

The journey through the twenty-fifth layer of Fyor was by no means easy. Although they had spent several years at this point documenting the various creatures that inhabited the outer area of the 'land half' of the layer, they had not risked pushing more than a thousand kilometers inwards. This sounded like a great distance, but the size of this layer was such that a thousand kilometers was not even a single percent of the total distance.

However, the people of Fyor had long since adjusted to facts such as this. The method for an expedition to travel did not solely rely on the speed of their march. Otherwise, it would truly take too long for any expeditions to make actual progress within this world.

Petra led the group at a rather swift pace through the jungle, moving at what could be considered a jog for untrained individuals. Their goal was to cover a hundred kilometers on foot within a single day, before setting up their first 'relay point'.

These relay points had been calculated beforehand at the guild when planning the trip. First, they would spend a full day traveling on foot. After that, the druids of the party would set beacons in the area so that they could recall to that point at a moment's notice. Finally, the wizards within the party would jointly cast a group teleportation spell to send them further along their path, with the relay point serving as their option to retreat if the area they land at was too hazardous.

This way, although they only covered a hundred kilometers on foot, their true progress could easily be a thousand kilometers every day. Yet, even with that, they had to prepare supplies that would last them for several months. The exact location of the gate was unknown--aside from Petra who had discovered its location through the shadow world-- so they knew that they were unlikely to find the gate by simply running in a straight line.

Instead, their 'plan' was to map the layer out as a grid. After they completed their straight line to the other side of the earthen half of the world, they would use their relay points as markers and explore in different directions, thus mapping out the entire layer until they found the gate.

Only Petra herself was aware that their straight line would take them directly to the gate that they sought, though it would still take them around seven months to reach it. Thankfully, such a measure of time did not affect the Maxers who mostly had attained their perfection. It was expected for the expedition to take up to ten years to complete, if they were unlucky.

*Have you checked the next layer yet?* Petra asked internally, communicating with Thelsa. Although there was still plenty of time before they arrived, she felt it was best to be prepared for what would be coming.

*I have... but the next layer is quite troublesome for us. That's why I haven't added it to our shadow yet.*

When Petra heard that, she was briefly alarmed, her grip tightening on her axe as she continued to jog through the forest. Her dynamic vision was good enough that she was not afraid of missing any suspicious movement that occurred in front of her. *What's wrong with it? A lava layer, or maybe extreme cold?*

*No, I think it should be quite safe for most people. It is just a problem for us specifically. The next layer is a natural maze.*

Petra's eyes twitched when she heard that. *How is that a problem for us? Just map it with the shadows and send people in to solve it.*

*It's a problem for us because the walls of the maze are made with the same material as the mana spires found on every layer. I waited at the entrance for three days without it ever entering its 'night' cycle, so the concentration of mana must be heavy enough to prevent the light from going out. Not only can we not use the spire as a landmark, but there are no natural shadows for us to take advantage of. Every wall and floor is a light source.*

That was... definitely annoying for people that relied on shadows to act. *Send some people in and make a building. As long as there is a persistent shadow, you should be able to add it to our world.*

*That's what I'm working on now. But, doing so won't help us find the path to the next layer, unless it happens to exist in an area of natural darkness. Otherwise, we won't be able to 'see' it in the shadow world.*

That was the real reason why such a layer was difficult for them. Although such a layer would be a great place to mine for mana gems, representing seemingly endless wealth, they were unable to take advantage of their powers to find the path. *It looks like the next layer will take a long time for us to pass...*

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I gave a satisfied nod as I saw Petra leading the charge to find the next layer, happy to see her taking a more active role in the world. Furthermore, I was quite interested in seeing what would happen with the world once the next layer was discovered.

*My Keeper?* Tsubaki's voice brought me back from my distraction, and I was reminded of the reason that the world had stopped fast forwarding in the first place.

*Ah, I'm sorry. You want to be able to share fourth tier arrays with Lorek and Spica?* Tsubaki had prayed to me, using her connection as my subordinate deity to reach me in the Admin Room.

*That's right, my Keeper. I fear that if we do not, then the ships you wish for will not be completed before the attack you are concerned about arrives.* There was definitely a valid reason for her to

be worried, and I did ultimately agree with her. Lorek and Spica needed fourth tier abilities in order to stay caught up with the rest of the worlds, especially Spica, now that its focus had been forcibly shifted from science to cultivation. Granted, they still had a great deal of science in their world, but it was woefully lacking when compared to the power that a cultivator could unleash.

Admittedly, there were those who were able to easily get by without the fourth tier of magic. For instance, the first generation of cultivators like Jana, who were 'blessed' with the accumulation of ki before the advent of the world's system. With that blessing, they were able to vastly improve their ki potential and fight far above their level. Jana herself showed an ability that allowed her to kill a monster god before she herself had properly ascended.

And, through the usage of ki, one could prolong their lifespan until they had an energy body. Of the first generation of cultivators, roughly a third of them were still alive thanks to the bonus to their ki potential. Unfortunately, that was still a rather small population, as Lorek was still considered a 'young' world at that time.

After thinking about it for a few more moments, I nodded my head. *Talk to Tubrock. As long as he doesn't have a specific plan to reveal the fourth tier of array knowledge in the works, it will be fine. Lorek is his jurisdiction, after all.*

That being said, I was sure that it was possible to create the ships with fourth-tier stellar magic. But, unfortunately, I hadn't personally studied that type of magic well enough to be able to figure out how to do so. Honestly, that felt like the most troublesome of all of my magic types to utilize practically.

*Understood, my Keeper. I will speak with him while preparing the material.* Tsubaki's voice spoke into my mind as I nodded my head, turning my eyes elsewhere. There was something that I had remembered to check on.

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With a loud shout, a muscular beast was felled, a blade slicing through its hide severing its neck. This beast took the form of a two-legged bull with flexible iron skin. There was a loud crash as it fell to the ground, revealing the nethrak youth that had slain it. Standing behind him was a translucent purple slime, who appeared to be simply idling.

A pale blue glow lit up over the nethrak's skin as his injuries healed, a clear sign that his level had risen. "Yes!" He shouted happily, surveying his latest kill. "See, the three-star dungeon isn't that hard!"

The slime simply nodded its head, moving over and absorbing the corpse of the monster. "Let's see... the size of this one's stone is worth three hundred and eighty points. The meat is of the eight ring, and worth twenty points per kilogram. No known use for the bones, so they will be ignored."

“The skin is of the flexible metal type, and is worth thirty points per square inch.” As the slime pulled itself back, all that was left of the once terrifying bull monster was a bloody skeleton.

“You’re not going to eat it?” The nethrak asked in surprise as it saw the skeleton being left behind. However, the slime simply shook its head.

“The bones of this creature are too hard to digest. As payment for this monster, I have taken the less valuable organs for myself, as well as a portion of the skin.” This was the job of the sentient void slimes, who possessed both incredible learning capabilities and the ability to store objects within a separate space.

These slimes would act as porters for the individuals or parties that chose to challenge the dungeon, butchering the monsters with their unique abilities and splitting things into different sections. In exchange, they would claim a portion of those monsters as their food, allowing them to continue to grow and evolve.

This was a highly beneficial arrangement for both parties, as it became tedious for one to haul such large monsters back to the surface time and time again. Without a proper porter, they would only be able to retrieve the mana stones of the monsters, leaving the rest to either be consumed by the dungeon or for the ‘shadow vendors’ to harvest.

The shadow vendors were a rather mysterious group, as nobody knew exactly how they operated. All that they knew was that materials from slain monsters would end up in various stores even if the ‘dive party’ themselves did not collect it. Whether it was an automatic system of the dungeon or a group of powerful individuals, nobody knew for certain.

“I think we could probably challenge the first floor of the four-star dungeon, at this rate.” The nethrak said confidently, before the slime shook its head.

“Until you are able to capture the thirtieth floor of this dungeon, you should not set your sights on the next rank.” As part of its job as a porter, the slime had memorized the known information of the different dungeons. This allowed it to ensure that not only would it be able to survive, but that it could increase the survival chances of its employer as well.

There was a vast difference between the different ranks of the dungeons, with less information being known the higher one went. While each dungeon seemed to have a limitless number of floors, the jump in difficulty was rather severe between the dungeons themselves. For example... the one-star dungeon will feature weak monsters that even a low-level fighter can resolve easily, or puzzles meant to challenge the mind.

The two-star dungeon will have more challenging monsters, and begin to have deadly traps after the tenth floor. This is where people begin to require real skill to survive, whether through their physical prowess, magic, or tactics.

The three-star dungeon held powerful monsters serving as floor bosses, and every level would have deadly traps hidden about. The two of them had currently defeated the floor boss of the first floor after spending one hour within the dungeon. While this was admittedly a good pace, it was far from enough to challenge the four-star dungeon.

In the four-star dungeon, monsters as strong as normal floor bosses roamed in groups, and began to exhibit their own strategies for combat. Here, challengers had to overcome the other party's intelligence in order to survive. But this was not the most terrifying of them all...

In the five-star dungeon, very little information was known. There had been numerous parties that explored its first level, but few had come back alive after encountering the floor boss. In fact, there was only one party that had survived the encounter by fleeing before the boss could kill them all.

In the five-star dungeon, monsters were no less intelligent than the nethrak, and carried vast amounts of power. On the door of the boss room, the word 'Ice' was written clearly. As the nethrak were a people born in an arctic climate, they naturally were unconcerned about a cold warning. They were not expecting that warning to mean that the boss of the floor was a monster God of Ice.

This was supposedly why the fifth floor was stationed directly beneath the Tower's home. If a dungeon break were to occur, it would take a god to settle it. Perhaps it was even where he himself trained, though nobody had seen him doing so...