

Tutorial 811

Chapter 811 - How are you?

"So, how are you, really?" I ask Dennis.

"You aren't going to ask about Aaron?"

"I have a feeling everyone already did, multiple times, so I'm asking how you feel. And if you just smile, I will smack you. You know very well I mean it."

He scratches the back of his head as if remembering the 6th floor and the time we spent there with the twins, Lily, and Biscuit.

"I think I want to go to Beyond. Sophie had some information on that, and I think I can trigger a personalized quest and get there," he says.

"Why?"

"So I can actually feel like I'm doing something about the current situation? Aaron feels the same. Dennis still smiles and looks up. "You know what's weird? It doesn't even feel that different from the usual. Even before, we were connected this way and spoke a lot. It's just that I can't see his ugly mug anymore."

"It makes sense in a way," I agree.

"Right? We've already started working on our illusions. I think with some work, I can create an illusion of Aaron and let him control it."

"You could probably make him even more ugly than you are."

"Was that a joke, Nat? Damn," he chuckles and then sighs. "Yes, it sucks a lot, and we're both scared, but... with all that weird stuff we've seen, why couldn't it be fixed? Yes, not even Kindness and that guy

everyone wants to kill were able to recreate a Mana Heart, but why couldn't we just steal one? Your master Lissandra did. And I bet you'd kill a guy for me if I asked you to get one."

"I would."

"It is scary if you say it with such a serious face, and without any hesitation."

I just shrug, and Dennis shakes his head, letting out a long sigh. "The only thing I worry about is him disappearing, or changing now that he no longer has a body, or something like that," he taps on the gem on his forehead. "This helps, but also brings a new problem of having to hide it. Aren't low Pristine items usually owned by rookie Champions?"

"Something like that."

"Well, I'll have to be careful then, and maybe I'll have to figure out how much stronger I am at the moment."

That makes even me curious as I observe him. "How different is it from your usual stat sharing?"

Dennis thinks, then gestures with his hands wildly before putting them down. "A lot? I mean, we never shared all of our stats, that would probably have left the one doing the sharing immobile on the ground, unable to move. But now I just have all of them, plus more computational power thanks to the resulting increase in memory."

He looks like he is listening to something and chuckles. "Aaron says it's possible that he truly died, and I just couldn't get over it and broke, and now I'm hallucinating, and making voices in my head."

"Well, fuck, if that isn't dark."

"Right?" He pauses and then nods. "He also says that he's sorry about what happened to Biscuit."

"It's okay, we will get him back sooner or later. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

“Smack the others around a bit. Some of them are acting brave, but damn, I don't have to be Izzy to see their emotions. It makes me feel depressed. Oh, and that drink you bought. Green, yellow sparks, all sparkly. Do you have more?”

“Just that one bottle. Did you already drink it all?”

“Most of it went to me,” he chuckles. “It felt weirdly calming, making me numb, and it seemed to affect Aaron, too. In a good way. Was it expensive?”

“According to the greediest person to ever exist, around 10 million shards for a bottle.”

“Nat... is she by any chance your sugar-”

“No more bullshit.” I cut him off.

“Thank you for your sacrifice.”

“Screw off.”

Taking another sip from the water bottle, I move to Tess, who's currently sitting near the entrance, looking up at the sky. Lily is already done with her, even though Tess is still missing about half the muscle in her left arm, it's better than before. That arm is now covered in what looks like black bandages.

When I sit next to her, I take her hand and hold it while looking over her arm, poking the bandage. I nod a few times, seriously, before beginning to draw on it with the tip of my fingers. Where I move, lines of pale blue mana remain. None of the lines make an inscription, nor does it hold any effect, it is just for the visuals.

“We have to strengthen the seal so the Black Dragon won't escape,” I mutter and look up at her questioningly.

Tess snorts, but then she smiles a bit and nods. "Yeah."

"No, Tess. You have to say, 'Aye.'"

"Nat."

"Yes?"

"You are such an annoying little gremlin sometimes."

"Aye."

She pokes my side, and I let go of her arm to look out at the sky together with her. "Left arms are overrated."

"You probably spent more time without one than with it, so obviously you would say that," Tess says.

"And look, what a fine young man I grew up to be."

"You're almost twenty-five, Nat. You aren't that young anymore."

"Yeah, as if. Everyone knows that years in the tutorial don't count."

"Is that how it works?"

"I heard it from one of the Rulers. Diligence. It must be true."

"The Ancient Armory Destroyer?"

“Yes, that guy.”

“It must be true then,” she agrees.

“Aye, aye.”

She smacks my shoulder, not taking her eyes off the sky. “You know, I saw your fight up there.”

That gets my attention, and I turn to look at her while she stares upward. “I was able to see the line connecting us, so I tracked it, and it led toward the sky. And then, when I concentrated hard enough, I found I was able to see that far.”

“Your eyes are getting annoyingly good, Tess.”

“I know, right? After what I did with my [Declaration], one of them doesn't see that well, and my normal spatial perception is a bit twisted, so I started to rely on mana for that. But in exchange, I can see further and a bit more. And this,” she touches her eyepatch, “when I want, I can see through it.”

“Why do you even have it? Your eye should be fine.”

“It makes it easier to make the other one stronger. It's a combination of my [Farsight] and one of my traits. I'm even thinking of commissioning an eyepatch to restrict that eye even further. But if I really wanted to, I could probably destroy that eye to make the other one even more powerful.”

She says it calmly and simply, then thinks it over, “More and more, these skills and traits are changing our bodies, and we do it even further and scar them on our own.”

“I think the eyepatch fits you, but keep the eye for now. Don't just destroy it.”

Tess looks away from the sky and chuckles. “Aye.”

"There you go."

"Yes, yes. Are you returning to Beyond soon?"

"It seems like I can. Morwag and Weslin are both ending their tutorials soon, so we might try something while our guild has three S-ranks. I also want to visit Doc and see Lochi and Duncan, if possible. It would also probably be fun to see Spark and Marble again. And then there's that mysterious thing about the center of the 1st floor and the surface of Beyond."

"You have it pretty planned out."

"I've done a lot of thinking about what I want to do. Though I would probably have to fit it all into a few days or up to a week, so I'm not away for too long."

"And the next Beyond floor?"

"Hmm, later. I'll probably sell my key and work on earning it on my own."

"How out of left field this is, and how simply you've said something so crazy. But would you believe me if I said I thought you would do that?"

"Yup. You probably knew it before me," I joke, and look at my right forearm where the key to the 6th floor is. "Do you want it?" I ask her.

She looks at it as well, pausing for a moment before shaking her head. "I'm going with Lyraen and his handpicked group to the fifth. He'll likely kill the Champion with enough support and preparation, but he said he isn't that interested in the Key. By the way, I think you're being dense. You could use the key to explore the floor with Nyssa. It won't stop you from hunting the Champion on your own later. If you're up for it, you could probably hunt all of them just to sell the keys. I heard they go for an incredible amount."

"Maybe you truly are a genius, Tess. I'll think about it. But what about Lyraen? Doesn't he want to enter the next floor?"

"I think he did most of that as a competition between him and Nyssa, and once she did it all alone and went down to the sixth floor, he just let it be. He can be surprisingly mature and reasonable. He isn't as bad as you seem to think."

"That vyssari is worse, Tess. He's probably nice to you because you're a woman. He is a well-known womanizer, that guy. I heard he has like fifty wives. Do you hope he'll leave the key behind for you?"

"I don't think he will do that. But I don't think anyone in his group is ambitious enough to head to the next floor either. They all realize they wouldn't be able to even attempt a Champion without him. So, it's possible they'll just try to sell it and share the shards. I might be able to sneak in somehow."

"Well, you still have the five million shards I got as my salary for being a Guild Master."

"And I still think you could have gotten more if you'd negotiated properly."

"I'll just rob the treasury if I need to. And honestly, I felt a bit bad about stealing from them, as I don't have any plans to really do much. They're like kids, Tess."

"Of course. How could you not call the demons 'kids'?" She sighs and shakes her head with a smile. I notice she's playing with a Low Pristine ring on her right hand as she speaks. "After fighting the Champion, I think I'll form our own group to attempt to kill one again. I was already able to get bits of information and will likely have to offer a lot of shards for more, but I think it's possible."

"Ambitious. Is it for the key or the 'achievement'?"

"Mostly the achievement, for the better 3rd trait and later for a better primary class at 450. Obviously, me, Lily, Sophie, and probably Dennis if he's strong enough for it. We still have to test that. Victoria would probably join. Then I think Lily can get Tacita to join, and I can probably make a deal with Savant, and then spend a bunch of time keeping those two from killing each other."

She taps her lip with the tip of her finger.

“Then there are Jean, Lucien, Leticia, and Luna, who I know would be willing to join. If you think about it, don’t people from Earth tend to be rather powerful, Nat?”

“Huh. Kind of?”

Tess shakes her head. “Not ‘kind of.’ Like, too strong. Victoria, Tacita, Savant, the three of them will become S-ranks for sure, and likely very soon, too. Not to mention that a few of the others have a good chance at it as well. Jean, Lily, for example.”

“Not bad at all.”

She chuckles, looks at me, and pokes the middle of my forehead with her finger. “There is not a single currently running tutorial, not a single planet, with as many prospective S-ranks as Earth. And people have begun to notice. Tens of thousands of Beyond attendees, and out of all of them, usually only ten or so can place themselves amongst the most powerful, with probably two dozen more A-ranks who have similar strength but for some reason don’t become S-rank. Yet Earth has this many? Then there is also Nythis blabbering everywhere about what happened during the 3rd tournament.”

It takes me a moment to remember that Nythis is the name of the thylarin planet we faced. Tess watches with cheeky amusement as my face shifts from confusion to concentration, searching my memories until it finally clicks.

A smile flickers on her lips as she says, “I wouldn’t be surprised at all if Maya turns out to be correct and the 4th tournament results in the other nine planets joining together against us.”

Chapter 812 - A bunch of drunken losers

I stop by Lily, who’s hanging out with Maya. Before joining them, I watch as Izzy carries Noodle over to Dennis, where the two of them quickly get into a quiet conversation.

Lily asks me to play with my heart for a moment so she can make further observations. She wants to make changes to her own setup that’ll improve the output of her [Disintegration].

That earns us a few silly noises from Maya, who is currently busy with her Lesser Evil Orb training.

The way Lily talks about it makes me feel nostalgic for my first proper construct. The 3rd floor Nathaniel was truly something else. Did that jerk not realize how dangerous that was? What a badass.

It also reminds me once again that while I have many constructs, I haven't been giving them much time, other than the odd improvement every once in a while. Even so, they mess up my body in ways similar to my stat imbalance. They're just there, constantly running in the background and making so many things simple, like the knock off combination of a trait and a passive.

Maybe one day I will actually fix them. I mean, I probably should do something about them, seeing how many people are predicting my death in five to ten years. I don't know, these predictions are always changing anyway.

But as I listen to Lily talk about how much she learned from observing Biscuit while working on that special healing mark for Grumpy, I can't help but see a small connection. It all reminds me of what Ruby once told me, about a kind woman on a forgotten planet who found a certain very special bear. By observing him and his body, and through her own talents, she became one of the most incredible beings in the System. Cinderbear was ancient even before Kindness, then a mere Champion, found him. The question stands, is Biscuit special like that? Is Lily?

Lily waves her hand, bringing my attention back to her as she tilts her head and smiles. "All good?"

"Yup," I say, pushing the distracting thoughts away.

"Good. I'll keep a few vials of your blood along with the wyvern's blood so I can experiment on them. I'm sure I can come up with something cool."

"I don't think I'm an adequate host for wyvern blood," I say.

She agrees. "Nope, you're not. Noodle seems to be the most compatible, but he's already absorbing the blood from when he bit the hatchling. There isn't enough blood to do anything like giving any of you guys a bloodline similar to what some vyssari have, but I think I could probably observe it enough to come up with a way to force your Ichor to bolster itself."

My interest peaks as I lean closer. Looking into her brown eyes, I ask, "How?"

"I think I can concentrate it a bit further and get a few droplets of really pure wyvern blood. Then we would develop a process and let it into your body. It'll either hurt a lot and do basically nothing, or force your body to react and fight against it. Your Ichor is also very powerful, even if it's not comparable to a wyvern bloodline."

"Not yet, and shouldn't that be a crazy difficult thing to do?"

"I don't know? Maybe? I think I can do it, though," she says and thinks. "Maybe it would work with Izzy too, with her Burning Blood trait, but-"

I interrupt. "But there's a chance her bond with Noodle changes something once he adapts to it."

"Yup! So, if there is leftover concentrated wyvern blood, we could sell it, probably for a few million shards. Or keep it for Tess, in case she gets some sort of blood trait at level 400."

"I don't think she'll want it."

Lily lifts her eyebrows. "Are you sure?"

"Yup. I know her that much." I lean back and think about it a bit more, though no better ideas occur to me. "Let's go with your plan for now. Save any blood we don't use to torture my poor body."

"I will!"

"And how is Noodle, actually?"

"I healed him quite a bit and helped to ease some of the pain and did some things to aid the changes. I don't think he'll develop a wyvern bloodline, but his own will be enhanced. That's where I got the idea to strengthen your trait."

"If you think about it, didn't Noodle cost just a few shards back then?" Maya finally asks from the side.

"I think we were quite lucky that Noodle came out the way he is. Dennis spoke to Lootenant and Brainiac, and they've heard of people who just got some insects or really weak pets they couldn't even bond with. They said it's sort of like a gacha." Lily says.

"Or maybe we weren't lucky." Maya pokes one of her Lesser Evil Orbs. "Nat and Sophie bought it, right? It was probably influenced by that. I wouldn't be surprised if it was influenced by Biscuit as well, somehow. That corgi and his damn scary primordial energy and whatever achievements this lunatic--"

"Who do you mean?"

"-this lunatic and Sophie had at that point influenced it," Maya finishes.

"Sure," I decide not to argue. "But it seems like it's going to be you, Dennis, Min-Jae, Izzy, and Noodle here alone for a while, and then Dennis might truly go for Beyond."

"We've kind of gotten used to it," Maya waves it off. "And I'm sure we'll come up with some sort of rotation. And don't forget Blackie, though he'll probably cause more trouble than he helps."

"Still not wanting to try Beyond?" I ask.

"Not really. I was never that ambitious, and what would my poor little guys here do without me? Plus, I can just train with you guys and maybe, some time later in life, become a Champion."

"You can do it!" Lily jumps in quickly. "You're plenty strong. I don't think there are many people from Earth who could actually face you."

"Sure," Maya smiles at our petite healer, "if you say so. You guys just be careful. You know, at first, I thought five years would be a very long time. But the longer we spend in this tutorial, the more I realize how little it actually is. All these things and opportunities on the floors... all these things you guys get to do in Beyond."

“Honestly,” I say, “I don’t think there’ll be much left for me to do in Beyond after the next few weeks, and I’ll be spending more time in the tutorial. I won’t need to prepare for any fights there, I won’t need to be there as much for crafting, and by then, I’ll likely have explored most of what I want. I’ll just do an event or a quest once in a while.”

“The ‘most normal’ Guild Master,” Maya chuckles. “The most responsible, even.”

“Maya, if you think about it, and the sort of bunch the Primordial Lunat- I mean, Knights, are, you must agree that I’m quite reasonable.”

I get an undeserved look from her, but I really mean it. There are things to gain in Beyond, but it seems like fewer and fewer. Thanks to the most ignored floor of the tutorial, the 9th one, I had almost a year for such explorations.

Before leaving for Beyond, I move toward the pile of items we’ve gathered, specifically the ones we got from the auction house. There are things there like a set of armor, a small flower in a glass jelly-filled case, a necklace made of human teeth, a shield, and an abundance of materials. One of them is even a Pristine item, though it’s just a sort of thread and bone, so not immediately useful, but it should sell well or serve for being commissioned into items.

What interests me the most is a small orb made of water, held in a small glass vial. It isn’t an item, as there’s no description for it, which also means it isn’t a material. It reminds me of how the remains of the wyvern didn’t have a description. So it likely is... well, something.

A rare liquid? Strangely colored blood? The drool of a dragon?

Who knows. Still, I decide to take it to the Crimson Forge, maybe the three mora there will know.

I then listen to Maya as she plans out some duels with Lily. Min-Jae quickly joins us as well, done with the studying he’s been doing in the corner of the cave. For a while, the four of us argue about two things.

Firstly, we debate what the fragments are, with our winning conclusion being that they are fragments of something, of one whole.

We are truly a smart bunch.

The second, longer argument is about what influences your lifespan the most.

We come to the conclusion that while there are things like passives, active skills, rare fragments, traits, and items, the main factor for most people is likely the number of body upgrades and their Constitution stat. We also agree that Candidate titles, the rank of Champion, and bonding with a Sovereign Spark and thus becoming an Absolute probably influence it as well.

There are so many variables that we argue about for so long that it actually angers Maya. She starts making annoyed, angry, and rude jokes, saying that at this point, simply inhaling Kindness's farts would probably give you a few extra years.

As always, there are too many exceptions and no single simple answer, but our human brains still try to simplify everything. I think we're just built that way, trying to make things easy to understand, if only to avoid the unknown.

Eventually, we come up with a very rough formula, 1 Constitution = 1 year. Min-Jae fights to make it 1 Constitution = 0.824 years for some reason, likely out of a love for the game and a desire to tease Maya, who looks ready to kick his ass.

That leads us to the conclusion that Lily would live the longest out of all of us, given that her Constitution is well over 1,000. It brings up an interesting comparison to mine, which is only around 100.

Seeing the conversation, Dennis pulls Izzy and Noodle over to join us. Sophie returns from Beyond with water, alcohol, and other supplies, bringing Tess in from her guard duty. Even Blackie sits nearby, looking as if he's actually listening to the conversation.

The bottles of alcohol are open, and we go over the same points again. This time, Sophie fights us and joins Min-Jae's side. She says if you have more body upgrades, it's possible 1 Constitution equals 1 year,

but if you picked the Potency variation of the Constitution attribute upgrade, it could be 3 or more years for 1 Constitution.

Min-Jae then argues that being bonded to a Sovereign Spark and becoming an Absolute possibly ties your life to that planet, making you nearly immortal in regards to any cause other than being killed.

I push back against that strongly. Tess and Dennis join me, agreeing it feels too much like bullshit since we haven't heard of anything even hinting at that sort of longevity, though we agree it likely extends your life significantly.

Maya brings the conversation back to Lily. For an hour, we use all our formulas to try to calculate how long our petite bulldozer is going to live. In the middle of it, Min-Jae changes his mind, saying 0.824 is too long and it's likely that 1 Constitution = 0.5 years. He argues that, so far, he's seen Champions who are thousands of years old, maybe tens of thousands, and only Absolutes live longer.

Still, everyone agrees that Lily, with her healing, will likely live much longer, even using these new formulas.

At the end of the talk, Lily drunkenly promises that she'll make all of us nearly impossible to kill as she sips on the wine Sophie bought, the expensive sort that can make even people with bodies like ours drunk. In her speech, Lily shouts that she'll kick the ass of anyone from our group who comes to her hundreds of years from now, sobbing that they've had enough of living and want to die.

Tess pulls the drunk healer into a hug and gently caresses her head while laughing, teasing her, and pulling her cheek. She tells us that Lily recently watched a show that had a few episodes delving into those themes, so it's likely been on her mind.

Lily hiccups and nods seriously. She breaks from Tess's arms to almost squeeze the life out of Dennis, speaking to him and Aaron through his eyes, promising she will help them and repeating ten times over that they are her friends.

By the tenth time, Dennis, acting brave, pushes her away and passes on a few messages from Aaron, who calls us a bunch of "drunken losers."

I think that if someone attacked us right now, we would end up in a terrible state. But at the same time, I'm sure I could clear my mind and face it, as I keep Notdrunkthaniel scanning the area.

For some reason, at some point, I end up dancing with both Tess and Lily while Maya starts playing her instrument. Izzy plays some songs on one of the speakers I brought back from Earth. Dennis, who apparently took some dance lessons, gently shows Izzy a few classical moves before later performing a nice routine with the athletic Maya, who seems to be good at these sorts of things.

When Blackie joins in, the cave almost collapses under the blasts of kinetic energy, but no one gets angry. With a laugh, Tess dances in front of Sophie's bond, gesturing for him to mirror her movements.

Still, before I can use the chance to escape into my corner, Lily seizes me by force, and there we stay, swaying to the slow rhythm of the music, and the voices of the half drunk members of group 4.

Chapter 813 - My luck. My curse.

A day later, I'm in the headquarters of Crimson Forge together with Weslin.

Eldrin is still angrily sending away the guild guards. They don't seem to be panicking, but they are deeply uneasy at the thought of having two S ranks from Primordial Knights so deep within the guild, standing right beside three of their most valuable members.

When I glance to my left, Weslin is there poking at some materials, and Silverweave stares at him with wide open eyes.

"I have a girlfriend," the half-demon says with his usual confidence once it gets to be too much to ignore

I don't even have time to tell him that isn't likely to be what she's after before she speaks. "I can share," the mora says, licking her lips and smiling.

The hell?

I can't even pay attention to that as Eldrin moves closer. He snatches the vial from my hand and holds it so close to his eye that it almost touches his eyeball. He shifts it through different lighting a few times

and even sniffs it once before throwing it to Silverweave, who clumsily catches it without taking her eyes off Weslin. She lifts the vial to her face, licks it, and even gently bites into the glass.

"It's some sort of spinal fluid from a powerful monster. Not a wyvern. You should give it to the crazy lynthari, he will know better." After that, she throws the vial back toward Eldrin but misses entirely.

I halt it mid air by absorbing its kinetic movement, and Eldrin grabs it from there, and after cleaning it off, hands it back to me.

"I'll check with him. How's the item coming? Have you gotten the Everwood?" I say.

"Was it you who messed with our systems and broke all the toilets?" Isolde asks from somewhere off to the side.

Both Eldrin and I ignore her while the male mora nods. "We've already started processing the Everwood. The piece you got is very high tier, so we hired additional help since we didn't have the machinery or expertise required."

"I know it was you," Isolde mutters again.

"How much will it cost?" I ask Eldrin.

"Not much. They just want any of the smaller pieces of Everwood that would go to waste after processing," Eldrin says.

"Do you know how much trouble you caused? Are you not ashamed? Are you even human?" Isolde persists.

"That sounds reasonable," I confirm with Eldrin. Then, I take out a finger long glass vial containing a bit of red liquid. There are a few inscriptions on the vial to keep the blood from thickening and keep it cool. Conveniently, the blood itself also powers the inscriptions.

"Do you know what this is?" I ask. "And no, I don't want to watch Silverweave lick it."

Isolde finally stops blaming me and steps closer to Eldrin. She reaches out carefully to take the vial from me, but I refuse to let go. I just hold it up high, forcing them to lean in closer to observe it.

"It isn't wyvern blood, unfortunately. It belongs to a human, and there's an impressive amount of mana contained within..." She pauses, her yellow eyes turning blue as she observes it more closely. "Hyper-condensed."

She tries to take the vial from me again, but I move my hand further away to her annoyance, and Eldrin's too, as he observes it as well. Both of them are twice as tall as me, so I'm sure it's an interesting sight for anyone walking by. It's almost as interesting as Weslin, who's standing nervously off to the side as Silverweave continues to move closer to him, tiny step by tiny step.

"It's yours, isn't it?" Eldrin says.

Isolde glances at him with wide eyes while the male mora crosses his arms over his chest after handing the vial back to me. Then, Isolde looks quickly at me.

"Yup," I confirm.

"Well, let's get down to business. How much for two or three hundred vials like these?" Eldrin asks an outrageously high number.

"Are you a vampire or something? That's too much," I quickly reply, surprised by the number.

"As far as I know, true vampires are even rarer than Lycans, especially after their Progenitor disappeared so long ago. Don't try to bullshit me, human. You are sneaky, and I'm sure you came prepared."

It almost makes me smile as I nod, satisfied. "I can trade you probably around a hundred vials' worth. I prepared at least that much before I came here," I say, remembering the way I had to have Lily heal me as I filled them. Maybe I really should invest in a Low Pristine healing passive.

But... that would mean no passive to help with my attack power, or... more mana.

"I want a hundred of them, too," Isolde jumps in, like we're at a local food market.

"No, you'll have to share with Eldrin," I say to her disappointment. "But first, I have to ask someone I trust to make sure you can't use that blood in some voodoo against me, or try to clone me or something. I wouldn't want that."

"What is 'voodoo'?" Isolde asks.

"I'm too lazy to explain."

Eldrin begins to look impatient as he furrows his eyebrows. "You're wasting my time, human. I could already be experimenting with your blood. You should have long since been aware that there are processes to clear the blood, so it's impossible to use against you. And I hope you weren't serious about the cloning, as if it were that simp--"

"Yeah, yeah," I interrupt him. "Declare a guild war on us or something if you don't like it."

"Maybe I will. I'll retrieve my war armaments from where they're sitting gathering dust and get to taste some demon blood, wouldn't that be fun?" Eldrin lowers his face closer to mine. "Or I'll wait for Morwag and Weslin here to finish their tutorial. We have quite a few powerful A-ranks--"

He doesn't get to say more as Isolde smacks his back. "Are you sure you're not a demon? Control yourself, brother."

Eldrin just looks at her and smiles, standing up again. "So, what do you want in exchange, human? Also, know that there will be leftover Everwood even after we use pieces to pay the people processing it. I also looked over the fur pelts and that wood your Handler gave us, and I'm willing to buy both."

"I want information."

"That must be some very expensive information," his sister answers instead.

"I don't know if it's expensive, but it's information I'm willing to pay at least that much for, even a bit extra if needed. I have some Low Pristine items and Pristine materials I can throw in, and I can raid our guild's treasury."

As I say that, I notice Weslin perk up and look at me reproachfully. I ignore him, as well as Silverweave, who is now just a step away from him, as I speak to the mora siblings.

"I want everything you can get on creating host bodies for mind imprints, consciousness, and similar constructs. Something that won't reject it and would allow one to attach a Mana Heart to it in the future. Such as might be grown from a certain attendee to create a twin copy."

"How interesting. A homunculus, a replica, a clone, a host body, a vessel, an avatar... there are many variations that could work, but it isn't as simple as you might think," Isolde says. She looks at her brother as if waiting for him to confirm. "A mind would need to be powerful to be capable of that. For an Absolute or an extraordinary Champion, it is possible. But for anyone weaker, I don't think so, even if you were to create a perfect match."

Eldrin nods. "Once it's deprived of a Mana Heart to act as a source of power, such a hostless mind begins to degrade."

I sigh. "Yeah, we went over most of that with Sophie and Lily. But for now, it should be fine, as that mind had a strong enough connection to the body where it is currently, so it's being kept 'alive' that way. If we moved him out now, it would be as you said, it likely wouldn't be able to stay. But yeah, that's my price. Lily will come to find you in Beyond in a day or two, so you can talk to her for further details. She's a nice enough person, and I'll know if you try to scam her. If you do, I'll be angry."

Both of them, and even Silverweave, seem to perk up. The mora, who was probably about to attempt an assault on Weslin, leaves him as the three of them surround me.

"I get to meet Lily Chen again?" Isolde lowers herself to my eye level, the way I do when talking to a small child. It's annoying.

I wonder if they see me the same way I see a vyssari child. Am I cute to them?

“At least try to be normal. Brainstorm with her and give her any information she might need. Give her things to experiment with, and connect her with some of the Healing guilds so she can trade, learn, and improve. Just use the money and influence you have.”

I then watch as they dive into an excited conversation.

Taking the opportunity, both Weslin and I quietly leave. I lead him to the room where our current project is being kept, the chestplate that has already consumed so much time and so many resources. Weslin probes it and even tries on the unfinished version. The whole time, he acts like a man admiring an expensive car.

When we eventually leave the Crimson Forge, the three mora are still arguing.

Once outside the guild, I notice a figure sitting on a bench nearby, beneath one of the flowering trees.

“I’ll see you later,” I say to Weslin. He nods in understanding and walks away, glancing once at the blonde woman.

When I sit next to Kindness, she smiles at me. She’s striking as always, with long, flowing golden hair and violet eyes. Today she’s dressed in all black, black leggings, and a black turtleneck sweater with sleeves so long they almost entirely hide her hands.

“Actually, this is good timing. I wanted to speak with you,” I say.

“And I wanted to speak with you as well, possibly for the same reason.” Her smile lingers for a moment before fading. “Did you also want to talk about your healer friend?”

“Were you watching?”

"A bit. I have a great interest in both Lily and your bond, and Ruby sometimes fills me in on the things I've missed. Ruby is quite responsible, isn't she? I was never like that."

"That's a nice way to talk about a stalker," I shrug. "Biscuit was always different, and Lily... well, she's talented. How much can you tell me?"

"Quite a bit. The System won't even attempt to censor me, so I may as well tell you about myself and a bear I met long ago."

"That's fine with me."

She nods and crosses her legs, pulling her sleeves even lower until her hands are completely hidden. Her eyes haze over with memory as she begins to speak.

"Both Pride and I are from worlds in the central galaxy, the galaxy from which the System first started spreading. Can you guess where that is?"

"We're currently there, aren't we?"

Her eyes focus for a moment, and she offers a smile so beautiful and sad I can't take my eyes off it. "Just how perceptive you can be sometimes. Yes. From here, the First Dungeon, over which Beyond was built so long ago. I still remember a time when the System was just beginning. It was so rough, so imperfect. There were many powerful abilities for people to gain before the system balanced itself out, and so many mistakes that needed to be fixed. There were many Eradication Quests as the System attempted to regulate it all. And during all of that, many beings fought against the system to stop its spread in wars that destroyed life across entire galaxies. Beings awakened by the System fought to keep their power against those who held other strengths. Gods, Dragons, Wyverns, elves, mora, beast clans, primordial orders, vampires, Fae, Lycans, and so many more. But in the end, they couldn't stop it."

I watch her quietly, listening to every word.

"Even before the system, surrounded by all these beings, humans survived, and often thrived, just through their sheer indomitable will. They stood against all those amazing races even without the system. Once mana spread through the universe and awakened within them, they adapted the fastest,

as they always did. And so the system found a great weapon in them, and they thwarted any attempts that would have ended and even erased it entirely. As terrifying as those times were, they were also fascinating. And I was there in the middle of it all, a Champion traveling from world to world, out to the edges of the known universe where the System hadn't reached yet. And there, I met him. My luck. My curse. My gray bear."

She smiles gently.

"Cinderbear was born with a mutation that no one has ever been able to replicate, and no one ever will. Not the System, not Pride, and not even me at my prime. It isn't a bloodline, the power of a god, or anything else like that. It is just a mutation, the result of an extreme coincidence, a single change in his genome that made him what he is. What he has will never be seen again, not even in a universe as vast as this."

At this, Kindness seems to get more technical, taking on a more scientific and thoughtful tone as she discusses the subject.

"He cannot die of natural causes. He can still be killed, and he can kill himself, but other than that, he is perfectly immortal. Ancient, even before I met him. I imagine he watched his world die and revive so many times, living so long that he evolved alongside everything else around him. Once, long ago, he was worshipped by numerous civilizations as a god and a protector. He was much more powerful then, intelligent, capable of speech, leading and helping his people. He learned to use the time he was given to evolve himself into whatever he desired. That was long before the System, back when he was known for killing dragons, and, if only out of fear, everyone avoided his world."

She looks at me to see if I want to ask anything, but as I stay quiet, she continues.

"His world was eventually forgotten by everyone except a few dragons and gods who, in all their power, still bowed to him. And so the time passed, and his cycles of life repeated, as he watched everyone around him die. In a way, the two of us are similar. He also got exhausted of it all, but unlike me, he didn't choose death. He moved into the background, let the people of his planet live, and gave up everything he had. He cast aside his power, his intelligence, and his evolutions to devolve back into a bear, to return to the simple life he remembered from that time when he was so very young. A life in the forest, where he found comfort and love in simplicity. And that is how I found him. My Gray Sun. The Bear That Survived Time."

Out of nowhere, Kindness chuckles. "Oh, my hubris back then. Thinking I could ever, with all my talents, copy something as perfect as his mutation. Thinking I could copy what nature and the universe made so flawless. Sometimes I wonder... maybe if there is one true God out there who placed that gift with that bear for people to find, so that God could see if we were ready for it. But I know I wasn't. I thought I got everything I ever wanted. I observed the powers of his body, his immortality, and he let me. He saw me as little more than another animal in his forest, one that meant no harm and sometimes gave him foods he'd never experienced. But my ability was unlike that natural mutation. Thanks to the System, and my lack of understanding, it was twisted until I became the way I am now."

She falls silent for a minute. When she speaks again, her words come a bit faster.

"I always thought your bond was a bit similar to him, but it's far too early to say. Still, I wonder if history is fated to repeat. So please, tell your friend to be careful of what she learns, and be careful with what she has already learned from your bond. Ruby and your friend's handler, Wrath, wouldn't mind if she became like me. They both share a similar goal. Even I find myself hoping for Lily to grow stronger, for that ever elusive chance she might be able to put me to rest... but at the same time..."

Kindness stands up, her voice growing quieter as she turns to leave. "I can't meet her because I see too much of myself in her. But for that same reason, I wanted to give her this one warning."

Chapter 814 - Boys' trip

"What's this guy doing here?" Morwag asks, his tone surprisingly calm. "And what's he smirking at?"

"Why wouldn't I be smiling? The weather's nice, the food is great, and I'm surrounded by my friends. I'm blessed!" The lumoran known as Brich smiles widely.

"Are we waiting for someone else?" Weslin asks, cutting in before Brich can further irritate the most demonic demon to ever demon.

"Yes," I nod. "The most cowardly guy to ever exist."

That causes Brich to perk up again. He turns away from Morwag and looks at me. "I didn't know young Savant would be coming as well."

"Why not? I bet he doesn't have anything better to do," I snort, leaning back.

All four of us are currently sitting around a table on a terrace with no buildings below it. Nothing to block the view opening out into the vast canyons of the 4th floor of Beyond. On the table, there's already plenty of food and several drinks. As we eat the breakfast I paid for, I make a mental note to have my guild reimburse me. I definitely consider this a business expense.

Everyone here has brought their own equipment, whether it be armor, weapons, or travel bags. In Brich's case, it is the massive metal suit of armor he wears even as he sits, his winged helmet resting on the table. At his waist hangs the Ego weapon, Calvorn, and next to him is a massive bag with who knows how many items he's set to test for the mora trio.

"You haven't told me what your plan is," Morwag says, addressing me this time.

In answer, I simply shrug. "That's mostly because I make things up as I go. But don't pretend you have anything better to do. Before you return to the tutorial and get thrown out, you might as well explore Beyond a little bit with us. Don't tell me you weren't curious about what's been creating lurkers or what there is to see on the surface."

"I have no need for such a silly lie," the demon answers, crossing his muscular arms over his chest. "I just question the company you've brought."

"Well, it's not like I know all that many people. My group is doing their own thing, as is my sister, so you guys are who I have left. But honestly, I wouldn't trade you for anything. You are the best companions I could-"

"Oh, just shut up," Morwag snorts, waving at a waitress to bring us more of the snack he's been enjoying.

When I look around, I notice the attention we've been getting. After all, there are four S ranks all sitting together, planning an adventure. Even now, I wonder why I decided to put this small group together instead of going alone, much less why going so far as to contact Savant through Crimson Forge.

Well, I like spending time with Weslin and Morwag. Even if he is one scary motherfucker, the demon is a reliable companion, that much was proven when we faced that Champion. As for Brich and Savant, I've always been curious about their abilities. I want to see more of Calvorn and sneakily use this expedition

to learn from Brich. I'm also curious to see what the most cowardly guy in existence has been up to and steal some knowledge from him, all while visiting all the places I promised myself I would see.

Now that I think about it, we are all men. Doesn't that make this a boys' trip? What an amusing thought. I should come up with a cool name for us.

"Here you are!" Brich calls out just as Savant enters the terrace. He's still rocking long black hair, those same cowardly green eyes, and that annoying beauty mark under the corner of his eye.

For a moment, he looks around, his eyes stopping on Morwag and then on Weslin, before turning to Brich and finally landing on me.

I give it about a 40% chance that he will turn around and leave immediately.

In the end, he seems to clench his teeth and walks over. He shrugs off his bag, throws it on the ground, and sits in the free spot next to Brich.

"You told me it was only going to be you and Brich," he accuses me.

"Because you probably wouldn't have joined if I told you about the other two," I explain.

"Don't you think that's just a little bit deceptive?"

"Quite deceptive and an asshole move," I agree. "By the way, can you make your void heart start beating? I want to observe it."

"No."

"Well, maybe you'll change your mind in a few minutes."

"No."

“Reliable as always, but look. You have Weslin here, and he’s literally the best attendee around when it comes to handling void energy. There’s a lot you can learn from him.”

“That is the main reason I haven’t left yet,” Savant explains and turns to Weslin while nodding his head in a polite greeting. “It is nice to meet you. You can address me however you want, but my alias is Savant.”

Before Weslin can answer, it is Morwag who laughs out shortly. “Savant this, Savant that. Just how much hubris can a simple human have? And that pathetic, shriveled thing lying dead in your chest that you dare to call a heart. Stolen from a dead weakling of a demon nonetheless.”

The pressure around the demon increases. Even though his eyes are the reddest of any demon I have seen so far, that red deepens even further as the wood and stone around us creak.

“Morwag.”

That single word from my mouth causes silence to ensue, and the demon turns his head to me slowly.

Facing him, I smile. “I invited this guy here, and you immediately threaten him? After he just found out I lied to him and decided to stay anyway? During breakfast, no less? I know you want to establish dominance or something, but at least wait a while and do so in a way that doesn’t feel like you’re spitting in my face.”

That causes Morwag to smile back at me. After a few moments where we stare at each other, he smiles even more and says, “I apologize, I have been rude.”

“It is okay, I have been easily upset myself as of late and could have spoken more kindly.”

“No, it was me who crossed the line first. Your reaction is well deserved.”

“Still, I feel a bit bad now that you’re being so reasonable. I feel like I jumped to a weird conclusion and expected you to act in ways you never intended.”

“You guys gonna kiss or fight?” Brich asks excitedly, chewing on a bit of pastry with his mouth wide open and his armor clinking with each move.

Morwag laughs and pulls his chair closer to Brich while still showing that charming smile. It causes Brich’s smile to waver a bit, but he still maintains it and chews a bit slower.

Sometimes I wonder, with the way skills work and how they can be influenced by how you perceive things, and even made stronger, do weird people have an advantage? Let’s say you have someone with a skill like Tess’s [Declaration]. If she were totally twisted and delusional and declared herself a Champion candidate, would she have a chance of pulling it off with a high enough skill level?

Would you just need to have that, baseless, totally delusional trust in yourself? And would that make the skill work because that’s just how you see it? All because you are a bit... well, out of your right mind and literally incapable of thinking differently?

I think there might be something to that, and perhaps all the most powerful people are twisted in some way. The question is what that says about Earth that we should have so many powerful people.

Yet another disadvantage for normal people like me.

“Rookie, why do you even want to meet these people first? What about Lochi and Duncan? You even used the guild’s information network to track them down,” Weslin asks.

I switch my attention to him and answer honestly, “Just a whim.”

“A whim?”

“Yeah, is that weird?”

“Out of all the things you did? Not at all. Overall, a bit weird? Slightly, but nothing too serious.” The best void user currently in Beyond smiles slightly. “Maybe that just makes you a bit nostalgic at times.”

“That could be,” I nod. “And you? You agreed to join pretty quickly. How come?”

“Just a whim?” he smirks. “It sounded fun to go on one last big adventure before I end my tutorial, especially with my weird fucking buds.”

“Weslin, you’re too pure for this place. If Malika ever breaks your heart, I shall avenge you terribly.”

That causes him to laugh even more, and he moves his hand through his growing white hair, and I notice that he actually has a decent haircut now. Surprisingly, Weslin is a handsome fella.

It is not like he wasn't with his shiny bald head, but back then, he seemed to be in a more dangerous, austere way. Now he feels gentler, even if that personality hasn't actually changed at all.

“Well, why the hell not,” Weslin says. “Though it is a bit complicated with, well, you know, both of us being from two different freshly awakened planets. We might just give it a pause for a few years or decades before we find a way to meet each other.”

“Huh, I hadn’t thought of that. That sucks.”

“It does,” Brich agrees, and both Weslin and I turn to look at him.

The lumoran takes another bite and chews slowly, while Morwag just sits there with a straight face, spitting grape seeds at him every time he eats one.

My gaze shifts, and I look at Savant, who is giving all of us exactly the look I would expect from him.

“Brich, did you know Savi has a Sword of Aeons?” I ask.

“Of course I do,” the metal armor clinks as the lumoran nods. “Most of the bigger guilds knew about it before he even joined Crimson Forge. Weakened or not, the Sword of Aeons is the greatest mana battery on all of Eladore. There are some people I know who collect them enough to have a few dozen,

though they're rarely restored to the point that young Savant's is. How many times has someone tried to steal it from you or kill you for it?" he asks Savant.

That unhealthily patient man thinks for a second before saying calmly, "Two times on the first floor of Beyond, once on the second, once on the third, and six times on the fourth."

"How many of those times was it Crimson Forge or Brich?" I ask.

"About half of them," Savant answers.

Brich doesn't even seem ashamed, and Morwag spits another few seeds at his face. They fall behind his neck and drop down into his armor, causing Brich's eyelid to twitch.

In the end, it's the lumoran who stands up first. "Well, gentlemen, why don't we go? I just received information that Lyraen has left Beyond to return to his tutorial for a few days, so it should be safe for me to leave the Megacity."

On the third floor of Beyond, we decide to stay for a day. In my case, I need to visit a certain catboy. As for the others, they get weirdly into sync and agree that it'll be a good idea to head outside during the night when the most powerful monsters appear.

The kind of monsters that like to wipe out entire outposts.

Obviously, the settings of this floor haven't changed since the last time I was here. The day is safe, but during the night, you'd better be in an outpost, which ranges from a maximum capacity of 10, 100, 1,000, or 10,000 people. These outposts are safe zones at night, but only if the number of citizens doesn't exceed that maximum. Once it does, the safe zone function is permanently removed.

It's safe to say all citizens would rather band together and kill you from a distance than let you in during the night if the city's already full.

So here we are in the Black Tower outpost, where the largest branch of the Primordial Knights on this floor is located. At the start of the day, Morwag, Weslin, and I head into the headquarters while Savant and Brich go do their own thing until night falls.

I don't like the looks I get from the other guild members as we walk through the hallway. Most of them clearly recognize me, and it reminds me once again that I have become the guild master here, even if I had hoped I would just collect my salary and abuse the resources a bit without any real responsibility.

We split up with Weslin, who goes to greet the branch leader, while I head downstairs to meet the Doc.

Chapter 815 - Precautionary measure

"Don't lick the damn thing!" I shout at the Doc.

"Why?" he asks me, seemingly genuinely surprised.

He's currently wearing white latex gloves, and a single droplet of my blood rests on the tip of his finger, while several other vials sit, already filled with my blood. Some have already been placed in a freezer, while others are spinning inside a set of humming machines.

"It's weird. At least wait until I leave."

"Tsk," he sighs dramatically. He carefully uses his mana to force the droplet back into the vial. After closing it, he turns with a sharp swirl of his white lab coat. "My precious little baby," he mumbles as he stores it away and turns back to face me. "I require you to return here when you decide to strengthen your trait. And I require you to use both the second and third stage tokens at once."

"No."

"Why not!?" he shouts at me.

"Because I would fucking die!?"

At my answer, he begins to gesture widely, even pointing toward the sky as if complaining to some silent god. Finally, he lets his arms fall lifelessly to his sides in defeat. "No one understands. No one's willing to just sacrifice a little in the pursuit of knowledge. All the toughest battles are mine to fight," he shakes his head. "Why did you even come to see me then?"

"Maybe because I thought you could tell me a bit more about my blood? As far as I know, you work for the Primordial Knights, and we pay you. Currently, I am the Guild Master, so..."

The lynthari looks at me almost as if he pities me. "I work for the Primordial Knights for free."

"... You do?"

His hand lands on my shoulder as he shakes his head. "A lynthari of my talents is well sought after. You have no idea how much other guilds have offered to get me to join them. But I stay! Because where else would I find such a collection of beautiful, lunatic specimens to work with?"

"The first part of your declaration almost made me respect you, but the second part erased it all. Anyway, I'll stop by when I head back to the fourth floor so you can experiment with my blood a bit. I will also leave behind a tiny black orb so you can observe the ways they influence each other."

"I want one of your arms and an entire leg. One eye, too."

"Yeah, why the hell not? Do you want anything else while you're at it?"

The Doc's ears twitch as he looks at me, curious. "Maybe? A piece of flesh from your butt. Is it true you store your mana there? Some of the female demons were talking about that the other day."

I close my eyes and force myself to breathe.

When I open them again, I say, "I can't give you my arm, leg, and all that. Since the body upgrade and since I got the trait, I regenerate slower. But I can leave you a few fingers, maybe an arm up to the elbow, if you promise to diligently work on it."

The Doc nods. "I will. But you didn't answer my question. Do you store mana there? I've heard of such traits. It is true the location would be an interesting choice, but I have heard worse."

"I don't."

"Huh. Have those demonesses been lying to each other?"

"More than that, it sounds like they were joking among themselves."

"Joking," the Doc repeats the word. "Explain it to me," he says, looking at me with the same clinical curiosity he usually reserves for an interesting specimen or a severed body part.

Quickly changing the subject, I hand him the vial containing a droplet of spinal fluid. He snatches it up. With a twisted sort of curiosity, I watch to see if he'll actually bite the glass or lick the vial, but instead, he simply slides on a monocle. The lens cycles through several colors in a single second before he tucks it away.

"Leviathan spinal fluid. Likely from a powerful Greater specimen. They're quite the cute little critters. And tasty, too."

"I'll take your word for that," I answer, remembering the leviathan I fought in the dungeon back on Earth, where I claimed my fragment. "Are they specialized in mana?"

"They are known for having massive mana reserves," he pauses, looking me up and down. "A bit like you, even if they aren't quite so beautifully broken. I bet a leviathan would give me a few buckets worth of blood and its eyes without all this whining."

"Yeah? Why don't you try talking one into it, then?"

"Maybe I will!" he shouts. He storms toward his shelves, where items and materials have been strewn about in a mess that defies any thought of proper organization, though he finds what he's looking for with terrifying speed. It's another vial, this one filled with a murky orange liquid.

He uncaps the vial of spinal fluid and eyes it closely as he adds a few drops of the orange solution. After that, he pulls a jar of what looks like dried leaves from the shelf and tosses them in. Reaching into another, he adds a pinch of grey ash, followed by a small chunk of unidentified metal. Finally, he uses a very fine brush to paint glowing symbols directly onto the glass.

“Add in three drops of your blood,” he commands.

Curious, I follow his lead. I watch as my mana filled ichor hits the mixture, causing the other materials to hiss and activate. The small ball of spinal fluid dissolves, clouding the entire vial.

“Now, surround it with as much mana as you can, as quickly as you can. If it turns golden, it’s great. If it turns green, it’s even better. If it turns brown, it will be the best.”

I lift an eyebrow, having no idea what to expect from this, and I have a sinking feeling this crazy catboy doesn't either.

“Come on,” he repeats, shoving the sealed vial into my hands.

Shaking my head, I hold my breath and stare at the vial gripped in my fist. My senses reach toward my mana, and for a split second, all my minds snap into one. In a heartbeat, the mana within me moves like a torrent through my body and veins. I cycle it, concentrate it, and then slam it into the space enclosed by my hand. No mana leaks out into the lab, and every bit of it is focused on that single point as I blast the vial with everything I’ve got.

“Good, that’s enough!” Barely a second later, the Doc excitedly grabs my hand, prying it open like an impatient child.

Once the vial is revealed, the original materials are gone. In their place is a slightly transparent, pulsing liquid.

It’s bright pink.

“What does that mean?” I ask.

"I have no idea!" the Doc shouts happily.

"It doesn't even have a description."

"I know!" His mood doesn't dampen in the slightest, as he grabs an item from the shelf that looks far too much like a syringe, and after pulling all the liquid into it, he forces the syringe into my hand. "If you ever need a little boost, just give yourself a stab and inject the whole thing straight into your heart!"

Yeah, why the hell not.

An hour later, both Weslin and I are leaving the branch, both of us silent and drained of energy.

"You owe me. They wanted you to give a speech, make some decisions, and all that shit. I took care of it all myself," he says.

I look up from the case containing the syringe, glancing at the half demon. "I promise to be nice, not swear, and avoid causing you any trouble."

"Add one million shards."

"The most I can do is a thousand."

"Okay, transfer them to me." He says unexpectedly right away.

That causes me to hesitate in surprise. Even though it is a pitifully small sum, I find myself annoyed and, for some reason, really not wanting to give them away.

Weslin just stands there, looking at me seriously while constantly pinging me with a transfer request for 1000 shards.

With narrowed eyes, I confirm the transfer. Weslin gives an unbothered smile. "Nice doing business with you."

I know it isn't much. I know it's an incredibly low sum compared to everything he's done for me. Yet... the rest of the way to the meeting point, I keep thinking of petty things I can do to Weslin for revenge.

We find the rest of the boys at the agreed upon spot near the edge of the outpost. They're waiting for nightfall. Brich and Savant are caught in a quiet conversation, while Morwag sits with his eyes closed. His mana and primordial energy move in a way that seems like a mix between training and meditation.

There is a small group of attendees nearby, curiously looking their way, and I notice a few assistants of this outpost's "King" keeping an eye on them. When Weslin and I join, the chatter speeds up, and more people move about. Paying closer attention, I notice others spying on us from the nearby buildings, likely members of guilds with branches here or some other nosy organizations.

"Is it really that rare for multiple S ranks to hang around together?" I ask as we sit down. A pulse of my mana sweeps out, erasing all mana based spying and sneaky tracking marks in the vicinity.

Savant is the one who answers. "All three of the Primordial Knights' S ranks moving to the higher floors at once? Of course, people are going to panic. Your guild isn't exactly known for being reasonable."

Weslin counters, "As if Crimson Forge were any better. If it were me, I would think Crimson Forge hired us for something ugly. People still remember how things ended with the Ancient Armory."

"That's true," I nod. "Even the Ruler of Diligence was pissed off back then, so it makes sense that people would be curious."

There is a four second long silence.

Then, Brich slams his hand on the table, causing Morwag to open one eye in annoyance. The lumoran shouts, "I would think that too!"

"Me too!" a new voice adds. It tries to shout, but the speaker is clearly not used to it, so it just sounds like a regular sentence spoken a bit louder. Morwag opens both eyes this time, and we all turn toward the newcomer. None of us had noticed the person approaching until now.

Standing next to us is a ridiculously cute vyssari child wearing a tiny suit with perfectly styled hair. He stands as if someone glued a rod to his back for posture and bows to us when we turn to him.

"Sirs, it is nice to meet you all. My name is Zant, and I am one of the vessels of the Ruler of Diligence," he says in a perfectly polite voice. He then turns to me. "Sir Nathaniel, it is truly wonderful to see you once more. I do hope I have remained within your memory."

I blink a few times and nod quickly, remembering how I threw that rude velnar over the balcony for this child with a little help from Kindness.

"Of course I remember you!" I say.

"That is nice to hear." He nods, and a tiny smile appears on his face.

I would throw a balcony off a balcony for this tiny guy.

"While I haven't had the opportunity to meet the rest of you yet, I have heard a great deal about your accomplishments, and it is a pleasure to meet you. I realize that you are all exceptionally busy men, so I will get straight to the point. I hope you won't take this poorly, but I have been sent here to keep an eye on you. I am to ensure you cause no harm that would affect a large number of fresh attendees or locals, as we are aware you are heading to the higher floors. Such situations are rare, but with so many S ranks together, this was judged a necessary precautionary measure."

"And if we don't want you to?" Morwag asks.

"In such a case, I am allowed to use any amount of force I consider necessary, Sir Morwag. I won't interfere with your adventure in any other way unless it becomes necessary. I hope you don't mind, it would be rather sad."

“Of course we don’t mind!” I answer quickly. I pick up the tiny guy and set him on the bench next to me.

Before he realizes what's happening, I’m shoving a drink into his hands, and finding that even a normal glass looks enormous in his grip.

He looks at me, confused, but then lifts it and takes a few long, loud gulps.

“That is alcohol, you know,” one of the unimportant boys says somewhere in the background.

The tiny vyssari drinks the glass and then lets out a burp that clearly surprised him. “I apologize,” he says immediately.

But he can’t say more because I take the empty glass, replace it with a cookie, and gesture for him to eat.

What a mess this has become.

Chapter 816 - An ambush

We leave the outpost with what almost seems like a crowd. I bet some of those assholes are betting on whether we’ll all die, if some of us will return, or if all of us make it back.

I can’t even be mad, it’s rare to see four S ranks head out into the night to enact what seems like a group suicide. After all, if your luck runs out, one could stumble upon monsters that pose a threat even to a Champion. The last time I crossed paths with a night creature, it was a monstrosity marked with four question marks, meaning level 450, if not much higher.

Of course, getting to level 450 doesn’t make you a Champion, and there is a big difference between, let us say, a level 480 person and a level 480 person who just became a Champion. After all, once you become a Champion, the second stage of your attribute upgrade unlocks. And damn, it has been a long time since I got my first stage.

For me, I decided to upgrade my Mana, more specifically my Mana Amplification. My stages are Vast Mana, Omnipresent Mana, and the last stage being Limitless Mana. I suspect the third one might be

reserved just for the most powerful jerks, someone like Rulers and such. Even Lissandra, back on Eladore, didn't have a third stage upgrade.

Or maybe she did back in the real world, and her nerfed tutorial version was stripped of it. The Rulers must have been terrified of her. But perhaps 'scared' is too weak a word, judging by the state they left her tutorial replicas in. All those lobotomies and memory erasures.

So anyway, my first stage doubles my mana, and I'm already excited for the second one.

I may be saying it in a roundabout way, but to shorten it, if we meet a true Champion with a second stage, we are likely fucked unless it turns out to be someone with a big weakness to one of our strengths. And damn, even then, it would be dangerous. If we meet someone with four question marks who's not a Champion, we will likely be able to deal with them. But the power levels there vary a lot as well.

Another example: you can have a monster of level 500 that took 500 years to get to that level, being patient, cowardly, and without any ambition. Let's give that monster some random name. Something like Sav. Then, our group would have such a granny of a monster for breakfast.

But what if we meet a monster that is 50 to 100 years old and already level 500? Let's call it Monsthaniel. Some monstrosity that spent its teenage years angry, while constantly getting stronger and stronger, fighting for its life, and improving skills like the ancient corgi Archmages intended.

We would be their breakfast in that case.

There's something to be said about the simplicity of a system where you would have your numerical power level, and the higher number always beats the lower number, with no environmental factors, skill, or items to be taken into consideration. But it would be a very boring system.

So for now, we are careful. As much as we might seem like brainless lunatics, we've set up an array of plans and countermeasures, and defined our roles in combat. We also mostly have an idea of each other's capabilities, so we know what we can rely on.

And as much as some of us would like to beat the others down, I don't think we need to worry about a traitor who would leave everyone else to die on purpose. It is surprising, but I don't think even Savant would do that, nor do I think Brich would. As for Weslin and Morwag, I trust them wholeheartedly.

Zant is gone now, after delivering his message to us and after we exited the outpost. He just disappeared without any of us noticing how. I'm still sure he's still around, but I'm also sure he'll do exactly as he said. He will not interfere, not even if one of us were about to die. That's more than acceptable to me, though I am growing more curious about the tiny guy by the day and what his status as Diligence's vessel actually means.

As always, when I get excited in anticipation of a tough fight, my mind races and all these thoughts bounce inside, along with a great many more. Still, even now, I continue to keep my guard up, searching for danger and keeping myself ready to launch into a fight.

It is eerily quiet, and light akin to moonlight only serves to partially illuminate the rocky ground of the 3rd floor. There are no night animals, insect cries, or noise from the wind at all, so every step sounds that much louder, and every rock kicked under our feet almost seems to echo off the air itself. We walk slowly, as there's no need for us to hurry, and it is better if we stay somewhat close to the outpost. We also don't have any particular goal, we're just wandering into the night looking for a fight.

Brich's armor is completely silent now, and he doesn't give off any sound, even though his armor clanged the whole day through.

So, he'd been leaving it that noisy on purpose all along. What a guy.

It's then that I notice an interesting thing about Savant as well. The best I can describe it is that he's been absorbing his own presence. I can't sense any mana coming from him, and no heat or kinetic energy either.

Though I have experience with that, so if needed, I could probably track him by looking for the lack of these things. It is something that would be more difficult to notice right away if I didn't already know about it. I begin to compare it to Tacita and come to the conclusion that even if he improves it, it'll never be comparable to hers. Still, it represents yet another thing he's stolen, as that similarity tells me it can only have been inspired by her.

Weslin walks quietly, and his heart beats slowly and calmly, though I can see currents of his mana, ready to explode and strengthen his body. Morwag, meanwhile, walks proudly and tall, his heart beating like a drum as his eyes seem to glow in the night and his muscles bulge under his clothes with each movement.

There are no enemies even after an hour, and that silence starts to grow unnerving. Every one of us is used to monsters screeching as they circle the safe zones late at night, but today it's as if they've all decided to hold back.

"Fine gentlemen, how about we make our return?" It's Brich who speaks first, "It may just be my damaged mind from all the uploads talking, but it feels like every monster just left to bring in a few more powerful ones to deal with us."

We come to a stop. The air feels cold as I breathe in, but also fresh. If not for the current mood, it would be exactly the sort of night I enjoy.

"I mean, we could, but in between us and the city, there are currently like 100 monsters," I say.

Morwag laughs, Weslin shakes his head, and Brich looks at me and then pulls out a folding telescope, which he expands to near comical length and looks towards the outpost.

"Wow, some of them are really ugly," Brich breathes out. "Were you planning to tell us?"

I shrug, "Would it have changed anything? They're not all that strong, and we came out here to get ourselves into some fights. And I only noticed them a few seconds ago anyway."

"They're not moving any closer," he notes.

"It is obvious that they are waiting for their leader," Morwag says, slapping his palms together, creating a small shockwave that echoes into the night and blows a cloud of dust outward from our position.

The others seem to agree as Brich puts away his telescope and takes three sticks from his bag, which he then connects to one another and stabs the extended device into the ground. At the top of which, a

small yellow light activates, and using some wires from his bag, he connects two small, fist sized boxes to the stick, causing mana to flow through the device and expand a sort of array based domain.

“Silverweave’s inscriptions, mana engines from Eldrin, and... I forgot what she called it, some kind of fancy staff from Isolde,” Brich explains to me when he notices my look.

“What is a mana engine?” I ask, curious, as I gently kick one of the boxes he seems to be referencing.

For a moment, Brich looks at me like I’m the weird one. “I have no idea! Every time I tried to take it apart, it exploded and made Eldrin angry because they’re apparently pretty difficult to make.” His voice lowers to a whisper. “Though I think the name is a bit too pretentious. It’s probably just some sort of mana battery that only shows a mana signature when it’s actively generating mana, rendering it undetectable until then, unlike mana batteries based on mana stones or similar materials.”

“Huh,” I squat next to it and probe it with my finger. “Would it not be easier to place a bit of shielding around a mana stone for the same effect and just open it as you need mana?”

“I asked the same thing, and his answer was: No, Brich, are you stupid or something? Are you actually this thick, or are you just putting on a show for me? Silverweave, come here, look at this. Is he even awake? Is there anything going on behind those eyes at all? Honestly, come here, there might be a serious problem with his uploads... ehm, anyway, he also gave me one of his looks, you know the kind.”

“I can imagine,” I agree.

The next moment, what looks like a bone spear flies high over our heads and embeds itself in the ground about half a mile away. Right after, an explosion follows, which reaches us in a fraction of a second as I deploy one of my defensive barriers to surround our group.

The mana engine begins to hum and shake, and the mana output increases drastically to the point I am surprised to see where it’s all coming from. The mana surges up through the staff, the yellow light glows brighter, and the array surrounding us strengthens, expanding beyond my barrier.

Multiple more bone projectiles follow, stabbing into the ground all throughout the area. Each explodes in an almost quiet sort of way that generates no heat or sound other than the rocks being thrown into

the air and the shockwaves rumbling through the air in a way that seems to be disrupting mana to some degree.

One of the lances pierces through Brich's array and my barrier, stabbing into the ground next to Savant. For a moment, an orange light surrounds his figure as he grabs the lance, and in the next, it disappears. That orange light surrounding him expands further behind his figure like a steam engine releasing built up pressure before being pulled back. His eyes scan the area, and from his hand, he draws the Sword of Aeons and rushes out, using a combination of kinetic energy and mana based reinforcement.

I pull the barrier surrounding us back to me, reforming it and concentrating it into a projectile. More of my mana seeps out, and the skill activates, converting it into an [Empyrean Lance], which shoots off into the night in the direction of the incoming bone projectiles.

Unlike the others, Weslin is more of a team player, and he rushes towards the group of 100 monsters already rushing to attack us from the direction of the outpost.

Brich pokes the staff, which grows further in size, and the output of the mana engines increases even further while the array changes into something that feels, in some weird way, vile, before leaving to join Weslin.

Meanwhile, I follow Morwag, rushing through a rain of bone projectiles. Some of them crash against his body, exploding and throwing him all over the place, but they lack the piercing power to kill the demon binding himself together as his lips begin to slowly lift upwards.

Chapter 817 - Boys vs a weird spider

Something streaks past me and slams into the ground, where it bounces and flies further. An orange light flickers around the object, which I realize is Savant.

Even before I turn my head, I react to the presence closing in. I condense a massive surge of mana in front of me, making a barrier as thick as a wall, against which a fist impacts with a gong like thud.

The barrier shatters, and I absorb the kinetic energy behind the incoming fist, slowing it down, then Morwag uses his energy to bind it to the ground, causing an explosion that I use to move myself away.

The monster towers over me and Morwag, standing on spider like legs that stab themselves into the ground like knives. Its body is similar in size to that of a six armed velnar man, but the proportions are twisted, leaving some arms bigger than the others. Instead of a face, there's just a cluster of eyes, black and empty. And the monster has no mouth at all.

[Skreth - lvl ????]

It stabs one of its hands into its chest, pulling out a rib which grows and elongates into a bone projectile, which it then throws. I duck under the newly formed projectile, but it explodes behind me, and the resulting shrapnel rains onto the ground just as I teleport away to watch Skreth reach into the air, pull at the lines I've woven across the battlefield, and tear them apart with its bare hands.

In the next moment, Morwag crashes against it, and stone chains formed of Morwag's low, pristine weapon fly into the air. All six of the monster's arms move, some focus on fighting Morwag, while others pull at the lines I've set or the arrays I'm trying to deploy. Another one of them continues to throw bone projectiles, which have continued to grow in strength. The monster moves surprisingly quickly on its eight legs, often lunging forward to stab at Morwag.

Seeing that I won't be able to rely on my usual tactics, I surround myself with Regalia and manifest a long spear in my hand. I make the armor stronger by using [Weave] as I continue weave the structure I've manifested from my mind into existence.

Wraith Dance brings me closer, but at the same time, the Skreth throws Morwag away. Through some sense, it seems to be predicting the kinetic vibrations of my movement and turning to face the space in which I appear.

My attempt at teleporting away is torn apart by two of its hands, and two of the others form a bone spear and scimitar to attack me.

The spear in my hands breaks into a pair of short swords, which I cross in front of myself with my mana roaring through my body to strengthen it.

I block the spear, but the bone scimitar cuts across my chest at incredible speed. I avoid the knife-like legs' attempts to stab through me and pull the blood from the wound into my hand. The next moment, I send thermal energy to the wound, burning my flesh and scorching away the necrotic poison attacking

my body and causing the wound to rot. An [Empyrean Lance] grows from my blood, forming in my hand, and burning my flesh in the process.

Morwag crashes into the monster again, and all six of the monster's arms snap and pull toward its body as if tied to it by a rope, and I use the opportunity to stab at it.

I almost lose my balance as my attack passes through empty air, and my eyes sweep the area, searching for the monster, which I find standing high in the air. It breaks through the binding and releases its arms to spread them open. All of its eyes continue to blink, none of them in sync, and glimmering inside them, a red light begins to rise.

A huge amount of mana gathers around the monster, and it snuffs out some of the weaker attacks I launch its way. It slightly redirects the ones I have time to weave stronger, which pierce through the body but stop once they encounter bone and refuse to penetrate further. Any flesh pierced quickly heals, as do the burns from the explosions.

Morwag's stone spines reach toward it to press the attack, but it is already ready, preparing an attack as I lean to the point I am almost falling, then burst forth in a burst of speed. Around me and all across the battlefield, more bone projectiles start to land. Each one, growing in size as they embed themselves in the ground, and from it, many more bone spikes extend, creating a structure resembling a labyrinth of thorny webs that I find myself forced to move between.

I stop, and another bone projectile the size of a telephone pole lands right in the middle of my path. I absorb all the kinetic energy from the impact, along with the momentum of the spikes now beginning to grow, halting them in place. A blast of raw mana pours out around me in an omnidirectional blast, evaporating everything nearby and pushing everything else aside, including the bone spikes.

More blood drips from my hand, expanding into a spear surrounded by mana with a gold and white core, which I launch and boost at the Skreth. Behind the monster, a set of enormous wings made of bone appears, and then a wave reaches forward towards the lance, which breaks through the bone and continues on, even managing to pierce the monster's chest and leave a huge hole in its wake.

That hole closes up as bone plates grow around it, and for a short moment, the monster wavers, seemingly ready to collapse. Savant exploits the opportunity, appearing in the air behind the monster. In one hand, he holds the Sword of Aeons, and from his back, from one of his shoulder blades, a wing covered in white feathers has emerged, reminiscent of an angel's. Like the last light of a dying day, an orange light now surrounds his figure.

Still, the monster reacts even then, moving its arms to block the attack and releasing mana to blast him away. I open my eyes wide, staring at that mana and taking in all of the information, holding the glasses in my hand. The mana unwinds, breaks, and weakens under my gaze, creating an opportunity, as the Sword of Aeons cuts diagonally through the monster, biting deep into its trunk. The orange light intensifies, seeping into the blade and creating a wave of mana radiation that sizzles the monster, burning away half of its eyes.

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A terrible screech fills the area, and all the thorny bone webs, covering several miles of space, begins to shake and grow rapidly, forcing me to avoid and break the ones now reaching toward me. Most of the bone spikes stab toward the sky, growing like massive spears in a race to reach Savant.

Much more mana seeps from the monster, and Savant tries to pull his sword back, but he finds himself unable to do so as it gets caught in the bone growing over it and reaching toward him. His wing swings inward, and he moves away without his weapon.

With a thunderous crack, another of my lances pierces through the monster, which jolts and turns toward me, forcing more of the bone spikes to target me as they create a dense web I can barely move through. When the monster turns back to Savant, he's gone, absorbing his presence once again.

The Skreth screeches again, its bone wings spreading wide as the labyrinth of thorny spikes expands outward, now blanketing an area the size of a city housing half a million people, and still growing.

I use Wraith Dance combined with Pulser Stance to weave in between them, sometimes slowing to a walk and destroying the spikes with bursts of thermal energy that light up the night.

And all of a sudden, I can't help but think, this is beginning to feel like fun.

My body feels warmed up, that familiar tension is creeping in. My skin is going cold, my hands are hovering on the edge of trembling. My senses have sharpened to their peak, taking in everything around me. Mana roars through me as I draw on it more and more, holding it just beneath my skin, ready to be thrown at the monster.

I am not alone, and no one seems to be in a hurry to end this fight. Everyone believes the monster to be an opponent we can fight or escape from, and the monster itself is gradually increasing its output.

More thermal energy floods out into an orb over my head, about the size of a baseball. It spins, and from it, a thin, laser like stream shoots forth, roaring like a starting jet engine and sweeping in all directions across 360 degrees. It cuts into the bones, leaving molten lines of severance along its path.

Forcing my way through the blockage, I teleport towards one of the marks I've placed over the course of the fight, and the place where I stood gets hit by a bus sized bone projectile.

Slowing to a walk once again, I look up at the Skreth, now surrounded by building sized bone projectiles, as long as two or three train cars strung together.

Another launches at me with high speed, and I teleport again, this time much further. From there, I fire off another lance with its launch, so boosted that it more than breaks the sound barrier and evaporates the bone spikes around me. It pierces through the belly of the monster and continues on, where it embeds itself somewhere in the ceiling, far off in the distance.

The wound across my chest still hasn't fully healed, and a bit of my blood flows forth. All of it that is outside of my body, I gather and move, manipulating the extreme amount of mana within, bringing it to float beside me in the form of a small orb.

There is a blast of orange light that encompasses the area, and then the building sized bone projectile that was about to crash down on its center disappears. The next moment, it appears again and launches from that spot towards the Skreth instead. The next projectile breaks into a rain of powdered bone, and gradually, with a cracking and pulses of mana, all the other spikes do as well. Like a sandstorm made of tiny bone fragments, it swirls through an area the size of a large city, carving into the ground and gathering speed.

I see the flash of a white wing as Savant launches himself into the air, his [Dawn] facing the mana pressure and bone storm. Morwag is still nowhere to be seen, and so are Weslin and Brich.

Void surrounds Savant as his absorbed heart starts to beat, sending out waves of void energy around him. His orange light surrounds him tighter, almost creating an outline of his figure, as he crashes into the Skreth with the dense, city sized bone storm roaring around them.

I watch as he grabs the handle of the bone covered Sword of Aeons, still embedded in the monster, and pulls back with the bone, cracking as an enormous amount of mana is released from the sword as he yanks the blade free in a stream of sickly red blood. In a blink, he flies back and swings his weapon in a sweeping horizontal motion.

Like a scar, a clear, mile wide line separates the bone storm and cuts through it, carving a deep line into the Skreth as well, leaving it unrecognizable from before. The entirety of its body is covered in bone armor. The spider-like legs have grown much bigger, and its six arms are longer, each ending in a set of bone bladed claws. Savant's attack only creates a deep crack across its chest but fails to pierce deeper.

My lance launches forth again, but with my thoughts accelerated, I watch as this time the monster catches up. It turns its head at such speed it feels like a swift movement even with my accelerated perception. Then, the monster disappears, teleporting away.

I follow its path and turn to face it just as the monster appears from one of the larger fragments of bone on the ground beside me. It's now almost twice my height. A many limbed monstrosity encased entirely in bone armor. There's not even a slit for the eyes anymore, just an uneven, twisted helmet with seemingly random protrusions across the surface.

Returning to the ground was a mistake.

I reach for the teleport. The Skreth fights me for it, savagely like an animal, but I grind through anyway.

Then, instead of allowing me to disappear, someone else appears between me and the monster. The huge clawed arms crash against Morwag's chest and break as the demon lets me teleport him through the mark I've placed on him.

There is a smile on his face, and his heart beats rhythmically. Not a single wound appears on his body as he pushes his binding energy to the utmost. To increase his endurance, to hold his body, skin, and everything else together. At the same time, he overlocks his body, pouring every scrap of mana into a reckless body reinforcement technique that sends his output skyrocketing.

With the obsidian spine chain forgotten somewhere in the distance, with no more than the clothes on his back, without any items, and through the sheer power of his body, Morwag faces this monster. He grabs the clawed arm and yanks it downward, forcing the monster to bow to him, and smashes his head into the monster's skull, causing a shockwave that forces me to stumble back.

Chapter 818 - Is that bad?

I move further away, positioning myself at Savant's side just in time to watch Skreth slam Morwag to the ground, only for the demon to climb up entirely unharmed and then be thrown by the monster into one of the smaller mountains nearby, causing its side to explode under the force of the impact.

The monster ignores us entirely, and the huge volume of bone dust swirling around it shoots forth in a street wide stream towards the mountain. It scours the peak, grinding it down. The particles travel at such high speeds that their heat upon impact starts melting through solid rock.

Morwag climbs out of that half-rock, half-lava mess, pushing himself forward even as the particles continue to batter and push against him.

He takes another step, then another. With a massive stomp, the mountain cracks beneath him, and the resulting shockwave scatters the particles, leaving them to hang in the air like falling snow before the Skreth seizes control. Its huge body slams against Morwag's, who tanks the hit, grabs the monster, and slams it into the ground. He then throws it with such force that it crashes through a neighboring peak and flies into the distance, with Morwag following at high speed.

"Did he get stronger?" Savant asks next to me, done cleaning his sword, which gets absorbed into his body. His wing is gone now, but [Dawn] continues to gather around his right arm, which is now entirely orange.

"It would seem so, his output's increased. From what Weslin was saying, he's improved his body strengthening to something that would be straight up suicidal without his binding. New right arm?"

"How does his strengthening compare to your sister? And yes, from the 9th floor."

"It is stronger, and he can keep it up too, while Vic's duplicate would likely explode after a single punch. Still, it would be a hell of a punch, so after seeing this, I'll have to tell her she needs to try to talk to him. But let's move closer."

Both of us move swiftly after glancing once more in Weslin and Brich's direction. Where before I sensed around 100 monsters, now there's a swarm of over 300. Still, it doesn't seem like I need to worry too much. The body strengthening Morwag is using was something he created with Weslin's help, and he's one of the best when it comes to such things. Meanwhile, Brich is... well, Brich.

The scale of the fight is immense now, leaving miles and miles of destroyed space and evaporated mountains. And no one here's even a Champion. Still, as before, I keep most of my mind scouting the area, something I've kept up through the fight as well. Out of all of us, my senses reach the furthest, and with my combination of sensing mana, kinetic, and thermal energy, I'm the most reliable scout we have.

"Are you okay?" I ask, glancing at Savant once again. Something about his mana feels off, and when I look closer, there is a wound in his side through which rot seems to be spreading.

"Not everyone has potent enough thermal energy to burn it away," he says without skipping a beat.

"Yeah, bullshit. I bet your[Dawn] could pull it off. Are you trying to absorb something weird again?"

"Maybe."

I shake my head and land at the top of the destroyed mountain. I absorb the heat from the molten rocks around me and redistribute it into mana. The blood orb that's been following me this whole time begins to elongate, and I use [Empyrean Lance], canceling it mid-activation and reusing that mana to build it around the blood, which strengthens it.

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 54 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 55]

[Weave - lvl 12 > Weave - lvl 13]

I will have to find what action level [Weave] the fastest, because it's currently so low that it's bringing shame to poor old me.

Looking down the broken mountain, I find myself looking over a small rocky valley where Morwag, still free of wounds, is facing the monster, which is now missing multiple arms and legs. It seems tired, with a deep cut across its chest from Savant's attack, and my attacks can't have helped things either. Still, even now, that storm of bone particles continues to grind down the area. Wherever they pass, they leave a mirror smooth surface. Patches of which now dot the field.

Morwag breaks another leg off of the Skreth and stabs it deep into the monster, pulling down and cutting. He then throws a punch, cracking the bone armor, and strikes the same spot again, burrowing his hand inside. His binding seems to have weakened, or the monster finds a way to counter it, and its next attack pierces into Morwag but doesn't push the rest of the way through.

With a roar, the demon swings his hand and cuts the arm, impaling him free. He leaves it inside, not even bothering to pull it out, as he attacks again, pummeling the monster.

Each exchange is quick, even to my somewhat accelerated mind. If it were me from a year ago, I would be barely able to follow them. My kinetic senses also sense the vibrations coming off each attack and movement, along with the force behind them.

Savant moves to join the fight, but I put my hand in front of him. "Are you crazy? If you try to join now, Morwag will stop fighting the monster and attack you instead."

He furrows his brow and looks at me, but still decides to listen and stop where he stands. "He's running out of mana, and it's about to get dangerous. And we fought together until now."

"Sure, but now it's turned into a one on one, and he's locked into the fight. And what do you mean by dangerous? The monster isn't even all that strong."

"It is four question marks."

"It's not a Champion."

"Four question marks mean over level 450, so of course it's dangerous. This is such a bother, you know. We could have already killed it together."

"It's fine. We weakened it, and you got your rot or whatever it is, so let the poor demon have some fun."

As before, I meet his gaze, and only then does he pull his [Dawn] back.

"I'll go check on the others," Savant says and moves away using kinetic energy.

I observe him for a while, judging his use of it to be no better than a speck of sand on Lioren's boots.

Morwag, meanwhile, continues to have fun, with more and more wounds forming on his body, but with that, his mood continues to improve. The maniac sometimes even uses his horns to attack and even bites into the monster, which has finally begun to run out of steam alongside him.

Holding two of the legs he tore off, the demon continues stabbing the monster with them, with the particles encircling them finally grinding down his skin and revealing his muscles and even his bones in places, but he doesn't stop until the Skreth finally dies.

[You have defeated Skreth - lvl 461]

[Lvl 412 > Lvl 413]

I watch the demon stand there before he slides down and sits on the ground with his back resting against the monster's body. When I move closer, he looks up at me, and the aggression from his eyes is already gone, replaced by his usual state of control that uses that aggression as a tool and lets it rage only when it serves him.

Even now, he doesn't bother to remove the severed limb embedded in his body, which has otherwise slowly begun to heal. It makes me wonder how he deals with that necrosis or rot or whatever it was, but it doesn't seem to be causing him much trouble. Is it a trait? Is his body just that powerful? Or maybe he's using his binding energy in some exotic way to get rid of it?

"Not enough," he mutters.

"Pardon me?" I ask, standing there near him.

"Still not enough to beat you," Morwag says, his eyes firmly locked onto me. "I've developed my body strengthening and use of my primordial energy further than ever before. Day after day, training after training, fight after fight. Yet no matter how much I replay it in my head and compare it to our fight, I do not see myself winning against you as I am now."

"Is that bad?"

He stares at me for a second or two before he shakes his head. "No," he says, "it is not."

Even as wounded as he is, he pushes himself back up, finally pulling the impaling limbs free and throwing them aside. "You are an opponent I respect, along with the effort you put in to stand where you stand now. I am someone who understands what that requires."

Passing by me, he leaves towards where Savant went, and I'm left behind, musing on it all over. Then I look down at my hand. I open it, observing it, and then close it into a fist.

Shaking these thoughts off, I move towards the body of the Skreth and start looting, and that looting turns into a hurried exercise as, like a gust of powerful wind, a distant presence watches over me. Looking up, I look in its direction, noticing what seems like a burning horizon a dozen miles in the distance, quickly realizing I'm watching the movement of mana. It's blazing up to the ceiling of this floor.

I don't have to be a genius to tell that we have no chance against whatever is coming, so I quickly grab a few more pieces and then a bit more, teleporting and using Wraith Dance. I reach our boys' band sitting tiredly on the ground, surrounded by hundreds of corpses, with only Brich in an excited mood and the others quietly ignoring him.

"We have to get out of here." Something about my voice grabs their attention right away, so there are no complaints, and we swiftly head straight for the outpost. We should be able to enter easily enough, as there were still two hundred open spots when we left.

The entire time, I keep glancing back, but the presence doesn't seem to be in a hurry, and so we pick up speed.

Once the outpost appears in sight, we all come to a stop when Zant appears in front of us as if he stepped out of the air. "I am afraid I cannot allow you to enter the outpost," he says simply.

Right away, I drop all the loot that I took from Skreth's body.

"That is not it, Sir Gwyn. Unfortunately, each of you carries Necrotic Rot from the wounds you received. It would spread quickly and kill many attendees and locals. This outpost's leader would almost certainly deny you entry or execute you on sight. So I'd say giving you this warning is me showing you some goodwill while bending the rules of my current position to do so." He nods seriously, clearly satisfied with himself.

What a good boy.

I pick up the loot again and gesture at the others to follow as we change direction and move away from the outpost, slowly approaching the presence in the distance. Right away, I start checking my body for any sign of Necrotic Rot, the little guy has mentioned, and find none.

None at all.

I see nothing damaging my body or spreading through it, and I thought I had burned it out of all the wounds I'd suffered. I can tell Savant is doing the same, as his gaze is a bit hazy as he looks into himself.

Multiple times, I send a disrupting wave through my body, raise its temperature, and let thermal energy combust under my skin, and a few times I glance at Zant, who runs next to us on his tiny short legs that move very quickly, as he is easily able to keep up. Every time he understands what I want and shakes his head.

I bet Lily would be able to deal with it in a heartbeat, and the fact that Zant did not even mention an option of moving closer for some healer or the outpost's king to remove it tells me it is not that easy at all.

Maybe I have been underestimating the guy we just killed too much. Still, even then, I do not think it's something that'll be impossible to deal with. Not even as that presence changes direction and heads

towards us at that same slow speed, and not even as dozens more of weaker presences appear all around us and the night fills with screeching.

My excitement grows slightly, and I feel a smile climb on my lips at the situation. The ever present danger, things going from bad to worse, the night just starting, and we'll have to survive all of it.

There is no doubt in my mind that it's something I can deal with as I allow my Ignition Heart to beat wilder and gather more mana.

Chapter 819 - In a good mood

Standing atop the mountain, I continue to rain down attack after attack. Tricolored orbs explode almost constantly, and in between blasts, I hurl lances to deal with any more dangerous or durable targets. Occasionally, when a bunch of weaker monsters gathers, I release a wave of flames that licks the mountainside, spreading downward and outward in every direction.

[You have defeated Vraal - lvl 411]

[You have defeated Skalt - lvl 404]

[You have defeated Vraal - lvl 401]

[You have defeated Skalt - lvl 402]

...

[Lvl 414 > Lvl 415]

We've been moving and fighting for hours against these waves of weaker monsters, with another Skreth appearing every once in a while. Brich and Savant are currently preoccupied with one of them while I focus my fire on the larger groups.

Vraals resemble scorpions, though they have far too many legs, many of which are growing directly from their backs. They occasionally launch ranged acid attacks from their tails, and it's safe to assume they carry a weaker version of the Necrotic Rot used by the Skreths.

Skalts, on the other hand, are like spiders without any visible heads or eyes anywhere on their bodies. They navigate using a different set of senses, while each of their legs ends in a sharp blade. They are both fast and durable, as most of their bodies are covered in thick bone plates. Skalts also seem to share a hive mind and move in unison while each generates a weak domain, and they often combine these domains into a single, stronger version.

Meanwhile, that powerful monster looming in the distance continues its slow approach. It reminds me of the internet meme about the unstoppable snail that follows you forever in exchange for a ton of money, forcing you to constantly look over your shoulder because the moment it touches you, you die.

I focus more intently on my attacks. As I have done many times since acquiring the new skill, I try to weave mana and thermal energy together.

Unfortunately, just like many of my previous attempts, it ends in failure. I then try to weave mana with kinetic energy, or kinetic energy with thermal energy. All of these efforts fail, but the [Weave] skill levels up regardless.

[Weave - lvl 13 > Weave - lvl 14]

These experiments come at the cost of not having an array woven around us to strengthen my active skills. However, with my current reserves, I don't feel as though I need the extra strength to face these weaker monsters as I maintain my wide-range bombardment.

Though calling them "weaker" is a bit of an exaggeration. A single one of them could probably cut through entire groups of average 3rd year Hell difficulty attendees.

Maybe we are, in the end, something of a strong group here. Sometimes it is easy to forget these differences. I'm well aware of how different I am compared to someone like Channeler, but as of late, I've begun to notice these differences as well when I compare myself to attendees I meet in Beyond.

I wonder if the others here with me feel the same.

Lastly, the Necrotic Rot is no joke. Even though we thought we had it under control, it's begun to spread once again. Every one of us was wounded earlier, even if it was just a scratch, and that was enough. We purge the rot, only for it to reappear. As this cycle repeats, it's slowly beginning to feel more dangerous.

I bet Lily would have dealt with it in minutes.

I notice a spot where the monsters have gathered and surge my mana to push back against the quasi domain pressuring us. I manifest a cube in which gold and white mana begins to bounce through the core. Pushing further, I place a marker onto a durable javelin and fire it into the center of the pack.

Once it lands there, a decently big portion of my mana drains as I teleport the cube to the mark. It explodes there, leaving a lingering field effect that partially disrupts mana and weakens the monsters' domain.

[You have defeated Vraal - lvl 400]

[You have defeated Skalt - lvl 402]

[You have defeated Vraal - lvl 411]

...

Another current of thermal energy seeps from the exhaust node on my back. I twist the energy, making it move like a living snake throwing itself down a mountain, turning stone into rivers of lava and incinerating any monsters in its path.

A few enemies try to weaken the flow, but I predict and read the movement of their mana, shattering their efforts with my gaze mere moments before launching a rain of mana projectiles to finish them. After that, I switch my focus to the ranged attackers that have started bombarding me. Their mana based attacks break apart before they can reach me. Their bone projectiles are either erased by a blast of kinetic energy or golden flames.

Annoyed at the barrage aimed at me, I hunt them down and snipe them with lances, the projectiles easily punching straight through their defenses.

Weslin joins my side, breathless. "All good?" he asks.

"I could probably do this for days without getting tired. Do you want me to tell you how strange it feels to have half of my mind fighting while the other half rests, only to cycle them so I always feel fresh?"

"You can brag about your fucked up mental techniques later. By the way, stop talking about it like it's normal. Most people would have shattered their minds attempting that kind of insanity, if they didn't simply lose themselves."

"But it is just a basic mental technique. How could something this small break someone's mind?"

"That's exactly your problem."

"I see no problem here."

"Rookie, you... you know what? Whatever. Fuck you."

"No, fuck you, Weslin. How are you dealing with the rot?"

"I am fine, my void is proving to be great against it. Brich has been using some sort of bizarre items. Savant keeps absorbing the rot, and you had better hope he doesn't release it on your planet. Meanwhile, Morwag is..."

I nod. "Morwag is..."

Neither of us completes the sentence, we simply share a nod.

“So the plan-” He pauses as an explosion washes over us, and I raise a barrier to block a sickening blast of mana.

In the distance, where Savant and Brich are currently battling a Skreth, a massive bone pillar erupts, reaching high into the sky. From its surface, a mass of tentacles and bone spines grows, swaying and lashing out at the duo as they slam into the ground and the air.

By now, I can recognize Savant’s signature more clearly. I watch the starting sequence as he begins his [Dawn]. Observing the fluctuations, I can tell he is pouring a massive amount of mana into this one. Immediately after, I see the structure connecting the technique to the Sword of Aeons as he draws that power directly from the blade.

The domain spreads over an area large enough to encompass the entire pillar. Cracks begin to form on the surface of the bone, and Savant executes his new favorite move: a horizontal slash that cuts through the structure cleanly, causing the pillar to tilt and begin its collapse.

Strengthening my sight, I watch him leap into the air, swinging his single wing. The orange energy of his full domain is pulled inward to surround the sword as he lifts it to face the Skreth.

I turn back to Weslin as I begin to snipe the monsters attacking us at a distance. “The plan holds. We will endure the night and deal with the Necrotic Rot during the day.”

That fight ends with Brich throwing a hexagonal glass item that cracks upon impact. He strongly warned us about it before using it, so we clear the area.

It’s one of Eldrin’s creations, a truly monstrous thing, and this is just a test Brich will be reporting on later.

Once the item breaks, a powerful pull sucks in everything within a half mile radius. The Skalts’ combined domains don’t help in the least, as they’re dragged into a meat grinder formed of the surrounding debris. At the impact point, everything collapses into a dense pile of crushed rock and mangled limbs, leaving a hollowed-out crater below.

Brich throws another vial against the resulting pile, this one filled with liquid that ignites the moment the glass shatters and releases gouts of red flame.

That red flame seems almost impossible to snuff out. It roars over the mountain of creatures, setting fire to any monster attempting to claw its way out.

We stand near Brich as he takes notes in one of the many mana stones he carries. But we don't stay too long, still aware of the powerful monster in the distance. Leaving the carnage behind, we move again as that presence continues to draw itself closer. I try to look in that direction, but I can't see any more than I could before. It's as if there's something deliberately blocking my sight, even my strengthened eyes only pick up what appears to be mana moving as if it were burning.

Another group climbs from holes in the ground in an effort to intercept us. To avoid slowing down, I go almost all out right from the start. Cubes filled with broken pieces of my [Empyrean Lance] fly into the earth and explode, tossing soil into the air and triggering massive cave-ins. I follow the attack with a barrage of thousands of projectiles piercing the area, many of them infused with thermal or kinetic energy.

To finish the job even quicker, I release a series of raw mana blasts in their direction, an attack I still lovingly call Fuck Everything In That Direction Specifically.

When I notice how quickly I can convert thermal energy from my heart into mana, I stop bothering with weaker attacks and start constantly releasing these blasts. With my minds fully combined and no room for them to rest, I gather and channel my mana at high speeds, releasing another blast every second.

The notifications ring out, and the destruction I witness starts to grow somewhat addicting, so I pick up the pace. I partially lift the last seal on the Ignition Heart to draw more mana, focusing entirely on redistributing and channeling the flow.

[Redistribution - lvl 78 > Redistribution - lvl 79]

Quickly, these explosions grow larger, digging deeper and erasing more of the surrounding landscape. I don't have to worry about collateral damage, every signature I sense in that direction belongs to a monster.

There's a mountain right next to us, and I narrow the blast, concentrating it further. I almost laugh as I hurl it against the peak next to us, where it drills a circular, building sized hole straight through the stone.

A single monster climbs from the ground half a mile away, and in an overwhelming overexpenditure of mana, I launch a blast at it. I am certain that amount of mana would sustain a weaker Hell difficulty attendee for an hour or two of fighting, yet I throw it all at a mere trash mob. The attack is narrowed and concentrated, though it weakens as it stretches over the distance, becoming less reliable with the increasing range. Yet it still connects, crashing against the creature and sending it rolling across the ground, even if it doesn't kill it.

I leave the monster be, redirecting my attention to the rest, and slam seven more blasts into the same spot on the ground. I dig deeper and deeper until I reach and kill the last few monsters hiding there.

Once that's done, a wind picks up and blows away the dust, revealing a scarred landscape of broken mountains and deep craters. And I know I can channel even more.

Finding myself in a good mood, I open the system shop.

Do you really want to sell the following item for 50,000 shards?

Mana Kinetic Conversion Reservoir (Unique Epic)

Yes/No

With that, the unique epic passive finally disappears from my status. It's been there for so long that its absence feels strange, but at this point, it would just be silly to keep it. I believe I have gained everything I could have ever wanted from it.

Then I immediately purchase the replacement I've been eyeing for a while.

Do you want to buy the following Passive skill for 89,000 shards?

Passive Skill: Adaptive Defense (Epic) - The user's defensive capabilities automatically adjust to counter the nature of incoming attacks, providing optimal resistance whether the threat is physical, magical, or elemental.

Yes/No

Still in a good mood, I turn to look at Weslin. "Do you think we should make the Necrotic Rot stronger within us and use it against whatever's waiting in the middle of the first floor?"

Chapter 820 - Running away

"Please, stop. You have a problem. Just kill things normally. This is why the Ruler of Diligence sent-"

I continue to listen and nod once in a while, but use Redacthaniel to ignore most of what Weslin is so rudely saying. I think there's at least a degree of logic to my idea. There is the question of what sort of enemy waits at the center of the 1st Beyond floor, and whether or not something like Necrotic Rot would even work against it, but from the tidbits of information I've been getting from our guild's information gathering unit, I think it is worth the risk. Plus, I can probably get a bit more info out of Zant.

Then there's my new passive. I saw it so long ago I don't even remember when, but it's been on my mind ever since, especially as I didn't see a higher tier version of that passive in my system shop. Not Arcane, not even in Low Pristine.

The question is if the system is just showing me things it thinks I could use to strengthen my current build, or if it is being an asshole and actively trying to hide things from me. After all, we can't have that.

There was that creepy healer back on the 4th tutorial floor, from a guild called Ruminous Border. I still vividly remember him having some sort of adaptation skill or trait. The longer I attacked him, the less effective my attacks became.

So my thought process is simple. I want that. I want a stronger version of that passive to help my body to adapt to whatever fuckery I am currently subjecting it to. I want to adapt to more mana and primordial energies. I want to adapt, even to my own attacks. It would work very well with some other skills, too. And lastly, I want an active skill with a similar effect. That means I'll have to keep that passive for now.

Another important question is whether I sell my healing passive, it's been lagging behind, and I could buy a low pristine version of it, or if I keep that token and wait for a possible low pristine version of what I just bought. Or maybe I should just replace it and save up enough shards to buy another low pristine passive sometime in the future.

Currently, I feel like I'm really strong, with likely only Nyssa being stronger among all the attendees in Beyond. Maybe Lyraen? I want to test myself against him. Oh, and Vic too. I bet my sister could kick my ass. Possibly Tacita, I am sure that little devil has improved.

I turn to the side to watch Savant fighting and wonder how our duel would go, and I keep having difficulty imagining it. I'm confident I would win, but I just keep coming to the conclusion that he would still pull some kind of fuckery, he's been preparing to fight me since our first duel in the first tournament. Though perhaps he wouldn't even really fight in the first place and throw his hands up in surrender.

Savant is the type of guy who would keep cultivating for millennia, return to fight me when I am on my deathbed, and challenge me to a duel then. He would probably still lose, but it just sounds like something he would do.

Other than that... well, no one from Group 4. I know their fighting styles way too well, and while sure, they know mine too, and they could likely cause a bit of trouble, as beautifully twisted and abnormal as they are, but I'm still confident I would win.

Then only Morwag remains.

I turn towards the demon running in front of me. Like an animal sensing a gaze, he instantly twists his head towards me for a short moment before turning it back.

Now that I have my ichor and my body has become more difficult to heal, he has a higher chance of defeating me than ever. He would just need to bind us together and wound himself a lot, at which point his body would heal faster than mine.

If that binding was a mana based thing, he'd have no chance of pulling it off after I'd observed it for the first time, and he would be easily dealt with. I know I can make that binding carry over to my vessel, but

I also know Morwag isn't the type to fall for the same trick twice. Plus, the problem is that it's based on primordial energy, so it's trickier to deal with.

Still, I could fly out of his range, bombard him, or press him with all out attacks from the start. There is also a chance my Empyrean Ichor helps me resist his binding, even if it is based on primordial energy.

The fun thing is, I could fight him like a cowardly little bitch from high in the sky to defeat him that way, and he would only grumble but easily accept it as my win. That's how he perceives it, and that's why he doesn't mind using weapons if needed. In his view, victory and control are what's most important.

And there's also the fact that since I got the trait, it's continued to strengthen my body, and I've got other traits with which it syncs really well. That's also why I'll probably use my second stage trait strengthening token on my ichor when I return to the lower Beyond floors, as I still need to stop by so that catboy can make his observations.

I'm curious about what that crazy lynthari did and what injecting myself with his suspicious substances would cause. Did he use some sort of alchemy to make it? Is there such a thing? Didn't Elian say one of his disciples was working on a mana potion? Are there health potions? I bet Lily could do it.

Out of nowhere, a thought appears in my mind, and I let it spread. I think to myself: I want to go fishing. Not for normal fish, but that expensive sort of fancy fish with humanoid arms. The last time I used a bit of black mana on a low quality lure, and I bet I could do better now. Possibly, I could even add in my blood. I really need to find Duncan.

I barely finish that thought as all of us stop as if frozen mid air. Even the slight wind that was blowing is gone, as are the monsters in the wider area around us.

Thought acceleration activates almost by itself as I do it reflexively and observe whatever's halted us. I quickly find the field of mana responsible, it's mimicking something along the lines of [Telekinesis], but I cannot locate the being responsible.

In the same moment Savant's [Dawn] begins to spread, so does my [Eclipse]. My effect of draining all colors from the area clashing against his orange light. It takes only a moment before he pulls his back to let me do whatever I need to do.

This time, I'm not even disappointed about not getting to compare the skills against each other as I hurry to channel more mana into my domain and through the tiny veins in my eyes. I pick up on the structure quickly, but it takes a few more moments before I gather enough mana to break the effect. Considering the amount I can channel in mere seconds, it turns out to be a truly ridiculous amount.

When the effect of the skill holding us breaks within my domain, we all begin to run again. I pick up on the remaining efforts of Morwag, Weslin, and Brich attempting similar countermeasures to my own, but I was the fastest.

We run much faster than before, and everyone strengthens their natural barriers, letting their skills or, in Brich's case, cubes float around them, ready to trigger and fight against the next freeze.

Looking back, I am finally able to track where that field came from and trace it to the unstoppable monster following us.

But why didn't it attack us?

We pass by a larger group of monsters frozen in the same way we were, led by another Skreth. Before they free themselves or get released, Morwag charges faster, bulldozing through the body of the Skreth, which nearly entirely explodes on impact because it failed to prepare in time to face the demon.

I also throw multiple attacks around to get a few more kills, but I'm much more careful now. A good part of my mind keeps its guard up, ready to reach even for black mana as needed or, god forgive me, inject myself with that weird syringe. I can't make sense of it. If the monster following us is a Champion, as I think it is, why are we still alive? We were frozen for a few seconds, we could have easily been annihilated in that time. There's also something to be said for the fact that we didn't even need to be frozen in order to be annihilated.

It sends a shiver down my back to think of what that could be, how easily it was done, and how much of my mana it took to counter it.

As we move, I notice that every time we even pass by an outpost in the distance, many more monsters appear, as if they don't want to let us find shelter. And the attacks on us intensify. Moving on, we fight against numbers that make me wonder where so many level 400 monsters could be coming from. But it's me who picks up the slack there as I throw more bombardments against them. With my Ignition

Heart, I have the least trouble with mana. My mind and body have both been forged into a state where I can easily endure the constant channeling of so much mana and the creation of such a large number of attacks.

Then Skreths start appearing in twos and often cooperate against us. The range of their attacks expand, and they continue to use their bone projectiles, which can sometimes be the size of large buildings, and carry a lot of weight behind them.

In one of these fights, I watch one such projectile heading towards us at high speed like some sort of meteor while the other Skreth makes pillars behind us, creating a spiky bone forest to cut off our path. I watch as Savant slashes horizontally into that forest of bone and as a tiny speck of something akin to dust is released from the marble in Brich's hands, causing the bone meteor to disappear.

My blood lance stabs through the head of a Skreth, and Weslin finishes the one he and Morwag had been fighting.

As we begin to move, everyone is a little more wounded and noticeably quieter. The wounds are starting to look grim, and the effect of the Necrotic Rot seems to be growing stronger, constantly returning stronger even as we try to remove it. It shows in the graying of our limbs, the cracking of skin, and the blood in those areas beginning to turn a dull black.

But as tough as these battles are, and as they become increasingly difficult, we push towards the end of the night.

With the fake sunrise coming closer, that presence finally increases its speed while all the other monsters clear the area.

Another [Empyrean Lance] forms in front of me, longer than I am tall and packing more power than ever before.

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 55 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 56]

As I watch that immense presence moving closer, I feel myself calming. Where previously I let excitement and rage seep into my fights, now I'm entirely calm. This is true even as what feels like the

whole horizon fills with mana, moving in a way that looks like flickering flames. Somewhere deep within that is a single blurred out figure I cannot see.

One of my eyes bursts like a crushed grape, even behind the glasses on my head. I keep the other eye wide open and take the glasses off.

More of my mana seeps into the lance, making it stronger, but the presence doesn't seem to care at all. It moves closer and closer, now a mere two miles away, when my minds snap into one. I move all the mana I have been gathering and create a single black orb in front of me.

Then, I feed the [Empyrean Lance] to that orb. The entire lance disappears into that pitch-black sphere, no bigger than a marble, as if it were being sucked in by a vacuum.

For a moment, nothing happens, and the presence reaching us slows down. It fills the entire view in front of me, from side to side and from ground to ceiling. Then it stops entirely, as if the movements of its mana burning like a flame were halted in place.

My black orb grows to the size of a basketball, and dozens of spikes form out of it, each varying between the length of my body and my forearm. One of them stabs into me before I can even react, and with it, all my mana is gone. Taken in its entirety in that split second.

The orb pulses again, as if it is still digesting the lance and fighting against the mana that made it, before it shrinks back down again.

The next thing I feel is Weslin pulling me away. My manaless body feels so weird and so weak, but unlike Christoph, I do not feel disgust as I look down at my own flesh while being dragged away. My scars, my pale arm, my broken constructs; all of it is proof of my existence and my efforts. I don't cling to it in the least, but at the same time, it is precious to me.

Once we are further away, the pull on my mana weakens, and I ramp up the efforts of my Ignition Heart to redistribute more thermal energy into mana. With my single eye, I watch the black orb floating there, spinning and, once in a while, expanding and forming those spikes as it fights with [Empyrean Lance]. That monster still in the distance feels like it's leaning over the orb, watching it.

My mind reaches towards the orb as it tries to resist, causing me to smile and whisper, "You are mine, so listen."

[Focus - lvl 79 > Focus - lvl 80]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 80 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 81]

I wave my hand, and the orb shoots towards the monster. In the next moment, that powerful, immense, and unreachable presence shrinks and moves away quicker than it did at any point of this night.

It runs away.