

Tutorial 871

Chapter 871 - Proprietary something

I think I've made a good trade with Tacita. Promising her the dagger also means she'll be willing to stick around and be on her best behavior until the end of the floor out of fear that I might back out of our deal. With so many unknowns around how this floor is going to turn out, it can only be good to have her with us.

As promised by the Ruler of Diligence, who's clearly caused this mess and now finds himself scrambling to fix it, we've gained a compass item. It has no rarity, and it is like a normal compass, with its pointer indicating a direction, likely the closest member of Group 4.

We don't see any need to wait any longer, so we jump down from the tower, moving across the sand in this heat. I think Min-Jae said it could be as high as 300 degrees Celsius. What a nerd, though a true nerd would have used Kelvin. He refused to use Fahrenheit, insisting that Celsius should be used. But if I'm not mistaken, Fahrenheit tends to be double that of Celsius, or close to it, so that means it's probably somewhere around 600 degrees Fahrenheit?

Damn, I miss my four hot dogs long, weighing as much as a standard 24-pack of beer and roughly three lightbulbs tall, emotional support corgi.

But yeah, simply said, it's too fucking hot for the poor guys from Easy difficulty.

Still, how could something like this cause trouble for me? I pull the heat from the air around us and proceed to convert it into mana that I feed to my crown. It is not as effective or rewarding as converting thermal energy, but it is a nice way to gather mana. Especially now that I feel almost like I am slacking anytime I'm not doing things like this.

Even after my break in the Game, my mind is still not fully my own in some ways. Sometimes, just normal things, like watching Tess move hair off her face, feel unreal.

The fact that my mind doesn't feel like it is about to break apart sometimes scares me. It's an illogical fear, like I'm failing to notice something, and it's already too late for me to fix it.

599 days and likely 23 hours I've endured in thought acceleration.

Actually, let us just call it 600 days since it is already so close. It is easier to think of it in those terms rather than 599 days, 23 hours, 59 minutes, and 59 or so seconds.

So, my over 600 days of mental training left me this way. I suspect this feeling would be worse if it were actually 600 days and these changes had been ingrained into my muscle memory and reflexes rather than memories and experience. Even during the Game, I found myself lacking control over my abilities. I think it's gotten better now, but as I said to Nyssa before, I think the moment I get careless, I will kill someone by mistake.

I mean, it is what I always wanted: to quickly grow stronger, and I need to become even stronger, but still, something is missing to make me fully happy. But I hope I will always stay that way, unsatisfied and striving for improvement.

As for my body, it's gotten worse than ever, but my mana moves easier than ever. Not even mentioning the 1000 point increase in mana my Mana Vessel trait evolution gave me, I think I'm actually properly mana conductive now.

If Ruby's warning that someone might try kidnapping me for my conductive body did not come to fruition until now, it will surely become true soon.

It is a bit scary. I barely have to think about it, and there's mana already flickering at my fingertips. Not to mention the quantity. Where previously it flowed through pathways, circuits, and veins, now it feels like it's moving through my body itself, every piece of it. Further trait strengthenings will improve on it, I'm sure, and at this rate, even the slightest, tiniest bit of resistance is sure to disappear.

I will need to test it out later, but I think the amount I can channel has also greatly improved. The amount of mana I can use to power my skills is likely becoming ridiculous, and that means I'll need to find some sort of skill that'll take full advantage of that and truly test the high end range of my skills.

With some preparation, it's possible I could even prepare something capable of affecting an area the size of a small country, or I can just continue to use Fuck Everything In That Direction Specifically. After all, it's worked so far.

"It's Lily, and it seems like she is talking to some people from one of the Corporations," Tess says out of nowhere, and I squint in the direction where she is looking, but still don't see anything at all.

"Does it seem like she's being scammed?" I ask.

Tess mouths something, but shakes her head and mutters while mouthing it, "...not enough... she says?"

"Are you reading lips now?"

"It's an obvious thing to learn with the way my sight's improved. I hired a beyonder to teach me."

"Is that where the shards I gave you went?"

"I also spent some on local Megacity cuisine."

"Anything good?"

"A few really nice places. One of them sells some ridiculously good drinks."

"Are you turning into a drunkard on top of a thief now, Tess?"

"If I don't drink, I won't be capable of keeping calm with all the crazy people I have to work with."

"Understandable," I say, and this time I really mean it.

We pick up the speed, and Tess warns us that they seem to have noticed us, though no one appears to take it as a threat. A short while later, I begin to see them as well. Lily's petite figure is standing in the desert in front of what looks like a landed spaceship, with its hangar door open, where three or so people are standing there, waiting and watching as we approach.

Soon, the Bulldozer of Lust notices us, or perhaps notices the compass, and looks our way. Her body is ridiculous, given how much she spent on constitution and her potency attribute strengthening variation of it. She has good sight even without actively strengthening anything, and she waves at us as we approach.

When we start getting close, she runs up, putting her hands behind her back and giving a big smile. "Hello."

She tries to hug Tacita, but the mute girl jumps away. If she were a cat, I'm sure she would be swatting at Lily. So instead, Lily proceeds to hug Tess, who lets her, before she finally comes to a stop in front of me.

I am not a stupid man. I know she started with the girls, so I'd have no reason to refuse a hug. Making it seem like a casual and... I cut those thoughts and reinforce my body as she puts her hands around me and squeezes while pressing her head against my chest.

I look down, watching her smile, and clumsily pat her back in a hug. Lily is the type of hugger who holds on too long, so I wait a while, but it does not stop.

"Lower your natural barrier, you're blocking my healing," she says as I look at her face so close in front of mine.

"I don't want to."

"I know your body is fucked up. Everyone knows it. I swear I will hold you all day and enjoy it if you don't let me heal you. It's for your own good."

"Your lies used to be believable."

That makes her smile even brighter. "You remember that wyvern blood you gave me, that I promised to turn into a concentrate? I've already done it. I also can sense another extremely powerful form of blood you have on you, similar to the one from your trait. I bet you want me to help with that, right?"

“Perhaps.”

“Well, perhaps this is extortion then,” she snuggles closer and rubs her face against my chest. “The longer you let this go on, the more I will think you’re enjoying this and dragging your feet to make this last longer,” she smirks, and presses her ear against my chest. “Maybe if I wait and listen long enough, I will hear your heartbeats speed up.”

“I could just teleport away,” I say.

“You cannot overpower me, and my natural barrier is too powerful. We are also touching too much, so even if you somehow teleport, I will probably just move with you.”

I try my last defense. “People are watching, are you not ashamed?”

“Not at all, “I don’t give a fuck”, as you would say. The corpos can stuff themselves if they don’t like it, but they won’t because I’m actually a pretty good healer worth being friendly with.”

Looking down at her, I wonder: Is this my fault? Is this the consequence of my breaks from Group 4 and all the time I’ve spent delving into the beyond? Have these already lunatic and terrifying members of my group become even more unhinged?

“Sure then, heal me,” I sigh and lower my defenses a bit.

That causes Lily to smile victoriously as she relaxes and lets go of me, but in the next moment, I teleport two steps away from her, leaving her with her hand hanging in the air.

A stream of my mana surges as I use it to power [Redistribution] and lock her in place, absorbing the kinetic energy of each of Lily’s movements. Even as she tries to overpower it, to push through, I spitefully continue to power it with more and more, not caring how much effort it takes or how much of my mental processing goes into it.

Once again, I am reminded that I cannot allow myself to be weaker than Lily. I cannot show weakness either.

Leaving her standing behind, I walk towards the three corpo-rats while Tess boops Lily's nose a few times and then continues on to join me by my side.

The three men are all selari, wearing normal clothes, as I notice that within the hangar where they stand, there seems to be a controlled climate.

"Were you trying to scam her?" I ask them directly.

The leader of them just smiles and steps a bit ahead, just a half step from exiting the barrier within the hangar. "I am Balkalathejek from Novus Venture Corp," he bows slightly, "and these are my assistants, and I can assure you that we were not trying to scam the Lady Healer. We just tried to come to an agreement that would see the best results for both sides."

"I see. Do you mind if I call you just Bal?" I ask.

"I do not mind it at all. I do realize that my name might be difficult to remember for some people, Mister Gwyn," Bal says.

That causes me to glance at Lily, but Bal continues to talk. "I didn't hear that from Lady Healer. My associates and I had the opportunity to watch the Game," his voice is smooth, carrying a smile in it, yet it does not feel like he is making fun of anyone. "You and your sister have been fascinating to watch, and that ending... I am sure it will be spoken of for centuries to come, especially with the return of Starless Sky."

"Well, I bet you didn't watch it in a legal or intended way," I say, but Bal just stays quiet and continues to smile. "So, what did you want from the Lady Healer?" I ask him.

"We intended to purchase one of her healing marks for further examination. We'd already started arranging the arrival of a test subject for her to place it on before you and your friends interrupted the negotiations, Mister Gwyn."

A loud crack makes my body shudder, and I slowly turn around to watch Lily's body twist and bulge as she pushes through my kinetic hold. Even with the ridiculous amount of mana I'm powering it with, her

body is monstrous, and forces me to wonder if her natural barrier isn't stronger because of her Constitution. Maybe it is not just body upgrades that strengthen it?

But all thought of curiosity disappears as Lily twists and breaks her neck, instantly healing it over, just as she twists her limbs at the joints and restores them. The amount of kinetic energy generated is ridiculous as she powers and reinforces her body. Twisting and turning our way, she then takes a step and then another, forcing her way through, and with each step, she faces it better and improves her ability to push through.

In the end, she stops near us, looking at me with a glint in her eyes, clearly intended to challenge and make fun of me.

I begin to reach toward more of my mana to accept her challenge when a cough catches my attention, and I look at Tess, who looks back with a lifted eyebrow.

With a sigh, I let go of my kinetic hold on Lily, leaving it for the next time. A movement catches my attention, and I glance to the side as I watch Tacita, hidden within her field, casually stride past the barrier on the edge of the hangar. Unnoticed by Bal and his assistants, she heads in.

"Nathaniel and Tess will trade in my name," Lily says, and she moves close to hang on Tess's arm, as she pokes the blonde.

"As you say, Lady Healer," Bal says. "Our offer, it still stands. An information exchange for one healing mark, and if both sides consider it adequate, we can share more information in exchange for another healing mark."

Fixing my clothes, I clear my throat and look at him, reaching toward my Nerdthaniel submind. I lean in slightly, making my posture casual, while trying to mimic the way Lissandra radiated her pressure during my mental training, letting them at least partially feel my own restrained mana through the barrier.

"Bal," I start, my voice low. "Let us dispense with pleasantries and ignore the fact of just how much you were trying to rob my precious friend. You want a piece of Lily's life's work. That's fine. But you surely understand what we're dealing with."

I take a slow step forward, almost touching the barrier. "What you're talking about is not just a simple healing mark, and though we're still just attendees, some of us aren't actually stupid. You want to get your grubby hands on her proprietary somatic healing constructs, uniquely developed by Lily's incredible talent. We know you'll attempt to harvest, replicate, or deconstruct the underlying logic of the mark. I will not be warning you of the localized... unpleasanties this can cause to the test subject and anyone who gets too close, I'm sure you're already aware of that."

I gesture lazily toward the metallic walls of the hangar. "I've heard enough about how the Corporations operate to know that your specialists will attempt to bypass the encryption and steal Lily's intellectual property. In any such case, it's not just the mark we're trading, but also the risk that you'll break Lily's trademark, and that carries much more value than just an exchange of... some information. So, let us hear what kind of data you think warrants this level of access. Don't even dream about a second healing mark, and be sure this was worth Lily's time."

When I turn to my side to look at Lily, she panics for a short moment as all attention turns to her and she lets go of Tess, glancing with her eyes from Bal to me and back to Bal before just nodding quickly. "What Nathaniel said! It is my proprietary something healing construct, so you better pay up!"

Chapter 872 - The Art of the Deal

"Deal." Bal smiles at me, causing me to come to a stop and narrow my eyes. For a moment, I want to glance at Tess in search of help, but decide not to show any weakness.

Quickly, I type into the community and decide to resend the message until Lily notices it.

Nathaniel Gwyn (Hell, group 4) -Grumpy, I don't like this guy. When it comes time to trade, give him healing mark number 3.2

Outwardly, I ask, "How many corporations are there on Xyphos?"

"Aurate Consortium, Novus Venture Corp, Meridian Alliance, Questionable Assets Group, and Coda Collective."

The asshole doesn't elaborate, and I know it is on purpose.

Still, I have to ask, "Questionable Assets Group?"

"Yes, that's their legal name," he confirms.

"So you are all here to harvest talnium?"

"Most of our main objectives align with this, yes, though some have a side project in observing the Labyrinth, but that's highly regulated, and permits are rarely issued."

"Whose control does this planet fall under? Or did, you know, before all this happened."

"The Ruler of Diligence at the moment, though the Rulers tend to coordinate on that and make changes to oversight procedures."

I pause and blink a few times, but just in case, I ask, "Tell me, this talnium, is Diligence getting a good chunk of it?"

"As per my knowledge regarding the Ruler of Diligence, not personally of course, though he does a lot of trade through his vessels and through the maintenance of centuries old deals accounting for more than 40% of the talnium harvested on Xyphos, yes."

I rub my hand across my face and allow myself to have fun in my thoughts, imagining new tales along the lines of: So the Ruler of Diligence didn't find 40% of the talnium on Xyphos sufficient, so he manipulated the system to make Xyphos part of the tutorial, allowing him to seize the rest while masking the move as an unexpected occurrence through fake system messages.

Quickly, I shake the thoughts away and curse in my mind at Lily for not having read my community message yet. Our group has long since been drilled into checking the messages often, given the way it allows for hidden conversation, but the petite healer is clearly slacking.

So I resend it again, for like the tenth time.

Nathaniel Gwyn (Hell, group 4) -Grumpy, I do not like this guy. When it comes to trade, give him healing mark number 3.2

Esos (Hell, All Business) - Oh, shut the fuck up finally. People here are trying to organize, so go fuck yourself, you and this Grumpy!

"Why does so much of talnium go to Diligence?" I ask Bal.

"The Ruler of Diligence is one of the very few in the universe known to be capable of reliably creating Spatial Caches within his World Forge on Domus. Talnium is one of the extremely rare materials used in the process."

"I guess that makes sense," I agree with him. "How many can he create?"

"At the smallest size of a cache, probably one or two per millennium. The highest quality ones often require tens of thousands of years."

Once again, I blink a few times and ask a bit more carefully, "Doesn't that seem a bit lazy? Or is he limiting the supply to keep the value ridiculously high?"

Bal smiles, and for the first time, he almost looks condescending, but not in a truly arrogant way. It is more like the question itself is ridiculous, as if his child had asked if they could go out and pet the cute baby bear waiting outside with its momma.

"I personally couldn't even fathom the sheer effort, thaumic mastery, and complex processes that go into the creation of a simple spatial cache, Mister Gwyn. We're talking about folding the very fabric of reality into a non Euclidean manifold and pinning that fold to a physical anchor. Said anchor must be calibrated to resonate perfectly with the structure of a spatial cache, otherwise, the inner space of a cache effectively detaches the moment it's moved, leaving the inventory floating at a fixed set of coordinates in the void."

It seems to be something he's actually taken an interest in, like someone who admires a great car or enjoys discussing insane theoretical technology that might allow humans to travel between the stars. So I just nod and listen as he talks.

"Furthermore, there's the issue of maintaining the structural integrity of the inventory space. Reality has a natural and aggressive tendency to equalize, so creating a stable, isolated volume of space should be impossible. I cannot imagine, no, I can not fathom what it requires to prevent the construct from unwinding or, worse, collapsing. Then you must consider the concealment of the spatial cache. Left on its own, it radiates a signature that's as bright as a beacon to anything sensitive to spatial anomalies. Masking that sort of signature is an art form in itself."

"It sounds like it is." I nod again.

"Right!? And worst of all, you have to mitigate the effects of spatial radiation. When you compress space to that degree, the friction between the inner space of a cache and the external world generates static that can crystallize one's mana channels in most cases! There are great masters who have dedicated entire lifetimes to the study of spatial caches, and yet, most of them gave up on understanding the theory, never managing to take even the first step. It is a miracle anyone can craft them at all!"

"I see," I nod, and can't help but feel Bal's excitement. Maybe Diligence is kind of cool after all. Still, I send it into the community.

Nathaniel Gwyn (Hell, group 4) - Grumpy, I do not like this guy. When it comes to trade, give him healing mark number 3.2

Esos (Hell, All Business) - Oh, not again. I've had a shitty day already without this dumbass being annoying. This is like the 30th time, you fuck. You'd better pray I don't meet you somewhere.

Lisjek (Normal, Rat Buds) - There's no need to be such a bitch about it, he's probably spamming it to get an answer from his group, but with so many people chatting here, it keeps getting lost.

Esos (Hell, All Business) - As if I care.

Sset (Hell, group 4) - Group 4? Isn't the current guildmaster of the Primordial Knights also from group 4?

Piere (Hell, 123456) - Nyssa Volare? Is she even still in the tutorial?

Treeson (Hell, S.T.A.R) - No, they had a new coronation. The new guildmaster is that mana lunatic, but I don't remember his name.

Piere (Hell, 123456) - Oh... that guy.

Lisjek (Normal, Rat Buds) - Sset, aren't you in group 4 going by your alias!?

Sset (Hell, group 4) - Hehe.

When I glance at the blonde, she is smiling, and after making fun of me for a bit longer, she leans closer to Lily and very quietly whispers something into her ear.

"How many Adjudicators does the Aurate Consortium have?" I ask Bal and check the community, where Lily finally answers.

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) - Got it!

Then there is a bit of a pause as she reads the older messages and a new one.

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) -I'm offering a healing mark capable of restoring limbs in exchange for the location of this annoying guy called Esos.

Treeson (Hell, S.T.A.R) -I think I know where some attendees from his planet are gathering. I can share that information, but I'll do it for free. I've met you in the Beyond, and you healed a friend of mine.

Esos (Hell, All Business) - Hey, what the fuck is this?

I ignore the rest of the conversation and listen to Bal, who says, "The number of Adjudicators is unknown. If you offer a second healing mark, I am willing to share the way we categorize them and our theories as to how the Aurate Consortium creates them."

To that, I shrug, "Isn't that obvious? They are where they are, around what they are, and have access to what they have in exchange for what they must do."

Bal's smile widens, "You are very well informed for a tutorial attendee, Mister Gwyn."

For a while, I wonder what face he'd be making if I told him who I learned it from and that I also met the real Kindness, not some crappy clone of hers that the Aurate Consortium is clearly creating from her flesh. But seeing how they've been doing it without much effort to hide, Kindness likely doesn't care, as long as most of their budget goes into trying to find ways to kill her.

I'm once again reminded how ridiculous this is. 90% of the Aurate Consortium's budget goes into finding a way to kill her, and even with the remaining 10% of it, they're still the most powerful corporation by far.

Weapons made from the flesh and body of a Ruler with a level 99 skill, clones of her to be used as their warriors, and god knows what else, they truly know how to get the most out of it in ways I even have to admire.

"I just overheard some B ranks talking about it somewhere in the Beyond," I say to Bal, "how much more do you think I can ask?"

"I'm sure you did hear it there, Mister Gwyn. As for the number of questions, this is open to negotiations where both of our sides will agree. After all, we aren't shameless enough to try to trick you or Lady Healer."

"Sure. Want to ask them a few things?" I look at Tess, who just agrees with a nod and moves ahead.

She starts with some pleasantries before rapid-firing a barrage of questions I bet she has been preparing. She asks if there are any Absolutes present on Xyphos, and learns that there are only two, as limited per contract. One of them hired by the Corporations, and the other as an overseer appointed by the Rulers. She asks about Champions, and the answer is a limit of two per corporation. Then she gets into what territories the corporations have and how they've split their lines of influence and stuff, and many similar questions besides.

I already told her about what happened during the Game, so later she asks them about it as well.

“What can you tell us about Starless Sky?” she asks directly.

But to that question, Bal instantly shakes his head, “Any information on gods is extremely valuable, and I am afraid you likely don’t have much of equal value to offer. Though, Mister Gwyn, it has been seen that you’ve been given a dagger previously owned by Absolute Candidate Euris by your sister.”

“Out of the question,” I just say, and it seems the selari man had expected it.

For a bit, I wonder how they would behave if not for Diligence threatening everyone present to keep them from messing with the attendees. Would they try to steal it? Would they try to kidnap Lily or even myself for my traits? And lastly, I have to wonder what they think of Tacita just disappearing.

Of course, I saw her sneak inside, as did Tess, more likely than not, but they don’t seem to have noticed, so do they think she left? Or maybe they know she’s there, and they’re hoping to trap her?

Shaking these thoughts, I ignore it. Tacita knows her abilities better than I do, and she’s been clearing the tutorial’s floors on her own.

“That much should be enough information for the value of a single healing mark from the Lady Healer, do you agree?” Bal says after Tess gets a few more answers from him, and in the end, we agree.

I can almost see the greed in Bal's eyes as they bring out what feels to be a level 150 monster that reminds me of a monkey, with four arms, a single long horn, and a tail ending in a bony, mace-like appendage.

“Be careful with the mark I’m placing. It’s single-use, and it activates automatically when the host takes damage,” Lily says.

“What scale of damage are we talking about?”

"A scratch," Lily says, occupied with working on the mark so she doesn't notice how wide Bal's eyes get in that moment. His two assistants begin to whisper excitedly, and that causes him to frown at them, but it's already too late, and when he turns back, he must have realized Tess and I noticed.

Bal gives a polite smile and calls inside, causing another selari to come out, this one clearly combat-oriented, likely one of the guards. Then they take the monkey away very carefully, moving it back in a cage and even restricting it, likely so it doesn't damage itself by mistake and cause the mark to disappear.

"Lady Healer, if you would be willing, I believe we could make a deal for a second healing mark," he says shamelessly. It is just so obvious, even to me, that he thinks they overwhelmingly came out on top from this exchange.

Meanwhile, Lily looks at Tess, who shakes her head, and Lily straight up rejects the disappointed selari.

Still, they don't interfere as we begin to move away, towards the closest member of group 4 the compass is now pointing us towards.

Tess sighs and scratches the back of her neck when we are further away, "I just heard them laugh, and one of his assistants called us dumb attendees," she says, showing off her talent at strengthening her senses.

Meanwhile, I open the community and check the messages, where I find a few interesting tidbits.

Sset (Hell, group 4) - Tacita, on your way out, can you scratch that monkey they're keeping in the cage? They should be passing by. I think Nathaniel and Grumpy would appreciate it.

Barely two minutes later, Tacita steps out of her field next to us, slowing her run to a pace matching ours. Even then, her walking speed feels like she is annoyed at us for moving so slowly.

She throws something at me, and I catch it automatically. Glancing down at it, I see that it's a mana stone meant to serve as information storage. There are still a few connections hanging off of it, meaning she likely just pulled it from somewhere. And seeing the level of encryption, which is likely going to take me days or weeks to break through, it must have come from an important place.

When I lift my eyebrow in a question, asking what she might want in exchange, she simply draws a shape in the air.

It makes me realize that she's buttering me up for our deal with the dagger, and for some reason, I have no doubt that she managed to scratch that monkey, causing the healing mark to trigger and leaving Novus Venture Corp with nothing.

Chapter 873 - Contingencies

"So you want me to keep the wyvern blood that I purified?" Lily asks.

"Yup," I say. "For now. Once I feel like I'm properly prepared, I'll, probably during this floor, strengthen Mana Vessel to the second stage. During that process, you'll inject me with the wyvern blood and empyrean ichor I've gathered. Then, during the trait strengthening, I will support my trait, which will surely clash with the wyvern blood and ichor."

I squint and look at some shiny structure in the distance, likely a corporate building, and continue to talk to Lily. "If I am very lucky, Mana Vessel might evolve, though I think it's already a really high-grade trait even as it is, so probably not. I could also probably hunt down Savi and take the sample he scavenged of Nyssa's primordial blood, but I think trying to deal with three kinds of blood would kill me even with your help."

"It's also possible that the ichor you collected will forcibly strengthen your ichor trait," Lily says.

Meanwhile, we watch Tacita running nearby, playing catch with an awakened baby ferret that, even if it can't move as quickly as she does, remains extremely nimble when changing direction. Still, the mute girl must be holding herself back so much, even if the baby ferret is likely faster than all Hard difficulty attendees and plenty of Hell ones.

Out of nowhere, I mutter, "I almost want to meet up with Lissandra and ask her what she's been doing to check in on Biscuit as per our deal. I mean, I don't think she'd break her promise, but didn't she just fuck off to the Labyrinth? Is she planning to do it later, or did she get a vow from the wyvern and delegate the task to it?"

"She would have told you if she thought he was in real danger, would she not?" Lily asks.

I think about it for a moment and conclude that she likely would. Lissandra isn't the sort of person who would soften her words just because they might hurt someone.

"I think I want to talk to the wyvern if possible, but that asshole refuses to talk in a normal language, so that could be a problem." I let out a sigh and ask Lily, "Have you been earning shards the way you should?"

To that, she rolls her eyes. "Yes, I have. I met with that mora trio from Crimson Forge and joined up with some healing guilds so they can pass me some jobs, of course, they get a cut, which I managed to negotiate down to 10 percent."

"No hidden payments or clauses?"

"I had the contracts checked."

"Good."

"I guess. It doesn't take much effort, and the shards are nice. Do you want to know how much I've made, Nat?"

As we walk, I give myself time to think and then close my eyes and sigh again. For some reason, I've noticed I do that a lot when dealing with group 4.

"Is it a lot?" I ask.

"Millions."

"How the hell are you making millions already for just a bit of healing?!" I raise my voice.

"Right?!" Lily raises her voice as well to match mine. "It takes me only a few minutes. They even schedule the meetings, so I don't have to wait around and waste time, so I just walk in, heal, collect the shards, and leave."

"Is it at least for something difficult?"

"Not really? I mean, maybe? I don't really know. It's so much more difficult to heal your body. Like, healing you is like what I'd imagine doing surgery on a hummingbird to be like, while most of the people they want me to heal are more like elephants. I have so much space for mistakes, it's just crazy. And then they just go "whoa" and "wow," while staring at me with wide eyes. Nat, the last time, they gave me two hours to regenerate the arm of some high constitution A-rank and fix some nerve damage. It took me five minutes, and most of it was because he was really annoying and kept complaining about pain."

She lowers her voice and mutters, "Sometimes people come and beg me to heal their bonds. Cute animals. Lizards, foxes, wolves, ravens, and such. I give those people a big discount, though, since I started doing that, more of them started coming and saying they weren't able to pay the previous prices, but I don't mind those at all."

"Our cute Lily's made enemies of quite a few healing guilds that've gotten angry because she kept undercutting prices they'd set and has been giving discounts to everyone she's felt even the slightest bit of pity for," Tess says.

"They won't do anything about it," Lily answers with an uncharacteristically angry voice. "Some of them came to me to try to make me change my mind, but I threw them out. Through the walls. I also think Tacita's been killing a few of the more ill-intentioned ones." She looks at the mute girl, who playfully boops her golden ferret before running away.

Lily smiles at the sight. "But I've also been shamelessly spreading the word that I'm in the same tutorial grouping as the Guild Master of Primordial Knights, and most of them stopped after that. I think most of them gave up and are now waiting for me to complete the tutorial or get bored."

"That guild master must be a menace," I say.

"He is the worst," she chuckles. "But, as you see, I'm making some decent money. I am being financially responsible. I think I'll spend it all on passives. Soon, I might even start selling healing marks. I've been working with a few healers my Handler recommended on making them more difficult to copy. Though I'm hesitant about it, I think it would be nice if a lot more healers could create these healing marks, it would save a lot of people."

It takes me a few moments to realize she means this as a question, and that she's been waiting for a reaction from me.

"Lily," I say.

"Yes?"

"Do whatever you want."

"Of course, you would say that."

"So stop asking."

"But it's nice to hear out loud," she says.

"Sure, sure. But you know, if other healers start copying you, you can just improve the healing marks, right? Then the other healers would take care of the lower segment, and you could sell your much better healing marks at a much higher price to the rich ones."

"Huh."

"Of course, it would be nice if you could put some sort of backdoor into it. Like, if someone were to try and kill you while bearing one of these healing marks, you could just destroy the marks at a distance and render them useless."

"I... probably?"

I nod twice. "We could also try to come up with some spatial component to your healing mark. Imagine if you could place a mark once, and recharge it from a distance. For a subscription or something."

"I..."

"Lily, I think Nathaniel is mostly just teasing you, he's joking. Mostly," Tess says.

Looking at me, our black haired healer narrows her eyes. "Did he always have such a punchable face?"

Nearly an hour later, we reach the next member of Group 4. From the hot haze of the desert, we see Dennis moving towards us at high speed.

Even before he's reached us, he's weaving his [Connection] to make a telepathic link between us. He does so surprisingly quickly, making me think he's working in tandem with Aaron.

Then the first thing he does is charge me and pull me into a hug.

"Nat, you stupid, beautiful, annoyingly perfect motherfucker," he says with a surprising dose of emotion. He is even shaking a little bit, though I can see him smiling widely as he looks up with that low, pristine crystal imbued in his forehead.

"I want 1% of those ten million shards you got, so you do not have to than-"

I do not get to finish as he interrupts me, "Not that! I am talking about Iant!"

"Oh, the vessel of Diligence acting as your Handler. What about him?"

He smiles so brightly, I think it might be brighter than the desert. "Iant said Diligence might be able to help us! Of course, it won't be now, and it won't be free, but Iant said our [Connection] skill and whatever's happened to our minds and our connection as twins is very fascinating, Diligence might want to study it!"

"Dennis, you-"

"Yes, yes, I know: be careful, don't get my hopes up, be careful, and then once again be careful not to get scammed by a Ruler whose full intentions we don't know, and such."

(Yeah, Nat, we're not dumb! If you think of it, we're actually a superior species with human brains. Diligence is just an ant!) Aaron sends through the connection.

"What exactly did Iant say?" Tess asks curiously as Dennis lets go of me and gives her and Lily a quick hug.

"Nothing concrete for now. He was a bit vague, but I made him use a vow. He did not lie. He just said the cost might be high. We might have to spend years on Domus being studied and looked over," Dennis says.

(We also think he probably wants to use Nathaniel through us. Diligence is... well, super fucking diligent, everyone says. He probably plans really far ahead and likes to create contingencies,) Aaron also throws in.

"Well, feel free to use me. I don't think Diligence would truly try to push me if he wanted something from me, so we could always just negotiate. Now how've you been otherwise?"

(Currently, we are in the Third City of the second floor. We talk to Spark a lot, and he's been showing us techniques to help stabilize our minds. That sweet little guy isn't even asking us for anything, and only says he can understand what we must be going through.) Aaron's voice turns gentle and thankful. (Of course, there are still dangers. A powerful mind mage could erase me. As could a mana disruption powerful enough to break Dennis's natural barrier, and probably some other things as well. I'll tell you all about it later, I think it'll be safer if you know.)

His brother then completes the thought for him, "But we can do that over a drink."

All in agreement, we continue to move while sharing what's happened thus far. Most of the time, we don't even bother trying to hide anything from Tacita, and she doesn't seem to care in the least. She

often disappears, moving far away, likely to examine something she found interesting, and then returns. She also has a habit of moving all around me, pointing at Veto until I give her the dagger so she can hold it for a few minutes before mournfully returning it to me.

I also use that very same dagger to stab myself to examine the way it locks each of my skills.

From that, I learn that the skills I'd always thought of as higher grade are blocked for shorter periods of time, and the skill level has an influence as well. It's very fascinating to watch how my level 83 [Focus] gets turned off, giving me no chance in hell of reactivating it until the effect wears off. There's no cooldown on the dagger either; once my skill is unlocked, I can stab myself, and it blocks that skill for the exact same duration.

The only difference is that while a skill is locked, if I stab myself, it locks another skill.

As for [Focus], it gets locked for a ridiculous 8 seconds. [Mana Manipulation] gets locked for 4 seconds, and for example, level 19 [Selective Adaptation] gets locked for close to one minute.

And no matter how much I observe the process or try to fight against it, I find no way of shortening the duration or blocking it. I know I just started experimenting, and in a few days or weeks, that might change, but it still annoys me. The fact that it will lead to me improving my hold on my skills doesn't matter that much right now.

Lily joins me too, stabbing herself a few times as well, fascinated by her locked skills. As if she's trying to follow our lead and keep from being left behind, Tess eventually joins in as well.

Dennis does not. Almost with horror, he reads the description and widens his eyes as he takes a step away from the blade, as if its mere presence could lock the skills that might or might not be the only thing keeping his brother with him.

The realization makes me apologize to him as I store the dagger away, and even though he smiles, I still see the fear the dagger brought to the surface. For the rest of the time, he follows Tacita, trying to learn from her and constantly pushing himself to try to use his skills and doubled stats to catch up to her.

The next members of Group 4 we meet are Sophie, Izzy, Noodle, and Blackie.

Chapter 874 - What happened?

I watch as Izzy smiles and waves excitedly as we make our way closer. She nimbly jumps up and towards Blackie, who's now completely encased in red armor. She lands on his arm, and he swings it, launching her at the speed of a bullet.

There's something to be said for the acceleration she experiences, which would've probably resulted in the instant death of anybody from Easy difficulty, as I watch her fly through the air.

As she starts to slow down, she hits the sand, sliding and flipping through a few somersaults to slow her momentum until, at last, she comes to a stop just a few steps in front of us and jumps up to her feet with her arms spread out to her sides.

Lily and Dennis begin to clap while Izzy beams with pride.

Is... is this normal? What happened while I was gone?

The first one to receive a hug from our empath is Dennis, and she even goes so far as to give his head a few pats before rushing on to give hugs to Lily and Tess. When she stops in front of me, I allow her to read my surface emotions, as usual, and get a hug of my own as well. Tacita gets just a wave, and the mute girl standing further behind and to the side tilts her head as she watches Izzy.

Not one to be left behind, Noodle slithers out of Izzy's sleeve and coils around her arm, stopping when his head sits at the same level as Izzy's eyes. The pearly white snake still rocks two sets of three green eyes, but after taking a bite out of the baby wyvern, there have been changes. It's not even like it made him any more like the wyvern in appearance. Rather, there's a new shine to his scales. It's not always obvious, but when the light hits them properly, I can see a blend of blues, greens, and purples shining through.

Noodle gives me a polite nod when he catches me looking at him and keeps staring expectantly in my direction. Even as Izzy moves around to speak with the others, his eyes remain fixed on the same point, perfectly locked onto me.

I create a mana orb like the ones he enjoys and, taking into consideration that he's likely gotten stronger now, I spice it up before flinging it at him.

His head shoots ahead as he snatches it from the air and eats it with all the speed of a puppy devouring a Lego figurine as its owner shouts for it to “drop it”. All six eyes close in deep satisfaction, and the snake gives me another very polite nod.

That’s about the point where Sophie arrives with Blackie as well, and I look over the reanimated corpse of the demon Champion, now encased in its red armor. The armor looks like a heavy medieval style composed of red metal plating, though I notice there are certain spots with lighter shades of red, almost fading to a somewhat yellow hue in places.

“Well, I didn't know your favorite color was red,” I say to Sophie after she finishes greeting the others.

“Crimson Forge is fucking expensive, you know. Even with all the discounts they gave me and that was after barely avoiding them tripling the price when they realized I was a mind mage, it cost a lot. So I didn’t bother with surface modifications, leaving it at the base color of the material, which was, as you can see, mostly red,” Sophie answers.

“I like this color!” Izzy says. “I think you look cool,” she adds, patting Blackie’s arm, who just stands there motionless in response.

Izzy doesn’t let it bother her in the slightest and taps his arm again. Looking at it, I guess we’ve effectively settled the question of how to stop that incredibly powerful kinetic reflection trait from constantly activating.

“How are the stats?” I ask Sophie.

“Fucking high.”

“Why are you so annoyed? Be nice to me for once. I recommended you to those guys.”

“No.”

“Izzy, do something about your older sister.”

"I don't want to. I like Soph as she is."

"Typical mind mage, I guess. So?" I ask Sophie again.

She rubs her face with her hand before combing her hair. "It was probably too much for me to expect you guys to take this floor change and that damn terrifying domain making me shake in fear seriously."

"It's always been like this, Soph. We joke around a bit and make ourselves content with just being around each other before we have to get serious later. Just go with the flow, it's faster that way," Tess says in my place.

"I guess I don't have any other choice," our mind mage says and turns to me. "The body is probably near indestructible to almost anyone below Champion rank. Trust me, plenty of people in Beyond have tried to kill me. His Strength and Dexterity are also very high, but this is where Blackie's hit a bottleneck, he's not able to make use of it all. And the kinetic reflection trait is a nightmare for anyone fighting him melee. And a nightmare to me if I let myself get too close, of course."

"And the armor?"

"Low pristine. I spent all I had and signed some contracts I'll have to deal with later. It's not anything special durability wise, it just serves to hide what's under it and has an absorption layer that stops the trait from triggering."

"Release mechanism?" I ask.

"Yes, there's an encrypted connection keyed to this," she says, lifting a necklace with a silver medal inlaid with a small, red droplet. "I can trigger it and cause it to fall off near instantly, and no, I will not be doing it now. The armor is heavy. Like heavy-heavy, and putting it back on without triggering the reflective trait is a pain in the ass."

"Well, I bet I'll be getting a chance to see it soon anyway," I mutter sadly.

“Don’t jinx it, and what the hell did you do? What happened to the Exploration Rankings?”

“The Boys happened.”

Sophie looks at me almost angrily and absentmindedly reaches and grabs Izzy to pull her closer and hug her from behind, in response to which Izzy twists her head up to look at her sister.

“Just tell me, they’re offering a ridiculous amount of shards for the information. With me being a member of your group and coming from me, it would be taken seriously, and they’d gladly pay me off,” Sophie says.

Scratching the back of my head, I think of it and ask, “How much?”

“Starting at 500 thousand and rising to over one million in places. Mostly from information guilds planning to sell it on further.”

“I bet you could get more.”

“That is what I want to try. I might be able to push it to 2 million if you returned to Beyond and did something fucked up to bring more attention to yourself, and people get reminded of these rankings.”

“If Savant or Brich don’t sell it before you. I’ll tell you, but I want 50% of any shards you will make, and obviously, I won’t be giving you all the details.”

“30% because I am too tired to negotiate further. And won’t Morwag or Weslin try selling it as well?”

“Deal to 30%. And I don’t think so. Both of them should’ve finished their tutorials. Brich, I think, a month or two after Nyssa, who should be finishing up in two months.”

With a sigh, Sophie does what I take to be opening the community while letting go of Izzy and muttering, “I’ll send a message to Savant and see if he’s planning to sell and possibly make a deal with

him. Expect your cut to be smaller if I'm forced to split with him. When I get to Beyond, I'll try to check in with Brich too."

"If you call him Brichant, I think he'll be more inclined to negotiate," I say, getting one more weirded out look before she shakes her head and returns to her community window.

When I feel a tug on my clothes, I look down into Izzy's green eyes. "What?" I ask her.

"Is this floor your fault again?" she asks me.

"What do you mean again? Obviously not. You can blame Lissandra and her wyvern."

She tugs on my clothes again.

"What?" I ask her.

"What did you do?"

Under her eyes, I cannot even look away, so I just snort instead, "Maybe I helped Lissandra make a dagger. But help might be too powerful a word. I just gathered and compressed a little bit of mana."

"So little, even an average Hell difficulty attendee would've been able to channel it?"

Instantly, I feel offended and defend myself, "Not a chance in hell some casual would be able to move that much mana so quickly. It would melt their feeble bodies. Those guys couldn't even fathom..." I pause there and look at Izzy. "Okay, maybe it was a bit more than a little bit of mana, happy?"

"Do you like Lissandra?" Izzy asks me out of nowhere.

Somewhere in the background, the Lustdozer freezes as I think over my answer before saying honestly, "Probably?"

Izzy quickly asks as if there is a danger hanging over our heads, "Like like? Or like?"

I tilt my head in confusion, "Do you mean romantically? No chance in hell. I just like her determination and admire her skill, don't tell her, but it is a little bit cool."

"See?" Izzy says while looking somewhere behind me and then back at me. "I was just curious why you helped her. That is why I asked."

"Obviously, I didn't help her just for that. We made a trade," I say, explaining the obvious.

"Didn't Lissandra have a grandson, and didn't you kill one of her descendants on the second floor?" Dennis asks, already chewing on something that looks like dried up fruit.

"Something like that," I nod as we begin making our way to the next place the compass is leading us, towards Min-Jae and Maya.

The group stays rowdy with conversation quickly swapping through multiple subjects, and eventually even Sophie gives up and decides to wait until we're all together before starting to plan what to do next.

On our way there we stop by one of the barriers holding Easy and Normal difficulty attendees. This one is full of 30 or so demons. It's my first time ever seeing an Easy difficulty demon, and honestly, it's pretty hard to comprehend.

An Easy Difficulty. Demons.

Just how? You get born with a Demon heart and a natural connection to primordial energy in most cases. Some even get a second extra trait and yet... Easy Difficulty?

When some of them start calling to us to come closer or share some water with them, we move closer.

“What do you mean 'give us water, human'?” Dennis asks as he stops in front of the barrier, “You should ask nicer if you want something.”

“You’re just a human,” one of the demons snorts, causing Dennis to quickly get annoyed.

“Just a human? Unlike you coughing babies, we’re in goddamn Hell difficulty! Most of us are Beyonders!”

Even that doesn’t seem to shock the demon as he laughs, also moving closer to the barrier, just like the dozen or so demons around that also decide to start shouting at Dennis and challenging him to a fight.

“I bet I could take you on in a fight!” The demon hits his chest three times with a fist, generating more kinetic energy.

The others begin to roar as well, and a few even kick or attack the barrier as if they want to push through to Dennis, who stares at them with wide eyes.

“I’ll just fucking break the barrier, and you’ll all melt in the heat! My guy over here can break it if he tries!” Dennis threatens and points at me. He then presses his face against the barrier that squishes his cheeks as he stares down the demons with wide open eyes.

The cute lunatics being kept in the barrier for their own safety start shouting in excitement. A few of them start attacking the barrier with the attacks bouncing and hitting other demons, which causes even more fights to start.

Meanwhile, the demon that started it all presses the face against the other side of the barrier opposite Dennis and starts cursing at him.

We leave ten minutes later when Dennis and Aaron run out of insults.

The entire time as we walk away, the group of Easy difficulty demons keeps shouting after us and calling out their victory, while within the barrier, some of them are still fighting each other.

Chapter 875 - Our modus operandi

Ever since I found myself here, I've had this feeling, like someone's watching me, and the more time has passed and I've had the opportunity to examine things, the more I'm beginning to suspect that it's the one winged wyvern.

With Rulers likely to interfere, I repeatedly wonder what the plan is. Right now, it seems like most of the attendees are being used as hostages to keep the Rulers in check.

But even though this wyvern seems to be at least as powerful as a Ruler, I wonder if it could truly face someone like Wrath or Greed. Which also invites the question: why hasn't either of them killed the wyvern, be it alone or with help, in an effort to move on to the next floor of Beyond?

The only thing I can think of to explain it is that the wyvern's had thousands of years to set up its domain and make it incredibly powerful in the process, to the point where challenging it within its domain would be suicide even for a squad of Rulers. After all, I've been told that wyverns are domain specialists.

When the wyvern was killed by Pride so he could pass onto the next floor, it's possible that the domain was heavily damaged in the time it took the wyvern to revive, making the next challenges against the wyvern easier.

So, all of this is likely running on a timer. I don't think the Rulers are going to allow the wyvern to build up such a powerful domain again, not here on Xyphos, and if pushed, I think they'll even sacrifice the attendees in the process.

It depends on how valuable Xyphos is to them and how much they don't want the wyvern to be free. They can't move freely, though. At any moment, a certain cockroach might exit the Labyrinth with a new heart beating in her chest.

It's a huge mess all around, and I really have to wonder why the Ruler of Diligence would have done this.

I put those thoughts on hold and sigh. It's fun to blame it on him, I have to say. It's actually very fun. For a being as old as him, a few years of a few thousand people blaming him for stuff is likely nothing, bearing no consequence other than the annoyance that he can't even use it as an excuse to kill me or something.

I like these kinds of games. The ones where I test how far I can push before I see consequences.

I am someone who proudly calls himself an asshole.

Still, I really can't bring myself to envy him, considering what he has to deal with. If it were me, I know I would've been much more radical and attempted to deal with it through sheer force. And yet, the Ruler of Diligence continues to try his best, following the code he must have set for himself once he became a Champion on Myrra's and Eris the Matriarch's world.

Out of all of the Rulers I've met, that ant is among the most normal, and that's saying something, given the fact that he's a giant house pest. It almost makes me want to try to help him out of pity, and because I know his code would force him to pay it back.

That occupies my mind for the moment, along with the wyverns' domains. I wonder if these existed pre-system or if the wyverns became domain specialists after learning to bend mana to their will as the system spread.

Other parts of me watch Tacita, Dennis, and Fuci playing around, all three of them pushing their speed to the limit.

Dennis is very fast in any single burst that takes him in a straight line, though it takes him some time to recover his bearings. I suspect it's the result of all his stats and his skills being stacked into that single burst, meaning that his thoughts can't really keep up. I notice it, but when he moves so quickly, it seems almost like he's pre-programmed his body to manage itself while his mind catches up to his movements.

There are advantages to that incredible speed, but it has its weaknesses too, though he won't be likely to encounter many able to keep up with it. When he moves like that, his speed almost reaches Tacita's level when she goes full out.

But in the end, that's all there is to it. It's a single, short burst. Tacita can maintain that speed for dozens of seconds. She can maneuver instead of just shooting off in a straight line, and her mind can keep up with it on pure instinct alone.

Ridiculous, I say.

[Selective Adaptation - lvl 19 > Selective Adaptation - lvl 20]

Reading the notification that suddenly popped up, I use the tip of Veto to stab my arm again, watching as it locks [Selective Adaptation] once more.

As the dagger locks the skill, the skill tries to fight back and adapt. Even though it's only locked for a minute, I've come up with a theory that after hours of repeating this process, I should be able to forcibly level the skill by abusing this feedback loop. It even broke through the bottleneck, so it should become easier to level up now, and I certainly have the time.

Xyphos is quite a large planet, I suspect that it's much bigger than Earth, and yet we're still coming across barriers with Easy difficulty attendees inside, making me suspect that many of the attendees were simply clustered together. The corporations, meanwhile, have been sneaking around, mostly meeting with Hell difficulty attendees who've been moving freely through the incredibly hot desert, though they rarely visit those locked inside the barriers.

I wonder what these five corporations think of this whole situation. Are they powerful enough to put pressure on the Rulers by making use of the structures behind them, or are they just sitting there quietly and hoping things don't get any worse? And in the end, how can we abuse this to our advantage?

There isn't much value we could have, but we have one clear advantage: the system shop for tutorial attendees isn't available outside of the tutorial.

Surely there are certain materials or items these people are interested in. Maybe they'd even be willing to give an attendee items to sell, even if they only get 10-20% of their value, just to get their hands on certain items or materials.

So, the adventures of Group 4 continue as we make our way toward the remaining members, who have somehow ended up much further away than the others.

The hours turn into days as we make our way over to them, not meeting any enemies other than the heat and the corporations landing in their ships nearby to engage in trade.

Our modus operandi remains the same.

We want information. As much as possible, and we're willing to trade one of Lily's trademarked 3.2 healing marks.

Yes, marks, multiples even. For better information, obviously.

Sometimes we ask about wyverns or the gods, and even though such information is very valuable, we get bits of info for a few marks Lily places on whatever targets they bring. In other cases, we ask for water and other supplies, which we often share with attendees trapped in the barriers to make more progress toward the unofficial quest that's been issued by Diligence.

Of course, our trades always end the same way.

The corporations leave. Tacita reappears from her field with more shiny loot from the ships she snuck into, and all of Lily's healing marks get triggered by the scratches she's caused in the process.

The 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' mentality remains as relevant as ever, and the more we use this strategy, the more proficient we become.

After about the tenth time, I begin to suspect the corporations either aren't sharing information with each other or they actively can't. Although Sophie brings up an even more probable reason: it's possible that each group we meet is acting as an individual cell trying to get some stuff from attendees 'off the record,' which is why no one we meet talks about how his buds made this trade and marks mysteriously triggered.

Sometimes corpos notice the marks vanishing and return to complain, but even here, we have a plan.

Simply put, how could we help them? The trade is done. It's their fault for not restricting their test subject, and it must have damaged itself somehow. We have warned them about how the mark triggers, and they even watched the process and confirmed the mark's placement.

Not wanting to pick any fights, they leave because of the shadow of a certain black ant threatening corporations not to mess with the attendees.

Among the information we get is that Starless Sky was, as we already knew, one of the Godkings, the most powerful of the gods. The hierarchy generally ranks them as Godkings, gods, and then demigods.

Godkings are usually the oldest and most powerful, with Starless Sky representing the concept of a sky devoid of stars. In rumors, one of his powers makes navigation near impossible, and this is where we wind up needing to have a long conversation.

Sophie says it is because early civilizations used stars as markers to travel vast distances. Tess mostly agrees, though she thinks that it's because if there are no stars, there isn't any light, and without light, you can't orient yourself.

They have a short, stubborn battle between themselves, fighting over that small distinction.

Once they are done, we theorize the extent of those powers. I suspect it might make teleportation nearly impossible, with a possible mental component that causes people to move in the wrong directions or have trouble estimating distances.

Dennis mentions it could affect time, perhaps by dilating it in some way, which causes most of us to look at him in confusion. Then he calls us all idiots, telling us that we tend to measure the passage of time by the cycles of day and night, and that without light, it might change our perceptions. He gives an example of how, when you are inside pure darkness, the passage of time is nearly impossible to estimate.

Izzy asks if it means the Godking might slow down time or our perception of it, which is where I share my experiences with thought acceleration.

Our healer wonders if no stars means no heat, likely being tied to the concept of an entirely dark, cold universe. And that mostly matches what I saw before the game ended.

Another piece of information is that the Starless Sky died in a fight against a dozen or so Rulers during the System War, as they schemed against him to claim the incredible system rewards killing him offered.

In the end, his death later led to the erasure of all elves, whom he was protecting along with a few more gods.

Apparently, only the Ruler of Justice is rumored to be still alive from the group that killed him, while no longer bearing the position of a Ruler.

All this information makes my fingers tingle the more we learn.

And now we are, for the first time, meeting with the Aurate Consortium, and these people are clearly at a very different level from the previous corporations. Their ship is huge, heavily defended, and the mora woman who speaks with us is accompanied by an Adjudicator whose form is entirely hidden under a black jumpsuit.

Tacita doesn't even try to sneak onto the ship and stands nearby, giving us a signal that it's going to be impossible.

The mora, who introduces herself as Raga, continues in our conversation, "While I'm surprised you know that much about Starless Sky already, I have to disagree with the information you've mentioned and what the other corporations told you. According to our company records, Starless Sky died in battle against nine Rulers, not a dozen. He killed eight of them, and only the Ruler of Justice survived back then. The Ruler of Justice then gifted the greatest shard of the dead Godking's Elysian Frame to Pride before disappearing from the records."

"Did he by any chance die after challenging Pride?" I ask.

"Not to my knowledge."

"Weird," I mutter.

Lily brings confused Raga's attention back to her as she asks one of the questions we prepared in the group: "What does it mean to bear a god's stigma?"

"I can't reveal such information due to our company's policies, but I believe you might find a corporation willing to shine a light on it," Raga says. "But... if Mister Nathaniel Gwyn would be willing to trade a 'black mana' orb with us, I might be able to share such information." As Raga says it, my own blank voice sneaks in to replace whatever fake name she gives "black mana."

"Kindness has black mana as well, get it on your own," I say.

"That is indeed correct, but we like to make comparisons between all persons capable of using it, and so far we have been able to gather data from over 90% of bearers that have appeared in..." Raga pauses and then smiles, "...let's say a very long time."

"Still no."

"That is unfortunate. A mid sized vial worth of your blood?"

"No."

"One of your eyes?"

"No."

"A sample of your flesh, bone, and hair?"

"No."

"If the price is a concern, we can increase the scope of information we offer in exchange."

"I just don't think I should be sharing much of anything with you," I say after taking a glance at the Adjudicator.

Raga gives that typical mora smile, which feels even wilder, taking into consideration that she is twice as tall as any of us.

She gives a short bow. "In that case, I will take my leave. I thank you for a pleasant conversation, and Lady Lily's healing mark will not be needed at this time. Please don't feel like you owe us anything, as this was not my intention. We shall meet again soon, now then."

Raga walks up to the ramp, and the Adjudicator stays behind with her head turned toward Lily, whom she seems to have been watching the entire time. At the top, as she's about to enter the ship, the mora turns around, narrowing her eyes in a mix of curiosity, surprise, and annoyance as she stares at the Adjudicator.

The mora hisses something, and a short pulse shoots from her, bouncing off the core embedded in the middle of Kindness's clone.

Only then does the Adjudicator turn around and walk up and under Raga's eyes, enter the ship, after which she follows her.

Chapter 876 - What is it planning?

We find Maya and Min-Jae inside a barrier with 20 or so Easy difficulty lynthari. I feel my head beginning to hurt the moment I see those cat-eared, cat-tailed, overly curious, and uselessly tall creatures.

Apparently, it's pretty easy to enter the barrier, you just need to push a little bit, so we enter as well. The feel of the air inside is like traveling from a sauna into a well air conditioned room. Well, if said sauna were at risk of setting you ablaze.

Looking down at the ground, I see a few barrels filled with water and food that the lynthari are still chewing.

"We bought some resources from the corporation we met along the way and shared them with these guys," Min-Jae says after greeting everyone as we awkwardly shake hands.

I notice the Korean boy is already getting taller than me and make sure to recheck a few times, even looking to see if he's wearing some kind of platform shoes. But there's just no trick to it. He's just gotten taller.

Well, his mana reserves are trash, so that is still an overwhelming win for me.

There are a few missing days in Maya's memory and that of the uselessly tall boy as they tell the others about what happened and about how they ran into the Labyrinth in an attempt to hide from the Adjudicator.

Everyone automatically blames it all on Lissandra. Deservedly so. But there's something different about this. Both Maya and Min-Jae feel... off? It's difficult to describe, so I run checks over them multiple times and compare their signatures to their previous ones. And, of course, even then, my cursed [Perception] skill refuses to level up.

Still, I find them the same, just stronger. Especially Maya feels sharper, more determined, and directly stronger than before. Meanwhile, Min-Jae is... I don't really know. He's also slightly different or something. After all, I'm no expert here, so I watch Izzy as she checks them over, I am sure she's in the best position to do so. Her [Empathy] and her personal knowledge of them will take care of that, and I am sure if something's wrong, she'll let us know.

Meanwhile, I continue to perform checks trying to confirm that they're not mimics, possessed, or ghosts, or something like that.

During it, Min-Jae sits next to me and, annoyingly so, without him realizing it, he's sitting on a boulder even taller than the one I'm sitting on, leaving him even taller than before.

"The checks you're running on me are getting more and more intrusive," he says with a slightly tired smile.

"I want to be sure," I tell him.

"I know," he nods, pausing for a while before carefully asking, "And what if I wasn't me? What if I am a copy or some monster that killed the real me?"

For a while, I pause as well, giving it a thought before saying, "If something killed you to take your place, I would kill it. If you were already dead and had come back as a copy of yourself, I have no idea."

“Would you hesitate at all if my killer behaved and looked like me?” Min-Jae asks.

“I would make it quick.”

For some reason, he nods, as if confirming something. As he stands, he says, “I think I wouldn't be able to do that.”

“That’s okay.”

He adds with a smile, “Yes, I think that’s fine too. Thank you.”

I watch as he leaves me and walks towards the others. My eyes react to my will, burning in my sockets as I watch his back. I watch every slight movement of mana around him. How the ambient mana reacts, how his own mana leaks, and all the imperfections I’ve ever noticed in his mana control.

Even then, I find nothing, so I blink a few times, and my eyes calm down as I filter out the information I’m taking in and restrict it a little, something I’ve been doing ever since Lissandra broke Elian’s spy glasses.

Instead, I look past the barrier around us and over to the white glowing dome encompassing the entire planet. As always, I observe individual parts of it, still careful not to overwhelm my brain by seeing too much, though as time passes, I peek deeper and deeper.

“Psst, human,” a voice next to me sounds, and I decide to ignore it.

It takes a few seconds until that voice sounds again, “Are you deaf, human? Human. Human. Yes, you with the pretty eyes. Humaaaaaaaaaan. Humaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan. Huma-”

“What?” I interrupt and look to my left, where the lynthari girl, maybe 10 years old or so, crouches behind the boulder along with a boy a few years younger.

“Teach me your ultimate killing technique. Our Hell difficulty attendees always said they have one, but refuse to share!” she says.

“No.”

“I thought you would say that. But! I’ll offer Timas as a trade! You can pet his head and scratch his ears. Look, he’s widely considered to be one of the cutest lynthari to ever live!” she says as she pulls the boy closer.

The boy looks at me with big blue eyes, contrasting with his black hair, cat ears, and tail. He blinks a few times and gulps before making a shy smile and twitching his ears.

“Aaaaaa.” In the end, it’s not me, but the lynthari girl who fails to resist and takes him into a hug, rubbing her face against him. “So damn cute!”

As she regains her bearings and lifts her head to talk to me, I’m already gone, teleported away, landing next to Izzy. I place my hand on her shoulder and whisper to her, “I need your help.”

“Sure!” she says without hesitation, and we walk out of the barrier back into the hot desert. Sophie notices us leaving but does nothing to stop us.

Outside, I create an orb, place a mark on it, and sling it around us, and quickly feed it more speed until it whistles loudly as it pierces the air. I gradually stretch it into a sharp, aerodynamic projectile and add weight to it, and the sound it makes starts to change as the speed increases.

When I finally launch it, I add a boost of kinetic energy to it, causing it to crackle in the air, sending a shockwave booming out around us.

Then I wait for a while and look into the distance where it flew with my eyes before nodding and putting my hand on Izzy’s shoulder, at which point she lowers her natural barrier, and I teleport us towards the mark I placed on it.

This place looks like any other spot in the desert, but I look towards the sky as this time I compress mana until it passes the threshold and turns black. Then I launch it towards the sky and wait.

“Nat...” Izzy says in warning, “I hope you aren’t-”

“I am,” I confirm to her.

“Sophie’s going to kill you.”

“Only if she finds out.”

“I’m going to tell her.”

“Well, that is unfortunate,” I say with a shrug.

Together we watch as the clouds in the sky stop moving and an area dozens of miles wide starts to grow darker and darker as the clouds inside begin to concentrate rapidly.

An immense pressure lands on us, making the hair on the back of my neck rise and my body feel cold, as if I were starting to shake with fear. Still, even then, I face that pressure. My own mana blazes into the area, not even trying to resist the pressure directly, but by bending like a tree in the wind as I protect myself and Izzy.

The dark clouds covering the sky as far as I can see are pierced by the bright white light, as a deep, suppressed roar shakes the planet and the clouds above take on the faint shape of a one winged wyvern.

The enormous shape covering what feels like the entire sky speaks, in that way it always does, that the system can’t seem to translate.

I wait for it to finish before saying, “You know I can’t understand. I wanted to ask what you’re planning to do with this place.”

Once again, that sound reverberates, like the sound of a breaking mountain falling into the lake, and this time it sounds annoyed or maybe angry.

“What do you think?” I ask Izzy.

“I-” she starts, furrowing her brow in concentration.

But before she can finish, I let all my mana explode around us, carefully weaving it so that not a drop touches or damages Izzy. It erupts like a blazing flame, swirling into a protective whirlpool as I channel the raw mana to face the presence pressing down on us.

The pressure intensifies as I compress and concentrate my mana. It flickers violently, like a flame fighting off a hurricane or the surface of a lake struck by a shockwave. My mana shifts into a tricolored hue, with white and golden streaks flashing at its core.

For a few long seconds, I feel as though my mana might escape my control at any moment. Yet, I continue to feed it, fully releasing the seal on my Ignition Heart, as I look towards the sky in cold determination. I don’t hesitate or worry and focus solely on protecting the two of us.

Then, as if from nowhere, the pressure vanishes. Released from the crush of that weight, my mana surges outward, expanding and blanketing an area the size of a small city.

It almost looks as if it is over, but as tons of sand rise all around us, the pressure returns with greater intensity than before.

[Eclipse - lvl 74 > Eclipse - lvl 75]

[Eclipse - lvl 75 > Eclipse - lvl 76]

[Weave - lvl 32 > Weave - lvl 33]

[Weave - lvl 33 > Weave - lvl 34]

[Manifestation - lvl 52 > Manifestation - lvl 53]

The area around us instantly turns black and white as I expand my domain, leaving only the colors of mana within. In [Focus], I watch it all happen, regain control of my mana, and quickly pull it back from that wide area to our position. The crown above my head dissolves, adding another huge chunk of mana to the fray.

Again, it's my mana that moves like a torrential tide, splashing through the space, washing over both of us, and shooting out to meet the pressure. Luminous particles of mana scatter away after each clash, only to be pulled back to me. They merge with everything I'm already channeling, feeding the flood I've surrounded us with.

After another five long seconds, the pressure is gone, this time fully, and the voice from the sky speaks again.

I look down to my right at a now pale Izzy, who stands close to me, holding onto my clothes.

My eyes activate to their fullest as I use the full capabilities of my new body. A long wound opens on my palm, spraying out a stream of deep red blood with particles of white and gold swirling within.

"Nathaniel," Izzy whispers somewhere in the background.

With ease, I move all the mana gathered around us toward the blood, which stretches into the shape of a javelin.

I grab the weapon, one of my legs slides back as I take a stance, and I reach out to throw.

The javelin shoots ahead and disappears immediately, and with it, all of my mana, as I watch as a straight line tears a path through the sky, leaving what looks to be deep gouges in the air. A line of blood red with gold and white peeking from inside, and faint blue and purple leaking out around it.

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 59 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 60]

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 60 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 61]

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 61 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 62]

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 62 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 63]

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 63 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 64]

[Weave - lvl 34 > Weave - lvl 35]

[Weave - lvl 35 > Weave - lvl 36]

[Manifestation - lvl 53 > Manifestation - lvl 54]

Then, there's silence. Everything feels as if it has stopped moving.

The pressure feels different now, it is as if a heavy weight is pressing down on me while a powerful wind blows against my face, whipping my hair around.

I continue to look up, unblinking and without hesitation, as the clouds weave themselves back together again. They erase what remains of my attack, they become denser, forming a dark shape of a one winged wyvern formed out of clouds that lowers itself to the ground, with its building-sized head coming to a stop right in front of me.

That voice, akin to breaking stone and thunder, sounds again, this time deep and deliberate.

"I don't know what you're saying, and honestly, I don't think I give a fuck anymore," I answer and take a step forward. "I came here to speak, if only because I think even you have to acknowledge that your ass would still be rotting on the 12th floor without me."

I take another step, making sure to stay between Izzy and the clouds.

"Yet, here you are, behaving like an ungrateful dick. Like total fucking trash. Sure, push me around, play these silly games to pressure me or whatever form of tactic you think this is, but do not fucking mess with my people."

That deep voice vibrates, and the clouds reach closer, almost touching me, so enormous that it almost won't fit in my field of vision.

"I said I have no idea what you're saying, but I do know a bitch when I see one," I mutter, feeling blood in my mouth as I give a smirk and stare the clouds down. "How did it feel, having to rely on her to get out? Not even a human, but the imitation of one, created by the system."

One of my eyes bursts open, and I close it.

Both of my hands twist, stretching until they break and contort in ways they probably shouldn't.

"So scary," I say, pushing through even as my tongue explodes inside my mouth.

Amused by that, I give a smile, showing my teeth as blood flows from the corners of my mouth down to stain my shirt.

The clouds freeze as they stand. A loud roar follows as they spin around us before shooting back towards the sky.

Just a second later, everything is back to normal as if nothing ever happened.

The temperature within my body increases as I use the heat from the still unsealed Ignition Heart. That heat activates my Heat Resonance Restoration passive, which spreads through my body and heals me faster with the rise in temperature. With how high the heat generated by my heart can be, I'm healed very quickly.

My tongue regrows inside my mouth, giving me an extremely odd feeling. My arms twist and snap back together. Thanks to my low constitution, the healing is near instantaneous. The problem is with my traits. My eye, the function of my body as a mana vessel, and my blood take longer, clearly showing just how high-grade their tiers are.

But as always, I don't need them. Even if I lost everything, I possess enough confidence and arrogance to know I'd still be doing just fine. I gained all of this myself. I control it all, and it's the result of my own mind and effort.

Only once I feel more restored do I glance at Izzy with a question: "So what do you think? What is it planning? Should we try to ditch this planet as quickly as possible?"

Izzy looks at me with an expression that makes me add with a smile, "Don't worry." I reach out and caress the top of her head as I once did years back on the 3rd floor. "It was just playing with me. It hates the system and humans, so I was expecting that reaction, and I was fairly confident it wouldn't kill me, because of Liss and Diligence."

"You know I'm not a child anymore," she says and tries to push my hand off her head, but I reinforce my body and continue petting her.

"How cute, our little Izzy is an adult now," I tease her, but through our touch, I sense something, so I ask, "What happened to your Burning Blood?"

"It changed and evolved." She gives up and, with the expression of an angry kitten, stares at me. "It's Glacial Veins now, and it cools down my body because of Noodle's evolution, and that's a good thing, now that our fragment is a part of us, and threatening to cook us alive."

"That is cool, you'll have to let me test it. And, so, the wyvern?"

She gives up, "I think it just wants to leave, Nat. It's so tired and angry... for now, it doesn't want to cause trouble, I don't think. But once it is free..."

"Well, that will be someone else's problem then. Just like Starless Sky."

"Aren't you worried about how it could affect us?"

"You know my feelings."

"Maybe."

"Maybe," I snort and let go of her head. "First, we'll have to clean up our own backyard... or, to say it more accurately, empty the septic tank. We'll just have to take care of the rest later. You have to start thinking longer term, Izzy. Just like my sister apparently has."

"Are you going to start talking about how cool she is again?" Izzy sighs as I start walking towards our group.

"Yup."

"You want to walk back and talk about silly stuff to calm me down before we return to the others."

"Yup. Is it working?"

"Perhaps."

Chapter 877 - Four requirements

As I watch yet another corporate ship leave, I begin to wonder where all these promised Champions and Absolutes even are. I'm pretty curious about them, actually.

I strongly suspect that the mora, Raga, might be a Champion, maybe even an Absolute, though it's hard to say. That mora also had her own shiny ship with no one else on board other than an Adjudicator, even if it's possible she had more of them there.

Otherwise, the corporate rats we've met aren't all that powerful. Well, I mean, they tend to be over level 400 and have multiple guards of a similar level, but I've never felt pressured by them. Sure, combat would be dangerous; after all, I've had a mere three years in the system, while they've probably had

centuries or more. But there's something to be said for growth through adversity, often caused by some mechanic of the tutorial or my own actions.

Plus, Tacita.

Yup, I bet that dexterity lunatic would wipe the floor with most of the people we've met before they even noticed. Unlike me, they might be aware that she is fast, but not quite how fast. And if I threw her Veto... well, let's say I think killing a Champion together wouldn't be such a problem.

Of course, that applies only to a fresh or average Champion. A proper mid-grade or peak Champion is probably an entirely different beast, closer to an Absolute than a basic Champion. But even then... if they had a weakness Tacita or I could exploit...

If. If. If. If my corgi had wheels, he would be a bike.

I let these thoughts amuse me as I endure Sophie's angry gaze, even as she burns holes into me after Izzy immediately told her what I did. I also got shouted at. Though maybe the blood on my clothes told on me as well.

These Martinez sisters are sticking together stronger than ever before, and it makes me wonder if Sophie could really have told Izzy the thing she told me when she was trapped in my mental space.

That reminds me, it's been a while since I had an intruder in my mental space, and it feels nice. Though with the amount of jinxing I've indulged in as of late, something's bound to happen soon. Be it corporations kidnapping me for my traits or gaining a new intruder in my mind.

While group 4, also known as the Angry Kittens, as Aaron telepathically reminds me, begins work on the substitute floor quest, I feel a hint of sad nostalgia. That's just the best I can describe it.

Every one of them went off to do their own stuff in a way that shows they know where they're best suited to help out and what role fits them. They make reference to inside jokes I can't help but feel left out of, as I wasn't there when they came about.

We find an area where multiple ships belonging to different corporations have landed and begun to dig a hole to create a large underground structure to shelter Easy, Normal, and the occasional Hard difficulty attendees.

None of it feels like a permanent solution, and it doesn't have to be, after all, Diligence is just giving us something to work on so we don't have to think too much. He probably thinks everyone's the same kind of workaholic as him.

The Angry Kittens join the corporate staff and other attendees who've gathered here to help with the construction, sometimes going to meetings to plan out how best to bring the attendees here. Some even run or fly around to map out their locations and the like.

Trading starts too, with each side trying to scam the other, and I notice there are a few places where even Hell difficulty attendees can sit down for a rest.

I'm suddenly reminded that not everyone can stay in this heat for hours or days at a time, even if they are from Hell. Either they start running out of the mana they need to maintain their skills, or the mental wear of constantly using them begins to show. Some have even taken to wearing special clothes with tubes and cooling liquid flowing through them.

Standing on one of the dunes with the heat all around me, I watch them move into domed barriers and occasionally even into the hangars of ships. I look down at my scarred arms and my casual clothes.

I don't even remember the last time I wore proper armor, much less any sort of gear, and yet almost everyone here has some.

However, even as I think that, there are monsters with incredible defenses that don't even have to pretend to try to defend themselves against the heat. Their bodies just endure it all.

Lily, and to a point, Dennis, with his doubled stats, handle it better than most. Izzy, too, thanks to her evolved trait, which must be serving as some sort of coolant flowing through her body. Noodle also seems to be enjoying the heat, always moving to rest where it's hottest, and Blackie, encased in his red armor, just stands there like a statue, scaring people.

As Lily gets pulled into the barrier and Maya puts her in a chokehold, much to Lily's confusion, and Dennis gets into yet another fight with Min-Jae over something they found while I was in the Beyond, I just stand there.

I start to get the feeling that I don't belong here until Tess climbs onto my dune and taps me on the shoulder.

When I look at her, she seems to have read my mind. Like she's some kind of Izzy 2.0.

She grabs my hand, pulling me towards the others.

"Sometimes, you think way too much," she says simply, and then I hear Dennis complaining about where I was, how I've been slacking off, and telling me to inform Kim that, since he and Aaron are now combined, he is, for some goddamn reason, effectively twice as tall as before because of some weird logic.

While sitting inside the barrier, I open my eyes and look at the training pyramids floating all around me. It's the evolved version of the training I called "evil orbs" Lissandra once taught me so long ago.

Ever since then, I've been training my mana shaping with them as much as possible. Now, my efforts are interrupted by a notification.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 84 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 85]

It feels almost weird to read it out of combat, though cases like this are more common than what I've been doing.

"Anything happen?" Min-Jae asks, with hundreds of metal orbs floating around him in dizzying patterns. Uninterrupted, they continue their motions even as he talks.

I shake my head and reread the notification before closing my eyes and concentrating on my mana sense and the pyramids I train with.

It's impossible for us attendees to become a Champion inside the tutorial. One of the requirements specific to us is to complete the tutorial. It's something the system forced in at the start, and that hasn't changed, even as the Rulers, led by Ruby and their own intentions, replaced the original tutorial with its current version.

I think it kind of makes sense. After all, you have to be a Champion, a Champion of somewhere or something. That title remains even if Earth were to be destroyed and that connection severed. The system likes its themes. Connecting, I mean. Connections between master and disciple. An Absolute connected to a planet. Connecting two planets together in pairings, and so on.

Another requirement to become a Champion is three active skills at level 85 or higher, which I'm almost tempted to call an easy task, and only rarely realizing just how ridiculous that feat is.

The third requirement is to become a master of your subclass.

The fourth is a level over 450, meaning you must have upgraded your primary class.

And that's it. Simple, isn't it?

Becoming a master of your subclass is difficult on its own, nothing ever tells you how. You just have to hope you lucked out, picked correctly, and learn to enjoy the support of your subclass in everything you do.

Three level 85 skills... that's what a Champion must have. I have been told by Doc that most beyond attendees never even break through the bottleneck between level 69 and 70 during the tutorial, and sometimes it takes them decades back on their home planet to raise a skill up to 80, if they ever do.

And even then, 5 to 10 is the average number from each planet that ever fulfills the requirements to become a Champion.

Of course, the older the planet, the more time people have to reach that level. But that also means the planet is powerful and likely has no true danger forcing that kind of growth. These people then often leave and become Champions somewhere else, that's another option, apparently. Then there is internal

strife, pairings, and other situations that often reduce the number of Champions or candidates on each planet.

5, 10, 20, it doesn't really matter much, honestly. But it is interesting to think about.

I open my eyes, knowing that I willn't be able to fully concentrate again with how giddy I am about the increase in skill level. So, I separate a part of my mind to lounge around and let the bulk of my mental capacity focus on training.

"Lily," I shout, calling to our healer.

Sitting near us, with her back resting against Maya's, she lifts her eyes off the Fuci in her lap, who is biting her fingers, and asks, "What?"

"Starting now, you breathe manually," I say.

Even without turning, Maya groans, annoyed.

"I bet I could hold my breath for hours if I wanted," Lily says with a smile.

"Of course, air is mainly there to supply the brain," I answer.

Min-Jae chuckles, but Lily doesn't even hesitate as she continues to brag, knowing exactly how to hurt me.

"Did you know there's this chemical your body releases when it thinks you should feel tired? And some other stuff built into your muscles that eventually runs out? I met a few attendees with traits that suppressed those things and supported the generation of some other sort of chemicals. At least, that's how I think they explained it at the Academy. I bet if I tried, I could mimic it."

"That's not even a reaction to what I said."

“Also, what do you think of this?” She smiles, and quickly her eyes change color. Her left one turns gray, and the other turns brown.

“Show-off.”

“And this?” Lily’s hair turns white, and two horns grow from her forehead while her eyes switch color to red. The false Demon heart she’s been working on beats, distantly mimicking the real thing.

At that, the golden ferret on her lap freezes and twitches, quickly squirming out of her hands. Fuci hops a few paces away, stands on its hind legs, and looks at Lily in confusion.

All the changes revert back, but even as Lily reaches out her hand, Fuci refuses to come back to her. Instead, the ferret jumps in the way they move when startled, not directly straight, but with its body turned slightly diagonally, and it retreats over to Tess, climbing onto her and up to the top of her head to nestle into the blonde hair it has been amazed by since it first saw her.

Tess doesn’t even move or let it bother her, and instead continues to watch something far up in the sky.

“Maybe if you learn to turn into a ferret, Fuci will come back to you,” I say.

Lily rolls her eyes and leans back, pushing Maya, who reaches back and playfully slaps Lily’s head a few times until they settle down.

Five minutes later, the surface under the barrier ripples as a signature I recognize pushes its way inside. The not fully accepted, if honorary, member of The Boys.

Savant, of course, already knows about us, so he makes his way toward us and sits on a boulder nearby, entirely ignoring the manablock chair that’s now sitting free, after Sophie left a while ago.

The cowardly man must know I would’ve unmanifested it the moment he tried to sit on it.

“How good are you at deciphering stuff?” I ask him.

“Decent,” he answers.

I throw him one of the mana stones Tacita stole from the first corporation we met, and Savant catches it.

“Me and Sophie tried, and both of us left some notes there so you can try as well. Just make sure no one sees you with it. You’re an accomplice now.”

Savant looks at the stone, then at me, and for a while, looks at the space outside the barrier.

In the end, he stays where he is and gets to work.

Chapter 878 - Good ant

While Tacita holds Fuci so it can’t try to go back to Lily and Tess, I, Savi, and Sophie get to work on the encrypted stone. Tacita spends the whole time watching Savant, who she still clearly doesn’t like very much. Though at least she is not trying to stab him outside the tournaments, where it generally seems to be her favorite way of passing the time.

The Ruler of Cowardice, a man who, as it has been rumored, would turn into the Fragments of Eternal Cowardice upon death, the most cowardly person since the System Wars—yes, I still remember the way he forfeited our duel—is the same as always.

“You and Sophie have been going about it all wrong. Rather than trying to get around the defenses and use the existing point of entry, it’d be easier to simply erase the defenses. Even if you do have to be careful so that the process doesn’t destroy the information,” he says.

“So what? You just absorbed the defenses or the knowledge out of the stone?” I snort.

“Something like that,” he says.

“Bullshit. There’s no way your [Absorption] works in such a weird way.”

"It's a very versatile skill."

"The fuck it is. Tess! Come here, declare this stone deciphered or something," I call out to the blonde.

"I'm busy!" she calls back and then returns to sparring with Maya inside the temporary arena we've created.

"So you've entirely extracted the knowledge?" Sophie asks.

"I haven't, but I used the progress you made and did-"

"Oh come on, stop being so mysterious. You already saw what we did and, from listening around, know like half of our skills. It is not like we've tried to hide it," I groan in annoyance.

The green-eyed man returns my gaze, narrowing his eyes, and I can see thoughts spinning in his head. He looks towards Sophie too, who just shrugs.

In the end, he gives up. "I used my [Absorption] and [Severance]. I won't be explaining exactly how, but the names of the skills should give you an idea of what I did."

"What level are you?" I try my luck.

But there, he decides to stay quiet, so I do not even try to push it.

"What have you gotten out of it so far? Did you search for keywords?" I ask.

He nods, returning to look back at the mana stone, with cables still attached, now lying on the table in between us, surrounded by many inscription circles and a few fields we've set up.

"I've been searching for any mention of the gods and rulers," he says, "but I didn't get very much, and there are multiple levels of encryption, especially when it comes to this sort of information. I think you'd

need a specialized Champion or an Absolute to break it, and honestly, it makes sense for corporations to safeguard their information.”

Sophie and I wait as he pokes the stone. “Pale Titan is suspected of being a Demigod. Demigods don’t have an Elysian Framework, sometimes known as a Divine Framework. Instead, he has a Divine Heart.”

“Huh, wouldn’t that make the Black Mana God a demigod?” I ask.

Savant, already knowing about some of that stuff we shared with him, shakes his head. “I think it’s more complicated than that. The Pale Titan is likely the descendant of a god, while the Black Mana God wasn’t a descendant, but born from the concept, or whatever black mana is, only lacking an Elysian Frame. No one born normally can become a god, and new gods haven’t been created ever since the System War.”

“Some Emphyreans had a Divine Heart as well, so that would make them demigods. Maybe that guy, the replica of the Last Elf used to awaken Starless Sky, was a demigod as well,” Sophie says.

“Very likely,” Savant nods. “There was also information that it was likely Pride and Kindness who developed a means of shattering the Elysian Frame and killing gods that had, until that point, been immortal and would otherwise have returned sooner or later.”

“Oh?” I lean closer. “Anything else?”

“Yes,” he says. “Some records called Pride the System’s Champion, or even its Executioner. This is just history most people already know, so it wasn’t strongly encrypted, but during the System War, the original races of the universe almost won. Led by the Black Mana God, the other Godkings, the Dragon Emperor, and the Elven Queen, they were pushing the forces fighting for the system towards the First Dungeon to end it all.”

I know it is not on purpose, but he does a pause that makes it seem more dramatic. “It’s been rumored that Pride waited until the perfect moment. To ensure that the system detected the situation as the highest level threat to its function, whatever that may be, and to start giving the best rewards. Only then did he join in and, over the following years, killed many gods and destroyed allied forces.”

“Oh, that’s smart,” I mutter.

For some reason, Sophie looks at me like I am weird and asks, "Anything on Justice?"

"Nothing, but it does mention that there were more Rulers like that during the System War. Hate, Vengeance, Grace, Devotion, and..." he pauses. "Ruler of Oblivion too, the rest I wasn't able to pull out, but there's probably a lot more."

"Ruler of fucking what?" I feel my eyes widen.

"I almost reacted the same when I read it. It just sounds--"

"Too fucking powerful?"

"Something like that," Savant agrees. "After the System War ended, the system pruned it down to the 14 we know now. While it didn't, or was otherwise unable to take the powers of the other Rulers, they either died out or are still somewhere in hiding, waiting for. It's possible they're acting as the system's safeguard against the current Rulers, kept in the background and sometimes given their own system quests."

I look towards the sky and send a prayer towards Diligence.

Dili is indeed a good ant, and I am sorry for causing him trouble, as that poor guy likely deals with more than my feeble, mana deficient self can imagine.

"So, if a Ruler outside of the current 14 we know dies, they likely aren't replaced... or maybe they are. Hell, maybe the system's been keeping a bunch of hidden cults and families around to pass on the title of said rulers, while hiding it from everyone. Who knows. But if the Rulers outside the current 14 aren't being replaced, that means the ones that are still alive are veterans of the System War and would probably smoke most of the current ones, with the exception of maybe Charity, Greed, and Wrath, and obviously Pride." I sigh and lean back.

"Then..." I say and pause, "Wait. Dili is a good ant. I bet on his planet, he would be very dangerous. You remember how the Colony shared powers with him on the 4th floor, right? Imagine how much he could get now. But anyway, with Pride messing stuff up, Ruby messing stuff up, Lissandra messing stuff up, the

one winged wyvern messing stuff up, and Starless Sky messing stuff up, we might soon have System War 2: Electric Boogaloo.”

There’s a quiet moment until Sophie says, “We’re talking about beings that are very, very ancient. Soon might mean a few hundred years.”

“That is possible,” Savant says, letting go of a mana stone. “Obviously, there are still gods and likely a godking or two hiding somewhere, the Last Elf and his many replicas, especially the Prime replicas. And from the historical data, it seems that dragons and wyverns have been suspiciously quiet for a long time.”

“Before we start pitying the Rulers and stuff, we should remember that Earth is currently caught up in a Pairing, though it, obviously, should not be,” I remind them.

“I don’t think anyone here is pitying the Rulers, Nat.” The mind mage shows no pity at all, unlike my sensitive self, and then asks Savant, “Anything else useful?”

“Not that much, but I’ll try to dig deeper,” Savant says. “Just constant reminders of how impressive the Aurate Consortium is. Did you know they create their battleships out of the body of the Ruler of Kindness? Weapons, armors, they were even able to purify some of the blood and adapt its properties a little to create what they call a Tissue Enhancement and Regeneration Ambrosia that heals you and provably slows aging. Then there are things like warp gates, which require materials with ridiculous levels of durability as a base.”

“That sounds like something Nat would come up with,” Dennis chuckles as he slides over beside us.

(In the next hundred years or so, we’ll be making similar stuff out of Nathaniel’s body.) Aaron shares.

“Nat, your silence worries me,” I hear from the mind mage, and as I look at her, she frowns. “You think it’s cool, don’t you? You’re already thinking about what you’d have done with your body.”

“Perhaps.”

"Imagine," Dennis spreads his arms, catching even Savant's gaze to himself, "A dagger made out of Nathaniel's flesh and bone with his blood flowing through it."

(It would explode the moment it broke and evaporate you, the opponent, and the city around you!)

"Or, a spear made out of Nathaniel's flesh and bone!"

(It would also explode upon-)

"Okay, we get it," Sophie hisses, dismissing him. "Now, show me how you broke through the defenses, and I want to check the data myself," she tells the Savant and reaches towards the stone, putting her fingers on it.

"As I said, you were looking at it the wrong way, if you..." He reaches and puts his fingers next to hers, and then they both delve into the deciphering.

Dennis looks at them and then at me, lifting both of his eyebrows multiple times with a dumb smirk on his face.

Releasing a weak burst of kinetic energy that he, because of his carelessness, only partially redirects, he coughs from the impact, while I use my defensive layer to deflect the projectiles he shoots my way in response.

I ignore these attacks even as I begin to walk away as they bombard my back, and I head towards where Izzy is to observe her Glacial Veins a little more.

Izzy's new trait is interesting. As I thought before, it's basically an extremely cold coolant that regulates her body so the Fragment of Eternal Fire doesn't burn it. It's obvious that the fragment's either changed or became a bigger part of her, if it had remained a simple fragment, it would've been easier to control it.

Here, I have to blame Noodle, though blame is too strong a word.

Noodle's a good snake.

He continues to serve as some sort of storage for Izzy and often throws out any items she needs, all while shrinking and expanding in size.

He's like a poor man's version of a Spatial Cache, I would say, even though he can't store stuff for too long. Things with too much mana or energy are also a no-go, and the same goes for living things. Doing so also restricts the sizes he can shrink or expand into.

But even with all of that, it's still kind of amazing. Is it rare, or common? Is it not as cool as I think it is?

Sometimes I wonder what this snake actually is. For now, though, I continue to feed him my mana orbs, which he absorbs instead of storing as food. Fuel. Something. I don't really know.

In exchange, I can study him a little bit. I suspect he has something like the stomach I was offered for my 3rd trait, the one even Elian was curious about.

As for Izzy's Glacial Veins, of course, we're working on a way to abuse it. Izzy's already learned she can cut herself and let her blood drip out as a supercooled liquid. We try to store it in a vial, but we don't have any capable of keeping up with it, and all of them freeze, shattering in the process.

Lily joins us too, and it freezes her hand as well, but of course, the Lustdozer still continues to move her fingers, breaking them, ignoring the frostbite, and healing herself to deal with it.

The limitations are also clear. If Izzy loses too much blood, the Fragment of Eternal Flame will damage her, and if she uses too much of the fragment, her blood will freeze her instead.

So. Holy fuck.

I bet her 3rd trait at level 400 will be something else.

Myrra also comes to mind, given the way that silly lynthari uses fire and ice to create her Aurora Glass. She could be a nice inspiration and teacher for Izzy. I don't even need to worry about the lynthari being a bad influence, in fact, I'm pretty sure Izzy would just tame the catgirl instead, wherever she is at the moment.

A bit later, we also learn a bit more from the info Sophie and Savi deciphered.

Apparently, the mora Raga is the Absolute representative of the five corporations present on Xyphos. She's also one of the Aurate Consortium's strongest and someone who in the past, could've taken the title Ruler of Gluttony if she wanted, yet decided not to, choosing instead to stay with the Corporation.

All of this is so fucked up.

Chapter 879 - I totally forgot about

"If you think about it seriously, who else could she even try to hit on? Everyone hates mind mages, and dating someone weaker than her would always feel just wrong. That doesn't leave her much choice if she wants someone from Earth," Dennis declares.

"But Savant?" Lily asks with wide eyes as she slurps on some sort of ramen-like soup.

"Who else?" Dennis asks. "You've already got dibs on Nat, and I don't think she sees him that way. Maybe Jean? I heard from Tess that he's gotten pretty strong, and there are all kinds of maniacs who'd love that sort of enemies-to-lovers relationship."

"That's true," Lily nods excitedly.

"Derick already has a wife, and Baek is weird, aside from them, she's already stronger than the rest of the kings," Min-Jae wonders, sipping on the soupy liquid before chomping on the noodles.

(That's only if you're just pairing her up with the men! How about the girls?) Aaron joins.

"I don't think she swings that way," Lily shrugs.

(But imagine her with Victoria, Tacita, Leticia, or Klara! And I think Gloria's plenty strong!)

"And why not you?" Lily asks, causing multiple heads to turn to her.

(What?)

"I mean, you're a Beyonder, and your mental defenses are high. You probably wouldn't have to worry about that."

"Lily, my dear, stop teasing," Dennis slurps longer than he probably should and pompously addresses the petite healer. "I know I'm handsome, and Sophie is pretty, but... nope, she's just not my type!"

"So that only leaves Savant?" Min-Jae asks.

"Probably?" Dennis gestures wildly. "I think if she truly wanted to be sure she isn't subconsciously manipulating anyone, her only options are Nat, Savant, and probably Jean. And if we include the girls, Tacita, Victoria, Tess, and maybe you, Lily?"

Lily shakes her head. "I don't think my mental defenses are actually that good."

"So that settles it, Nat, you aren't interested, right?" Dennis asks.

I just shake my head and quietly eat my noodles.

(Savi it is,) Aaron says excitedly. And I can hear the innocent joy he takes in spreading more gossip. (He is powerful. He's handsome too and patient. If you think about it, he is just a step below Channeler and a better looker than Nat!)

"But I think Nat's handsome," our healer complains, coming to my defense.

(Better looking than both of them?)

She hesitates. "I don't think so? Channeler's just too ridiculously handsome, and Savant has a nice face, but it's not just about the looks either. It's more about a general vibe created by a combination of looks and personality? And Nat has a really kind smile."

Dennis, likely Aaron, Min-Jae, and Lily look at me while I do my best to continue eating at least somewhat gracefully so as not to ruin my vibe.

"Nathaniel's eyes are cool," Min-Jae says with a nod.

"But he has that vibe where you can't be sure if he's going to push you down the stairs or if he's just this quiet, nerdy guy with a troubled past," Dennis sighs. "But yeah, unfortunately, too many girls fall for the bad boy type, and his face, combined with his resting expression, looks great on posters and photos. Like, you know, that cool guy you just don't want to mess with."

"Yes! That!" Lily confirms.

(What about us? Do you think we are handsome, Lily?)

"Huh? I think so. You can't go wrong with blonde hair and blue eyes, and you do have a nice face."

(Give it a few years, and we'll leave Channeler in the dust. What about Kim?)

The moment she turns to him, Min-Jae turns a bit shy, even blushing slightly, and after a second under her intent gaze, he looks away.

"Plenty of girls during the tournament told me he is cute. And now that he has grown so tall, there's likely to be many more. And yes, I think he's good-looking too. All of us are!"

Hearing that, the Korean boy twists his head back to her in surprise, showing he hadn't ever realized this.

I am already almost out of food, even though I've been eating as slowly as possible to keep myself busy and avoid questions. Even now, with just scraps at the bottom of the bowl, I pretend it is a magical, infinite sustenance replicator bowl, full of food as I continue to chew the air in my mouth.

If you think about it, shouldn't something like that be possible with the help of a little bit of spatial cache magic?

I'll have to talk to Dili about a business opportunity for the two of us.

An hour later, my training is being interrupted by shouting and some flares of mana. Curious and done with my most recent segment of mana shaping, I open my eyes and glance towards where five corporate ships are parked and where most of the Hell difficulty attendees from many planets have gathered to cooperate with our efforts to build a base to shelter the lower difficulty attendees.

It goes on for a minute, so as a guy who would totally stand near the river and watch it rise during a storm if it took out a few corporate offices, I stand up and head there.

As I get closer, I stop by one of the Hell difficulty thylarin who's also been watching and ask, "What happened?"

Without even turning to me, he snorts angrily, "Some of the guys from a lumoran Hell difficulty tutorial discovered what seems like a hidden cache while digging. It contained a store of talnium. One of the corporations immediately jumped in and said it was their hideout."

He spits on the ground, "As if anyone would believe such bullshit. Now they want to fuck off and store it on their mothership before any of the other corporations present get interested."

"It must be a decent amount if they are acting like that," I nod with understanding.

"Yeah," the thylarin nods.

"And why is no one attacking them to take it back?"

“It is a powerful corporation. We don’t know how they’ll react.”

“Questionable Assets Group?”

“No, Meridian Alliance.”

“I mean, wouldn’t Diligence jump in in that case?”

“Who knows what someone like the Ruler of Diligence would do. Surely he doesn’t have time for this kind of stuff.”

“I see.” I nod and take a step forward, passing by him and stepping up onto the landing platform.

The Meridian Alliance guys are already getting on a ship, and their leader is shouting at the lumoran attendees, but I can see that barely hidden smirk. He peacocks himself, pretending to be important, like he is the Meridian Alliance, just because he uses their name. Yet he is just one of their many groups, hell, maybe even a subcontractor.

As the doors of the ship close, I watch it, curious, as it lights up and its weird-ass engines, using a proprietary mix of gravitational energy, some arrays, and crystals, lift up.

I let it fly a bit into the air before my vessel manifests behind my back.

It grows in size, creating just a half-figure manifesting from the waist up, similar to the one Adrian likes to use. Unlike his, mine mirrors all my scars, and instead of a smooth face, it has two eyes replicating my Preeminence Eyes.

The vessel turns dark blue nearly instantly, and with a speed reinforced by the kinetic energy I send rushing through it, it reaches into the air as it expands. Its hand grabs the corporate ship trying to fly away and holds it there.

As the engines increase the effort, my vessel starts to turn tricolored even as the ship fights back with EMP-like pulses aimed to disrupt mana, some corrosive defenses, and other trifling stuff I swiftly deal with. Some attacks pass through and slam against me, only to disintegrate into shiny particles that bounce off the defensive layers covering my skin. Another one hits my face, but the same layer causes it to bounce into the distance.

A stream of concentrated heat surrounds me as it reaches out in an unrestrained stream from the ship, increasing the temperature to the point that the sand around me turns to glass, but I just stand within it.

At my order, my vessel squeezes harder, making the metal of the ship groan as I pull it down even as the engines fight against me and the ship sways in my hold, trying to get out.

This time, I use a pulse of disruption sent through the arm of my vessel and into the ship, whose engines blink and turn off before kickstarting again.

A bit surprised, I watch it and send a few more disruption waves, these ones more concentrated as I peer through my eyes.

More with brute force than mastery, my vessel pulls the ship back, causing the engines to cough like they are about to explode, and I slam it back into the sand, halfway burying it there.

While the ship is still held there, I move closer, letting blood drip from the freshly made gash I've opened in my palm and form it into the shape of a long sword with a slim blade. [Empyrean Lance] flickers nearby only to be broken instantly, and its remains surround that sword, almost without having to do anything, as if it were being pulled into my ichor. I stab the sword through the doors of the cargo hold and carve a long cut through them.

Right away, my vessel moves again, shrinking and compressing as its fingers stab into that cut and widen the hole.

Pouring from within, multiple attacks shoot at me, but I either disrupt or tank them with my defenses as my vessel reaches in, searching for the crate I've already located. There's just nothing else with a presence that compares, so I pull it out.

That crate sits at half the height of my waist and is made from some sort of weird yellow wood, but what I feel from inside must be talnium, I recognize the spatial component of the material.

While I disperse my vessel and pull its mana back into me, I jump up and comfortably sit on the crate, setting the sword across my lap while I wait.

Stepping from the ragged hole, an angry human from the Meridian Alliance pulls himself out with two more men in full battle armor, and behind them, more of the same.

Before he can say anything, I start to speak, "Thanks for taking care of my crate of talnium. I hid there and totally forgot about it."

"What kind of bullshit is this? Do you even realize-" he begins to shout angrily.

That instantly leads me to write him off as some random goon, someone who's totally not an important or powerful member of any corporation. For a bit, I listen to his curses, and the more he talks and shouts, the better my mood gets.

I just watch him and feel my lips slowly rise up. When a vein starts to bulge in his temple, I even smile a little and nod seriously in response to his complaints and explanations.

Yet, as much as he barks, he doesn't do anything. After Diligence's message, he wouldn't dare to put a hand on an attendee. He probably could have attacked me before, if only on the pretense that he feared for his life after I caught the ship, but now that I'm sitting here peacefully? After he's spouted this much bullshit? I truly do not understand how an average Hell difficulty attendee could have fallen for this.

"Got it," I nod seriously.

The man breathes out, his arms shaking in anger. He tries to hide it, but I can sense the kinetic waves being caused by his movements. His heartbeat, the twitching of his muscles, the changes in his body temperature, it's all so amusing to watch.

"I will overlook what just happened, so return the Meridian Alliance's property to me," he pushes through his teeth.

"Why?" I ask, confused. "There must be some confusion. I told you it's mine. I just forgot that I'd hidden it there."

"HOW DOES THAT MAKE ANY SENSE!?" he shouts in anger as he finally snaps, "THIS IS THE REAL PLANET OF XYPHOS, NOT THE TUTORIAL!"

"I don't know." I scratch my cheek and look to my left.

There's already a bunch of attendees gathering around, mostly just listening out of curiosity. And if only to prove that people from Hell aren't normal, some have already started betting and making fun of the corpos. Some even seem to be getting ready for a fight. One of these, of course, is a demon standing to my left.

"Guildmaster Gwyn," he says with a smile and a short bow.

"Hey," I greet him in return, though I have no idea who he is. I don't think he would be lying to imply he is a member of the Primordial Knights.

Curious, because it just doesn't fit with the demons' personality, I ask, "You let them take it?"

"The lumoran that found it didn't want to share, so we stayed back and laughed as the corpos took it," he says with that same smile. There are a few other demons standing around, likely from his group, and more nearby, likely from different planets.

"Well, that makes more sense," I say.

"Are we going to fight them?" he asks.

"I don't think they have the balls to attack us."

"I am worried about that as well," he says, disappointed, his expression as if he is looking at trash. "I could attack them first."

"No."

"Just a small attack to provoke them and-"

"I said no," I repeat.

With his words cut off, he looks back at me, eyes wide and heart beating in excitement, but all of it halts the moment he meets my gaze.

"Maybe next time," he says a bit sadly after that.

The Meridian Alliance human begins to shout again, and I listen to him for a few more minutes. I find myself really impressed by the bullshit he spews and the creative mind he must have. That talnium must be really valuable.

Then, as they leave without even trying to attack us, I jump off the crate. My vessel manifests behind me again, this time with legs standing as tall as an average velnar. It then grabs the crate, carrying it as I head back to our corner to find Sophie and Savi to find out what's so interesting about talnium.

Chapter 880 - I knew you would do that

[Acceleration]. That's one of Tacita's skills, I think, or something like it. I've noticed it a few times before, but the way she can build up speed out of nothing, the signs of the skill activating, and the fact that the longer she runs, the more speed she can gather, are all pointing to it.

Some of these thoughts come from me directly, mostly thanks to my own observations. Others come from training inside my mental space, those 600 days I spent there with Lissandra.

Or was it 601? Yeah, I think something like that.

I'm reminded of that as I watch her just running around and playing with Fuci. Dennis sometimes joins her, and she seems to be equal parts annoyed and unbothered by it. It's sort of like a swallow watching a young chick trying to fly.

Anyway, I use these thoughts as a distraction. A distraction from Savant and Sophie, who've taken to fighting once again, and from the notification I just got a few seconds ago.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 85 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 86]

This... this is a bit worrisome.

The duo seems like they've finished arguing, and now they're looking down at the crate where the talnium is still being stored. We haven't even finished fully unpacking it.

The yellow wooden crate is open, but inside it was a green metal crate wrapped in what seems to be a reflective blanket made of silver metal, or something.

Opening the green metal crate, we find another smaller crate. This one is silver in color and has been placed inside a sponge-like pink material that's extremely good at kinetic absorption. And at this point, you begin to worry if you should continue on to open the silver crate.

We surely did. Each step took us hours of extremely careful examinations and a few trades with corporations nearby, aided by Izzy, who made sure they weren't pulling one over on us.

So now, even the silver crate is opened, and inside it lie a few vials of a transparent liquid that moves a bit like mercury, and within that is the talnium. The metal is in the shape of loops, exactly like the sort you have in your breakfast cereal. Moreover, talnium looks like a blend of dark gray metal and an obsidian-like stone, somehow perfectly blended together.

And it is as weird as expected.

We have been warned, so all of us avoid using any sort of spatial skills or teleportation marks in its presence. Even the twins' telepathy reacts a bit unpredictably, so Dennis most of the time stays as far

away as he can. Min-Jae, with his gravitational energy, isn't allowed to so much as reach for it, and every time he wants to take a look at the talnium, he borrows one of Tess's old eyepatches to cover his implanted gravitational eye.

I wonder, what would happen if Noodle ate talnium? What would happen if you stored talnium in a spatial cache?

And what would happen if you tried to store a spatial cache in a spatial cache?

It's important questions like these that keep me up at night.

Sophie and Savi come out against my plans to take a piece for experimentation. Their argument against it is pretty strong if I'm being honest. They just have to point to all the defenses on the crates.

Fair enough.

Many times, I've heard that the people here harvest talnium, rather than truly mining it, they harvest it. And apparently, the process involves placing a special item at certain very carefully chosen places.

You wait 100, 200, or 1000 years to return, and then there should be some talnium gathered around the item. It is something about spatial resonance and harmonic diffusion, or whatever, which gathers particles of sand over time and causes them to take on this state under their own force.

There used to be natural places like this where talnium gathered, but they were overharvested and were rendered incapable of continuing the process naturally.

So, processes to do so artificially were developed, and there are only certain zones where one might be permitted to do so. Of course, this all needs to be done while hiding your talnium growth device so nobody can steal it.

Interestingly, there are likely hundreds and possibly thousands of devices all over the planet. And more interestingly, plenty of them belong to groups or corporations that have been destroyed over the years,

and no one knows their locations. Some might even be hidden after being illegally placed by some higher-up from one corporation or another.

That results in people, every once in a while, finding one of these places where the device has lain for thousands of years, placed by some long-forgotten, erased group or corporation.

I think most of the corporations aren't even marking where they've placed the devices out of fear of espionage, while the information is only ever shared between the higher-ups, leading to the current situation.

I find all of this to be very, very cool. I'm a simple man, I want to take a shovel and go out, try my luck, and dig into the desert to find my very own jackpot. After all, I'm different, surely luck will smile upon me.

As for the crate I forgot I placed here oh so long ago, it's probably from one of the illegal operations. Harvested, shielded, hidden, and waiting for a ship to come to pick it up, that, for some reason, never arrived.

[Selective Adaptation - lvl 26 > Selective Adaptation - lvl 27]

Another notification appears, and satisfied, I wait a bit and then stab myself in the leg with Veto.

"Earth, calling Nathaniel," Sophie grumbles.

Without taking my eyes off the notification, I reach out to my subminds, and with a bit of thought acceleration, I quickly replay the past 30 seconds of arguments they've been having.

"I agree, we'll probably need the devices that corpo guy mentioned to be able to safely manipulate the talnium, and even then, we'd probably end up wasting it," I say.

"What did you even expect from this? You can probably count the people and groups able to use talnium on your fingers," Sophie sighs.

“Six-armed thylarin have like 30 fingers.”

“You know I meant human. And yes, maybe there are some other things you could do with talnium other than spatial caches, but you’ve heard how expensive those blueprints are,” she says.

“Well, no matter how much they ask, I refuse to sell them my blood, eyes, hair, flesh, or bone. At least until I am confident Lily can make sure they won’t be able to clone me or use it against me somehow.”

“Don’t forget them wanting to trade for your sp-”

“We don’t talk about that, and stop laughing, you asshole,” I interrupt her and turn to Savant. “What do you think?”

“I find it fascinating, and the concept of spatial caches is interesting. But other than that, its greatest value is in its use in constructing the big intergalactic travel gates.”

“That? You could always just learn to teleport. Ruby can easily teleport all over the universe.”

“I think your view of things like that might be skewed. Not to mention she likely needs to place a mark or reach towards that place before she opens a portal there,” Savant shakes his head.

“Yeah, Nat, the universe is kind of big,” Sophie adds.

“Yeah, yeah,” I say, waving my hand, and looking at the vials containing the talnium, I swing my hand down and slap those bad boys to create a satisfying noise.

Both Savant and Sophie jump up while Sophie shouts, “MOTHERFUCKER! I knew you were going to do that. I KNEW IT! And it still scared the shit out of me!”

I nod at that and think that maybe I’ve been getting a bit too predictable as of late.

As I begin to close the boxes one after another and reset the defenses, I ask, "So how much talnium is this?"

Savant gets to answer, "This should be five packets worth, so quite a bit if you consider that to complete the 11th floor quest, you would've only needed half a packet per person."

I look confused, and so does Savant when he sees my expression, but Sophie gets it first. "A packet is around the amount that would fit into one of those tiny pre-workout drink bottles. I have no idea why it's called a packet, but that's how it's measured. For long term storage, you put talnium into bigger vials with more of that weird liquid, as you can see in the crate that you forgot you buried here on the planet of Xyphos."

"That's a better answer. Savi, learn from her," I say, nudging him, and then, deciding to be a good person for today, I add, "Sophie's smart, isn't she?" as I try to elevate Savant's image of Sophie.

In response, I get confused looks from the pair, but having already finished closing the crate and snapping back the last seal, I walk away, leaving the barrier and heading over to a group of demons. Even if they aren't from the same group or even the same planet, people are starting to gather in groups. Selari with selari, vyssari with vyssari, and other similar clusters, where they can talk things out. I think many feel a bit more trusting when talking to members of their own race, though everyone here knows it makes no sense.

Of course, some people seem content to gather in random groups, often the ones that have already met in Beyond.

The demons are no different, and there are around fifty of them here at the moment. All of them are from Hell difficulty, with maybe 10 to 20 from Beyond. And unsurprisingly, five or so of them are members of the Primordial Knights, who introduced themselves when they barged in just as we were unlocking my crate.

"Guildmaster Gwyn," these five greet me with excited smiles, coming closer, and some of them even tap my shoulders in a friendly manner.

Some others come closer as well, curious about me. There's a lot of probing, and almost all of them take a moment to measure their hearts against mine, and I let them sense my heartbeats. I even change the rhythm, opting for a slower, more powerful one, letting more kinetic energy and thermal heat seep out.

There are a few more annoying cases that I pressure with my mana until they finally give in.

By passing out.

The whole time, the five from the group chuckle and even trash-talk the ones that step to the side with their tails between their legs.

With this solved, the lunatics all gather around, and for some reason, Lily's there as well, standing near me. Her hair is white, her eyes are red, and she's even made herself a pair of black horns that elegantly grow from her forehead and bend towards the back of her head while parting to the sides. Her fake heart beats, now almost indistinguishable from the real thing.

"What do we do, Guildmaster Gwyn?" she asks me seriously, her voice coming out deeper than usual.

I blink and stare at her for a moment before shaking my head. The demons around begin to nod and call out like Lily.

"What do you want from me?" I snort. "The Great Ruler of Diligence is having such a hard time, and you would give him even more work? I would never."

"The armory destroyer?"

"But isn't this all his fault?"

"I don't care about some Ruler. Do you think he would fight me if I asked?"

"Who?"

My attention is drawn to the muscular demon in the background who asked the last question. Out of respect, I give him a nod, and he returns it before whispering to a demon near him and asking what a Ruler is.

He's one of the Beyonders present.

"For now, you're going to stay put. I don't want to see you causing too much trouble," I say. "If anything like what happened with the crate of talnium happens again, come to me first. And I'm willing to spar with the ones with primordial energies outside of the common five if there are any. And no, not to the death. You can find me later."

With that, I turn and leave, with Demon Lily following swiftly by my side. In that same slightly deeper voice, she asks, "You just wanted to tell them that?"

"I kind of had to. Too many of them recognized me, and the five from the guild have been spreading it all over. These lunatics wanted to start doing risky things to show off and prove their worth before trying to challenge me."

"Huh, really?"

"It's how they work." I shrug and ask, "Did you find any vyssari with a wyvern bloodline?"

"Two of them, though it's not as pure. I can still use it to purify the blood, I have a tiny bit more. I gave them healing marks in exchange."

"Won't they try to sell them to the corporations?"

"I made it so they can't be moved, and they'll only activate with the owner's signature. Then I also got vows from them in exchange for adding a few more marks, so I don't think they'll try."

"Sounds good. Then, tomorrow we can start with upgrading my Mana Vessel to the second stage."

"Your primary class upgrade is going to be scary when you finally get to it," Lily says.

"It better be."