grounds of insufficient difficulty. The Ruler of Envy has suggested a duration of one hour and one minute.

Unlike my master, I won't shy away from using Beyond's main defensive array. It's time for that old legend to die, and I'll be the one who kills her. - Ruler of Envy.

The Ruler of Envy and the Ruler of Lust have voted for increasing the duration of the floor quest to one hour and one minute.

The Ruler of Greed, the Ruler of Kindness, and the Ruler of Diligence have voted to maintain the current duration.

The Ruler of Wrath abstained from the voting.

And with that, finally, the notifications cease, and a new countdown appears, ticking down from one hour.

As the arrays in the sky begin to die off and the vibrant colors disappear, the ship accelerates to a much higher speed, attempting to head toward the opposite side of the planet from the weredeer. I rush towards... I stop.

Towards where? Towards what? There is no way we can do anything about that monster once it appears nearby. Not a single thing. Even if she were seemingly not combat oriented, the weredeer just killed this planet's Absolute. Someone bonded with this world's Sovereign Spark. Here, on this planet, where she was at her most powerful.

Once again, I turn around, looking toward the west, and that suffocating feeling hits me again. Many of the crew seem confused, as if they'd just woken from a spell, but the captain recovers the fastest. He shouts orders while moving through the deck toward the communication mast. I use a step of Wraith Dance to move to his side.

In the current situation, he doesn't even seem to care that I might be listening, he just acknowledges my presence with a glance before putting his hand on the telecommunication officer's shoulder.

"What information do you have?" he asks.

The feylith, wearing what looks like a helmet with a visor and headphones, with a multitude of antennae sending threads of mana to connect him to the panel and the mast, lifts his hand, concentrating on listening. Both I and the captain wait, and a few more people move closer to hear.

"Champion Pothas and Champion Qiurass have joined forces and already killed two other champions who haven't been identified yet..."

With a deep sigh, the captain looks toward the sky, somewhat melancholic. "Those two were always the strongest in combat out of all of them. Now, freed from her control, they will likely hunt together, killing all the other Champions before turning on each other and fighting to the death so one of them can become the Absolute."

"W-we should change direction, Captain. I'm immediately sharing the information with the navigation officer! We're currently heading towards one of the battlefields, it seems like Pothas and Qiurass are fighting another champion, possibly Lukas. He's the only one who should be able to put up a fight," the man with the helmet says swiftly.

"I'm confirming the change of course," the captain says, sounding defeated.

That melancholic expression remains on his face as he turns to me. "Is this how our world ends?" he asks me, though I think he isn't really asking me. "Would it be better if I stayed and died in my beloved Hadon? Just maybe-"

(NAT!) I hear Tess shout.

Even before I fully recognize the danger, my body moves in a burst of speed and kinetic energy, which I quickly use to bore a hole into the ship and make my way to the room where the others are. A few notifications pop up as I kill a few passengers and crew members who happen to be in the way, and I throw myself inside.

Though, just before I leave, I catch sight of the captain's entire chest evaporating in an explosion as an invisible projectile made of wind hits him. I see hundreds of the very same projectiles passing all throughout the area. Their spread makes me realize it wasn't even an attack intended for us.

The ship shakes as its defenses light up, absorbing some of the attacks while the others tear it apart, and I reach our room where everyone has already gathered themselves. My senses expand further as I judge if we should stay or go. I decide quickly.

"We're leaving."

At the same moment, group 4 lowers their natural fields and defenses. I teleport us all away, along with all the items we've gathered, causing us to splash into the water a few miles away.

I glance back at the ship, which is being bombarded by more wind attacks crashing all over the sea. Plenty of people are fleeing the same way we did. One of the larger strikes hits the water next to us, creating a skyscraper sized geyser and sending a wave rippling outward that rocks us wildly.

Far in the distance, the battle between Champions rages on. Constant vibrations, mana eruptions, the sky lighting up, and wind clashing against enormous monsters miles tall and made of water.

I teleport us again, and then again. Channeling my mana and using my skills, I do so repeatedly, dozens of times, as fast as I can place the mark and move us all. Even with their defenses lowered, it isn't easy to move so many people, each with their own traits, mana, and primordial energies. Every one of those factors makes it more difficult.

[Ley Line - lvl 75 > Ley Line - lvl 76]

[Current - lvl 44 > Current - lvl 45]

We travel a thousand miles and then another and another, yet I can still see the flashes and mana eruptions of that fight in the distance. We come to a stop on a small island, barely the width of a city block, made of sand and a few rocks with no trees in sight.

Once there, I slide to my knees, gasping for breath. Beside me, I hear someone throw up, followed by a few others joining them. Lily rushes toward Tess with a shout, quickly healing a hole in her side that she's had the whole time we were teleporting. As the wound is restored, the blonde stands up and gently pushes the worried Lily aside. With her gray eye, uncovered by her eyepatch, she casts a sweeping look in every direction.

I flick my left hand, dropping my fragment into the sand, and a dose of my mana makes it grow rapidly. In just a minute, it is as tall as I am, then stretches even higher. I force my blood to circulate faster through my veins while forming a mana halo over my head, filling it with mana transformed from thermal energy produced by my Ignition Heart. I am ready to manifest my Vessel and turn my mana black, but I avoid it for now to keep from drawing too much attention.

The weredeer is to the west. Three Champions are fighting to the north, and I sense more battles to the southeast. We are sandwiched between all of it.

Then, a new notification appears.

The Ruler of Greed has called for a vote to change the quest objective, reasoning that the difficulty should be considered too high.

The Ruler of Diligence, Ruler of Kindness, Ruler of Envy, and Ruler of Lust have all voted against.

The Ruler of Wrath has abstained from the vote.

Ruby must know when her vote will pass and when it won't, and she would make Kindness vote with her if she thought it was necessary. This is a clear message and a warning of danger.

My Vessel manifests behind me, and the halo over my head turns pitch black, beginning to pull on the ambient mana and everything else I feed it. I pull the glasses from my face and take a deep breath as I begin to filter the influx of information.

[Focus - lvl 77 > Focus - lvl 78]

[Manifestation - lvl 42 > Manifestation - lvl 43]

A crack sounds, and all of us look in the same direction.

The egg lying on the sand is now wide open, and within, a wyvern stretches from a curled position. It's white, and the edges of its scales are tinted blue, it's barely longer than my forearm from its head to the tip of its tail. It has two back legs, and its two wings have claws on the leathery membranes that it uses as front paws.

The baby wyvern shakes and rights itself before shaking a bit and yawning.

Then, it looks at us.

It's too calm. Its eyes are too smart and too cold. I don't like the way the ambient mana shifts around it, and I don't like the text over its head either.

[Wyvern Hatchling - lvl ???]

Its head turns, focusing solely on me. The creature would look cute if it weren't for those eyes and that gaze. It shifts its focus from me toward Tess and sniffs. Its brow furrows and, like a child attempting its first step, its mana moves.

Already prepared, my mana rises, moving to defend Tess. Sharp crackles of white lightning form in a small orb in front of it before a bolt shoots toward the blonde. My barriers crack one after another, but slow it down and weaken it just enough so it only burns her arm in its entirety, revealing bone and flesh even as she uses her own lightning to deflect it. The rest of the attack plunges into the water, which explodes a second later into a geyser of foam and white lightning.

The Wyvern Hatchling takes another step. The ambient mana around it shifts to obey as the tiny creature takes control of it, seemingly easier than breathing.

(It won't stop attacking!) Izzy says.

The wyvern snaps its head toward Izzy as if it heard her.

(Stop?) A new voice sounds in our connection. Then it's gone, along with the link that connects us.

More mana floods into the wyvern as it floats into the air, and an orb of white lightning forms over it, this one as big as a car.

Every bit of mana I can gather shoots toward it as I trigger [Empyrean Lance], funneling a lot of mana into the skill. A projectile of pure mana with a golden and white core screams through the air.

The attack slams against the wyvern, which instinctively lifts barriers that are far too similar to the ones I made to defend Tess.

More attacks follow behind mine, Izzy's flames, Tess's lightning and projectiles, mental attacks, and mana bolts. But the creature, in addition, surrounds itself with that white lightning and lifts its head toward the sky with a roar that spreads much further and faster than it should.

Sophie screams in pain and collapses onto the sand, clutching her head. At the same time, bloody tears stream down Izzy's cheeks.

"It's calling for its mom!" our empath shouts.

Then I remember the name of this floor.

Wyvern's Nest. Of course.

Chapter 803 - Not a bad run

I know I do it sometimes. When I'm around the other members of our group when we're in danger, I hesitate and become less confident in myself. Or at least more careful.

I hate these emotions, but at the same time, they're precious to me.

The more I gain, the more afraid I am of losing it all.

I'm sure it will repeat in the future, but for now, I suppress the version of myself who, ever since I returned to the 10th floor, has become overly cautious. I allow a part of me to surface that laughs at these thoughts. Even though, in the end, even that is a part of what makes me me.

I swing my arm, and my vessel behind my back mirrors the motion. A wave of raw mana crashes against the hatchling before it can channel another orb of white lightning. The black halo over the vessel's head expands in size, and the mana inside of it begins to spin wildly to pull in more of the mana in the area. All of my scattered mana, all the ambient mana agitated by the nearby Champions, and the mana from group 4.

Then I crash against the hatchling, fighting it for its own mana as well. The tiny hatchling with its cold eyes observes what I do, mimicking me and improving at an incredible pace. Its mana reserves aren't as big as mine, but it's been pulling on the ambient mana from the moment it was born to bend it to its will.

It is like drawing in the ambient mana is laughably easy for it. A lesser resource that's child's play to control. Impure and weak in comparison to its lightning. That tiny body, its bloodline, and whatever mutations and capabilities of its mind seemingly allow greater degrees of mastery.

But I won't lose.

I take a step ahead, my vessel turning pitch black. Two golden rings glow where the eyes should be, and pale blue lines are mirrored on it where many of my scars are. With the body I have, I won't lose.

Mana bends to my will and flows through my vessel. My mind channels it, and the vessel carries all effects of my traits and passives. The hatchling tries to fight me for it, but it fails.

I steal its mana as well, constantly launching attacks at it that each contain more mana than an average Hell difficulty attendee should ever possess. These attacks send ripples through the sea surrounding us, causing geysers of water to explode into the air.

Then the little creature looks at my black mana vessel and opens its wings wide. For a moment, its mana pull resists mine. It almost looks like the mana allows it to happen. As if it were accepting the hatchling's control over it lovingly. An orb forms in front of it and begins to compress. Tricolored, bright white, back to blue, then to one with a white and golden core. It continuously shifts and channels it all, switching between all levels of compression with such ease that it astounds me.

But it fails every time. No matter how hard it tries, that mana doesn't compress to the point of becoming black.

Those eyes turn even colder, and a dozen projectiles, almost fully mimicking Empyrean Lances, form all around it.

A pulse of my black mana shoots ahead, and the area loses most of its color. Before the projectiles can even launch, they all break into shiny white and golden particles that swirl in the air, spinning and swimming in the currents toward my vessel that takes them all.

When it comes to mana, I don't think my body and mind really lose that much in comparison to this thing.

[Focus - lvl 78 > Focus - lvl 79]

Signatures of the group around me fade and become just another source of information as my mind estimates how much of the attacks and the pressure the hatchling generates I should block and how much they can deal with.

I find myself capable of focusing on attacking the hatchling quite a bit, only jumping in occasionally to help out the others. I filter the mana my black mana devours to allow them to use their own, and their primordial energies and fragments continue to bombard the hatchling.

Stones are torn from the island and launched high up to fall down like meteors. The flames burst forth, along with the primordial lightning. Somewhere Sophie enters thought acceleration and, within that space, prepares an attack she launches in combination with the twins.

Maya, in her armor, after attacking, moves aside just as Blackie charges in. In a way, he's pretty similar to this hatchling, quickly improving and now let off the leash, he controls the body of the dead champion much more effectively.

Meanwhile, Biscuit is on the back of the island sniffing the air coming from the west, and amounts of primordial energy I haven't sensed from him before begin to gather as if he's preparing for something.

A surge of my kinetic energy ripples through the air as I throw it at Blackie, but it rebounds toward me, instantly far more powerful. I grab it and fling it back again, only for the same thing to happen, the force building much higher with each exchange. And as always, I simply channel it.

I narrow it to a needle point, then compress it further until it's about as thick as my wrist. Then it tears toward the hatchling with a sound like the sky itself is crying out. The sheer friction of so much energy moving at that speed makes it generate heat, as if the air around it were on the verge of igniting.

It almost matches the speed of the railgun attack Tess launches from her ring. Both of these attacks hit one after another, Tess's making a hole and mine breaking the barrier and barely missing the hatchling. No, rather than missing, it seems like the space around the creature twists and forces it to miss.

The hatchling screams again and flies to the side as Blackie reaches it, shooting white lightning at the dead demon in an attack that throws Blackie away, and every time his body bounces on the ground, more kinetic energy shoots from him.

As with the shout before, there is that feeling like the trembling of an entire planet, as if we were standing on a gigantic glacier crumbling deep under our feet. That feeling continues to become more and more prominent, like it's about to open and either swallow us or worse, release something that was never meant to wake.

My black mana turns into multiple orbs that float around me, each shooting ahead and stretching into the shape of a barrier segment to block lightning attacks the hatchling continues to shoot. It starts slowly, with one attack every second, but then it begins to speed up. It becomes two lightning attacks per second. Then five. Then ten. The hatchling's lightning rains down on us at high speed while I channel, concentrate, and move my mana at the same speed. Just a slight miscalculation, and that lightning would pass through, killing someone on the ground.

That fact only makes my mind calmer, and the hatchling is no longer managing to pull on any of the mana in the area. Any mana of its own gets disrupted the moment it leaves the body.

All of it is mine.

[Eclipse - lvl 69 > Eclipse - lvl 70]

[Current - lvl 45 > Current - lvl 46]

[Current - lvl 46 > Current - lvl 47]

Just as Blackie crashes against it, the hatchling calls again. The voice spreads much wider, and the tremors instantly become more powerful.

Then the entirety of the sky changes color from blue to white, while the clouds instead turn a dark blue. Everything becomes painfully clear in that lighting.

Both of my eyes sizzle in their sockets under the overwhelming amount of information, making me realize that the entirety of the sky has become an array, a domain, or something far greater. Something that now surrounds the entire planet.

I use multiple healing marks from Lily, restoring my eyes as I put the glasses back on, just to watch the hatchling under Blackie. He continues to slam at it even as bursts of reflected kinetic energy surround both of them. In one of these, Maya and Aaron are thrown through the sand and boulders of this island.

From the side, Noodle sneaks and shoots ahead, biting into the hatchling and, unlike Blackie, actually piercing the scales. But immediately, he pulls back, jaw wide open, and his body twisting and swirling in pain and spasms. Another kinetic reflection throws him away, where Lily rushes to his side.

Everything turns into a series of explosions, and I use it to channel more mana, preparing projectiles and fighting for mana more actively now that my [Eclipse] is gone.

Then the Weredeer appears.

Out of nowhere, it's here, bipedal, constantly bleeding, and standing on the calm sea under the white sky and blue clouds. Even the hatchling and Blackie go still. Everyone stands frozen in terror, unable to move.

In the face of how crazy this situation is, I find myself simply exhaling and smiling. It wasn't a bad run, I think, as I sweep my gaze over the place and people around me.

Then I take a step, and only I move through that pressure. My vessel moves closer, putting its hands on my shoulders, and the black halo expands even further. My Empyrean Blood circulates much faster as I

force it along, and the movement of such pure mana strengthens that field even further, allowing me to grasp mana inside of my body.

The Weredeer turns away from the hatchling to me.

The sky becomes an even purer shade of white, and somewhere on a distant part of the planet, a roar similar to the hatchling's sounds.

A hint of recognition flashes in the eyes of the Weredeer as it looks at me, and it lifts its clawed arm and swings in an attack that tears rifts into space itself with those claws.

I find myself somewhere else entirely. A small patch of forest. Grass on a small, gently sloped hill with a tree on the top and a few more trees around on the continuing patch of grass. Everything else beyond that and around that is a neverending white space with no clear walls or ceiling or floor.

I sit there, my back resting against the tree with Biscuit on my lap. He looks just as I remember him from the first floor. When I think of it, isn't the forest here the same as well? It makes me remember exactly this moment, one of those quiet ones where I found time to get away from everything, together with this wallet stealing corgi.

Automatically, I reach down and pet Biscuit's head, enjoying the feeling of his fur under my hand.

"I guess we aren't dead and this isn't the afterlife either, right?" I ask gently.

(Not dead.) The corgi lifts his head, and behind his eyes, I see his primordial energy more clearly than ever before.

"Biscuit, did you copy my lame Thought Acceleration attempts and create this?"

(Can do. Bond.)

"I see."

Even with what must be happening outside, I refuse to panic and instead place my trust in this corgi. But there is that faint tension in my chest that makes it harder to breathe. From his feelings, I begin to understand.

I allow myself a few seconds of silence.

(Will help,) He says.

"You know you don't have to."

(Want.)

"There is no way there won't be consequences."

(Doesn't matter.)

I open my mouth to say something against that, but I can't find anything to say. Instead, I reach down and pull him closer against my chest, wrapping my arms around him for a long moment where he doesn't move at all and just lets me.

After that moment, he turns around and boops my nose with his front paw. I don't recognize my voice as I say, almost begging, "Don't die. Don't leave me."

(Won't die. Will find again. Friend again. Nathaniel.)

Someone sobs, and then the thought acceleration disappears.

Out of nowhere, Biscuit stands in front of me, facing the Weredeer with his primordial energy blazing powerfully as ever before.

It devours the Weredeer's attack.

It devours the space in front of the Weredeer, causing it to reappear somewhere far away.

It devours our bond, cutting it off entirely.

It devours a tiny hole in the structure of the tutorial itself.

And then Biscuit disappears.

Chapter 804 - Two Wyverns

POV The Cerulean Parlor

About three dozen Handlers are sitting about in a cozy-looking lounge with a huge fireplace, and a floor covered in thick fur pelts.

This time, they've gathered for a rare opportunity to watch what's happening inside the tutorial without needing to skirt around the rules. It's the sort of thing they usually have to work around or get records of long after the fact. Now, they get to watch it as it happens, all thanks to the Ruler of Lust, who is present and sharing the view of her floor.

"Princess, I also think it was quite unpleasant to watch what that animal did to you. By the way, is that a new haircut? It's beautiful," says a woman whose body from the waist down is a spider, complete with its own head. Her voice carries a smile and a strange sort of charm.

The Ruler of Lust smiles back at her. Her hair, eyes, and wings are all black, and she's dressed in a sleeveless red dress.

"Thank you, my dear. And yes, I got my hair cut just a few days ago. It's been really trendy on my planet," she leans back in the special chair that doesn't restrict her big wings and crosses her legs. "And yes, it is a shame, but I myself know how cute and weak I used to be before I got my precious baby. Since then, a lot has changed."

"I think it is possible the weredeer was stronger than it should have been, wasn't it? The last floor they cleared had a higher difficulty and fewer restrictions than yours," the spider woman continues, her voice polite and soothing.

The Ruler of Lust seems to like the observation and nods. "That must be it, though we all know how powerful that brute's bloodline is. But who knows, maybe he will be mine one day as well," she laughs.

That causes the Ruler of Kindness sitting nearby to chuckle, and the Princess furrows her brow, deciding to ignore her.

On the screen, they watch the baby wyvern hatch. It lets out a call that spreads through the planet and then rises to face the group arrayed against it. There's barely any hesitation in that tiny creature. Wyverns are just born like that. Always looking down at every other living thing. It doesn't even consider the possibility of talking or creating any sort of mutually beneficial relationship. Instead, it attacks on a whim with the intent to kill.

"I almost forgot how cute he used to be when he was just a baby," the Princess sighs. "Now I can't even carry him anymore."

She is about to say something else, but a murmur starts when the barrier weakens the white lightning. The blonde woman deflects the rest with her own, even though it burns the entirety of her arm.

"Her lightning must be very pure to be able to do that much," one of the Handlers says.

"It was against a newborn wyvern, it should not be considered that impressive," another one muses.

"I know, but she only holds Primordial lightning. It shouldn't be able to do even that much against that."

"Silence, you two. He is using--"

That man gets interrupted by the Ruler of Kindness. "He is using black mana. Remember, that's the name." The way she smiles makes the others nervous, but they force a smile back and quickly nod.

“...he is using blackmana again,” the Handler completes his sentence. “I was curious how it would stack up against the white lightning ever since he had his clash with Lyraen.”

They watch on the screen as the domain expands. A man with a cold expression moves, and his vessel follows his movements. His mind controls all that mana, and the vessel channels it. Black orbs move all across the field, creating barriers to block the white lightning that the wyvern is beginning to master at an incredible pace with bursts of white sparks.

The Ruler of Kindness, sitting on the couch, allows her body to slide down until her head falls on the legs of the person she’s seated next to. Her golden hair spreads over them like a brilliant waterfall as she looks up at the woman.

“What do you think of your ward?” she asks. “How does he compare to the Ruler of Greed, said to be the most powerful combat mage since Lissandra Hawthorne?”

The Ruler of Greed doesn't look at the screen, nor the other Handlers, nor even the other Rulers present. She just looks down at her friend. “He’s still not enough.”

“I think you’re lying.”

“You can think that. And what is your opinion of him?” After only a second, she adds, “Lady Kindness?”

“I like him. He should rely on his black mana even more, allow it into his body, and let it turn him into a monster, hopefully one just as powerful as the Empyrean Thaumarch once was. Did you hear that Pride said the Thaumarch was the strongest person he had ever faced?”

“Was that before or after his duel with Lissandra Hawthorne?”

“I haven’t spoken to him in a long time, so who knows? Maybe Lissandra stands higher in his opinion.” Kindness laughs playfully and turns her head to the side to watch the screen before addressing everyone in the room. “I noticed not many of you have spoken of that man’s adorable little bond.”

This time it's the Princess who speaks. "I agree that he is cute, and while his Pantophagic primordial energy is powerful, what can he actually do here?"

"Princess, isn't that the primordial energy that one clan of wolves also has?" one of the Handlers asks.

The Ruler of Lust smiles at the woman, asking, causing her to blush and look away. "Yes, the descendants of the World Devouring wolf. Though sometimes beings outside of their clan appear with Pantophagic energy. I wonder why the system hasn't given out a quest to erase them as it did with the Emphyreans. But look, my cute little murderer is back."

As she says this, multiple Handlers chuckle. The spider woman on the side smiles for a short moment while watching the screen, though her spider head remains turned toward where the Ruler of Kindness lies on her friend's legs.

The weredeer's appearance causes the fight to stop. Everyone halts, and no one makes fun of it. Many of them remember their first meeting with an Absolute who wasn't restricting their pressure.

This book was originally published on [NovelFire](#). Check it out there for the real experience.

Yet, through all of that, a single man moves. His steps are slow, almost unhurried, as he moves in front of everyone else.

"What an incredible body and mind," one of the Handlers whispers with admiration. "If not for Nyssa or Christoph, he would've been the greatest attendee in the past thousand years."

"And what a smile," another one says, and a few of them chuckle, throwing in similar words.

"I still think Lyraen shows more promise. And some of the overlooked S ranks that completed their tutorial have been doing really well. Have you heard of Ozlashaktralq? He's almost an Absolute now."

No one seems to worry much about the people on the screen or the chance they might die in the next moment. Many of them have already had their fun watching this curious new development. Some of

them, perhaps, are even hoping for the people on the screen to die so their own wards will have better opportunities in Beyond. Others might have already placed bets, sure to win them plenty of shards.

But their words stick mid sentence as the small corgi moves ahead. The primordial energy he's been raising flashes forward with a strength like never before. The weredeer disappears, and the corgi follows, causing an eruption of multiple conversations as groups explode into excited chatter.

"...Did he damage the tutorial's structure?"

"Very pure Pantophagic energy can do that, though at a high cost, but even the members of that wolf clan avoid using it to such an extent to avoid triggering the eradication quest from the system. The poor little thing either couldn't control it or must have been desperate."

"He's probably gone. Is he dead?"

"If he didn't, his mind must have been destroyed by such an abuse. Or at least that energy devoured part of him, I've heard of such cases."

"It damaged the tutorial's frame. The Ruler of Diligence is going to be angry."

"The system's probably fixed it already and adapted against such cases in the future, making the energy weaker. The system can be slow to adapt to such unique powers that aren't used much. Give it some time, and it will suppress that energy to the level of the common five. In the end, it was just a tiny hole in this instance of the tutorial, and it was only there for a fraction of a second anyway." One handler flatly explains, though he hasn't spoken until now, a lumoran whose limbs are all made of crystal with mana bouncing around inside his visible bones.

"I bet a million shards that the cute creature is dead."

"Two million shards. It's alive, but it's crippled, and its mind is broken."

"Three million shards, it will..."

The Ruler of Greed tunes them out as she observes the Ruler of Lust, who stands with a flashy smile. Greeting everyone else and even bowing toward the Ruler of Kindness, then Lust hurriedly leaves.

It seems the Ruler of Greed knows what is happening or where she went and seems intent on following her, but she is stopped by the blonde resting on her knees.

“There is no need,” the blonde mouths.

It causes her friend to furrow her brow, but she stays and settles back.

With the weredeer gone, the view on the screen shifts to where it had been before, but before it can return, it pauses and shifts to the south.

The ground erupts as something colossal pulls itself from the depths, a wyvern resembling the hatchling, yet scaled to a terrifying, incomparable magnitude.

This is the source of the domain currently suffocating the planet. While wyverns are well known for their searing white lightning, they are equally feared for their mastery over various domains.

The beast instantly senses its offspring’s presence, but its path is blocked by the opponent that appears in front of it.

A long time ago, it would have squashed that being in mere seconds, erased it from the face of the world for daring to stand in its way. But not anymore. It’s old, dying. Woken by the call of its offspring, it climbs from the place meant to become its tomb.

Even so, it looks down at the creature facing it and spreads its torn wings wide, space itself shaking around it. It knows it won't be able to track the cry of the hatchling without dealing with the opponent in front of it.

The screens are now maintained by Kindness after Lust’s departure. And just as the Handlers begin to bet on the fight, she switches the view back to the group facing the hatchling. Even though disappointed, none of them dares to complain too much.

"I had hoped they would have killed the hatchling by now. I bet that would've made the mama wyvern very angry," one of the men says. His body is covered in fur, and his face bears animalistic features slightly reminiscent of a bear. Despite this, he wears a pure white suit.

"You've been hoping for that ever since the egg cracked," the spider woman reminds him gently. "Plenty of time still remains, though, and I bet the mama wyvern would've sensed if it had gotten hurt and pushed through the weredeer."

The bear-man dismissively waves his hand. "Just look, they're already holding back. That annoying little empath told them to. Why does she keep crying?"

The spider woman speaks as she continues to observe the fight. "Isn't it because the hatchling destroyed one of the twins? It is very impressive. No wonder Lady Lust rose so fast after taming it. What surprises me is how the others are holding back. I would've expected them to have killed it by now, they seem capable of doing so."

"Because of that annoying empath, they knew the mama wyvern would come and have decided to ruin my fun by not doing so," the bear-man sighs, but continues to watch the screen.

They watch the rest of the fight, which turns into an attempt to contain the baby wyvern. As they hold it down, mostly through the effort of the man with two differently colored eyes, some of the others try to kill the hatchling, causing the man to block their attacks wordlessly.

Multiple people in the Cerulean Parlor compliment the way he contains the creature and defends against its white lightning. They also note the way he blocks all attempts at communication the hatchling makes to call for its parent. After observing it only twice, he seems to have devised a method to silence it.

He and the hatchling constantly clash in a way where a single mistake, a single slip-up, or the wavering of a tired mind would allow the creature to break through. His black mana continues to flare up constantly, pulling further into the area and feeding on the ambient mana. The vessel behind his back grows in size, pressing against the barrier stacked around the hatchling and catching rays of white lightning.

There are bets on how long he'll be able to endure, with many guessing just ten minutes as the hatchling continues to grow and learn at a rapid pace, soon to reach the level of a Champion's power.

He endures for over fifty minutes.

The hatchling finds itself incapable of doing anything. It cannot break through, it cannot mimic his black mana, and it cannot develop the mana control necessary to shatter the man's ability. In the end, for the first time, it shows fear, pulling back to the far side of the barrier and away from the man whose gaze hasn't changed once. Not when one of the twins exploded in a bolt of white lightning. Not when the others threw themselves forward to kill the hatchling, or when his bond disappeared.

It doesn't even seem as if he has blinked since.

That same expression remains even when the entrance to the next floor opens, and everyone else leaves with all the items they can carry. Finally, the barrier around the hatchling disappears.

It cries for its mother multiple times into a world that seems to be falling apart from the fight, far away. The tremors intensify in reaction to that call, and the man lets it happen.

The arms of the black vessel behind him move and grab the hatchling, even as the creature surrounds itself with a cloak of sparking white lightning that punches holes into the vessel and burns through mana.

The man forms a spear of blood in his hand and stabs just once, straight through where he senses the beating heart of the hatchling.

Without so much as a glimmer of satisfaction or any other cruel emotion, he walks away, leaving the hatchling and even his vessel holding it behind as he steps through the portal, which closes to the cries of a distant, dying wyvern.

Chapter 805 - For a few more minutes

POV Nathaniel

One day after entering the 11th floor and confirming it's somewhat safe, I enter Beyond. Just as I'd hoped, I find myself in the usual place with Ruby sitting behind her table.

"Hey," she greets me.

"Hey," I say back, sliding into the chair opposite her.

Coming out of the scorching heat of the 11th floor, it feels weirdly comfortable here.

"Biscuit isn't in Beyond?" I ask, just in case. I wanted to get that question out as soon as I could, though I suspect I know the answer.

"He is not," Ruby answers. She quickly continues, "Why don't you stay here for a few more minutes before you use a Tutorial Stay token? It costs half a million shards. You shouldn't waste them like that."

"I don't think I can currently find it in myself to care about that," I say, and yet I remain seated in the chair.

"That floor really got fucked up," she says.

"It did."

"So, how are you taking it?"

I give myself a moment to think before I shrug. "It sucks, but honestly, I'd been waiting for something like that to go wrong. It is kind of in the name of this difficulty. It could have ended much worse. This failure doesn't even change anything or add further to our 'motivation.' All of us already knew that we needed to get stronger. It was just as you said: a shitty floor full of mistakes. Some of which could have been avoided, and others that were just bad luck."

"That is true," she says in a gentle voice, hinting for me to continue.

I find no reason not to. People always feel a bit better after complaining to someone who listens, so why not? "Biscuit is gone. Our bond is gone. But I will find him, or he will find me." I pause and lean back to look upwards. "He's strong, so I'm sure he's okay. But I guess that's not something you can tell me?"

"It is complicated. As a Ruler, some of my actions or words could bring unwanted attention from the system. It is best if I stay quiet for now."

I nod. "I understand. Then there's Noodle, who's still in pain after biting the wyvern. We think that gluttonous snake is trying to absorb some of its blood, and I think he's started to change a bit."

"I know you have some as well, from when you stabbed the hatchling."

"I do. Me and Lily will be using it to try and forcefully strengthen or evolve my blood trait, if possible, or share it with someone more compatible from the group. There isn't much of it, so I don't really know yet."

"Be careful."

"As much as is reasonable," I pause again, and this time the feeling is different, the kind that makes it difficult to talk. "Then there's Aaron. His body, his mana heart... all of it, gone. Now he's been reduced to a mind living in his brother's head."

"It was the better option of the two."

I nod again. "It is. That maniac even transferred all his stats to Dennis before his body got destroyed, so Dennis has effectively doubled his stats. Aaron can partially help him with some skills and stuff, too. So Dennis got a huge boost, and he's been joking that he might enter Beyond if possible, though I think that joking is just helping him avoid curling into a ball to cry. Apparently, on the later floors, you can get an individual quest to enter Beyond."

"You can. It starts on the 10th with rare chances on lower ones. You don't even need an upgraded difficulty change token anymore. Though by that point, there's usually much less time for you to explore Beyond or take advantage of its events and quests."

"That much is obvious," I say, deciding to complain a bit more. "If you saw that... Aaron jumped in to save Izzy. I failed to contain the lightning when the hatchling took advantage of my state after Biscuit disappeared against me. Without Aaron, Izzy would be dead. But now he doesn't have a body, and no one knows if he'll disappear soon, if he counts as an attendee, if the stats he shared with Dennis will stay, or if he can level up and get stronger. Lily could probably clone Dennis or slowly tear him apart piece by piece, like, tear off his arm, heal it, tear off his leg, heal it, use the harvested parts to build a 'clone' we could just maybe use Sophie to transfer Aaron into. But that body wouldn't have a mana heart, and I think without that mana, it would fail to keep that 'mind' alive. Even if we had Aaron's brain and copied it perfectly, we'd still just be creating a copy of him. Saying it sucks underestimates it a lot."

Ruby, who listens patiently, agrees. "It does suck a lot. Were you scared?"

"Of course I was. Scared shitless when I saw his body evaporate. I thought I'd just lost a friend. But what I feel is nothing in comparison to what he or his brother felt."

"Don't dismiss your own scars. You've gone through a lot, too. You lost your bond, and your body is continuing to fail. You're living in constant pain, and the pressure of knowing a single lapse in mana control could mean the end. On top of that, the burden of being the strongest falls entirely on your shoulders. Your planet, family, and life are being threatened by that man, and things on Earth are changing as he establishes his base there and makes his plans for the coming decades, not just the next few years. Before you ask: he is honoring his promise, and your family and friends are safe."

"If you say it like that, it sounds like a lot," I allow myself a breather, especially as I notice her reaching towards me and handling my mana in my stead. As she does, it feels like a constant hum in the background disappears, and some weight lifts off my shoulders, too.

Still, I look at her. "But it is something I chose of my own free will. As for the things I didn't, well, there I've gained a lot in return that normal people couldn't even dream of. It is obvious there would be a price for that."

I examine one of the mana stones lying on her table. "I thought about it, Ruby. I often think that these things happen because I'm just not strong enough, and to some point, it is true. But then I also look up. At the Rulers, and at you, and I can't help but think how pathetic each one of you is. So I've come to think that it would still be the same even if I reached your level. Tied back by various deals, goals, and straight up the system itself."

Her eyes narrow just as I look up from the table at her. "And I wonder, Ruby. When was the last time you truly did the utmost you could? I keep thinking of Lissandra as she was when I met her on the second floor. Satisfied with where she was. The strongest there was without challenge, stepping back so the others of her planet could take over and prove their worth. And then I think that you, I, she, we're similar in a way. Right at this moment, I feel angry. Motivated. There are many things I want to do right away, promises of revenge I have to keep, and promises to never let these events repeat themselves. Yet, I've felt like this before. These emotions will, in the coming months, fade from a blazing flame into glowing embers. I think that's just how humans and other beings are."

She doesn't break eye contact or say anything, so I allow these words to die off and look away from her. For a minute, we stay quiet just like that.

Then she speaks again, this time asking a question. "And why do you do all you do?"

There are many options I could answer, the usual ones, but for some reason, for a short moment, a memory of the lumoran Champion, Feroy, flashes through my mind from when I asked a similar question. Back then, he just spoke with that hint of gentleness in his voice.

"Because I'm a Champion of my people."

But out loud, I just say, "Because as long as I'm the strongest, no one can take anything from me or force me into choices I don't want to make."

"That's good to hear," she says. "Want to change the subject to something more lighthearted before you go?"

"Why not."

"The Lycan you met on the 9th floor is the Ruler of Wrath, currently considered the 3rd or 4th strongest Ruler. People can't decide who should be third, either him or me, though I think it should be obvious."

"It is obvious."

“Good boy. So, fun fact: since Kindness and I were blocked after you ran to Beyond with his hand, you almost traded with him for it, instead of Diligence.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, oh. Though amusing, I don’t think it would have been a very pleasant experience for you. Another thing. Would you like to know why he abstained from the votes for the new floor quest?”

“Please tell me.”

“He was too busy laughing his ass off after seeing Lust’s replica being obliterated by that Weredeer. Though in direct combat she is no better than an average Champion, it is quite a shame she got killed that way, especially as it was, in a way, caused by him.”

“How did she even become a Ruler?” I ask.

“The 10th floor has a two month duration. At the end of those months, the Champion would’ve gotten the egg and gifted it to her, at which point she would’ve realized what it was. For her, it is a pleasant memory as she was able to charm a wyvern and, thanks to it, grow much stronger. Currently, she has tamed one more wyvern like that and many more powerful beings she’s added to her 'collection over time.' Yet, she remains weak in direct combat, even though her other strengths are quite impressive.”

“Are you sure you can tell me all that?”

“Today... I don’t care for the rules that much.” She moves her hands and, reaching into one of the drawers, draws out two glasses and puts them in front of us. Then, from the same place, she takes a bottle that shouldn’t logically fit there and pours us a liquid that is green with yellow sparks glowing inside.

I pick up my glass and take a sip, followed by another. For a moment, I close my eyes and enjoy the feeling of strange warmth spreading through my body, relaxing my control of mana even further. Ruby helps me control it, keeping it from damaging my body, while the rest of it just seeps into the area. It’s something that would usually threaten the lives of even powerful people, yet there is no chance of it doing something like that to her.

“Want me to give you the fur pelts and wood you got from the Magi so you can take them with you to the 11th floor?” she asks.

“No,” I shake my head. “Please send them to Crimson Forge along with the Everwood. I’ll be back in a few days.”

“Will do,” she says, pouring us more.

I drink again and notice that the more I drink, the more numb my body and mind become in a strange way. All noises become slightly distant, and I become just a passenger.

“It must be expensive,” I note, taking another sip.

“Very. It is impossible to make more of it anymore.”

“Give me some so I can take it with me.”

“Ten million shards for a bottle.”

I pause just as I lift the glass near my mouth and look at her to see if she is serious. She seems to be.

So I just take another sip and then stand to pour us both another glass, being sure to fill my glass to the rim.

Chapter 806 - 11th Floor

Once back on the 11th floor, I find myself inside a cave that isn't particularly deep. It is wide, however, and offers an open view of the scorching dunes outside. There's no greenery at all, and even rock formations are rare. Otherwise, it is just sand as far as I can see, with the air wavering over the horizon with the heat. I have a suspicion that spending just a few seconds out there would have melted my pre-tutorial self.

The star of this system appears to be either two or three times the size of Earth's sun, unless perhaps we're just that much closer. The light itself is harsh, almost white. Interestingly enough, I don't think this planet is rotating at all. Min-Jae said it's probably tidally locked, similar to Earth's moon.

I take in that view for a while longer before taking over Izzy's effort to absorb some of the heat inside the cave to make the temperature a bit less harsh.

"Did you bring something to drink?" Sophie asks, coming to a stop at my side.

"Just a little bit," I say as I pull a few bottles of water from my bag. Between them, there is also a bottle of green liquid with yellow sparks that I bought for one shard. I stare at that bottle for a bit, thoughts swirling in my mind, before handing it directly to Sophie. "Please make sure everyone takes a sip or two. Especially Izzy and Dennis."

She seems to notice the tone of my voice and nods. "You don't have that item you used to have for storing liquids?"

"I took it apart a long time ago. I thought it had some sort of spatial compression component and tried to learn from it."

"I see," she says. "I don't remember the last time I felt so thirsty, and even in this heat, I shouldn't. So maybe it's part of this floor's settings or some effect of the environment. There are even some side quests that reward water, so that confirms it should be a big part of it."

"It seems so," I agree. "You should use a one day Beyond Stay token and bring some resources back. I'll stay here and scout the area a little."

Sophie nods and pulls me slightly off to the side by my arm, lowering her voice even as she sets a field that prevents anyone from listening in. "Nat, I really don't want to enter Dennis' mind. I'm too scared I'll mess with whatever Aaron did when he moved there. I'm also terrified of what a powerful disrupting pulse could do to what remains. Such an attack could easily treat it like an array or something to be disrupted. Their [Connection] is a weird skill, and them being twins, they always did even weirder things with it, so I'm not exactly sure how it would react."

"I think that all you said makes sense, so let's not rush and be very careful about it," I nod.

She covers her face with her palms and rubs them over it, sighing. "Izzy is a mess. Tess is holding strong, but her arm isn't going to be restored anytime soon, even with Lily's abilities, and we have to keep an eye on Noodle. Then... Biscuit... are you okay?"

"There is no need to worry about me."

After looking up at me, she says in a quieter voice, "I guess there's not. I already sent Blackie out there to scan the area, and I'll leave him here while I go to Beyond. He will listen to any of you, so take advantage of that if you need to."

"Sure."

After that, Sophie returns to the group, and I, after distributing the rest of the food and water I managed to get from Ruby, head toward the exit of the cave. Before leaving, I set up an array to help regulate the temperature. I leave behind an orb made of a tiny bit of mana that isn't even meant to power it, instead, in the middle of it, a drop of my blood floats, something I've been experimenting with to see how well it works as a replacement for a mana battery.

"You are coming with me," I say, stopping to address Min-Jae, who's just been sitting there looking lost.

I don't even wait for his answer and exit the cave as I hear him scramble to his feet. The temperature immediately increases, and the air alone feels hotter than some of the fire skills that have been used against me. To deal with it, I expand my reach over myself and Min-Jae, continuously absorbing heat which I then channel and turn into mana to feed the crown floating over my head.

There is a feeling of something missing, so I stop and try to remember what it might be, only to realize that the missing part is my connection to Biscuit. Which now feels quiet and empty.

I begin to walk again, and Min-Jae speeds up to walk at my side. As we walk, we don't hurry at all. I keep within sight of the cave, where I have multiple Ley Lines and marks placed.

Walking over a few dunes under the scorching heat, we reach Blackie. Sophie's bond notices us and explodes into a run that comes to an abrupt stop some distance away. Every time the wind blows or grains of sand hit him, pulses of kinetic energy are sent out into the area around his body. Unlike when we were in the city or on the flying ship, he isn't wearing the cloak to help him with that, but so far, there's not much reason to.

As we stand there, I sit down in the hot sand. I even stop absorbing the heat fully, allowing the dry temperature to attack my body. As Min-Jae sits down next to me, I notice his glance and do the same for him, allowing us both to feel the burn.

Blackie, seeing us sit, follows suit, though more energetically. His movement causes a larger explosion of kinetic energy, which makes more sand blast into the air and rain down, triggering even more tiny explosions.

Watching it all happen, I don't reach out to stop it. Instead, I observe it until Min-Jae uses his [Telekinesis] to make each individual grain of sand around Blackie halt in mid-air.

While Blackie watches the floating grains with what feels like fascination, poking them with the tip of his finger, I ask, "Are you okay?"

"I think so. I mean, I'm sad and shocked, but as long as there's hope, I have something to hold on to. If the worst were to happen, I'll be devastated at that point anyway, so there's no point in spiraling now," he says. "At least that's what I try to do. And you?"

"Similar."

Min-Jae pulls his knees to his chest. "I think for a while I even wished it was me instead, but I know how stupid that is. Now, at the same time, I'm angry at Aaron, and yet I admire him for what he's done."

"It is a bit cool of him, but as you said, I want to punch him too."

"I didn't say anything about punching."

"Punch him like ten times," I sigh and lie back into the sand, not minding the grains as they wash over my face. "One of my rewards for the last floor was an option to select an item reward. A Low Pristine. Don't you think it's stupid how incredible the rewards we got are, and yet they feel so useless at the same time?"

"I know exactly what you mean," he says.

"Yeah, I thought you would. I'll buy an item for Dennis, something to protect his mind against mana disruption and mental attacks."

"Did Sophie talk to you about it?"

"She did, but it was something I thought of on my own. Her coming to me with the exact same thought without me having to mention it tells me that the concern is very likely to be reasonable."

"Yeah," Min-Jae says, standing up. His mana flickers around him as he creates a barrier against the heat. "I will head back. If anything happens, I'll pull on one of your Ley Lines."

"Yup, see you later," I say, turning to Blackie. "You go back as well. I'm going to scout the area a bit."

As Min-Jae leaves, Blackie hurriedly rises to his feet and runs after him. I follow them with my eyes for a while before turning away. Then, I open my notifications and go through them one after another, after all, I only really glanced at them once we completed the 10th floor.

[Redistribution - lvl 77 > Redistribution - lvl 78]

[Manifestation - lvl 43 > Manifestation - lvl 44]

[Manifestation - lvl 44 > Manifestation - lvl 45]

[Current - lvl 47 > Current - lvl 48]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 79 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 80]

[You have defeated Wyvern Hatchling - lvl 439]

[Lvl 402 > Lvl 403]

[Lvl 403 > Lvl 404]

[Lvl 404 > Lvl 405]

[Lvl 405 > Lvl 406]

[Lvl 406 > Lvl 407]

Congratulations! You have cleared the 10th floor of the Hell difficulty tutorial.

Welcome to the 11th floor: Xyphos.

The objective of the cleared 10th Floor quest has been altered, and the rewards have been improved in line with the newly calculated difficulty.

You have acquired:

Trait strengthening token (up to 2nd stage)

Three active skills combination token

Low Pristine passive skill

Low Pristine item

I scroll past all of that and check the objective of this floor.

Floor Quest:

Xyphos is best known for its Labyrinth, an ancient structure built long ago by unknown hands for purposes that remain a mystery. The planet is also one of the few places in the known systems where Talnium can be harvested, a rare and highly coveted resource.

Three major corporations, along with numerous independent organizations, are constantly clashing for control of its harvest. Some are attempting to establish legitimate mining operations, while others rely on smuggling networks and covert strikes to secure their share.

Your objective is to obtain half a packet of Talnium and ensure it is successfully transported off Xyphos.

Rewards:

???

Passive skill combination token

Falling into deep thought, I muse over the objective, this time more deeply than before, and as thoroughly as the information I currently have allows.

After that, I close the window and open a new one as I use one of my rewards.

You have used an active skill combination token. Please pick three skills from the following list to combine.

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

Warning! A combination of incompatible skills may result in a worse skill.

Warning! After combining the skills, it will become extremely difficult to acquire the skills used in the combination.

Please select the main skill of the combination and two supportive skills.

List of available skills to combine:

Perception - Lvl 77

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 80

Ley Line - Lvl 76

Current - Lvl 48

Congratulations, you have successfully combined [Ley Line], [Mana Manipulation], and [Current]! A new skill has been created.

You have acquired [Weave]

[Weave - lvl 0 > Weave - lvl 9]

Still sitting in the sand, I reach out my hand with my palm up. Just as the sand moves around me, a few particles made of mana swirl over it.

Congratulations, you have acquired a new skill!

[Mana Manipulation]

[Mana Manipulation - Level 0 > Mana Manipulation - Level 78]

Not enough.

These particles begin to move faster as more of them appear. Between them, pale blue, white, and golden ones show as well, moving erratically like a poked beehive. I push further until there are more and more of them.

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

Under my Preeminence Eyes, they all halt and hang still in the air as I remember the end of the last floor, the way the hatchling moved its mana, and the way I mimicked and adapted to it faster than it could. My blood feels like it's burning in my hand, and I begin to actively pull ambient mana from the air, imprinting my will upon it.

Without my passives, without my domain or black mana, that mana still obeys my will and gathers over the palm of my hand.

[Mana Manipulation - Level 79 > Mana Manipulation - Level 80]

Better.

Chapter 807 - I'd better clean it up

I stand up and dust the sand off my clothes, stopping for a while to look at the shard on the back of my left hand. As half of it splits, I catch it between my index finger and thumb, taking a moment to observe it in the bright light of this floor. Then, I send all of the mana from my crown into it and throw it into the sand.

It begins to rapidly grow, at first just a trunk with a few branches and no leaves, but as it gets bigger, transparent green leaves with lights gently swimming inside grow as well.

It grows to be as tall as me. Using it as a node, I use my new skill to connect lines to it. The Nameless Tree makes them more durable and stable, even as I connect them to the existing ones that lead to everyone in Group 4.

I give myself a few minutes to work with the tree, molding it into the way I want it to work for now. With the tree at the center, a simple domain expands. This one works just as my [Redistribution] does, causing all the wind in the area to weaken as it begins to be absorbed, not all, but about half, of the kinetic energy from everything, from the moving sand to the movement of the wind.

It isn't extremely efficient, and through my connection to it via the half-crystal in my hand, I have to actively keep the absorption working, but it's not something that takes much of a toll on me. All absorbed kinetic energy is then fed to the tree, making it grow taller, its effects better, its range higher, and my connection to it stronger, along with the powers I can send through it.

Doing as I said I would, I begin moving toward an area where I saw higher levels of mana when I originally flew into the air to get a feel for the area. Still not feeling like getting into too much of a rush, I just walk, occasionally moving over larger distances with Wraith Dance. Sometimes I stop at the top of a dune and just take in the view.

Surprised, I also notice that enduring the heat takes a weirdly high amount of mana. Sure, it is hot here, but it shouldn't be draining me to such a degree. Well, it's not like I'll be running out anytime soon. I'm sure I could keep it up for months if I wanted, but for someone at a lower level, the surface would be unlivable. Someone with a powerful body could probably endure it with just that, or possibly with the right passives or items, but if you came here unprepared and didn't find a place with a bit of relief, this planet could kill you fairly quickly.

So far, I haven't detected any monsters or animals. As always, it makes me wonder if it's just the floor's settings, the environment of the place the floor's been based on, something I have no experience with, or a mix of all three.

While moving, I also use the glasses to train my eyes. It only really requires sending bits of my mana through the frame, which activates the lenses and the training regime the Magi designed them with. I suspect the frame tracks my eye movements and their reactions, modifying what I see accordingly.

At times, the ambient mana becomes more visible, either at random or through some system I don't yet understand, using color to draw my attention. That color becomes brighter and brighter to the point where, if I fail the exercise, it becomes nearly impossible to see. What the glasses do is emphasize the

ambient mana, track my eyes, and use the lenses as a shield so the influence of my eyes doesn't expand further than I can handle.

The glasses then require me to look at that ambient mana and understand it.

How the glasses know if I failed or passed the exercise, I have no idea. They also occasionally "zoom in" on certain waves and allow more information through, at first in small areas, and then in larger ones.

A few times, it surprises me how much I can gather. It's not like the glasses are doing the work, but rather that they focus my sight, making me realize what I'm already capable of seeing.

As annoying as that man is, I must acknowledge his talent. This exercise is exactly what I needed, not to mention the way the glasses filter out some information so my mind doesn't get overwhelmed.

It also makes me wonder what else Elian put into these glasses. I'm sure I would have added more if I were him.

Can he see through them? Do they gather other information on the tutorial or on me? Do they send him some sort of tutorial coordinates? Could they explode and kill me instantly? Do they contain a tiny part of his mind, and will I eventually have a new intruder in my mental space?

I don't know, but I wouldn't be surprised by any of those possibilities, though I don't really think Diligence or Ruby would be likely to let something that excessive happen. But who knows? They could've been tricked, too.

As I reach my destination, I stop using the glasses and take a look around. As far as I can see, there aren't any signs of any man made structures, so I look down at my feet. Through the sand, from deep below, small amounts of mana reach the surface. When I send my senses down there, I notice defensive and alarm arrays. I work around them, quickly finding a weak link and placing a mark.

Teleporting, I find myself in a tunnel around half a mile below the surface. The temperature difference is incredible. Right now, it feels like a warm autumn day at most, a far cry from the sand melting temperatures outside.

Spotting a group of people nearby, I head their way, listening to their voices.

"Aurate Consortium has taken over the Shades' base number two, the one on the night side. They just found more Talnium there, possibly two packets' worth to harvest. Man, I would slit all their throats myself for even half of that."

"Fuuuck, didn't the Shades hire some sort of Absolute Candidate not long ago?"

"Two of the arrogant fuckers, you know how those candidates tend to be. Boss said the Consortium's Adjudicator appeared there, so they're dead."

"Okay, great. We bail."

"Do not bullshit yourself. They won't send an Adjudicator after a small group like ours. Just keep your head down, we'll continue our harvest and ditch the place with the next shipment. There is no way I'm staying here any longer with how things have been going."

Coming closer, I observe them in the light of small shining orbs inside vials that each of them has on their waist. They are all around level 200 to 300. Each of them is wearing a strange sort of clothing that covers their entire body, leaving no skin showing from the neck down. Even their faces can be hidden, as each carries a helmet designed to cover the entire head and connect to the rest of the suit.

The suit itself is white, visible even through the dirt and patches of dried mud and sand clinging to them. It isn't very thin, rather, it seems like there are dozens of pinkie-width tubes covering most of the surface and connecting to a few reservoirs, each with some sort of liquid inside.

Lastly, each of the suits has a mana battery in the helmet and another in the middle of the chest, which looks to me like it can be switched over to be powered by the mana generated by the heart, given the presence of some sort of structure on that part of the chest. Each of the men here has a weapon. The walls of the tunnels are covered in bits of machinery and ventilation systems, and nearby, there's a small teleportation array, currently powered by a full mana stone, ready to be used.

Finally, they notice me too, and a dark blue projectile with a hint of purple mana shoots at my head. Covering the back of my hand with oscillating mana, I flick it away, at which point it breaks into a cloud of tiny particles that swirl in the air and get pulled into the crown over my head.

Multiple attacks follow in a similar manner, and I deflect each of them the same way. A few of the men move to run at me and, surprisingly, most of them surround themselves with armor made of mana. Looking with my Preeminence Eyes, I observe the structure of each, find a weakness, and then, through my gaze alone, each suit of armor breaks apart before the men can even reach me. A burst of kinetic energy bounces off the walls and violently pushes them back, sending them sliding until they can bring themselves to a stop.

Even in the comfortably temperatured tunnels, a few of them show beads of sweat on their foreheads, and a few even carefully move back toward the teleportation array, unknowingly to the others who are closer to me.

“So, I have a few questions,” I say in a voice I believe to be polite and calming.

Another attack launches at me, the projectile disrupted just before it touches my head, and particles are pulled to the crown.

The lynthari man who did moves to do it again, but before he even can, [Empyrean Lance] launches from me. It stabs through his chest, carries him over a short distance, and pins him against the wall. The man twitches a few times, attempting to pull the lance away while only wounding his hands, eventually dying.

[You have defeated Hexblade - lvl 295]

The lance disappears, causing his body to slide down the wall and drop to the ground in the silence that ensues.

“I have a few questions,” I repeat.

“Fuck you! You know we can't say anything! Who are you with?” one of them, a velnar man who just barely fits into the tunnel, shouts at me.

“Why can’t you say anything?”

“You... you have no idea?” the velnar stares at me almost unbelievably, but with even more growing suspicion, the same as the rest of the group. “It’s because of the implant in our brains. Everyone coming to Xyphos has them so they can kill us if we break the rules, and erase the coordinates of this place from our minds!”

I ignore his loud, almost shouting voice and, without caring if he notices, I scan his body, searching for the implant. Just as I find it and locate it in the middle of his head, the velnar groans in pain and falls to his knees while holding his head.

Observing even that, I deflect a few more attacks, wary not to kill the attackers.

How weird, I would have sworn I hadn't disrupted any of the implant's sensors for triggering that reaction. Either someone very skilled at the level of Champion or higher made them, or they've just been made in a way I have no experience with.

One of the men tries to rush through the teleportation array, and one of my lances pierces through his head, causing the body to fall down as I think about what I should do.

I already killed a few, so just letting them go wouldn't make sense, and the result would likely be the same or worse than just getting rid of them. But then there's the teleportation array, and I don't know if more people will come through, possibly bringing someone powerful, so I can't just leave it be.

And as much as I would like to ask the men in front of me, I don't think they lied, and the implant probably wouldn't allow it. The result would be the same even if me and Lily were working together to remove it. I confirm as much as I reach toward the implant in the velnar's head. That causes him to shout in pain again. A few veins in his eyes burst, making his eyes bleed.

I don't think I can destroy it, teleport it away, or anything similar. Well, not before it kills the man. The more I examine the implant, the more I realize it is quite impressive.

The attacks on me intensify in a way that feels desperate. Thrown weapons, some arrays activated, mana batteries powering the suit used to overclock it, and more. Yet I halt all movements and disrupt all the mana.

“Fucker! I swear my brother will kill your ass along with the organisation helping you! I...” The velnar doesn't get to finish as his head explodes in a high pitch of kinetic energy I send his way, carving a deep hole into the wall behind him.

Only a second later, do I realize what happened and furrow my brow.

This could easily turn into a mess and snowball into something more dangerous. So I'd better clean it up.

The rest of the men die in the same way, and, passing by them, I reach the teleportation array. There seems to be a code required to activate it, and as I dig deeper, I deduce it must be something the men here hold, so I begin to search while a part of me continues working to decipher the array.

Meanwhile, I sit down on one of the boxes and another part of me searches for any talnium they might have had, even as I don't know what it should look like. Still, I find no ore or anything that looks like that sort of material, so I go over my status instead.

Name: Nathaniel Gwyn

Title: Absolute Candidate

Difficulty: Hell

Rank: S, Radiant Gold

Guild: Primordial Knights

Floor: 11 - Xyphos

Time left until forced return: 1y 246d 16h 31m 16s

Traits (3/3): Preeminence Eyes 2/5, Mana Physique 2/5, Empyrean Ichor 1/5

Lvl 407

Strength: 371

Dexterity: 349

Constitution: 100

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1927 + 1927

Primary Class: Mana Weaver (Unique Arcane)

Sub-class: [Adept of Pride]

Active skills (8/10):

Focus - Lvl 79

Perception - Lvl 77

Redistribution - Lvl 78

Eclipse (Pride) - Lvl 70

Empyrean Lance - Lvl 49

Manifestation - Lvl 45

Weave - Lvl 9

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 80

Constructs:

Physical Fortification Matrix

Mana Flow Control

Mana Sovereignty Field

Kinetic Mana Heart

Sealed Ignition Heart (Partially Sealed, 1/3)

Combat Cognition Frame

High-Density Thought Network

Thermal Flux Controller

Passive skills (5/5):

Mana Kinetic Conversion Reservoir (Unique Epic)

Mana Wavelength Tyrant (Mid Arcane)

Subdermal Combustion Weave (Mid Arcane)

Mana Wave Predation (Unique Arcane)

Cognitive Hyperprocessing Vector (Low Pristine)

Tokens:

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

Passive skill combination token (low arcane)

Beyond visitor token - 1 year (unlocked after tutorial)

Beyond 14 day stay token (x 25)

Two active skills combination token

Trait strengthening token (up to 3rd stage)

Trait strengthening token (up to 2nd stage)

Low Pristine Passive skill

Low Pristine Item

Shards: 5,239,706

A few minutes later, I finish up and step into the array, activating it and teleporting to wherever it leads.

Chapter 808 - And who might you be?

The moment I appear on the other side, an attack shoots towards me, a laser-like stream of oscillating mana.

A spherical trap barrier encompasses me, and more defensive arrays activate. Behind them, people begin to gather, all wearing the same suits as the men I just dealt with. All of this is happening in a central square room carved into the rock, from which five tunnels radiate outward, each with its own set of tubes sticking out of the walls, and the sound of machinery humming in the distance.

Another wave washes over me, and the pressure threatens to push me to my knees. The beam widens, just barely splitting in front of me as I cut through it and send it off to my sides. I notice constant waves of probing mana searching for something in me, and as they fail to find it, the attacks only continue to intensify.

Realizing what it is, I recall the frequency of the implant I observed in the velnar's head and mimic it, letting a check on me connect to it. It takes a few tries, but I succeed. For a short moment, the beam stops, the pressure and the barrier disappear, and the alarms fall silent in stark contrast to the erratic movements of the people gathered around.

One of them barely gets the chance to scream as my lance stabs through him, carrying his body into the dark tunnel. Another man falls down, body pierced by Needle Point.

I move again, just in time as the barrier reappears and the pressure returns. The beam of mana shoots forth, moving through the wall, which cracks as it tracks me, and then locks onto me again. A burst of a nearly identical attack shoots from me, briefly pushing against the stream and then widening and blazing with greater intensity.

My counterattack pushes through the beam as they collide in the brief moment before mine overwhelms it. It reaches the device, shooting through it and destroying it entirely.

I use Wraith Dance to move and avoid the attack, and then repeat the maneuver a few more times to dodge a pair of men with high dexterity who've begun to follow me. Noting another man attempting to run away, my lance shoots at him, breaks through his barriers, and pins him against the wall.

One of the fast men reaches me, swinging to lodge his dagger in my chest, but a segment of a barrier appears in front of me, blocking it entirely with little more than a few ripples sent through the surface. The man disappears as if he had fallen into the ground. I track him with my eyes alone, finding where he intends to step back out onto the surface. As he does, I'm already standing there, my body boosted by kinetic energy and mana, and a dagger manifests in my hand.

That dagger pierces through the barrier over his skin, through his armor and chainmail below, and digs into his heart. I move just a bit of thermal energy into the dagger and leave it pinned there. At which point it explodes just as I Wraith Dance again to avoid the other speedster.

He dodges the explosion and quickly locates me, moving to track me down. This one's a lumoran, and the crystalline features covering his neck and forehead have begun to glow, sending a high-pitched noise, some sort of sonic attack, my way while also attempting to disrupt my mana. From behind me, what seems like a spider with just four legs jumps from the shadows to attack me. Some sort of animal.

The man's bond.

I hesitate, and the four-legged spider grabs me, stabbing its fangs into my arm.

My thermal energy burns the poison, and my mana rises up around me to deal with pressure, and all movement halts. I break through the natural barrier of the man and the spider and forcefully reactivate the teleportation array, sending them both away before disabling said array and overwriting it with my own structure.

A lynthari and a human man exit the tunnels, the lynthari has a [Mana Crown] hanging over his head. The human connects to what's left of the defensive arrays, reactivating them and taking over the mana batteries, using them to power his domain, which begins to expand, placing him at the center. Like ink, a pale red color seeps into the area, tainting everything with its hue.

Before it even reaches me, the colors around me drain away, and that effect expands further. It pushes against the pale red ink-colored domain and, faster than it can expand, I make it shrink as if time were moving in reverse. It slams into the man, who gasps for breath as his control over the array and mana batteries slips away. The lynthari man who was clearly there to serve as his mana battery doesn't even have time to fulfill his role.

[Eclipse - lvl 70 > Eclipse - lvl 71]

My domain strengthens, fills the air, and for a short moment, I power it with a pulse of black mana I've quickly compressed. My eyes read the frequency faster than the skill can change, and I break his [Mana Crown].

A huge amount of mana explodes from it, threatening to destroy the place in its entirety with the resulting pressure, radiation, and friction releasing that amount of mana would cause. Yet before it even touches the lynthari's hair, I take it over. All of that mana halts in my grasp, the ghost of an explosion caught on the brink of destruction.

My blood surges through my veins, strengthening my other two traits. I move that mana, spinning it and sending it to the fake Mana Crown over my head. It's a truly massive amount, probably what I could gather in a week of constant effort by transferring the thermal energy of my Ignition Heart into mana.

I begin to wonder why I hadn't killed the man and his bond and chose to teleport them away instead, when the lynthari man, now without his crown, twists and vomits out a huge amount of blood. His body breaks apart, and emerging from his insides, a baby falls to the ground, entirely covered in his blood and guts.

That baby quickly grows with a tearing of flesh and cracking of bones until it reaches the size of an adult mora, just as tall and slim as the three from the Crimson Forge. The mora just looks back at the corpse it appeared from and snickers before licking the blood from its lips.

[Endo Knight - lvl ???]

"And who might you be-" he asks.

Before he even finishes those words, [Empyrean Lance] stabs through his chest and causes him to lose his balance. He reaches out as he falls, grabbing the human who previously used the domain and killing the man, tearing off his head along with the spine attached.

The mora is twice as tall as the human was and entirely covered in the blood and guts of the lynthari, making him look even more terrifying. The spine he just tore out hardens and grows into a sword, while he tears chunks off the human man's body and shoves them into his own chest, where they merge with him, healing the wound I just caused.

“So you would rather play.” his laugh fills the intersection of the three tunnels, and he attacks.

His body moves in an animalistic, near unpredictable way. His speed is high, even for how tall he is. The edges of his body turn to a blur that almost looks like he's leaving a stream of transparent blue and green afterimages behind him as he moves. The spine sword in his hand grows even further, stretching into a greatsword, taller than he is, as he swings it at me.

Both he and the weapon halt mid movement, as I hold them there, and a dozen quickly made projectiles pierce through his body, tearing it to pieces.

I follow the movement of mana, and another bloodied baby climbs from the body of one of the corpses around us and begins to grow rapidly. Before the mora can fully reform, I boost my body and grab the spinal greatsword. I shorten the distance between us and slam the sword against the almost fully reformed mora, who resists, holding his forearm up to ward me off. It gets cut through, and the sword stabs into his shoulder.

Even so, the mora pushes hard and stands up tall, twice my height and covered in blood.

He smiles as I let go of the sword, and he grabs it.

When kinetic energy explodes from me, he puts the sword between us and is thrown through the room to crash against the wall with a sickening crunch.

As I shoot more blasts at him, the corpse next to me, the one he climbed out of, swells and explodes with surprising force. Before the explosion even reaches me, mana surrounds me in a barrier that gets splashed in red blood and pieces of flesh. It partially blocks my view, but using my other senses, I track the mora's movement as his spine sword swings down with great force, those green and blue afterimages tracking it as he does.

The spine sword smashes through my barrier as I step to the side, and it slams into the ground next to me. Before the area can explode from the impact, I absorb all kinetic energy and, in one smooth movement, step closer to the mora and strike his knee as I release that burst in an explosion. It causes him to sway and fall to his knees, his body finally ceasing to tower over me quite so much.

He still holds the spine sword and swings to attack me, but before it touches me, another high pitched blast of kinetic energy explodes into his body. In the next moment, flames surround me, bursting forth and incinerating every remaining corpse in the area.

No kill notification comes, and I can't feel the mora's presence anywhere in the complex. I stand there for a moment before making my decision.

I take off my glasses, and my trait pushes itself further as I scan the area within the effect of my released [Eclipse]. I force my mind into overdrive until I find what I've been looking for, a faint connection that allowed the mora to use his skill through the people he marked, allowing him to appear here.

My mind spirals through the connection, taking it over, restoring it, and strengthening it. I drain a chunk of my mana to power the effort and then teleport through that very same connection.

The place I find myself in is very different from the underground tunnels. This one is clean, with white walls made of some sort of stone and many potted trees placed throughout the space. There's even a small fountain nearby. In the middle of that stark white room stands a mora flanked by two women of his kind, while the corpse of a third lies on the floor. One of them is putting a white fur robe over his bloodied body while he gives orders to the other.

As I appear, he turns to me, his yellow eyes widening as he lets out a hiss before an [Empyrean Lance] stabs through him and throws him to the floor. I swing my hand, and like a torrential wave, golden flames blaze ahead, burning both women and reaching towards the male mora.

[You have defeated Blood Mage - lvl 256]

[You have defeated Farseeing Elementalist - lvl 191]

The fire twists mid air, chasing the Endo Knight's beast-like movements. I pivot the stream to track him, the flames lashing against the walls and incinerating the trees as he continues to dodge.

Thick pillars fall from the ceiling, careening toward me as defensive arrays activate, but more mana floods the space around my body, forming a partial suit of armor around me. It is only the upper half, and yet it towers three times my height. The pillars crash against that armor, melting some of my mana and partially disrupting it, but the armor holds, obstructing the defensive mechanism.

One of the armor's massive arms moves to grab the mora, who jumps over it and spins to avoid a barrage of my projectiles. He shouts in a way that shakes the air, and the flames reaching toward him die off in the shockwave.

The thick metal doors marking the single entrance to the room begin to open, but I halt their movement, absorbing all the kinetic energy as someone outside tries to force them open.

Then, more mana floods forth from me, making the armor thicker just as a hole opens in the floor. From it, a greatsword made of pale, dried-out bone, broken on one side, creating a jagged edge, shoots up, and the mora grabs it. Then, with that beast like grace of his, he takes a step to the side. Still bloodied and draped in the white fur robe, he bows slightly and shows me his teeth.

"Please enlighten me, what caused me to be the target of your hunt?" he asks, readying his body for an attack.

"Consider it a preventative measure," I say, my mana tightening around the room.

He gets no more words from me as more projectiles shoot at him.

Chapter 809 - Vlad

The armor around me expands further, filling more of the room as the mora just stands there. His arm swings through the air with after-images trailing behind. Each swing destroys one of my projectiles, and the final strike meets the [Empyrean Lance] I shoot his way.

As my lance meets that weapon with its blade of broken bone, the weapon doesn't explode. Instead, the mora is pushed back with the lance, grinding against the bone, sparks of white and golden light bursting

through the area, in time with the constant pulses of the field the [Empyrean Lance] likes to leave behind, disrupting mana to the point of collapse.

In the end, the mora swings the blade, deflecting the lance to the side, causing the weakened bolt to pierce into the wall. He turns that movement into another swing and slashes through the arm of the armor surrounding me.

I search for any skill or other effect from the sword, but find it to be nothing more than bone. It is extremely durable and possesses a sharpened, if broken edge, yet it has no other effects.

The doors I've been trying to hold closed slide open ever so slightly for a moment, and my mana reaches through the opening. Outside, I place multiple tricolored orbs before two more arms grow from my armor and force the door shut.

I feel them shake under the explosions.

[You have defeated Bloodmancer - lvl 353]

[You have defeated Flesh Berserker - lvl 349]

[You have defeated Lightning Guardian - lvl 346]

The mora is already standing beside me, slamming the sword into part of the armor that surrounds me before pulling it in front of him to block a kinetic blast. He lets the force throw him back and follows the momentum to spin in the air. He drops to all fours and charges at me like a beast.

As with all mora, his skin is red with gray symbols tracing his body, featuring slightly pointed, short ears and two short fangs that show as he wildly smiles at me. His limbs are long and slim, but they don't really feel weak, rather, they're incredibly nimble. An after-image follows him as he dodges under my barrage, making me take notice of the fact that he's been getting used to my rate of fire, as well as my kinetic blasts.

Instead, I let thermal energy flood out from me and step out of the armor, leaving it behind to keep the door shut. The flames surround me like a wave crashing against me and then pouring outward. I raise the temperature until the floor begins to melt and the air in the room becomes so hot that all the trees and other plants catch fire.

The pressure of a defensive array crashes against me. This one seems like it's been designed to disrupt mana and cut the intruder off from its use. It continues to try to break through my natural barrier and has a powerful push to it.

Still, it fails to do so. My blood, my upgrades, my other traits, and my Mana Cycling all keep my power tethered to me as my flames blast at the mora in a wide area attack, he has no chance of avoiding. Before they devour him, I notice him smiling as he just stands there. Those flames wash over him, just blinding enough to hide him from my sight.

Then they are pushed to the side, revealing the mora still standing there. He is burned but otherwise untouched. Instead of his slim figure from before, he stands before me now full of bulging muscles. Still twice as tall as me and now probably twice as wide as he was before. That bone greatsword now looks like a toy in his hand as he swings it at me in a horizontal motion.

The next thing I feel is the strong pull of a vacuum as the outer space pulls all of the air from this side of the orbital base.

Finding myself floating in that black void, mana flickers around me and covers my skin in an almost skin-tight suit of armor that clings to me like a barrier. It looks almost too thin, but from the effort I put into it, I know how powerful it is. It's one of the arrays that I've always got a part of me working on and focused on keeping it in the back of my mind. It is one of the variations of the armor I've come to call Regalia.

My eyes are pulled back toward the orbital base, which looks like a sphere made of silvery metal with no windows or openings at all. Now, in one part of it, there is a gaping horizontally oriented hole. In contrast to the silver and white colors, the bloodied mora in his white fur robe stands there, smiling animalistically.

"From one Absolute candidate to another, I challenge you to a duel to the death. I am Vlad Ar-Thal'vahr of the House Kezdhuul. Let the slaughter of a worthy opponent be our only reward, honored by the certainty that only one of us shall leave this void alive."

His voice carries through the vacuum, even as no other sound could possibly carry in this void lacking air.

As I speak, I find that I can hear my own voice as well. "I accept."

Now the extremely muscular mora laughs, though I can't hear it anymore. He shakes his hand, and the bone sword he's holding splits into two, and he grabs one in each of his hands. Both blades are quickly covered in symbols that are unlike any inscriptions I have ever seen, to the point I am sure they are not inscriptions at all.

Green and blue after images surround the weapons, and the mora, with a strong leap, pushes toward me, damaging the orbital base behind him.

Behind me, another orbital base appears, nearly the exact replica of the smooth silver sphere, just bigger and made from a metal that seems to have rusted with the years. This base has many visible weapons all over it. There are devices that seem like tools for channeling mana, shield generators, and other such things.

Maybe I should think of it as cheating. I know the mora has been sending a signal toward it and calling it for help. I detected it early on, and I'd kept an eye out especially for that. Now I have my preparations against it, and I cannot help but wonder how different our perception of honor truly is. Vlad doesn't even for a speck of a moment seem to think it might be the least bit cowardly.

With my thoughts accelerated, I watch the mora flying through the air toward me. The way his eyes move, his thoughts must be similarly accelerated, though likely not to the same extent as me. It is something I've been seeing in more and more people. Their brains process information like supercomputers, while physical laws continue their attempts to stop the body. At least, what remains of them.

In that slowed-down world, my hand moves to lift up over my head with my palm open, revealing a cut I made there. As I force my body to move so quickly, damage forms on it even as I deal with the kinetic energy and lessen it to a great extent.

Lioren would be laughing at me.

My blood seeps out from that wound, moving faster, expanding, elongating, and flowing. Red Empyrean Ichor, my blood with tiny sparks of white and gold.

I still don't like the name. It's not Empyrean. It's mine. But for now, I will allow it.

[Manifestation - lvl 45 > Manifestation - lvl 46]

[Manifestation - lvl 46 > Manifestation - lvl 47]

[Weave - lvl 9 > Weave - lvl 10]

[Weave - lvl 10 > Weave - lvl 11]

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 49 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 50]

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 50 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 51]

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 51 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 52]

The lance made of blood gets surrounded in another lance with a core of glowing golden and white as I weave them together. The blood feeds the lance, the lance feeds the blood, each strengthening the other as the weapon grows in size and expands, making the gold and white light fight against the blood, fighting to form it into a core until they settle and pulse together.

I release it with such power that a blast of kinetic energy throws Vlad away before he can reach me, and the lance shoots at the base that just appeared. Out of that base, weapons shoot at my projectile, lasers made of pure white light, mana streams, a generator attempting to absorb kinetic energy, and, in the end, barriers stacking in the way.

The lance pierces through everything and through the base as well, only to exit on the other side.

It feels weird, since I do it while floating in weightless outer space, but I am too used to it, so I breathe out and [Focus] further. Then, I swing my arm and pull it towards me.

And the lance returns.

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 52 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 53]

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 53 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 54]

It reaches through space to float over my hand, and I feed it more of my blood and more of my mana. Then I launch it again, targeting the spots with heightened mana that I can now sense through the base's broken defenses. Other projectiles from me follow as well, targeting these holes. Javelins filled with thermal energy, tricolored orbs, and more.

Many of them explode as the base continues to launch its rain of projectiles and lasers at anything that comes too close, but some still pass through, causing more explosions. Some of these attacks reach me, hitting the armor surrounding me and making the surface ripple, but nothing else.

Vlad reaches me again, and I spin and fly through the void, forcing him to follow as he continues to launch himself at me like he's jumping from invisible platforms, and we begin to clash.

Another part of my mind splits in the meantime as I manifest my vessel behind my back. This time, it isn't even a full figure, just the upper half, and it grows until it's twice the size of my torso. It swiftly turns black as I compress some of my mana and begin to transform more thermal energy into mana, feeding it. The more I give it, the more it takes. But it doesn't just take from me, it takes all the mana from the area as well.

It strips mana from the projectiles, from the broken mana batteries on the station, and from pieces of the barriers around them.

The lance shoots ahead again, this time piercing through the shiny base. The bombardment I'm under intensifies, but it's mostly mana-based and breaks apart before it reaches me. Even the strongest attacks

do nothing as my vessel covers me and absorbs them. Any attacks based on primordial energy, I just block straight on.

I pull some of the mana from the vessel, concentrating and narrowing it, and swing in a horizontal slashing motion. A stream of concentrated mana, a beam no thicker than my finger, extends for a mile. Oscillating and concentrated, it cuts into both of the bases through the places I see the most weakness.

There is still an utter silence even as I watch the bases explode from the inside and kill notifications ring in my mind.

Sometimes I wonder how much of the tutorial has been made so the attendees can experience their powers. So they can get angry, scared, and sad. To lash out and attack. It is made so they can break things in an environment that allows for it without any real consequences, allowing them to see. They learn to control themselves and learn to hold these powers and emotions inside as they return to the outside.

The mora reaches me again, and both mana and kinetic energy boost my body just as the lance flies back to me. That lance I grab and hold, forcing it to change shape into a two handed sword, even as it sears and damages my hands to grip it.

He swings his bone weapons, and I swing mine.

And my sword breaks. The blood splashes, and all that mana explodes into the area.

Vlad, with eyes wide open and a smile, steps forward, shifts his still nimble body, and swings both of the swords again to finish me.

I face him with a cold gaze as I gather what remains of my blood and the [Empyrean Lance] floating around us, shooting it ahead like a projectile.

The mora staggers, and his attack weakens even further as my vessel moves, pressing its hands onto his forearms and holding them. He makes an effort to move again, but the projectile that's still embedded in his chest moves under my will, piercing deeper and scrambling his body. An arch of light shoots out and pierces through his head.

[You have defeated Endo Knight - lvl 429]

[Lvl 410 > Lvl 411]

I let the momentum throw me away from him, spinning around to face the bases. My senses scan the area and, with my vessel following behind me, I boost myself forward to continue my attack.

Chapter 810 - Small Talk Only

Minutes after the mora called Vlad died, and after many more smaller fights, I find myself floating here, and detecting no more living signatures.

I feel lightheaded, and there are wounds covering my body. Even though I have plenty of healing marks from Lily, I don't use them. While keeping my guard up and senses monitoring the area, I comb through the debris, searching for anything that could be Talnium.

Passing by where Vlad's body floats, I reach for his bone swords and grab them. The moment I touch them, a scan washes over my body, searching for something. When I don't fit the criteria, the swords break and turn to dust before my eyes.

I watch said dust float through the void before turning around to face the planet, whose day side I can now see.

Here, outside of the atmosphere that would normally reduce its intensity, the light is even brighter and the temperatures even higher. Just maintaining the barrier around me drains a surprising amount of mana. As for the planet, it is just like the part where we found ourselves, sand piled upon sand with no mountains or seas. Right in the center of the planet, there is a zone that seems hotter than any other, where the sand has slumped into a thick, glowing sea of molten glass.

There is also something surrounding the entire planet. Not near the surface, not even here in orbit, something even higher. I don't know how I should even classify it. A field? A domain? Maybe an array or something entirely different? I also don't know what its main purpose is, as it doesn't seem to weaken the light of the nearby star. I just know I can't look at it for too long, and I have to hold myself back from using my eyes.

It's just difficult to explain. Imagine a planet the size of a baseball, while the sphere surrounding it is the size of a basketball, either hiding the baseball, creating a blockade I refuse to test at the moment, or something else entirely. I can't even figure out what's powering it or its source, it's just there, all around us.

As I move from debris field to debris field, I grab any items and materials that look useful. There is a lot of it, so I sell much of it to the system shop, even though I know I'm only getting 10 to 20 percent of the value.

And the entire time, I do what I've been doing since I learned about the implant. I continue to observe the bodies and search for any sort of signal that an implant in the brain could send: during the fight, at death, or at its destruction. I tested all these and even paid more attention to the implants of the more important people here. Yet, so far, there's been no such reaction from any of the implants.

That confirms for me that it is safe to fight and kill these people, and the same will be true for the rest of group four. I killed many of them, and even destroying their space station didn't bring any attention. I have already been floating here for minutes, and no one with any power has come to deal with me.

There are more things I confirmed or suspected back in the tunnels. These people don't avoid killing, as I could see by the mora's willingness to treat his people as expendable teleportation marks. I also found signs of torture rooms and prisoners on the bigger base. It doesn't change much, but it does give me a bit of peace of mind as it confirms this is one of the more lawless floors.

I also search the planet's orbital ring for more bases, but there are none as far as I can see, and no other organizations or corporations seem to be coming to check out what happened.

As I replay the fight, I also confirm that even if they can't do what I did individually, Group Four could've dealt with these people together. Of course, the difficulty usually ramps up gradually as the floor progresses, at least if you don't just go around poking the hornet's nest, so it's possible there are stronger people here. The worst are probably the three large Corporations, while the independent organizations are likely weaker.

I should probably throw myself against one of the Corporations to confirm, but there's no need to do it now. Knowing how the system works, they're either at the hottest part of the planet or on the dark side.

While floating there and waiting to see if anyone appears, I examine my body, searching for marks that could have been placed on me. I explore some of the pill-like implants I managed to get my hands on and experiment with my new skill.

As with the previous combinations, it seems I still have access to the abilities the combined skills allowed for. It is either because the new skill allows it, or because of the effort I put into training those previous skills, so I wouldn't need to rely on the system to guide me. [Weave] is slightly different from what I expected. I thought it would be a sort of combination of a domain, something that would allow me to move larger amounts of mana outside of my body, and something like The Veil from the 5th floor.

It did kind of turn out like that, but I get the main sense that I can weave things together, just like I did with my blood and [Empyrean Lance]. It was likely made easier because the two related to each other so well, but now I'm sure I could do it with other stuff. I'll have to give it some thought and do some more experimentation. But so far, I'm also sure I could either create the [Weave] as a thing, something akin to the Veil, and that I can perform the action of Weaving.

All in all, it's a good and useful skill.

Having mostly confirmed no one is coming, I take the black orb that has, until now, been absorbing all remnants of the mana in the area. I leave a small part of it as I teleport, getting pulled towards my Mana Tree along with all the useful things I've just looted.

Once down there, I observe the area for a few minutes. Then, the tree begins to shake and shrink until it becomes a crystal that merges with the one on the back of my hand. Leaving a tiny black orb behind, one I'm sure will break apart soon after absorbing the remaining mana in the air, I walk back toward our cave, dragging the pile of items behind me.

I use a few healing marks, as always admiring the way Lily's mana can restore even a body like mine.

Once inside the cave, I greet Tess. She's sitting near Lily, who's currently working on Tess's arm, which is still mostly bone with bits of scarred flesh. Tess waves back at me, while Lily doesn't even seem to notice I'm there, she's so buried in her work.

First, I observe the orb with a drop of my blood and find it has been able to power the array I left behind the entire time. It is hard for me to estimate how much mana it contains, but I'm sure that amount will grow as my reserves expand and I strengthen my trait.

I'm certain that if I became a Champion and died, my body would do some truly fancy things to the environment, just like the bodies on the 9th floor did. Would a curious young explorer be able to get close and find mana still clinging to my corpse even decades later? Would the Emyrean Ichor be dried up, or would some liquid remain? Maybe there would be an entire city built around me, using my corpse as a power source.

How cool.

I grab one of the water bottles off the table, take a few long sips, and close my eyes as I enjoy the taste of cold water hitting my parched throat. I even pour a bit over my face and hair, combing through the mess with my fingers.

The pile of items and materials stays where I dropped them as I head over to Izzy. She is sitting on the ground with her back turned to everyone, Noodle's head resting on her legs. She continues to gently pet him. I sit just behind her and wrap my arms around her in a hug, even though she doesn't turn around or acknowledge me.

"How is he?" I ask.

"It hurts him," she answers simply. "I have to keep helping him through our bond."

"And does it hurt you too?"

"It does, but I've decided to take on some of his pain." She looks around. "At least you aren't like Soph, you aren't trying to stop me."

"Do you want an answer, or do you want to read my feelings?"

"I don't want to read anyone's feelings right now." She turns away again.

"I see." I continue to hug her while I think. "You're right, I wouldn't try to stop you. Same as I didn't stop Biscuit, and the same as I wouldn't have stopped Aaron."

Her body tenses at those names. I let go and ruffle her hair. "It will be okay."

"How can you know?" Izzy says quietly, lowering her head.

"Because I'm an optimist at hearts."

I stand there in an awkward silence as she offers no reaction. After a moment, I gently nudge her with the tip of my shoe. "Come on, you've always liked lame jokes."

"Go away. You say it too often, it isn't even funny anymore."

"I think it is. Show me your face, Izzy."

"Go away!" she shouts, but I can hear the change in her voice.

Still, I do as I'm told. I pull an item from my pocket and read its description.

Aurelia Aegis-Gem (Low Pristine) -A tiny gemstone that grafts itself to the center of the forehead. It acts as an anchor for the wearer's consciousness while also greatly strengthening the body's natural barrier. Any attempt to disrupt the wearer's mana or internal biological functions is instantly negated, ensuring the wearer remains immune to most forms of cognitive or other interference.

Once I'm in front of Dennis, I stop. He looks at me, smiling brightly, the only member of the group currently wearing such a look.

I hand him the gem and watch as he reads the description. His emotions bleed through as he realizes what it's for, he doesn't even ask for permission before quickly pressing it to the middle of his forehead.

When he pulls his hand away, the gem remains there, a blue shade similar to his eyes, shaped like a four sided star.

"They didn't have a different color?" he asks with a smile once he's finished. I don't even have to be Izzy to know what he's doing.

"They just ran out of pink," I say.

"Well, maybe next time." Then, in a quieter voice and without the smile, he adds, "Thanks."

POV Earth

Small Talk Only - Live Podcast

10 million concurrent viewers

The podcast starts as it always does. There's no intro music, chimes, or animation. The blacked-out screen simply opens to reveal a young woman sitting in an armchair set at the center of what looks to be a living room, the sort you would see in the average house. On one of the walls hangs a framed photo of a cute dog, and on the table next to her sits a microphone and a bottle of water.

Her guest isn't yet visible, as the camera is currently focused on her half of the set.

Faye Hard, one of the most watched podcasters in the world, gives the camera a tiny, almost shy smile. She's in an oversized hoodie and lounge pants, looks like she just woke up. With her "host personality" switched on, she leans into the mic, a tiny, mischievous smirk playing across her lips.

"Welcome to the Small Talk Only podcast," she says in her soothing voice. "The only show where we promise to keep things light and then immediately fail. We said 'Small Talk Only,' but we lied. Well, I lied. I see there are quite a few of you today, over ten million people watching us live. That's a humble thirty times our average viewership."

She lets the silence hang before her smile widens. "But I guess that's my fault for the early announcement regarding who my guest today would be. Even though I didn't give his name, what he represents would seem to have been enough."

For the first time, the camera begins to gradually pull back, revealing an extremely handsome young man sitting in the opposite armchair, wearing homey clothes similar to Faye's. The man has bright blonde hair and deep blue eyes. When he smiles, his dimples reveal themselves in what seems like a coordinated strike.

"Welcome to Small Talk Only, Rafael. Can I call you Rafael?"

"Thanks for having me, Faye. And yes, please do."

For the briefest moment, Faye blushes, but she quickly clears her throat and sits up straighter in her chair. Thousands of people will notice the slip, discussing the reaction on social media for hours, though no one will know for sure if it was an honest response or a performance to drive engagement.

"And your friend is..." Faye points toward a dog sized spider revealed as the camera pulls back even further. The spider stands on the floor, one of its legs tapping against a broken vase it must have destroyed.

Once it notices the attention, the spider quickly scuttles back a few steps. It stands up on its four back legs and lifts its upper ones, spreading them wide in a threatening display while swaying from side to side.

Rafael smiles at the sight, seemingly unaffected by the creature or the millions of eyes on him. "That's Septa. She is... well, she's here to keep an eye on me. She won't hurt you. I'm guessing you have pets of your own, Faye?"

Seemingly unbothered, the host smiles as if a giant spider were the most common thing in the world. She gestures to the painting on the wall. "I have a cute Maltipoo named Vivi." Her voice lowers as if sharing a secret. "She and I both awakened not that long ago, Rafael. Tell me the truth, am I going to wake up tomorrow and find a horse sized dog in my kitchen?"

Rafael breaks into a genuine laugh. He brushes a golden lock from his forehead, looking devastatingly handsome as he does. "Honestly, it's a difficult thing to say. It's possible she'll grow. It's also possible she'll shrink."

"Wait, like a forever-puppy?"

"Could be."

Faye leans forward, her expression turning dead serious. "Rafael, I love Vivi. But I would sell the souls of one, no, two percent of today's viewers, if it meant she stayed a puppy forever. I think she'd understand the sacrifice."

"I think your viewers would find it a fair trade," Rafael counters smoothly.

Faye chuckles, but then her eyes go cold and focused. The "innocent girl" mask slips, revealing someone sharper. "This is the first time we've been promised actual answers regarding what's been happening all across the world. Something more than rumors and leaks. Finally, the President, Congress, and our world leaders have allowed some direct info to leak out, and they've sent you to speak on my podcast of all places."

"They did," Rafael nods, his gentle smile remaining.

"People are scared, Rafael." Faye is serious now, her playful mood gone. Her eyes narrow slightly, observational and sharp, as she questions the man opposite her.

"I'm here to help with that, Faye. No need to be shy. If there's something I'm not allowed to answer, I'll tell you to your face."

"Then pardon my bluntness. Why now?"

"There's someone I've been working with recently who's pressured them into allowing this. He's of the mind that information should be released gradually. So, it's possible we'll be meeting again, if you'll

have me, so I can share more. Today, I'm here just to answer a few of your questions, as I've come to believe that doing so piece by piece will be best, so no single truth gets drowned out by the others."

"This person you're working with... who is he? Did he create these towers that have been appearing all over the Earth?"

Rafael laughs shortly, in a way that makes him seem both innocent and charming. "While he would prefer for his identity to stay a bit more... well, private, he realizes it's impossible with so much footage already out there. His name is Christoph. Some of you have probably seen him in one of the many videos. And yes, the towers are his."

"So, are you telling me, and all the people watching, that all the things we've seen people doing were true? Please remember your answer is basically coming from the Oval Office right now." She pauses and chuckles, "Though you may be a Canadian."

He waits for her to finish, his calm never wavering, and he even flashes another smile, "I might be a big, scary Canadian, but I'll be making appearances like this all across the world. As for your question, I can confirm that. I can also confirm that many of the things you've gotten to see were just the start. People will become even more powerful."

"That... is a lot to swallow for a Tuesday," Faye says, her voice flat but her eyes glinting with interest, and for a moment glancing over at the spider.

"I understand. It's one thing to see it on a screen and another to see it in your living room. Thankfully, we have some time, and people have the opportunity to get used to them gradually. Following today, more information will be shared regarding 'returnees', those of us who awakened before everyone else on Earth. Those people will be appearing more in public, too."

"'Have some time'... that sounds a bit scary, Rafael."

"I won't lie and say all is well. The world is changing, and there are dangers that come with that change."

"Are you talking about an invasion? I think some people on the internet have been calling it 'The Pairing'?"

"Yes. That."

Faye leans back in her chair, crossing her legs with a smile. "You don't want me to ask more about that."

"I would appreciate if you didn't."

"Ha! With a smile that charming, how could I ruin the vibe by being so nosy?" Faye laughs, but she's already pivoting. "How are you spending your days lately, Rafael? Are you enjoying the weather?"

"Would you believe me if I said I've been spending a lot of my time taking care of a cat lately?"

"You know what? I would." Faye laughs, her green eyes glinting with interest once again. "May I ask you something more serious?"

"Please."

"The public is scared of people like you. They're afraid of you losing control, or worse, deciding you don't need to listen to 'normal' people anymore. Can you say something to the people who're currently terrified of their neighbors?"

"That's why I'm here." Rafael adjusts his sleeve, glancing briefly at Septa, who breaks another vase, before looking back at Faye. "The place we were sent served to help us control these powers and to learn about them. In exchange, we can teach the people here on Earth and protect them. I won't lie and say there won't be individuals trying to take advantage of this, but they will be dealt with. By us. Christoph has already sent a message to all those who've returned. There won't be any more incidents. And one more thing, Faye, it isn't 'us' against 'you.' We are all people of Earth. The same powers we have are awakening in each of you. We just got a... well, a tutorial on how to use them."