

Tutorial 651

Chapter 651: Stay here with me

I feel the world twist around me, and I appear in that ever-present darkness once again.

Cold liquid reaches my knees. Painful groans and splashes echo all around me. Faora sits on her throne with a single glowing orb providing the only light in this place.

After all the planning, all the constructs, all the training, here I am, easily pulled into her Mind Palace. I can already feel a strain on my mind because of the effects of her thought acceleration.

Memories, either emphasized by me or by the setting itself, keep returning. Memories of those twenty three hours spent lying with my head buried in the dirt.

“Welcome back, Nathaniel,” Faora says from her throne, made of twisted bodies. “I don't know what you're planning, but it won't work, and by the way! I noticed that you've improved your mental defenses a lot, and they're really quite impressive now. But why would you let me take you here so easily? I don't understand. Are you sure it was a good idea? You know, your body's kind of breaking right now. Well, it's not like it wasn't already. You've made some really interesting modifications, too.”

I don't answer, instead, I take a deep breath and force myself to step through the water.

When one of the bodies in the water reaches up to me, I shrug it away and continue walking.

More red drops fall into the dark water, blood flowing from my nose and lip. A few drops of blood stain my clothes; others simply deepen the existing redness.

“Nathaniel, are you angry? Why aren't you talking to me? I thought you missed me. You must have pulled a lot of strings to get to this floor so quickly, and using the Null King? Impressive, you actually got that guy to face Luan. Weslin usually is... well, more free-spirited than that.”

The next step I take is much more difficult, but I continue nevertheless. The bodies reaching towards me scratch me, tear at my clothes, and become stronger. The red water I walk through is incredibly cold, as if it's pulling all the heat and life right out of me.

“Nathaniel,” Faora says again, “I really, really want to break your pride. I thought maybe just leaving you behind, scared that I'd exit the tutorial before you could reach me, would've been nice, but you went and messed that all up. So should I instead, maybe return to the first floor and wait around there for your friends?”

She stops swinging her legs and smiles even more, looking directly at me with eyes wide open.

“Tell me, how is dear Sophie? Did I really break her? Did Izzy cry when you brought her back?”

I stumble slightly, and she bursts into laughter, still pounding on the throne of bodies she sits atop. With every strike, her fingernails draw more blood. She laughs even more as one of the bodies in the water knocks me down, and it takes great effort to get back up again. All around me, the groans continue to intensify.

Then she stops laughing, and the groans disappear as well.

“Why aren't you talking!” she screams. There is no echo at all, her voice simply disappears into the darkness. “What are you planning! Why aren't you using that skill from the last time!? Why aren't you BREAKING!?”

The water around me explodes in motion, and I take another step.

They grab my leg, my arm. Teeth sink into me, tearing away at my flesh. A nail pierces one of my eyes, blinding it. Another rips off my ear.

My movement stops, and Faora stands up. She buries her hand in the pile of bodies that make up her throne and, in a geyser of flesh, pulls out a rib bone with a really sharp edge, holding it like a dagger.

“Why aren't you talking!? Why are you even weaker than you were last time?!” she screams, taking a step from her throne, her face twisted in anger.

Before she can take another step, a pale blue spear pierces through her back and emerges from the front of her chest.

She lets out a loud scream, and the other bodies start to twitch. They let go of me, and I fall back into the cold water.

Just like Faora, who twists her head around in disbelief, I watch as a figure steps out from behind the throne.

It's a young man with black hair, wearing simple, everyday clothes. One of his eyes is gray, the other brown, each encircled by a glowing golden ring that gives them an eerie look in the dim light. Blood flows from his nose, eyes, and ears, just as it does from mine, filling me with ringing waves of pain.

He has a calm expression and takes another step, lifting the spear he holds in one arm higher into the air, raising Faora along with it until her legs dangle there. Blood flows from her mouth and chest, and she continues to scream in pain.

"What have you done, you lowlife fuck! How dare you!" Then she stops for a moment and manages to control her twitching, and her eyes widen. "You... you maniac! Did you really split your mind like this? You... you tricked me!"

Faora starts clawing at the weapon, piercing her, attempting to break the spear. The other broken versions of herself start moving toward the man who stabbed her, but he remains unfazed and lifts her even higher.

While doing so, he looks at me, and I return his gaze.

I nod, and he nods back.

He swings his arm, and Faora's body slides off the spear, flying towards me. She crashes into me, sending us both rolling through the red water. We sink beneath the surface, and as she thrashes, I grab her, wrapping my hands around her neck and starting to choke her.

Red water fills her mouth, and she spits it out, but here, she's stronger than me. I can barely hold on as her thrashing breaks my bones, yet I refuse to let go.

"You maniac, how can someone like you exist! Splitting your mind like this only doubles the effects of my thought acceleration. There's no way your mind can endure more than mine. You're killing yourself, you fucker!"

"Two?" says the second voice in my mind, standing by the throne with a long, pale blue spear in hand.

It is a voice I recognize so well, but at the same time, it sounds so unfamiliar.

Faora stops moving and stares in shock.

"There's a third, small piece that stayed in my body, and it's already moving to kill you," he says.

Then, just like me, he looks at the top of the throne where a small figure sits, having been there the entire time without Faora noticing it at all.

A little girl with black hair and green eyes.

He extends a hand to her, and after a hesitation that feels endless, she takes it, gently placing her hand in his. Then, as he stops manifesting his mind into Faora's, they both disappear.

I grab Faora, and even as she starts to twist again, I force her head underwater. She thrashes and breaks free, kicking me off. But I crawl through the water after her and lock her in a chokehold from behind.

I can feel her trying to escape, but I know it's not that easy. Once her skill activates, there is a minimum amount of time it has to stay on for.

"Faora, don't go. Stay here with me." I whisper into her ear, tasting blood and feeling every strain in my body.

Her struggles grow fiercer, and I cackle even as she rips off my arm and kicks me away again.

She disappears after that, choosing to face the backlash of forcefully canceling her skill.

The Mind Palace falls apart, and I disappear as well.

As the three parts of my mind combine back into one, I find myself outside. My body is already in front of Faora. Barely a second has passed in the external world. Even the black mana isn't fully compressed, and the [Empyrean Lance] hasn't been created.

The side effects of everything that just happened hit me hard, but I ignore them and pull my entire focus into finishing what the third mind started, having a head start over Faora.

But of course, even Faora isn't dumb enough not to know about this weakness. Automatic defenses rise up around her. Arcane items activate, and barriers envelop her.

As she is opening her eyes and they start to get into focus, my black mana clashes against mana based barriers and starts devouring them. I barely deflect the first automatic attack, which tears a massive, bloody gash down my side, then dodge the next.

My lance pierces through the barrier and stops just a hair away from her eyes, held there by her automatic defenses.

Her eyes snap open, and a powerful mental attack slams into me, but my mental defenses are back in place. Her attack weakens as it clashes against my mind labyrinth, both passives and my active defenses.

I change the shape of the black mana into a dagger. I grab it and continue to expand the blade while stabbing at her.

Then, even as I try to stop it, she teleports away.

I track her through the remains of her teleportation, and the countermeasures and traps in it crash against me. My eyes bleed as I take this information in and disrupt it before I teleport as well.

She is already high in the air, flying, and when I move to do it as well, I hear a voice.

(Stop. Defend your mind.)

I do exactly as instructed, raising my mental defenses to their limit. Pain surges through me, causing me to falter, but I manage to stop the attack Faora hurls at me.

Then, mana projectiles shoot from her and head my way, but I raise the black sword and block them all, continuing to clash against her mind.

(I will help.) The voice says again, and the mental attacks assaulting me weaken.

I hear Faora scream, and another barrage of attacks crashes against me, explosions, projectiles, nasty circles, but I block them all with a sword that devours all mana in reach and disrupts the rest.

Staring at her, I hold myself there, and the presence I was feeling comes closer. Luan appears, standing in the air beside her. There is no damage on his body at all, and the glowing lines on his forearms seem more lively than before.

Weslin joins me by my side. His wounds aren't healing at all, and he has one of his eyes closed with blood seeping out. He's well-pummeled, but he's still alive and determined.

Faora begins to speak, her voice rising with each word. "Kill him. Kill that maniac. Kill them both, Luan. Kill that creepy-eyed fuck! That guy cannot be allowed to live!"

Luan glances down at me, then at Faora. She, like me, shows clear signs of our mental clash: ruptured veins in her eyes, a bleeding nose. Even though I don't think I can kill her, I don't think she can kill me either, without going through a lot of trouble, and with Weslin there, we could finish her off.

That changes if Luan decides to join.

"I won't," Luan says simply. "If you want to go after them, do it yourself, Faora. I've already weakened Weslin, so it should be easier for you now. And the other guy? He's just a third-year, so it should be a simple matter anyway."

The thylarin leaves, simply walking away over the air.

After a moment of hesitation, Faora follows him, before she is left to face the two of us alone. She has a hateful expression as she stares at his back, but doesn't dare to say anything.

Only for a moment, she looks towards me and Weslin. I can see that she's thinking of attacking us, trying to estimate whether she would be able to do it.

But I already know what she will do. Faora is weak. Her Pride is brittle. She doesn't push herself enough.

She leaves just as I thought she would, and I let it happen. I'm sure we'll meet before her tutorial ends, and that will be the last time we do.

Me and Weslin stay where we are, and he sighs in relief. He starts blabbering in excitement about his fight with Luan, but it all sounds only in the back of my head as the world around me starts turning black.

I keep myself up just a bit longer, in case Faora returns, but in the end, I'm unable to hold on to consciousness, and before I black out, I feel my body hit the ground.

Instead of the black darkness surrounding me, I find myself back in my mental space. A small, clearly Earth style room with a crib, older furniture, and an open window beyond which I notice snow falling outside.

That green-eyed, black-haired girl I saw sitting unnoticed on Faora's throne is there as well, now on the ground with her back resting against the wall.

Yet another intruder in my mind.

Chapter 652: Intruder

"Well, that was dumb," the girl says, sitting with her knees pulled to her chest.

"It was all perfectly calculated."

"You almost died. You could've just let her go for now and caught up with her later, but you risked everything just to get back at her."

"I never said I was a smart person."

"Splitting your mind into three parts, accelerating each of them to the point where your brain is almost sizzling out your ears... that's not just being 'not smart.'"

"Look, there's this guy I know from the third floor I have to compete with."

The girl sighs. "So dumb. And your good mood is showing. Izzy told me about it because apparently I didn't notice before, and she's right, you really do look more lively, talk faster, and joke more when you're in a good mood. So, you split your mind into three parts. You hid it from Faora and allowed her to take one of those parts into her Mind Palace."

"She was careless, just as I expected. It's fun when people underestimate you. A piece of advice from me: if you truly think you have no chance against someone, don't put up a proper fight. Just do enough so they feel satisfied with beating you, let them underestimate you, and wait for an opportunity. It always worked on my bullies before."

"Were you bullied like that a lot?"

"Do...do you wish it was different?"

"I think everyone wants to change something, but at the same time, if they really did change, I wouldn't be the person I am now, and someone else would be standing here instead. Well, that guy would

probably have died on the first floor, served up as food for Cinderbear or that giggling goddamn Phantom Goblin."

"That makes sense. So you allowed one of your minds to be taken by Faora, and then you followed that link, manifested the second part of your mind in her Mind Palace, and waited for the right opportunity."

"Yes. [Manifestation] is a broken skill. At first, I wanted to kill her, and if everything went perfectly, I think I could have pulled it off. One of my minds was made to be durable and to get her attention, the second was made for killing her, and the third was a failsafe. But everything changed once I noticed you."

She stays quiet and doesn't react to that. So shy.

I shrug, "But I made some miscalculations too. I expected doubled thought acceleration because of her Mind Palace, but somehow it even managed to affect the mind I kept in my body. But somehow it worked out in the end."

"I don't know if you're lucky, dumb, or just that scary. Maybe all three?"

I take a few steps and come to a stop in front of her. This time, I speak with a more serious tone. "The first time I lost. The second time I met her, I was prepared. The third time I see her, Faora will die."

These words are almost a declaration, and I'm as confident in them as I can be.

The green eyed girl doesn't even bother to answer.

Sitting in front of her, I ask, "So, Sophie, how are things with you?"

"You've probably already guessed."

"Explain it to me like I'm five years old."

“Please stop giving me such stupid instructions.”

“So?”

She pulls her knees even closer. Right now, she looks a lot like Izzy. Even the age seems similar, perhaps even a bit younger, but there are differences, especially in her expressions and the general vibe she gives off. It’s like the real Sophie, but slightly different.

“I’m a fragment of my mind. Back then, I attacked her, and she fought back with a mental attack I couldn’t handle. The attack cracked my mind, and to keep it from fully breaking, I split it into parts. I hid some in Blackie and a few in my body. They contain my memories and other stuff. It’s hard to explain properly, since I mostly went by feeling and instinct.”

“That’s a nice, simple, explanation.”

“I know you prefer them like that.”

“I do. So what was this piece doing inside Faora?”

She looks down at her small body and then back at me. “This body, you see, is something like a manifestation of the memories it contains. I probably look like a child because the strongest memory it holds is from that part of my life.”

“You wanted to throw it away?”

When she looks at me, her green eyes are very piercing. “I hate how perceptive you can be sometimes.”

I don’t react to that and just wait for her to continue.

“Yes. The memories and parts of me here are the ones I hate the most. The unforgivable things I did, the impulses I hate, and so on. In that moment when my mind broke, I split them off and left them in

Faora's mind through the connection she made. As you said, she can be careless when facing people she thinks are weaker than her."

"And she didn't notice you there?"

"Nathaniel."

"Yes?"

"I think if I really try, I'll become a terrifyingly strong mind mage."

"It seems that way," I agree.

"Faora didn't even notice me. Yes, this part of me is tiny and weak, and I was hiding, but Faora isn't weak or inexperienced, so logically, she should have. Instead, I kept improving the way I was hidden. I even siphoned off bits of her mana to keep myself stable without her noticing. I watched her, studied her, and planned. Over time, the mental abilities she was so proud of started to seem pathetic."

Her eyes do not waver at all. "I slowly began to erode her, and in a few years, I believe Faora would be no more. Her mind would've been gone, wiped clean, without her ever realizing. And in her place, me."

"I'm probably not the right person to feel sorry for her, Sophie. Honestly, I think she deserves worse. So if you had a plan like that, why did you show yourself to me?"

Slowly, she burrows her head between her knees, and her hair falls over it until I can't see her face at all.

"I don't know," she mumbles from there.

"Good enough answer, but I think you know."

She ignores the second part of my sentence and changes the subject, "Why did you agree to join the Primordial Knights, Nat? Didn't you want to start a guild and name it Angry Kittens just to make the others smile, all while pretending to be annoyed about it?"

"Sounds like something the 6th floor Nat would've done. He was a total weirdo who nearly got played by a particularly dangerous minion. And why would I do that? It costs shards. And it'll take years before Tess and the others get strong enough, and only then would they be able to start gathering people for a guild. If they want to do it, then I'll join and we can just roll with it."

"Why join Primordial Knights?"

"To be honest? Weslin is one cool motherfucker, Sophie. I offered him all my shards to keep Luan busy. And the guy rejected it all for some strange reason and then proceeded to face down one of the strongest attendees in Beyond."

"That does sound kind of cool," Sophie agrees. "But you wouldn't do it just because of that."

"They have a guild leader with three primordial energies. An S-rank, and rumored to be one of the three strongest attendees currently in Beyond. She also seems like she wants to go to the sixth floor of Beyond. That makes me curious. Plus, wouldn't it just be more fun to help Primordial Knights reach first place in the guild rankings instead of joining someone who's already higher? They also have a guy called Doc who apparently wanted to cut me open and examine my body. He might be able to help me with my construct problem."

"Construct problem?"

"I have three new constructs."

"...why are you like this?"

"I don't know. Blame my environment or something. Oh, and the system too."

"You also don't seem very annoyed by my presence in your mind."

"I'm used to it. I bet once I return you to your body, it won't even be a month before someone else ends up here. Maybe in the form of a hand like Lissandra, as memories like Lioren, or in a memory pocket like you."

"Lioren... do you miss him?"

"Yes, a lot."

"...it's amazing how you can say things like that without hesitation."

For the first time in a while, she looks up, and her eyes shine from behind her black hair. "You're not going to ask me what kind of memory is at my core."

"Nope."

"I see," she repeats.

I nod. "A question. Can you see what I see or go through my memories?"

"Don't worry. I didn't do that, and I won't. If you're not here, I'll be sleeping, and I'll only watch through your eyes, and listen, if you call me. I won't touch your memories."

"Got it."

I walk over to the open window and close it. Even though this is my mental space, the cold air from outside makes it feel like it's freezing in here, and as I do, a few snowflakes manage to drift in.

Just as I'm about to leave, Sophie buries her face back in her knees and waves her hand. The window slams open with a loud clack that echoes through the room as I walk out. She stays there, and this time, I black out for real.

When I open my eyes, I squint them closed again because the light of an orb reflecting from the surface nearby shines right into my eyes, blinding me.

Weslin moves his head, and the reflection disappears.

"Yo, newbie, you alive?"

"Apparently," I say and cough because of my parched throat. "My bag..."

"Oh, I drank everything you had in there. Some of it tasted really weird, and some were really nice."

I force my sight to unblur and focus it on Weslin.

"I ate everything in there, too."

"I hope you upset your stomach."

"Newbie, just say you hope I shat myself. Oh, and when I brought you here, I threw you on the ground for all the trouble you caused me. You were passed out for two days, and my wounds still haven't fully healed because of Luan's goddamned Fragment, whatever that shit is."

Almost done checking my body, I thank my constructs for circulating my mana and thermal energy.

"I also used void energy a few times to deal with the thermal energy and mana build-up in your body," Weslin says, curbing my enthusiasm a little. Then he adds, "Even though I didn't have to do it all that much for the mana. Even passed out, your body just kept circulating it in that fucked up way you do."

"Thanks, I guess."

"You're welcome, you little bastard."

I turn my attention back to my body. To my knowledge, there was no part of my mind awake to deal with Mana Cycling, so my only guess is that my body actually started doing it almost instinctively, because of the years I've spent doing it constantly.

What a nice find. I'll have to check it out later.

"Thanks for holding off, Luan," I add as I move my body into a sitting position.

Weslin, sitting on the chair near me, just shrugs. Looking over his body, I still notice the wounds he sustained in that short fight. But as quickly as he lost, I realize how incredible it is for him to be in such a state, and more so, to still be alive.

"I should have taken the damned shards. I don't even know what I was thinking when..."

Not hesitating, I open my status and initiate the transfer, at which point he pauses mid-sentence and looks at me intently.

He stares for a few seconds before the notification window disappears. Canceled again.

"This is why I fucking can't hate you, you little bastard. Damned little asshole."

"You'll have to tell me about your fight with Luan."

"I will. That shit was crazy. But first, there's not much time before we reach the Black Tower, and you'll likely end up signing a contract with the Primordial Knights, so there are a few things you'll need to look out for."

"Didn't I say I'd join them without any pay or something like that?"

"You did? I don't remember anything like that."

"I see. I must have misremembered. So what should I be most careful about in the contract?"

Chapter 653: Beware of contracts

Weslin leans forward and cracks his neck. "Alright, listen up. The Primordial Knights aren't assholes like some of the other guilds, but they're not a charity either. Their standard contract isn't a straight-up trap, but there are things you really don't want to gloss over."

"Like what?"

"First, the duration. On the surface, it'll say one year. Standard stuff. But you'll probably find a clause for auto-renewal unless you cancel with a full thirty-day notice before the term ends."

"That's fine. I can read a calendar."

"Want me to congratulate you?" he snorts. "Sure, but that clause could also be locked behind performance incentives. You hit those bonuses, and suddenly the contract extends by three months automatically, 'to maintain stability.' Which sounds great until you realize it stacks and resets the renewal window."

"What does that even mean?"

"No idea, but I was warned about it before signing my own contract, so ask them to remove it."

"Okay."

Weslin sighs. "Second thing. Your salary in shards. It's solid on paper, a monthly base rate, usually tied to floor, role, performance, blah blah. Yours will be higher than average because of the whole whatever-that-black-mana-bullshit-actually-is package. But again, read the fine print. They'll say bonuses are performance-based, but they don't define performance either."

"Probably? But then that person is probably going to want a cut of your salary."

"Noted."

"Good. Now for the exit clauses. The contract will say you can leave at any time. What it won't say up front is that there's a cooldown period before you can join any of the other guilds. Sixty days, no exceptions. Or if you get too good a salary, the contract might straight up try to make it impossible for you to leave."

"Didn't you just say the Primordial Knights weren't assholes?"

"You should see the contracts Bloodline gives to their best. The salary and other stuff are insane, but damn, I would rather be thrown to Cinderbear as a level 1 than break it," Weslin mutters. "Another trap, they'll give you access to some good stuff. Class information, guild-wide skill libraries, exclusive training lessons from some of the A ranks we have, and some other stuff. But it comes with a Knowledge Lock clause."

"I figured. "

"Means anything you learn through their resources can't be taught, sold, or shared without explicit permission, even after you leave."

I stretch my shoulders. "Any upside?"

"Plenty. Resources, information, guild quests, teammates you know won't stab your back for an upper epic item, access to the guild crafters, training rooms, sparring arenas. Not to mention our item vault, they might loan, gift, or sell items that work really well with your primordial energies. I'm also sure you can imagine how much knowledge our library and members have on primordial energies, you won't find anyone better for that in Beyond."

"Tempting," I agree with Weslin.

I still think of myself as someone who specializes more in mana, and that's something I want to explore on my own, maybe slowly, but I'll go about it my own way.

It's not the way I look at Primordial energies, so some information would be nice. At least when it comes to thermal. I don't think they have anyone better than Lioren was when it comes to using kinetic energy. Even now, there's so much I'm trying to absorb and practise. The sort of things Lioren was able to do as easily as breathing.

That asshole of a demon was truly something else.

"Any exclusivity stuff in there?" I ask.

Weslin nods. "Yeah. You can't work for other guilds or groups without clearance. And if you pick a fight outside of approved missions, you take the blame, not the guild."

"So they'll disavow me if I torch the wrong feylith?"

"Only if you do it publicly," Weslin says with a bright smile. "Keep it clean, and usually the guilds will pretend they didn't see. Of course, that might change if a guild starts losing important members and stuff, but don't worry about that newbie, unless it's something truly outrageous, Nyssa and the others don't give a damn. They'll happily fight it out with other guilds, even if they're one of the top five."

"Weslin, why am I starting to think the Primordial Knights are a lot messier than they look?"

"Newbie, our guild master's a demon, most of her party are demons, and out of every guild in Beyond, we've got the highest number of demons as members. Did you really think we were gonna be normal? As annoying as that can be, we're probably the last guild anyone wants to mess with."

As he cackles, I just stare at him.

When he seems to be done, I ask, "Any personal clause I should try to negotiate into the contract?"

"Yeah," he says, suddenly serious. "Get a personal exemption clause. I think that's what they call it. It's for these exploratory types like you. Just a line that says your independent research is your own business, not the guild's. You've got a weird brain, magic, or skill? They'll want to study it. Make sure the

contract says anything you develop yourself stays yours. With your black mana thing, it might be a bit more difficult, but you should agree, just ask for a lot in return. You might learn something useful about it, too."

Taking a deep breath, he checks to make sure I'm listening and then fires out.

"Look for clauses that say they can relocate you to another floor without warning should the leadership decide it has a strategic advantage, the one that lets them use your combat recordings in training or promotions without credit or pay, promotion rights clauses that include your name, likeness, even your damn voice, automatic housing fees whether you stay in guild facilities, training waivers that void all liability should you break something in sparring even if it's their fault, priority reassignment clauses that let them pull you out of a guild quest mid-run to cover someone else's mess, non disparagement rules so vague you can get fined for calling someone important a bitch, limits on out of guild quests that could keep you from being able to take shard work outside the guild, mandatory participation in guild events or public appearances for the sake of 'building a positive image,' medical clause exclusions for any difficult to heal wound earned under 'reckless' judgment - oh, that's me for example, I will need some specialized healing to deal with what Luan did, but it also could be anything from soloing a room too fast to jumping into a fight during guild events without asking first, data rights giving them access to your system logs or mana reports for the purpose of 'guild optimization,' clauses that let squad leaders override your combat decisions mid fight and still try to hold you accountable if it should fail, item use restrictions that stop you from using guild loaned gear during personal time, late return penalties if you show up more than a day late to report in, even with reason, shard docking for gear maintenance you didn't request, and sometimes, they'll try to sneak in permissions to simulate your combat style for testing or sparring constructs."

"You remembered all that shit?"

Weslin looks a little too proud of himself. "You have no fucking idea how many times I've had to say that to other rookies. But there is one more thing, the most important one."

He looks at me to make sure I pay attention.

"The thing is, Primordial Knights being run by a bunch of lunatics also means they don't really care if you break half that crap. Sure, the contract says they've got the right to push it, and sometimes they will try, but if you manage to fight them off, they usually drop it."

"Fight them off?!"

"Anyway, I'm tired. Get some rest. I'm almost fully healed, so they won't make fun of me, and we can head over to the Black Tower soon."

He walks away, and I wonder if he was just messing with me, maybe most of the things he mentioned aren't worth worrying about. I just need to... fight them off?

What a guild.

I turn inward, slipping into my mind space.

(Sophie, there are some things I need to tell you about the contract and stuff. You'll need to remember them before I forget.)

Reaching the Black Tower only takes us a few hours, and as it comes into view in the distance, I send a call ringing through my mental space.

(Yo, look,) I say to the intruder in my mind.

With a groan, Sophie awakens, and I allow her to look through my eyes.

There, nestled between two mountains, lies the biggest safe zone we've seen so far. As Weslin said, it probably holds somewhere around ten thousand people, locals and natives. It's built in a mostly circular shape with multiple levels. Each level is slightly different, with the inner ones having taller buildings and seemingly better defenses. And at the center of it all stands the eponymous tower.

It's not even close to the size of the one from the third city on the second floor, but it's still pretty tall. This one is made of some smooth black material, with a stairway coiling around the outside. There are barely any windows or visible entrances, or anything of that kind.

Weslin notices where I'm looking and says, "Yeah, that belongs to this tower's master. He's one of the oldest on this floor, and not once has this place lost its status as a safe zone."

“Because he killed everyone who took them over the permitted number?”

“That, or forced them out of the city.”

“Isn’t that the same, from what you told me?”

“Close. But if you’re lucky, very powerful and lucky, or good at hiding, you can survive the night. Or if you join some of the bigger parties that sometimes go on hunts for materials. But even then, try not to stay out so long that you catch the attention of anything too scary.”

“The same rules apply for this safe zone as well?”

“Obviously. These rules are older than most existing guilds. As cruel as they might be, they’re necessary.”

“I guess. Do you think there will be free spots for us?”

“We’ll see.”

“See?”

“Yup.”

“So you don’t know for sure?”

“I’m confident there will be some, but if not, we’d better hurry to the other safe zones they point out.”

(Nat, I don’t like this guy.)

(He's not that bad.) I defend him.

Then I turn to Weslin. "So, doesn't that mean we should hurry?"

"It's fine," he waves it off.

I follow him at the relaxed pace he keeps, and like that, we enter the city. Right away, I check the notification.

Welcome to the safe zone!

Current number of people: 9,766 / 10,000

"Please, this way," a man appears in front of us as we pass the gate.

Weslin follows him, and I go behind him. We reach a mana stone embedded in the wall, and Weslin touches it briefly. I do the same after him.

It doesn't place a mark on me, but it does take a bit of my mana.

"It's your first time here, I see," the man says after checking the mana stone in his hands. "This device serves as registration in case the city limit is exceeded and we have to decide who has the right to stay."

What a nice way to put it into words.

The guard then turns to Weslin. "Welcome to the Black Tower, Sir Weslin. Can I assume the two of you are here together?"

"Yes. He's here to join the Primordial Knights."

“Understood. May I know how long you plan to stay?”

"My stay token ends in three days, and then I'll return here after another week in my tutorial. He will likely stay a week or two before they decide what exactly to do with him."

"In that case, I'll register him as a long term visitor and include his presence in the calculations we share with the other safe zones."

"Sure. Is that all?"

"Yes. Thank you for your patience."

Waving him off, Weslin leaves and heads into the city without hesitation.

I observe the buildings along the way. Even though it's "just" ten thousand people, it seems more than enough with how densely packed this place is. People are moving around with the same sense of urgency attendees usually have. Stay tokens have limited durations, after all.

"What percent of the people here are locals?" I ask. "And don't say you don't know because you don't care."

"Even I can remember that, you little shit. According to the latest statistics, the Black Tower has almost four thousand locals living here on a permanent basis, so quite a few, all told. It's dangerous here, but the larger zones are safer, and the opportunities are equally as great as the danger. Outside the really big safe zones, this one is likely one of the safest."

"How many safe zones are there? And how many attendees are there on this floor?"

"Are you trying to estimate how many tutorials are going on at once?"

"Yes."

“Well, good fucking luck. This floor is enormous, and I don’t think anyone knows for sure.”

“But the second floor had only three safe zones. Even though they were big and each one had a few hundred thousand attendees...”

He interrupts me. “Three safe zones we know about.”

I sense Sophie becoming more attentive to what Weslin says.

“There are more?” I ask.

“Some people surely think so, but others strongly disagree. A few of the Handlers might know, but those assholes like to stay tight lipped. Anyway, we’re heading to the local Branch of the Primordial Knights now. You can start asking them instead of me, if only so they know what poor ol’ me went through. And don’t forget my warning about the contracts, and try to act somewhat normal. And be careful, the Doc might be there. He’ll hold himself back if you’re a guild member, but he can be... well, you’ll see.”

(I bet you and the Doc will end up being the best of friends, from what I’ve heard so far.) Sophie mumbles before disconnecting again, fading back into my mental space.

It’s too late to respond to such slander, so I’ll just pretend I didn’t hear it.

Chapter 654: Behave

The building of the Primordial Knights Guild branch is massive and not all that far from the Black Tower where the Enforcer lives.

That building is made entirely of some sort of whitish metal and glass. Multiple tall trees tower even over that huge manor, and there are pretty gardens nearby.

At first, I’m about to think how wasteful all of this is, but then I realize something. Wouldn’t creating a building like this take just a few days for someone with enough power and skill in something like [Metal Manipulation], or at least whatever that material really is? The same goes for the trees. I already saw Sophie grow an entire tree from a tiny seed in just a few minutes when she was practicing.

That would also explain why what I suspect to be the other guild branches are equally interesting. There is a big wooden pyramid, another tower nearby that's about as tall as the black one dominating the city, a circular building with a myriad of windows, and a tree growing from the middle of it.

We find ourselves being let into the building that houses the Primordial Knights without delay. Weslin just sends a bit of mana to the gate, and it opens automatically. And immediately afterwards, a few people come to welcome him, all of whom I can only assume are locals.

I asked Weslin before, but it seems like any guild worth a damn employs plenty of locals to take care of upkeep, trading, organization, and that kind of thing. Meanwhile, attendees fill the positions of leadership, deciding the direction the guild will take next while learning from the attendees who led it for a few years and are about to leave the tutorial, or from locals who can share some information.

Overall, it seems to be a system that both sides are comfortable with, to the point where if I asked someone why it is like this, I'm sure I would hear something like, "It has always been that way."

From the moment we enter, everything moves quickly. Within minutes, I'm standing with Weslin in front of the guild branch leader, an older and massively built human. He towers over us in a way that makes me wonder if he might not be part velnar.

At this point, I don't even have to ask why, even though the Primordial Knights are supposed to have the most demons, I've barely seen any. These maniacs are surely crowding the deeper levels of Beyond. The same goes for the local demons.

When his eyes land on me, they stay there. The crazed-looking lynthari pays no attention to anyone else in the room and charges straight at me.

"You should have told me he was here!" he hisses, his fangs showing.

His clothes are in an even bigger mess than his hair. They're still the same white with a mix of blue, like the other people from the Primordial Knights, but stained with red and black liquid, torn, and even burnt in places.

The branch leader seems used to it. "He's a member of the Primordial Knights, so you know what that means. Behave."

To my surprise, he lies, we haven't even gotten to the contracts yet.

"You! You mean man! Did you wait to inform me until he became a member on purpose?" the lynthari complains.

"Obviously. And I'm warning you. Nyssa's going to want him on the 4th floor, and Weslin seems to like the guy, so once again, behave."

"Sure, sure," the disheveled lynthari scratches his chin with stubble and walks around me.

The entire time, he doesn't even bother talking to me. Instead, he observes me. There are even some blatantly rude checks that I fend off with ease, but that doesn't seem to bother him too much. He continues with modified and even more probing ones. He even puts on some round glasses with dark purple lenses that hide his golden eyes and continues to stare at me.

So far, he hasn't tried to touch me, but I can see how much he wants to from how his arm and fingers keep twitching and sometimes almost reaching toward me.

"I see. I see. Interesting. What the fuck."

He fixes his glasses and makes another, slower circle around me.

"This is weird. This is even weirder. What the fuck. Oh, so it's like that!"

The branch leader continues to look at me, as if expecting me to react, but so far, I just stand there, not that bothered. More than anything, I'm a bit curious.

"What the fuck. What the fuck. How? Broken, twisted. So weird." The source of this content is [novel\(f\)ire.net](http://novel(f)ire.net)

When another circle around me stops, he puts on another pair of glasses over the purple ones. These ones are bright yellow, with lenses as thick as my finger, and inscriptions are etched around their edges.

“WHAT THE FUCK!”

“Please, don’t swear so much,” the branch leader tries.

The Doctor just glances at him and shakes his head. Then, for the first time, he reaches out to touch me. His finger, his arm, stops mid-air, held there by my [Redistribution].

In a quick reaction, he attempts to do something to push through it, and a weird barrier flickers around his skin. But instead, I just use more mana and brute-force through that weird thing he’s placed around himself.

“Tsk,” he says and pulls his hand back, and I let him. Then he pulls a cute little scepter from his clothes and starts waving it around me.

The mana stones at its top light up, and the glasses he has on light up as well.

For a moment, he stands there in sheer shock.

“There are six good reasons you should be dead, and ten more lesser ones why you should be either in pain, dead, or crippled. How do you continue to exist?”

"When you hear people say it that often, it just turns into background noise," I say.

His ears twitch, and he smiles in that way only lynthari can, the kind that shows their fangs in full beauty. Slowly, he takes off both of his glasses and puts them away.

He reaches his hand toward me, as if to shake mine. “Nice to meet you, I am...”

I halt that movement as well. "There is no way I would fall for that."

"Tsk," he sighs and gestures at the branch leader, then at me. "I want him unconscious so I can examine his body!"

"I won't be doing that," the branch leader disagrees.

Once again, that crazed lynthari seems annoyed and makes another circle around me.

"Listen," he says, circling me again, fingers twitching like he's resisting the urge to grab a scalpel. "You are either a complete mess or something pretending really well to be one. Either way, I want to cut you open."

"Metaphorically," the branch leader adds quickly.

The Doctor waves him off. "Fine. Metaphorically. For now."

That weird-ass lynthari sniffs the air. "You don't even feel right. There's no harmony to your mana signature. It's like... someone chewed it up and spat it back out in your shape. So many things compounded to make such a gloriously fucked up body."

He tilts his head at me and mumbles, "Has someone been experimenting on you? Did you get possessed? Or were you born like this? No, wait, don't answer. I want to guess."

He pulls out a notebook, flips to a page full of cramped symbols and messy diagrams, and starts sketching something while occasionally glancing at me. "Are your organs where they're supposed to be? Can you confirm? Do they move on their own?"

I stare at him.

He blinks. "Rhetorical. Mostly."

Then he starts making strange clacking noises and activating some kind of skill. I feel incredibly small and weak soundwaves wash over my body and then bounce back toward the Doctor. He repeats the process, this time using an array of tones, constantly shifting the pitch and frequency of the sounds he's making.

I look at him and then at the branch leader, who mutters with a shrug, "He does this sometimes."

The Doctor suddenly looks up, wide-eyed with excitement. "Can I borrow your left arm? That pale one? Just the outer layer of skin and a few bones. I'll return it."

"How many shards?" I ask.

"Ugh. So greedy." He taps his temple with the end of his pen. "But your mana doesn't echo like a normal person's. And why the hell is there so much of it? Rookie, what is your exact stat distribution? Did you go by the golden standard? Are you following the ancient ways? Some strange school I don't know about?"

He eyes my chest thoughtfully. "If I could knock you out for ten minutes and do a non-lethal incision, I bet I'd learn so much."

"Please try," I reply.

His ears twitch in amusement. "You're fun. I hope you don't die too soon. Well, not like you have much to say in that. Oh, maybe you do. You can obviously make it come quicker."

He cackles and scribbles a few more things down, then spins on his heel, talking to himself. "Nyssa will praise me again for letting her know how much she would want you after I heard about that black mana. Yes, yes, yes. She'll love this one. Show me that black mana."

"Nope."

He pauses.

His eyes slowly drift back to me, wide and blinking, like his mouth had outrun his brain, "...Wait. Did I ask that of you out loud?"

He snorts and taps his forehead, his tail swaying. "Stupid mouth. Always skipping ahead. Can't be that rude!"

Then he leans closer, just slightly, just enough to narrow the distance, his voice lowering into a strange mix of wonder and unease. "But how can I endure? There's a signature. Very faint. Not exactly present, but pulling. Like a fucked up mana someone dressed up in fake mana skin and forgot to give it a name. Have you ever had people get headaches just from standing too close to you? No? You probably didn't notice."

He twirls the pen between his fingers and glances at the ceiling.

"See, once, once, long ago, I read about a field researcher who claimed she'd met someone like you. I wish I still had that mana stone where it was mentioned. It wasn't mana she saw. It was... collapsing. Consuming. Dominating. Something she didn't know how to categorize."

He looks at me again, a smile twitching.

"She wrote that it was a form of mana black as a night sky without stars. Compressed. Hungry. Like something that had forgotten it was supposed to cooperate with the world."

He shrugs, casually flipping through his notebook. "She's long dead, that researcher I mean, so it's not like I can ask her more. I don't even know her name, and all the other mana stones turned to ash when I started reading them. But she did talk about her pet fish in the one that endured. Apparently, it was very cute."

The branch leader sighs. "Get to the point, Doc."

"I don't have one," the Doctor says cheerfully.

He leans back and tilts his head at me like I'm a magic puzzle box that hasn't decided if it wants to open or eat him. "Have you ever suppressed something so hard that the suppression itself started leaking? Because that's what this feels like. Like there's a door. And it's locked. And behind it is something that eats keys."

Something about that sentence is very fascinating to me. And the more I observe this man, the more curious I get. He might be crazy as fuck, but there are things I can sort of pick up on and almost understand.

The others in the room seem to be annoyed, and it's possible I would be as well if I'd known this creepy lynthari longer than a few minutes, but for now, he represents something new. And I'm curious.

He giggles again, the sound high and bright and just a little too sharp.

So I ask, "How much could you really tell me if I let you examine something?"

That shuts him up. Immediately. His ears twitch, his eyes narrow, and his tail freezes mid-flick.

Then his grin widens slowly.

Chapter 655: Of course

"Define 'something'," he says.

"Skin. Tissue. Blood. A left arm or two? I don't know what you're looking for. No sedation. Nothing lethal. You look, I learn." I gesture at his notebook. "I want all of your notes. And I will be asking lots of questions."

The branch leader raises an eyebrow. "I don't think this is a good..."

The Doctor is already moving like he wants to cut me open right here.

"No sedation?" he says, almost breathless. "You're letting me? Is this a trick?"

"I want information. I'm not afraid of needles." I extend my left hand, palm up. There, I compress a bit of my mana, push further, and turn it into a tiny black orb.

The lynthari maniac's eyes gleam as he leans in close, so close in fact that it almost looks like he might touch it with his nose.

"If your skin tries to grow teeth, please warn me," he whispers absentmindedly and puts on a different set of glasses. These ones are dark red.

He also takes out a small glass rod as long as his finger. It looks very fragile and has wisps of white smoke bouncing around inside of it.

Then the rod shaped crystal cracks. The white smoke inside of it disappears and gets pulled into the tiny black orb, which grows a little from the surprising amount or quality of mana. Then the tool cracks a bit more and snaps in half.

The Doctor stares at it.

"...Okay," he whispers. "That's new. There goes 200 thousand shards. Or was it 600?"

The Doctor stares, motionless, eyes wide.

After a while, he finally exhales. "I'm going to need a lab, a containment array, four extremely illegal grimoires, maybe a vyssari or two to sacrifice, and an assistant just stupid enough to ask the right questions without dying halfway through. And I'll need gloves. Better ones. Preferably made from the skin of anything at least distantly related to a wyrm. And maybe someone to kick me if I get caught staring too long."

Without waiting for an answer, he leaves and heads back to the lower floors, calling out and asking for someone to take him to the treasury.

As I begin cutting the black orb off from all mana to starve it out, the branch leader calls out to me.

"I think we should quickly sign your contract before he finds out."

Just hearing those words starts to drain the energy from me, and I call out to my current favorite intruder in my mind.

(Sophie, time to pay rent.)

(You know how I told you this part of me holds all my darker impulses?)

(As if you were actually skilled enough to pull something like that off. Face it, you're just a simple copy of yourself, loaded with the memories you didn't like.)

(Maybe I should take over your mind just to show you how wrong you are, Nat.)

(Go ahead. What do you think will happen if I manifest myself in my own mind? I'll kick your self-pitying, sorry ass and drag you back to your body if I have to.)

(You're such a dick.)

(I've heard that one before. At least try to be original.)

(Arghhh, for fuck's sake. Fine. Let's check out this contract these lunatics've cooked up.)

With her cooperation secured, I turn to the branch leader. "Let's go, then."

"Great," the branch leader says with a smile, pointing me upstairs, as we head that way, walking side by side. "I already have word from Sir Weslin, and thanks to Doc, Nyssa seems interested as well, so you can expect a decent offer. There's no need for testing, but of course, you'll still have to fight for the best possible contract." *RaNoöEδ*

His heavy steps make the stairs groan, and his smile grows wider. "Ah, I love this part. Don't you think signing contracts is a fight all its own? A clash of wit and will, each side struggling to find an advantage. You wouldn't believe how many contract variations I have. A few hundred years ago, the leader of the Primordial Knights at the time paid an insane amount of shards to one of the best contract specialists to create templates for nearly every possible combination. Whether they be S-ranks, A-ranks, B-ranks, or lower. For people with one primordial energy, two, or those rare monstrosities with three. And many more besides. These templates have all been crafted with one intention: to secure the best possible deal for the guild. Do you know why?"

He stops, and I do too. I have to look up because of his height.

"To entrap the poor sucker or make them fight against the guild?"

"Exactly!" he says with delight.

"Was that guy a demon?"

"The contract specialist? Surprisingly, yes. So was the guild master," he replies, starting to walk again. "Doesn't that sound like a beautiful idea? So perfectly fitting for demons. If you are, as you said, a sucker, you'll leave soon enough, and before that happens, the Primordial Knights will squeeze as much value out of you as possible. But if you're a proper member, you'll push back, and you'll keep challenging the guild. In the end, the one who is right is the one who proves themselves stronger."

The longer he talks, the more my good impression of him fades. He may be part velnar and part human, but his eyes gleam with the same maniacal shine I've seen in so many demons.

(Did these lazy lunatics really not change the contracts in who knows how many hundreds of years?)
Sophie asks.

(I think it's safe to say at this point that the contracts don't really matter all that much.)

We reach the office, and once we're let inside, I sit down. Opposite me, stepping behind a massive table, the branch leader takes his seat as well. He places a few smaller piles of papers on the table and smiles.

"Let's start then."

I leave the office five hours later, holding a contract in my shaking hand. Sophie's presence is gone, possibly dead after the fight we've just been through. My body feels like it got run over by a bunch of Lily-shaped bulldozers, and there's a constant ringing in my head.

Along with the contract, I'm also carrying several sets of white and pale blue clothes in different styles, so I can pick whichever suits me best.

With a one-year contract signed, a base salary of 500 thousand shards, and a myriad of performance bonuses tied to my rank, tutorial floor progression, beyond floor progression, and who knows what else.

I've officially become a member of the Primordial Knights.

The next goal is to stick around and work on some certifications. After that, I'll be assigned a partner to start working on this floor's quest, so I can finally enter the fourth, where Nyssa can make her way up from the fifth to meet me.

But before that, I still need to meet the Doctor.

POV Weslin

I return to Beyond exactly two weeks later, after a few of the usual checks on the 13th floor of the tutorial. But even now, we've made no progress. The floor's quest is just too messed up, and it makes complete sense why barely anyone ever manages to clear it before the end of the tutorial. The difficulty might not even be all that much lower than gaining entry to the 6th floor of Beyond.

I remember Nyssa telling me once that she could clear the 13th floor if she wanted, but that would mean finishing the tutorial and getting sent home. And of course, that maniac wants to enter the 6th floor of Beyond before that. As the second person in a thousand years after that guy, Adrian.

Demons...

But speaking of demons, I wonder how that maniac's been doing. It should've been about two weeks since he joined the guild. By now, he should have gone through some basic introductions, gotten some information, taken a few tests, and more likely than not been assigned a partner. Maybe even a quest, though I'm not quite sure. They probably just threw him out on the 3rd floor to clear the quest and move on to the 4th.

I appear in my room in the Black Tower, and find it just as I left it.

There's no need to laze around, so I open the door only for it to hit someone I recognize.

"Oh, Sir Null King!" the man says with clear excitement, balancing a plate of food in his hand so it doesn't fall. "What a nice coincidence."

"You..."

"It's Talon, Sir Null King!"

"Call me that again and-"

"And there will be consequences, surely! I apologize, but that's what most people call you, so it stuck with me. Is Weslin okay?"

The speed with which he runs through thoughts and sentences clearly shows his entire intention was to talk to me using my name and create some sort of familiarity. Maybe even to make it seem like we're close in front of others.

What a shrewd guy.

"What do you do here?" I ask him instead.

“Someone from the higher-ups liked my Primordial energy, so I got some preferential treatment!” he smiles. “Stellar Wind is rare! I also already shared some information from my status with the branch leader, so please don’t suspect I might be lying. Everyone thinks so already and...”

“Sure, sure,” I wave him off. “I have to go, so don’t bother me.”

“Of course! Are you looking for that guy? The Mana Boy?”

There can only be one person he means with a name like that. The way he says it, it’s like he thinks it’s something I’d want to know.

“Tell me,” I nudge, feeling like I’ve already lost to the guy.

“I came here just a few days ago, but I heard it’s already been a week since he got himself locked up in the Doctor’s rooms in the basement, and no one’s seen him since.”

“Well, whatever,” I pass by him, and I’m about to head to the branch leader for some information.

But somehow, I find myself turning right instead and heading downstairs toward the basement.

What the hell is that bastard doing?

A few minutes later, I find said bastard. He’s sitting comfortably in a chair and, upon noticing me, looks me over with that familiar expression.

“Oh, hello, Weslin.”

“Hello, newbie.”

The Doc near him curses. “Control your mana more! It’s biting at me.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, it’s not biting anything,” the newbie says. “Just endure it a little. You’ll heal.”

The chair he is sitting on is made of a material I know is difficult to break, and very much so at that. His hands and legs are tied to it.

He’s shirtless too, but more than that, there’s a hole bored into his chest, revealing his strongly beating heart behind the ribs, though it’s located in a different place than one would normally expect to find a heart. The skin is being stretched by silver slats, and wires are moving from a nearby panel directly into the heart.

“Newbie. What the fuck.”

“You mean the fact I’m shirtless? I apologize, but it’s annoying and expensive to go through so many shirts, so...”

“Do you want to get beaten?”

“Not currently, but we can spar later for sure.” Then he jumps as a bit of golden flame washes over his heart. “The fuck are you doing, Doc?” he turning to the lynthari.

“Your natural defenses are just so annoying! And these working conditions are terrible too!”

“It just happens,” the newbie says before turning back to me. “Did you know this crazy lynthari over here specializes in things called implants? Some of them are really interesting.”

“Obviously. I also know what usually happens to the sort of people who get them.”

Another wave of golden flames washes over his heart, and the newbie closes his eyes, letting out a painful groan that he tries to suppress. A golden circle glows around his eyes as he looks at the Doc.

The Doc rushes to the panel and starts adjusting some settings while mumbling, “Yes. Yes. I know. I know. I know what I did wrong.”

Then the newbie turns back to me. “Of course, it’s not like I need anything else to mess with my balance.”

“Your body is already beautifully messed up,” the Doctor nods in agreement, then runs back and stabs another needle into his beating heart in place of the one he just melted.

Nathaniel ignores him. “I don’t like to rely on items either. And even though implants are technically items, they’re fascinating, and I feel like I can pick up a thing or two. And as crazy as this catboy is, he has some knowledge, so we’ve been trading notes.”

“I get to cut him, and he gets some of the low level knowledge I’ve gathered!” The Doc agrees happily.

“Hell no. Mid to upper level, or you’ll never see black mana again.”

“Cheater!”

They keep talking, but by that point, I’m already halfway out of the basement.

After leaving the lab, I run into the branch leader’s assistant, who wordlessly hands me a piece of paper, my assignment. It seems word of my arrival has already spread.

I channel a bit of mana into the seal before opening the envelope, which would have burned if I hadn’t.

Inside, I find my assignment laid out in simple terms, along with the name of my partner.

I glance down the hall toward the lab and groan.

Of course.

Chapter 656: Temperature control

POV Nathaniel

When I'm finally done with yet another round of examination with Doc, I use [Ley Line] to teleport to my room. It took over ten days to create one that would work within the defensive arrays of this building. But at some point, I started to take it as a challenge. A game of cat and mouse.

Then the voice of said cat echoes in my room.

(I'm asking once again, no, I'm begging you, please no more teleportation inside the main building. I had to call off the guards again, turn off three alarms, and modify four different arrays.) That voice belongs to the security lady. A particularly rude vyssari woman.

"Sure, sure, I'll just modify [Ley Line] so I can teleport again. It's not my fault your defensive array sucks."

The voice sounds again. (If you said something, I didn't hear it because of privacy rules, and you know that. Still, I'm pretty sure it was something rude.)

"I've already started modifying my [Ley Line] to counter the changes you just made."

(It was so calm here after all the lunatics were moved to the lower floors and... wait a second... are you messing with the defensive array again, right now, as we speak?)

"Oops."

I use [Eclipse] and disrupt whatever sound transfer array she's been using, and the voice cuts off. Then I start stacking defensive arrays around the door, along with a number of additional locks.

Next, I use [Focus] to filter out outside noise and begin going over the results of today's experimentations. This time, we were observing my sealed Ignition Heart. Even though it proved difficult, there is a thing or two I managed to take from the process, and a few more I still need to think about for a while longer.

The past two weeks here have been annoying at times because of lessons, certifications, and all that guild stuff, but Doc has proven himself useful, as time with him has helped a lot. I only wish we had Lily with us. She would have loved it here.

And Biscuit. I miss that corgi. I wonder how he's doing. Not even being able to use Community to talk to my ESC doesn't help either.

I had hoped I would have learned a bit more about black mana by now, but it's nearly impossible to observe properly, at least between me and the Doc.

We more or less confirmed my previous suspicions. It is extremely densely compressed mana, but also something else. If it were just compression, every other Champion would have it. It dominates all mana in the area, and it grows the more it absorbs.

The more mana I use for its creation, the more it can absorb before it destabilizes. The destabilization, if allowed to continue, always ends in an explosion. Interestingly, if the same amount of mana is used to create a tricolored orb and a black mana orb, the explosion from the tricolored one is bigger. The black mana orb, however, causes a wide-range disruption that lingers for a while. The more mana, the bigger the range and the longer the disruption lasts.

Part of that disruption is similar to the field [Empyrean Lance] leaves in its wake, so we thought there might be a connection at first. But the difference is that the lance destroys, while the black orb disrupts. It is like a last attempt to dominate, to take control, or absorb everything around it. Black mana is also really difficult to observe, which makes things harder.

As a side effect, it is difficult to estimate how much mana was used to make it as an outside observer. That means it's hard to grasp how dangerous it is. That could explain why some powerful but less perceptive people I met immediately tried to get rid of it and perceived it as a great danger, even though I probably couldn't cause much trouble for anyone truly powerful. For now.

And oh, how many times we tested using black mana for body strengthening, mind strengthening, and empowering my skills. Up until now, I've mostly gone by feeling, but that crazy catboy came up with some numbers and a few more efficient methods.

Black mana isn't really that effective for powering my mind, but it is far more efficient for my body. And even there, it's better at increasing my durability rather than strength.

As for my skills, [Redistribution] and [Eclipse] work best with it. But even though we don't really have any proof yet, I think once my mastery increases, [Focus] and [Manifestation] will become very scary.

I throw the mana stones and a few papers on the table and start taking off my clothes while heading into the shower, these thoughts still running through my mind. I keep thinking about the tests we could continue. Plenty of them have already helped me improve my constructs, some of them significantly.

As unpleasant as it is, I also know, from the tests I've run with Doc, where my body is most damaged. I know what parts to improve and modify further, and I know how to push things further if I choose to. And so I continue speeding up, running downhill, because stumbling and falling means nothing good.

Even if I hadn't gained anything else by being here over the past two weeks, I think it was worth it. Just for one piece of information, I got from the Doc in exchange for three left arms. ṚαΝóΒΕδ

I heard about someone who's rumored to have something similar to my black mana, or maybe even the exact same thing. One of the four people known to have had it in the past millennia.

The Ruler of Kindness.

Later that evening, I venture into my mental space where I find myself facing mini Sophie. She is, as always, in the same room I left her in, and even now I refuse to ask. I'm waiting for her to tell me, and she knows it.

And she's clearly annoyed by it.

At first, I had wondered if there was going to be a big difference between this version of her and the real Sophie. After all, she herself said this is just an amalgamation of some memories she disliked. But the longer I talk to her, the more I think she may be wrong. Even though this one remembers almost nothing from before the tutorial, she knows everything since the start of the 1st floor.

I don't think it was just a few memories, I think her mind fractured into many parts, and each part had the current Sophie as a base, with some of her Earth memories mixed in.

Or something like that. Who knows. All that mindblendering stuff is weird.

"I think that spine implant he showed you could help you improve your Thermal Cycling construct," she says.

"How the fu... how the hell."

"You know you can swear in front of me."

"You look ten. I'm not going to swear in front of a child."

"Don't bullshit me. I've heard Vega speak."

"She learned all of that long before she met me. You know, growing up on the street kind of..."

"Sure."

"Anyway, so how the hell do you think that weird spine implant can help me with cycling?"

"Isn't it simple? That implant was made from the body of some monster he got his hands on. That monster didn't channel thermal energy, but it did move fire through its bones."

"Yes, but they were mostly hollow. And are you asking me to fix my construct by messing with my body more? I mean, I'm not against it, but..."

"No," she energetically shakes her head and moves closer to me.

A bit of pale blue mana glows on the tip of her finger as she starts drawing into the air.

“Your thermal threads don’t handle the flow of your energy very well. They’re static and built to hold their shape. That’s fine for weapons, but not for something like your Thermal Cycling.”

I raise an eyebrow. “So?”

She redraws the bone and threads again. This time, taking a moment to adjust the shape, instead of focusing on layering or hollowing things out. The thread starts folding into itself, spiraling along the inside of the hollow. Like veins wrapped around a spine.

“You’ve woven multiple threads together,” she says, “but you don’t let them interact. You bundled them. That’s not a structure, it’s just a bundle of rope.”

I grunt. “I’m not stupid. I know where this is going. You want me to let the threads support each other.”

“No.” She looks annoyed again.

I stay quiet and listen.

“Right now,” she continues, “your pathways heat up evenly. All at once. That’s why they heat up so much, and probably part of the reason you feel so much pain. But what if one thread runs hotter, faster than the others? What if you let some threads rise while others fall?”

“That’d destabilize everything, and make channeling slower.”

“It’d accelerate everything,” she disagrees. “One thread surges, forces the weaker ones to collapse, while feeding the stronger ones. You don’t get simultaneous heat, but it cascades instead. You get spikes and surges. Instant, localized small explosions inside of your construct, that would force thermal energy into narrower paths and cause them to move faster.”

I blink, slower this time. "And to do that, you want me to alter the pathways so they feel more like proper parts of my body and use my subdermal combustion to heal them at the same time as they combust in cascading explosions?"

She watches me, then finishes, "Something like that. You and I saw the implants that maniac created, right? And you heard him blabber about the ways he makes sure the body doesn't reject the implants he creates. Your natural regeneration and passive heal those constructs, but it's not all that quick."

"Yes, yes, my constructs aren't like system-given traits, so they don't work as well with my body's upgrades, natural healing, passives, and stuff, and so they tend to mess things up," I say, giving it a moment of thought.

Then I continue, "So instead of just thinking in lines, or as you so nicely put it, bundles or ropes, I'll think of them more like layers. Of course, it's going to be a shitload of work again, just to modify what I already made. There'll need to be segmentation, multiple layers, sacrificial threads, the main one... and fuck, creating nodes at the places where all the paths meet will be a pain in the ass. But like you said, I can use my bones and run a few paths through them as well."

"That should make it easier to force your body to accept them as a proper part of you."

"Or mess it up so badly that I won't be able to heal my bones with my passive."

"Or that," Mini Sophie nods.

"I can do that."

"It's always scarier when you say it."

"Mini Sophie-"

"Please don't call me that ever again."

"Do you realize how much thermal energy I'll be able to channel if this all works out?"

"A shitload?"

"Language. You're too young to swear."

"Fuck you."

"A lot of thermal energy. And maybe, in just a few months, I'll be able to keep the second seal on Ignition Heart lifted for more than just a few seconds. Anyway, you know what's so nice about all this, Mini Sophie?"

"What?"

"As I apply these changes, I can start working on a prototype construct to allow me to turn all that thermal energy into mana."

"Not another construct. You just barely patched the ones you've already made."

"Mini Sophie-"

"Don't. Call. Me. That."

"More mana."

She glares. "You're going to set yourself on fire and die from mana radiation one day. You're actually proud of that, aren't you?"

"It was your idea. You should make a spreadsheet."

"You can't blame it all on me. And no, I'm not making your damn spreadsheets."

"Something color-coded by likelihood of organ failure, heart explosion, that kind of stuff."

"Fantastic. Can't wait to watch you combust."

"Thanks for the support."

"You're welcome, you absolute maniac. I fucking swear, the longer I spend talking to you, the more I'm inclined to the idea of returning to my body."

She then tries to kick me out of my mental space, but she can't. Instead, she just stands there, awkwardly staring at me.

To make it easier for her, I leave.

It's all statistics in the end. Sooner or later, someone who enters my mental space will actually be kind to me.

Chapter 657: Rumors

"Hey, Mik." I greet as I barge into the smithy.

The velnar in the corner of the room groans, and the heat inside rises. Doing his best to ignore me, he takes a piece of metal he's been hammering and throws it back into the forge, and the heat rises even more.

So silly. He's long since learned that won't work on me.

As I absorb the heat, I move closer and observe the axe he's just thrown into the forge. He already carved pathways into it using his golden-hued tools. I know either he'll alter it for one of his disciples or sell the weapon to some inscription master.

"I'm busy," he complains.

(He doesn't seem very busy,) Sophie says in my mind.

"You don't seem very busy," I say out loud.

Once again, the temperature rises, but I absorb it all, to his growing annoyance. This poor big fella is used to using heat as a wall and an excuse to get rid of people who annoy him.

He's a smart man. I would totally do something like that.

With a movement like an attacking viper, he turns to me. Seeing such a huge body move so fast is quite scary, but I'm brave, so I face him.

(Why did you want me to watch this?) Sophie asks.

"What is someone like you doing in the Primordial Knights? Those lunatics don't usually gather crafters," the velnar asks instead of answering.

"Please, Mik, I may be new, but I'm also a member of the Primordial Knights. You can't be so rude about them in front of me," I answer Mik.

(It's more fun when I talk with you, too. It keeps my mind busy.) I say to mini Sophie.

(Nat, are you using me as a second monitor content because of your terrible attention span??)

(No.) I defend myself.

Meanwhile, I take a few more steps and come to a stop in front of Mik. "So? Just say it. Did my items sell?"

“Only a lunatic from the Primordial Knights could make items like that. Why were they so ugly? And why were so many of them prone to hurting their users if they got careless or exploding when misused?”

“Just use them correctly, it is easy. And I left notes and precautions for each item in case someone who was exceptionally cowardly got them. But the performance should still be pretty good. Since you’re twisting like this, I guess you were wrong when you said no one would want to buy them?”

Finally, he lowers his head in defeat. “They all sold at auction a day ago.”

Somewhere deep inside, this velnar seems to be hurt. He is someone who holds a great deal of respect for his craft, but he might have just forgotten how insane most Beyonders really are.

(I estimate your cut to be 100,000 shards.) I hear that voice in my head.

(Only? Some of those items were pretty fancy.)

(You mean the Antomic Bomb 2.0 and Sparrow Obliterator 9999? Both of those things could’ve killed the user far more easily than whatever they were meant to fight.)

(I miss them both. And I think you’re underestimating Beyonders. I’m sure they loved them and fought over the opportunity to buy them.)

(Whatever helps you sleep at night.)

“Your cut, as per our deal, is 155,000 shards,” Mik says.

I feel Sophie immediately disconnects from our call, and I decide not to push it, being the gracious winner I am.

While I gather my prize from Mik, I start to wonder if this is really the best way to make shards. So far, I’ve held off on buying an upper arcane passive because I don’t really need it. Something that powerful

would just sit inactive most of the time to avoid making things too easy. There's already too much for me to experiment with. Even so, I'm not dumb. I realize the value of a passive that grade represents, and I already know what I'll buy if I ever truly need it.

Sure, it'll take some time to fully apply, but at some point in the future, I'll probably be kicking myself anyway.

One of the reasons I've kept over two million shards is to make more shards. With a huge sum like that, it should be possible. The problem is that I still haven't found a proper way to do it.

Yes, getting a few hundred thousand shards here and there is nice, but it's far from optimal, even though I'm using guild facilities and buying the materials from the guild, by way of my contract. I think they've underestimated how many materials I might be buying.

"I'll see you later, Mik."

"Please don't return."

You could be reading stolen content. Head to Royal Road for the genuine story.

The next crafter I visit is someone I've lovingly come to call Dave.

Dave is a lumoran, and like all his people, he has black skin with transparent blue crystals covering patches here and there. Compared to most of the Lumorans I've met on the 7th floor, he has more of these crystals than most. That either means he's either very old or very high level. In his case, I'm guessing it's age since he doesn't really seem to be all that strong.

But Dave is very experienced, intelligent, knowledgeable, and talented when it comes to inscribing.

Dave also doesn't talk. I don't think he's mute, it seems more like a decision on his part. Maybe it's like in that story I heard? The old man pretending for decades to be mute just so he wouldn't have to talk to his wife? Like many things, even this internet story is probably just a legend, but a part of me hopes it's true, if only for how ridiculous it is.

As with the many times before, when Dave sees me enter his shop, he smiles, waves, and gestures for me to come closer.

Used to this behavior, I follow him to one of the backrooms where he shows me three items he's bought since the last time I visited three days ago. We spend a few hours examining these items and going over their structures. One of them is a broken shield, another is an inscribed dagger, and the last one is a pendant. None of them can be called anything impressive, but I've learned just how much this man admires craftwork.

Even if it might be rough, amateurish, there's a lot you can learn about a person from the lines they've made.

Just like Dave, I also take some time to point out the parts I find interesting, and they're always very different from the sorts of things Dave admires. Our inscribing styles are pretty different, too, yet Dave, having seen my work, has never tried to correct me. Instead, he seemed curious about where my style might take me and found joy in comparing it to his own.

To put it simply, Dave is a pretty chill guy.

As I've done many times before, I take out a small ring I found in one of the Primordial Knights' treasuries I was able to sneak into. Its rarity is only mid epic, but it was created in a style so different from mine and Dave's that I'm sure he'll find it interesting.

And he truly does, with his smile growing even wider.

He takes it and puts it away, probably so he can examine it more later when he's alone, and I let him. I don't even ask for any shards in return. I know for sure he'll add its value to my share of the money from selling the items I gave him.

He gives me thirty thousand shards and a thankful shake of hands.

As I leave, Dave already rushes back into the backroom to examine the ring while setting up an alarm in case a customer comes in.

The last crafter I visit is a vile, tiny creature. A woman called Sutri. A vyssari.

When I enter her shop, she shouts, "Welcome back, you frigging lunatic!"

"Please don't call me that."

"No way, anyone from Primordial Knights is and always will be a frigging lunatic by me!" she shouts again and jumps down from the normal-sized chair, which she always manages to make look ridiculously oversized. "Did you come for your shards?"

"I'm the most normal member of Primordial Knights you will ever meet, and yes, I would like my shards."

"Bullshit! I'm already hearing rumors spreading about you in Black Tower."

I halt my steps and look down at her as she stops near me. "Talon?"

"Talon," she nods. "I swear I never met someone who can talk and bullshit as much as him. But you know what's the problem? The guy is charming and seems to know just how far he can push things, and somehow you can't even get mad at him."

"What did he say this time?"

"Obviously, nothing too secretive. Some might not notice, but I did. Even when he seems drunk, he never lets anything important slip. Everything he says either boosts his own reputation, promotes your guild, or helps him get on someone's good side. Frigging lunatic. That blabbering fool's gonna end up as vice guild master of the Primordial Knights before any of you even realize it."

"As you said, he's a blabbering fool. So, what are the rumors this time?"

Sutri smiles widely. "Apparently, you're scarier than the Doc and literally forced the poor lynthari to cut into you. Rumor has it the Primordial Knights are still crying over the contract they signed with you,

weeping as they discover all the addendums you slipped in. You took over their defensive arrays in a matter of days. Your salary is two million shards a year as a newbie. You talk to yourself at times. Something seems to be possessing you and burning you out from the inside. You have an insanely powerful item that sometimes causes intense mana radiation that hurts people even stronger than you. You might be Nyssa's lover."

"What the fuck was the last one?"

"...rumor has it you're missing your left arm more often than not. Your eyes glow when you're hungry. They made Weslin your babysitter for some reason. And then there are the ones about the guild, Talon, and Weslin."

"I'll have to have a talk with him again."

"Yeah, talk," Sutri smirks. "I think he's just decided to stick with you for some reason. Just use him, he's probably counting on it."

"Sure, sure, how much?"

"Twenty thousand this time. And I had a few B-ranks ask me who made the projectiles."

"They can keep asking," I answer while I accept the transfer of shards.

"You know I won't say anything. I take the privacy of my clients seriously. But I've had a few people make projectiles for me before. From metal, stone, wood, and all kinds of stuff, but yours are really special. I don't think there's any other C-rank who can make projectiles from mana and make them so durable and long-lasting. I've got some saved in my storage because I'm curious, I'm sure it'll take years before they start to lose their shape."

"Glad you like them."

"You bet I did! You made me some nice shards. So many projectiles, so quickly and in so many shapes. Hell, the better ones you made were even resistant to low grade mana disruption, and you made some neutral so they could be charged with mana."

"What about the armor I made?"

"Nah, no luck there."

"Oh, they prefer items with different effects? I know the chest plates I made didn't have any, and..."

"They're ugly as fuck."

"...I see."

"Yup," Sutri nods. "It's different if you just want to throw something, arrows, javelins, throwing knives, orbs, that's fine. But a suit of armor you're wearing at all times? But don't worry, if you make that armor just a bit stronger, they'll ignore the design. By the way, are you making them ugly on purpose?"

"I have to go. See you later, Sutri."

I open the door and exit while she calls something from behind me. Then I head back to the Primordial Knights.

The schedule is clear. Weslin used a one day beyond-stay token, so he's already back in his tutorial, but it's been decided that he'll be returning once I return from my tutorial. Yes, somehow it seems that I will be sticking with the guy a bit longer.

My 30-day stay token ends soon, so I'll be going back to the 9th floor for a day or two, to check on the others and deliver mini Sophie to her body. After that, it's another 30-day stay. But before my 30-day stay token ends, I get to spend more time with the Doc.

And who knows, maybe I'll get to learn a bit more about the Ruler of Kindness.

Chapter 658: Fragile

The time finally comes. I leave the primordial knights without any goodbyes, just a promise to return in a few days and make my way back to the 9th floor.

The humidity of the 9th floor immediately hits me, and the near-claustrophobic, all-encompassing jungle wraps itself around me.

Min-Jae sits nearby with an array of interesting items around him. A few shelves filled with books and mana stones, some desks that seem like they'd belong in a library, and a few more pieces of furniture. The most eye-catching is the huge, closet-sized clock whose arms reach the set time, and then the clock rings.

As the ringing spreads through the jungle, Min-Jae looks at me and smiles proudly. The sound is somewhat soft while still being clearly noticeable.

After it rings for the last time, Min-Jae waves his hand, and the tree above the clock and the furniture around it creaks, cracks, and then entirely falls down, squashing it beneath a trunk as thick as a bus.

Still, with a smile, he explains, "I could just use the countdown timer to estimate when you'd return, but it was fun to set the clock to countdown, and I timed it to the second. I didn't even open the clock, I just used my senses and [Telekinesis]."

"I appreciate such frivolous uses of your powers, but wasn't it a waste to destroy the furniture?"

"It's fine. We already moved all the useful stuff and sorted it out. There's just too much. Clothes, some mattresses, beds, pillows, blankets, books, furniture, food, their drachen, items, and all that stuff. We could probably furnish a small mansion with everything we've got."

"Then it's fine," I say, and ask directly, "How's it been going?"

"It was rough for a few days, but Izzy and the twins worked hard and found a way to "fix it". So it went from Sophie being dead to... well, just you guys...."

"Getting our asses kicked."

He shrugs awkwardly, "Something like that. Everyone more or less went on a training spree. We've moved pretty far away, so I came to wait for you and bring you back. Some of the demon tribes are highly perceptive, but we've been avoiding them thanks to Izzy and Tess. We know their territory pretty well, so I can lead you to our base without running into them."

He gestures, and I follow behind him. Then it's less like he flies and more like he's pulling on a set of strings he's tied to himself. It's just more of that weird-ass way he moves when he uses [Telekinesis] and primordial gravitational energy to move.

"We shouldn't stick around too long. A few hours ago, one of the stronger monsters passed by here. Likely over level 400, big scary thing," he explains.

"Seems like you guys have learned a bit more about this place."

Min-Jae jumps on the branch of a tree and then moves to another with a nod. "Not the most important stuff, but it could be said we're slowly learning more. We could likely learn more, but the situation..."

"I see."

"Yes. And you, how'd it go? Did you kill them?"

"I met her. She's alive for now, but next time, she won't be."

"That's good."

"I guess. Can you sense that huge presence to our left?" I ask.

"Yup," Min-Jae says. "Even from this distance, I can see its gravitational wavelength. It has to be that big ass lizard. It moves pretty slowly, but it weighs a lot and it's likely very durable. We've avoided it so far. If

you cause too much of a commotion, like explosions, fire, or flying around, more strong monsters like that lizard start appearing in the area."

"Likely a floor setting."

"Seems like it," he says as he comes to a stop, and so I stop at his side.

I notice he's looking to the left, where that lizard should be, and his yellow left eye shines just a little bit. "I think I can kill it without much commotion, but I want to plan things out a bit longer," he says.

I understand right away. "It's all yours."

"Thanks," there's a slight smile on his face, and we start moving again. "So, back to the demons, there are multiple tribes, and each far away from the others. They all look more or less the same. White hair, horns, red eyes, but some tribes seem to have more bias towards certain forms of primordial energy, while others orient around something different. So it seems likely that it's genetic, at least partially? Whatever decides what demon heart they get."

"Have you spoken with any of them?"

"Not so far. We're considering a few different tribes, and Tess has been planning for her and I to take the lead because of our primordial energies. I think, at worst, our group can deal with one of the smaller tribes fairly easily, and we'll probably try before Tess and Lily head to Beyond again."

It all seems pretty well planned, and the whole thing carries Tess's clear signature, so I keep asking for more details, and Min-Jae keeps answering. Once in a while, I watch him kill a group of monsters that gets in our way.

Most of the time, he just increases gravity under them until they fall and find themselves pressed into the dirt as if something were holding them down from above until they die. It is surprisingly mana-efficient when it comes to dealing with monsters with weaker physical stats.

For the stronger ones, he moves some of his projectiles out of the bag on his back, which holds hundreds more like them. Some are needle-like, others are orbs, and some take the form of long rods. All neatly organized to take up the least space possible, and each likely weighing many times more than Min-Jae himself.

A few hours later, we climb to the top of one of the highest trees in the area and set up shop to wait a few hours. The sun is setting, and dawn and sunset are the times when the most annoying and powerful monsters appear.

The view opens up a bit here, between the sparse branches, and I can actually see the never ending jungle with the last rays of the sun covering it in a beautiful golden color. The activity all around us rises in a swell, and we hear trees cracking and falling, small explosions, and monsters screeching.

I hear a familiar sound that doesn't belong here at all, and look to my right.

Min-Jae is holding a smartphone and taking a photo. Another shutter sound follows.

Noticing me looking at him, he smiles. "Izzy hasn't been in the mood for taking photos lately, so I've been taking some for her. She'll like them when she sees them later. Maybe."

"She'll like them," I say with certainty.

I know that even if Min-Jae's only managed to take photos of his thumb from awkwardly holding the phone, leaving the other half smudged with his fingerprints, Izzy would like them. If only for the gesture itself.

For a moment, I close my eyes and appear in my mental space. In that small room with aging furniture, the crib in the middle, and a window open to the cold weather, and the snow falling outside.

Sophie has been listening and watching through my eyes since we entered the floor, as I've invited her to. Looking at her small figure now, she seems even more down, the closer we get to returning her to her body. And with her, the memories she wanted to throw away.

"Want to tell me?" I ask simply.

From down there, she looks up at me. Once again, I realize how much her younger version looks like Izzy. Not enough to mistake them for twins, but very close.

A self-deprecating grin appears on her face, and she starts talking, "I was an only child, and my parents gave me everything. Some people could say I was spoiled, and maybe I really was, but I loved them, and they loved me. It felt perfect, and I thought that was just how things would always be."

She still keeps that grin, but it starts to fade, and her voice drops.

"Then Izzy was born. She was weak, got sick often, and almost died more than once. My mom quit her job just to watch over her, and my dad started working from home so he could help too."

As she talks, I sit down opposite her, putting the crib to my left, and look at those big green eyes.

And she continues, "It went on like that for months, and I slowly went from being the favorite child to the one in the background. My parents stopped loving me, and instead, there was little Isabella. She stole them from me. That always ill little thing. That's what I thought at the time. How stupid, right?"

"Kids are stupid."

"And not just stupid." She stops resting against the wall and moves closer to me. It becomes colder in the room out of nowhere, and the snowflakes start falling around us. "So, Nat. What would you say if that jealous little girl had waited until her parents were asleep, then went into her sick sister's room, opened the window while it was freezing outside, and nudged the blanket off her just a little?"

For a moment, I just stare at her. The grin fades from her face, and her eyes start to well up, but she doesn't cry. She just wipes them away.

"Izzy survived by a miracle. Dad woke up at night and, for some reason, decided to check on her. The next day, my mom kept crying, she thought she was tired and forgot to close it. Not even for a second did they think it was the little monster that they'd been keeping under the same roof."

Sophie wipes her eyes again, more aggressively. "A few days later, both of them died in a car accident." She doesn't stop, continuing to wipe her face on her sleeves. "And then it was just me and Izzy, moving to my uncle's. Nat, there's a reason I'm here, and I still believe my parents' death was a punishment for what I did. And now I'm being punished again, dragging Izzy into the tutorial and to all this with me."

She keeps wiping at her eyes like she's trying to erase the whole thing. The air in the room stays cold. Not from the window. Not from the snow.

I let the silence hang. It deserves to. Then I speak, quietly.

"I don't think there's anything I can say to that."

She doesn't react. Just sits there, breathing unevenly, her face half-lit by the faint light from outside. The crib creaks slightly as if reminding us both what's lying in the middle of the room.

"But I'm still here, and I can listen," I say.

Her fingers tighten slightly around the sleeve of her shirt. That's it.

"And so is Izzy," I add and lean forward. "If you want me to hate you, I don't."

She doesn't answer right away. Just lowers her head again, like even that is too much to hold. "I wouldn't blame you if you did, if everyone did," she finally says, voice barely audible.

"I know," I reply.

Sophie pulls her knees up closer, rests her forehead on them. Then she speaks again, and this time her voice is steadier.

"I kept telling myself I was a child. That I didn't understand. But I did. I knew exactly what I was doing. And that's what makes it worse."

I don't interrupt her.

She lifts her head slowly. Her eyes meet mine. "Sometimes I wonder... does she know? What if she does, and just hasn't said anything? Every time I think about it, I'm too scared to ask."

Both of us stay quiet, and I stay with Sophie for a bit longer. Not because I have anything left to say, but because leaving would feel like I was abandoning something fragile.

The cold isn't going away, but it stops feeling sharp.

"You should go." She says after a while.

I explore her expression for a moment, and only then do I nod and leave without any further words.

Chapter 659: Sisters

As we travel through the 9th floor, I let Min-Jae handle most of the monsters, and we talk a lot. It's been a long time since it was just the two of us, and I've always felt more at ease when talking to one person at a time. And something about it makes it easier for me to speak up, too.

My intruder doesn't count. Sophie is getting more nervous the closer we get, and I can only think that she's quietly considering the merits of not "returning." I think if she wanted to, she could disappear, dissolve these memories, and let them be lost forever, forgotten, known only to me, who won't tell anyone.

The fact that I won't tell Izzy likely makes it even harder for Sophie, since it all ends up being her decision.

To distract her, I let her watch constantly, after informing Min-Jae of her presence and explaining the situation a bit.

Min-Jae, meanwhile, talks a lot about everything that's happened over the past month, and I have to say this floor suits him. He seems more confident and says he tends to move alone for days at a time.

There's also a lot he's managed to learn from the materials we stole from the Academy, and even now, he's taken to carrying some mana stones around to study at all times.

Two days pass like that, traveling, fighting, and having quiet conversations at dawn and dusk. Then we reach the "territory" that Group 4 has taken for themselves.

I would've expected the first person to meet me would be the best corgi of the 9th floor, and I obviously turn out to be correct.

Currently, Biscuit is big enough that his head reaches my waist, still perfectly proportioned as the glorious corgi he is. He flies through the forest at a speed that, by my estimation, is at least 6% faster than his previous record.

Min-Jae and I stop the moment we see him, and Biscuit continues floating toward us, waving his legs below him as if he were swimming. It takes a solid minute for him to reach us, and I pull his absolutely huge head into my arms.

(Food!) He says, and I can hear the excitement and pride in his voice.

"Of course I noticed! Who wouldn't?"

(Food.)

"Oh, Maya didn't?"

(Food!)

"Yes, that's pretty sad," I agree, continuing to enjoy this big, fluffy corgi.

Even though I love Biscuit in his normal form, his puppy form, and his giga form, this current size is also very pleasant to hug.

He keeps pushing himself against me and sniffing. Each time he does, his wagging tail speeds up even more.

His smart eyes meet mine, and he suddenly shrinks into his puppy form. Tiny budding antlers sprouting from his forehead.

He sniffs again, and I feel our connection start to deepen. In a flash, I find myself forced into my mental space, in the small room with the crib and its open window, snow falling outside.

Mini Sophie looks around in confusion, and then, just like me, she glances down where Biscuit now stands. At which point he lets out a cheerful woof.

Still in his puppy form with those little antler buds, he jumps, wobbles, and runs to where Sophie is sitting on the ground, resting against the wall. From his back, a single purple tentacle stretches out and shuts the window close before he leaps into her arms. I feel a telepathic link forming between them as he jumps at her, licking her, pressing his tiny, cold nose into her face.

At first, Sophie tries to resist, but the little beast won't stop. Eventually, she gives in, laughs softly, and starts hugging and petting him.

"I can understand him so much better now. He's almost speaking in complete sentences," Sophie says after a while, holding Biscuit in her arms as he relaxes. "Is this how you usually hear him?" she asks.

"I don't think so? I understand him much more clearly than you guys do. Our dear Biscuit doesn't know how to speak very well. When he communicates, he tends to send out too much information at once. Smells, emotions, all the things he perceives or thinks about. You guys hear one word, but to me, it's like hearing dozens of sentences at once."

Sophie's eyes go wide. She looks down at Biscuit, then back up to me.

It's amusing to see her like this, so I explain a bit more. "At first, Biscuit was scared of hurting you guys, so he tested things out on monsters, trying to talk to them. But even if they had high levels, it hurt them if he was able to connect. It's just too much information, and the pressure of Biscuit's mind can be

overwhelming. He kept trying but couldn't refine it, so he gave up and just picked his favorite words to use."

"Food," Sophie whispers.

Hearing that, Biscuit sniffs, twitches, and starts looking around. When he doesn't spot anything edible, he snuggles back into Sophie, clearly disappointed.

"Yes. I think it's because he's my bond that my mind can handle it better. But ever since the 1st floor, I've been feeling how strong the presence of his mind is."

Hearing us talk about him, he lets out a soft woof and twitches slightly when Sophie touches his tiny, budding antlers.

"And this?" she asks.

"Tess can be an asshole, so she wanted to surprise us. But Biscuit already told me about them a while ago, so screw her. The antlers came from that deer, the Champion that was trapped and tortured back on the sixth floor. When Biscuit ate him, he took something from it. Call it absorption, devouring, assimilation, whatever you like. Now the antlers are helping him communicate better. When he feels like it."

I sense another presence coming up nearby, so I return to the outside world, leaving Sophie and Biscuit alone in my mental space.

Min-Jae and I, with Biscuit in my arms, reach the base as a simple defensive array lets us through. And I'd bet Tess is standing there in one of the trees, watching us from a distance as we approach.

Then, coming up on a house carved into one of the larger trees, I start seeing all the items we've stolen from the Academy, and in between them, somewhere are probably my thermonuclear warheads.

Like that, we eventually see Izzy, and watching through my eyes, Sophie sees her as well.

I won't lie, I still feel a bit nervous. Even though I know Izzy, somewhere in the back of my mind, I think I might still expect her to hate me, even if only a little, because I wasn't able to protect her sister.

But of course, the budding teenage empath bears not even a speck of such emotion. She rushes in to give me a hug, and I open my arms for her, and I gently hug her back.

"You were right, it is possible to save her," she says when she finally manages to speak.

"Of course," I ruffle her hair and look behind, where I sense what I can only guess is Sophie's body.

"Dennis and Aaron helped me a lot, and together we found and connected the broken fragments. Lily's been looking after the body, so somehow everything worked out."

Tess, surrounded by her typical cloak of flickering red and white lightning, lands nearby with her javelins floating behind her. At which point they stop and settle a bit further away so they don't get in the way.

The blonde glances toward our empath. "Izzy likes to be modest, but most of it is thanks to her. She's the one who's spent most of her time searching for and carefully moving fragments back into place."

(Indeed, a stunning pair of mindblender sisters.) I send to the space in my mind.

(Don't put Izzy and me in the same bag. She is pure and kind, unlike me. She doesn't have a talent for manipulating minds. Her gift is more about understanding.)

(Sure.)

When Izzy keeps staring at me, Sophie becomes quiet. Using senses I can barely perceive, Izzy notices the very thing I expected her to.

"You... you have one of her fragments," she whispers.

“Freshly plucked from our least favourite feylith gal.”

“Nat... that... just how dangerous?”

“It’s fine. It’s not like I went to Beyond with the intention of avoiding her. You could also say it was Tess’s fault, at least partially. She pretty much sent me there.”

Izzy widens her eyes and turns to Tess. To that blonde, the unreasonable maniac, just like the rest of our group. Who else would just send someone after the very person who almost killed them? And what’s scary about it is her faith that I could pull it off. Even now, she’s not even trying to deny it, she just smiles just a tiny bit in that way only she can.

“She’s still alive?” Tess asks.

“For now.”

“Good. She should die for what she’s done. Was the piece of Sophie you have embedded in Faora’s mind?”

“Yup. Apparently, the laziest, nastiest, and most cowardly part.”

(I hate you.)

“Nathaniel...” Izzy prods, quietly tugging on my sleeve.

Looking at her, I can only sigh. I’ve thought about it a lot over the past few days, but seeing Izzy now, I’m certain of something even Sophie still questions.

Izzy knows. She understands what young Sophie did and how close it came to causing something terrible.

I wonder if it's something she knew even back on Earth. Or if she learned about it here in the Tutorial. But looking at her, I can say by instinct and with absolute certainty: she knows.

How scary can this teenage girl be?

"So, how's your progress?" I ask.

Izzy lets go of my sleeve and looks back towards the tree where her sister is. "I'm nowhere near as good as Sophie, but with some help from Dennis and Aaron, we should be able to do it in a few weeks. But that piece in your head feels very different from the ones hidden in her body or Blackie. It's like they're sleeping, but the one in you is awake."

"Very perceptive, aren't you?" I praise Izzy, who smiles weakly. "And yes, I think there might be something I can help with, so give me a minute."

(What do you want to do?) Sophie asks.

(Isn't it obvious? And why are you getting nervous now? You seemed so determined before.)

She stays quiet but also doesn't protest as we enter the tree, where, behind the many layers of defenses, we reach her body. She looks almost as if she's sleeping, even though her chest moves in a shallow rise and fall as she breathes. She is a bit pale, but otherwise looks healthy. Well, aside from the way her shadow seems darker than it should.

Once there, I activate [Manifestation].

(The twins and Izzy seem to have prepared a connection I can use, but you'll have to help me. Okay?)

(...okay.)

(And Sophie.)

(What?)

(I know you were probably doing it for Izzy. Trying not to use your mental abilities too much. But I don't think you'll have any other choice if you want to live, stay with her, and protect her. People are going to hate you anyway, no matter how little you use your mental abilities. So at least give them a reason to hate you, along with a reason to be scared shitless.)

(Yes, Nat. I will.)

There is more I could say about how unfair it is, how much it sucks. I can also think of a myriad of other problems it's going to bring. It truly is a shitty situation. But as with all the times before, my priorities here are clear. Group 4 is mine, it's ours. And it seems like we're going to have to be a bit rougher to keep it that way.

I use [Manifestation] and project my mind at Sophie's, using the bridge Izzy and the twins prepared. Sophie holds onto me, and as we delve into her body, she nudges me along, sometimes taking the lead in the process.

It's even simpler than I thought it'd be, even though it's probably because of mini Sophie, who does most of the work. But before long, there we stand, mini Sophie, with me by her side, in front of a big wooden door.

"They've done so much work," Sophie whispers while looking around at an array of things I cannot perceive. "The twins, Izzy. It must have taken weeks."

"So it would seem. Do you just need to open the door?"

She nods. "Yes, my pieces, the ones they've already put together, are there. I just need to combine them before awakening them all."

"So this piece, you, will become the new, main Sophie?"

"It's not that simple. We will merge, and I will awaken. It'll be like I was when we met Faora, just with a few extra memories from the part of me I represent now. The others were sleeping, so there's nothing for them to add."

"In that case, I'll be leaving."

"Leaving me to decide for myself."

"Yes, because it's your decision to make. But I think we both know what you've already chosen."

"...just get out already."

"See you later."

I leave and reappear in the room, and gesture for Tess and Biscuit to follow me out. Izzy stays behind, likely not even noticing as we leave, focused entirely on her sister's body.

Chapter 660: Awfully curious

"Where are Dennis and Aaron?" Min-Jae asks Tess.

"They went north to observe that area that's always covered in mist. They brought Noodle and Maya along because they planned to explore deeper inside."

"I'll go and grab them so they can see Nat before he goes back to Beyond."

"Sure. Be careful."

As she says that, Min-Jae starts pulling on his body and quickly moves through the jungle, leaving me, Tess, and Biscuit behind.

Tess glances at the puppy sized corgi with his tiny, cute antlers, then at me. “Lily went east. She found some monsters she wanted to fight so that she could level up a bit, but she should be back in a few hours.”

“So everything’s going well so far?” I ask.

“As well as it could. Everyone’s been a bit more... proactive? If that’s the right word. It’s a reasonable reaction to what happened, but we’re only human. In a few months, when the memories start to grow more distant, we’ll calm down again, if only to find ourselves getting stomped on again.”

“How dark of you.”

“I found her and could’ve probably killed her if I’d tried really hard, but of course, nothing ever goes according to plan. Instead, I brought back one of Sophie’s fragments.”

Tess smiles. “So our spiteful mind mage managed to pull off something that sneaky. That sounds just like her. Still, who would’ve thought something like this would happen after everything that went down between you two on the first floor?”

“Or the second time, when she and Hadwin tried to kill me—right after I showed up half-dead from fighting Cinderbear.”

“I think it was me who put them in their place, if I remember correctly.”

“Yes,” I confirm. “You were so cool back then.”

Her smile widens. “I have my moments. How’s your social battery? Do you feel like talking about plans, asking questions, or just blabbering?”

“I think blabbering is fine. We can talk about plans when everyone’s here instead of everyone telling me things separately.”

Tess straightens her posture and lifts her chin. "In that case, you are currently looking at the second member of Group 4 to reach a level over 300. I'm only accepting congratulations. If I hear anything close to 'took you a while,' you can be sure I'll be as petty as possible when the time for my revenge comes."

"You're so cool. Level 300 already? Congratulations."

"I'd prefer a bit more enthusiasm, but I'll take what I can get."

Biscuit keeps glancing between me and Tess, as if unsure what to do, but in the end decides to stay quiet. He just snuggles closer. I'd even swear he puts his ear over where my original heart is and listens to it in much the same way my minion likes to.

That's when a thought hits me, maybe the real reason Biscuit likes to take such a small form is so that he can be carried around. I still remember the existential dread my minion went through when Vic told her she wouldn't be able to listen to my heart anymore as she grew older.

I push that thought away. "It must've taken a lot of work. I mean, I did some large-scale leveling with explosions and stuff to get where I am, but you..."

"Right? But with my Potency and my Primordial Lightning being so good at single-target damage, combined with my ranged projectiles... it wasn't all that bad. Plus, I got some decent level-ups from everything that went down on the seventh floor."

"What class did you get?"

"I thought you'd ask that first. It's called Primordial Stormpiercer. Unlike yours, mine's just Arcane, but that just means I'll have to try harder next time."

"I don't think there's really all that many attendees running around with Arcane classes."

"Right? I was thinking that too. It also came with a nice passive that improved my [Farsight] a lot. Soon, I might even be able to see through clothes."

I glance at her and blink slowly, half in disbelief, half daring her to elaborate.

She holds my gaze and smiles—calm, amused, utterly unbothered. It's one of those smiles only this tall blonde can pull off.

I say nothing. Just keep looking at her, waiting.

She chuckles softly. "I think it's part of your charm, Nat, for you to react like that after one of my looks. But it would also be fun if you blushed and looked away. Min-Jae did that. It's heartwarming to see him act like that after everything he's been through."

"I will not apologize."

"Of course you won't. Biscuit, do you want to show Nat his new room?" she asks.

At that moment, Biscuit reacts immediately and wriggles until he breaks free of my hands. Then, instead of flying, he creates a series of purple mana arms from his back. Eight of them, moving upward before twisting toward the ground. Just like spider legs. Except they're human arms.

With fingers.

I had hoped he'd stop doing that.

Not expecting Tess to answer, we follow the terrifying being that is Corgider as he swiftly moves down the stairs and then to the side through a carved out hallway into one of the bigger rooms. This one is inside the trunk but has a huge opening onto a branch, like a balcony, offering a pretty nice view over the shorter trees.

I see. Biscuit knows I like a room with a good view, so it's not bad. All my items are here, too. There are the thermonuclear warheads, some mana stones, my Earth clothes and snacks, a few experiments, and some things I was able to steal from the Academy, all nicely piled up.

There are even two mattresses. A larger one, and a smaller one near it.

Oh, how cute. He prepared a bed for himself as... Then Biscuit climbs onto the bigger mattress and lies down comfortably. His spider-human legs vanish, and he looks at me from the top.

I see. So the smaller one is for me.

There's no need for me to turn around to know Tess has that smug smile on her face.

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

For the time being, I stay in my room alone with Biscuit. I'm gracefully allowed onto his bed, and as I lie there, I continue to pet him.

All these cheeky things aside, I still think everyone should have their government issued emotional support corgi. There is no question about that.

As I muse on that, I continue to check the Community while keeping my stats open on the other screen.

Lvl 323

Strength: 264

Dexterity: 252

Constitution: 457

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1675 + 1675

I'll need to improve the Restrictive Training Emblem and Burden Enhancement Inscriptions again to increase their output, as my stat gains have been slowing down again. But it's nothing I didn't expect, just one of the many things I'll need to do.

Savant (Hell, Alone) - It's been months since we met during the tournament, and the first thing you said here is that I was a bitch when I forfeited our duel.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - I remembered it out of nowhere, and it pissed me off like it always does. And finally, you got your ass to the 9th floor.

Savant (Hell, Alone) - Not everyone clears their floors with a full roster of party members.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Oh, you are so cool, you clear all those floors alone?

Tacita (Hell, Luce) - ~(><)~

Noname (Hell, group 4) - I still have no fucking idea how YOU cleared the 8th floor.

Tacita (Hell, Luce) - (¯ω ¯ ;)

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) - Nat, stay where you are, I'll be there soon!

Noname (Hell, group 4) - I'm not leaving, don't worry. I'll probably be staying for a day or two longer.

Sset (Hell, group 4) - Didn't you say you told your guild that you'd only be staying two days? That time is gone, taking your travel here into consideration.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - It'll be fine. Savi, how's your Sword of Aeons project been going?

Savant (Hell, Alone) - Absorbed.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Damn, and your kinetic energy?

Savant (Hell, Alone) - It's confusing and chaotic, but I've made some progress.

Tacita (Hell, Luce) - |0_0)^J

Tacita (Hell, Luce) - ~(^•ω•)^J

Tacita (Hell, Luce) - (Θ o Θ)⌘=[::::>

Savant (Hell, Alone) - Is that a stabbing emote?

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) - She still doesn't like you!

Savant (Hell, Alone) - I noticed, especially when she attacked me during every other event just to fuck up my tournament performance.

Tacita (Hell, Luce) - (• `ω´ •)

Savant (Hell, Alone) - You can keep trying. This is enough for me for now. I'll be leaving for the time being.

I don't even bother responding, knowing his Community tab is probably already closed. He just loves having the last word.

Tacita then follows up with one more message.

Tacita (Hell, Luce) - `、ヽ`ヽ`ヽ、ヽ(ノ><)ノ`、ヽ`ヅヽ`ヽ、ヽ

The emote likely means it's raining where she is? How the hell would I know?

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) - No going back to Beyond before I get to our base! Promise?

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Promise.

After that, I close the Community as well. Biscuit's already sleeping in my arms and breathing softly. I count my 660th boop since I came here and look around the room, picking out the things I'll take back with me to Beyond. Likely some mana stones, and possibly a few things I'll ask Min-Jae for recommendations on. Some Earth clothes and a few snacks for when I feel especially mentally drained after interacting with people.

Now that I'm a member of the Primordial Knights, I think I'll get a boost to my Beyond Stay token. If I recall correctly, it should be a 50% duration bonus for 2nd to 5th ranked guilds, so my next stay will be 45 days. That's why I don't mind stretching my stay here for a few days longer. In the end, it won't be me who has to deal with the consequences.

Interestingly, my affiliation with the guild now even shows in my status. Another line that people outside of Beyond aren't likely to have. And one more, this time for my rank. That one appeared the moment I entered the second floor, I think. Or maybe only on the third, or after I joined the guild. I rarely check that part of my status, so it's hard to know exactly.

Name: Nathaniel Gwyn

Title: Champion Candidate

Difficulty: Hell

Rank: C, Ivory White

Guild: Primordial Knights

Floor: 9 - The Pit

Time left until forced return: 2y 199d 16h 14m 36s

Traits (2/3): Mana Wavelength Iris 2/3, Mana Physique 0/3

Getting to B rank should be fairly easy, A rank as well. And I'm starting to think S rank should be possible if I really try. The only problem is that I don't know the requirements yet, but I guess if I manage to enter the 6th floor and do some fancy Beyond quests, I should be able to pull it off. That would make me one of the apex Beyond predators for at least a few months before I have to leave the tutorial.

Facing equally strong opponents, or someone stronger than myself, is great, and I live for that feeling, the thrill of battle.

But!

Curbstomping someone who used to be stronger than you, once you've overtaken them through the results of your hard work, feels good in its own right.

Thinking of pleasant, normal, things like that, I continue to enjoy the view from Biscuit's penthouse. Through my senses, I perceive that Izzy is still with Sophie, and Tess went ahead to help Lily get back, who apparently lacks the navigational skills to do so by herself.

The wind shifts slightly, brushing against my skin in a way that feels just a little too deliberate. Something in the air feels off, too still, like the world is holding its breath. Biscuit lets out a tiny huff in his sleep, ears flicking once, before settling.

One moment, I'm looking at the wide open view.

The next, there's a face in front of me.

White hair. One red eye, the other closed, blood flowing from the socket. One leg cracks underneath her, and she stumbles a moment before regaining her balance, still putting full weight on it as if she were ignoring or failing to even notice the wound or the pain that comes with it.

All my instincts scream at me to move, but my mind races faster. Before I launch an attack, I recognize the feel of the presence in front of me. The presence of someone else piloting this native demon's body.

Biscuit twitches, sniffs, and seems like he's about to wake up, but I hold still and gently pet his head until he calms down and continues sleeping. Even then, I feel an adrenaline and mana rush through my body, preparing to fight in an instant.

"You seem to recognize me. I'm glad to see that!" the woman says, and her shoulder twitches and cracks, the bone tearing through the skin and clothes.

Watching that white bone covered in blood, I lift my finger to my lips and glance at Biscuit.

She smiles apologetically and lowers her voice. "How unkind of me, almost waking this beautiful beast from its slumber."

Taking another step, she stumbles again as she puts weight on her broken leg, and it twists a bit more. Looking at that leg for a good moment, she just sighs before turning back to me.

"You've been awfully curious about me, Nathaniel."