A long time ago

The monster was chasing him. His entire team was dead, the elite monster had killed them all. He was barely managing to keep up, running down the uneven stone beneath his feet. The cave corridors were twisting, he couldn't get much speed before he had to turn. He slammed into a wall, then pushed himself with his broken arm and body in another direction. The monster roared behind him, the sound of its claws dragging against the walls echoed from the walls.

His spear was gone, lost somewhere in the cavern where they had fought, where the others had died. His spatial ring was gone as well, along with three of his fingers. He had nothing. His side was burning, the three gashes from the monster's claws had opened his flesh and scratched his ribs. He could barely keep his head focused, but he knew that he needed to escape.

He cursed himself, cursed his foolishness, and he cursed the Framework. There was a reason as to why people didn't just go out to hunt monsters, the risks were too great. But what made him curse everything the most was that it was all his fault. He was the one that gathered them, the one that convinced them that this was a good opportunity. And all because of his own selfish desires, to get stronger, to become worthy. Getting this deep into the Under had been a mistake. They knew what monsters to expect, they prepared, but the Under didn't play by the rules of the surface.

The moment that the event happened, the moment that he read the words and understood, that was the moment when they had lost everything.

New Event! Shadow Stalker
The Shadow Stalker draws near, survive for 1 hour and gain great rewards.

He cursed that message, he cursed the Dealmaker and the world's cruelty. It was… beyond unfair, for a monster like that to appear. They had no chance. All of them had been in the Lord Realm, on the cusp of Monarch, but they all needed something to push them over that barrier that kept so

many Lords from moving beyond. And the battle was one of the ways in which inspiration could show itself.

He had been a fool, a failure. He had led them all to their deaths, because he wanted to prove something. To make others see him like someone with talent, worthy of them. To silence the whispers he heard every time they saw the three of them together.

A roar sounded behind him—too close. He turned, trying to see it, and missed a step. He yelped in horror as he realized that there was no ground beneath him, only an endless darkness. He fell through the crack in the floor, his head hitting something, his hands and legs sliding down the narrow hole. He tried to catch himself, but he couldn't grab hold of anything, his hand twisted uncomfortably and got caught between his body and the wall, it cracked, and he screamed as he felt the bone break skin. His horns hit the stone and broke off, his tail dragged against the wall and peeled his skin off. He tumbled down, further and further until he finally hit the end. His legs cracked, breaking in the fall.

He laid on the floor, unmoving, in the darkness, his entire body in agony. Somewhere high above him, he heard the monster roaring, but it was faint, so far away. He was bleeding, his bones were shattered. His core was empty, his perks used up. He had nothing to try and save himself. Slowly, his mind grew darker, and then his eyes closed as he lost consciousness.

"Terland, wake up," a voice whispered.

Terland opened his eyes, seeing tree branches above him, the sun's rays breaking through them. His heart was pounding, and he felt agitated, on edge. Something was wrong. He blinked as a shape moved into his vision, golden eyes, and skin as black as night. She smiled down at him and he relaxed.

"Terland," she said slowly. "How long are you going to sleep?"

She raised an eyebrow and he sat up. He turned his head and looked at her, seeing that she was wearing her usual, which was barely anything. Her hands and chest were bound with bandages, and around her waist a small loincloth kept her privates from being seen. He had grown used to it, even

though it still bothered him when others ogled her. Her toned body was perfection, only marred by tattoos that crawled around her forearms and upper arms. He knew that the plan was for them to cover all of her, which did make him sad, but it was not his place to comment.

She pushed a lock of hair behind her pointed ears and smirked at him. "Like what you see?"

"Of course I do, Erdania," he told her. "You are gorgeous."

She titled her head. "Even with all of these muscles?" She asked, a question that she had asked him often, in private when it was just the two of them.

"Of course," Terland said. "I love all parts of you."

Terland had always been attracted to humans, and Erdania was a prime example of their beauty.

"More than you love her?" Erdania asked.

Terland sighed. "Haven't we gone over this?" He asked in turn. "I love you both equally."

Erdania chuckled. "C'mon, you can tell me, I won't let her know."

"Dani," Terland chided her. "You both hold a piece of my heart, you are my sun and the moon. Each different, and each irreplaceable."

"But I am the sun, right?" She asked.

Terland rolled his eyes. "If you must be."

"What?" Another voice said from his other side. "So that makes me the moon?"

Terland turned and saw another woman sitting next to him. Her pale gray horns were curving backwards, framing her blond hair. She was slender when compared to Erdania, at least. But he knew that she too was fit. Stats did much, but different bodies reacted different to them. Selia's tail was curled around her, slender and long. Her pale skin contrasted against her black and white robes.

"Selia," Terland whispered. He hadn't even noticed that she was there. Her eyes were as blue as clear sky, and they watched him intently. She was keeping her face blank, but Terland knew her well enough to see her mirth. "You are the most beautiful of moons, love."

She smiled at him, and shook her head, making her long hair sway around her shoulders. "Such a charmer," Selia said as she glanced across from him to Erdania.

Terland sighed in contentment. He didn't know what he had done to deserve them. To have them look so far beneath their station and find him, to think that he was good enough for them. It was why he wanted to grow stronger, to catch up, to... *Something is wrong.*

"What is it Terland?" Selia asked.

Terland looked around, the three of them were sitting beneath a tree that was on top of a hill. Blue grass covered everything, and as he looked out in the distance he saw more hills.

He frowned. "Where are we?" Terland asked.

"What do you mean?" Erdania asked. "We are here, silly."

Terland blinked, he looked from Erdania to Selia, looked at their smiles, their eyes looking at him with love. "You... you don't talk like that."

"What do you mean?" Erdania tilted her head.

"You..." he turned again, looking at Selia. "And you... you are mad at me."

Selia raised her eyebrow. "Mad? I could never be mad at you, Terland."

She reached for him, but he recoiled. He stood and walked a few steps away. His head started to hurt and he bent over, his hands coming up to his head. And then, as the pain abated, he pulled his hands away. He saw blood on them, and his heart started to beat faster and faster.

Then, Selia and Erdania were there next to him, and the blood disappeared.

"Are you alright, Terland? Come, you sit, rest," Selia said and guided him back to the grass next to the roots of the tree.

"I... you can't be here. I can't be here," Terland said.

"Why not?" They asked.

Terland tried to remember, but everything was so... hard. He could barely think now. "I... we... we had an argument. You didn't want me to go somewhere, you said that I was foolish."

"We would never call you foolish, love," Erdania said.

"You did, you were mad, both of you," Terland said as he tried to remember. He turned to look at Erdania. "You threw a chair at me."

None of them reacted, and memories started to come back. "I wanted to go to the Under. To get stronger, you didn't want me to go. I... I wanted to get stronger, like you are."

The two of them just looked at him, neither saying anything.

"I... I went ahead, didn't I. I gathered my friends, and we went to the Under."

Terland bowed his head as he remembered. "They died, oh heavens, they died before my eyes. I... I did this." He raised his head and looked at them, the two people that mattered more to him than anyone else. He had wanted to be like them, and he wanted to do it on his own. Without their help. He didn't want others to look at him and whisper how they had given him everything.

"I'm dreaming, aren't I?" Terland asked.

"You are dying," Selia said sadly.

"Not much longer now," Erdania added.

Terland remembered the fall then, and he realized that there was nothing that could save him now. His own foolishness had killed him. They had been right, he was stupid. He couldn't have gotten rid of his pride.

He turned his eyes on the two of them, figments of his imagination. Everything that he did, he did for them. But in the end he didn't listen. They were so far above him, the daughters of Sect Leaders. Talented, powerful, beautiful, everything that he wasn't. And they had looked at him and decided that he was good enough for them. But he couldn't be content with that. He didn't take what they offered, he didn't want them to hand him power. No, he tried to get it by himself, and he led his team to their deaths.

He took in their faces, wanting to say so much. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "So fucking sorry for not listening to you."

They didn't respond, now that he knew that they weren't real, they just sat there. Looking blankly at him. The hills in the distance started to disappear, and Terland wondered if that was death, coming for him.

He looked at them, wanting the last thing he saw to be them.

The darkness reached his hill, and then everything turned to nothingness.

Agony woke him up. He gasped as he woke up on the hard and cold stone. He couldn't move, his stats not high enough to heal any of the damage his body had sustained fast enough to save him. He knew that he lost blood, he was feeling cold and light. His face was against the floor, one eye able to look out. In the darkness he could see something, and then he realized that he had a notification. It was in front of his face, a window that he didn't remember pulling up.

Event Cleared — Shadow Stalker
The Shadow Stalker draws near, survive for 1 hour and gain great rewards. 1h/1h You gain a reward 80,000 Greater Essence; Skill Stone: Sprinting; Skill Stone: Shadow Stealth; Skill Stone: Burst Run; Skill Stone: Greater Acrobatics; Potion of Greater Regeneration; Potion of Greater Speed; Potion of Greater Stone Skin.

Terland blinked at the text, seeing the rewards, and a spark of hope found its way inside. He dismissed the message and saw the chest in front of him. The rewards were inside, if only he could reach it, get a potion, he might be able to survive. He tried to move, and nearly blacked out from the pain. But he pushed through, forcing his still whole arm to pull him forward. He had never been in more pain in his life, but he didn't couldn't stop. He wouldn't.

He needed to get back to Selia and Erdania, it was the only thing that mattered.

He pulled through the pain. Trying to focus on something. He couldn't move his Qi through the pain, and even if he could, none of his techniques

could help him. He reached the chest, his hand barely able to touch it. He tried so hard to reach higher, to open it. But his strength had left him, he'd lost too much blood. Slowly, while his fingers still touched the chest, he was slipping into darkness. There was no one here who could help him. He was all alone.

His team was dead, and he had been too stupid to tell anyone where they had gone. He wanted to prove them wrong, to show them that he was worthy. And now he was going to die, alone. Tears rolled down his face, his heart slowed its beat. He was scared, terrified of what awaited him next.

He was alone.

His last thought of Selia and Erdania, of how he failed them and how he wouldn't get a chance to tell them how sorry he was.

Terland died. He knew the exact moment when that happened. The pain disappeared, everything seemed to have disappeared. It felt as if he was floating without any care in the world. And then he was pulled violently, he was squeezed and pushed, and then he was somewhere else and all sensations returned.

He opened his eyes and looked around, he saw that he was in a large cave, nothing like the small hole where he had… Where he had… He couldn't remember what he had been doing a moment ago.

His powers didn't work. And he… He really needed to get back home, to Selia and Erdania. He looked around trying to see a way back to them and he saw something. A light, something that called to him, far in the distance. He could see it through the stone and the earth.

And then he realized that he was dead. It hit him and made him freeze. He looked around, afraid that a spirit or a shade was lurking somewhere in the ever shifting darkness of the cave. He had heard stories of the Ethereal Realm, of what happened here.

He needed to reach the afterlife, in order to be safe, but he couldn't use any of his powers.

He felt fear, and somehow the emotion was worse without a body. He took a step toward the light, but then paused. He... He needed to get back home, he couldn't leave Selia and Erdania. He... didn't want to go without them.

He turned around, away from the light. He looked around, searching for a way out of the cave.

He was so alone.

He walked and walked, and never saw anything or anyone. Only the stone, the corridors that mocked him. The world around him changed, sometimes the walls were made out of mist, other times they changed color, but always he was underground. He couldn't find a way out. There was no way out!

He started to wonder if what he had lived before was even real. Was he real? But always, he remembered Selia and Erdania, and he continued walking. The light was behind him, always shining, always in the same place. It made him feel like he hadn't moved at all, but he knew that he had!

He reached a new cavern, this one filled with impossible trees that twisted like springs, and a pond in the center. He walked over, looking at the strange sights, at things that he had never seen in life.

The water was strange too, it was silvery, and it reflected everything as if it was a mirror. He sat down next to it, and wondered if he was ever going to find a way out. Terland put his arms around himself and he rocked back and forth. There was no one to speak to, no one to ask for advice, and the loneliness made him mad. He had never spent so much time alone before, it almost made him turn around, go to the light.

But, no, he couldn't. He needed to get back to them. They were mad at him, but they would forgive him when he returned. They would understand. He had only ever wanted to be worthy of them. He wanted to stand next to them, not be propped up by them. They shined so bright in his mind, he didn't deserve them. And yet, he couldn't be without them. They were his all.

He should've listened, he knew, but he had just wanted to be respected. To not be called names for being with them. To be, great.

Yes—A voice whispered in his head, his own. The only voice down here was his, always. *Need to get back to them.*

Terland made a decision, he would never go back to that light. He would find a way out. He leaned over and looked down into the silvery pond, seeing his own reflection in it. He looked the same as when he had died, he wondered how long it had been. He had seen so many corridors, so many different parts of this world. And yet, he couldn't tell. Time was... He didn't know, and he was alone. He had no one else to ask.

And then, just as he was about to move and continue from this room, he saw something change. He stopped and watched as his eyes changed, and a ring appeared in them

Terland that was, died, and a new, Terland that was to be, was born. Alone in the caverns of the Ethereal Realm. A lonely shade made its first decision. He was going to find those he loved, it was their fault, he was here because of them. He needed to find them, nothing else mattered.