I stare at the glowing crystal path on the green sand. My heart feels cold and empty, as if the light within had been ripped out.

I'd only been connected through [*Bind*] for a short while, but it was such a wonderful feeling that I must've become addicted to it, and now I miss it so much that it hurts. It felt like Wolfy was always warmly holding me with his arms, and I could be in his presence with just a thought. Now, I just feel a dark void inside me.

I fall to my knees and hold my face with my hands.

What even happened to us? The ship crashed, then… a river? Rapids? How didn't I drown? And where's Lina…?

I open my "Status" and confirm that everyone's names are still in my "Companions," though I can't seem to feel the fellowship bond that would let me know where they are.

Somehow, only part of the bond has been severed, but at least everyone is still alive.

I sigh and run my fingers through my wet hair, then I stare at the glowing path again.

Is this a challenge?

Suddenly, I feel dizzy and lose my balance, then [Diagnosis] triggers.

Dizziness, headache, memory loss. Symptoms of a concussion, likely acquired in the rapids. Low risk of death unless treated.

I steady myself on the sand and hold my head.

How did that happen when I was wearing a padded helmet, though?

I immediately start focusing my mana while I prepare [*Heal*].

Healing focus: divine-powered realignment of the soul and body. I can't risk using physical treatment to heal the brain because it's either too imprecise or too dangerous.

"[*Heal*]," I cast on myself and use a good amount of mana to ensure that my concussion goes away.

My mind immediately clears, but the emptiness within my heart remains.

I sigh and start taking off my armor to properly dry myself off.

After I'm done, I take my glaive out of my [*Item Box*], then I cast [*Holy Spirit*]. A blue [*Spirit Light*] surrounded by a heatless fire materializes in front of me. Then, two small lights solidify into long transparent crystals to act as its feet, and a third solidifies into a small oval metal mask with two holes that acts as its face.

The little Spirit lands on the sand and starts scurrying around me excitedly, then I take out my large, delicious bar of hazelnut chocolate and sit down.

I stare at the glowing path while I eat. The crystal lights continue on for about a hundred metri, then they suddenly disappear into the darkness, making it seem awfully eerie to me.

What's waiting for me over there…? The Dungeon Master hasn't seemed particularly sadistic or murderous so far, but they're from the time of God-Rulers, who are known to be very overbearing. If I fail this test, would they kill me for not being worthy of following Wolfy?

Perhaps I shouldn't be worrying about them killing me, but rather that not being allowed to be Wolfy's wife anymore would be as severe a punishment as death… It'd certainly be like that for Alissa…

I grumble and force myself to set aside these stupid thoughts. I can't start overanalyzing things now, or I'll just fall for my own stupidity.

What am I even thinking? This is a trial that I must complete… no matter what.

Everything gets properly dried off and is ready to use again, so I put my armor back on, then I pull out the Lithograph and Emergency Rings and fiddle with them for a bit. Predictably, they don't work, so I store them away again as I let out a tired sigh.

I stand up feebly like a low-level grandma and frown at my own lack of motivation.

Alissa wouldn't think twice about facing this head on; Roxanne would just do it without even thinking too deeply about it; Hana would face it while laughing; Lina would do whatever she could to reunite with us again; Aoi would have fun while doing it; Yunia wouldn't let stupid thoughts get in the way.

I breathe in deeply and close my eyes, then I start gently whispering a chant, "A candle in the Long Night, a flame in the snowstorm, a pyre to warm our hearts. I beg not for strength but instead just for the ability to prevent the light from being snuffed out. The cold will be expunged, the storm will pass, and dawn will come."

I look forward and straighten out my posture, then I fearlessly let my voice echo throughout the green cave, "I shall stand tall and proud; and with a spear in hand, I'll

cry out loud: as long as I live, I'll fearlessly brave the night, for I know that another day will come! [*Inspire*]!"

The spell forms inside of me, then it sends out a pulse in all directions, blessing everything it touches with its effects. There's only the Spirit and myself around, so this spell didn't cost me that much mana.

My darker thoughts start to clear from my mind, and a faint [*Regeneration*] affects my body, helping it recover from the exhaustion of today's fighting. Both of these effects compound on each other, giving me a second wind and allowing me to reach full combat readiness again.

Alright. It's time to move.

I finish eating the last of my chocolate, then I get up onto my feet and start following the glowing crystal path.

As I carefully approach the end of the path, my anxiety increases with its proximity. It's not just the crystals that stop after a certain point, I also don't see any more of the sand's glimmer that should be caused by my [*Spirit Light*]. It's as if there's an impenetrable darkness ahead.

I look around cautiously, but I don't see anything except green sand and stone walls, so I decide to send the Spirit ahead to inspect the end of the path.

It scurries forward and stops right before the end, and its glow makes it quite obvious that there's no reflection of any kind coming from anything ahead. It's like everything just *ends* past a certain point, as if there's a Dark Void-like screen covering the way forward.

I notice a few grains of sand getting kicked up by the Spirit's small crystal feet, and they simply disappear into the darkness.

Soon, I reach the wall of darkness myself, then I stop in front of it and stare into the abyss.

My heart starts pounding harder. Two voices call to me. I'm needed inside.

"We need to go," I whisper, then I look down at the masked [*Holy Spirit*].

It energetically nods back at me, then it steps into the abyss on its own, and I follow it a moment later.

Everything disappears except for my body and the Spirit. We stand on a cold, solid floor with nothing but darkness around us. There isn't a single reflection I can see, so it's like we're standing in mid-air even though I can feel the floor under my boots.

What did I get myself into?

The voices call to me again, and I start moving "forward," even though I don't know what direction that really is.

Our footsteps don't produce any sound, but all our other movements do, so it's just the soft, muffled clinking of my padded armor that echoes through the empty void.

Something catches my eye, but when I try to look at it, it's already gone. It happens again a few minutes later, then I notice a wisp of something smoky on the third try.

The wisps grow larger and start to become more noticeable, as if candles were being snuffed out all around me, releasing small streams of white smoke.

I stop when I suddenly notice a semi-transparent blue ghost of a person materializing in front of us. They don't have any details, making them seem like a mere doll on its knees, praying for something.

I cautiously approach them, but they don't react. Then I touch them with the butt of my glaive, and it sinks through their form without any resistance, which tells me that this spirit is completely immaterial.

They suddenly crumble like a mound of ash falling apart, and its glowing "particles" fly towards my [*Spirit Light*]. They start flying around the spell, and I feel trace amounts of Light mana leaking out of them.

This is… just odd…

I blink repeatedly and shake my head. There's something oddly "mesmerizing" about these particles, and I'm not sure if I want to know exactly why it is.

*Should I dispel my [*Spirit Light*]…? But the symbolism here makes me think that I shouldn't.*

The voices call to me again, and my heart pounds harder once more, then I realize that this "desire" to move forward is very similar to what I felt when we met the dungeon core's orb.

So the dungeon is calling for me…?

I look down at the Spirit and its glowing mask simply stares back at me emotionlessly.

I kind of wish that you could talk. I really need a second opinion here, like Wolfy's.

I breathe in and softly chant [*Inspire*] again, but I don't actually cast it. The chant and the mana released from this spell is rather calming, so I use it to clear my head again.

"Not one step back, I guess," I mutter to myself and continue forward.

I hear a faint whispering coming from far ahead, then it gradually increases in volume until I recognize it as weeping.

A cold chill runs down my spine as I remember the Weepers, then I start to softly chant [*Inspire*] again to keep my nerves steady.

More doll-like spirits appear along my path. They crumble whenever I get near enough, then their glowing particles add to my [*Spirit Light*], and it becomes slightly brighter.

Oh, I see what's going on.

I continue "collecting" more praying souls, and the weeping gradually grows louder. It unnerves me and makes me want to stop, but the voices in my head give me the motivation to continue anyway. Two opposing forces start fighting each other inside my heart, but the louder the weeping gets, the weaker they become.

I stare straight ahead into the impenetrable darkness, steeling my heart for what's to come. I *must* continue forward, I *need* to get through this dark realm, and I *will* reunite with the harem.

Suddenly, I feel *something* stare at me, and I freeze on the spot.

I blink and rub my eyes, but the feeling doesn't go away. "Something" is still staring at me.

I grip my glaive tighter and point it forward. The Spirit starts floating in front of me, prepared to attack anything that could materialize out of the darkness, but nothing comes.

The abyss hatefully glares back at me, but it doesn't make a move. Its ever-present stare weighs down my mind and slows my steps, but I continue on.

The next spirit appears bowing on the floor, looking towards the abyss ahead of us, but their body doesn't collapse when I get near.

"Lord… I don't want to go," the spirit whispers with barely any strength, begging to me about something.

What…?

"Lord… I don't want to go," they repeat.

"Go… where?" I ask, unsure about what's going on.

"Forward," they submissively answer me, and I'm reminded about the glare of the abyss again, making me frown.

I can kind of understand why they wouldn't.

"Why not?" I sternly continue the questioning.

The spirit curls up into the fetal position, terrified. "I'm afraid," their weak voice comes out, almost breaking into tears.

I ignore its obvious fear and press on. "Of what?"

They whisper their reply almost inaudibly, "Of the abyss."

I kneel down beside them and ask them more gently this time, "What is 'the abyss'?"

"Death," comes their flat response.

I frown and state, "There's still Paradise after death."

They shake their head gently. "Death is death."

What are they talking about? Is this related to heretics destroying their own souls?

"Paradise comes after death," I insist, being stern with them again.

Their voice becomes tired. "Paradise is not life."

"But it also isn't the abyss."

"The abyss is death," it states, then they start weeping.

I don't understand.

I shake my head and retort, "Death isn't empty like 'the abyss.' There's Paradise, and then reincarnation into the next cycle. Death frees us from our mortal chains and allows us to receive our just rewards."

"The chains are all I have," their pained words give me pause.

Oh…

I look away, then I stare down at my own hand.

A commoner isn't awarded the same glory in Paradise as a hero, and they also don't leave much of a change in the realm after their death, so for them, their life, their "chains," is everything they have.

I look at my [*Spirit Light*].

Do I really need their power?

The glare of the abyss is unrelenting, always pressing down on me, telling me to turn around and run away with my tail between my legs.

I sigh gently as I gather my determination, then my priestess training comes back to me, blocking the abyss from my heart for a moment, which grants me a brief feeling of peace. I lean closer to the spirit and whisper, "We're all afraid of the abyss. Of failing, of falling, of disappearing, but there's nothing we can do besides moving forward."

The spirit's round, smooth face suddenly turns to look at me. "Forward, where?"

I look around and ask myself the same question. I don't even know where I was going anymore.

My heart pounds again, then my head suddenly turns towards the voices calling to me.

When in doubt, follow your heart. That's something that I think Wolfy would say as a reference to something.

I smile wryly for a moment, then I look at the spirit again. "I'll… I'll guide you forward, so will you follow me?" I gently ask them.

They bury their face in their hands. "But I'm afraid of the abyss," they whimper.

I smile warmly at them. "So am I, but together, we can keep it at bay."

Their body starts to crumble apart, and they give me a parting whisper, "Together…"

My [*Spirit Light*] becomes noticeably brighter, but it doesn't hurt my eyes anymore when I look right at it. It's really weird.

I move on and ask a few more spirits to join me, but while they make my [*Spirit Light*] brighter, they don't seem to help against the abyss's glare or the weeping, both of which are still getting stronger.

Okay, I learned this from Wolfy.

I will my [*Spirit Light*] to come down in front of me so that I can see it properly, then I gather my courage and announce, "I'm guiding you, but if we are to continue on, I'll need your support."

Wisps of ethereal smoke leave the glowing orb and start to orbit chaotically around me, then I start to feel their "presence," as if I knew where they were through a fellowship bond at all times.

I start to hear a crowd of different voices inside my head. Cheering, chatting, laughing, singing. The spirits all seem excited to be going on an adventure, and their collective noise starts to drown out the weeping.

I cast [*Inspire*], and every single wisp receives the spell's effect, boosting their continuous chatter. The intensity of the glare doesn't change, but it's easier for me to deal with it now because I know that I'm not alone.

I collect more and more spirits, but one of them asks me a question that gives me pause, "Will you save me from the abyss?"

I don't even know if I can save myself from this place.

"I can only give you the opportunity to save yourself," I sternly answer, and the spirit lowers its head in disappointment.

The other wisps slow down, and their chatter diminishes, allowing the weeping to press down on my mind again.

I start to get stressed out and very annoyed with these spirits, so I look around and berate them, "Aren't we *already* in the abyss? If we stay here, it would be the same as death. Only through struggle and effort can we save ourselves from this place, but

I'm the only one here that's actually moving forward! I can't force any of you to help me, or rather, help *us*, so you need to find your own courage, your own fire, and then you can help us fight… or you can just stay inside my [*Spirit Light*] and merely *hope* that I succeed."

"I don't wish to fight," the spirit moans, then it starts weeping.

I look down on it and state imperiously, "You can come, but if you don't help, you have little reason to complain. You're surrendering your Thread of Fate to me, but you aren't giving me anything that will help us reach your goal. Do something! If you believe in me, then support me!"

The groveling spirit hugs itself, and they crumble apart, then their particles add to my [*Spirit Light*], and a vibrant flame appears around it. Unlike the [*Holy Spirit*], this flame actually gives off heat, and although it doesn't exactly counteract the abyss' stare, the warmth it provides me makes it easier to hold strong.

"Forward!" I yell and raise my glaive in cheer, then the chatter increases in volume once more.

More and more spirits add to the chatter and warmth, but it isn't enough. The abyss's strength is still growing faster than theirs, and I'm sure that it'll eventually overwhelm me.

The pressure intensifies, and it becomes hard to breathe. My heart guides my way every once in a while, but it happens less and less frequently.

I start to sweat cold and lean on my glaive to keep walking. The weeping unnerves me, and the glare instills me with fear, but I stubbornly continue forward anyway.

"Not… one… step… back…" I mutter under my breath, but the spirits all seem to be oblivious to what I'm going through. They react when I cheer and when I order them, but they ignore me in my suffering. "FORWARD!" I suddenly bellow, and they increase their support for a short while.

I have to act like a drillmaster.

"FORWARD!" I encourage them again, but I don't even know where I'm going anymore.

"Not one step back!" I cheer, but it's more for myself than for them.

"The abyss shall not take us…!" I yell, but I feel like I'm about to fall.

"We'll get… through… this…" I mumble, but they're just empty words.

The heat of the flame increases even though I was mumbling, so I do it again.

"We'll get through this…!" I yell with a little more confidence, and the spirits gain another small boost in power.

"We can all survive the abyss!" I lie, but nobody seems to notice that since the spirits gain even more power than before.

Lies: they work, until they don't.

I grit my teeth and decide to not lie anymore, but I immediately start to regret that when a cold begins to steadily seep into my bones. Even the spirits' fire isn't enough to completely prevent the abyss from taking over my mind.

No…!

I resist and soldier on.

I don't know where I'm going, the cold is making me shiver uncontrollably, my voice has gone hoarse, and my legs are starting to refuse to obey me.

I slow down until I fall to my knees, then I take a long rest right there, but my fatigue doesn't go away at all.

Is this it? Is this as far as I can go?

"Will you take us further?" A spirit childishly asks.

"Will you succumb to the abyss?" A displeased spirit grumbles.

I don't have the energy to answer them.

I don't know where I am, how far I've walked, or how much further I still have to go. I'm surrounded by people I don't know or understand, but they've all given me their loyalty regardless. It's all so poetic, so… so like this dungeon.

I don't even feel sad that I'm about to fail, I'm just sad that I won't be able to help these spirits.

I laugh self-deprecatingly, then I roll onto my belly and start crawling forward.

But I'll only accept failure when the Dungeon Master themself tells me that I've failed.

"I'll… continue… forward…!" I yell at the spirits while groaning with exertion.

The cheering, the weeping, the warmth, and the cold all fade away from my mind, as if they were just background noise. The only thing that remains now is the glare of the abyss telling me to go away.

I crawl forward and glare back at it.

What is it that you want from me? Why are you in my way?!

The glare intensifies, and my chest stops moving entirely. I can't breathe.

I can't stop!

But am I even going in the right direction?

I can't stop!

But how will I move forward?

I can't stop!

But wishes alone won't take me anywhere.

The abyss manifests before me, its hateful eyes looking down on me, and I weakly raise my head to look right back at it, face-to-face.

I'm weak; I'm afraid; I'm cowardly; I'm willfully walking towards death.

I slowly push my glaive forward, then I point it right at the abyss and cast [*Beam*]. I hit *something*.

I'm willfully walking towards death.

I strain myself and forcefully pull air into my lungs so that I can breathe.

I'm willfully walking towards death!

I unsteadily get onto my knees, then I manage to stand up while wobbling slightly.

I won't run from death! Not again!

I feed more mana into [*Beam*], and I can feel the abyss weakening.

THIS IS MY PENANCE! FOR MACHT AND FOR WOLFY, I'll NEVER RUN AWAY AGAIN!

My mana runs out and the [*Beam*] wanes.

I WILLFULLY WALK TOWARDS DEATH!

The abyss hits me, and I fly backward. I tumble across the hard, black floor, and all the air is forced out of my lungs.

The [*Holy Spirit*] finally reacts and lunges at the abyss, but it can only hold it back temporarily.

I look up and see the wisps all indifferently flying around my flaming [*Spirit Light*], which is now glowing as brightly as a small sun. I notice the chatter and the warmth again, but the weeping and the cold of the abyss is still overpowering it all.

I'm sorry…

I raise my hand, then I use [Redirect Mana] to gather all the mana I can onto my palm. A deluge of Light particles rush out of my [*Spirit Light*], and I struggle to control it all.

The wisps fade away, the chatter dies down, the warmth recedes, and I'm left alone with an inconceivably large amount of mana in my hand.

Wolfy's right, the Dungeon Master is a pretentious Plom.

The [*Holy Spirit*] is torn apart, then the abyss attacks me again, and I groan in pain.

FOR WOLFY, FOR THE WIVES!

I feed all of the immense Light mana into my glaive.

I WILLFULLY WALK TOWARDS DEATH!

My glaive melts and explodes from the surge, then a searing heat washes over me for just a second, and the pressure of the abyss simply disappears.

I wait for a few more seconds until my vision recovers, then I look around. I'm now in a corridor made of square blue slabs. In front of me, there's a circular gray platform made of smooth stone, and beyond that is a large, green hole in the floor.

The platform glows, and Alissa and Roxanne suddenly appear on it, both of them passed out, then I hear an explosion from the hole.