

Tutorial 641

Chapter 641: The second floor of the First Dungeon

After going through everything, I've gathered 130 usable items out of what I estimate to be 231 bodies. There are a few more items, but most of them are broken. Armor, weapons, pendants, and the like all got wrecked by the arrows. But even those, I immediately sold to the system shop, though I only got a few hundred shards each.

The 130 gathered items are a mix of rarities, with the lowest being mid-rare and the highest being low arcane. There are 11 low arcane items and 21 damaged arcane, around 60 upper epic, and I didn't count the lower rarities.

I sit down next to a boulder nearby, observe the pile, and try to ignore the constant pulses of mana coming from somewhere in the distance.

Coincidentally, that's where my javelin went.

These pulses are followed by pulls of mana and gradually happen more often, to the point where it feels like a countdown.

It'll be fine.

Anyway, in the system shop, you can buy a low arcane item starting at around 100 thousand shards, with some going up to 150 thousand or slightly more. Damaged arcane items cannot be bought and can only be found in the tutorial.

The problem, when selling to the shop, is that if the system is selling a low arcane item for 100 thousand shards, and I make exactly the same one, it will only buy it from me for 50 thousand. What sucks even more is if such an item is found in the tutorial, whether taken from a native, bought in a normal shop on the floor, or otherwise, the system will only pay 10-20% of its value.

I quickly go through all low arcane and damaged arcane items to check how many shards I would get, and the final number is around 250 thousand shards. The remaining ones would take too long to check, but I estimate around 150 thousand.

Using my mana, I weave threads to tie the items together into a huge pile, which I then surround with more mana threads until it becomes a cocoon the size of a large closet.

I stop only when the pulses of mana from the distance cease and bright white light fills the horizon.

[You have defeated Reanimated Remnant - lvl 311]

[You have defeated Reanimated Remnant - lvl 341]

[You have defeated Reanimated Remnant - lvl 361]

[You have defeated Reanimated Remnant - lvl 351]

[You have defeated Reanimated Beast - lvl 314]

[You have defeated Reanimated Beast - lvl 333]

[You have defeated Reanimated Beast - lvl 314]

[You have defeated Reanimated Beast - lvl 349]

...

[Lvl 321 > Lvl 322]

I see the shockwave heading my way. A single loud screech pierces through the area as a powerful presence stretches in my direction. It is easily comparable to the Harvester and likely stronger.

Without looking back, I create large arms of mana and throw the closet-sized cocoon through the portal before following after it, leaving the 1st floor behind.

I come to a stop with city buildings surrounding me, only to be bombarded with notifications.

Welcome to the second floor of the First Dungeon.

For a fee, you may utilize arrays to teleport to the first floor or to any safe zone you have previously visited on the second floor.

The second floor contains three safe zones. Each safe zone is a large city governed by a King.

I close that notification and open the next one.

2nd Floor Quest: ???

Rewards:

14-day Stay Token

???

Of course, it's going to be like that. I wonder how many shards I'll need to pay a Local for information on the floor quest without getting scammed.

As for the city I've found myself in, it's big, unlike any other safe zone in Beyond I've visited so far. The tallest buildings are two or three stories at most, and it's built in what currently seems to be a perfect circle around a mountain in the middle. The outer rim of the city is surrounded by simple stone walls, and a set of similar walls surround the mountain as well.

I stand on a hill that quickly gets steeper as it approaches the mountain, turned to place the mountain behind me and the city ahead.

Now that I'm looking at the mountain behind that wall, I notice some truly nasty arrays. There are people guarding it, and although it looks dangerous, it also seems pretty ceremonial. Most of them wear a combination of black clothes with bright yellow stripes and shiny silver armor. It's probably safe to guess that they're Locals.

Beyond the city, I can see the rest of the 2nd floor. Like the first, it's one enormous cave that stretches miles upward and extends much farther into the distance, where I see a mountain range covered in snow. On the other side, there's a black void filled with a near constant stream of red lightning.

All around the city, miles upon miles of plains stretch out, covered in soft yellow grass and patches of flowers that sway gently in the breeze. The landscape feels quiet and endless, as if it belongs in some long forgotten fairy tale.

Before I can look further, someone steps up to my side. A young lynthari boy in old, if fairly clean clothes. He's probably somewhere around ten years old, and I notice him checking over my cocoon before looking at me. His hair is black, his eyes are gold, and his ears are a grayish color. Interestingly, instead of a single tail like other lynthari, he has two, both incredibly fluffy and the same color as his ears.

"Sir Beyond attendee, may I know your fine name?" he asks with a polite but energetic voice.

"No."

"I see. It's true, names are important, and I may have pushed too far in asking yours. I deeply apologize! Please don't kill or beat me up!"

He lowers his face and lets out a bout of sobbing that's more fake than a three-dollar bill. His shoulders tremble in exaggerated spasms, one eye sneaking a glance to see if the performance is having any effect.

"You want shards, right?"

"Yes! I mean, no!"

“So?”

“Maybe? You, dear sir, appeared in the zone where the most people who just finished the 1st floor tend to appear, and with so many items at that!” He steps closer and lowers his voice to a whisper. “Other guides like me wanted to come closer to offer their services, but they were scared off by your expression. But I decided to risk it, sir. You remind me of my father, who died long ago and whom I loved so much.”

“I see. If you lie to me again, I will hang you upside down from that lamp over there by your legs.”

“That would be a reasonable reaction, sir!”

“Your father?”

“I misspoke! He should be home from work by now!”

“It happens that one might forget things like that. So why did you decide to talk to me? Aren’t you too young to be a guide?”

“Maybe I, just a bit... overstated my qualifications! I don’t have any certifications. Yet. But everyone has to start somewhere, right? And I decided to talk to you because you seem like you might be rich, sir attendee!”

“Are you related to someone by the name of Duncan?”

“I don’t know anyone with that name, sir!”

“I see. And?”

“And I don’t think you would hurt me. Attendees very rarely do, and when they do, our King punishes them. At most, I’d get a kick in the ass or be screamed at and sent away. It’s only the other kids who are too scared.”

"You could be wrong, you know."

"But we're talking, and you haven't gotten angry yet, so I'm not! Sir, would you like to know where you might sell those items? Or directions to the guild square, so you can meet with guild recruiters or have yourself tested? Any certifications you're looking to acquire? I will say, though, that Guild Square is usually the first recommendation for most attendees."

"It's fine. Just tell me about the places I can sell these items. I don't mind if you lead me to a merchant you have a deal with, I'm fine with you getting a small cut in exchange. But if you lead me to one that tries to scam me, I will get annoyed."

"Indeed, my eyes weren't wrong. You, sir, are surely very experienced, smart, glorious, and..."

"Are you stalling to buy time to think of a place because you planned to lead me to some suspicious merchant offering a huge commission in exchange for scamming me?"

"Yes!"

"Then keep thinking. Are you used to dealing with people who have concentration-type skills?"

"We call them Coldies, sir! They're just like you. Empty expressions and sometimes they can be scary, but they tend to be very logical and rarely act with aggression."

"You mentioned a King. Who is it?"

"I'm hungry, sir attendee."

With a sigh, I transfer him 1000 shards.

At that, his eyes widen, and the tails stop moving. He nods quickly and says, "I'm not hungry anymore! Each city on the 2nd floor has a King that's both a powerful Champion and one of us Locals!"

"Little jerk. Your name?"

"Lochi, sir! Shall I lead you to a very proper merchant who will give you a good price for the items you have?"

"Yes," I confirm.

"May I ask for the rarities of the items in your possession?"

"11 low arcane, 21 damaged arcane, around 60 upper epic, and a jumbled mix of others. I already separated the items I will be keeping, so all of this is for sale."

"Hehe, sir, you must surely be joking!"

Instead of answering, I just look at him, and he looks back at me.

I stay silent. His tails start moving wildly, and I sense his heartbeat speeding up as he keeps glancing between me and the cocoon at my feet. He gulps.

Then he nods once.

Not even ten minutes later, a lynthari merchant in one of the more expensive parts of the city, closer to the mountain in the middle, finishes going through all the items and moves to sit on the armchair opposite me. Between us, there is a small table where I've already been served a drink.

Lochi stays near the items and curiously continues to poke them, sometimes lifting up a weapon to swing it around a little.

The merchant lets the silence stretch a little before he says, "As a merchant, I will pay the systems cut myself."

He waits for my reaction, so I nod.

"The system shop value of all the items, if you wanted to buy them, would be 2,545,131 shards."

Somewhere in the room, the sword falls from Lochi's hands and rings against the floor.

I nod again.

The merchant continues, "If you wanted to sell them yourself to the system shop, you would get 381,770 shards. If I were to buy them from you, it would take me years to sell them all piece by piece. I need to pay for the shop, I need to pay for the employees, and with every transfer, the system takes 10 percent of the shards. Some of the items you brought are great, but some require work before I can sell them. Others are highly specialized, and I would either need to wait years for the right person to come along or cut the price. Usually, I buy items from attendees for 50 percent of their system shop value. In this case, that would be 1,272,565 shards. With me also covering the system fee, it would cost me 1,399,822 to pay you that."

He leans back slightly. Partially, it seems like he talks out loud to himself as well.

"I usually end up selling items to the attendees for 70 to 80 percent of their value. Then, subtract the system cut. Ten percent on every transaction. That's around 180,000 shards gone immediately. It's non-negotiable, automatic, and taken the moment the sale goes through. That leaves me with 1.62 million, if the items all sell for 70 percent of their value."

Second finger.

"Next, storage fees. Mana-secure vaults aren't free, especially not for mixed arcane inventory. I'll be paying around 15,000 shards per year minimum just for these. If it takes me four to five years to sell everything, that's 60 to 75 thousand shards gone."

Third finger.

"Repair and prep costs. Even the damaged arcane items need some work, so it's not just cleaning. Some of the upper epic pieces will need enchantment tuning or rebalancing. That's another 100 to 120 thousand easily. More if I have to hire local specialists."

Fourth finger.

"Staff commissions and handling. My apprentices get a cut of everything that moves. I can't run a shop this size alone. I'm expecting at least 7 to 8 percent overhead here. That's another 90 to 100 thousand shards eaten away over time."

He lowers his hand again.

"Then there's the unpredictable drain. Customer disputes. Resales. Errors during the preparation of the items. One item flagged by a paranoid buyer as unstable, and I have to cover the loss or risk my merchant' rating dropping. Factor in all that chaos, and I'm looking at a net return of somewhere between 100,000 and 150,000 shards."

He looks me in the eyes.

"I am tying up 1.27 million shards of liquid capital to eventually make maybe a 10 to 12 percent return over the years. Of course, there's a chance I might get lucky and make 5 percent more, or if I'm really lucky, 15 percent more. That's something I always hope for, obviously, but I'm not the sort of person who relies on luck."

He pauses and looks at me with a questioning gaze.

Not once did I get the feeling that he is lying as I observe his heart, the vibrations his muscles cause, or the movement of his blood.

"I'll take it," I say, standing up and reaching out a hand toward him.

He stands up from the chair and shakes it with me. "Pleasure doing business with you."

Chapter 642: Information Guild

There are guild rankings in Beyond, the ones that update once a year. They're more or less similar to the last time I checked them, with the exception of two guilds that have apparently swapped places.

Guild Rankings

1. Bloodline

2. Frontier

3. Crimson Forge

4. Primordial Knights

5. Astral Brotherhood

Crimson Forge is ranked higher than Primordial Knights now.

As one of the five top guilds, they even have a branch here in Rookie City. It's possible they have more in the other two cities, but I haven't asked about that yet. Actually, most of the guilds try to maintain some sort of presence here.

There's clear value in that, but it's not something I'm currently interested in. Neither am I interested in the salaries guilds offer their more talented rookies.

I leave the merchant's house, where Lochi is probably still collecting his cut. The old man seemed fair, so that little jerk of a guide will likely walk away with at least a few thousand shards.

As for me, a nice number of shards appear in my status, likely an insane amount for so "young" an attendee as I.

Shards:2,319,196

It's a good problem to have, but now I need to think about what to do with my passives.

Passive skills (5/5):

Mana Kinetic Conversion Reservoir (Unique Epic)

Mana Fortified Mind (Low Arcane)

Mental Attunement Loop (Mid Arcane)

Mana Wavelength Tyrant (Mid Arcane)

Subdermal Combustion Weave (Mid Arcane)

Upper arcane passives start at around two million shards. Not even a few weeks ago, I would've never expected to save up for one this soon. Hell, most of the Beyonders I know don't even have a low arcane passive. Meanwhile, the members of Group 4 got one million shards each thanks to Lissandra killing the mimic Absolute, and now I've got over a million more. At this rate, I'll likely be able to use an upper arcane passive skill combination token before the end of the tutorial and get a unique arcane passive.

I'll need to sit down soon and give this all some serious thought. The most reasonable move would be to buy an upper arcane passive right away, but that would mean replacing either Mana Kinetic Conversion Reservoir or Mana Fortified Mind, both of which I really like. With my construct built for mental defense and all the other things I'm working on to strengthen it actively without relying entirely on passives, I think it would be a mistake to get an upper arcane version of Fortified Mind. I also don't want to remove it just yet, even the low arcane version is plenty powerful, even if it's not entirely effective against people like Faora.

As for Reservoir, although it's a unique epic, it's a really good one, and I don't think I'd be able to find another with a similar effect. I'm still learning a lot from it, especially now that I'm working on creating my own crown with [Manifestation], and Reservoir is a great point of reference.

Well, it's a future problem for future me. Screw that guy.

Now I start making my way toward the place where the Information Guild is. Surprisingly, it's the only guild dealing with information in the city, and it's directly supported by the local King. Part of its staff even consists of locals, but there are also attendees working there, and the two sides seem to cooperate.

The building it resides in is unassuming. Just another structure along the street with a scant few boards to mark it as an important place. But I guess if you can't even find it, you're probably not worth dealing with.

I enter, and I'm immediately directed to a table, from which I take a slip with a number on it. Then I head to the waiting area and sit with the other attendees.

Most of them are dressed simply, travel-worn clothes, a few enchanted accessories here and there, and some upper epic items. Some fidget impatiently with their numbered slips, others stare ahead, focused. No one's talking. It's not like it is forbidden, but the atmosphere just doesn't invite it.

I glance around and choose two individuals to practice on. I split my mind into two parts and try to make these parts exactly the same, doing the same things. The goal is to put myself in a state where, at least temporarily, I won't be able to tell which one is the real me. One of the parts I'm practicing with observes a human woman, the other a male lynthari.

Even though I've experimented with this for a while, the results are still lacking. I can easily tell which mind is the "main" one. The second always feels like a copy to me.

That's probably good. I'm sure there could be some messed-up side effects otherwise, but that's not what I'm aiming for. It's not my goal to create a clone of myself or a duplicate like I did back on the fifth floor, just something similar.

Well, I'll keep working on it.

Eventually, a clerk calls my number, and I bring my training to an end. I follow the servant into a small side room packed with sparse furniture, a desk, and a few chairs. The woman behind the desk doesn't introduce herself. She simply nods towards the chair, so I sit.

"May I ask what you're looking for today?" she asks, not unkindly, but clearly pressed for time.

"Information on people."

She raises an eyebrow. "There is publicly available information and rumors I can share with you, but our Information Guild avoids collecting or sharing too much information on individuals directly."

"I understand."

"Thank you. Now, before you ask, I will require a session payment from you before we proceed."

Request to transfer -1,000 shards. Confirm?

Yes / No

I confirm.

The woman nods. "Thank you. Please ask your question, and before answering, I will inform you of the price."

"I want information on Faora. She is a feylith and a 5th-year attendee, soon to finish the tutorial. And, a huge thylarin named Luan. He is also in his 5th year."

"A moment, please."

She closes her eyes. For a moment, an emblem lights up on her forehead before she opens them again.

"Both of them are A-ranks, so information on them is considered a high-tier request. Especially Luan, who is rumored to have the potential to reach S-rank before he finishes the tutorial. Information on Faora will cost 5,000 shards, and 20,000 for Luan. Would you like to proceed with one or both?"

"Just Faora first."

Request to transfer -5,000 shards. Confirm?

Yes / No

The emblem on her forehead glows faintly again. There's a silence that stretches for a few seconds before she speaks.

"Faora of the House known as Elvastra, as reported by attendees from her round of the tutorial, is a feylith of noble blood. She is a 5th-year attendee, currently on the 13th floor of the tutorial. She is rumored to possess powerful mental abilities, with a specialization in mental entrapment. An adept of Pride and a very... well, nasty personality, as confirmed by her slayings of at least a dozen other adepts of Pride. That number could be higher. Multiple record entries from her third and fourth year mark her as highly resourceful, and due to her usefulness, she is currently being supported by the second ranked guild, Frontier, which she is a member of."

She pauses, still not making eye contact. "No information about her Handler. Several recruitment attempts were made by the Astral Brotherhood before she joined Frontier."

I lean forward slightly. "Anything more on her combat records?"

"Sparse, but consistent. Selective participation in Beyond events, always in support positions. Other than some very high mental abilities, she seems to specialize in domains and disruption. Ability to fly at high speed confirmed. There are rumors of a teleportation ability. One unofficial report states that she performs well on the fifth floor of Beyond but prefers higher floors, though this has not been verified."

"Last known sighting?"

Her mark glows again, and then she shakes her head. "No trace for three weeks. The last activity logs come from the 1st floor."

I nod slowly. "Anything else on her?"

"This is all we currently have. As I said, our guild doesn't spy on people, just gathers freely available information."

"I see. Please, I'd like the same for Luan."

Request to transfer -20,000 shards. Confirm?

Yes / No

The moment I confirm, the emblem on her forehead lights up again, a stronger pulse this time. She doesn't move for several seconds, and when she finally speaks, her tone is more measured.

"Luan is a fifth-year attendee, thylarin with glowing lines on his forearms. Four arms. Widely considered one of the strongest attendees currently in Beyond. He recently joined Frontier, despite recruitment attempts from the other top five guilds, and especially Bloodline. The Fragment he possesses is one of the reasons he draws so much interest, but so far, it is unknown what Fragment he has."

She pauses, then adds, "Reports indicate he's currently moving with Faora for unknown reasons. His combat style is overwhelmingly physical, focusing on dealing wounds that either cannot be healed or heal very slowly. That's supported by what's likely a very rare and powerful set of traits. He uses no weapons, bare hands only."

"Anything mental-based?"

The clerk shakes her head. "Limited to non-existent. He's never shown signs of mental abilities, but most reports imply that he has ways of defending himself against mind mages, but that much is mostly expected from someone as powerful. He relies on physical overwhelming force as a counter."

“And his personality?”

“Taciturn. Doesn’t speak unless necessary. There were even speculations that he may be mute, but that’s been confirmed to be false. Some information suggests he operates under a personal code, as he rarely attacks first. But if provoked, he rarely holds back.”

“Last sighting?”

“Eight days ago. On the third floor.”

I lean back slightly, processing. “No Handler for him either? Why is knowing who a person’s Handler is important?”

She shakes her head. “Unknown. This is all I have on him. He’s extremely private, and most attempts to learn more about his early tutorial years hit dead ends. As for information about the Handlers. Thousand shards for basic information. Ten thousand for more.”

“Ten thousand.”

Request to transfer -10,000 shards. Confirm?

Yes / No

The clerk nods after I confirm. “Each Handler has at least attained the rank of Champion, and some are Absolutes. They tend to be people from planets that lost their Pairing and managed to escape. Another option is that their planets were entirely destroyed. Another common case is Champions or Absolutes who received a quest from the system and tied themselves to Beyond for anywhere between ten years and a hundred, sometimes longer, serving as Handlers in exchange for quest rewards and a share of the opportunities Beyond might offer. Before you ask, they do not have access to the system shop. That is available only during the tutorial and to attendees. Outside of the tutorial, the shop is not available. This information is free.”

"Thank you."

She nods. "Either through some aspect of their own abilities or with the help of items from the Ruler of Diligence, each Handler manages at least a dozen, if not several dozen, attendees, helping them orient themselves in Beyond, supporting their growth, managing Beyond quests for them, and providing other opportunities that will become available on lower floors. On the fourth floor of Beyond, it becomes possible to meet other Handlers as well, and there are areas where they can meet with attendees."

"How are attendees assigned to a given Handler?"

"Usually, every Handler has a different quota of attendees they must manage and automatically receives assignments. Then, every Handler has low-grade access to records of the attendees and their performance in the tutorial. They also have a set quota of attendees they can pick themselves and take under their wing. If multiple Handlers are eyeing the same person, they negotiate over who will take them. From a certain perspective, a kind of competitiveness exists among Handlers themselves for the advantages that having someone so successful would bring. Just like attendees, Handlers are rewarded according to their performance."

I listen carefully to what she says and use it to build a picture in my mind. But it is not like this concerns my Handler.

"As for your previous question about why knowing someone's Handler is important. It tells you what kind of backing they have. A Handler does not fight in place of their attendee, but knowing who guides someone can hint at the kinds of opportunities they've had, the advice they live by, and the quests they're being steered toward. Some Handlers are known for favoring certain strategies or for having better access to specific types of quests or resources. Other Handlers are known for taking only the most talented attendees, so knowing they picked someone can tell you a lot about that person's potential. At the start, the Handlers are not as involved, but that changes slightly as the attendee spends more time in Beyond."

"That makes sense."

"That is all I have for now. If you want more details on specific Handlers or the attendees under them, that will cost extra. Prices depend on the subject."

“Understood. That’s all for today.”

As I move toward the door and put a hand on the knob, she calls out to me. “Would you like to know one more thing? It regards a rumor tied to you.”

“How much?”

“Two thousand.”

For the last time, I confirm the transfer and look at her.

"It is rumored that members of the Primordial Knights have been instructed to watch for a young man who might enter the second floor. He has black hair, gray-brown eyes, and a concentration-type skill."

“Got it, thanks.” I open the door and exit the room.

Chapter 643: Coldie

I know nothing is ever free, but the way everyone asks for shards in exchange for even the slightest bit of information is almost as annoying as it is funny in its own twisted way. The worst part is that I’ve been getting used to it.

Sooner or later, the tables will turn, and I’ll be the one scamming people for shards.

In a way, it makes sense. For example, the information guild has to function, and they need salaries for their people, so of course, they’re going to ask for shards. But there are also situations where people just wait around to exploit careless or impatient attendees.

Spending some shards can speed things up by a lot here. You can gather information on clearing the floors, ask about the guilds so you don’t end up picking the wrong one, get help with your training, or buy customized items of the sort you might not be able to find in the system shop.

I also know that the system shop won’t be available after the tutorial. That much is more or less confirmed. So, seeing as even locals ask for shards, it is likely they have access to the system shop as

well and spend their shards there. Or maybe there is a different way they spend them. Who knows. Maybe I should ask. I'm sure they would answer. For shards.

So, that leaves the question. Will something else replace the shop after the tutorial is over, or is it only meant to be a temporary resource for the First Generation throughout the duration of their tutorial?

I also know I could get more of this information much cheaper or for free on my own, but I don't mind spending shards at the moment.

That's how I learn about the ways to get to the third floor. By asking and paying, of course. As before, there are multiple ways to get to the third floor, and I pay to learn about three that make up the most common approach.

One of them is similar to one of the options on the first floor. Some call it the Key Fragment Hunt, and it's exactly what it sounds like. You kill monsters that have a chance of having a single blue bone. Gathering enough of them and setting them up in a special formation, almost like a ritual, that you, of course, have to buy information on, allows you to create an entrance for one person.

There is a question that comes to mind. Why did the Rulers do it? And what is the First Dungeon when the Rulers themselves don't seem to have the same level of control as they do when it comes to the tutorial? Does the First Dungeon really pre-date the system, or is it something new the Rulers haven't had time to learn about, or can they simply not influence it to the same level?

Either way, I won't complain. Not having a quest that requires me to spend a month or two on this floor is better for me. But it just makes me wonder if all floors can be so easy to "clear" if you're willing to spend enough shards.

The second way to get to the third floor that I've heard about is called the Ritual. There are multiple ritual circles placed all over the floor where you can sacrifice something to gain entrance to the next floor. That sacrifice can be items, memories, stats, and I've even heard rumors about human sacrifice.

This one is extremely interesting to me, especially because of how much it clashes with the system itself. Even during the Challenges, it's extremely difficult to set things like that as wagers, from what I've heard, yet here they can be sacrificed?

Any other day, I would love to study it, and there will be a time when I will.

The last option I learned about is probably the simplest, but it's also likely to be the most difficult in some ways. In the third city, there's a permanent portal to the third floor. That city, like the second and the first one, has a King of its own, a powerful Local who oversees it and the surrounding area.

If the king likes you, he'll simply let you pass. There is also the possibility of joining one of the big guilds that trade with the King and have a limited number of passes each year that they can give out. Even though I don't think they use it that often, such big guilds surely can buy up any available blue bones and give them to an attendee along with the instructions to use them.

As I walk through the city, I glance at the back of my hand where I let a bit of my mana seep into and activate the identification emblem that shows the same Ivory White C, even after my battle with the Harvester.

Does that mean it should be possible for most B ranks to do what I did back then?

I slow down and allow the presence I sense behind to reach me as I take a seat on the bench under a tree nearby.

"Sir, attendee!" The lynthari boy says, greeting me with a big smile, slightly out of breath as he stops running. I would be surprised if he weren't smiling after that. He just made a lot of shards off me after all.

"The thief," I say, returning Lochi's greeting.

"I didn't steal anything! I merely facilitated the flow of information at a competitive rate," he says quickly, grinning wider.

I raise an eyebrow but don't correct him.

He plops down beside me, uninvited, like we're old buddies. "Is the ascent to the third floor your next course of action, or are you still weighing the matter?" he asks, eyes flicking around, possibly looking for more prey in the crowd.

If you spot this narrative on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

"Maybe," I answer. "Why are you talking like that today?"

"Sir, I assure you, this manner of speech is my natural cadence when I find myself in the presence of greatness..." He gives a wink, half self-mocking, half calculating.

I sigh. He continues anyway.

"Besides," he adds, folding his hands neatly in his lap and straightening his back, "one must distinguish oneself. In a city full of plebeians, elegance becomes its own form of currency."

"100 shards if you tell me why."

"My father read me a book where people talked that way, and I thought it sounded like fun!"

I glance at him sideways. "Your father, who died?"

"He got better! Anyway," he chirps, smoothly shifting topics, "you want to go out on a hunt? I can connect you with some hunter groups or merchants who've been looking for materials from specific monsters. Or I could connect you with a trading guild that needs people to protect their caravans, or people searching for bodyguards. Attendees usually start with jobs like that."

"Not really. How many shards did you make off me?"

"You mean from the fruits of my labor?"

"Sure."

"I asked for a percentage of the final profits once the items are sold. Sure, it'll take years, and it might not work out to be all that much, but I trust Sir Merchant to work hard to make as much as possible!"

I watch as his two tails swing from side to side in excitement. Even his fangs show a little, smaller than Myrra's, but still similar.

"Why do you have two tails? And please, don't say it's a genetic inheritance from some ancient lynthari ancestor."

"That exactly!" Lochi grins.

I sigh and stay silent, not reacting.

"So what are you waiting for, sir attendee? It seems like you're either waiting or thinking!"

"Perceptive, aren't you?"

"I gotta be if I wanna work with people," he says, nodding all serious. "Coldies are really hard to figure out just by looking at their faces, but if you watch what they do, it tells you way more than you can learn from normal people. People who don't use concentration skills are kinda all over the place, and it's hard to tell what they're feeling. Like, if they're trying to hide it, you've got no idea what's going on in their heads. They could be scared or mad or something, and you won't even notice until they do something really weird. But Coldies aren't like that. They're way better at hiding what they feel, but they don't let their feelings boss them around as much. They don't go nuts just 'cause they're mad or scared. So if you watch closely and think about it, you can generally figure them out. They don't do random stuff like normal people. They do things 'cause they thought about it, not just 'cause they felt like it. You gotta look at what they do, not their face."

"I guess that makes sense," I admit, looking away from him and off into the distance at the ethereal-looking plains. "It could be said that I'm indecisive. I know what I want to do, but at the same time, I don't know if I should do it."

"Is it something scary?"

"It doesn't scare me, but the question is if I should be patient and do it later when I'm absolutely sure it will go my way, or if I should be impatient and risk it now."

"What would you do without your concentration skill?"

"I would've been on my way to the third floor a long time ago."

"Why don't you partially weaken your skill to see how things go? Not fully?" Lochi asks innocently.

In some way, he reminds me of Vega, and as always, that childish curiosity and innocence feel so relaxing. Before I know it, I'm reaching out, my hand brushing the top of his head as a smile spreads across my face.

His little heart speeds up, and his golden eyes open wide as he stares at me in shock.

"Sorry," I say, quickly pulling my hand back.

"Sir attendee, please don't smile like that in front of my mom. She'd leave Dad for real this time!"

"I won't."

"Good! And how can you smile that way with a concentration skill? You're weird for a Coldie."

"I'm doing some testing. Instead of suppressing all of my emotions, I'm trying to be more selective. I could do that before, but now I'm trying to improve on it. Partial suppression vs full suppression. I'm also trying to see if I can suppress pain entirely or maybe even make myself temporarily forget different memories. I'm practicing storing, arrays, and frequencies in layers so I can pull them up instantly without thinking. I'm practicing information compression so I can remember more with less space. Also, my mind is currently split in two, and one part has all its emotions suppressed, while the other one's just

suppressing anger and the like, and I'm working on switching between them. I'm locking away memories and seeing if I can stop myself from finding them. "

"Are you actually really strong, sir attendee?"

"My name is Nathaniel."

"Oh! Are you maybe really strong, sir Nathaniel?"

"Just Nathaniel."

"Are you maybe really strong, sir Just Nathaniel?"

"Wanna be suspended from that lamp over there by your leg?"

"Hehe." He smiles and stands up in that energetic manner only kids have. "I have to go, but don't forget me when you become much stronger! And you should go. I think you'd be unhappy if you stayed a Coldie forever!"

Before leaving, he smiles deviously and takes a quick step closer.

It would be easy to avoid or react. I even increase my processing speed and watch in slightly slowed motion as he reaches toward me, but I don't do anything to stop him.

His small hand taps the top of my head a few times, much as I did with his.

Then I return my processing speed to normal and watch as he runs back to the other kids at normal speed and shouts something, his twin tails swaying behind him.

"Damn man, I thought he would never leave. But it felt weird to interrupt, so I waited." A man's voice sounds from my side.

"Yes, I noticed. Thank you for that," I answer and turn toward him.

There, a short man with a shaved head stands, wearing clothes laced with a mix of white and pale blue.

Upon seeing my face, he smiles brightly. "Well, you finally showed your face on the second floor."

Chapter 644: Weslin

I look at the man, and he looks at me. He stands there with arms crossed, and eyes that seem both sharp and lazy at the same time, like he's sizing me up but still can't be bothered to care too much.

"Man, took you a while to get your ass over here, but also lucky me to be here just as you came around. Or unlucky? I hate dealing with newbies."

He is short, bald, and seems like he likes to smile a lot, but not always in a friendly way. These smiles are often ironic and for his own amusement rather than to show friendliness. The uniform he's wearing isn't too restrictive and seems to be made with comfort in mind while showing his affiliation with a specific group. Done up in a combination of white and pale blue.

Most of all, this man feels dangerous. Just the look in his eyes and the way he carries himself betrays his strength.

Seeing me fail to react, he doesn't seem to care at all and shrugs, flashing me another smile. "Fuck, I hate dealing with newbies. Anyway, my name is Weslin, from the Primordial Knights. I will be taking you to the third floor."

I observe him, but he seems to be serious.

Maybe I could use him to get to the third floor quickly. The plans are already starting to run through my head.

"Why?" I ask.

“Rookie recruitment program? Kidnapping? Test subject for the Doc? I don’t know, man, it’s mostly up to you and how much the Head Recruiter likes you. Though Nyssa seems interested, so she might want to test you personally? But who the hell knows. Lately, she’s been spending more and more time on the fifth floor, she might not want to come up to the third.”

He smiles. “Of course, you are free to do that! But then I’ll have to beat the crap out of you. I saw your fight with Whitey, so I’m curious to see how you do against me. The same goes for that black mana, as annoying as it seems, makes me very curious, so don’t try me. Now, you are Nathaniel, right? No need to lie, we’ve already bought some information on you. Will you go with me, or do I have to beat the crap out of you?”

“Haven’t the Primordial Knights been dropping in rankings? Why shouldn’t I join Bloodline or Frontier?”

Weslin sighs. “I know, right? I blame Nyssa for being so obsessed with trying to get to the sixth floor. Sure, the others have been taking care of the guild while she’s been working on that, but it’s not the same without her. Especially when she’s got most of her party on the fifth floor.”

He gestures at me as he starts walking, and I hesitate just a moment before following at his side.

As talkative as he is, he continues to blabber. “And damn, those maniacs. I was on the fifth floor too, and man, it’s an ugly place to be spending so much time on. Sure, Nyssa is a prodigy, one of the most talented users of primordial energies you’ll ever meet. I wouldn’t be fucking surprised if she gets the fourth one out of nowhere, but damn if she didn’t pick one nasty challenge. And who the fuck was that Adrian guy? You saw the rankings, right? That maniac managed to get there all on his own almost a thousand years ago. Frigging monsters. I bet that asshole’s an Absolute by now somewhere outside of the tutorial.”

I keep nodding energetically as I listen to him speak.

This isn’t that bad. I’m getting a lot of information for free, and so far, the man hasn’t made himself very threatening. Though obviously that’s only if I ignore the fact that I’m getting kidnapped right now. It’s like following some strange man to a van with 'Free mana' printed on the side.

But I know that if I tried to leave or disagreed with him, he would turn against me very quickly. At the same time, I don't think I'll ever get a better chance to push against him than right now. If he takes me to more people from his guild, it'll be harder then.

The question then becomes whether or not I even have a chance right now.

Weslin looks at me like he knows what I'm thinking. Then he smiles.

Nope, I don't think so. He looks and feels stronger than Faora, and he's probably at a level not far off Luan. If I threw all I had at him and surprised him, I could probably have a small chance, but at the same time, I don't know how he would react to that.

So, for now, I may as well hold myself back and decide to use this as an opportunity. He will get me to the third floor. I'll get plenty of information from him in the process. Then I can decide what to do from there.

"Man, you have one arrogant-looking pair of eyes. So what's your conclusion? Think you can beat me up?" he asks, turning left between the buildings. From the direction we are heading, I figure we must be going to the Guild Square.

"Maybe," I respond.

That only seems to make him even more amused, and he taps my shoulder a few times.

"Good! A real man should have confidence in himself. You seem like a decent enough man, so don't make me do something ugly. I'd rather welcome you as a newbie in the guild than hand you over to the Doc."

"Do you usually kidnap the new members?"

"You would be the first one in decades, but whatever that black mana of yours is, Nyssa seems very curious about it, so we kind of skipped some of the normal protocols." He slows and leans closer and whispers, "What is it, Primordial energy? One of the Older Fragments? Some kind of fancy skill?"

“Honestly? I don’t even know.”

“Damn, you don’t seem to be lying. That’s fucked up.”

“I know, right? Is Nyssa a demon?”

“Obviously. Ninety-nine percent of the guild leaders of the Primordial Knights over the past thousand years have been demons. Those fuckers breathe and fart primordial energies, I swear. You probably expect her to be a typical demon, though. Horns, white hair, red eyes, all that stuff. Well, somewhere in her distant bloodline, there must have been something different, so her hair is black. But god damn, don’t ever mention it in front of her if you like your legs unbroken.”

“I won’t. What primordial energies does she have?”

“Well, I can tell you she’s got kinetic, but you’ll have to find out the other two on your own. That’s not the kind of info I’m in the habit of just handing out. What I can say is that there both something beyond the common five.”

“I see. So you have void only?”

At that, he snorts. “Only... It’s not as fancy as having three or two, but just one is already super rare.”

“It is? In our group, we have, including me, three people with Primordial energies.”

“They aren’t demons, right?”

“Nope. All humans.”

“Well, in that case, you’ve got one really fucked up group. I think the information said you won your tournament, right? Probably both? Then you’ve got some kind of insane healer, a mind manipulator,

and now a bunch of other folks with Primordial energies, someone else with a Fragment, and a few more. It's like all the future Champions of your planet got thrown into your group, my guy."

"Do people from my planet really blabber that much?"

That makes him laugh. "I said exactly the same thing a few years ago about my planet! There are always newbies that some skilled guide ends up running into, making friends with, and slurping up all that information for free. Then the guides sell it to Information Guilds."

"Damn."

"Right? You'd think all Locals were some kind of Greed subclass freaks who see us attendees like tourists they can profit off. Little shits." He says the last part toward a few young Locals like Lochi, his smile seeming a bit more genuine than before. Even that much scares them off, and they run while glancing back at the scary attendee.

"Do you have information about a man from Earth? He..."

"...he started in Beyond," Weslin finishes for me. "Another friggin' monster in the making. There isn't much we could gather. His Handler is probably one of the top dogs here, one of those old monsters who takes one attendee under their wing once in a hundred years. They block as much information as possible. But even that should tell you more than enough. Best to avoid the guy."

"I thought Handlers were required to take in attendees."

"Yes, most of them. But let's say you're a Handler for thousands of years. You gather enough rewards to the point you only need to take one every hundred years or so, and use Beyond like a holiday villa in the meantime. You might even have enough rewards to enter one of the deeper floors where only Rulers and maybe a few others can enter."

"I see."

“Enjoying the free information? The Information Guild would charge you tens of thousands of shards for this.”

“I am. Thanks. Do you know anything else about him?”

“Greedy little jerk, aren’t you? That’s all you’re getting for now.” He stops and points toward a food stall nearby. “Go buy me a candied molten thornfruit. And don’t give me that look. The information I gave you is worth way more.”

I glance at the stall. The molten thornfruit looks like some kind of dark, spiny fruit, its skin cracked and oozing thick, glowing syrup that drips slowly like honey but steams where it hits the air. The vendor uses tongs to handle them, dropping one onto a leaf wrap before handing it to his customers.

I sigh and head toward the stall, feeling Weslin’s gaze on my back the whole time. The closer I get, the stronger the sweet, almost sickly scent becomes, reminding me of burnt sugar.

The vendor barely glances at me and asks for a price I’m sure is multiple times higher than anything he’d charge the Locals.

Never in my life have I been so sure of something.

I transfer the shards, and he gives me two fruits, wrapped carefully so the syrup doesn’t burn my hands.

When I turn, Weslin is grinning like I’ve just passed some ridiculous test. I hand him the fruit, and he bites into it without hesitation, syrup dripping down his chin.

“See? You’re a good kid, newbie. That’ll help you last longer here as long as you don’t mess with the wrong people.”

I ignore him and take a careful bite of mine to taste it.

Then I turn to head back to the stall for more. Weslin shouts at me to buy more for him, too.

The square is busier now, with guild members, merchants, and curious onlookers filling the space.

Weslin finishes his thornfruit and tosses the sticky leaf wrap into a bin nearby. He wipes his hands on his uniform, then glances at me.

“You know,” Weslin says, licking the last bit of syrup off his fingers, “people like to act all grown up, serious, important. Funny, isn’t it? All these tough guys acting like enjoying a bit of fun makes them weak. But deep down, adults are just kids pretending they’ve got it all figured out.”

He looks at me, amused. “At least you didn’t act like it was beneath you. So let me give you some advice. Find a powerful backer soon. If you do manage to escape me, I won’t even try to hunt you down later, even if Nyssa herself orders me. You’d damn well deserve to be left alone if you managed that. I don’t care if it’s someone from the Primordial Knights or someone else, but do it fast. There are already rumors about that black mana of yours, and whatever it is, it’s making certain people curious. Plus, that asshole who started in Beyond isn’t doing a good job of not attracting unwanted attention to your planet.”

I bite into the thornfruit again and nod. “So, where are you taking me now?”

“Our guild’s branch. I have something to pick up from there.”

“Let’s go then,” I say, and as he starts walking, I follow.

Chapter 645: Talon

POV Talon

Of course, that crazy bastard walks into the exact room I’m in, out of tens of thousands in this godforsaken city full of greedy assholes.

I’d hoped to never see him again, especially after we left him behind. I still think it was the most reasonable course of action, and he probably would have done the same. I swear by the name of the brother I had to kill when he backstabbed me, literally, that I wouldn’t have been angry if he had done the same to me and left me behind to deal with the Harvester.

I still remember the faces of the others when we entered the second floor, and a few seconds later, got the notification about the Harvester's death. I never saw people rush so quickly to get away from the place we appeared in.

So here I am, alive and once again relying on my charm and prowess to get me through the floor. With my primordial energy giving me a chance at joining the Primordial Knights for a nice warm spot and a good salary. One-year contract nearly signed, and enough time to prove myself and negotiate for some fanciful rewards once it expires. With hopes of earning enough shards to buy a few nice passives or get some items from the guild storage to reinforce my primordial energy. After all, if they don't have an item like that, who would?

Just as I'd planned ever since the first floor, with the help of my lovely Handler.

But now, that mana boy glances across the room, and our eyes meet. I don't even bother hiding and instead force a smile onto my face and wave.

His eyes slide off me in that manner I hate so much. Goddamn concentration skill users.

After looking at me like that, he follows the bald man he entered with, and they enter another room.

Next to me, a few newbies also wait for their tests and take care of some other boring stuff before we find out if we can join or not. I'm confident about my spot, but it's still too early to start building relationships with them when I don't even know if they'll be chosen.

One of them sees the whole scene go down and asks, "You know that guy, Talon?"

I already ranked the one who's asking a bit higher than the other potential members, so it probably won't hurt to be nice.

I turn to him. "Yup, we were in a group, fighting a guardian to enter the second floor."

He lets out a low whistle. "Interesting. He didn't even wait for the tests like we did. Was he strong?"

That makes me snort. "Strong? The bastard murdered the guardian monster by himself."

"Bullshit."

I look around and notice the other candidates listening as well, but I don't mind, though I lower my voice a bit for the next bit, "I don't know about you guys, but if we ever meet eye to eye, I will turn into the most obedient fucker there ever was. Yes, sir. Always sir. Please don't kill me, sir. May I kiss your ass, sir?"

"If he really did solo the guardian monster, it had to be one of the weaker ones," the useful looking guy theorizes.

"Weaker? That bony asshole wiped out ninety percent of our party."

"The hell? Did you guys fuck up, or was it really that strong?"

"Probably both? It was a new one, and we didn't have any prior information, we couldn't even prepare properly. I bet at least some of the assholes in our party were doing their best to get most of us killed so they could take the items."

"Oh, that makes sense. But your raid party could've waited, couldn't they? Someone got greedy."

"Guilty as charged, but don't think I'm joking either. The guy gives me chills, and it's not just his concentration skill. What kind of bastard agrees to play the bait for a guardian monster?"

"So he volunteered? You're serious?" the newbie asks.

I lean back and grin. "Serious as a heart attack. The guy's got a screw loose, I swear. But in a good way. The sort of guy you want to point at the bastards you hate, while keeping him from coming after you."

A woman with a scar running across her eyebrow chimes in. "So, he's a frontline tank?"

"A tank?" I scoff. "Honey, we all thought he was gonna die. Some maybe hoped he was gonna die, you know, bigger share. And then... well, then he didn't. He just... didn't. That skeletal monstrosity totally ignored us like that guy was the only one worth its attention. I almost died to that fucking arrow it pulled out of its ass at the end. Meanwhile, the crazy bastard was just there, unfazed, dodging and weaving like it was god-damn dance night. Then he just waited like he was curious to see what kind of bullshit the guardian would use to attack him next. Who the fuck does that?"

A nervous cough from one of the weaker-looking guys. "So, when you say 'murdered the guardian monster alone' ... you mean, like, actually alone? Nobody helped him?"

"Are you fucking deaf?" I turn to the dumbass who has asked that. "I could sense it. Whatever bullshit that guy was preparing to face the guardian, I didn't want to be near it. You just instinctively know you don't want to be in the area."

"Well, good luck with that." That asshole smiles and nods towards the door the mana boy is returning from as he starts walking in my way.

All that could be a coincidence, but what isn't is his eyes glued on me as he walks toward me.

He stops as he reaches me and says, "You owe me 30% of the value of the items you grabbed before you ran away."

Motherfuc...

"Yes, sir! I was looking for you because of that!"

POV Nathaniel

Surprisingly, the archer guy just keeps nodding and smiling. He quickly names the items he was able to take before he ran. Unsurprisingly, the two low arcane items and two upper epics, from how he describes them, are fairly valuable.

He tries to be sneaky and offer me 30% of the value of the shards he would get if he sold them to the system shop, where he would only get between 10-20% of their value.

I gently correct him. I'm not too unreasonable, so I assume he would be able to get 50% of the value, not unlike the deal I got from the lynthari merchant, and so I ask for 30% of that.

In the end, he transfers me 39 thousand shards.

I observe him as we speak, and even though he seems sour about it, I don't really think it's all that much to him. More likely, he is just annoyed that he has to pay while the guys I haven't met before don't have to.

"What primordial energies do you have?" I ask after the transfer is complete.

"I don't know, and it's pretty rude to ask, man, hehe," he smiles, that smile some men can do that shows their teeth. With his stubby beard and wavy, long hair it makes him look rugged and not much different from a man known as Strider from one of my favorite movies.

It must be nice to be handsome.

"You know what's rude?"

"Oh man, I know what you want to..."

I don't let him finish. "Agreeing to let someone serve as bait while..."

"Come on, you almost literally begged us to use you as bait."

"...while relying on their teammates, who promised to use the time to kill the..."

"We did our best."

"...kill the monster, and then running after barely managing to do any damage, all while the other guy fights for his life."

"I did damage it a little bit."

"That's what I consider rude," I finish.

"Stellar Wind," he sighs. "It's not like I planned to keep it hidden. Such a rare form of primordial energy will get me plenty of attention from the other guilds and force the Primordial Knights to offer me something nice."

"I see. How did you get it?"

"You have to agree, THAT is a very shameless question."

Looking at his eyes, I give it a bit of thought before I agree with him. "I guess. Where are the others from our raid party?"

"No idea. They ran away the moment we got the kill notification."

"Shame."

"Right? Are you with Primordial Knights now?"

"It's difficult to say, but if that bald guy I came with asks, then I said 'yes.'"

One of the guys to the side decides to join the conversation. "Don't you know his name?"

"Weslin," I decide to answer.

"Damn. What's a monster like him doing on this floor?"

Before I can say anything, the archer speaks up. He looks at me first. "By the way, I'm Talon." Then he turns to the guy who spoke. "And who the hell is Weslin?"

"Sometimes they call him The Null King, he's one of the top dogs in Primordial Knights and likely the best user of Primordial Void currently in the Beyond."

Talon blinks and then glances back at me. "You friends with him?"

"Not really."

"You should become one. If you don't want to, just give me an introduction instead. I don't mind handling the communication part, so you can stay in the background and continue training and fighting head-on with monsters many levels higher than you."

I suspected it from the start, but this guy really is a social butterfly. A pure extrovert and an opportunist. The worst part is, even though he talks like this and doesn't seem to be hiding much, his face and easygoing nature make it seem like it might just be some harmless quirk. People around him actually find it amusing and listen to him.

At that time, Weslin finally exits the door, likely having received the package he's meant to be delivering to the third city. When he spots me, he heads my way.

"There you are, making friends?"

"Sir Null King! Greetings, I'm Talon and..." The archer starts right away but stops in the middle when he sees Weslin's expression.

Weslin stares at Talon, his expression a mix of mild annoyance and amusement. "The fuck are you on about? Stop licking boots. You'll wear your tongue out before you even get a contract signed."

That shuts Talon up for a second. The gathered people exchange glances, most of them clearly uncertain how to react. A few smirk at Talon's expense, but nobody dares speak up, at least not right away.

I stay quiet and watch the scene with part of my focus. At the same time, I adjust my Restrictive Training Emblem to draw a bit more out of it and start feeling the damage it's doing to my body. In response, I quickly tweak my construct to let bits of thermal energy flow through me, just enough to heal the worst of it without fixing too much. My body needs to take damage for the emblem to work the way it should.

Lastly, I keep manifesting a mana orb inside my closed fist, dissolving it right away, then creating it again. Each time, I make small changes and continue my testing of the skill.

Talon, shameless as ever, chuckles and shrugs off Weslin's words. "Fair enough. No harm in trying, right? Got to grab any chance that comes your way, hehe."

Weslin sighs, clearly done with the bootlicking. He glances at the others. "Any more bright questions or comments?"

No one says anything.

Weslin shifts. "Good. Enough gawking. Rookie, let's go before I start losing brain cells just standing here."

I follow, but as we head off, I hear Talon's voice behind us, low but clear. "Remember my friendly face if you make it to the top, mana boy!"

Weslin snorts without turning. "He's got better things to remember than your mug, and at least get your contract signed before you talk crap."

That more or less says anything I could answer, so I just turn around.

Then, as we leave through the door, I shrug. Just once.

The expression on Talon's face is well worth it.

Chapter 646: Disable that skill

As we take our leave, I wonder if I'll ever see that shameless guy again. At this point, I wouldn't mind, even if it was only to observe the way he uses his primordial energy. Even now, there are so many things that make me curious about him, in particular, what his primordial energy might do. My best guess is that it has something to do with the multicolored light he used instead of an arrow that managed to pierce the Harvester's skull.

There was also something about his movements that felt off, too, so maybe that's part of it as well?

Just more fodder for the enormous pile of questions I already had. I wonder if I'll still have this many five, ten, or even a hundred years into the system.

Obviously, that depends on whether I can solve the problem of my body modifications clashing with the system given ones. Lissandra estimated a deadline of ten to twenty years, but with three of my new constructs? Probably not as long.

But that is what I'll continue to do. I'll just keep running downhill, increasing my speed so I don't fall, doing everything I can to make sure I don't stumble along the way.

My first test will be killing Faora before she finishes her tutorial and returns to her planet. Everything I do now, including the custom training and experiments, has been done in preparation for facing her.

Weslin says we should reach the third city in four to seven days if we hurry. He doesn't seem to be worried about the possible dangers of the floor. With him being the kind of person who reached the fifth floor of Beyond, I'm not that surprised.

In the third city, there's a portal that Weslin plans to use to get us to the third floor, where a bigger branch of the Primordial Knights can deal with me. Something tells me that he's impatient to get rid of me, like a hot potato he intends to let someone else handle. But Faora is likely on the third floor, so that's exactly where I want to go. That's why I follow through and continue with my planning. I will deal with the problem known as the Primordial Knights later, they're not all that important at the moment.

My mental training continues as well, and every hour I learn a tiny bit more about my newest skill, and it's always just a bit more than before. I start thinking that even though I'm normally confident, I may have underestimated myself.

During one of our short breaks, Weslin turns to me. "Yo, newbie, I'm getting tired of that bitch face of yours. Just be a man, disable that concentration skill, and talk to me normally."

I look at him and then glance around us. The space between cities is huge, and I suspect the second floor might be much, much bigger than the first. Even as fast as we're moving, there are still a few days left until we reach the second city, and a few days beyond that before we make it to the third.

That's probably why Weslin seems to be getting bored.

I suspect one of the main problems this floor presents is crossing these huge distances while avoiding monsters. Here on this floor, they are...

"You bastard, are you thinking about useless stuff again?!"

I look back at him. "Even without my concentration skill, I don't talk much, especially not with people I barely know."

"You talked a bit before."

"You were giving me a lot of information I didn't already know, but you stopped doing that, and then you started babbling on about a bunch of useless stuff most of the time."

"So my adventures from before the tutorial are useless stuff?"

"Maybe I misspoke." I correct myself a bit.

"You betcha you did, you little shit. Well, I can disable it myself, right?" He takes a step toward me and enters my reach without a speck of worry.

The light of the crystal embedded in the ceiling of this enormous cave, miles above us, shines down and reflects off his bald head.

“You think I can’t do it?” he asks threateningly.

“I think you probably can,” I reply.

“Let’s try then...” he says with a smile, and his primordial void rises around him. Then, in a way I haven’t seen before, it reaches out for me.

Even though I defend and try to stop it, it disables the effect my concentration skill has on my emotions, in what can only be a great display of delicate and precise, if powerful, use of void energy.

Weslin smiles brightly while he waits, as if counting down, “You know, I’ve learned how to deal with guys like you. I can pick out concentration type skills from the unique feeling they give off. Don’t ask me how I do it, maybe I’m truly a genius, but some of the things I can do with void energy no one in the Primordial Knights can understand.”

As he says that, all my other skills activate, but the part of [Focus] that affects my emotions feels distant and out of reach. It’s unlike anything even Professor Feran could do.

Weslin takes a step closer. “What now? Want to punch me?”

“A bit,” I agree. “But do you think my control over myself is so pathetic that I’d do it the moment after you disable my skill?”

I face his eyes until he groans in an annoyed manner and mumbles something about this being a boring mission while he kicks the rock on the ground.

That’s when I channel and unleash a surge of mana at him. It roars through me, moving so fast it ravages my body as I drive it forward with all my strength, sacrificing control for speed.

Even though there isn't as much of it as there was back then, it still explodes in his direction, just like it did against the Witherclaw during the tournament.

It tears the area around us apart in one huge blast. Debris rains to the ground as I stand unmoving, and the air is filled with a distant hum and the scent of mana.

In the middle of the resulting crater, Weslin still stands, completely untouched and still with his back to me. His primordial void flickers across his skin as he turns his head around.

"Stop fucking polishing your head, it's blinding me..." I don't get to finish the sentence because he is suddenly standing in front of me.

I absorb the kinetic energy of his first blow and redirect it through my body, using it to meet his next attack and then reposition. That same feeling of void trying to cut me off from my skill reaches toward me, and I don't hesitate to compress my mana into a black orb, which I place between us.

The surface of the orb wobbles, and the orb itself elongates and stretches. But then it bounces back into the shape of an orb.

It just fully resisted void energy disruption from someone who's probably close to a hundred levels higher than me.

Staring into Weslin's eyes, I grab the orb in my hand and squeeze, letting it seep into my body, where it flows through me, slowly feeds on my mana, and compresses it the same way.

I've seen him fighting often enough, so I don't even bother with ranged attacks. The best chance I have against Weslin is to fight him at melee. Or possibly from a distance with matter-based ranged attacks, but there's no way I would try that now.

With my suppressed emotions slowly rising within me, I reach him. The field around him flickers with void energy and disrupts my kinetic strikes, but I rely on my body, strengthened by black mana. Honestly, I'm not the greatest at mana based body reinforcement, but with the amount of mana I currently hold, I don't have to be.

Weslin blocks my punch with his forearm and punches me, sending me staggering back. The skin on the arm I used to block twists like a whirlpool, and flesh, skin, and blood explode as a hole is punched right through me.

Once again, he's in front of me, delivering another punch, which I partially manage to block. As another hole appears in me, I throw thermal energy at him. It blazes all around us, setting the grass on fire, heating up the dirt, and rising high into the sky in a rush of golden flame.

And he just swings his arm while primordial energy moves around it. As if it were blowing out a candle, the flame around me disappears.

A few more exchanges earn me a few more wounds. His body is ridiculously strong and durable, and even the technique he's been showing off is great. But he's still holding back, and I can use that against him.

I gather kinetic energy again and move. This time, as he sends a wave of void energy at me to disrupt it, and I force black mana from my pathways to the surface of my skin. His void energy bounces off it and fails to reach the kinetic energy beneath.

Wraith Dance brings me to his side, and I absorb my inertia, causing him to miss. Then I move again, using the kinetic energy the entire time, and bury my fist into his face with all the power I can gather. It sends a shockwave rippling out around us, so strong it looks like waves spreading through the grass.

Slowly, Weslin turns to me, with my fist still against his face. He is smiling.

"I didn't expect that," he says.

I don't see what happens, but in the next moment, I find myself flying through the air. As if in slow motion, I watch him move toward me.

Not for a moment do I take my eyes off him. I absorb the inertia of my flight while clashing with his new attempts at disruption. I adapt to face them and stop him from interfering with my kinetic energy. I send

a pulse upward and push myself toward the ground. As my feet touch the grass, I use Pulsar Stance to avoid three attacks aimed at me.

I release a seal on my heart a slight bit more and push all that heat into the area. And while he deals with that, I push through the golden flames with a Wraith Dance.

Even without [Focus], I feel myself settling into the familiar calm that comes during a fight. I concentrate on all the information I can gather. I keep coming up with ways to fight him. I keep handling the black mana, transferring bits of normal mana that regenerate into kinetic energy before the black mana can take it. I continue to cycle thermal energy through my body, and I keep observing his void energy as I do.

As my fist heads for his rib cage, I send ten pulses of kinetic energy at him, emanating from the front of my fist. All in a fraction of a second, each with a slightly different frequency.

He uses ten similar pulses of void energy that deal with all of them. My fist hits his chest, and I feel the bones beneath crack, but he doesn't seem to care at all. In fact, his smile grows even brighter.

"How about this?" he says, and before I can even move, he sends a hundred pulses of void energy at me.

They bounce off me. They bounce off each other. Some push away the black mana, some try to contain it. Each one is different. About half push the black mana barrier away, even the one I've been using for reinforcement. The rest bounce around inside my body.

When it all stops, the second seal on the Ignition Heart lifts from the strain, and thermal energy floods my body. It forces me to immediately start dealing with it as pain and golden flames fill me.

But Weslin doesn't give me a pause. He punches the exact spot on my chest that I struck on his, cracking a few of my ribs, then lands another blow in the same place.

I barely absorb the slightest bit of the incoming kinetic energy and dedicate more of my mind to handling the thermal energy.

As pain fills me, my body starts healing rapidly. The wounds he caused before close in moments, and even the broken bones begin restoring themselves.

In an effort to counter Weslin, I let some of the thermal energy reach my skin, forcing him to deal with it to continue his assault. At the same time, I shape some of the black mana in my body into a javelin and hurl it into the distance, because I can't handle both it and this amount of thermal energy at once.

Weslin swings his arm again, the flames against me die off, he blocks my attack, endures another, then hits my chest again in exactly the same spot, sending more ripples of void energy piercing into my body.

The third seal around the Ignition Heart lifts just the slightest bit.

The flames surrounding me increase tenfold in a blink, causing Weslin to stagger back and cross his arms in front of him to fend it off. Void energy surges around him, and he takes no damage.

Even now, he moves closer and swings his arm to make the flames die out, and they do. But a moment later, they return, even bigger and more intense than before.

The air crackles with heat, and my skin starts melting and regenerating at an insane speed.

Looking at it, Weslin smiles. "That was almost too easy. I could probably just walk away and let you die from this, right? Damn, man, I really gotta show you at least a bit of how to deal with void energy." He shakes his head.

He swings his arm again, and void energy gathers, surrounding us in a huge loop. It spins around both of us, with void energy flowing inside it. The loop then starts shrinking and spinning faster, and the faster it spins, the stronger its disrupting effect becomes. Gradually, the flames around me die off.

Using the small window of time that gives me, I work as quickly as I can on the Ignition Heart, placing the slightly lifted third seal back in place. As I do, I come to realize that it had lifted even less than I thought, just the tiniest bit.

The seal falls back into place. Then the second. The loop of void energy finally disappears.

My normal mana starts filling me again, and my constructs reactivate themselves. I throw myself onto the ground, resting on my back and breathing heavily. My body is perfectly healed, but the pain makes me feel like my head is going to explode and my body is going to melt.

I move a little and let out a long, painful groan as I do. I turn my head to Weslin, who's still sitting nearby and observing me with curiosity. He's barely taken any damage.

"Is it possible to enter all of Beyond's floors without bothering with the quests? Just by buying the right stuff or passing through portals?"

"Holy hell, man."

"Just answer my question, damn it," I groan.

"Maybe if you didn't look like you were about to die, I would."

"Fuck you."

At that, he smiles. "Bitch."

Only then does he move a bit closer and answer. "It's only the second and third floors you can enter so easily. Getting to the fourth is much more complicated."

"Not so fucking difficult to answer, right?" In the middle of that sentence, I groan from the pain again and close my eyes.

He kicks at the ground, and bits of dirt and small rocks hit my face.

Then I spit some of the grass from my mouth and continue asking questions to distract myself from the pain.

Chapter 647: Ol' Reliable

A while later, Weslin goes off to fight another group of monsters that's been getting closer. I lay in the same spot as before and continue my mental exercises. The ones where I imagine mana flowing through impossible shapes still hurts, but I've made progress with creating two minds to cycle them.

I've decided to call it Load Rotation.

No one ever said I was good at naming things.

Weslin and I both ignore the black javelin stabbed into the ground a mile away, as it hungrily devours all the mana in reach.

As I continue practicing, I keep observing Weslin. After having my ass kicked by him, I can easily say he's stronger than Faora. I just can't imagine her being able to do anything to him, not with that primordial void energy protecting his mind. Even my black mana struggled to counter him. Although in this case, I blame it more on myself. I wasn't willing to create a denser version of black mana because I knew I wouldn't be able to control it properly yet.

I have a pretty clear view of my capabilities, thanks to my many deaths during the tournament.

Of course, I also know that if I needed to, I could push myself further than what my tests in the tournament showed. The real sense of danger and possible death just has that kind of effect on me.

It also makes me wonder if part of that comes from the effects of my Pride subclass. Even now, the things that subclasses actually do are hard to grasp. It's more about a feeling rather than accurate numbers or something easier to quantify.

Still, I'm sure my subclass is constantly affecting me and my skills. That would explain why I'm better at some things than some people who should be comparable to me.

Some of his fights feel like they can barely be called combat and feel more like executions. He's clearly too overpowered for this area. His void energy disrupts the enemies' mana and primordial energy-based attacks, so most of the fights end up being physical. In that, with his powerful body and nearly unpierceable skin, he usually has a clear advantage.

In my estimate, he doesn't put many points into dexterity. Most likely, he focuses on strength, with part going into constitution and a bit less into mana. His skin is probably the result of a powerful trait or a combination of merely strong ones.

Maybe he's even over level 400 with his third trait, but I've already asked, and he refuses to tell me.

When he returns to me, I ask, "Why didn't you buy blue bones to create a portal to the third floor? Wouldn't that be quicker?"

While cleaning blood from his hands, he looks at me. "Probably? But there's a package I need to deliver to someone in the third city, so I may as well combine the two quests. The last time I was on this floor, I was in rookie city, so I appeared there. I just got lucky enough to find you. If I hadn't met you, I would've just used the teleportation array to get to the third city, but it wouldn't work with you because you haven't been there yet. That's why we have to go on foot."

"You can't fly?"

"You little shit, are you looking down on me?"

"I'm just surprised. I had expected flying to be more common at higher levels."

He snorts. "As if. But we've got a few people in the guild who would already be in the third city and back before we could even reach the second."

"I can fly pretty fast. If I wanted, I could probably run away from you."

"Are you sure? I'd just need to disrupt your flight and kinetic energy to slow you down, and even if it took a while, I would still catch up to you. Then I'd beat the shit out of you for the trouble."

"That's why I didn't do it."

“Nah, don’t think I don’t notice how weirdly cooperative you are. I know bastards like you. You’re probably planning something behind those eyes of yours. To be honest, I don’t care. The others can deal with that. I’ll just do my job.”

I shrug and return to the previous subject. “How many people can fly?”

“Percentages? I don’t know. Probably ten percent? Five? Twenty? I never cared about that kind of thing, to be honest.”

“Aren’t you worried about someone attacking you from above and not being able to reach them?”

This time, a laugh escapes him as he crosses his arms over his chest. “There were assholes like that at times. Oh, so many. And you know what I did? Nothing. I just stood there, disrupted any attacks that reached me, or even let them hit me. Huge explosions, concentrated projectiles, piercing attacks, nothing worked. Most of them get annoyed and leave like the cowards they are. That, or if they’re really dumb, they come closer.”

His smile widens, and his teeth show in a dangerous grin.

Taking a few steps, he’s about to pass by me, but before he does, he taps my shoulder. “I knew you could do that, too, during our fight, but you didn’t. That’s why I like you, newbie. You’ve got balls for facing me up close. But at the same time, you aren’t quite as bad as demons.”

Littering every floor I enter with black mana is likely one of my favorite pastimes. Every time, I just leave it behind because I don’t know what else I could be doing with it.

Even now, we move again, as my condition improves, and the javelin a mile away is about to destabilize. It has finished sucking in all the mana it can handle and is unable to reach for more.

It starts breaking down, and once we are far enough away, it finally explodes. And as a pleasant surprise, I even receive a few kill notifications about some random monsters.

[You have defeated Plains Shadow Wolf - lvl 371]

[You have defeated Plains Shadow Wolf - lvl 369]

[You have defeated Plains Shadow Wolf - lvl 374]

[You have defeated Sandfang Tunnel Serpent - lvl 368]

[You have defeated Sandfang Tunnel Serpent - lvl 358]

[You have defeated Ashcoat Field Scorpion - lvl 376]

...

[Lvl 322 > Lvl 323]

"Why is there sometimes such a huge difference in strength between two monsters at the same level?" I ask Weslin.

"How the hell would I know? I don't care about that kind of stuff."

"I see."

A day later, we pass a mountain range covered in snow. By now, I don't bother asking how it could be possible for it to snow inside a huge cave. I simply admire the enormous mountains. Everything there is eerily still, and I even feel a bit of the chill reaching us.

"What is that place?" I ask Weslin without stopping as I run near him.

He glances to the left. "We call it the Snowy Mountains." Then he turns to the right and points to a black veil filled with lightning. "And that's the Storm."

“Attendees really don’t fuck around with names.”

“Right?” He smirks. “The locals have some fancy names for them, but you won’t get them from me. I forgot them long ago.”

He increases his speed, and I quickly catch up.

After days of running, the area surrounding us is getting stale. It’s still the same beautiful plains filled with lush grass and flowers swaying in the wind in beautiful patterns, but there are no hills, no trees, no lakes. Just an ethereal, never-ending plain, and once in a while, we encounter holes in the ground where monsters climb out.

“I wonder if it could really be so easy to enter every floor of Beyond? You just need some money to buy a portal and get there?” I ask, reiterating a question I never got a real answer for.

Weslin looks amused in a way that makes it clear he’s been asked this question many times before, but this time he answers more in detail.

He even confirms it. “A lot of newbies ask that. But, as I said before, no. That only works up to the third floor. To get to the fourth is harder. And yeah, you’re not the first to notice how weird this place is. Most people just say it’s because it isn’t properly included in the system. Either because it can’t be, or because the Rulers haven’t bothered.”

He gestures at me to speed up and runs more to the right. I follow, increasing my speed to run by his side.

“They say the Rulers were the first to clear the First Dungeon. After that, they used it to link the tutorial and the real world because of the unique properties of this place. Don’t ask me why. No one but the damned Rulers know. I like the theory where those dickhead Rulers cleared the First Dungeon and its floors, similar to how we clear the tutorial. Hell, maybe the tutorial was inspired by the First Dungeon by some asshole who came along before the Rulers. Some also say this place was much more dangerous, but after clearing the floors, the Rulers made it easier for the people who came after. That theory says the Rulers are still clearing deeper floors than we could possibly imagine. And once in a while, one of them dies there.”

"Do they just leave the Ruler's bodies there?"

"Newbie, what the fuck are you trying to say?"

"I mean, wouldn't you have a lot to gain from studying such a body?"

"Newbie, you worry me sometimes. As you and I are now, we would probably turn to soup if we even got anywhere near close to the true body of a Ruler. Why do you think these assholes keep using Projections, Avatars, and Vessels when fucking around?"

"Isn't that lame? I would expect some amount of control from them."

"Sure, some can do that, but others don't bother. And if you're dead, you really don't care what happens around you, right?"

"Oh, the Saint from the third floor?"

"Something like that. Now imagine what a true Ruler's body would do, when even a powerful healer's body like the Saint's fucked up an entire world."

"Probably nothing good."

"Shit beyond your tiny brain's comprehension."

"I see."

"Newbie, you still want to see it."

"Yup," I confirm.

"Well, good luck with that. Now, you've stopped attempting to counter my void disruption. Why? Did you get lazy when I graciously offered to help you with that?"

"I didn't stop. I just changed the way I go about it and decided to observe how that disruption works. It is very different from mana based disruption, and it's quite a bit stronger. Do you think the system created mana-based disruption based on the Primordial Void that existed before it? There are skills that use or help with primordial energies, right?"

"Yes. I have several like that," Weslin looks at me curiously.

"So even though it likely requires more levels or effort, void energy should be possible to counter with the system given skills. There are some active skills or passives that help you fight back against mana based disruption. I think it is possible they were also inspired by something, a fragment, some other primordial energy, or maybe they were just derived from something else."

"And how will that help you?"

"Probably not much, but don't you think it's interesting?"

"Aren't you a curious little jerk?"

"It's you who is weird for not caring beyond making the numbers go up."

"Hey, it's worked so far. So what are you testing?"

"Even though void energy is great at a sort of cutting you off from your powers, style disruption, I think it could be countered by having a better handle on these powers or even straight-up overpowering it."

"Newbie, I don't know you well, but I think I see where you're headed."

I look at him and tilt my head at his reaction. Weslin, as everyone from Hell difficulty and by extension from Beyond, continues to prove himself as a weirdo.

Then I turn my attention back to my body and continue making modifications to my already existing constructs and Mana Cycling, and Thermal Cycling. I do it all while remembering the feeling of that oppressive disruption. It is not something I will keep up at all times, but I create something akin to a switch in my constructs so I can quickly pump things into overdrive. It will make control more difficult, but the modifications I make should lessen the load for a while at the cost of some pain. It will also require more mental control from me, but that's something I'm already working on.

I'm not the most talented person there ever was, so until I properly improve my control, level up my skills, or make my mind more powerful, I will counter these things my way, which still works reliably.

I'll just straight-up overpower it with the sheer amount of mana or primordial energies I hold.

Chapter 648: The third city

We pass by the second city without stopping. Unlike the first, this one has been built up inside one of the craters that dot the ground. The difference is that this one is enormous. It's between two and three miles deep and about a mile wide. The hole is circular, with perfectly smooth edges covered in balconies, holes, and windows that lead to hallways and rooms, and each opening bathes the surroundings in a gentle light, even as the hole continues deeper into darkness.

As weird and creepy as it might be, it's also one of the most fascinating and beautiful cities I've ever seen, and I promise myself that I'll come back to visit sometime in the future.

We head deeper into the second floor, and the area around us doesn't change much. The plains are still filled with the same yellow grass, and a myriad of flowers continue to grow even here. The only difference is that more monsters start to appear, stronger ones at that, and the black stormwall feels as if it's pressing in closer around us. And this time, I can even hear the constant barrage of thunder pouring out of it.

Most of the monsters attacking us seem to be some sort of animal, whether they're creatures I'd recognize from Earth or something I haven't truly seen before.

There are Gleamspeike Lopers, translucent jelly-like creatures with an orange flame pulsing along their spine. They move in this strange sort of leaping motion and scorch anything they touch.

Or Skraiths, which tend to move in swarms. Each one is the size of a football, made of flesh and chitin, and floats like a jellyfish with tendrils that crackle with lightning.

Once in a while, we encounter Behemoths, too. There are several elemental types, often closer to level 400 than 350. These turn out to be bull-like creatures with six legs, covered in brown fur, and with wide black horns on their heads. Each one is easily the size of a small building, and they're extremely aggressive.

While Weslin fights most of them, I watch and study their weaknesses. Sometimes I take down a few myself, mostly with piercing projectiles to avoid causing overly loud explosions. According to Weslin, the noise only attracts trouble he currently does not want to deal with.

As for this member of the Primordial Knights, he, at least, is very efficient. His body is extremely powerful, his attacks pierce through enemies' defenses, which he disrupts with ease, and the way he renders nearly all mana-based attacks useless is fun to watch. I spend a lot of time watching, and as I do, I learn a great deal about the Primordial Void.

Moving this way, we reach the third city. And it's just as fascinating as the previous one. Where the second city was built along the walls of an enormous crater, the last safe zone on this floor makes itself manifest as a gigantic tower. Even though it is very wide, it also rises so high into the air that I'm sure that if the builders had been restricted to Earth's materials, it would have been impossible to construct. And that's without even mentioning the sheer scale.

"Some say the tower is the remains of an attack by one of the Rulers," Weslin says as he stops by my side, also staring at this mile tall colossus made of white material. "They say it killed an Absolute grade monster long ago when the Rulers were exploring the First Dungeon. Over the last few millennia, the locals carved a city into it, aided by an early group that served as a predecessor to the Handlers. Only Champions and Absolutes are capable of carving into the material that makes up the tower."

We start running toward it again, and the closer we get, the more impressive the scale becomes, cutting a grand impression with its myriad of terraces and balconies carved into the surface where it hasn't been built out with other materials to jut outward.

From its many balconies, long strips of colorful cloth, each about the width of a car and nearly as long as a building, hang and gently sway in the wind. They tend to be decorated with paintings and texts that I still can't quite make out from this distance.

Interestingly, the bottom fifth of this tall white pillar is bare of constructions and windows. The surface is almost completely smooth, likely showing how it looked originally. It might not even be made of stone, it could just as well be bone, or perhaps even some kind of wood I have yet to see, or even a material I have no hope of recognizing.

The smooth surface is broken by a single black door the size of a two-story building and just as wide. Its entire surface is covered in glowing blue inscriptions.

As we stand in front of it, Weslin pulls a mana stone from his pocket and sends a single pulse toward the door. I try to decipher it in case I want to mimic it in the future, but I realize right away there's just no chance.

If my ability to read mana signatures is like being able to decipher a five to eight letter password, this feels like trying to break one with a few dozen. It's far too confusing and too early for me to attempt.

After a bit of waiting, I hear creaking. The door does not open for us completely, instead, a small entrance forms at the bottom of the door. It looks like it's probably tall enough for even a velnar to pass through, but it's just so tiny compared to the size of the door and laughable compared to the city itself.

As we pass through the entrance, we cross some kind of barrier that places a mark on us.

"Don't remove it," Weslin warns me. "This city is the King's domain, and everyone who enters receives his mark."

I do as I'm told, though it doesn't stop me from observing the mark out of curiosity. I even probe and poke at a few parts that I am sure have nothing to do with tracking, but I still can't figure out their purpose.

I keep doing this as we pass through a huge, wide open, circular space, with a number of locals and attendees moving about.

The floor is made of the same material as the outside of the tower, as are the inner walls.

There are multiple elevators stationed in the exact center of the room. Some are big enough to fit several buses all at once, while others are clearly meant to ferry smaller groups of people and can therefore move much faster.

Around the edges of the space is a huge stairway that coils upward. Just wide enough for about ten people to walk comfortably side by side.

The entire area is illuminated by dozens of crystals embedded throughout the space. They've been placed under the stairs, on the floor, and simply positioned around the darker corners like lamps.

"Sir Weslin!" one of the locals shouts, rushing up to us. A woman wearing clothes similar in style to the uniform Weslin is wearing, white mixed with pale blue.

"Narisa, how the hell are you still working for the Primordial Knights? I told you, you can do better," Weslin snorts the moment he sees her.

That only seems to amuse her. From her expression, she does not look surprised or scared in the least. She seems used to this man's behaviour.

"I am now the local director for this city's branch of the Primordial Knights, Sir Weslin. I wouldn't say I'm doing badly."

"Did they raise your pay?"

"They tripled it, and I negotiated some hefty performance bonuses on top of that. The contract is for three years only, so I will renegotiate later to get even more."

"I guess that doesn't sound so bad."

"Right? I don't know many locals who make nearly as much as I do. I made sure to use offers from their competitors to push my deal higher. I might have used your name once or twice during the talks."

"I wouldn't be surprised to find out that it hurt your case more than it helped."

"Always so ready to put yourself down, Sir Weslin. But we are being rude. Will you introduce me to your companion?" She turns to me with a look of curious calculation.

Instead of answering, I let Weslin speak. He says, "Yeah, that's Nathaniel Gwyn."

To my surprise, that seems to tell her everything she needs. "Oh, that person. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mister Gwyn. I am glad you decided to accept the invitation to join the Primordial Knights. I am sure you won't regret it."

"I was kidnapped."

That makes Narisa freeze for a moment. Her smile fades slightly as she looks at Weslin.

"Yup," he confirms.

Her eyes move between me and him. "I'm sure it's not as bad as it sounds, and there must have been a good reason..."

"He threatened me, kidnapped me, and said he would hand me over to someone called the Doc if I refused to join. He also beat me so badly I had to lie on the ground for thirty minutes because I couldn't walk from the pain."

Weslin looks like he wants to argue, but after he realises that, even if it is a bit out of context, it's all still true, he stays silent.

That silence tells Narisa enough. "May we talk, Sir Weslin?"

"Sure," he says and waves at me. "Newbie, go explore the city for a while. I'll catch up once I get your transfer ticket from the guild. The portal can only be used once a day, so you'll have a few hours anyway."

"I will. It's been nice meeting you, Miss Narisa," I say, hoping to confuse the poor locals a bit more and potentially give Weslin a bit more trouble, before turning around and heading off into the city.

Since Weslin didn't specify where I should go, I start walking upstairs, curious to see just how high I can climb before I reach a restricted area or before Weslin decides to come looking for me. I'm also curious to find out how he intends to find me. Maybe he'll do it by using the mark the door placed on me. That thing is very interesting, and from what I can see of its structure, it's very versatile as well.

There's a node built into it for something like telepathic communication. I recognise it because it has a striking similarity to that thing Dennis and Aaron can do. There's also a structure tacked on for teleportation. Maybe it could be used to forcefully teleport me somewhere else, perhaps some kind of prison. Then there are functions for stunning, restraining, causing pain, and other, more sophisticated effects.

To be honest, it's pretty scary, and the ease with which it was placed reminds me of the Harvester. I start thinking of a way to defend against these placements in the future.

At the same time, I realise the mark is removable. I think I could get rid of it right now if I wanted. It would not be easy, but it is possible. So I think, rather than being a clear gesture of aggression, it's intended as more of a warning meant to coerce attendees into behaving while in the king's city, who would seem to be a powerful Champion.

As I walk through the tower, I explore some of the smaller shops. A few guides try to offer advice, of course, asking for shards in return. I notice more guild branches and places to stay, either waiting to be rented out to attendees or serving as permanent homes for the locals.

There are no guards. None at all. And yet the city is very peaceful. After a while, I even learn to follow the frequency the mark gives off, and I realise that everyone here, even the locals, have one.

What an interesting way to keep order.

As I begin to approach the higher floors, I start seeing more professional smithies, bigger shops, and auction houses, paid entry parks, and even the odd restricted area. The architecture keeps changing, and an interesting thought comes to mind. According to Weslin, this place was carved out over the course of several millennia, so of course it makes sense that things changed as new parts were added hundreds of years after the oldest ones.

It's while I'm exploring one of these floors, my mark activates, and an excited voice sounds in my mind.

(Hello!)

Chapter 649: Spark

(Hello?) I send back.

(Hello!) The voice in my head replies.

This time, I follow it properly and confirm that it's coming from the mark that was placed on me when I entered the tower.

(Are you the king of this city?) I ask.

(It seems that way!)

I blink a few times and glance around. Then I decide I should sit down, so I move over to a nearby bench.

(Seems that way?) I ask.

(It is difficult to say sometimes, with there being so many copies of me.) The voice sounds like a man in his thirties, maybe, but it has a strange sort of innocence to it.

(I don't think I can really agree or disagree without more context. Also, don't you have more important things to focus on than talking to me?)

(Does that make you a stalker then?)

(I... I'm not going to lie, that definition is pretty close to the truth, but not really. There are a few more versions of me doing the same thing. I saw you with that rude guy, Weslin, before. Are you a disciple of his or a rookie freshly enrolled in the Primordial Knights?)

(I am neither. In the same way, you could almost call yourself a stalker, I could almost be called a victim of kidnapping. Are you a mind mage by any chance?)

(Don't insult me. I only use my mind and marks to track people and observe them through the devices placed throughout the city. I don't like to eavesdrop, that would ruin the fun of making my own observations and guesses. But some other parts of me might. Some of us are very curious.)

(So the 'other parts of you' that you've been referring to are different parts of your mind?)

(Hehe, I can guess why you might think that. I can sense you experimenting with something similar after all. I noticed it when I placed the mark on you. But no, it is not really like that. It is different from what you've been doing, but I won't tell you more. Do you want me to save you from Weslin? Kidnapping people isn't nice.)

(Thanks for the offer, but no.)

(Are you not angry at him? For kidnapping you and hauling you to the third floor? I know for sure that I would.)

(A bit, but so far it fits with what I was trying to do anyway. Are you a Champion?)

(Probably? I personally prefer watching people, but there are parts of me I can call on or ask for help. They're super strong. There are two or three that are fully combat-oriented and would have no trouble killing everyone in the city in mere moments if they wanted to.)

I pause my thoughts there. Yes, that totally sounds like a Champion, even though this one is really fascinating. I would have guessed it was someone who could split their mind like me, who'd messed up

somewhere and created some sort of split personality. But he said that is not it. So maybe it is something more like duplication, intent, or an avatar, or something similar?

Leaning back, I notice myself tapping my finger on the back of my hand as I think. Maybe it really is something entirely different. But what? A Champion who acts as the main mind, meaning that the one I am talking to is something like a logic core that thinks it is the mind or the Champion? An artificial mind? A program?

Maybe he's a new kind of race, kind of like a seven-headed hydra, each head having its own mind?

It could also be some kind of fancy trait, a passive ability, or a skill.

(Can you tell me what exactly you are?) I ask.

(Nope.)

Well, that's it then.

I try again. (I am curious, so I hope it does not offend you. Do you want something in exchange for the answer to that question?)

(Hehe, people are rarely as bold in their curiosity as you. But I have to refuse. Still, I quite like you. You really do not want me to ask a stronger part of me to stop Weslin and sneak you up to the third floor? I can ask the part of me in control of the portal to let you use it.)

(Thank you, but there's no need at the moment. Is it possible for me to see your body? Or talk to the main part of you?)

(Not really! And there is no main part. Each part is equally real. As for the body, we never leave our room at the top of the tower. Only parts of me move around to observe the city, guard it, run experiments, support the city arrays, and things like that. Our body has not left the room in a few hundred years. I am called Spark. And you?)

I see no reason to lie, and so I give my name to likely one of the greatest introverts I have ever met.
(Nathaniel.)

My respect for the guy grows by a notch. I couldn't imagine doing something similar, but who knows.
Maybe in a few hundred years, I'll have the chance to go on a training arc like that.

(Spark, can you tell me about Faora and Luan? Do you know them? I can give you their descriptions.)

(I can't.)

(I see.)

(Are you angry?)

(I'm not.)

Spark lets out a laugh. (I can see that you're not lying, hehe.)

(Why would I? I thought I'd try, but I didn't have any expectations. So, do you need anything from me?)

(I don't! I just wanted to watch you for a bit and talk. But I can't annoy the attendees too much or the other me will get angry. So, in exchange, I'll answer your questions. If you ask for something big, I'll either refuse or ask for something more as payment!)

(That sounds good to me.) I answer, filtering out the background noise a bit.

While sitting on the bench, watching people move around, I anticipate the next question.

(Wait a moment! Another part of me has joined and wants to take part in the conversation too, so I'm trying to send him away!)

(I don't mind.)

(You don't?)

(I don't,) I repeat.

(Great! This is Marble. He's a bit rude sometimes, so please forgive him,) Spark says as he introduces another part of this city's King.

That new voice joins. It sounds the same as Spark's, but it lacks the excitement and innocence. Instead, it carries less emotion and sounds deeper overall.

(Human, there is something off about your body. Will you allow me to use the mark to observe it?) it asks right away.

(What will I get in exchange?)

(Yes! Don't be rude, Marble. Offer something. It's very rude to probe attendees like that. Remember what Sunshine always says!)

(I'm willing to offer equal payment to satisfy my curiosity, Spark. I know attendees are greedy, and such transactions always make things easier.)

Spark sounds a bit louder now. (That was rude too! Please forgive him, Nathaniel.)

(It's okay,) I say. (What interesting or useful information are you willing to give me in exchange for probing my body, Marble?)

For a moment, he falls silent before speaking again. (I have a hard time judging what attendees consider interesting or useful. But there are four pieces of information my other selves were interested in as of late, so maybe you'll find them interesting too. You can pick one.)

(That works for me. What are they?)

(Someone threatened to destroy the 1st and 2nd floors of Beyond. Then there was the death of someone important. The number of times attendees have tripped over their own feet while trying to look mysterious or intimidating in the past 500 years - the actual number will surprise you. And finally, a detailed chart tracking how many times attendees have tried to secretly feed the sparrows on the 26th floor of the city, only for the sparrows to completely ignore them. This one is long term, observed over the past 1,000 years.)

I sit on the bench and stare into the space in front of me.

Some of these don't feel like the others.

Both Spark and Marble wait patiently while I make a difficult decision.

(The first question and the second one. What would you want in exchange for both?)

(Are you sure, Nathaniel? The actual number of tripping attendees would really surprise you!)

Spark probably doesn't realize how close I am to picking that one.

(Maybe next time I come to the city.)

(He has picked his questions, Spark.) Marble says. (For the first one, I'll probe your body. For the second one I will...)

(What are you two doing!) A third voice joins the conversation. It sounds the same as the other two, just stricter.

(Veil!) Spark says, and I can hear fear in his voice.

I feel Marble trying to slip away, but something holds him here just like Spark.

(You two aren't going anywhere! What information are you trying to give to the rookie attendee!)

(But Veil! Nathaniel and I are friends.)

(We've made a fair trade, Veil. Please don't interfere.)

(I'll just sit here, then. Carry on.)

(I'm sorry, Nathaniel. It's just Veil being rude. Veil, apologize to Nathaniel!)

(I agree with Spark, Veil.) Marble says. (You barged in so rudely, even though I...)

(Argggghh, just be quiet. How could I not barge in when you're about to talk about this information.)

Marble's voice softens a little. (I see. I guess it really was too much to offer information about the chart of the number...)

(Not that!)

(Veil, you're getting riled up,) Spark warns.

I reach towards my bag next to me and pull out one of my last, and according to our calculations, around 100 thousand dollars' worth bar of chocolate. I take only a few pieces before I carefully package it and put it into the bag while eating the ones in my hand.

After a bit of fighting, the conversation shifts when Marble says, (Veil, you probably would want to probe his body too. I got only a hint, but look at this.)

Then there is a long silence, and in peace I finish the chocolate.

(Mmm, I guess we could come to a trade agreement. But the chart is out of the question. Breeze spent too much time on it just to give it away so freely.)

(I'm fine with that.) I say.

(Thanks for your understanding, Nathaniel!)

(You are welcome, Spark.)

This time Veil addresses me, (Well then, the information about someone threatening to destroy the 1st floor and the death of someone important in exchange for a deep probe of your body. We will not touch your mind and will swear an oath not to share it with anyone other than ourselves, even if it would mean our death.)

(I agree.)

As I do so, Veil recites the oath, (We swear by our name, by our mark, and by our bond with this city. The knowledge we gain through this probe, or that any part of us gains by any means in relation to this act, will not be shared, shown, spoken of, or otherwise conveyed to any being or force beyond ourselves. This includes all parts of us, present or future, known or unknown. This oath will bind us wholly and without condition, and shall hold even if our ruin or death be the cost. This is our word.)

I confirm its reality by the feeling of weight these oaths have, and observe the entire process. As always, calling the system as a judge is a very interesting process.

(Go on,) I say.

Then these three presences, through the mark placed on me, start examining my body. It isn't as creepy as I expected it could be, and it doesn't feel all that intrusive either. They're being very careful about it

and never go any deeper than they need to. And the mark serves as a great boon to the process. With their work, it expands through me and allows for a deeper scan.

While they do so, I continue to hear their voices.

(Nathaniel, how are you still alive!)

(Isn't that Cycling similar to The Absolute's?)

(This is such a mess. How can all these things fit there?)

(Two hearts. You're so cool, Nathaniel! The demons must love you!)

(Statistically, he shouldn't even be alive right now.)

(When was the last time you saw someone with this kind of stat distribution?)

(Nathaniel, how are you still alive!)

(What is this?)

(Connection? Maybe to bond?)

(It feels scary.)

When it's finally done, Veil leaves after a brief thanks.

(Thanks for your patience, human. Spark, you're coming with me. Right now.)

(Sorry, Nathaniel, I have to go. They probably want to reprimand me again. I'll see you later!)

(See you, Spark.)

Only Marble stays, and from him I get two pieces of information.

About a certain Absolute who escaped the tutorial and threatened to destroy the first two Beyond floors. Something Marble and the other parts of the King noticed, and even feared, as it was happening, finding themselves unable to push back against that incredible power.

The second piece of information connects to this as well. The Ruler of Envy is dead, killed by the imitation of The Ancient Monster that once tore through the Beyond. She is now trapped on the 12th floor, where her fate remains uncertain.

And the last piece of information I get is for free. The death of the Ruler of Envy means one of his Masters will sooner or later be crowned as the new Ruler of Envy. Then they will gain privileges and the opportunity to pass through the floors the same as the Rulers before them and head deeper into the First Dungeon to prove themselves.

They might stop at the 11th floor like the other Rulers did. Or maybe they will head deeper, to the 12th floor, in an effort to kill the monster entrapped there.

Chapter 650: Just good luck

In the end, I offer Marble two chocolates and a blue sports drink. He hesitates for a moment but eventually accepts and points to the place he wants me to leave them. Someone will be along later to pick them up and bring them to the room where the body he shares with Spark, and Veil is locked away.

And in return, I get an answer to something that's been stuck in my mind ever since he mentioned it.

The number of times attendees have tripped over their own feet while trying to look mysterious or intimidating in the past 500 years.

(Really?) I ask, after he tells me.

(I told you it would surprise you.) Even though he speaks in his usual, calm, deep voice, I can hear the satisfaction beneath it, he's clearly pleased by my reaction.

(But how?)

(I know, right? It's really surprising.)

(I never would've expected that.)

(None of us did either.)

After that, we spend a bit more time talking until Weslin comes to get me.

As we walk through what, by my estimation, must be the center of the tower, we enter a floor that seems to be completely empty. It's a massive open space, broken only by a large portal framed in twisted silver metal shaped like roots. And through it, I can see the third floor.

There are no guards and no locks, but after everything I've seen, that doesn't surprise me anymore.

Weslin and I pass through and leave the second floor behind.

Welcome to the 3rd floor of the First Dungeon!

There are multiple safe zones distributed across the floor. Each safe zone has a capacity limit of 100, 1,000, or 10,000 individuals.

During daytime hours, it is possible for the number of individuals in a safe zone to exceed the designated maximum. However, if the number of individuals remains above the capacity limit by nightfall, the offending safe zone will permanently lose its function as a safe zone.

Individuals who have been present on the 3rd floor for a duration of 24 hours or less, either as a result of utilizing a Beyond Stay Token or by recently entering the floor, are not included in the safe zone capacity calculation. Once the 24-hour period has elapsed, these individuals will be included in the capacity count in the same manner as all others.

3rd Floor quest: Contribute to the creation of new safe zones

Rewards:

14-day Stay Token

100,000 shards

Activation stone for the portal to the 4th floor

Most of all, this floor reminds me of the environment of the Astral Prison. Rocky plains stretch out in every direction, eventually giving way to mountains and hills. Only broken up by clusters of ancient-looking trees.

But the ceiling of this enormous cave cannot be seen. It feels as if it's much higher than it was back on the other floors, and it's covered in what looks like clouds, through which light shines down, sometimes slipping through holes in their cover, allowing their warm rays to fall on the ground.

"So, any info you would like to share?" I ask Weslin after rereading the information on the third floor.

"Maybe? I mean, should I, though? You've already gotten to the third floor like you wanted. You might try to run away."

"Didn't you tell me you could easily stop me and kick my ass if I tried?"

"Yes, but it would be too much of a bother at this point."

Under his eyes, I just shrug. "I won't for now. There's someone I still want to find. If you help me, I might even give a thought to joining the Primordial Knights."

"Was there ever a more annoying little jerk than you?" Even though he says that, he's smiling. "Names."

"Faora and Luan."

"Luan?"

"Yes, Luan."

"As in motherfucking Luan?"

"Probably?"

"Damn, I gotta admire the balls on you. Faora is a bitch, no question, and a dangerous, rabid animal. Even she is too much for you at the moment, but Luan? Why the fuck would you want to mess with that guy?"

"Because of stuff," I answer, as I take a moment to control myself, as happens every time I talk about them. I feel a small smile climb onto my lips. "Luan, not so much, but I would like to talk to Faora."

"Sure, man. Talk. Yeah, yeah. Just talk. Fucking great. I brought you here so you can get killed by that twisted bitch. Damn great."

"I don't plan to die. Is Luan that strong?"

"Not gonna ask about Faora if she's more important?"

"There's no need."

For a while, he stares at me while the quiet of this floor continues to fill the area.

"I'm not surprised you're asking about the two of them at once. For some reason, he's been seen moving with her a lot recently. Luan is... well, insanely talented. He's already an Absolute Candidate and just a step away from S rank."

"Could you beat him?"

"Newbie, I love you for thinking your good ol' kidnapper might be that strong, but we have to be realistic, okay? Even though I'm sure I could fight him for a bit, there's no way I could win, and I would die if I made a single mistake. Wouldn't you agree that would suck for me?"

"I do agree with that."

"Good boy. I always say a man has to have his own mind and make his own decisions, so do whatever you want. But I would strongly recommend putting this off, especially when it comes to Luan. As for Faora, even though she will never reach S rank, she's a very powerful mind mage. Newbie, you probably know that everyone here fucking hates mind mages. The fact that she's survived long enough to become an A rank should tell you something about her."

"I see."

"Yeah, you won't listen. Well, anyway, we'll be heading to one of the smaller safe zones nearby, where I'll get some information before we move deeper into the floor. I need to get you to the Black Tower. It's one of the bigger safe zones here, and we have a branch there that will take care of you."

"It seems like you'll be getting rid of me soon."

"Right? It was fun, newbie, but I ain't built for taking care of rookies. After I deliver you, I'll return to my tutorial for a week or two. When I get back, I'll probably be assigned to some well-paid guild quest, or my Handler might have something fancy for me."

He gestures, and I follow at his side as he heads on into the third floor. This time, he moves faster than he did on the second floor, so I put in more effort to keep up while flying. In some ways, these past days have been good training, and my use of kinetic energy for long-distance running has improved greatly.

"So what's the deal with this floor?" I ask.

"Very simple, newbie. During the day, all is well. Everyone's your friend, monsters are weaker, and it's almost nice out there. But when night comes, stronger monsters start to appear. The longer the night, the stronger they get."

"Stronger than you?"

"Get unlucky, stay in one place too long, or cause too much commotion, and you'll get fucked up, newbie. S-ranks have been known to die on this floor."

"Damn."

"Yeah, damn. You can go out at night, and it's even somewhat safe for about an hour after nightfall. If you're strong or part of a powerful group, you're probably fine. But with just a bit of bad luck, you're finished."

Support creative writers by reading their stories on Royal Road, not stolen versions.

"And the safe zone capacity?"

"Sometimes it feels like I'm either babysitting or doing unpaid work for an information guild."

I open my status and transfer 100 shards to him.

Weslin stops running, and I stop too. He stares at me, and I stare at him.

“You little shit.”

I nod.

He accepts the transfer.

And we continue.

“As the system message says, if you have a safe zone with a capacity of 100 people, and night comes with 101 people inside, it stops functioning as a safe zone, and everyone gets royally screwed. Don’t ask for more than that. They’ll explain it better at the guild branch.”

Seeing that I’d only be pressing my luck, I agree and stay quiet.

We head deeper, and I keep thinking about how damn punishing this place is and how a little bad luck can get you killed. I also start thinking about the rules I’d set to keep an entire safe zone from dying over the actions of one asshole. I’m pretty sure that when night is coming, everyone in the zone checks the number of people there. And if it’s over the limit, well, I bet they wouldn’t hesitate to use... drastic measures.

The safe zone we reach first is small. Just a few buildings at the edge of a small forest. A few people move around, and more of them are in what’s no bigger than a camp.

When we enter, we get a notification.

Welcome to the safe zone.

Current capacity: 86/100

Instead of heading in, Weslin waits, and a man comes to us. At this point, I can more or less guess who’s an attendee and who’s local. This Vyssari seems like a local. Like others of his race, he’s very short and wears little over his scaly legs, just something that looks like shorts.

As he and Weslin talk, I listen.

In a way that seems common on this floor, the vyssari tells Weslin that we'll have to leave because they're expecting people who registered their stay with the intent to return before nightfall. Weslin tells him that we're within our 24-hour period, so we don't count toward the limit.

That noticeably calms the vyssari. After some sort of simple check that washes over me, he confirms it somehow. I take note of what part of me he scanned so I can look into it later.

Weslin then asks for the capacities of the safe zones along the way in the direction we're heading, and the vyssari shares the information easily.

It's all clearly business as usual.

Looking at me with a smirk, Weslin turns to the vyssari one more time in a way that is clearly meant to make fun of me. "Have you seen a four armed thylarin and a feylith woman in the area?"

Unexpectedly, the vyssari lights up at the memory. "Oh, I did. Not that long ago. The thylarin was extremely powerful and helped us hunt a monster we needed for material. They left just a while ago."

The rest of his words sound distant, with a dark hum echoing in the back of my mind.

Weslin's shoulders slump, and slowly he turns away from the vyssari, who keeps talking about the thylarin he met, and looks at me.

When our eyes meet, there is an expression on his face that's hard to read.

Just a few minutes later, we leave the safe zone. In the end, the vyssari doesn't know where the duo that passed through that safe zone could've gone. He just points in the direction they left, possibly having decided to stay a bit into the night to hunt some powerful monster or maybe with the intent to head toward some other safe zone.

Weslin and I are heading that way as well.

“Newbie, once again I would like to remind you...”

“Weslin, want to hear what someone told me before I met Faora and Luan for the first time?” I interrupt.

He doesn’t answer and keeps that serious look.

But I ignore it and stare in the direction we’re heading. “She told me that it’s all just bad luck.”

The construct in my body twists, and I make further modifications. My mind strains to the point I have to combust thermal energy under my skin just to ease the strain a tiny bit. Even that isn’t enough as I push myself further.

Looking in that direction, I wipe away the blood that drips from my nose.

“Maybe this time, it’s time for me to have some good luck.”

Two days pass, and we spend the nights in two more safe zones along the way. One is smaller, with a limit of up to 100 people, and the others a bit bigger, with a limit of up to 1,000. During these days, I do not sleep. I keep preparing.

The nights are filled with roars, reverberations, and distant explosions that grow louder and more powerful the deeper into the night it gets.

Something huge keeps circling the safe zone as well, waiting but refusing to enter.

Most people in the safe zones create sound dampening barriers during the night, but I don’t. Instead, I spend these nights at the edge of the safe zone, looking into the dark night that even my strengthened sight fails to pierce.

On the third day, we leave the place we spent the night before and move onto the final stretch toward the safe zone known as the Black Tower.

I recognize two of the figures we see while heading there instantly.

They notice us too and stop, waiting. Weslin sighs, glances at me one last time, and heads their way.

By the end of the five minutes it takes us to reach them, my [Focus] is almost gone.

"Hello, Faora, Luan," I say.

"Nathaniel! It's nice to see you. Are you doing well?"

"I can't complain."

"How is dear Sophie?"

"She could be better."

Faora laughs, both her hair and eyes turning bright yellow, her small wings flickering in excitement.

She turns to Luan and nudges him. "Did you hear that? She could be better, hehe. And look, he has Weslin with him. Weslin, are you guys going to be adopting this mess?"

"Maybe?" Weslin shrugs. "It's up to the others to decide. Nyssa seemed to..."

"I don't give a fuck!" Faora barks. "Don't think I didn't notice that veiled threat you made by using her name. If I want to, I'll kill him right here, and I don't care what Nyssa might think!"

Weslin stays quiet, and Faora keeps looking between him and me before fixing her hair, which turns red, the same as her eyes. "But it would be rude for me to bully poor Nathaniel, right? So what if I just leave you here and head deeper into the dungeon? That would mean we wouldn't have the chance to meet again before my tutorial ends. That would be terrible for you, right, Nathaniel? Would your pride handle it, especially with how happy you seem at the sight of me?"

I don't answer, and she bursts into laughter. "Luan, let's go. There's no need to deal with someone as weak as him, right?" Her eyes stay on me. "Just tell my sister to stay strong, okay, Nat?"

For a brief moment, her hair turns black and her eyes green.

Time freezes as Luan turns to her. He watches, then his gaze changes, like he has just confirmed something.

Faora herself doesn't seem to realize what she just said, and continues to tease me.

Then she and Luan turn to leave and walk away. By my side, Weslin breathes out in relief.

Then I say.

"Where do you think you're going?"

POV Weslin

"Where do you think you are going?"

Just those words, and everyone stops moving. There is still a chance to de-escalate, but I've already decided to respect this man's decision and won't even try.

He watches to make sure Luan and Faora stop. Then, while she turns to say something, he completely ignores her and turns to me.

“Weslin, can you hold off Luan for a moment?”

I shake my head. “I won’t.”

I don’t know what happened between him and that woman, or what makes him so eager to die at her hands, but I won’t be helping with any of it.

Hearing my answer, he tilts his head in confusion. “Oh, you want shards then?”

Immediately, a notification pops up in front of me.

Incoming transfer of 2,286,688 shards. Confirm?

Yes / No

I have to reread the number a few times, unable to believe he could have that much already. The way the number hasn’t been rounded at all tells me this is likely everything he has. All offered without a speck of hesitation.

And my view of him starts to change.

When I look at him, without having accepted the trade, he's staring back at me with golden circles gleaming around his pupils.

“Is that not enough? Fine, I’ll join the Primordial Knights. I’ll sign a contract without asking for any pay. Or is even that not enough? I’ll make a mid arcane item for you. If you help me with the materials, I can make it upper arcane before your tutorial ends.”

He talks quickly, his eyes wide open. The golden circles seem to bleed light as he pauses, tilts his head, and asks, “Oh, are you maybe scared, Weslin?”

It isn't him being rude or trying to provoke me. It's a genuine question, asked in the same style as everything else he's asked me so many times before, when we were still talking about the floors.

"Weslin," he repeats, and his expression shifts from cold to slightly maniacal. "I don't understand. From your heartbeat and movements, you don't seem to be refusing because I haven't offered enough. So what is it? Is it really that you are scared? Or am I wrong? Is it not enough? Do you want me to beg? I can do it, I can crawl at your feet. I can lick your shoes if that's what you want."

He takes a step towards me, and I step back almost instinctively.

That makes him hesitate, and for that moment, he looks almost sad.

"Weslin," he says. "Why do you hesitate? Why don't you want to fight and push yourself? Aren't you supposed to be really strong? You have such power, greater than I currently have, and yet you hesitate?"

In that moment, I understand, I was wrong about him the entire time.

This man is no different from demons. He might be even worse than any demon I've ever met.

And in reaction to that, something stirs inside me.

How does he dare?

Without hesitation, I refuse the transfer of shards. As I pass by him, I push him aside.

"Don't do it," Luan says simply.

"I don't seem to have any other choice," I shrug, and almost without realizing it, I smile.

What a nice feeling.

The void answers before I even call it. It wraps around me like an old cloak, familiar and cold.

Then I charge Luan, leaving the newbie and Faora behind.