

Tutorial 821

Chapter 821 - Our responsibility

For a while, I watch the powerful presence disappear entirely from my sight, and with the first light of the starting day, I track the black orb as it falls somewhere far away. Once there, it begins to absorb the ambient mana and, to my remaining eye's surprise, it stays fairly stable. It doesn't pull too much, and it doesn't show signs of breaking and releasing all it's absorbed. It just sits there in the distance, sipping on all the mana in the area it can reach, and that reach then begins to grow, very slowly.

I might be too much of an optimist at hearts, but at this point, doesn't that mean it could stick around for years? Is it the lance I fed it? Did the orb like it that much? Or was it something I did afterwards, led by my instinct and will? A combination of both?

In any case, this doesn't look too good. I begin to worry it'll explode one day, long after my tutorial ends. As one of the S ranks, I feel a bit responsible, so there is only one thing I can do.

"I can't believe the Ruler of Diligence just did that."

Multiple heads turn toward me, and the way Weslin drags me changes, becoming much less comfortable.

"I can't believe the Ruler of Diligence got so angry again, not even a year after the Ancient Armory incident, when he destroyed that-" I don't get to finish as Weslin drops me on my ass.

With my still weakened body, I lie on my back, and my head catches the first light of the day from the brightening ceiling.

Still lying there and looking up, I say, "We're almost all S ranks here. It is our responsibility to warn people of that dangerous zone with that mysterious evil orb as black as the First One's carapace and heart. Coincidence? I don't think so."

Letting my words trail off, I let the others absorb what I said as we rest and lick our wounds.

Only an hour later, as likely the first group in who knows how long, we see the day break fully. The monsters have long since stopped appearing, and even that powerful, ghostly stalker that had been tracking us all night seems to vanish entirely, not even giving a hint of returning.

A part of me wonders what it is about the day that makes the monsters hate it so much, to the point they never appear before dusk. The silence now feels unreal after so many hours of chaos. No enemy presences surrounding us, and no heightened senses waiting for another freeze mid fight just to find ourselves threatened with being torn apart by a Skreth.

“LET ME GO, YOU MOTHERFUCKER! YOU UNCULTURED BUFFOON. MY BELOVED MASTER WILL-” Calvorn begins to scream as Brich lays the sword on the ground. The blade somehow slides out of its sealing sheath.

The lumoran, clad in half destroyed armor with nearly half of his consumable items used up, lets the sword scream for a moment before tiredly shoving it back into place and applying another seal. Morwag remains standing near Brich, staring in the direction where that powerful presence disappeared, while Savant also remains on his feet. Weslin just sits next to me. For a bit longer, we simply sit there and rest.

Looking at my graying hand, marked by the Necrotic Rot, I finally speak. “I have a plan.”

I hear Weslin groan, having heard about my plan earlier, Savant looks away, and Morwag doesn't react. Meanwhile, Brich excitedly sits up and crosses his legs, listening patiently.

Slowly, I lift my grayed hand. “How about we let this thing spread? We make it stronger and...” I pause. “Then throw it at whatever fucker is waiting at the center of the 1st floor.”

“Absolutely not!” The new voice belongs to Zant, who once again appears out of nowhere beside us.

I force my best gentle smile onto my face and gesture for him to come closer. The tiny vyssari looks at me suspiciously but approaches and sits down nearby. I fish a broken bar of milk chocolate out of my bag and, after unwrapping it, hand it to him.

The bar is a normal size, but the broken pieces seem massive in his hands as he starts nibbling on it.

“So, I have a theory that the rot spreads very quickly, but isn't that difficult to remove, at least not for us here. The only problem is that I remove it from myself, and in the next instant, I get it back from that asshole Savant,” I begin to explain.

As I talk, I pull Zant closer and pet his tiny head. He almost doesn't notice as he bites into the chocolate, which he seems to like very much.

“It's possible that we could get rid of it if we removed it all at once in a very short window,” I say.

Brich lifts his hand, “I have a question.”

“Go on,” I gesture.

“How does it spread from that asshole Savant to you, when before we needed to be wounded with the bones those monsters here seem to like?”

“That is a good question,” I nod. “I think once you're already infected, it becomes possible for you to be infected wirelessly. It's possible that it waits dormant inside of you to be reactivated. I don't know for sure, I'm not a healer.”

Brich lifts his hand again.

“Go on.”

“Why can't we be let into the outpost then, if it only spreads through being wounded by these monsters before it can be transmitted wirelessly?”

“That's a very good question.”

“Is it?”

"Yup."

"So what is the answer?"

"I have no idea."

I can almost hear Savant groan as he stops standing and plops down on the ground. "It spreads from the monsters' attacks initially, but once it's taken root in any other race, they can spread it through the air as they become carriers."

"Isn't that a bit too dangerous though?" I ask.

"It would've already killed most people below level 300. We have the advantage that we're the only five people here, so we can all remove it at the same time and get rid of it if your theory is correct. Imagine if it spread to a bigger group. Someone there would surely find themselves unable to remove it and continue to reactivate it in the others. It is possible that even if we remove it, something dormant will stay behind waiting to be reanimated for days if not longer."

"I bet Lily could deal with it."

"I think if she'd wanted to, your healer could've created something even worse than Necrotic Rot by now."

"I guess," I nod. "So cool. So, what have you picked up on?"

Instead of answering right away, Savant takes something out of his bag and begins to eat as well. Some sort of cookie or something wrapped in a leaf. For a moment, I can smell the scent of oranges and butter.

He notices my look but doesn't even offer to share as he talks. "I was observing how it spreads and letting it progress a bit further. If you want, I can give you the exact formula for how much it strengthens, after how long, and to what point my body's stats and passives influence it. You would need to adapt it to yourself and-" he pauses, seeing my expression. "Never mind. What I've managed to

learn is that, constantly and immediately after it appears, erasing it slows its spread. If you let it grow further, even if you erase it, the next time it appears, it becomes more powerful at the start and spreads faster."

I pet Zant on his tiny head, turning it so he can see the cookie Savant is eating. The little vyssari stops eating the chocolate and looks at the cowardly guy, who stares back intently for a moment before handing a whole cookie wrapped in its giant leaf to Zant.

"I baked it, by the way," he says. "So it might not be very good."

"Thank you, Sir Savant!" Zant takes a few swift steps and grabs it. Then, once he returns to me, I watch him break the cookie in half and offer one half to me with a serious expression.

My sour mood over him not thanking me for the chocolate, as he did to Savant, is immediately gone. I take the cookie and start eating while turning back to Savant.

"So, what do you think?" I ask while silently cursing him. Not good? The cookie is delicious.

He nods. "I have a few ideas that could help."

Nodding just once, my eyes move back to Zant, who's continuing to eat while we talk. I ask, "But you won't let us, right?"

He doesn't even answer right away, but instead slowly finishes his cookie. I notice that not a single crumb of it landed on his suit. Then, only once he's done, he fixes up that already perfect suit and nods. "It's too dangerous."

"How come? There is no way we're the first people ever to get Necrotic Rot. I bet there've been cases of people coming to outposts with it, or moving between floors," I say.

Weslin and Savant both listen curiously while Morwag seems to be doing his meditation on the side.

Zant looks at each of us before answering, "All the big outpost leaders have items that warn them when someone who's infected with Necrotic Rot is approaching and are able to deal with them in most cases. Sometimes, smaller outposts fall to it, causing the surrounding outposts to create their own units to deal with it. Before, I was worried about what would happen if the Black Tower leader attacked you, and what would happen if you fought against him. There was no need for that, so I interfered. After all, I am empowered to make these kinds of decisions."

Unable to help myself, I ask, "What does it mean to be Diligence's vessel?"

The tiny guy doesn't even seem to be surprised by the change of subject. "It means he and I are connected, and if he wills it, he can manifest his power through my body, as much as I can endure. Or, if it should be required, I can give up my life to allow him to manifest here in his full power."

"That sounds like a bad deal for you."

"Is it? I am a Vessel for one of the most revered Rulers. Even if I'm different from the others, I am a member of the Colony, and as our leader's vessel, I am able to call upon him. I can ask for assistance, power, or advice. Many people would wish for that."

"Does he watch through your eyes?"

"He can, but he never does that without my knowledge. Also, one of our rules is to tell the others when he is."

"Well, in that way, you're already doing better than the twins and Min-Jae," I mutter. "Well, anyway. So, how about we set some rules about our use of Necrotic Rot and make a deal? You can't take it away from us and can't stop us either, until it seems like it might hurt a large number of people, right?"

Zant furrows his brows. "That is correct, Sir Gwyn."

"Good." I stand up and call upon Morwag. "Hey, we're gonna need your arm."

Chapter 822 - A gun

Gathered around my trademarked thermal cube, we look down at Morwag's severed arm. I pushed for it to be the left one.

Tradition required it.

Now that it's been severed, that arm has turned gray with black veins, with Necrotic Rot spreading without the demon holding it back. Though with how powerful his body is, and how changed it is by his use of primordial energy and his stats, it spreads slower than it would in any of us.

"I will buy the blueprints of this cube from you." Brich doesn't seem to be interested in the arm at all and instead keeps poking at my cube.

"What blueprints?"

"The plans on how to make it, it is such a fascinating thing. The constantly shifting heat reminds me of a real fireplace, as do the cracking sounds and the sparks it releases every so often. The smoke it generates and the push of kinetic energy blowing the smoke into my face is also very realistic."

"A true camping experience requires you to constantly be moving to avoid the smoke, with that smoke and wind seemingly tracking you as you move all around."

"Why does the cube have a function allowing it to recognize mana signatures and, based on that, target the smoke at Savant for the past thirty minutes?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Brich nods. "I'm a handsome and honorable man, a man of my word. I promise to steal an item from the treasury of Crimson Forge an hour before my tutorial ends and hand it to you. I could potentially get my hands on anything between the grades of rare to low pristine, possibly mid pristine if they have it, but no promises. In exchange, I want the blueprints for your cube! It's a fascinating thing. The effort it must have taken to make thermal energy behave that way, the channels for kinetic energy to mimic the sounds and the wind, the structure itself. It's a masterpiece!"

"I'm not interested in loot boxes and uncertain rewards. And even if I wanted to, I don't think I can create such a blueprint. I've got most of it stored in my head, and in such a way that it wouldn't make much sense to you."

"Such a shame," Brich sighs. "Well, I will try to raid the treasury anyway, though they likely expect it."

Someone coughs from the side. "The arm."

I turn toward that voice and watch Savant, whose face is full of the transparent gray black smoke the cube releases. His eyes are even a bit watery, but he stubbornly, or perhaps patiently, refuses to move from his place. Well, not after he did so five times before. Though he keeps trying to put up barriers against the smoke or make modifications to my cube, while I do my best to stop it. It feels almost playful.

"Yes, the arm." I nod and put my hand on Zant's shoulder, as he now sits on my lap, and ask, "So, how about we make a deal about the Necrotic Rot and the arm?"

"I'm listening, Sir Gwyn."

"We will go on with our plan and store the arm and all the Necrotic Rot, so it has no chance to spread to anyone else, then carry it to the 1st floor. Even once we're there, we'll contain the fight to the middle of the floor so it doesn't spread. If we fail, I will ask my Handler to interfere and clear things out, and the Ruler of Diligence can punish me in any such case as he sees fit."

"Even if such punishment is death, Sir Gwyn?" Zant asks calmly and looks up at me with his big eyes.

"Even then."

"And how confident are you that your handler will be able to interfere and will be willing to?"

"Something tells me she would like the deal I'm offering you. How about you call on Diligence, and we confirm things with him if you feel uncomfortable making such a deal?"

It might be just me, but it seems like a wave of relief shoots across the face of the tiny vyssari, so I caress his hair.

Brich laughs out loud. "Haha! As if The Ruler of Diligence would come down here over something like that!" Continuing to laugh, he looks around, and that laugh weakens as he sees Weslin's solemn face.

"There is no way THE Ruler of Diligence will come here, right?" Brich repeats.

Weslin and Morwag stay quiet.

Savant coughs.

Zant closes his eyes for a moment, and when he opens them again, he says simply, "He is coming."

I ignore Brich and watch as the tiny vyssari's expression changes. Where before it was controlled and calm, it now begins to shift to something more furrowed. Even his voice as he talks grows deeper and more commanding, reminiscent of the one I heard belonging to the huge black ant.

"Attendee Gwyn... you, again," The Ruler of Diligence speaks through his vessel.

Unable to help myself, I reach down and caress Zant's hair again, causing everyone, even Morwag, to freeze in what seems like shock.

"How much do you know?" I ask him.

The Ruler of Diligence doesn't seem to be bothered, or at least he doesn't show it. "Most of it, your offer is acceptable, and within the rules. There are requirements, though. In this specific case, the Necrotic Rot cannot get out of control and spread to any living being, be it monster, attendee, or local. It can be used at the center of the first floor as you have planned, but that requirement stays. It is possible you will find it more difficult to uphold than expected."

"I've taken that into consideration."

"I do not think you have. Very well. In the event that things go awry, Zant will interfere, and in the event they escalate, I expect your Handler, who I am sure is listening, to interfere as well. If it comes to that, I will be expecting a payment of my choosing. Perhaps an item from her personal Repository."

"Won't you ask her first, to find out if she even agrees?" I ask.

In a way very unlike Zant, he almost snorts and looks at me, making me realize he hasn't blinked even once. "I know her well enough to know what she would have done in this situation."

"Good. Nothing like taking my life if I fail?"

"There is no need to be quite so barbaric, though I am sure there are rules I can use to deliver a punishment. Something like blocking you from taking S rank quests or reducing the effectiveness of your Beyond stay tokens by 90%, or other, similar ancient rules we could apply."

"How cruel."

"Is that all, Attendee Gwyn?"

"It is, thank you."

"I will be leaving then, but I have to warn you. Do not abuse Zant. He is powerful, but still young and inexperienced. Missions like this allow him to gather some experience."

"As if I would do that to him, and you know me better. That's probably why you sent him to me instead of someone else."

For a moment, he looks at me, and then he laughs, a broken sound, reminiscent of clacking mandibles.

Without warning, that choking presence disappears. Zant's eyes clear out, and the tiny guy shakes his head, checking his clothes before looking up at me. "Are you satisfied with the deal, Sir Gwyn?"

"Yup," I say, picking him up and setting him back down on the ground while handing him another chocolate.

In a better mood, I look at Brich, who has a helmet over his face with a light flashing on the side as if he's currently recording something.

I blink a few times. "What the hell?"

Brich sighs. "What the hell indeed. The interference has not allowed for a recording, unfortunately. Do you realize Eldrin, Isolde, and Silverweave would eat you alive if they knew you'd gotten to talk to the Ruler of Diligence?"

"I mean, they probably would. At least Isolde seems to admire the guy, well, the ant."

Brich laughs. "Someone capable of creating an artificial sun, an owner of the World Forge, and impressively, one of the very few beings to ever be able to make Spatial Caches."

"Is that new info?"

"Some of it. Isolde started looking for more as of late."

"Should you be telling me this for free?"

"Clearly not." Brich nods seriously and, seemingly even more excited, he plops down and weaves his fingers with the fingers of Morwag's severed arm, laughing. "Look, Morwag, we're holding hands! I would never-"

His words stop coming when he sees the demon smile at him. That demon's smile is so gentle and honest looking, which causes the lumoran to put the arm back down and tap it a few times. "How about we start?"

POV Lily Chen

When I look around the street in Megacity, I can only sigh. Among the people passing by, I've already noticed a few familiar faces. There are recruiters from the guilds who must've already been informed of my return to Beyond.

There are also some who seem like they want to buy healing marks from me. As for how they were able to learn that I can make them, I don't know. Maybe they deduced it from spying on Nat?

I'm currently alone, even if I should know better. At least when I am here with Sophie or Tess, people don't follow me so much, but I just wanted to be alone for a bit. I realize how greedy that might seem while the others are dealing with so many things.

I could probably change my looks to avoid these people, but when I did it previously, they were still able to learn it was me. Nat always said I was terrible at masking my mana signature.

"Lady Lily, may I have a moment?" One of my stalkers stops by, a tall and polite lumoran. He even bows. "Of course, I am aware of how valuable your time is, so please consider this a consultation. I am willing to pay 500 thousand shards for just a hint of your wisdom."

"Is this a bribe?"

"N-no! Just a small sum for whatever amount of time you consider reasonable." He smiles. He is one of the most stubborn, likely from one of the top five guilds.

So I look at him and think. What would Nathaniel do?

"Okay," I say and initiate the transfer.

The lumoran smiles at me brightly and confirms it, taking all the fees on himself.

"So-" he begins.

I interrupt him. "Thank you. Your reasonable amount of time has concluded."

Then I stand there and watch him. At first, he seems angered and stricken with shock, but he quickly controls himself, and that fake smile appears again. Still very politely, he smiles and bows before leaving quietly.

Sometimes I truly loathe being a healer. Why are we so rare, and why is everyone so obsessed with monopolizing me? They want me bound to them, buying healing marks, chasing long life, or demanding body modifications. They want to dictate my price and lock me in their guilds just to sell my services for a cut of the price. They're all so greedy... so disgusting.

Against my will, gray mana flashes across my palm before I shake it off, dissolving it.

With a sigh, I turn around and take a step, only to bounce off someone. "I am sorry," I begin to apologize instantly, only to realize who it is.

A young woman with messy brown hair stands there, her eyes glowing with a light that's always seemed so free and full of life to me.

Tacita smiles at me and waves, her movements drawing symbols into the air with the tip of a finger, glowing with mana.

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I laugh, but the sound dies when I see another man approaching. "Lady Lily, I-" He doesn't get to finish, or even get close, before he's reeling back with a dagger buried in his arm.

Tacita smiles at him and shoos him away playfully, while the man stares with wide eyes.

He still tries to say something, but Tacita sighs and points a finger at him in a gesture that looks like a finger gun and mimes the recoil of a shot.

Nothing happens, making the bleeding man even more confused and Tacita annoyed. She taps her chest a few times, and something moves there. From the inner pocket of her jacket, a sleepy head pokes out. It has golden fur with cute black eyes. A small baby ferret.

Tacita makes her finger gun again and shoots at the man again, and the ferret yawns, sticking out a tongue, but it does nothing for the mute girl. The man, meanwhile, smartly disappears.

Turning back to me, she draws.

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"Gun?" I mutter.

She stands by my side before I even realize it and nods happily while showing me the sleepy baby ferret. She points at it and draws again.

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"The baby ferret is a gun?"

Tacita nods wildly but then lifts her hand, gesturing as if that still isn't fully correct. She looks around and turns into a blur before returning a few seconds later. The cute baby ferret doesn't seem to have been shaken by the fast movement at all and instead is dozing off again.

Excitedly, Tacita puts a piece of white cloth on the ground, on which she places sets of green and red clothes. She creates vertical stripes of green, white, and red, reminiscent of a flag. An Italian one.

I can't help but smile seeing her excitement and move closer to look at the flag, in the process, softly bumping into her. She pulls away but doesn't attack aggressively. She rubs the shoulder I bumped into while looking at me expectantly.

I begin to pick up what she wants to tell me. "So you meant gun in Italian?"

She nods so quickly her brown hair flies around her head, but again she gestures as if I still haven't quite gotten it.

"So not a gun? A weapon? Pistol... eh, shotgun, rifle-" before I finish, she nods quickly.

"So rifle it is." I put my hands behind my back and lean to the side to get a better view of the golden baby ferret. It is so reminiscent of the one Biscuit befriended, and that saved Izzy, leaving her crying over its pitiful life and end. That ferret continues to sleep, and Tacita protectively covers it, hiding it from my sight as if she doesn't want to share.

I like how free she is, how wild, and how much she knows about what she wants, and the way she just follows through. In a way, I think I truly am jealous of her.

"A, B, C, D, E, F," I begin, and she stops me at F.

I nod and start again. "A, B, C..." I continue on in this fashion, and it takes us a while until I get the name.

Fucile. Or Fuci, for short.

Tacita's gun.

Chapter 823 - Record of a confrontation

Morwag's arm is now entirely black and traced through with faint gray veins, and the place where it was cut off almost looks as if it's being eaten into by a slow developing rot.

It now lies there with the elbow bent and squeezed into a glass container provided by Brich. With the help of Savant, who actually seems to have a bit of experience with this, we have moved a few of Lily's healing marks from me to the arm to make it last longer and to feed the Necrotic Rot.

The container is now almost filled with it, after Savant released almost everything he'd absorbed. All in all, it's turned out to be quite a large amount. The guy seems to have been absorbing it whenever he could during the night. He also threw in a few very suspicious pieces of flesh and one that looks like a small sort of fish scale, apparently to make it more potent.

Not to be left behind, I contribute a small vial's worth of my blood, to which Brich adds some pinkish liquid from one of his bottles, as Weslin joins with his void, seemingly in an attempt to cut off and entirely separate the version of the rot that is inside from the version of the rot we all have. He does this just in case, so that in the future, it doesn't reactivate whatever remains we might still carry.

For the moment, after syncing our process, our Necrotic Rot is gone as we all sync to get rid of it in less than a second. Then, extracting another homemade cookie from Savant, Zant also confirms it.

So now we have a container holding a rotting arm and an assortment of strange liquids sloshing inside, along with a few weird items. And the rot within has begun to change gradually. It's growing through the arm, powered by Lily's healing marks, and who knows how those'll affect the process, along with the other things we threw in as well.

Now, carrying this through the floor sounds like a scary idea, but the container gets reinforced by everyone in the party. Morwag uses his binding to make it tougher. I draw the array on the container with my blood instead of mana conductive paint, and the others do their own things as well.

Zant watches quietly the entire time with a look that seems almost entirely disinterested, though I do catch the odd spark of horror as we do certain things to the arm.

It must be a good thing.

With our goals more or less done, we head off to leave the third floor, with me giving one last look towards the mana dead zone in the distance. The question still remains.

Why would the Ruler of Diligence do that?

All of us appear at the same place on the second floor, and right away, marks are placed on each of us. All facilitated by the owner of this tower, carved into the core of an enormous stone projectile launched by some Absolute long ago. I still find it fascinating how much time it must have taken to carve.

Giving ourselves a bit of a break to do our own things for a few hours, Brich and Savant separate while Weslin, Morwag, and I head to our branch to find information on the guide known as Duncan for our fishing trip.

Before they leave, I finally break and speak to Morwag. "What the hell have you been snickering about this whole time?"

He looks at me for a few heartbeats before he bursts out laughing. "Mwahhahaha!" Out loud and without shame, to the point that I can't even be sure if he's just making fun of me or if he's really that happy. The laugh disappears as quickly as it came, and he swiftly pulls his emotions back under control.

Then, with a calm face, he says, "You'll see soon enough," and waves for Weslin to follow him to the guild branch. Morwag is still missing his arm, but he doesn't seem to be bothered in the least.

I stare at their backs as they leave before pushing those thoughts away. Then, as I expected, a connection forms with my mind through the mark the local Champion placed on us, and a voice sounds in my head.

(Nathaniel! I am so happy to see you again!) Spark shouts excitedly with his youthful voice.

(Hello, Spark,) I say, as I find myself a nice bench to sit on.

(Are you the one kidnapping Weslin this time?) He laughs, and I can sense him observing me.

(You could say that,) I snicker. (Are you alone?)

(I wish! There are so many of me, and I keep hearing their voices, but it's still fun! In fact, I want to hear more voices because that would mean more friends! Marble wants to join in, can he?)

(Yup, why not.)

(Thank you! You are such a good friend, too! Marble, you be nice to Nathaniel!)

(There is no reason for me to be nice, but I will remain polite,) The new, less emotional voice says. (I greet the guild master of the Primordial Knights,) He says to me.

Before I can even react, Spark speaks up. (That's true! Congratulations, Nathaniel! Are the demons bullying you? Do you need help?)

(As if demons would've let him become guild master if he'd needed help. It is more likely he bullies them.) Marble snorts.

(Nathaniel wouldn't do that, right?)

(I'll be keeping silent on that one,) I say.

(Oh no,) Spark says in shock, as if his world is breaking.

(Please ignore Spark. I want to once again ask you to let me observe your body on a deeper level in exchange for reasonable payment. It can be the same kind of information as last time,) Marble says to me.

(What do you have?)

(I have three things I can disclose that I think you might be interested in. The first is the contents of a message left under a loose floorboard in the West Wing about a hundred years ago. It was meant to stop a guild war, but someone put a heavy rug over it, and it got lost. Currently, there's some sort of domesticated creature sleeping over said rug.)

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(Ehm. What else?)

(See, Spark? I keep telling you all attendees are greedy and unable to appreciate the value of information like this.)

(Nathaniel, do you really bully demons?) Spark ignores Marble entirely.

(Sometimes?) I say.

After my answer, Spark falls into a shocked silence while Marble continues. (Another one is a record of a confrontation that happened on the twelfth floor of Beyond not long ago.)

(You can't share that! Veil will be angry!) Spark shouts.

I can hear Marble snicker. (She won't. That record was broadcast live by the Ruler of Envy through the entirety of Beyond for all handlers and kings to see. The outcome won't change the fact that the record was freely shared and is thus available for further spread.)

(But wouldn't he get angry if more people saw what happened?)

(His feelings won't change much about the nature of the information.) Marble cuts him off and then turns back to me. (The last information I offer is the number of times attendees in this city have been brought the wrong food by a waitress and ate it anyway because they didn't want to say anything, over the past 500 years. The actual number would surprise you.)

(I have heard something similar from you before.) I mention.

(Indeed. The number of times attendees have tripped over their own feet while trying to look mysterious or intimidating in the past 500 years. That one was truly valuable.)

(I still can't believe the number.)

(So surprising, right?)

(Yes, but this time I would like the record of the 12th floor confrontation.)

(How disappointing,) Marble sighs and muses before saying, (How about the number of times attendees from the past 200 years that have watched the hairdressers cut their hair as their faces started twitching seeing it turn out entirely different from what they wanted, and didn't say anything, then cried outside the store after paying.)

Hearing that, I fall into silence and bury my face in my open palms.

I really want to hear that.

Still, I force myself to stop and speak again. (I'll go with the record, Marble.)

The part of the mind of the local Champion's mind seems disappointed but agrees, and I let him observe my body, something he undertakes alongside Spark. This time it takes longer than the first time, and they don't stop to talk much.

Though at the end, Spark whispers, (N-Nathaniel, are you okay?)

(Yes.)

(But-)

(It's fine, Spark. So, all good from my side?)

(Yes,) Marble says. (I will invite you to a mental space of my creation, so just follow through the link I provide.)

(Got it.)

After that, I do just as I'm told and soon find myself in a desolate area filled with mountains and clear skies, allowing me to see far into the distance. It looks like it never ends, with some places seeming to repeat across the landscape. Almost as if someone made a dozen or so square miles of area, filled it with nature and mountains, and then just copy and pasted it across a neverending stretch.

Soon, two floating orbs appear next to me. One of them seems like it's made of black gray marble, and the other is simply a cheerful spark of light. While Marble moves slowly, Spark jumps all over the place, bumping against my form in this space.

"We are now within the record," a voice speaks, coming from Marble's orb as it stops at my side.

"Hello Nathaniel!" Spark continues to quickly circle me and bounce all over the place before landing on my shoulder. "But I mean it, your body is, as Ember would say, fucked up. You need to take care of yourself more!"

"There will be time for that later," I say as I give Spark a poke. "It'll all be okay. My plans are beyond your mortal comprehension."

"So cool!"

"Let us not waste more time," Marble says, getting impatient, and the area around us shifts as he moves us through the record until we find two figures. A silver haired woman and a lynthari with two tails standing next to her.

Lissandra and Myrra.

Then the record starts playing. Both of them stop running as Lissandra gestures for Myrra to halt. She then swings her hand as if deflecting a series of unseen attacks.

For a few long seconds, nothing happens. Then, far, far in the distance, something explodes into a huge fireball that fills the horizon and continues to grow and grow. I watch the shockwave spread and bulldoze everything in its way. It erases mountains taller than Everest, reducing them to exploding clouds of rock as it spreads further and further.

Then, as it's about to reach Myrra and Lissandra, the former Absolute swings her hand, and the shockwave splits in front of them, missing by a mile on either side and carving deep scars into the earth.

"Hahaha, that was such a nice reaction, and I thought I was being sneaky about that attack! Though it could be expected of an inferior copy of a once great being." The voice sounds like it's coming from everywhere, making it difficult to locate where it's coming from.

Lissandra doesn't seem bothered in the least, as she looks around, specifically in one direction. "Is that all?"

The laughter stops.

"What, did you think your pathetic ability would hide you?" This time, Lissandra reaches for her waist, where she taps on the pitch black dagger hanging there. Just that little touch causes the light to flicker, and the field hiding the lumoran breaks like a sheet of colored glass.

The newly revealed lumoran has black skin like all members of his race, with crystalline features adorning his head alone, creating a diadem-like set of protrusions encircling it, the largest of which protrudes from the center of his forehead. His right hand, made of the same crystal enclosing the bones visible inside, along with swirling currents of mana, begins to shake until he clenches it tightly.

The smile then flowers on his face again. "THAT was fucking scary. But how about this, you fake little thing?"

Lissandra's hand turns into a blur, and two seconds later, multiple explosions similar to the first one erupt so far in the distance that I can barely see them. Yet the flashes of light and the fireballs grow until they must be each twice as tall as the mountains surrounding them. There are five such explosions, each a different color: pink, purple, yellow, green, and blue.

Myrra stares on, with eyes wide open as Lissandra flicks her hand once again, this time to deflect an attack targeting the lynthari, and another explosion is deflected, creating a sixth fireball. The shockwaves far in the distance continue to spread rapidly, entirely evaporating everything in their way as they bounce off each other.

"Little kitten, your mana," Lissandra says simply, never taking her eyes from the lumoran man who simply continues to smile at her.

As asked, Myrra offers her mana to Lissandra, who takes it over without ever breaking eye contact. In the elegant gesture of a practiced duelist, Lissandra moves her open right hand, lifting it in front of her face with the palm turned toward her.

And when it almost seems like the shockwaves will reach them, Lissandra clenches her hand into a fist with an audible crack reminiscent of breaking ice.

All of the colossal fireballs from the explosions in the distance disappear as if they never existed. All of the shockwaves are gone, dispersed into a gentle summer breeze washing over Lissandra's back, blowing through her clothes and silver hair as it wavers around her head.

As she opens her hand again, a small orb glows there, made of the many colors of the prior explosions.

She grabs it with the tips of her fingers and flicks it toward the Ruler of Envy, who shouts in panic as the entire sky changes color.

Chapter 824 - An Asshole vs. the Imitation

There is no following explosion, and the orb that shot towards Envy stops before returning to Lissandra to circle around her. There, it splits into six smaller orbs, all taking on the colors of the attacks Envy shot her way before.

"That was insane," Marble mutters. "The precision, skill, and control it takes to separate an attack of that scale with as little mana as she did."

"Shh, Marble, look at what she's doing with the one winged wyvern's domain," Spark interrupts him.

"Wyvern's domain?" I ask.

The fake sky of this floor, which has now changed color, taking on a mix of dozens of shades of gold, continues to waver. I can't feel the pressure of it through the record, but I can tell it's something Envy

must have activated to defend himself. Meanwhile, underneath that golden domain, a transparent white light shimmers weakly.

Spark buzzes around me, bouncing against my cheek before stopping next to my ear. "The Ruler of Envy has activated Beyond's main defensive array. They gave him access to it, and unlike his predecessor, he didn't hesitate to use it."

I watch as Envy, having collected himself, chuckles at his prior reaction. Sweat beads on his face, and the golden light is at its densest around him. I can even see the faint outlines of a myriad of thin lines all over.

"The Absolute's imitation is very smart. She must have been expecting someone to come after her with Beyond's main defensive array, so she defeated the one winged wyvern and took over its array to defend herself! How smart!"

As Spark talks, the battle continues. A mantle made of mana forms behind the Ruler of Envy, and over his head, three crowns begin to grow. All at the same height, floating over his head in a tight orbit. One of the crowns is filled with mana. Another one has flames fighting to escape, and the last one is transparent with a green hue to it.

While Beyond's main defensive array continues to push against the wyvern's domain that Lissandra's seized control of, Envy lowers himself and bursts into a dash. I can't track him anymore, but the place he launches from explodes in a way that seems almost like a meteor striking a mountain peak behind him, and it blasts it into pieces flying into the distance.

His voice makes itself heard from everywhere once again as he teases Lissandra, calling her an imitation, a fake, and a replica, threatening to kill her disciple and her as well, for everyone to see.

Meanwhile, Lissandra doesn't even bother to move, she just stands where she is. Her hair rises up, its silver color seeming to shine a bright neon white under the domain she now controls. It creates a striking contrast against her brown eyes.

Once in a while, she flicks her hand, and somewhere, far in the distance, an explosion bursts forth. They grow bigger and bigger to a scale that's beginning to seem difficult to grasp. A barrage consisting of thousands of projectiles pours out from behind one of the mountains, tearing through stone and

heading for Lissandra. One of the orbs floating around her, the pink one, moves in front of her and pulses once before disappearing.

With that, all of the projectiles are gone. From where they came, a spherical pink orb eats into the area and the mountains around it just once before disappearing. At the center of it all, the Ruler of Envy floats, surrounded by golden light. The mantle made of mana behind him flickers, stretching out like wings, and the three crowns begin to spin faster and faster.

The golden light of Beyond's defensive array intensifies, drowning an area the size of a continent in blinding light. The air screams and reality tears, dissolving the world into a shimmering haze.

And even though I can't truly sense any of it, I feel myself shudder.

All that immense pressure pushes against Lissandra and Myrra, now surrounded by a transparent white domain that crackles like lightning around them as she faces that attack. Another explosion thuds, and for a moment, my sight is entirely obscured. It is as if reality itself disappears before returning, and all three people within the record are still there.

For dozens of miles around Lissandra and Myrra, the earth is pressed deep, perfectly level, and smooth, with a sheen almost as reflective as a mirror.

In the distance, enormous figures begin to move, gargantuan lizards made of rock, moving to attack Envy. He doesn't seem to pay them any mind, and a fire from one of his crowns flashes forth, and the colossi disappear entirely without any chance to put up a defense. These very same attacks hammer towards Lissandra, who, since the start of the fight, has yet to take a single step, and even now, the ground beneath her and Myrra is entirely undamaged.

He follows with more attacks, using items that break upon use to launch exotic projectiles at her. Shadows reach from tears in space, turning everything dark as if absorbing the light around them. Oceans of fire burn in ways that seem impossible to extinguish.

Finally, Envy snorts and reaches into his inner pocket, from where he produces a long spear made entirely of white lightning. I notice the way it damages his hands, and one of the rings he's wearing cracks and breaks off, but he doesn't really seem to mind.

Golden light and dense lines trace paths in the air surrounding him furiously as he lands on the ground and, with all his strength, throws the white spear. His throw creates ripples through the ground around him, making it seem like it's been liquified.

Just a few seconds have passed since the start of the fight. Maybe ten, maybe fifteen, I have a hard time saying. But I can tell that the record's been slowed down for my benefit, likely by Marble. Even then, I've been accelerating my thoughts since the start, just so I can observe this insanity. I'm also sure I can only truly grasp a small part of the fight. Maybe a tenth of it, maybe a bit more.

Not like it matters. There are parts of this fight I can't even perceive at the moment, but I can watch Myrra moving as if in slow motion while Lissandra and the Ruler of Envy face each other.

In that moment, as the white spear flies her way, the record slows even further as Marble says, "Watch."

Lissandra, for the first time, takes the black dagger from her waist and throws it at the ground below her feet. It stabs itself there by the blade, and in that same movement, she weakens the domain around her. A pulse from the dagger stabbing into the ground blows away the golden defensive array and clears out the area.

And Lissandra moves.

The record slows further just to catch her, yet I can barely see as she runs past the white spear. She snatches it from the air, twists it around her body, and hurls it back at Envy. He begins to move, as if to dodge, but before he can, Lissandra is standing in front of him. His eyes widen as she delivers a blow to his belly, grabs the [Mana Crown] from over his head, and squeezes it until it breaks, letting all that mana flood into her body.

Her speed increases further as she moves around and behind him, grabbing him by the back of the neck with one hand and lifting him into the air just in time as the white spear reaches him and stabs itself through his chest.

The lumoran coughs blood and smirks. The green crown flashes and his body explodes, but before any of it can damage Lissandra, a burst of mana from her cancels it out. The shockwave and pressure, I am

sure, would've normally erased a continent or two becomes a short gust of powerful wind that presses against Myrra, who covers her head while still seeming to move in slow motion.

Standing there with the white spear that fails to damage her at all, Lissandra looks around. She moves again, reaching Myrra, and as she passes by, she lowers herself and flicks the handle of the dagger, which lets out a clear, beautiful noise. Another pulse is sent from it, pushing Beyond's main defensive array back once again, though it had already begun to spread.

Lissandra runs over the broken landscape, avoiding dozens of attacks and erasing or canceling out all of them, as each and every one of them carries a power that almost no Absolute could ever hope to face.

The Ruler of Envy is already back again. This time, only the green crown floats over his head, and his mana mantle spreads itself behind his back, forming two additional muscular limbs.

He even uses the defensive array to surround himself in brilliant golden armor, from which the white spear simply bounces off. The spear continues to fly into the distance, its blade cutting through everything in its path as if it were no denser than air, and leaving rifts in space as if it were cutting and scaring the fabric of reality.

After dodging under his attack, Lissandra grabs his arm and throws him off balance against the ground. He rolls, stands up, and punches at her, which she simply redirects with a calm face. She uses his momentum to throw him off balance again and kicks against him, causing him to slide back without taking any damage.

He moves again at that incredible speed, and the ground beneath him explodes into a mile wide crater from the sheer force he unleashes. When Lissandra runs to follow him, not a single speck of dust is sent into the air.

She reaches him mid leap, grabbing his feet just before he reaches Myrra. His fingers pass just barely in front of the lynthari's face as Lissandra pulls him back and throws him into the distance. There, Envy stops, breathing heavily with his fingertips shaking, but he is still smiling as he takes a deep breath.

But that smile disappears entirely when Lissandra speaks.

“I have the feel of it now.”

Envy’s face turns to horror as the white domain she controls spreads further. It starts devouring and taking control of portions of the golden arrays. Piece by piece, it pierces through.

“It’s a loud and flashy array, certainly, but an incredibly clumsy one,” Lissandra says as she takes a calm step. “There are so many openings and pointless gaps that it was actually confusing to find the center because I couldn’t believe someone would actually build something this poorly. Watching it struggle to function is almost embarrassing.”

With each step she takes, the white domain becomes less transparent and more of the sky loses its golden shine.

The Ruler of Envy chuckles, and in the same moment, Lissandra’s attack seems about to reach him, but he disappears. Only his cracked green crown falls to the ground, along with the golden armor, and a rapidly closing tear hangs in space behind him.

Even though he is gone, his voice sounds once more, followed by a laugh. “That was fun. Maybe next time, cute little imitation.”

Then the record stops as if frozen, holding that final scene of Lissandra standing there as her domain takes over.

We are moved again, this time standing right in front of Lissandra with Marble and Sparkle circling around her. “How scary! Did you see that, Nathaniel? I’ve watched it like ten times already, and it is still so scary! One day, I’ll have to thank the Ruler of Envy for showing this record live. Even if he seems a bit like...”

“An asshole.”

“You cannot say that about a Ruler, Marble!”

"I obviously can," Marble snorts and flies to me. "The Absolute's imitation killed the one winged wyvern, which was initially set on the 12th floor as a test for anyone wanting to head to the 13th floor. The one winged wyvern is at this point rumored to be nearing the level of a dragon, and the floor is entirely within its domain. Domains are what wyverns are truly famous for, and this one is especially powerful."

I watch Spark touch Lissandra and then run away as if scared, while Marble continues to explain. "That poor wyvern is bound to defend the entrance to the 13th floor, reviving stronger after every death. The imitation killed it and took over its domain, all in preparation to face Beyond's defensive array, which she started to analyze and began to take control over during the fight."

"I bet she would've been even stronger if she didn't have to analyze the array. Or do you think she still hasn't gone all out? Perhaps she didn't want to kill the Ruler of Envy right away?"

"That sounds like her," I say, agreeing with Spark and turning back to Marble. "What happened next? If you can't tell me, I can just leave some Earth food behind for you, just like last time."

"Deal," Marble says immediately. "Before the Absolute's imitation took over Beyond's main defensive array entirely, the Ruler of Diligence reacted. With the help of the Ruler of Greed, they forcefully sped up the one winged wyvern's revival ceremony. The wyvern then started to fight the imitation while they used the distraction to retake control of Beyond's defensive array. Yet, the imitation still got what she wanted in the end. The main defensive array is now entirely closed off and set to go through inspection in case she made some unforeseen changes to it. It cannot be used against her again anytime soon."

Chapter 825 - Cutie patootie

After we finish watching the record, I find myself in the Primordial Knight's headquarters with Morwag and Weslin. The leadership here wanted us to have a meeting somewhere more "official," but we just ended up on the terrace, giving us a view of the false tower's surroundings.

There I stand, resting against the railing while Morwag sits inside doing his meditation thing. Weslin is talking to a local woman who has introduced herself as the local director Narisa, and apparently works for the guild. I remember her from the first time Weslin and I visited the simply named Third City of Beyond's second floor.

I hear the woman ask Weslin in a shocked tone, "He dumped most of his guild master's responsibilities onto a man called Talon?"

But I mostly ignore all that, the sights from the record still weighing on my mind. At the moment, I'm having to suppress my urge to move, to attack, to fight, and grow stronger. That's how I'm feeling right now. Sandra the cockroach has proven herself to be truly annoying, even in a record.

"You said you wanted to talk to me about something, Narisa," I interject once Weslin seems to have ended his conversation with her.

The woman smiles and nods politely, moving closer to me onto the balcony. "Just a few very minor things. Sir Weslin already told me that I can make my own decisions about most of the smaller things I wanted to bring up."

It seems to be a question, and I simply nod without hesitation.

"I still remember the first time we met and the way you blamed Sir Weslin for kidnapping you," she chuckles. "How quickly things can change. You seem to have a similar personality to Lady Nyssa, so I'll be straightforward. There is a guild called Rising Stars. They're currently 11th in the rankings, but they've been growing quite fast. As of late, they've been taking advantage of this place's rules and financial power to hire small groups to suppress our members on the second floor. We think they're one of the guilds being supported by the Astral Brotherhood, who're currently 5th in the rankings."

She pauses to see if I have any questions, but I simply gesture for her to continue. "It isn't anything outrageous, but this is being done with a longer timeline in mind, building towards the time the three of you end your tutorials. If you could provide me with a larger amount of financing, I could-"

"It's fine," I wave off. "Where is their headquarters?"

"Fifteenth floor of this tower, near the central fountain, the tall yellow wooden buildings. If you want to visit them, I can arrange a meeting."

"There's no need. How confident are you in that information that they've been messing with us?"

"Extremely."

"Good. Morwag, can you go there? Don't kill anyone, but you can break some bones. Destroy as much as you can before they throw you out of the city."

Narisa looks around in a panic, switching her gaze from Weslin and then back to me, while I make my way to Morwag. A small orb of black mana forms in my hand as I erase the mark from him. Spark, Marble, Veil, or any other part of the mind of the local Champion will likely notice it soon, but hopefully not too soon.

"This should give you a bit of time before it's replaced. We'll meet outside," I say.

"Sounds good to me," Morwag pushes himself back to his feet without any hesitation, before lazily, and while yawning, making his way out of the room.

In the following silence, Narissa makes her way to me. "Why? What? I don't think this is a good idea. It's a violation of the rules," she mutters rapidly.

I shrug. "Unofficial rules I never agreed to. Even when Morwag and Weslin leave, I'll still have well over a year left in my tutorial, so do not worry. You can tell them that I'll hunt them down, along with whoever supports them, if they try to take revenge for what Morwag is about to do. They're probably just testing us now that Nyssa's gone, and, honestly, it pisses me off. Weslin, do you think they're looking down on me?"

Unlike Narisa, he doesn't seem the least bit surprised and smiles at the woman to calm her down before turning to me. "They likely just want to see how far they can push. I don't think anyone's underestimating you at this point. But there's likely to be more such probing in the future."

"I guess," I agree with him and switch my attention back to Narisa. "Was there anything else you wanted?"

"Now, I'm even more inclined to deal with these things on my own." I can see her nerves coming out in the movements of her body and the twitches of her muscles as she gives up in the end. "This is going to be a mess. I just hope they send Sunshine to complain and not someone like Veil."

"Ask for Spark."

"They rarely let Spark touch these things, unfortunately, and not all of them are as cute as him," she shakes her head. "Well, on another note: we have been able to locate the guide known as Duncan, but..."

"Go on," I encourage her.

"I bought all available information and even connected to our other branches. It seems that he's gotten himself into a large amount of debt to move his eight and eleven year old siblings to the second floor's 1st city. All seemed well until he got wounded and required extensive healing from one of the healing guilds, which increased his debt. It looks like they did shoddy work, too, and he's still wounded. To avoid dealing with it, they sold the debt on to one of the shadier guilds, and now they've been threatening him. Even in his state, he's caught traveling between the 1st and second floors to make the shards he needs."

"I see. Do we have any good healers in the 1st city?"

"Currently none, but I can give you a contact for a healing guild we are friendly with."

"I would rather not. However, I will need you to send a message. Also, I'd like you to give me the information on the people who lent money to Duncan and sold his debt. And any information you have on whoever they sold it to. Also, information on the healer guild, along with the individual healer who botched his healing."

"I do not like the sound of that, Guild Master Gwyn."

I ignore such blatant lack of trust in me. "And contact the old man, the vice guild master. There might be a mess that needs cleaning up."

After that, and before leaving, I stop to talk to Spark for a bit. When he asks me about what I could have done to Morwag's mark, I don't bother to lie, and I even tell him where Morwag is heading as well.

"I will hide it from the others, Nathaniel," he gets out after a long hesitation.

I reject it straight away. "No."

"But I can do it!"

"I said no. I don't want to take advantage of you in any way. Just do what you would've done anyway."

There is a brief silence before he giggles. "You're being far too cute right now, Nathaniel," he says, his cheerful tone shifting toward something more serious. "But don't forget who I am. I am a Champion. Why do you think I'm usually the one to greet newcomers? I'm one of the primary facets, the one most similar to our original self. When it comes to the more important decisions, my voice often carries the most weight."

"Oh."

"Hehe, oh! I wish I were looking at your face now! But as I said, there are rules we've set that I have to follow. They're necessary with all the things I've done to my mind, but let us say... I can ignore them just for a moment! So, as long as he doesn't hurt anyone too much, I'll let MorMor have some fun. But then they'll have to kick him out, and he likely will not be able to enter the city anymore. Oh, and the Primordial Knights will receive a huge fine, too!"

"It's what I expected to happen, but I still think it is good if he does it."

"Why?" Spark asks curiously.

"Because I think people fear someone who's unpredictable much more than someone powerful who follows the rules. Yes, you get punished, get a fine, and get kicked out of the city, but it is like taking a punch to deliver a more powerful blow."

"Haha, how fitting for someone with your body," that cheery part of the Champion's mind laughs before calming again. "But Nathaniel, I believe that sometimes your life is not just your own, as much as you would like it to be. One day, you will look around and finally realize that some wounds you receive hurt the people who care about you more than they hurt you."

I don't even know what to say to that, so I just stay quiet.

Spark giggles again. "I met a person from Earth not long ago, and we spent days where she taught me many things about your planet. And at this moment, there is a word I think describes you."

Spark talks in a tone that shows the smile in his voice as he says, "Nathaniel, sometimes you are such a cutie patootie."

Weslin and I are kicked out of the 3rd city not long after. I receive a one week ban, while Weslin is somehow banned until the end of his tutorial, which he complains about, loudly.

When we rejoin Morwag outside of the city, the demon is sitting on a boulder and waving at us. For some reason, he still hasn't restored his arm, and I'm getting more and more suspicious of that. I do not expect a betrayal, though, but I'm nervous. Demons should not be capable of scheming in the way Morwag tends to.

We also learn that Morwag has received a 100 year ban, which he announces almost proudly.

Brich and Savant join us not long after, and soon enough, we start making our way toward the 1st city. I have some business to deal with there before we head on to the 1st floor to fish and explore the middle of the floor, followed by our expedition to the surface.

Nathaniel and the boys' adventure continues.

Once on the road, we barely stop, except for the occasional detour to deal with an interesting monster. We bypass the second city entirely, and though a part of me wants to explore them, we also pass by The Storm and The Snowy Mountains. None of us has any need to rest, and I begin to imagine how it must look to see two humans, a demon, a half-demon, and a lumoran in clanking armor traveling side by side while engaging in friendly conversation.

There isn't much to be said until we enter the first city, also known as Rookie City. It's massive, built in a perfect circle around a central mountain, and yet the tallest buildings only reach about three stories.

Surrounding the city are miles of flat plains, covered in yellow grass and patches of flowers that sway in a constant breeze.

Once we enter the city, I notice those nasty arrays I saw when I came here for the first time, even if they don't feel all that dangerous now. I mean, they are scary, but not that scary. I bet with a little bit of effort, I could do some really fun things to them. We also begin to notice the guards moving through the streets, most of them wearing a combination of black clothes with bright yellow stripes and shiny silver armor.

First, I head to the information guild where I request the most current information on Duncan's location, and this time I don't even have to pay. The information guild even sends out their vice guild master, who has a crystal in the middle of his head, to personally share the information with me.

Before moving on, we then stop by the headquarters of the Primordial Knights to meet someone I'd requested be messaged while we were still in the 3rd city. Reliable as ever, she is already there waiting for us.

Lily smiles brightly the moment she sees me and rushes closer in that creepy way where she mimics kinetic movement through the strength of her body alone.

For some damn reason, Tacita's there as well. The moment she sees us, she narrows her eyes protectively and zips up her jacket as if hiding something.

Did Savant get caught staring at her chest or something?

"Hello!" Lily brings my attention back to her, and I look down at her. "I think you probably didn't get the message, but I have only a day or two before I have to return to the 4th floor. It should be enough to heal your friend, though."

"More than enough," I nod and gesture for her to follow so I can introduce her to the others. Tess would be proud of my social skills, I think, and I even tell Lily, "Thanks for coming."

"You are welcome! That's just another thing you'll owe me. Maybe one day I'll even charge you a massive amount of shards."

I just snort at that. "As if you ever asked for shards. I'm telling you, Lily, if you wanted, you could be very rich. We'll have to do something about that before our tutorial ends."

The smile stays on her face and only widens as she asks playfully, "Maybe if the offer is good enough, I'll join and be your guild's exclusive healer."

That thought almost makes me laugh. "Even if you did join us, why would you only heal our guild? Just heal whoever you want."

I stop walking as I realize she's stopped. When I turn back to her, I see her looking at me intently with an expression I can't quite identify.

Lily then shakes her head with a gentle smile before rushing back to my side, and we continue toward the others while Tacita begins sneaking her way closer as well.

Chapter 826 - Visiting Duncan

"You already know this guy," I say, gesturing to Savant. "Though for some reason, he's been cured and smoked to perfection."

"Hello, Savant!" Lily calls out cheerily.

I ignore her interruption and continue on with the introductions. "I think you've met Weslin at least once, but just in case you haven't, that's him. This asshole next to him is Brich, he's a thieving rat, as confirmed by the great womanizer Lyraen himself. Then the huge demon missing an arm is Morwag."

"He is missing his left arm, Nat. But that's more your thing," Lily points out.

"Traditions, Lily, traditions. And then we have Zant, but he only appears every once in a while. He is an adorable little fella. When you meet him, be nice to him, it's not his fault that he's Diligence's vessel."

"I will! And hello, I'm Lily, Nathaniel's future..." She looks at me and smiles jokingly. "Ehm, I'm another member of Group 4!"

"Lily, what the hell was that?"

"Ignore it."

"I have a feeling like maybe I shouldn't."

"Then don't ignore it," she challenges.

"Okay, let's ignore it."

"Coward."

"Sure," I answer, gesturing toward Tacita nearby. "What is she doing here?"

"I think Taci was bored, so she joined me, and I'm glad for that." Lily smiles at Tacita, who looks away in response, before Lily turns back to me. "Being with her reminds me that it can be so simple to just do whatever I want."

"But it is—"

"Don't," she cuts me off. "It is not as simple as you might make it seem sometimes. Not for me. But I won't bore your friends with it."

"I wouldn't call them my friends. Maybe except for Weslin, when he finds time for poor old me and manages to get away from his weirdo demon girlfriend." I blame the man who just waves at me.

"You aren't friends with Morwag?" Lily asks.

That makes me look at the most demon demon to ever demon, and he stares back at me in the exact same way.

“What are we, Morwag?” I ask him.

The demon seems to need a moment to give it some actual thought, but in the end, he looks just as confused as I am and simply shrugs.

“Men,” Lily says, looking at Tacita as if she expects a reaction. The woman stands there, looking around to confirm Lily is actually looking at her, and then gives her a quick, sharp nod.

Then Tacita’s eyes narrow as she looks at Morwag, who has been staring at her openly this entire time. His eyes are wide in a way I know all too well, and even without his left arm, the muscular demon looks impressive and dangerous. Maybe he’s remembering what happened during Humility’s event.

Still, Tacita doesn’t seem bothered in the least. She must be sensing his battle maniac intent and the inherent danger, yet she remains confidently comfortable.

“Lady Lily-” Brich starts.

“Just Lily.”

“Okay! Just Lily it is!” Brich says, making use of the cheapest joke in existence, and I hate myself for snorting at it in my head. “I’m Brich of Crimson Forge, one of the very impressive S ranks and currently the best item user in all of Beyond. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Is being the best item user really that impressive?” Lily asks curiously.

Brich doesn’t seem insulted in the slightest. He steps closer, his heavy armor clanking with every movement. “Of course! Did you know that most people aren’t even using arcane weapons properly? Sometimes they don’t even discover all the properties or tricks, and end up incapable of ever using them to their full potential!”

He continues to brag, speaking with all the manic, high energy excitement of a total fanboy, the sort of person for whom using and abusing items is the greatest joy and hobby. Meanwhile, our group begins to walk through the city toward where we were told we would find Duncan.

It's a bit weird having the others join me, but I can't complain, even if I do find the whole situation a bit amusing. Me, Morwag, Weslin, and Brich as S ranks. Then there's Tacita, Savant, and possibly Lily as future S ranks. Somewhere nearby is Zant, the vessel of a Ruler.

This is the most overkill of overkills ever, and the king of this city seems to have taken notice as well, though it is possible Zant went to speak to him about us, being our caretaker and all. Regardless, the city's defensive array is already shifting, putting more attention and pressure on our group. There's also been an increase in the number of powerful guards around. Some of these locals are likely to be even stronger than us, or at least they're high level. It can be hard to guess their true strength.

On our way through the street, I notice Tacita picking up small stones from the ground and accurately throwing them at Savant. He patiently ignores her and just continues to absorb their kinetic momentum.

Morwag watches her so intently the whole time that I am worried he will bump into and accidentally kill some poor local, and yet even then, he seems to be well aware of his surroundings. Plus, people are avoiding us by a wide margin, as if we were some sort of hooligans or gang members.

Lily continues her conversation with a curious Brich, and Weslin joins in from time to time to keep the momentum going. Meanwhile, I keep my focus on searching for Duncan's signature.

I find it soon enough near our destination, a calm street lined with trees bordering a large park. It's a nice place all in all. It's quiet, clean, and well kept. Without hesitation, I come to a stop in front of a smaller house and knock a few times firmly. I almost expect some sort of cliché, like for Duncan to shout through the door about how he'll have the money ready tomorrow, but he just opens the door quietly.

I see the toll it's taken on him immediately. His face is thinner, and his clothes even seem a bit baggy now, yet he still smiles the second he recognizes me.

"The melee fighter, Nname," he says jokingly. He glances at the people behind me, seeming to recognize a few of them, and then looks back at me with a question. "Are you by any chance looking for a guide? Is that why you've come to find me, Nathaniel?"

“Something like that,” I answer, and then ask shamelessly, “Will you invite us in?”

“Ehm, my place is a bit humble for a visit as-”

“Sure, sure, thanks!” I wave it off and gently push through the door to barge in.

The others follow my lead to quickly make their way inside the small but cozy house, and quickly occupy every available seat. Lily and I end up on the same couch. Savant remains standing near the window while Brich sits in an armchair that almost breaks under his weight. Weslin pulls a chair closer from the kitchen, and Tacita jumps up to sit on the kitchen counter.

During all of that, I notice two kids peeking from upstairs. Seemingly unaware that likely everyone in this room already knows about them, even without needing to see them, and are currently whispering something between themselves that I’m nice enough not to strengthen my hearing enough to spy on.

We’re almost settled when Morwag pulls out a kitchen chair and sits. It gives way immediately and breaks. The wood splinters loudly in the silence, leaving Duncan standing there, frozen and unsure of what to do.

“I apologize,” Morwag mutters as he carefully kicks the pieces of the wood to the corner.

“You could have bound it together with your energy before sitting instead of spending all your time staring at Tacita,” I note.

“I could have.” The demon nods.

When I turn to Duncan, I ask, “We will pay for the chair, of course. How much did it cost?”

“Not much? I mean, if we convert it to shards, then maybe five or so?”

“Fifty thousand shards!? Well, it sounds about right. Must have been some fancy chair or family heirloom. Anyway, it is my responsibility as guild master to clean up the mess my cute underlings made, so I will pay, as a matter of course.”

“What-”

I don't let him finish. I initiate the trade myself, covering the transfer fee. “Accept it,” I say, “or the Holy-Fuck-It’s-Morwag-Run is going to get angry.”

Still confused, Duncan accepts the trade.

“Good,” I continue in a better mood. “This is a nice start.”

I take a sweet candy wrapped in paper from the bowl on the table and hand it to Lily. She quickly grabs it, opens and eats it just as fast.

I shake my head at her, looking appalled. “Wow, so shameless, Lily. How could you? Our host didn't even offer you that candy. For all you know, it's a family heirloom or something. I guess you will have to pay him back somehow, but you are poor because you refuse to make money for some reason. I guess, you will have to use your healing skills instead.”

“I guess I will have to do that! And yes, I am bad with money!” Lily calls out and smiles gently at Duncan. “Can I heal you?”

I observe the man. He keeps gulping, though seemingly not from fear, and his eyes appear a bit watery for some reason. He's a man, though, so it's probably just dust. I've noticed him limping on one leg and seen the painful twists in his face as he let us in, though he tried to hide it.

When the silence goes on too long, I give him a poke. “Duncan, I'm the last person to give lessons on social etiquette, but you're leaving Lily hanging here. How can you be so rude to a healer? Just tell her, can she heal you or not?”

“Y-yes. But it won't be that simp-” he mutters.

“Done!” Lily smiles happily.

“What?”

“I healed you already!”

Duncan looks at me, then at Lily, and then touches his side as if he can’t believe it. He puts more weight on the leg he was limping on, and his surprised expression deepens. For a while, he just stands there, opening and closing his mouth.

Then Brich reaches out and pokes a vase near him, making it fall and break. “Wow, how clumsy of me!” he calls out. “That artistic piece must have been expensive, and I would know, I am an expert on items after all! I’ll be transferring you fifty thousand shards to pay for it, Mr. Duncan. Please accept them as an apology in the hope they will plug the hole left behind after the loss of such a grand example of craftsmanship.”

“Brich,” I call to him. He looks at me, and I gesture at the water on the floor and the wilted flower that was in it. “The water from the vase surely damaged the flooring. You should pay for that as well.”

“How silly of me! Of course! I am very rich after all! I’ll gladly pay a hundred thousand shards, Mr. Duncan, and my everlasting apology!”

“Nathaniel, is this some sort of-” Duncan does not finish again. He just closes his eyes for a while and takes a few deep, long breaths. When he opens them, he is calmer. It’s that expression that first made me like him, and it hasn’t seemed to weaken since we showed up. It is that calm resourcefulness combined with his straight and fair personality.

Looking around, there is only one person I can rely on for this, so I move to Weslin and whisper, “Look, I am bad at this kind of stuff. I will take Lily and deal with some people quickly. I wouldn’t be able to sleep otherwise, knowing those assholes are out there eating well. Please talk to Duncan and hire him as our guide for fishing and a few other things. You can throw him a decent amount of shards as well.”

Weslin doesn't even try to complain. He just smiles at me with a knowing look. "Sure, rookie." He whispers before saying louder, "Just fuck off already, you are just being a bother."

"Fuck you, Weslin."

"No, fuck you."

Chapter 827 - w(° o °)w

Once outside, Lily falls into step beside me, still giggling to herself. "You know, you just left that poor guy alone with Morwag and the others, and he doesn't know any of them. Some people worship S ranks, and he has so many of them in his living room. Isn't that incredibly dickish of you?" she asks.

"A bit," I shrug. "But I refuse to stand there and watch Duncan's watery, puppy eyes or hear him thanking me over and over again. Weslin will do a good job, and Savant is at least somewhat responsible. Morwag won't cause much trouble, and Brich is harmless in these situations."

"You forgot about Tacita."

"Did I? She is behind you on your left."

Lily turns around and widens her eyes, finally noticing Tacita trailing several paces behind us.

Lily's first reaction is to wave the woman forward. "Come here! You can walk next to us."

The offer is not accepted, and Tacita simply turns her head to the side and continues walking after us at a distance. Lily, of course, is unbothered. As she likes to say, she's used to playing the long game. Poor Taci might be tamed in a year or two without ever noticing.

Our first stop is a building hidden in one of the back streets. It's unassuming, but it does have a robust set of doors locked with sensors designed to recognize specific mana signatures. I ignore them entirely. We pass into a dead end alley where I stop to turn and face a blank wall.

Once there, I allow my senses to expand, diving into the structure of the inscriptions hidden within the stone. Then I pull on one specific section of inscriptions.

With a soft clack, the wall swings open like a door.

“Oooo,” Lily breathes out at the sight of the hidden entrance. She excitedly looks around, and she even takes out a smartphone to take a photo with a flash before she follows me inside.

A pulse of my mana drains the color from the hallway for a split second. Every alarm and defensive array is erased as we walk through the dark interior. I create a small thermal orb even though I don’t really need it to orient myself. We pass a small room where five men have gathered around a table playing some sort of game. Hearing our footsteps, they look up with wide, surprised eyes and scramble to their feet.

Five pulses of kinetic energy throw them backward. An expansion of my mana chokes out their skills, and then a cube made of mana completely surrounds them, locking them inside. I channel a bit more power to strengthen the walls against any attacks from the inside, and we continue. A bit further behind us, Tacita follows quietly.

Another set of doors has its mana based defenses stripped away under my gaze, but to my annoyance, they stay closed because of a mechanical lock. My scan locates two people inside. In an effort to avoid hitting them, I release a precise blast of kinetic energy, and the metal doors crumple inward like paper and shoot into the room with the speed of a bullet, embedding themselves deep inside the far wall.

With the same simple ease, I disrupt a barrage of mana based attacks with my eyes alone. A man running toward a teleportation array in the corner cries out as his leg explodes in a blast of kinetic energy, sending him tumbling to the floor. The other man lifts his hands into the air, and all movement of his mana halts in an instant.

“Can you heal him?” I ask Lily.

“Sure!” Without even moving from where she stands, she begins the process. The man’s leg begins to regrow at high speed. His signature tells me he’s not even high enough level to have a chance of resisting Lily’s magic, allowing the healing to take hold in seconds, even with his natural barrier on. Or maybe it has more to do with the fact that natural barriers aren’t all that good at resisting healing? But

in that case, couldn't someone like Lily use that to break through the barrier with some sort of false healing and sneak in some virus instead?

What a scary thought. I'll have to ask her how it works and how natural barriers react to her healing, body modifications, and other scary stuff like that.

"Guildmaster Gwyn," the man with his arms up says. He likely recognizes me from descriptions or somewhere. "I don't know what-"

"Do you know a man called Duncan?"

"I..." he looks around as if debating whether he should lie. "I do."

"Good. Honestly, I am not really sure what to do with you. You just bought his debt. It is kind of his fault for getting into it, and a bit of bad luck that got him wounded. He could have also asked me for money. I mean, I personally would've been shameless enough to do so, no problem." I pause and look at him, waiting for a reaction.

The man nods quickly. The man on the ground, now with his leg fully restored, pulls himself against the wall. He breathes raggedly, his heart beating like a terrified animal.

I shift my gaze back to the standing man with the arms in the air. "Still, I don't really think I should feel bad about doing whatever I want to you either. You are clearly the type of people who don't mind using threats, violence, and the like over debts and such. So, what should we do?"

"We didn't know he was someone you knew! If we had known, we would never have touched him or bought his debt!"

I nod slowly. "Probably not." Then I ask again, "So, what should we do?"

He gulps. "Of course, his debt is all forgiven now, Guildmaster Gwyn. No, we'll even pay him three times the debt he owed. I will personally make sure he receives all of it tomorrow!"

“You would do that for him?”

“Yes! Mister Duncan was just a victim of poor luck and bad timing!”

"True," I sigh. "But I feel like some B-grade goon now. Tell me, do you use violence to 'motivate' people to pay?"

The atmosphere changes, growing darker. I can feel his heartbeat spike and notice his hands shaking.

“We have not touched Mister Duncan yet, but yes, we sometimes...”

“Be specific. Do not talk around it.”

"We... We occasionally kidnap family members and keep them in our care for a while to make the debtor nervous or use our contacts to make things difficult for them in the city, and so on. Sometimes we hire people to beat them outside of the city."

"Do you hurt any of the abducted family members or kill people when they don't pay?"

"N-no!" he shouts quickly. In his panic, he drops his arms only to shoot them right back up again after realising what he has done.

He doesn't seem to be lying. "The Lord Champion and his guards would bury us if we went that far," he adds. "They only look the other way for the small stuff, not that the debtors need to know that."

"I guess," I sigh. "Lily, this is an annoying situation."

"Is it?" she asks curiously. She observes the two men with a clinical eye. "Couldn't I just heal the lungs of the man on the floor? They seem to have been damaged by some sort of toxic attack from a few years ago. I could also remove the other man's back pain from a damaged spine and heal it. That would probably be worth a similar amount to what they are paying Duncan."

"Would that work?" I ask the men.

With wide eyes, the standing man nods. "Actually, such a high level of healing is worth much more than-"

"Good, you will reimburse Duncan five times the total of his debt. Lily, go on."

A second later, she beams. "Done!"

Leaving the two men in a state of total confusion, I offer the palm of my hand to Lily, and to show a bit of my annoyance, I send a strong pulse of disruption through the entire hideout, enough to permanently destroy all of the arrays. I could probably do more, but for now decide to not stick my nose into the local Champion's business too much.

Meanwhile, Lily places her hand in mine. For a short moment, I close my fingers around hers and hold it before teleporting us both back to the surface.

After letting go, I begin to walk, and she follows closely. "Don't they usually have defensive arrays in the city to stop teleportation?" she asks and looks back behind us, where, after a few seconds, Tacita appears in a blur and then begins to stride lazily.

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I watch Tacita's drawing while I answer Lily, "It's probably only there to stop the general public. It won't work against people at the higher levels. But I guess those types are kept under control in other ways."

Noticing a nice looking shop to the side, I head over. From the window, I observe several food and drink items in a glass showcase. I pick out the most tasty looking ones. After paying, I hand a pastry that looks like a mix between a croissant and a donut to Lily while I bite into my own.

"This is for your help," I say.

Already biting into hers, she mumbles, "Never in history has there been a healer like me working for so little, and under such inhumane conditions."

I chew for a while, musing over her words before I nod in agreement and take another bite.

Before we even reach the headquarters of the guild that originally lent money to Duncan and then sold the debt, we see a crowd. There are multiple guards in black clothes and silver armor, all of them sporting distinct yellow stripes. There are also several official looking people standing outside the building.

Leading them is a velnar in a dark blue suit. He quickly heads my way and bows deeply. "Mister Duncan is already receiving the apologies of our company. We have provided a small gift for the situation we unknowingly created, which put so much strain on him and his family. As an apology, we have decided to pay him either a value ten times that of his debt in the hopes it will help him overcome the received trauma or a house in one of the nicest locations in the First City. We also hope that you will be willing to accept this small gift from us, a tome on the Primordial Knights guild. We bought it in an auction not long ago, and it contains stories of great guild masters from almost a thousand years ago."

Flashbanged by the sudden turn of events, I just stand there. I begin to look around to see who could have caused this. The best candidates that come to mind are Zant or, more likely, the City's Champion, who must have spoken with Zant.

In other times, it would bewilder me that a Champion would get involved in such minor affairs, but I guess gathering this many powerful people in one place tends to attract their direct attention.

It makes me wonder. Would our current group be capable of facing a proper Champion? It is an exciting thought.

"In the name of the Primordial Knights, I accept," I say simply.

The velnar in the suit bows again. Even then, he almost towers over me with his massive body. I simply turn around and leave with Lily following behind.

Once we get further away, Lily notes. "Isn't it a bit cool, in a way, how they treat you with such care?"

"Lily, I want to get angry and beat up someone, an asshole or two, but people are being too reasonable, and I bet Zant has his tiny, cute fingers in it. My only remaining hope is the healer's guild that botched Duncan's healing."

I stop and fully turn to Tacita, who also stops and quickly draws.

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"Why the hell do you have a baby ferret with you, and why does it have a similar feel to the ferret from the 9th floor?" I ask her directly.

Instead of an answer, she just closes her jacket further.

"That is Fuci, or also Fucile. I think it is either a baby of the ferret we knew or of the same species. Oh, its name translates to rifle, or what we thought was the gun Taci mentioned some time ago. Fuci is very cute, by the way."

Standing there, I begin to feel a bit of the same confusion Duncan must have felt.

"So Fuci?"

"Fuci," Lily nods.

"Yeah, why not," I say, beginning to walk again, "By the way, we'll need you to help us with our group project. We've got some necrotic rot brewing in Morwag's arm, and we're trying to juice it up. You can toss an idea or two in. If we manage to rot someone's face off, the System will likely give you some assist levels, however it calculates all that stuff."

"Sure, why not?" Lily nods. "How much do you want me to do? I mean, dangerous to a few people, or some more effort from my side to make it dangerous to a city or two?"

I force myself not to side-eye this petite healer. And as we head towards the healing guild, I hope they are truly corrupt, just as they are in all those cliché stories, or else I don't know what I will do.

Chapter 828 - Five hours later

Five hours after reaching the doors of the healing guild, Lily, Tacita, Fuci, and I all find ourselves in the office of the local Champion and King. Zant is here as well, sitting on my lap as I use him for emotional support while facing the scary Champion. That guy is the same race as Izzy's disciple, Seneca. His hair is blue and constantly moving as if made of fire, while he impatiently taps on the table that stands between us.

His office isn't bad either. It's been built into the side of the mountain located at the centre of the First City, also known as Rookie City. It isn't dug into the surface, however, rather, it's a separate structure built on a terrace near the top. Over all it's a very cool and pretty place, full of light, beautiful rugs, and a lot of windows that open to a view of the city and the fairy tale environment around it.

"So, you are telling me that while you went to deal with the crooked healer who purposefully mistreated the guide Duncan, you attendees, Nathaniel, Lily, and Tacita, got teleported somewhere far away into a complex of dark and, as you called them, "evil" caves?" the Champion asks, still keeping a calm visage.

"I think it must have been some sort of artifact, or a very powerful and mysterious old item. I didn't notice it before it was too late, and we got teleported away," I say, repeating my earlier statement.

At my side, Lily nods. Tacita looks like she wants to jump out of the window and run away, but even she has enough sense not to do so. The Champion seems pissed off, even though I'm sure he can tell I'm not lying.

Meanwhile, I follow his gaze and, with satisfaction, see the smoking remains of that healing guild's headquarters in the distance.

"Lord Champion, they are all still wounded and terribly tired, we should-" Zant tries to speak as calmly as always, but he is interrupted.

"I don't think that's the problem here. I've seen records of this healer, and I'm sure she's put them back together. And don't even get me started on this maniac. There are bets all across the city regarding how long it'll be before he invests just one more mana point and explodes as his pool escapes his control.

Zant, people are saying that the more wounded he is, the more 'optimal' his state becomes." The Champion looks like he is about to slam the table, but stops himself, opting to just tap it instead.

"I mean, isn't this kind of your fault? How could something like this happen in your-"

This time, it is me who gets interrupted. Zant squeezes my finger to the point it hurts, and I shut up to cough out, "Ehm, as I said, we went to their headquarters and, yeah, I might have used a bit more force than I should have to get in, I might have hurt a few people just a tiny bit, I might have even caused some slight damage to the surrounding arrays, I also might have, with the purest intentions, blasted that guy through a wall. But they gave me no other choice. I located the healer and was tracking him through their arrays when he disappeared from my senses. That's what led me to their chapel, where Lily noticed the remains of blood from human sacrifices. In an effort to cover it up, they used that weird artifact to teleport us into those caves, and I was unable to stop it."

"You're lying this time."

"Okay, maybe I could have stopped it, but that doesn't change anything about the situation."

Lily quickly joins in. "I can swear to what we found as well. There was an altar in the middle. It was cleaned, yes, but I noticed the blood and the remains of organs they'd failed to clear away."

The Champion looks from Lily towards Tacita. She senses his gaze, looks away from the window to meet his eyes. She shrugs and nods, surely confirming that we're telling the truth in whatever way the Champion is using to check.

"There, you found out that they had long since stopped healing people fully, so they wouldn't lose clients and a source of money, forcing people to keep coming back. You called it a subscription. You said they were also developing a method where other healers were rendered unable to suppress pain, even temporarily, meaning patients had to return to them specifically," the Champion says.

"I had my suspicions once I healed Duncan, but I thought some healer had just made a mistake," Lily says. "But when we were in those caves, we managed to confirm that it was done on purpose." Her face darkens. "I wish they would put more effort into improving their healing rather than creating methods like these."

Once again, the Champion taps on the table and looks at Lily. "But that is something we cannot confirm anymore, as you, attendee Lily, killed all of the participating healers. By your own words, eight of them."

Lily doesn't even hesitate. She faces him with firm, dark eyes. "And I would do it again. For someone to abuse their healing abilities the way they did is beyond pathetic, and it was not something I could stand to watch. They were even developing something they nicknamed addictive healing, and yes, I destroyed everything I found regarding it."

For a while, they face each other until the Champion sighs and leans back to continue talking. "You killed these healers, but then attendee Tacita and her rifle rushed deeper into the caves, and the two of you followed her. All while attendee Nathaniel was trying to connect to one of his teleportation marks outside to get you out."

"I did," I say. "But I was also curious about what was inside. You know the feeling of exploration you get walking through old ruins, maybe finding some hidden treasure, so I-" I stop myself as Zant squeezes my finger again.

The man with the blazing eyes waits for me to continue, but I decide to stay quiet, so it is he who continues talking, "You also found out they were planning to poison me, gathering pristine grade materials and developing methods to escape detection. They had a vial of what would seem to be my blood, gathered from the site of my challenge against Champion Pelm, whom I fought thirty five years ago, to aid them. And they planned to use my taste for alchemical wines to get to me."

"Yes," I confirm.

"Then there were also vials containing an artificial plague they wanted to use to their advantage, one that only they would be able to remove. It was an idea they got from a certain powerful lurker on the first floor, whom they'd visited repeatedly to make use of his rare poison skill for the development of said plague."

"Yes," I confirm once again.

"There were also cells with people whom they were using for their experimentations and harvesting organs from, only to regenerate them, and repeat the process. And another set of cells with people

possessed of fascinating traits, they kept trying to transplant those traits and then healed the subjects to allow them to try again,” the Champion says.

“Yes, we brought those people back, and they surely confirmed it,” I reply.

“They did, attendee Nathaniel. I am thankful to you and your party for saving all those people, and I will make sure you are rewarded for putting a stop to it. So, further down, you found a door with a sealed monster they’d been worshipping, do I have that right?” His eyes snap to mine, staring intently with his senses expanding around me.

“It was quite scary, it was red, with big horns that I think it used as a mana battery,” I confirm. “It kept regenerating and had some sort of blood manipulation, it could even change its form a bit. It was trapped with a series of spikes that had been pierced through its flesh, and they kept draining its blood and drinking it or something. I wouldn’t say it was all that powerful, below Champion rank for sure, but it seemed to be special. The four of us killed it in the end.”

His eyes widen, his pupils growing so large that I feel as if the entire world around me has disappeared. As he stares at me, I begin to feel lost in them, my mind wavering. His flame like hair blazes stronger, every strand rising high into the air.

“Lord Champion...” Zant says politely. The pressure disappears instantly as the Champion leans back, before tilting toward me and continuing his stare.

He taps quickly on the table, speaking rapidly. “You found an altar with a prophecy they also worshipped.”

“Yes.”

“You broke through the floor because you sensed something 'interesting' down there and found the one who had been the mastermind behind it all. A skeletal mora who had been mind controlling and influencing their whole organisation. And that guy started running the moment he saw your eyes, sensed your blood, and felt your, as you call it, black mana.”

“He was quite weak.”

"I don't think he was really that weak, Nat," Lily interjects. "He just couldn't use his skills at all, so Taci and I had an easier time dealing with him, and I disintegrated him entirely."

The Champion is breathing heavily at this point. "And then you returned to the main chamber as the place started to explode, and thousands of monsters appeared from the walls, with the skeletal mora's death, but attendee Nathaniel was finally able to get through the anti-teleportation arrays and escape. But before you left, you pushed out all your remaining mana to destroy the place behind you, and some part of that explosion destabilized your teleportation and passed through as well, destroying the healing guild's headquarters in the middle of my beautiful city."

"It wasn't even that big of an explosion--"

The Champion slams his desk with his fist. It cracks down the middle, vibrations spreading through the room and making everything rattle. Windows, my bones, metal, everything feels like it is about to break apart, but the man holds himself back just enough to keep the room standing.

"How does any of this make sense!?" he shouts. "How is it possible that not one of you is lying in the slightest? Just how ridiculous is this! And I've been told you have what attendees have referred to as an emotionless face, so why the hell are you smirking? It pisses me off!"

My hand shoots toward my face. I touch it, realizing I am truly wearing an almost imperceptible smile. I must be in a good mood after everything that happened in those evil caves and the adventure we went through. Quickly, I force my face back under control and stay quiet. I have a suspicion that silence is the right choice in front of this man.

As if praising me, I feel Zant tap my leg a few times, and I feel a sudden urge to pull on his cheeks. Meanwhile, for some reason, the Champion seems even angrier than he was before.

"Because of your help, I will overlook all that happened, partly because of my respect for Zant and the Great One he is connected to, but mess around in my city any further, and none of that will matter. Now, go before I change my mind," he says, shoos us away.

As ordered, we stand up and leave, stepping out onto the plateau at the edge of the mountain. From there, a set of winding stairs made of carved rock leads down the mountainside toward the city.

The view is glorious, so I take the walk much slower than I probably should. It might also be because it's pretty fun to watch Zant jump down stairs that are a bit too big for him, he occasionally lets out soft, squeak-like noises when a drop is steeper than the previous few. When I poke Lily, she starts secretly recording the tiny guy with her smartphone.

We reach Duncan's house a bit later. Everyone is already waiting there, and for some reason, Lochi is present as well. Yes, that Lochi, the young, black haired lynthari boy with two tails whom I met the first time I entered this city.

"Greetings, Sir!" he calls out, approaching with a brisk energy. He stops before me and offers a firm, formal hand. "Truly, it is an honour to serve on an expedition of such high standing as yours."

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"Wow, how rude! I'm Sir Duncan's disciple, gaining experience to become a true guide... I mean, a truer guide!"

"It's fine, you already told me you were just posing as a guide before."

"Oh, I did? Great! Did you know that I asked him to teach me because I heard you bring up his name the last time we met?" He laughs briefly.

"What luck. But what about your parents? You know this can be dangerous, right?"

"Of course, Sir! What do you take me for? But it's just to the Lake City safe zone and back, and nothing bad could possibly happen with this many S ranks. By the way, Sir, isn't it a bit... much to hunt with so many S ranks? Oh, and my parents just divorced, and I need money to take care of my siblings if you could..."

"He doesn't have any siblings," Weslin says, stepping closer and eyeing the shameless lynthari boy. "Duncan warned me about him. His parents are still together, too. He's just trying to squeeze you for sympathy and shards."

Lochi blinks. "M-maybe my parents were lying to me about having siblings? And t-they are still together? How great! Things must have changed without me knowing. Anyway, Sirs, I will go and quickly check if Master Duncan needs any help!"

The boy quickly disappears while Weslin and I watch him retreat.

"Zant already sent someone to explain what happened, but damn... really? Isn't that just one of your cover-ups so you don't get blamed for blowing up a guild in the middle of the city?" Weslin whispers by my side.

"There's no way I'd do that, much less be smart enough to come up with a way to lie like that," I say, shaking my head.

"If you say so, rookie. By the way, that Duncan guy is scary. I had a percentage in mind for his participation in this fishing trip, but somehow I found myself agreeing to twice that amount without knowing how. By the end, I even thought it was fair, and that we might be taking advantage of him."

"That's how he works," I agree. "But first, let's mess with the arm a bit more. Lily's going to have to leave soon, and we want her to add some scary stuff to it."

"I'm calling for Zant to keep an eye on it," Weslin adds, already looking for him. "We don't want it escaping into the city."

"Yeah, let's definitely do that."

Chapter 829 - The Boys on a Fishing Trip

The small, cozy living room has become quite crowded. There's me, Lily, Savi, Morwag, Brich, Calvorn, Weslin, Tacita, Fuci, Duncan, and his two siblings, even Lochi. Oh, and Zant, though that adorable little fella doesn't take up much space. May the Rulers bless his tiny soul.

Even if we are about to do something fun, I feel uncomfortable with so many people around. We're all currently trying to surround the small container we've squeezed Morwag's arm into. Where it was transparent before, it now has liquids sloshing inside. There's also what looks to be some sort of gray mist with a greenish tint floating around it, as well as a pink liquid and other materials. At this point, the

inscriptions drawn with my blood covering the surface seem to have more of those golden and white particles in the red liquid. I draw a few more just in case.

“Duncan, I know it is fun and all, but can you tell your siblings not to poke at the container? Whatever is inside is now likely to annoy even a Champion.”

With eyes wide in horror, Duncan pulls them away. They throw annoyed faces at me like I stole their favorite toy, so I stick my tongue out at them, much to their shock.

Looking around the room, I nod in satisfaction, seeing that everyone is intently staring at the container.

Then, I lift my hand high and slap that bad boy with the entire surface of my palm to generate a satisfying noise.

A good half of the gathered people jump. There are even screams and squeaks, meanwhile, Lily looks at me with an expression that clearly says she'd been expecting it. Well, at least she already examined all of us for any remnants of the Necrotic Rot and, according to her, removed it entirely, while using it as an inspiration for her own part.

“So,” I start after getting a few curses thrown at me, “we just make a tiny hole, and Lily will throw in whatever mutated monstrosity of a fake healing mark she's prepared. Weslin, Savi, and I will hold whatever's inside, keeping it from escaping. Morwag will bind the container. Brich will keep his hands to himself so he doesn't steal anything, and Zant can continue to look cute.”

“Sir Gwyn, I will keep an eye on the container. If I have to interfere to stop the rot from escaping, I will have to report it.”

“Zant, you can do anything you want.”

The tiny vyssari nods seriously and stands to the side of the table. Seeing him next to the container makes me realize that it's actually bigger than him. Maybe I could make one such container for him, too, and kidnap him to Earth after my tutorial ends.

I forcefully shake my head and look around. I don't waste much more time planning or explaining. That's the nice part of working with such skilled people, everyone knows their role and quickly adapts. They have to be like this to get where they are.

Then it all starts.

I weaken the defenses along with Morwag, and Lily makes a tiny hole into the container with her [Disintegration].

All that follows happens in less than a second.

A piece of Lily's bone with her prepared abomination of a mark falls inside the container, which is surrounded by many layers of [Dawn] and [Eclipse], each layering closely over each other, and Weslin's void continues to flicker as his heart beats loudly to increase his output.

Every one of us goes all out straight from the start. Brich sets up a field for our attempt so we don't trigger every defensive array in the city or straight up turn the brains of the lower-leveled people around us into mush.

For the shortest moment, I think it will be easy. Then, pressure begins to leak out of the hole, and the outer sides of the hole crack, threatening to spread through the entire container. Morwag uses his primordial energy to prevent the container from cracking, while also using the piece Lily cut off to cover the hole, forcing the edges to unite and smoothly reseal. At one point, I notice that using his primordial energy seems to strain the demon more than usual.

All of this is happening while Weslin, Savi, and I push as hard as we can against whatever's currently trying to get out.

Even so, it's a losing battle. The piece we used to reseal it continues opening back up. The cracks widen, and the rot, in that sick gray and green color, attempts to get out by eating into our mana and Weslin's primordial energy.

Lily's [Disintegration] crashes against it and erases it a few times, only for the rot to continuously seep out, adapting and seemingly beginning to try and eat [Disintegration] instead.

When it looks like we're about to have to attempt something much more drastic, it's Zant who moves. He taps the side of the container with the sound of a chitin leg hitting glass.

Then the rot, as if scared, floods back inside, allowing us to fully reseal it and Morwag to bind it together. Right away, I slice my fingertip open and draw a few more inscriptions. I even sacrifice a few of the mana batteries I had prepared for just such a case, using them to further power the inscriptions and tie those batteries to the container.

Once it is done, I am confident that Duncan, his siblings, and Lochi have no idea how close it was to failure and just how much happened in that single second.

Zant stands there in his suit, which he continues to straighten. "As I said, I will have to report this, and I am sure the First One will be using this to his advantage," he warns.

"It seems so," I agree, but I don't mind it that much. At the moment, it seems like a problem for Ruby and future Nathaniel.

"What just happened, and who is the First One?" Duncan asks. "And why did you stop so soon? Is it done already?"

"It is all done," I confirm. "Zant, do you think the local Champion or healers could deal with it if it escaped?"

"I do not think so, Sir Nathaniel. The local Champion doesn't possess such abilities, and the healers here are not all that powerful. On this floor, perhaps the King of the Third City could."

"I see. Oh, and by the way, Duncan, this cute fella is the Vessel of the Ruler of Diligence."

"No joke?" Duncan asks with wide eyes.

"I mean, it is not his fault, he's a vessel for the destroyer of the Ancient Armory. Did you hear the story?"

“Of course, I heard the rumors, everyone did. The Ruler of Diligence got so angry during the Beyond Event that he buried the entire Armory out of spite, so the attendees could not get to it. Oh... I apologize, Zant. I hope I did not overstep.”

“No offense taken, Mister Duncan,” Zant nods seriously. “The Ruler of Diligence is not so petty as to react to such things.”

For some reason, as I look at Zant, it almost sounds like he wanted to add: unlike someone else. But that just cannot be.

Once again, I sit in the armchair and ask Zant what I was curious about. “Can you tell me how powerful you are?”

“I see no reason to hide it, Sir Gwyn. Each of the Ruler of Diligence's vessels is comparable to a Champion.”

Sensing an opportunity, I ask further, “How many vessels does he have?”

“Currently, there are twenty-six of us, Sir Gwyn, with me being the youngest.”

The atmosphere seems to be calming down, but I notice Lily giving the container a much more careful look, as is everyone else around us. After what just happened, I can't even blame them.

“And who is the most powerful among you?” I ask.

“It is Aant, he was the first of us.”

Everyone in the room goes silent as it dawns on them.

I ask carefully, “Zant, just in case... is the second vessel called Bant?”

"He is, Sir Gwyn," the tiny vyssari nods.

I open my mouth. "And is the third called..." I pause there as I notice the gaze Lily is giving me, and I just wave it off.

Thirty minutes later, I stand outside of Duncan's house near Lily and Tacita. Tacita keeps poking Fuci's tiny nose while the golden ferret bites at her, only for Tacita to easily move her finger away every time. All of this happens at a speed that I am confident someone from Hard difficulty wouldn't have a chance of tracking with their senses.

"Be careful," Lily says, making me turn my attention back to her.

"You know me."

"Yes, that is exactly why."

"You be careful too. Don't underestimate the 5th floor, even if it's just a scouting and preparatory expedition."

"With Tess, Lyraen, and your sister there as well? I don't think I have to worry too much. At worst, I'll just throw Jean into the Champion's path." She smiles and moves closer to tap my left arm a few times. With each tap, more healing marks move onto my skin. "I worked hard and improved them. They should help to keep you alive."

It makes me remember something, and I remind Lily of it. "Do you remember how you used to tell me to give up on my healing passives, calling them trash?"

"They are," she nods.

"And meanwhile, you keep giving me a limited number of healing marks, making me keep coming back for more. Isn't it a bit like a subscription, just like these evil healers wanted?"

She snorts playfully. "And what do you pay with, if it's a subscription?"

"With what, indeed," I smile for the shortest moment with an ease that surprises even me before I feel that smile disappear.

Sensing the others inside beginning to gather, I wave to Lily and give a last look to Tacita and Fuci before heading back in.

After that, we are more or less ready. We take a short breather, gather the last of our baggage, and then head up to the 1st floor of Beyond. It isn't even fishing season, but I don't think that matters much, given just how much more I can compress mana when compared to the first fishing trip.

Once on the 1st floor, Duncan, reliable as always, quickly deals with his people while bringing Lochi along to teach him. He reserves a teleportation array to Lake City for us. He buys the best possible fish lure, and most of the cost comes out of his own pocket, much to Weslin's surprise.

It isn't that much of a surprise to me, though. I'm sure the experienced guide has already calculated it all out. He likely estimates this'll be a big catch, so such petty spending is nothing to him, and it only serves to provide the others with an even better image of him.

And so, not long after, here we are.

The cold, dark, and mostly gray 1st floor's Lake City. This time, there are no other groups fishing alongside us, so we spread out in small groups, everyone looking for the "feeling" Duncan described to us. He says it is a sense of pressure and a slight tingling in the fingers that usually marks where the biggest fish lie.

The lake allows for it, so we walk on its surface without sinking, each step sending out ripples. I watch Lochi excitedly jump up and down to create more ripples while Brich, who is currently watching him, starts doing the same.

Meanwhile, Duncan and I walk side by side. Being as smart as he is, he doesn't try to repeatedly thank me or make a scene. He just behaves normally and talks to me about silly things while I listen and respond once in a while.

But at some point, I am unable to stop myself from digging into the past. I note, "You know, you could have tried to send a message to me and asked for help."

The guide glances at me and smiles. "It isn't that easy. I just felt we barely knew each other, and it would have been too shameless."

"Duncan, I have a sister. If it came to her safety, I would be the most shameless person in existence. I would be crying in front of your door every day, begging for money."

He laughs. "Maybe I was too prideful for my own good."

"Prideful..." I say, sensing him looking at me while I overlook the lake. "Wouldn't you take more pride in doing all you can, no matter what others think?"

Before he can answer, we hear shouts from Weslin, who's currently standing with Morwag near the center of the lake. Quickly, we gather there as well, looking at our feet as if any of us could see something. We're all fishing experts now, interpreting this weird feeling of tingling in our fingers.

"I guess it is my time to take my disciple and ditch you for the city. I don't think there's any chance this will be a normal fish," Duncan says, then takes a small box from his bag. "Be careful with it. It's fragile, and you don't want to break it before you soak it with as dense a concentration of mana as possible."

He opens the box, and unlike the lure he sold me the first time, this one is about the size of an apple. The surface is shriveled, and there's a very strong fruity scent to it, along with the smell of the sea. It's so strong it almost makes me lightheaded. Duncan even supports Lochi, as he sways and almost falls.

The guide says, "The same as last time. Fill it with as much mana as you can and squeeze! Oh, and give me a few minutes to return to Lake City."

With a smile, he and Lochi head out, leaving the five of us behind. There is no need to say much as everyone prepares. Savant does Savant things. Weslin gathers his void and activates his body reinforcement, while Brich deploys a few items, some of which look a lot like drones. Morwag, on the other hand, just stands there menacingly.

I do the same, triggering my arrays and swapping to more combat-oriented sub minds, as well as increasing the speed of the mana and blood circulating through my body.

As soon as I see Duncan and Lochi enter the safe zone, I reach out and gather ambient mana. I pull it out of the air and force it to bend to my will, reaching as far as I can. The density is nowhere close to what my body produces, but it is something.

My sealed Ignition Heart beats louder as I pull more thermal energy from it to immediately convert into mana, then I compress all I have gathered, creating a pitch-black orb.

Brich watches it through his visor with fascination, and I notice Savant taking note as well.

I lift my arm to raise the orb higher into the air and pull more ambient mana from further away, taking even the tiny bits I had been unable to pull before due to their low density.

Then I carefully lower it, pressing it against the fruit. It shrivels and cracks further, turning smaller in size until it fits into my palm. Closing my hand around it, I hold it and squeeze in an explosion of aromatic scent.

From the fruit emerges a single shining droplet, with all the colors of the rainbow, that falls toward the surface.

For a second, there is silence.

Then, one powerful ripple runs through the entire lake from where the droplet fell. It creates a wave twice as tall as I am, making the surface we stand on rock like a wild sea.

Another ripple creates an even stronger wave, and then another. All over the lake, dozens of enormous, human-like hands pierce the surface. Using the wavy surface of the lake, they pull themselves up. Dozens of fish, salmon-like, carp-like, small, colorful, all kinds of weird fish, appear everywhere, each with many eyes and multiple pairs of arms.

Every one of us moves away as the surface under us explodes. A single hand, bigger than any of the other fish in their entirety, pierces the surface. With movements showing off its enormous strength, the monster pulls itself onto the surface while we balance on the rolling waves and watch it.

It has six pairs of arms, each of a different length. Its body is the size of a plane, coiling around it with dark scales reminiscent of armor, each a deep blue and green color. The head is blunt, armored, and features a jaw filled with curving teeth.

Around it, mana spirals like the eye of a maelstrom, pulled there by the immense mana reserves the monster holds. Unlike any other fish we've ever seen, it has just two pale, luminous eyes, and they ignore everyone else to lock onto me.

[Leviathan Fish - lvl ????]

Chapter 830 - Werewolf and Leviathan Fish

POV Dennis

(I move, you attack.) I hear my brother's voice say in my head, and I squeeze the short sword and dagger I hold.

(Be fast,) I send, and my body moves by itself. [Haste] activates, and [Reinforcement] connects to it, forcing them to work in sync. All the stats I currently possess come together to launch us ahead, and the ruins of enormous buildings that couldn't have been built by human hands turn into a blur around me as we take on the Beyond trial.

With an explosion tearing outward, only to be followed by an implosion in the next instant, dozens of attacks begin to track our movements. Aaron jumps into the air and twists to avoid more, while I move the weapons in our hands into position to deflect the spears of mana. Aaron connects us to the ground, making us land much faster, and I throw the dagger at our opponent.

The werewolf, though incomprehensibly weaker than the one we met on the 9th floor, dodges under that dagger. However, the mana I wrapped around the blade to sharpen it still cuts several strands of brown fur as it passes by.

Another attack shoots our way, and it is me who uses [Connection] this time. We reappear near the pillar where the dagger landed after missing the werewolf. I grab it, and Aaron lands with our legs against the pillar to push us away, connecting us to the ground to make us land faster, before exploding into another sprint.

Even now, the werewolf roars and moves, twisting and attempting to get out of the hole, a trap we prepared while we observed and tracked it. Now the werewolf is half buried in the hole, which we specifically dug to ensure it wouldn't be able to get out of that quickly, with only its upper body peeking out. But even then, it is bigger than us. And more orbs and projectiles form around it as it launches them our way.

Another spin and pirouette in the air avoids them all, and using [Connection] to bind us to the wall brings us to it, allowing us to stand on its vertical surface as if it were the ground. Then, as the barrage comes to an end, the werewolf begins to grow, its eyes reddening and muscles bulging as it does.

(Im ready,) I send.

(Let's go then.)

(Together.)

(Together.)

We leap from the wall and land on the ground. Our muscles bulge only for them to shrink in the next moment as we bury our feet into the earth.

[Haste]

[Haste]

[Haste]

We stack the skill several times until even our reinforced bodies and stats begin to strain, and the werewolf seems to notice. It twists with more strength, even at the cost of taking more damage, and the ground around it explodes outwards just as we charge.

Both of our minds connect just as multiple projectiles fly towards us. We use both of our minds' calculative power to observe the structure, and then, just as Nat taught us, we connect and take control of them all.

The projectiles miss us by barely a hair's breadth and begin to twist behind our backs. But we're much faster. We reach the werewolf before it can fully free itself. Mana covers both of the blades, oscillating and sharp, extending their range just as I swing with the dagger.

The werewolf's hand flies away.

I swing the shortsword.

Another hand flies away, and its blood burns our face.

The werewolf snaps with that huge maw at us and bites into our neck, only to reveal it as an illusion a second later as we move just the tiniest bit to the side. Instead, the maw takes a chunk of our shoulder as it bites down, and our dagger stabs into the beast's eye, and the sword cuts its side just as we move around.

With a roar, the werewolf twists, the ground exploding out from under it and showering us with the remains of our trap as it then lowers itself to charge and take another bite out of us. That's when the projectiles we connected to and took over slam into its side, piercing through and wounding it even further.

Once again, I connect to the dagger and teleport back, grabbing it even as it remains lodged in the beast's eye. This time, we have more mana to work with, and I send it through until the oscillating blade pierces the head of the faltering monster.

(Dodge!) Aaron shouts.

I combine my efforts with his, jumping back and connecting to the nearby pillar. I feel an attack cut through our side, and our fall accelerates just as a burst of mana explodes around the werewolf.

Pierced with its own projectiles and a dagger through its head, it roars, and steam rises from the wounds as they attempt to close. The severed limbs begin to regenerate. Bones stretch, and nerves and muscles reach out to twist back into limbs.

(Fucking ridiculous,) Aaron groans. (All out?)

(All out,) I confirm. (Go for the neck.)

Aaron takes control of our body, dropping into a similar stance to before. Our muscles bulge and shrink, tightening like a spring ready to launch, something Lily taught us. I squeeze the shortsword, feeding it more mana until the oscillating pale blue blade becomes darker, lengthening and widening. It isn't much longer, but it is much broader now.

A last deep breath in. A few last calculations. Then, [Haste] stacked five times.

Everything turns into a blur that we can't perceive, not even with our conjoined minds. Our body moves strictly on the orders given to it, hurtling toward a target we hope won't manage to avoid the strike. We move at the absolute full speed we are capable of.

The view only clears once we find ourselves smashing into a pillar. The impact forces us to slow down, throwing us to the side and through a nearby wall. Even then, we push the pain away, rolling back onto our feet to look toward the werewolf.

In the wake of our movement, the werewolf only manages to catch up now. It turns around, lowering itself to charge, but then remains standing in confusion and unmoving. Slowly, along an incredibly smooth cut, its head slides off its neck. A cut, short strands of fur fly down, flickering in the beams of light covering the ruins. Another cut reveals itself as the body splits diagonally and then vertically, the pieces sliding down and away from each other.

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

Even then, we continue to move, holding our side as we limp closer from the place we landed. Ignoring efficiency this time, the sword blazes with oscillating mana as we reach the pile of flesh that already seems to be trying to regenerate.

(Mini Lily,) I groan in pain, fully feeling the weight of the wounds.

We apply [Haste] to our arm alone. It begins moving in a blur, cutting further down into the werewolf. We search for the heart and the brain, cutting as many times as we can until the beast finally stops moving.

(Lily would've tanked that.) Aaron chuckles weakly, and I join him.

I don't even know who's moving the body now as we reach the pillar and slide down, covered in multiple wounds and many broken bones.

(Painful way?) I ask.

(Yeah, why the hell not,) Aaron says. (I swear, I sometimes want to disconnect so I can't feel this shit.)

(Go on then.)

(Looking for a beating?)

(As if you could ever beat someone as pretty as me. Have you seen this face?)

(Unfortunately,) Aaron says, staying connected as we endure the pain together.

Together, we use [Haste] to speed up our natural regeneration, but it comes with a massive price. Any pain that would usually be spread out over the duration of the healing is inflicted now all at once as the process accelerates. For some reason, it even seems to hurt more than it should.

And in the meantime, I check the most important of the notifications we just got.

Congratulations, you have successfully completed your Beyond Trials and may now enter Beyond.

You can now buy Beyond Stay Tokens from the system shop. They will also be included as rewards for certain floor and side quests. You may also earn Beyond Stay tokens within Beyond itself.

After entering Beyond, you will receive more information and be assigned a handler.

Well done!

POV Nathaniel

Morwag slams into the Leviathan Fish first, using the full force of his body. My thoughts are already accelerated as I take notice of the small tears dotting his skin. His binding seems to have been acting strangely lately. Just what is he planning?

Then I have to dodge. I use a pulse of kinetic energy to push myself underwater just as a beam of tri colored mana passes exactly where I'd been standing.

Once underwater, I boost myself again to evade as the beam twists to follow me, then I surge back onto the surface in a spray of water. With one hand, I comb my wet hair back from my face and remove my glasses.

A blast of kinetic energy tosses one of the weaker fish aside just as it's about to attack me. Mana rises around me as I face the tri colored beam I've been observing. Just before hitting me, it shatters into a rain of mana particles that blast against me and whip behind me, like sand sent flying by a wind turbine.

Behind me, all that mana twists and flies back toward me. A crown forms above my head. Within it, mana begins to spin, pulling in both the ambient mana and the particles I've been breaking down. Almost as if my own maelstrom is facing off against the Leviathan's.

Morwag breaks one of the creature's arms, and then Weslin is there as well. His body reinforcement takes a more technical approach than Morwag's, the output isn't as high, but it's more skilled and far less damaging to his own body. Every attack thrown at him disappears. He easily ignores the mana radiation from the Leviathan, even as it continues to ramp up. Occasionally, he uses his void to break the attacks the monster launches at him, stripping them of their intent.

Savant and Brich, meanwhile, move to attack the smaller fish. Each of these proving themselves comparable to an A or B rank, something I remember giving me quite a bit of trouble not even that long ago.

Weslin dodges, but Morwag gets hit and blasted under the wavy surface of the lake. In that same moment, my [Empyrean Lance] stabs through the Leviathan. I fire another, but it gets deflected by the armored scales atop its wide head as the beast twists to block. With the sound and fury of a jet engine on a rocket shooting off to the moon, another tri colored mana blast shoots from its mouth. It splits the wavy lake apart, piercing through one of the weaker fish as it heads straight for me.

Just as before, it breaks apart before me, feeding into my maelstrom. Yet the stream doesn't stop. It continues to ramp up, changing and widening, even as Weslin pummels the side of the Leviathan and Morwag slams back down onto the surface of its head.

The monster's domain, which I recognize as a high level [Mana Domain] begins to spread, making all the mana in the area seem brighter without affecting the other colors.

With a last thump of my Ignition Heart, I redistribute all thermal energy into mana. I reach into the crown, and [Eclipse] fans out around me like ink staining paper. All color drains away, making that already vibrant mana even more intense.

The beam breaks apart entirely, and this time, I mimic its structure and create one of my own, powered by the output of both of my hearts. Pale blue, dark blue, and purple combine as it roars ahead, carving the same path as the previous one. Unlike the monster, I continue to narrow it, compressing it until it's only about as thick as my torso. [Empyrean Lance] forms in front of me and flickers immediately as I pull it apart.

The energy that created it feeds into the beam, causing a faint gold and white core to appear. The sound becomes high pitched as the beam pierces through the side of the Leviathan.

Flailing in distress, it throws both Weslin and Morwag away, and then the creature starts swimming through the air quickly, teleporting a number of times while using droplets of mana filled water as tethers.

My beam shifts, trailing it. I have to stay aware of where I point it as the light reaches more than a mile into the distance. It cuts through the water and three more fish along the way. Savant swings his single white feathered wing to jump above the blast, and I dip the beam below Brich as he stabs Calvorn through yet another fish.

Once again, the beam reaches the Leviathan just as the beast teleports into the distance, leans back, and gathers mana from its incredible reserves. Within our clashing domains, it shoots another beam that crashes directly into my own.

The roar of the jet engine cuts out, replaced by a low, vibrating hum that shakes my bones and creates a myriad of tiny ripples across the surface of the lake. The pressure builds until my vision starts to bleed red at the edges.

Even then, the Leviathan isn't budging. It starts to lean into the blast, its massive mana output growing larger as it forces its way toward me.

In the slowed world of my thought acceleration, I observe it all. The monster, the wavelengths of mana, and the droplets of water splashing into the air, only to be evaporated by the friction between the two beams of mana.

Just the right amount of light lands on the lake and the monster, emphasizing its armored scales and creating contrast to the dark water under the surface.

And I think.

What a beautiful day.

The Leviathan's beam pushes against mine as I let go for a moment, taking that heartbeat to manifest my vessel behind my back. It appears there, just as scarred as I am.

Then, the beam that seemed about to reach me stops as I pick up the slack. A few lashes of mana still cut into me, causing my Empyrean ichor to drip onto the surface of the lake. And the water ripples once more, and even more fish pierce the surface with almost maniacal expressions as they rush toward me.

My beam shoots ahead again, this time with much more force as I fully open the last seal on my Ignition Heart.

[Redistribution - lvl 79 > Redistribution - lvl 80]