

Tutorial 661

Chapter 661: Not what it looks like

“I wouldn’t say awfully curious, maybe just a little bit? But don’t people do that often?”

The demon woman smiles, and something audibly cracks, likely another bone breaking.

“That’s true, people ask about us a lot, but you asking brought my attention. Can you guess why?”

“Is it this?” I ask as a tiny black orb forms over the palm of my hand.

As always, its oppressive presence fills the area, and even though I haven’t used that much mana to create it, it starts hungrily sipping on the mana surrounding me as well as mine.

“How terribly predictable I must be when even an attendee can guess that,” she breathes out in a playful tone and then tilts her head as if listening to something.

“This body isn’t that bad, actually. I picked it because it seemed stronger than the others, but examining it now, it’s quite impressive. This demoness would likely become a Champion candidate just through the power of her body alone.”

I look at it. One eye burst, bleeding tears, twisted arms, and bruises covering most of the pale skin. All that just from the presence of the Ruler, and likely a limited one.

“How do you guys even move around if even a fragment of your power causes that?”

“Wouldn’t a Vessel die if you were to manifest yourself through them?”

“They are very durable, but most of the time, yes.”

“So you guys just stay on your planets?”

She smiles, and the corner of her lip tears. "I like the many questions you ask and how much you try to exploit the opportunity. I still think you could have been a great Greed if you had decided to pick that subclass. You must have also sensed Greed nudging you towards it, greedy as always. As you said, we rarely move ourselves, often keeping to our own domains, the most durable planets."

"What do you mean, durable planets?"

"You seem to suspect something already, don't you?"

"Planets that've been through a lot of pairings?"

Her laugh spreads through the room. "When I watch you sometimes, I still find myself getting surprised by that instinct you have regarding the system's functions. And yes. The more pairings the planet goes through, the stronger it becomes and the..."

She cuts her words and then shakes her head. "I think I'll keep that one to myself for now."

"So, which floor is yours?" I ask her directly.

She stares me down with the same gentle expression she's worn this whole time.

I count three seconds before she answers: "Not telling."

Taking a few steps, more cracks sound, and her blood flows down her body, dripping onto the floor with every movement. From up close, she stares at the tiny black orb.

"Can you tell me what it is?" I ask directly. I know the body she's possessing has a time limit, so I try to ask a question that hopefully won't annoy her so much that I don't get an answer.

Looking at the black orb for a bit longer, she stands and shakes her head. "It has many names, but no one knows which one is the correct one. Or maybe all of them are. Someone like the Warden, the Last Elf, or the Magi could probably tell you a dozen or so."

"That answers nothing," I say, pushing a little more.

"The best answers are like that." Her smile turns more gentle, and she squints her good eye a bit. "I know Greed likes to think of you as her own 'secret' project, but I hope there is a little chance you could help me as well."

"How could I even help someone like you?" I ask, genuinely curious.

"You probably can't, but like Greed, I like to spread my webs even if the chance of success is low. Tell me, Nathaniel, do you know what she wants from you?" Her voice turns to a whisper, and she steps closer, only to come to a halt.

I follow her eyes and look down at Biscuit, who is calmly resting in my arms, his eyes now open. There is a slight purple glow to them. He's not even doing it in a threatening manner. There is no mana, no primordial energy.

He just looks at her.

The Ruler of Kindness smiles wider and stays where she is, meeting my gaze.

"I'm sure Greed is listening, and she would get angry if I said any more, so I will keep her hopes and desires to myself. I have but one request. Only one thing I have longed for through the millennia. Something even Pride could not give me."

She opens her mouth to say more, and the leg supporting her cracks. She falls to the floor backwards.

Slowly, she turns onto her chest and then uses her single unbroken arm to crawl around to face me. Blood covers most of her face now.

"I want someone, anyone, to extinguish what remains of me and let it be over."

Her mouth curves into one last gentle smile before she twitches. Her lips begin to move, as if to speak, but no sound follows. Then she goes still, and the presence vanishes.

I wait a few seconds longer, just to be sure, but the body doesn't move again.

Looking down at Biscuit, I say. "There is no way I'll be able to do that anytime soon. Do you think she was just trying to 'preorder' my help, perhaps she asks the same thing of every particularly capable Beyonder?"

(Food.)

"I think so too. Most of the time, these people don't even give it much thought. It's just like those guys telling you to ask 100 girls on a date and hope one says yes. Like a numbers game. The thinking is: the more you try, the better your odds, and rejection, or in this case, my failure or death, just becomes part of the process?"

(Asshole. Food?)

I lay back on the bed and put Biscuit on my chest, where he sits in his puppy form, looking down at me.

"Maybe? They-"

The wind moves again, the side of my room explodes, and barging in through the hole is a petite black-haired girl, a gray mantle swirling around her. In her hands, she holds two axes made of bone. She breathes heavily, and her eyes first land on the dead demon at my feet before looking at me.

"It's not what it looks like," I say.

At first, her face goes blank, then confusion follows, and finally, it settles into a smile. With a groan, she lets go of her axes, which thump heavily onto the wooden floor and crack it with the impact. The mantle around her disappears, and she slides down against the back wall, landing on her bottom. There are wounds all over her body, quickly healing, almost fully closed already.

"Did she speak to you as well?" Lily asks.

"A bit, if you can call it talking. You know the type, mysterious, hiding behind 'it's too dangerous to tell you more' or 'such and such person wouldn't like it if I said anything.' That kind of stuff."

Lily gives a quick laugh, brushing sweat from her forehead. "She popped up out of nowhere, talked for a while, and disappeared heading in the direction of our base."

Another person steps through the hole, Tess, surrounded by lightning, with a crown floating above her head. "I've never seen anyone move so fast just using their body. That goes for you, too, Lily. You must have broken some kind of record."

"I was worried she was after the others, so I rushed back, but I couldn't catch up at all."

"I'd have given you Biscuit if you had been able to catch up to her," I tell Lily.

When Biscuit looks up at me, eyes wide open, I whisper very quietly, "I wouldn't."

He chomps down and bites my finger, then continues chewing on it as I look back at Lily. Tess, meanwhile, is in the room now, sitting on the windowsill.

"Did she say anything interesting?" I ask.

It takes a moment for Lily to take her eyes off me. She shakes her head and smiles wider. "Something about wanting me to extinguish what remains of her. And that I did something before to pass her test. I don't even know what it all means."

I shrug. "It makes sense. You've just met the Ruler of Kindness, who took over one of the natives. And if I'm right, we've met her before. On the third floor."

Tess blinks, and while Lily seems even more confused, she says, "The Saint."

"Yup."

Lily looks between me and Tess, then briefly at Biscuit, still chewing on my finger, and back at me. "The Saint was dead. Only the body lived."

"And she also has black mana. That would explain why the King recognized it," I say aloud, thinking. "She's looking for someone to kill her. So maybe the third floor's setup wasn't her getting assassinated, but it was her trying to kill herself. She probably failed and became a Ruler later. That floor might be designed to help her find people who might have even a small chance of killing her. Then there's Greed, who wants to kill Pride. If someone kills Pride, it means that person is strong. And such a person might also be able to kill Kindness as well, and that's why Kindness seems to be working with Greed. Pride couldn't kill her, apparently, by the way. I don't think she's stronger than he is, though. I think he just literally couldn't kill her. Lily, she might be an even more cracked-out healer than you. Scary stuff."

I pull my finger from Biscuit's mouth and wipe the saliva on his tiny nose. He scrunches it, woofs, and starts biting me again with more enthusiasm.

Thinking a bit more, I continue, "She didn't seem all that great at handling mana, but who knows? I think that unkillable maniac brute-forced her way into compressing mana into black mana. Just abused her body and mind until she figured it out. I gotta say, I kind of admire the spirit of that. I'd love to see how her use of it differs from mine. And oh, Lily, we'll run a few tests and see if you can learn it too. I mean, I don't really think you need more terrifying abilities in your arsenal, but I'd die of curiosity if we didn't at least try."

I look at her and wait. It takes her a second to realize I'm expecting an answer, and then she nods. "Absolutely!"

I grab Biscuit and hold him tightly with one hand while pulling my finger from his mouth, now even more soaked with his saliva. As if sensing what's about to happen, he twists and hurriedly tries to get away. But I move quickly, stick the tip of my finger into his ear, and give it a twist.

Biscuit howls long and loud with that tiny mouth of his puppy form until Tess walks by, takes him from my arms, and holds him close to her chest protectively.

(Asshole! Asshole! Asshole! Asshole! Asshole! Asshole! Asshole! Asshole! Asshole! Asshole! Asshole! Asshole! Asshole!)

I stand up from the bed and come to a stop in front of Lily, who's sitting there on the ground looking up at me. She grabs my hand as I extend it to her, and help pull her to her feet.

As expected, she takes the opportunity to pull me into a hug. I try carefully to get out, but I can't even push against the strength of her body and the grip of her arms, not without reinforcing myself or using kinetic energy. A part of me thinks it might almost be a threat or a reminder from her.

When she finally lets go, I'm about to step back, but she keeps looking at me with those big eyes.

"You haven't pinched my nose," she jokes with a big smile.

I glance at Tess, who just watches in quiet amusement, then go ahead and pinch Lily's nose, making sure to use the finger Biscuit was biting.

Lily hisses and jumps back, wiping her nose with her sleeve while I step toward the body on the floor and glance down.

"Let's examine it a bit before the others get back," I say.

If it was good enough for the Ruler of Kindness to bother with possessing, it's good enough for me to take a look at.

Chapter 662: Demon cosplay

There must be a reason why even a Ruler called this body impressive, but that also raises some worrying questions.

Did the Ruler of Kindness just off an important native? Did she just ruin a potentially rewarding quest line?

I wouldn't be surprised.

"She has really tough bones, they're even stronger than mine!" Lily says while touching one of the arms. "I think she might even be over level 400 and have a third trait."

"I don't think we've seen any demons that powerful in the area," Tess notes.

"She could've come from really far away. You saw how quickly she moved," I say.

Looking down at Biscuit biting my shoes and pants, and pulling them in revenge for what I've done. I wonder what I should do with this ankle biter, but it's cute when Biscuit embraces his puppy form and behaves like one as well, so I decide to let it go and move closer to the body. Biscuit follows and attacks me again.

(Asshole. Asshole. Asshole.) He keeps repeating, constantly sending thousands of words into my brain with each thought.

"So you can probably learn something from her?" I ask.

Tess gets the same idea I do. "In that case, this could help Min-Jae improve his training."

Lily agrees. "Yes, I already thought of that and started preserving the parts he'll need to examine."

As she says it, the body, though broken, starts very slowly repairing itself. The broken arms begin to gradually snap back into place, the wounds start closing, and even the eye looks better now. It's probably taking a lot of mana and effort from Lily. The stronger the body, the more it requires, so it makes sense that it heals more slowly.

Maybe she's not just doing it to avoid looking at the broken body, but also to practice healing someone like this.

Another worrying thought forms in my head. "Let's hope her tribe doesn't come looking for her."

"I wouldn't be surprised if they did," Tess sighs and looks up at the sky. "Those guys do like to mess around, and they don't seem to care about the consequences. We might have to move now because of that, and even then, it's possible that they could track us and blame us regardless."

"You can flip off the sky. You'll feel better."

"Maybe next time, Nat."

"As you wish."

"You don't want a piece of her?" Lily asks me as she looks up from the body.

"That offer sounds a bit weird for some reason, and I'm sure you're trying to make me look like a creep. And not really, it wouldn't be that useful to me right now, and I already have too many other things to work on. Just in case, though, when you're done examining it, don't take a piece or anything like that. Throw the body to some monsters to eat or something."

"I already thought of that. There are a few around here we can toss it to. We'll have to deal with the demons sooner or later, but I'd rather it be on my terms than theirs," Tess says.

"Just have Lily kick their asses."

"What else, Mr. Demon Expert?"

"You have to admit, I have the most experience with them. It'll work for sure."

"I wouldn't say experience, more like familiarity. But yes, I know from watching you what works. Minimal speech. The harder you kick their asses, the more they respect you. Questioning the strength of their hearts is a challenge."

"Tess, are you indirectly calling me a demon?"

"Maybe."

"Nat, I'm sure I could make you look like a demon if you wanted. I even thought of that myself. Look."

At first, I want to stop this petite bulldozer healer from showing off, but my curiosity stops me.

I watch as her body grows taller and her limbs stretch. Her frame shifts slightly, and her clothes tighten as they become a bit too small. She rises to match Tess's height. Then, her eyes turn red. Starting from the roots, her hair begins to fade to white. Finally, a pair of horns emerges from her forehead, curving backward in an elegant arc.

Her face remains almost the same, changing only slightly to fit her larger structure.

Lily smiles and does the thing I think she's most proud of. Her heart starts beating at a different frequency... no. I activate my eyes and expand my senses as confusion hits me. What did she do?

Tess says something, but I don't listen. Instead, I stare at the place where her heart is.

Lily knows how dangerous messing with a Mana Heart can be, so she wouldn't risk growing it any bigger or changing it too much. At most, she would do something like what I did, building onto it, some construct or something. But she doesn't have the talent for that. So what did she do? Her heart feels almost like a kinetic heart, very demon-like.

Only when I focus in on it do I start to pick up on the differences.

Then, I get it. She's hidden her real heart and built something akin to a fake heart right next to it. It probably shouldn't even be called a heart, as I'm sure it doesn't pump blood. It's just some kind of fake organ that beats strongly and noticeably even to my senses.

I remember that Lily saw my heart working a lot during both of the tournaments and with our experimentation later. Still, to be able to mimic it to this point. It's damn cool.

Satisfied that I was able to pick up on what's happening, I look up to meet Demon Lily's eyes. For some reason, she's blushing, but while I would expect her to turn away shyly as she used to, she doesn't now. Well, she's likely ashamed I was able to see through her, so maybe I should compliment her a little.

"That's actually impressive work. You made it look almost completely natural, seamless, even. It draws attention right away, but it doesn't feel fake. You barely notice it at first, and even then, only if you look too closely. At that point, it would be considered a challenge to a fight, so you could probably beat that demon before he says anything."

She doesn't say anything. Neither does Tess.

I shift slightly and glance down at Biscuit, who's still trying to chew through my boot like a dog possessed.

"And it's not just the placement," I add, still analyzing. "It's the way it moves with everything else. You almost forget it's not the real thing."

I nod again, satisfied. "Good stuff."

"Tess..." Lily pleads in a weak voice.

The blonde glances between her and me before saying, "I'm sorry. In situations like this, I've never been able to tell if he's messing with people or if that's just how he is."

While Lily starts returning to her normal form, I reach to the ground and lift up Biscuit, who twists a few times in an attempt to escape, but I pick him up and hold him against my chest. Maybe I should use that minion communication token already. I wonder how Vega's been doing.

"The others are almost here," I say, and jump out through the hole in the tree Lily made.

I absorb the kinetic energy of my fall and gently land on the ground. I don't think I'll ever get tired of this. It just feels way too cool to the more childish parts of my brain.

Taking a few more steps, I then stop and wait, looking in the direction where I sense the signatures of the rest of the group.

Noodle appears first, quickly slithering between the trees in his giga form, where he's as thick as a car. Flames of his Fragment of Eternal Fire still flickering across his scales. In shades of purple, blue, and green.

As polite as he is, he stops in front of me, his tongue flickering as he tastes the air around me and the mana as well. Then he nods politely, and I return the gesture.

He then shrinks further and rushes into the base, likely to join Izzy, whose emotions he must be feeling due to their bond.

Min-Jae exits next, by the side of the laughing blonde, blue-eyed boys. I swear these two have gotten even taller now, and I start to realize they might grow up to be handsome, just slightly below the levels of Lioren and Channeler.

I wonder, does growing to adulthood with mana flowing through your body and leveling up actually make you more handsome? If it does, I find that deeply unfair, since most of my growth seems to have happened just so mana could make me more handsome.

Some people really have it too good.

(You'll have to chew their shoes or something, Biscuit) I send through our link.

Biscuit quickly looks up and tilts his head in a confused manner, making his ears flop around his head.

Min-Jae spots me and waves. The blonde twins are still laughing about something, probably an inside joke that started before they could even speak in full sentences. They reach me fast, skipping the greetings, like we're in the middle of a continuous conversation that only paused because they were too far to shout.

"Did you kill her?" one of them asks.

"Unfortunately, not yet," I say. "Everyone keeps asking that."

Another one smiles. "We know you that well, at least."

"I guess," I agree. "By the way, the connection you guys built to connect to Sophie was a good job."

"Nah, it's fine," the one, I guess, is Dennis, says, waving it off. "We already got thanked by Izzy way too many times, no need to pile on more."

"I don't think so," I say, getting their attention. "Izzy's nice; she says thanks for everything, so sometimes it doesn't feel quite as... rewarding? If that's the right word to use. I saw what you two did, and it must have taken hundreds of hours to complete. I think you really did a good job, and for all it's worth, you have my thanks as well."

Aaron, next to Dennis, seems even more awkward and shoots me a playful look. "We know you probably want to thank us because you feel responsible for what happened to everyone in Beyond, but damn, Nat, you can be stupid as fuck sometimes."

"Stupid as fuck," Dennis nods seriously.

"Stupid as fuck!" Min-Jae quickly adds.

Aaron's expression turns more serious, but there's still that smile on his face he almost always keeps, which makes it so easy for me to tell him apart from Dennis.

"You're the only one blaming yourself. But for now, if you'll let us, I need to go see Sophie. If my face is the first thing she sees when she wakes up, she might just fall in love with me."

Without further talk, he rushes toward the base, with Dennis right behind him. The two superhumanly fast guys push each other away to get there first.

Min-Jae stays behind and shrugs awkwardly. "Ehm, I didn't call you stupid as fu..."

"It's fine," I wave it off.

He nods and also rushes in to check on the others.

It takes a few more minutes, but finally, Maya appears as well. Her body is surrounded by a massive mana construct in a humanoid form. The construct looks like a suit of armor, but it's not solid. Its surface shifts constantly, flickering between dark blue and near-transparent pale blue. Purple lines run through the mech, glowing faintly. There is no face, just a smooth plate where one might expect eyes.

Maya floats just inside of the chest, sitting within a web of thin mana threads. The construct moves with her, responding like it's part of her nervous system, and not something she's piloting.

As her feet touch the ground, it shakes slightly, showing the weight of the armor. Even from a short glance, I notice places she's made multiple improvements, and when our eyes meet, I recognize that look of being caught in a deep state of focus, trying to maintain the armor and move it properly. As always, there are also a lot of high-quality mana batteries lining her body.

She takes a few more steps, and I notice that the armor is dragging some sort of big, bear-like monster behind her by its legs as she walks.

With her final step, the mana armor breaks apart and collapses into particles that rush back into her body. The pale blue and purple threads slide over her skin, forming glowing purple and pale blue tattoos looking things that wrap around her arms, spread across her shoulders, and reach halfway down her back. They're clearly visible because of the tank top she's wearing, and they pulse slightly for a moment before settling.

Chapter 663: Just one more day

"You can pet Biscuit a few times if you tell me what those lines are," I tell Maya.

"Sorry to tell you, but Biscuit is surprisingly cheap. He lets us pet him just for a few pieces of any sort of smoked meat. He tried to make some on his own, but it went pretty badly, so he's been relying on us to do it."

As she talks, her [Focus] completely turns off, and her expression shifts back to her usual one. A bit sarcastic in her way of speaking, but easy to talk to, and someone who likes to smile.

Biscuit's terrible sense of economy aside, I'm really curious. Maya was the first to come up with mana armor and later, mana mechs. The [Regalia] I used to have, along with most of my mana weapons, armor, and the similar tools I've developed since, can all be traced back to her.

It's probably surprising from an outside perspective since she doesn't even invest most of her stats into mana. But there's a reason she started with [Focus] and [Armament] as her initial skills.

While it's safe to say I'm probably developing Armament or Regalia—if you want to call it that—type skills faster than she is, she shows more talent for them. And as awkward as it might feel, I always find myself coming back to her for new notes and sharing my own in turn.

After all, it's not like I'm a parasite or anything.

Now that I think about it, I do that quite a lot, learning from others and borrowing ideas. I wonder where I'd be without them. While I refuse to say I would've been any weaker, it's safe to say my arsenal would be very different.

"Did you buy any mid arcane passives to help with that stuff?" I ask, taking my best guess.

"Plus [Focus]," I add.

"Plus [Focus]"

"Good. Those tattoos look nice. So, does that passive help you to store anything? Isn't that way too good? What's it called? I want to check it out in the shop."

I step closer, eyeing her forearms, where pale blue and purple lines are arranged in elegant patterns. On Maya's darker skin, they look cool enough that I start thinking maybe I should get some of my own. I know there are tattoos classified as items in the system shop.

“Mana Archive, it...”

“The hell, that sounds cool. How did I not notice it?”

“...it, as I said, allows me to store mana, though not as much as your passive does. And it helps me to store the blueprints. I think you mentioned you wanted to store your arrays and constructs in your brain or something.”

“I’m a romantic, so I might just change my mind and store anything mana-related in my heart to show my love for the best attribute.”

“Alright.”

“Alright,” I nod.

Even though I know she’s fighting it, she sighs and smiles. “You can be such a childish ass sometimes.”

“I blame my environment and subconscious need to catch up on all the things I missed out on growing up. I think Izzy said something like that once.”

“Doesn’t sound very much like her. But seeing you bullshitting like this and in a good mood, did everything go well?” She asks, stretching out a hand so I can examine part of the blueprints she’s archived there.

“If I were aiming for a perfect score, I’m still missing one dead feylith and a thylarin, but there’s still time for that,” I state, taking on a more serious tone. “Sophie left a piece of herself in Faora’s mind, and she says that piece would’ve, in the next few years, erased Faora and taken over her body. I believe her.”

Maya shrugs. “We all know how scary Sophie’s abilities can be. If you think about it, the way we’re always letting our guard down around her and trusting her, she could probably, slowly and carefully, turn us all into her slaves before the tutorial even ends. And then walk away with some of Earth’s best listening to her every word.”

"It sounds disturbing, and somehow cool."

"You're the only disturbing thing here. But if we believe she won't enslave us, it's more than likely that, before the tutorial ends, our group will have the best mental defenses on Earth after training with her."

"Sounds about right. Izzy is with Sophie, who's currently working on putting the fragments of her mind back together. She should be up and running soon. There might be some injuries or side effects she'll have to work through, but I don't think it'll be anything too serious."

Maya sits on a fallen tree nearby, and I sit next to her. "So in the end, she was lucky. It could've been much worse. And how's Beyond?"

"I'll talk about it later tonight, but it's not bad. There's a lot to do, a lot of information to gain, and plenty of opportunities. Do you regret not trying to get there?"

"Not really. If, after the tutorial, Earth ends up with 10-50, or however many people who survived Beyond, I believe I can still make it into the top thirty of those who only went through Hell difficulty. That's enough for a very comfortable life."

"I think you're underselling yourself."

"I'm trying to be more modest these days."

"And if you aren't trying to be modest?"

"If I don't count some of the other members of Group 4 and a few monsters like your sister, Tacita, Savant, Jean, and the Kings, I don't think there are many people from Hell difficulty who could stop me if I really tried."

"And are you really trying?" I ask.

Looking at her hands and the lines covering them, she closes and opens her fists a few times while searching for an answer to that question.

When she looks back at me, she says simply, "I am."

What a nice expression.

Maya doesn't talk about the training or the effort she puts in, but I can sense the effect it's had from the state of her expression and hear it in her voice.

Ever since the first floor, she's always preferred relying on others to make decisions and following along. It's a part of her I don't like much, but I don't hate her for it either. I'm sure the others have things they hate about me, too.

But over time, I've come to see how Maya's picked up the slack, and all the ways the personality that once needed someone to follow has grown more confident in itself.

Her subclass is Patience, the same as Savant's, and it shows in the way she's learned to patiently decide what she wants to do and then stick to it. I've seen it in the way she trains.

Once she decides on a target, she makes a schedule she sticks to no matter what, and progresses in ways that demonstrate an impressive level of determination. Out of all the members of group 4, she's also the most "technical" when it comes to using weapons or martial arts, and likely when it comes to creating armor from mana. Everything is well structured, prepared, and practiced.

I don't know if it has anything to do with her previous job as a personal trainer, or if it's a remnant from the time she first started exercising and sculpted her current body from the person she still calls a sad slob

Even after all this time, I find it fascinating how these little thoughts continue to float through my mind as I learn more about these people.

I decide to stay a day longer. During that time, Izzy stays near Sophie, who's still working on her mindblender stuff and hasn't awoken. Lily shows me the progress on her skele-suit, even though for some reason she still refuses to call it that. It's not something she wants to use most of the time, since she has her mantle, and her body alone is currently more durable than any armor made of her bones that she could quickly deploy. But she says she's doing it so that at some point in the future, she'll be able to create a multi-story mech grown from her own flesh and bones. Possibly something as tall as mine and Maya's.

It's something we've talked about before, though I mentioned it mostly as a joke. To my horror and fascination, this petite, black-haired maniac actually wants to do it. And I respect her determination to make her powers as creepy as possible.

Her [Disintegration] has also gotten stronger again, her progress seemingly inspired by whatever Fragment Luan used against her during that fight.

While we're talking, I overhear the twins joking that in a year they'll be as old as I was when the tutorial started. A sudden, shocking thought hits me. I do the math and realize that Lily is now 19, almost 20, but as I get to that number, my brain just refuses to accept it, and almost shuts off.

I know close to two and a half years have passed. I know she was 17 and one of the twins' classmates when the tutorial started.

But there's just no way.

Maybe it's because she's still petite, even though she's grown a little. Or maybe I just still see her that way. Or maybe it makes me feel old, since I'm also approaching 24 years old?

It's straight up stupid. Why am I here, panicking about age when I'm on track to live hundreds, possibly thousands of years? The ticking time bomb that is my construct problem, aside, of course.

And doesn't that mean Min-Jae's almost 18, and Izzy's almost 13?

I quickly cut off those thoughts and proceed to reject that reality.

We spend some time together in the living room, where I share as much information as I can and learn what they can tell me about this floor.

We, mostly Tess and I, make some plans. I leave some arms with Lily so she can use them later as needed, and as she takes them from me and puts them into the bag, the twins are still calling The Armory.

I look at Lily and wonder. Would I still look the same as I do now if I had an ability like hers to change the structure of my body? Or would there be a person with looks comparable to Lioren and Channeler standing in my place, if not surpassing them entirely?

I eventually come to the conclusion that I'd stay the way I am now, maybe with a few small tweaks here and there. A touch wider at the shoulders, slightly bigger calves. Nothing too unreasonable, I think. Everyone knows calves are fair game. Those things just refuse to grow properly. I mean, why is my ass getting rounder and firmer as I exercise, but my calves stay nearly the same?

With Maya, I examine her Mana Archive. It's cool, and I think it fits her, but it doesn't make much sense for me to pick up. With my [Manifestation] and the mental exercises I've been progressing with, it only makes sense for me to store them in my mind.

While I talk to the twins, Tess sits with Biscuit, and Maya and Lily exchange ideas with Min-Jae, things based on what she's learned from the demon's body. It finally happens. I sense two figures approaching the room we're in, and I'm not the only one. Gradually, the conversation dies down as everyone's unique senses pick up on it, and we all turn toward the door.

Izzy opens them wide and, holding her hand, she pulls Sophie inside. Izzy's eyes are red, but she has the prettiest smile I've ever seen her wear.

And Sophie herself is a bit pale and slimmer than usual. Her green eyes seem a bit wet, and she also moves somewhat awkwardly.

As the others rush in to greet her, I just watch, and for a moment, she looks my way. That short moment is enough for me to confirm one thing. And as Lily crashes into Sophie and nearly throws her to the ground, I step slightly back to avoid the commotion and noise, if only a little.

Chapter 664: Acceleration

As time passes, I start getting a bit nervous, not gonna lie. That asshat of a security lady will surely complain again, and Weslin won't be happy either. And the branch leader... assuming I'm right, probably snuck something into the contract to use against me in situations like this.

Well, that only leaves one option.

I will lie.

I could probably damage my body a little or ask the others to do it for me. I'm sure some of them would do it gladly. Tess's lightning and its remnants could be sensed on me. Since it would be recognized as Primordial Lightning, I could blame it on one of the demon tribes if I needed to.

The problem will be lying convincingly. A few of the members of the Primordial Knights currently stationed at Black Tower possess thermal and kinetic energy detection. They might try to sense my lie the same way I've been known to do with others.

Well, that's a problem for the future. For now, I'm going to sit here with growing fascination and listen to Sophie as she speaks to Maya.

"The way Faora's thought acceleration worked within her Mind Palace wasn't all that hard for me to grasp, and I think I can mimic the effects somewhat. Even though I don't have a skill like the one that made the Mind Palace, I know I can make it work, if not at the same level."

"So you're saying that bitch was able to make minutes pass in her mind while seconds passed outside?" Maya asks.

During the conversation, Sophie's voice sounds weak, but the longer she stays here and the more Lily pumps her with healing mana, the better she looks. Everyone is probably watching for signs that something might be wrong with her, but Sophie seems to be alright. That's even more apparent as we watch Izzy cling to her like a baby koala, completely forgetting about Noodle and Biscuit.

"Yes, of course, you'd need to have a powerful mind to pull off something like that. But you have [Focus], and we have Lily in case anything goes wrong," Sophie says.

“Okay, I get it. I get that you’re a maniac who can’t help but ramble about training mere moments after waking up from the dead. But what does that have to do with me? Wouldn’t Nat be better for all that mumbo jumbo?”

“That moment when you’re seconds away from death is, according to some people here, the moment you reach your peak performance.” As Sophie says that, most eyes glance between me and Lily, but I decide not to react to such slander, and Lily stays quiet too.

Sophie continues, “Nat can’t help me because he doesn’t have the skill you have, Maya. [Compounding]. You’re still using it only to increase damage, right?”

“Kind of? It levels very slowly, but the longer the fight goes on, the higher my damage gets, so that’s good. So what do you want with it?”

At this point, I already start getting an idea of what Sophie might want, and I really, really like it. To the point where I start thinking...

What if I stayed here a week or two longer?

And Sophie says, “I’ll make my own variation of thought acceleration. Then we’ll get you deep into [Focus], cooperate with the twins if needed, and use your [Compounding] to increase the effects of the resulting thought acceleration.”

That sounds way too cool, so I move closer and sit on the couch we stole from the Academy, next to Lily, nudging her slightly to the side so we can both fit.

“How much compounding do you expect to need?” I ask Sophie.

And she smiles. “I knew you’d like it. I’ll need to run more tests, but I think I can create something similar to your mental space and use thought acceleration there. Probably five seconds inside for every one second outside. Later, we could expand that to ten to one, and likely more with time. I’m not sure how long it will take Maya to be able to use [Compounding] that way, but it could probably compound the effect a few times at the first level. More at the second level, it should only increase more and more the deeper we go.”

“You’re already classifying it in levels?”

“Yes, before you try to give it some shitty name like you did with Manabloc.”

“Everyone loves my Manabloc chairs. So what kind of result are you hoping for and what do you think is going to be possible?”

Thinking for a moment, Sophie allows herself to dream.

“To make the math simple, let’s say my base, Level 0, is ten seconds inside of my mental space for everyone outside. That much I think should be reasonable with some simple training. Level 1 could be ten times that if Maya does her part as well, right?”

She doesn’t even wait for Maya to answer. “So at Level 1, that would be 100 seconds inside for every one second outside. Now what about Level 2? We compound it by ten times, once again, if her skill works the way I hope it does. That would make one second outside into about 16 minutes inside. That’s getting damn close to what that bitch could do.”

Sophie ignores Izzy’s less than enthusiastic complaints about her language. “And what if we compound it again, and go deeper? Level 3? That would make one second outside equal to almost three hours inside. Forget trading seconds for a minute. Ignore all that sexagesimal stuff, and just to keep it simple, say I could turn one hour of real time into ten hours in my head. At Level 0, that would be...”

“What’s sexagesimal?” I ask.

Everyone, including her, ignores me and looks at Min-Jae.

“I was never good at math, you know that, right? Damn stereotypes,” he grumbles and takes some time to calculate it anyway. “At Level 0, it would be 10 hours with just Sophie and her Thought Acceleration. With Maya’s help at Level 1, it would be 100 hours. At Level 2, 1,000 hours or almost 42 days. At Level 3, 10,000 hours or about 1 year and 51 days, if I calculated it right.”

“So how likely is it that this will melt my brain, Sophie’s, and anyone else’s? And why would we want to spend a year in your head, Sophie?” Maya asks, crossing her legs and arms, leaning back.

I answer instead of Sophie, “To train? I don’t know if you could gain skill levels if your mind was out of your body and in Sophie’s mind instead, but likely yes. Or Sophie could learn some things and teach you. Or you could just spar, practise martial arts. Invite more people there. Do some recon on a city’s defenses and then spend a few minutes outside while taking months’ worth of time inside preparing countermeasures and stuff. And I could probably go on.”

“Not to be a party pooper, but I’m sure most of us would fry our brains after just a few seconds of something like that.” Aaron says, looking around and smiling, “But I will not lie, I want to try.”

“Nat seemed to have some good ideas for...”

“Okay, okay, okay, let’s calm down here, Sophie,” Dennis interrupts her, “Nothing sane ever starts with ‘Nat had an idea,’ as I’m sure most of us can agree.”

As he looks around, everyone solemnly nods. I even look down at puppy Biscuit in my arms, who watches and then mimics them, nodding clumsily a few times with his ears flopping as he does.

He senses me looking at him, so he twists his head and looks up at me in a way that almost makes it seem like he’s broken his neck.

I blink.

He blinks.

Lily, sitting next to me, giggles softly.

Then I boop Biscuit’s nose, and in response, he grabs my finger and starts biting it with his tiny, needle-like teeth. Then, for some reason, he does something I’ve never seen before: a small helmet made of purple mana forms around his head, with extra coverage for his ears.

Then he bites my finger with even more enthusiasm.

“Of course, we’ll tone it down,” Sophie says to Dennis. “But he’s started doing some sort of mental exercises. I’ll modify them and prepare some for you, too. Plus, everyone here could probably stand to replace some of their near-useless upper epic passive with something that boosts their mental resistances.”

Tess also adds, “I guess it’s not something you want us to add to our mainline training, it sounds more like some sort of side training.”

Exactly. I don’t think I’ll be able to finish any of that anytime soon, but I’ll work on it and would like Maya to as well. We have the floor quest to deal with. And I want to go to Beyond, so it’s not the main focus.”

Izzy stiffens a bit when Sophie mentions Beyond, and her sister notices it. They look at each other, and Izzy, for a moment, seems like she wants to storm off in anger, but in the end, she just stays there. I’m sure she wanted to get mad, but at the same time, she can feel her sister’s emotions, so she can’t help but fully understand.

Sophie smiles at her, and the conversation is about to continue. I almost want to step in and stop it, but Tess intervenes instead.

Izzy,” she says softly, and all eyes turn to her as she stands there.

Her blonde hair is long now. With no hairdresser to fix it, it falls straight down her back like a golden waterfall. The [Lightning Crown] above her head cracks softly, flashing with faint red and white light.

It’s okay to be angry.” Tess stares intently at the little empath. I can sense her shielding her mind so Izzy won’t pick up on her emotions. “You don’t always have to be understanding, and you have the right to feel anger. It’s okay to be selfish and put your own emotions first.”

Izzy opens her mouth to say something, but Tess adds in a colder voice, “Sophie almost died out there, and she’s already talking about going back just a few hours after waking up from what could have been

the end of her. It doesn't matter if I, she, or anyone else, even you, thinks it's the best course of action. It doesn't matter if being angry at her is illogical or if it might hurt Sophie."

Once silence fills the room, Izzy opens her mouth again, but no words come out. She just looks around as if desperate, searching to find what she should feel. But this time, there is someone else who isn't allowing her to do it.

Biscuit's eyes have a faint purple shine, and his shadow, which is usually so tiny it barely exists under his stubby frame, now stretches unnaturally across the entire room. At first, it slithers as if in slow motion, then begins to twist, bulge, and ripple, branching out into a myriad of delicate, flickering tentacles that reach for the edges of the walls, the ceiling, and even expanding beneath the furniture. It doesn't feel threatening, but it has a kind of silent presence.

It fills the space with something that feels eerily similar to the way I sometimes hide my emotions from Izzy, just covering the entire room and hiding the emotions of the others.

Izzy is left to her own emotions, and her eyes water as she looks at the corgi on my legs, but Biscuit doesn't stop. He just looks at her with what feels like a gentle smile.

And just like that, Izzy rushes out of the room, and no one tries to stop her.

When she's gone, no one blames Tess. Even Sophie gradually begins to relax, and the anger she had toward the blonde fades, replaced by understanding.

I could probably stay a bit longer, maybe even go after Izzy, but I think it's better to leave her with her own emotions. She's always been kind to all of us, but lately, it's started to feel selfish on our part. Her bottomless well of kindness was beginning to seem unhealthy for her. Tess saw it and acted, so it stands to reason that she'll be there to help her from here on out.

I share the last bits of information I feel could prove useful, wish them luck with the ninth floor, and with the Beyond expedition they'll be heading into soon. Then, with a promise to meet here again in 45 days or leave a message on one of the Beyond floors, I leave.

And as I use my Beyond stay token, I appear in that never-ending space under a sky filled with nebulae and beautiful stars.

There, my handler sits behind her old wooden table. This time, her black hair with red streaks is entirely red, and her irises are yellow with intricate patterns. Even her face is different.

But rather than giving the impression that this is someone else, it feels more like she's finally dropping the mask I've known about for a while.

Chapter 665: Difficult to work with

"Hello," she says.

"Hello."

Then there is silence. Neither of us seems to want to break it. She probably wants me to ask first or react to her appearance, but I also know that's what she wants, and I don't want to give her the satisfaction of doing so. So I stay quiet as our allocated time here ticks down.

In the end, it's she who breaks the silence, all the while trying to act nonchalant about it.

"I have a Beyond quest for you. It's an eradication-type quest. You and a few other attendees will be dropped at a specific location to search and destroy. It is very dangerous, but the rewards are equally great and given according to performance, and split between the attendees."

"A Champion could probably deal with a thing like that much quicker and easier."

"Look at it as an opportunity to gain experience and either make connections with your fellow attendees while gathering more information. The duration is one week, and it will count toward the remaining time of your current 45 days in Beyond."

"I see. How the fuck do you have so much time to mess around? Aren't you supposed to be busy or something?" I ask, unable to resist any longer.

“After my warning from the last time, you don’t have enough information allocation for me to answer that question.”

“While there are loopholes and ways to twist the rules around the access given to us, there are things even we don't mess with. Either because we can't, or because they tend to be soft rules we've set among ourselves, and simply breaking them means the others will break them as well. We risk everything falling down like a house of cards once too many of them go ignored.”

“Great. I need to let Weslin know that I'll be gone if I accept this quest. I'm already late as it is.”

“You don't have to worry about it. I'll be sending someone to inform your guild. The rest will be up to you to deal with.”

“Damn it. Is it at least a good quest?”

“It is.”

“Tell me what it's about.”

“I'm glad you've decided to accept it. The eradication quest is a mission to destroy one of the smaller bases of the Last Elf. Your goal will be to eradicate any of his replicas that happen to be present, down to the last one. Anything else is free game. You can explore the base. You can loot it. We don't have enough time here for me to explain, but one of the A-ranks, a thylarin called Io, will be there to lead the Beyond quest. He will share more information with you and the others.”

As much as I want to be angry, the quest does sound interesting, so I can't bring myself to feel too mad about it. And this redhead in front of me, of course, sees that, much to her satisfaction.

“But allow me to leave you with a warning. The people going with you are all powerful, Champion candidates at minimum. Io came close to advancing to S-rank multiple times. The only things that held him back were a few very specific shortcomings.”

And of course, she times it so that as she speaks these words, the door appears nearby. The same hole in space, leading to somewhere unknown, likely lightyears away, yet seemingly so easily bridged.

And despite the beyond-insane levels of energy it must require, I can't feel even a speck of mana radiating from it. Even now, after seeing it a few times, it sends shivers down my spine.

"Why did you drop the mask so soon?" I ask, stopping a bit from the door.

My handler smiles.

"I've mentioned it before. Once one of us breaks the rules, the others follow. There are currently seven Rulers who, either out of boredom or some hidden goal, have become Handlers. One of them broke our informal rule and revealed themselves to the attendee they were handling."

"I see."

She seems to be checking something before she gestures for me to sit on the chair opposite her.

When I glance at the portal, she says, "It's okay, we're still waiting for the last member. She's a bit... difficult to work with. Until then, we can talk."

As I sit down, I ask, "You said my information allocation is nonexistent."

"A normal conversation is fine."

I just shrug and take the opportunity, "I've heard it's difficult to be in the presence of a Ruler. Something about them needing to stay on powerful planets, using vessels as proxies and stuff."

"You should have known that there are ways to work around those things and there are exceptions to every rule."

“That’s not an answer.”

“It is not,” she confirms.

“So either you’re using something to limit your presence, or this place is special—oh, are we even in Beyond?—or it’s not even you. Possibly a projection, like my Minion mentioned, or maybe you’ve been speaking to me through a Vessel from the start.”

“If you try to get an answer by watching for my reaction to gather information, I will render you unconscious until the others arrive and then throw you through the portal.”

“How was your day?”

Leaning back in her chair, she looks at me very intently.

“I don’t think small talk counts toward the information limit.” I defend myself.

“That might be true, but you don’t seem like the type to enjoy it. And you don’t seem particularly fond of me either, as unfortunate as that is. We seemed to get along pretty well on the second floor.”

“And I’ll say it again. The Ruby I knew is dead, you aren’t her. I don’t know how much time has passed since then, but no matter how hard you try, you’ve grown into someone else entirely.”

“Other people would jump at the chance to form a good relationship with me, you know. For the possible information or favors I could give them.”

“Isn’t that what I’m trying to do?” I answer.

She stares at me for a moment, as if trying to figure out whether I’m serious or not, and I return the gaze.

In the end, she looks to the side and falls into deep thought. "I haven't been asked that kind of question in a long time. So, how was my day? I wonder what I would have answered back then? It sucked? It could've been better?"

A smile grows on her face. "Or maybe: It would've been better if I had been able to embezzle more gold from Master Lissandra? That sounds like something I used to say a lot. It was a nice feeling, being richer than most of the Champions."

"I'd like to think she was easy to fool because the original Lissandra was clueless when it came to money. But more realistically, it seems like she just didn't care."

"She didn't care about the money at all. She even went entirely hands-off hundreds of years before the fall of Eladore, leaving the planet to her grandson Keiron and Champion Tristan. It was up to them to deal with the Mind Mage Emperor."

"And they failed."

"They did," she nods. "Even though her grandson was resourceful, and even though Champion Tristan was one of those people she felt was capable of becoming an Absolute. She gave everyone on the planet freedom to act, to live their lives without her constant watch. All, so they could finally grow up and step out from under her shadow. And you saw what happened. But I think it's time for you to leave."

I stand up and give her one last look before turning toward the portal. She doesn't say anything, and neither do I. There's nothing left to add, no parting wisdom or final comment that would make a difference.

The portal hums quietly ahead, steady and waiting. I take a breath, and I pass through as it closes behind me.

POV Nathaniel's Handler

The redheaded woman watches the portal close behind the young man, and for a moment, she looks at the place where it once stood.

Then she looks into the space in front of her, and even though she's still alone, she starts talking.

"Yes, it's me. Send someone to the Black Tower branch of the Primordial Knights. Tell them their new recruit, Nathaniel Gwyn, has been sent on a Beyond quest for a week."

She goes silent, listening to something.

"No, simply say it's information from his handler."

The conversation cuts off, and she is left in silence again. Her face looks deep in thought as she weighs the pros and cons of a difficult decision.

Making her decision, her body changes. Her hair turns black with streaks of red, her eyes turn brown, and even her face shifts.

Then she speaks again, this time in a different voice than before. "Irun."

It takes only a moment for her to get a response, and she says, "There's no need to be such an ass. I won that last game fairly."

Getting another answer, she nods, barely hiding a smug smile, even though no one sees it. "Anyway, I want to congratulate your Luan on becoming an S-rank. Everyone says it was about time."

After a short pause, she shakes her head. "While I agree that you, as his handler, had something to do with it, saying it's fifty percent your merit might be pushing it."

A longer silence.

Then she speaks again. "Yes, there is something I want. Not from you, but from Luan."

She listens and nods. “Obviously, I’m not shameless enough to ask for it for free. I’ll make it worth your while. I think you wanted a better temporary residence permit for your attendees on the fourth floor? I could get you one in the inner city.”

While listening to the answer, she plays with her hair absentmindedly, coiling it around her finger.

The never-ending space around her is filled with a quiet hum, and myriads of stars cast an unearthly light on her face.

And she nods. “We have a deal, then. I want him to return to the first floor in a week or two. I’ll specify the time and location he should appear at later. He doesn’t have to do much. I might even prefer if he stays hands-off. But I want him to bring that feylith mind mage with him.”

There is one more reply she listens to, and then the conversation ends.

With that dealt with, she looks toward the sky. She knows Wrath is watching because of that petite girl, and she knows Diligence dislikes this sort of interference. But with Kindness supporting her and Envy missing from the roster of five Rulers managing this Beyond cycle, any votes would end in a tie—until someone calls in one of the other Rulers to participate. But no one’s going to bother over such minor interference.

POV Nathaniel

After passing through, I see six other people appear with me, their portals closing at the same time as mine. With the portals gone, the place we’ve found ourselves in fades into darkness until ember-like sparks form around a thylarin with six arms and float into the air, generating light and almost perfectly illuminating the room.

A simple, not even particularly large room, but it is a very long one, with walls made of rough light gray stone, a single metal door waits nearby, and a long window looks out of the room, covered in dust. There are vibrations running through the entire place, almost as if the space is moving. Maybe we’re in an airship, or on a floating island, or a submarine?

I watch as a man with a tall, slim figure, almost gray skin, and long limbs reaches for the window and starts wiping the dust from it.

Others in the room are also examining the space, but they do so carefully, always pulling back their scans if they think they might be detected.

“Fuck me,” the gray, lanky man groans, and all eyes turn to him, except for the thylarin’s.

The freshly cleaned section of the window reveals a view, opening out to the blackness of space and glowing stars. Then we see a planet in the distance, red, enormous, and covered in shifting clouds. The planet stays in place while we continue moving, and the view pans over its surface.

The thylarin, who I assume is Io, coughs to draw attention to himself. His arms are folded, and unlike many thylarin I’ve met, he seems to be a bit on the shorter side, with slender limbs, all coming together to give him a nimble appearance.

“Welcome to what remains of one of the smaller examples of the Last Elf’s asteroid bases. We believe it’s been moving through space on its own, using the gravitational pull of the planets around it and occasional bursts from its main engine to travel, heading in an unknown direction.”

He turns, letting all six arms fall loosely behind him.

“As with every sighting of a Last Elf replica, this mission has one objective: eradicate every single replica in the area.”

Io is about to say something else, but a human woman starts moving off to the side, and his words cut off. He watches as she almost playfully walks toward the window, her steps long and smooth.

She moves with silent, effortless grace, not making a single sound. Messy brown hair falls into her face as she reaches the window and, with the tip of a finger, draws a shape in the dust covering it.

Chapter 666: Anyone home?

Io stares at the drawing in the dusty window, then at the brown-haired girl, who meets his gaze for a brief moment before lowering her head, letting her hair fall into her face. Her presence weakens further,

to the point where I'm sure most low level attendees probably wouldn't see her, even if they were staring directly at the spot where she stands.

It isn't camouflage or anything like that. It's just that strange field she has around herself, the one that almost makes your senses stop sending signals about her to your brain. Though I'm sure there's no mind manipulation involved. It's just far too strange.

Tacita moves with the same swift, elegant, and almost dance-like motion and hides behind my back, an arm's reach away without touching me at all.

The whole time, the six-armed thylarin continues to track her without saying a word. After a few moments, he finally coughs and breaks the silence.

"As I said before, being so rudely interrupted, we are on one of the Last Elf's smaller bases and..."

"What's going on with these replicas of the Last Elf?" I ask.

This time, he turns to me, but unlike Tacita, I don't mind it at all.

"Look, we have heard how important you are and everything, but you're being a bit too dramatic and taking too much time to answer simple questions," I say.

In reaction, a demon woman nearby sneers, and noticing her attempt at confrontation, I finally allow our eyes to meet. And it's exactly as expected. The maniac looks like she wants to fight. Her red eyes shine as she moves her hair away from her face, her gaze moving between where my hearts are and my eyes.

"I do not want to hear complaints about anyone's personality from a demon," Io cuts her off.

That only amuses the demon woman more. "If that bothers you, you know what to do. If you've got the balls for it."

"We are here on a cooperative Beyond quest. There won't be any fighting. Not now..."

"I wouldn't mind it." I rejoin the conversation.

Once again, he turns to me, and the demon turns as well, her heart already accelerating its beat. Familiarity with Min-Jae's abilities tells me that it is likely a Gravitational Demon Heart.

"What?" I ask Io. "You know how these maniacs are. Beating the crap out of them right away will only make things easier in the long run."

"We will properly assess the situation. If it's confirmed we don't need all of us to cooperate to complete the quest, you can jump at each other's throats right away," he answers firmly.

The way my Handler talked about him made him seem powerful. After all, she mentioned he almost became an S-rank a few times and that only a specific weakness prevented it. So I would normally expect him to be able to do this quest on his own. But I guess that weakness stops him?

"Whatever, bluey. As if I'd let you order me around. Let's fight and..." The demon takes a few steps forward and then, to her surprise, disappears, only to reappear a few steps back.

Just like me, she quickly figures out what happened and moves faster this time, but the result is the same. Just as she's about to reach Io, she vanishes and reappears in front of one of the walls. Her momentum carries her straight into it, and she crashes, then bounces off.

Before she can do anything else, she disappears again and reappears near Io, who grabs her by the neck with one of his arms and throws her against the opposite wall.

While still in the air, she disappears and reappears again, this time above the ground, and crashes down hard from her own momentum.

More than simply hurting her, it confuses her senses. There are no wounds, and she gets back on her feet, a broad smile on her face. Her heartbeat intensifies. She takes a step, only to disappear again and reappear in front of Io.

She expects it and attacks him, but she disappears three times in a row before she can hit him, each time facing a different direction. On the last one, Io punches her in the face, sending her stumbling back with a torn, bleeding lip.

The thylarin is extremely fast, and whatever kind of forced teleportation he's using, I'm having a hard time identifying it or figuring out how to defend against it.

Just as the fight seems like it's about to get more exciting and I start placing mental bets on who would win, the door into the room creaks open.

Only then do I realize Tacita is missing. Turning toward the door, I see a smoothly cut lock, a flash of her dagger, and her figure as she disappears into the base. At that same moment, an alarm rings through the area.

It isn't even that loud, just a deep vibration sent through the structure in a way that almost feels like I'm sensing it through my bones. A multitude of fields begin activating in the area around us as well.

I feel a presence heading our way, and Io disappears, this time teleporting himself. I spot his figure in outer space, just beyond the window, right behind Tacita's emoticon. He grabs onto something and moves along with it.

Did... did he just run away?

Staring in his direction, I start wondering if I would be able to survive it, and what kind of defenses he uses to spacewalk. I also wish I had more knowledge about outer space. How was it? Super cold? Or super hot when exposed to direct sunlight? Some kind of radiation damage? Exhaling to protect the lungs?

Worst case, I'll just use Subdermal Combustion and outheal the damage. Although... would my flames even work without air? Eh, it is probably fine.

The five of us remaining in the room seem confident enough to face our opponent. It's a bit worrying that our possibly most informed member disappeared instead of confronting it, but I guess that explains why everyone else looks like they're preparing an escape route.

Of course, everyone except the demon woman, who already seems completely ready to fight.

As always, I find that demonic, reckless drive to die strangely endearing. Maybe even a little cute, even now.

The lanky, gray-skinned man whispers quickly, "The Elf's replicas are dangerous, despite their low level. The stronger they are, the more of his memories they unlock. But even the weaker ones have plenty of those, along with a ton of extra knowledge."

Everyone slips into their battle pose, and I can sense a few of them preparing for a quick retreat if needed.

A human man with brown hair even moves a few of the cube shaped items floating around him. They stick against the wall and start to hum. He's also carrying multiple bags and several weapons, and he pulls out a hammer in one hand and a strange orb in the other.

"The replicas are known for experimenting on themselves, causing mutations, and using items and monsters under their control. If you see a replica, it's either because you are far more powerful and managed to catch it off guard, or because it believes it can win."

The gray, lanky man doesn't finish his words. Instead, he touches his shadow on the wall and disappears into it. Said shadow moves quickly across the surface of the wall until it settles into one of the normal shadows nearby and becomes nearly unnoticeable, unless you happen to know what to look for.

The demon takes a step forward and stands beside me, her eyes glowing with excitement, just as a being appears in the hallway Tacita vanished into.

Right away, it's clear that this isn't one of the Last Elf's replicas. Instead, it's a wolf-like creature with four legs, a massive maw, and a head level with mine. Its entire body is gray, including what should be

the pupils and whites of its eyes, right down to the inside of its mouth and teeth. It almost looks like it's been carved from stone, with cracks, large and small, running across its surface.

And the golden halo floating over the creature's head makes for a striking contrast to the grayness of its body.

[Gilded Huskwolf - lvl ???]

So, at minimum, it's somewhere over level 350, even though it feels much stronger than most monsters around that range. It must be one of those "named" types, like bosses and elite monsters, as some would call them.

As it looks at us, it barks. The sound is deep and grinding, making the window showing the void of outer space vibrate.

My [Eclipse] spreads through the area, and my eyes activate as I detect the signal it is trying to send and resonate with it to suppress and cancel it out. The human man uses some of his floating cubes as well, and a kind of jamming field surrounds the wolf.

The demon charges in, her steps covering far more distance than they logically should. She reaches it first, but when her fist crashes against the wolf, her bones crack and break, meanwhile, the wolf doesn't even move a single step.

Its head becomes a blur, and the next time I see it, it's holding a piece of flesh in its maw, blood dripping down onto its gray body and the floor.

Taking a step back, the demoness grabs her side where a chunk of her waist, roughly the size of a football, is missing.

The wolf becomes a blur again, and this time, it appears in front of the human man. It bites at the item, creating the jamming effect while trying to emit its signal again.

Another cube floating near the man moves in to meet the wolf. When they collide, the wolf halts as a web of mana threads explodes from the item and binds it to the floor.

The threads snap, and the wolf is about to move again when Tacita appears behind it. With a dagger made of pale white bone and a jagged surface, she cuts into its neck smoothly and separates the head from the body. The dagger cracks and turns to dust.

Even as it falls, the wolf doesn't die immediately. Now I see flesh and lightning-like veins running through its body, but they are all the same shade of gray as the rest. The body moves on its own and swings at Tacita, but she's faster and avoids it.

The wolf's mouth still snaps open and shut as its head slides across the floor toward me, while its body lunges at the human man using the items.

I watch it creep toward me in a disturbing slide, its mouth wide open and snapping with force strong enough to damage its own teeth, without even a hint of emotion in its eyes.

There is a presence reaching out to both the body and the head with that same familiar, unnerving feeling I felt a few moments before. The same way it did with the demon, it ignores the wolf's natural and active defense against teleportation.

Just before the wolf is teleported away, I launch a tricolored orb I've been forming straight into its open mouth.

Both parts vanish and reappear several miles away in open space, floating weightlessly and twitching as they try to move back.

Then my orb, filled with a sizable chunk of my mana, explodes.

A silent bloom of blinding tricolored light expands outward, leaving arcs of raw energy spiraling through the dark. The wolf's head and body twist mid-float as translucent shockwaves ripple through the vacuum, tearing them apart.

There is no sound, no fire, no vibration reaching us here. Only the brilliant flash of light, slowly fading. It pulses once, then fades completely.

Even the epicenter of the explosion drifts miles away, as the base we are on continues moving. Now that I observe it more closely, it feels like we are in orbit around the planet below us.

[You have defeated Gilded Huskwolf - lvl 375]

[Lvl 323 > Lvl 324]

[Lvl 324 > Lvl 325]

Io appears in the room again.

"I went ahead and disabled the alarm and checked for the guards. I'm not naive enough to think we haven't been detected, but this should limit how much information they can gather on us and partially obscure our location," he says, shooting an ugly look toward Tacita, who's dropped into a squat near the dust left over from her bone dagger and begun working on something with some kind of strange black crystal.

The dust clings to the crystal like metal shavings drawn to a magnet. I watch as, slowly, a dagger's shape begins to form out of the dust, very slowly solidifying. The process is almost mesmerizing. Bit by bit, the bone dust binds to the crystal, reshaping itself into the curved and jagged silhouette of the dagger Tacita had used only moments ago.

I push the thought aside and quietly apologize to Io in my mind. Then I focus on the golden halo I managed to grab with one of my Ley Lines before Io teleported the wolf away.

Synaptic Relay Halo (Low Arcane) -Synaptic Relay Halo is designed to be affixed above a deceased monster or deceased and altered being. It creates a mental link between the host and a controller. It enables direct command input, shared vision when active, and a faint feedback loop. The device allows the controller to issue passive and complex behavioral routines to the bearer. When activated, it can also trigger dormant protocols within deceased altered beings and monsters.

I see. I see.

I stare at it a moment longer before raising it and placing it above me. It floats into place on its own, adjusting slightly until it hovers steadily just above my head, in a similar way my crown used to.

(Anyone home?) I reach out with a thought.

Chapter 667: Altercation

I wait for a few heartbeats, but no message comes, and the halo doesn't activate in the end. It just floats there.

I run a few more checks and assign part of my mind to keep monitoring it, while also setting up some defenses. Only then do I leave it alone and let it float above my head. It draws a few looks, but no one says anything.

Following behind Io, we move through the hallway. I still have so many questions about the gilded wolf thing that just ended up outside the space base in that pretty explosion of mine. Thankfully, Io seems to be in a better mood now that he is taking the lead, and we're following him. He starts talking and begins to share some information.

"There aren't many replicas here, and they're not much stronger than us. If I had to guess, they'll probably rely on traps and the functions of the asteroid base itself to take us out, so stay ready for anything. We'll need to push through the defenses to reach the more secure areas, and they'll be expecting that."

"Can't we just blow up the base?" I ask.

"This Beyond quest lasts one week, and we won't have a way to return before then. The Last Elf is very familiar with the system and knows it well. There's no guarantee, but he might know or at least suspect that we're here on a Beyond quest. After all, quests like this aren't exactly rare. At some point, he may try to use that against us, as you can probably imagine."

"I have a question."

"Yes?"

“Why are we killing the Last Elf?”

“Who is your Handler? This is something you should have known before accepting the quest,” he says.

“She is a nasty, greedy person. You wouldn’t like her. I’m regularly getting scammed by her.”

“You know you can change your Handler, right?”

I pause there. Is he actually a good guy? There was almost a hint of concern in his voice. Is this a trick to make me put my guard down?

“Yes,” I answer.

“Then why?”

“I’m normal.”

“I didn’t say anything about...”

I ignore him and turn to Tacita, who’s following behind us. “Tacita, do you at least know why I haven’t done that?”

She quickly draws with the glowing tip of her finger:

(~ ;)

Thanks. And for tripping the alarm too.”

(^)

Sure.”

We reach the dead end, and Io seems surprised by it. With all the active interference around here, I can’t blame him too much. Even I had to use most of my senses to know that we were heading into one.

I wonder if this is one of his weaknesses. Maybe the one that kept him from becoming S-rank? Or maybe it’s a lack of damage output on his part? Does that mean my senses are A-rank level, or is he just really bad at this? Or is it just one of those oddly specific situations where I’m better?

We turn around again and head down yet another hallway. This base is probably built throughout the entirety of an asteroid that stretches on for miles. I stop my train of thought.

Would this be large enough to kill all the dinosaurs on Earth?

Did that bastard known as the Last Elf do it? I’ve wanted to see a dino since I was a kid.

I guess probably not. That was about sixty million years ago, and he shouldn’t be that old, but it makes for a funny idea.

After we march for five more minutes, Io says, “The Last Elf is one of the few beings alive who was around before the system.”

There aren’t many of those beings?” I ask.

Plenty who were hunted down by the early Absolutes and Rulers. Some of them even ended their lives and destroyed their own bodies so they couldn’t be taken for study or harvested for materials by the early generations.”

How did the system come into existence?”

The slim thylarin snorts. "Let me know if you find out. I don't think even the current Rulers know for sure. Though maybe an older Ruler, such as the Ruler of Charity, knows."

Oh? Is the Ruler of Charity the oldest?"

From what I have heard, he is very old. You're asking an awful lot of questions."

I get told that a lot. So what happened to the other elves?"

No one knows."

You mean, you don't know. There could be others who do know. Who's older, the Elf or Charity?"

Io pauses for a moment and signals the others to stop. He looks as if he's listening to something coming from the hallway ahead. I've already checked and know it's another dead end, but like before, I don't say anything.

While examining it, he says, "Logically, you'd have to answer that the Last Elf is older. But it's also possible the Ruler of Charity existed long before the system and only took on the title of Ruler later."

I feel almost proud as Io identifies it as yet another dead end, and doesn't head there this time. We follow him in a new direction, some of the others also chatting quietly behind us.

So, no idea if someone created the system, or if it just appeared out of nowhere? Or if we're all in a simulation run by something that's forgotten we're in here, or somehow wound up dead, while someone else watches us like a reality show? It could be a rogue robot vacuum AI or something. Maybe it's not even technology, maybe it's some ancient god that digitized itself and forgot it was a god, and decided to start handing out quests and stats because it thinks that's what life is supposed to be. Or some overgrown code experiment gone feral, or a psychic parasite that latched onto reality and started handing out quests to keep us busy while it feeds, or it's literally just a runaway script in some abandoned server farm in the year 30291 that's been auto-generating the system ever since the lead dev died in a scooter accident."

I don't even know what most of that means. But no, we don't know. There are dozens of opinions, and none of them are confirmed."

"That sucks. You're not as bad as you seemed at first."

"Thanks for nothing. You already know my name, apparently. I'm Io, from the Astral Brotherhood. And you are?"

Nathaniel. Angry Kitt... I mean, Primordial Knights."

No way!" another voice calls out, and from behind, a figure crashes into me.

The demon woman throws her arm around my shoulder and shakes me. "I almost joined them too, but they seem to be going down the drain with their guild master doing nothing and just uselessly staying on the fifth floor all the time. Why did you join?"

I like underdogs."

She shakes me more energetically and leans in so close I could probably headbutt her if I wanted to.

You're fun, and I like your hearts. You said you are Nathaniel, right? I'm Malika. Abyss Bound, Fourth Squad."

"Sounds like a crappy guild. Even worse than the Primordial Knights, and ranked lower, too."

Her smile widens into something sharper, and her arm tightens around my shoulder. "Isn't it better to join a new, growing guild, one that's actually strong, where you can make your own mark, instead of siding with some washed-up group clinging to old connections and still managing to slip in the rankings, even with all their supposed advantages?"

Sounds like something a loser rejected from the Primordial Knights would say. Now take your arm off me.”

But I don't want to~”

Before she can even finish, I split my mind into two more parts. One of them boosts my movement with mana, the other with kinetic energy, and I headbutt her.

As her head snaps back, both parts of my mind merge again, and I halt her movement mid-air. The blood spraying from her face freezes as well. The field that Lioren liked to use so much stops all motion around us. As she channels her gravitational energy, I feel pressure building around my head. I shift it to the side, and only my cheek and ear twist and tear as a compressed zone of steep gravity sucks at them while I move out of range.

Another gravitational zone forms around my head, following me like a trap about to snap shut. Malika's red eyes stay locked on me, sharp and unblinking, even as she hangs motionless in the air.

It is not so different from what Min-Jae does with his primordial energy and Gravitational Wavelength Iris. She continues to manipulate gravity all around me. It strengthens, it weakens, it pulls me toward the ceiling or the walls until directions themselves become hard to estimate.

It all happens in a single second. She starts reaching into my head, trying to compress my brain. Her power slips through my natural defenses with a precision I've never seen before, and the sheer control behind it stuns me for a moment. Maybe my lacking physical stats are part of the problem, but even so, I never thought something like this was possible against someone at a similar level.

I throw up a barrier around my brain and conjure something like mana pillars to resist the compression, which now looks like a bubble trying to collapse inward.

A quick Wraith Dance puts me right in front of her. I tap her forehead with the tip of my finger, sending a pulse of kinetic energy through her, just enough to rattle her properly.

Then I wait and look at her.

She almost passes out from that, but regains composure. Her eyes still hold that same look, and the pressure on my brain intensifies further.

So I tap her forehead again, this time with a weaker pulse, a gentle nudge, barely even an attack. Just a message that the next one will be the last.

I return her gaze even as the pressure increases and my defenses begin to crack. All the careful balancing, my mind working in overdrive to protect me, and the absurdity of the whole situation make me smile unconsciously.

Three," I say, and her pupils widen.

Two," I continue, and they start to tremble.

On..."

Before I even finish, the pressure around my brain vanishes.

I tilt my head and keep holding her in place. I stare into her eyes without moving at all, almost as if I were frozen by [Redistribution] myself.

Then she looks away.

Only then do I let her go.

"Got it, got it," she says with a smile as she takes a step back. She wipes the blood from her face, and the wound on her waist doesn't seem to bother her that much at all. It's still bleeding, but I saw her using some kind of item on it, and the rest is regenerating.

Just in case, I watch her for a bit longer, but I see no ill will. Competitiveness? Aggression? Sure, both are there and strong, and I'm sure she will try again if she thinks she has the advantage. But at the same time, I don't think she would try to stab me in the back or something like that.

What a weirdo.

I fix the golden halo over my head that shifted during our... altercation, and send another message, getting no response, even now.

When I turn around, I catch a tall, slender gray man saying something to Tacita. She ignores him, just like she does with everyone else, and takes a step back. He looks confused, repeats himself, then steps closer and reaches out to touch her.

Oh, this won't end well.

In the next second, his arm flies through the air, freshly cut, and he staggers back with a dagger lodged in his neck. As he looks on in shock at such a display of speed and lack of hesitation from Tacita, she takes a swift step closer and pulls the dagger out of his neck to take it back, then steps back to avoid the resulting spray of blood.

The gray man disappears into his shadow, which moves across the wall and slips into the larger shadow cast by one of our lighting orbs. When he reappears, his arm is reattached, and his neck is healed. The blood on his body remains, and I notice the mana radiating from him is noticeably weaker.

And as expected, Tacita moves. In a few steps that feel both animalistic and instinctual, yet strangely elegant and dance-like, she slips behind my back.

I have no illusion that it's something she's doing because she trusts me, and that she wouldn't be stabbing me in the neck if I were the one to cross her line. I think she just acknowledges the fact that she might need to cooperate with us and stays close, for whatever reason. Maybe she saw something when she left on her own, if I had to guess.

So, at least here, I'm someone she knows a little, and she knows what to expect from me. As annoying as it is, I also don't mind it all that much. I know she takes notice of my "cooperation" and will pay me back if needed.

But in the end, it is confirmed once more. The thing I say so often.

Among all of us present, my behavior falls closest to what might be considered standard.

Chapter 668: Contact

Now that I think about it, I've visited plenty of secret bases, underground bunkers, floating cathedrals, fallen floating islands, and more. I even went to a base not all that dissimilar to this one back on the 4th floor during the hunt for The First One. Even though this one doesn't come with a view of an Earth-like planet, the occasional sights I catch through the windows every now and then is nice in its own way.

The planet we've been passing by or orbiting appears to be completely red, giving off a dry, desolate vibe. But as I strengthen my sight, I start thinking I might have been wrong. Rather than being a desert planet covered in reddish clouds, it's more like the planet itself is on fire. The clouds seem to glow with the light of fires below, stretching across almost the entire surface. The few areas they don't cover appear to be drowning in molten lava.

Maybe it isn't even a planet. Perhaps it's a dying star? A gas giant or something else? Maybe I should have paid more attention in school. Then again, Mrs. Smith spent more time telling us to "be realistic" than teaching us anything about orbital mechanics. She always rolled her eyes when anyone said they wanted to be an astronaut.

I wonder what she'd say now, if she could see what I'm seeing. She'd probably complain about the lack of seatbelts or something.

Also, the halls of the evil base have been changing as we head deeper into it. We still move slowly, and no one runs, flies, or teleports. Along the way, we do our best to avoid traps and detection mechanisms. But the deeper we go, the more it feels like we're walking through something constructed, not just natural tunnels carved into the gray stone around us by water.

There is some broken machinery. Piles of materials like wood and heaps of something like iron. There are even entire trees, and huge tanks filled with oddly colored liquids. Along with monster bodies, in various stages of dissection.

I try to sell some, but I don't seem to have been acknowledged as their owner. Oh, and also, the system shop doesn't seem to be working here, so that might be why.

At this point, it seems mostly confirmed that the shop doesn't work outside of the tutorial, or at least not the variation I have access to. If that's the case, just having it is a huge advantage for the First Generations.

I also take the time to observe the teammates I'm stuck with for the week.

Then there's the demoness, almost fully recovered from her wound and moving around confidently. And I think I caught her staring at my ass a few minutes ago.

The human man with brown hair mostly moves in the background and stays quiet, surrounded by his assortment of items. There are plenty of weapons hanging from his body, some bags, and a few items that he keeps constantly floating around, the cubes mostly.

Then there's that lanky gray man, whose race I still don't know. But like Rat, whom I met before, he seems to like using shadows, mostly to hide in or for movement. There's likely much more that he can do, but like most of the others, he holds himself back. He also avoids Tacita as much as possible for some reason.

Lastly, there is that vyssari woman. She barely talks, and like all vyssari I've met so far, she is very short, with scaly legs, in her case, metallic gray. And like with most of her kind, she also has a favored element, in her case, it's lightning, at least as far as she's shown. It doesn't have that feeling of Primordial Lightning I get from Tess, so I guess it's a more normal manifestation. But I still don't drop my guard. No one here can be called an average Beyonder.

And for more fun, there is something my beloved handler told me. The fact that the rewards are predetermined and distributed among the surviving members.

So. Does that mean the fewer people who survive in the end, the better the reward?

The last day or two of the quest will surely be interesting.

I continue to observe that human man. Sure, he notices and even looks at me. Maybe I'm expected to feel some shame, look away, and stop doing it. But I don't. His items and the way he fights are both of great interest to me.

He doesn't seem very physically strong. I can feel that much from the vibrations his body sends out as he moves and the way the air reacts to those movements. But then there are his items, and he has dozens of them. That much I've confirmed with my eyes. Some feel like single-use affairs. Others are at least arcane, and I wouldn't be surprised if he even has a mid-arcane item or two. He just seems like the type.

Even as we make our way through the evil elf's lair, the human man continues to modify some of the items in his possession. I'm sure part of it is adjustments for the environment we're in and for the gilded monsters we're expecting to appear. However, I'm also sure he's modifying some of them to better face us, and I can't even blame him.

I'm already doing something similar. I've sacrificed a small part of my mind to it, which even now continues to run mental exercises with twisted shapes, and I'm using it to observe the others and think of ways to better counter them.

The halo floating above my head has remained completely silent, neither receiving nor sending any signals. Of course, I think it was a pretty funny idea to just put it over my head in a moment of impulsiveness, but I didn't do it without thought.

Another part of me constantly monitors it, ready to destroy it at any moment. If it were mid arcane, I wouldn't have put it there. But I'm confident I could deal with a low arcane item, especially since its function doesn't seem all that threatening to me.

Beneath the golden coating of the halo, I found a patch of inscriptions. Though I'm pretty sure they were only designed to work with the wolf we killed. Then again, maybe "only" isn't the right word.

The halo was modified to fit the wolf's body and what remained of its brain and nervous system, to allow whatever the crown does to function. So now I'm trying to modify that part, in hopes of replacing it or tricking it into activating.

There's a being nearby who's probably even older than that tower hikikomori, Kyralon, so there's no way I'm passing up the chance to get some answers out of him.

“Please stop staring at me. It is creepy,” the human man says, coming to a stop in front of me. His items float around him like drones, but they’re acting differently than before. It doesn’t feel straight-up threatening, but it is more... firm.

I defend myself right away, “Just in case, I’m not staring at you because I’m attracted to you or anything.”

“I’d guessed.”

“I mean, I’m just making sure. Some people might misunderstand.”

“Right. As I said, I had guessed that wasn’t the case.”

"I don't know about you, but I've known girls who would start shipping people even based on such simple interaction. It's scary out there."

“Yes. No worries there. I haven’t taken it that way, as I have already said.”

“I mean, it wouldn’t even make sense. I’ve seen men many times more handsome than you and didn’t feel a thing.”

“I see.”

“I mean, many, many, dozens of times better looking. It can’t even be compared. Not even close. You look like a sad frog in comparison.”

“Got it.”

“Just making sure.”

“Yes. So please stop staring at me.”

"Nope. And I'm not staring at you, I'm staring at your items."

"It's rude."

"Probably. But I'm from the First Generation, only a few years into the tutorial. I don't know anything about the intricacies of social interaction, so I think that much can be forgiven."

"I'm also from the First Generation."

"I see," I say. "Maybe that's why you've been rude enough to keep staring at my halo."

That makes him pause for a bit while continuing to look at me with that same intense expression.

"It's a Synaptic Relay Halo, isn't it?" he asks.

"Yup," I confirm.

"Low arcane?"

"Yup."

I can see the question he's trying to ask and the curiosity in his eyes as they keep flicking toward the halo floating above my head.

"I've only read or heard about them from a few people. They're extremely difficult to make, even though their rarity might not be all that high. The materials they require aren't that rare, but they demand a lot of work."

"Are they a signature item of the Last Elf?"

"His replicas use them pretty often. More powerful replicas, once they reach the rank of Absolutes and Champions, rarely bother with them. But for the lower-level replicas of the Last Elf, with all his knowledge, I imagine halos are quick and easy to make."

"That's good information, but I'm not giving it to you."

"I didn't even want to ask that," he looks around, and an amulet around his neck flashes. A bubble forms around us for just a short moment as he says, "In case everyone turns against each other, let's group up. I don't care about hoarding all the rewards for myself."

With that offer of alliance, he turns around and leaves to work on the door we are trying to unlock without triggering alarms.

I decide to examine the door later and reach towards the halo over my head with my mind. I find the part that connected it to the wolf and temporarily bridge it, which causes it to activate and slowly spin around my head.

In the window nearby, I see a faint reflection of my face, my eyes with my Mana Wavelength Iris activated, forming a golden circle like the one over my head.

Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to make my crown in the shape of a halo when I finally learn how to make it. Something about that sentence probably doesn't make sense, but I don't let it bother me.

(I can sense you sneaking and trying to activate some annoying protocols and pull out location and visual data. I disabled them all.) I send.

(How curious.) The voice says, calm and clear. (And who, I wonder, do I have the pleasure of speaking with?)

(I would rather keep that to myself. Are you the Last Elf?)

The voice doesn't laugh, and I might be imagining things, but I could swear I hear amusement in it as it answers, (So, you're an attendee on a Beyond quest. And haven't even entered the final year of your tutorial, if your inexperience is any measure. Will you tell me why you've chosen to reach out while on one of those eradication quests the oh so great Rulers are ever so fond of assigning?)

(You don't seem to like the Rulers.)

(Do not misunderstand me, attendee. I find their ways naive, occasionally irritating, but they're not without a certain charm. There is something about it I still find oddly endearing, especially when they strut around and puff up their chests and act so important. But they and I have played this game longer than most of the current ones have existed. They track down my replicas, eager to erase me, and from time to time, I return the gesture. So then, what is it you want from me?)

(Mostly some information. Honestly, I don't mind failing this quest if I get some good intel.)

There's a short pause that obscures the replica's reaction.

When the voice returns, it sounds even more amused. (In that case, why don't you go and kill the other attendees who came here with you. After that, we may speak.)

With that, the conversation cuts off, and I send a wave of thermal energy at the halo, melting it down in response to a sneaky attempt to activate some of the protocols.

I take a long look at the small pool of molten golden metal at my feet. Then, just to be safe, I burn it further along with a chunk of the floor, making sure to get rid of everything.

Only then do I stand up, dust off my hands, and head towards the door that the item guy is trying to open.

Chapter 669: Fellowship

There is no panel next to the door we could use to hack the controls or anything like that. That leads us to think the replicas of the last elf must have some kind of Bluetooth like item on them that sends out a signal to open the door.

Hell, maybe he opens it mentally, or maybe there's some poor dead monster with a golden halo opening the way for him.

Our little fellowship already went to check all the hallways, and we fought another wolf there, like the one I sent into outer space.

Part of me admires how the thylarin just tosses them aside like garbage, trying to ignore them, maybe hoping they'll drift close enough to that hellish planet and fall to its surface.

At this point, I'm also convinced we're orbiting that planet for a specific reason, and I keep asking myself a bunch of things. Would I survive being caught on its surface? Would I survive crashing down like the asteroid that wiped out Earth's dinosaurs?

I'm an optimist at hearts, so I guess I could. What really makes me nervous is the heat I can sense from the planet. As someone who deals with absorbing heat, thermal energy, and uses thermal senses, I can feel the heat of the surface even at this distance when I focus on it.

It's not something I like to acknowledge, but I think I'd be able to survive down there for a few minutes, maybe a few hours at most.

Something is deeply wrong with that planet.

Once again, I shake my head and refocus on trying to hack into the door.

Sure, the last elf knows about us, but our exact location in this massive asteroid should be a mystery. Someone at our level could probably find us in a few seconds if there were no defenses in place.

That's where we still have a bit of an advantage, since he doesn't know our power levels. He probably assumes we're strong enough to deal with him, of course, or we wouldn't have been sent on this quest at all. So he'll be careful.

Possibly.

He should be.

Who the hell knows.

“How does it look, Barion?” Io asks the item guy.

Barion doesn’t even look up. He keeps connecting wires from a device tied to his waist, linking them to different parts of the inscriptions now visible through the hole he cut.

He says, “I think we found an important storage area. Otherwise, it makes no sense for this door to be so secured. The wall is built from a layered mana-reactive composite. No standard alloys. You can see the lattice lines and the tight crystal memory structure, probably bonded to a separate root core from the one deeper inside the asteroid.”

Barion threads a thinner wire through one of the exposed inscription nodes. “There’s an interference signal running across all of the outer channels. A full suppression net and lots of communication lines. That means any remote intrusion gets phase-cancelled before it even reaches the central array. You could try to disrupt it with a powerful interference-type skill, and it probably wouldn’t do anything.”

His hand adjusts a small dial on his belt. “There’s no active mana circulation on the surface layer, but I can feel something underneath. Likely some kind of hidden weave, one of those systems with its own power source that feeds on ambient mana. If you trigger it wrong, it spikes and sets off all the traps. The good thing is that it probably can’t be activated remotely.”

Another wire connected. Another tap. Then a pause.

“It’s running a negative feedback circuit too. Closed-loop resonance siphon as well. Similar setup to the ones they once used for very old safe rooms. Everything here is extremely old-school, honestly. Ancient even.”

He finally looks up, just briefly, then back to work, slower now. “I’m bypassing one of the external locks through the script anchor. Should take a few more hours unless the system is scheduled to shift frequencies. There’s a setup for that too, and it could add a few hours depending.”

Next to me, Malika stops and shoves my shoulder. "Do you know what he's blabbering about?"

"Yup."

"Bullshit."

I turn to her and straighten up. "He says the wall is made of weird smart metal. It remembers stuff and blocks magic."

Malika stares at me, but slowly her mouth twists into a wide smile that shows her teeth.

Before she can say something stupid, I walk past her and plop down on the ground near Barion. I draw a few Ley Lines that reach inside, much like his wires do.

There's a strong hint of panic from him as I do that, but I ignore it and form more lines while separating a bigger part of my mind to focus on the task. Then, just like him, I proceed to work on the lock.

Negative feedback circuit. Closed-loop resonance siphon.

What's wrong with all these people?

Just like Barion said, it takes a few more hours. In the end, the two of us are forced to cooperate. The guy acts like he thinks the wall's alive and just pretending to sleep. Everything he does it's like he expects something to lunge out and take his hands off. Can't blame him. The trap that... never mind, we don't talk about that one. It wasn't my fault at all.

It could've happened to anyone. Even the best of us.

So Barion continues like he's trying to read the damn wall like a book written in landmines. The others obviously aren't there the whole time. They go on a few shorter expeditions through the base, only to be stopped by the doors. Not even close to being as well defended as the ones we're unlocking, but still nothing they could get through without causing a lot of damage.

Even I can't teleport through them. At most, he could probably reach outer space and try to find a way around from there, but something tells me he didn't like it very much out there.

"Careful..." Barion whispers next to me for the damn who-knows-how-many-th time.

As before, I ignore him and quickly bridge the gap I made by using [Ley Line]. Since I've gotten used to doing it, I try to partially activate [Manifestation] while doing so, in hopes it'll help me train my new skill and understand it better. I have a theory that anything I materialize could be influenced by that skill and hopefully made stronger.

That line starts glowing like a wire about to melt, so I strengthen it and create another weave around the first so they share the charge.

Somewhere next to me, Barion starts sweating profusely, but finally, it looks like there is some progress. It took almost 24 hours. One entire seventh of the duration of our quest, mostly just to maybe open these doors.

I find it amusing that the others don't even seem to mind all that much. Either they're as curious as me, or they know they'll probably have to destroy the other door without me or Barion, so they decide to wait.

"Okay, now, and I really mean it this time, PLEASE, be careful," Barion says, drawing out the please like it might physically stop me.

I glance at the mess of wires and inscriptions, then back at him. "You say that every five minutes."

"This time I mean it, like, seriously mean it. Capital letters. Bold text. You break that link, and this whole place might try to throw us all into outer space, or explode, or just lock us in forever."

I hover my hand near one of his thinner, fragile-looking wires and raise an eyebrow.

"Don't," he says instantly.

“I wasn’t going to.”

“From what I’ve seen from you so far, it looks like you were absolutely going to.”

“I’m not an idiot.”

Barion mutters something I pretend I don’t hear.

I think there’s an opportunity to pretend to cut one of the lines we made and scare the crap out of him. I even hesitate and think about it, but then give up and let him do the rest while I observe. The way he uses all these items he has around him is just way too fascinating.

He’s even carrying a lot of materials and half-finished items, so he can complete his work in whatever way he needs. Working next to him, I recognize some defensive drone-like cubes floating around him, some shields, and a lot of weapons for different types of opponents: ranged, close, mid-range, some explosives, and such.

Something clacks, and the door opens ever so slightly.

Same as the wall, they are made from that silverish matte metal. No keyhole, no window, no handle. There are not even seams around them as they smoothly materialize into the wall. If you don’t know where to look, you probably wouldn’t even see them while passing by.

Air rushes in as they slightly open, making a hissing sound.

Everyone else gets on their feet and watches as I reach into the gap that’s been created and pull them toward myself to open them. Barion moves further back, but maintains his connection to his wires, and I’m sure he’s keeping an eye on them as he does.

The door opens very slowly, almost like it weighs way more than it should or is fighting to keep from being opened. But by using a bit of kinetic energy, I gradually get it open enough to see inside the room.

It's the size of a small bedroom, with walls, floor, and ceiling made from the same silverish metal as the door. In the room, rests a single item, thrown on the ground and crammed in one of the corners.

A cage.

Small, no bigger than both my fists pressed together. It sits in the corner like it was discarded without a care, maybe even forgotten. But nothing about it feels casual.

It's made of metal rods forming the edges of a perfect cube. The strange part is the material. Each rod is a different shade, not painted or coated, but naturally colored. Blues, greens, rust-reds, golds, deep violets, and something close to black.

Barion's already scanning it, of course. A glass-like, bluish visor drops down from the helmet on his head.

I don't move yet. I just stare at the thing. Everything else in this base screams locked-down and triple-secured and glued to the floor so the loot enjoyers like me can't take it away. Meanwhile, this one item is just sitting here like trash.

You don't build vaults with mana-reactive whatever walls like that and then toss an item in it to rattle across the ground like it's one of these fake meat vegan burgers.

Before I realize what's happened, I take a few steps forward after checking to make sure it's safe, and crouch next to it. The metal doesn't reflect light normally, refracting in some way I can't identify. And it's cold and weirdly still in the space around it for some reason.

Barion steps in behind me, already scanning it with some different devices and a cautious glance.

"It's empty," he says.

"Yeah," I reply, and poke it with a mana arm I form and control from a distance, purposefully disconnected from my body.

Nothing happens.

Then I reread the item's description again.

Thermal Nullframe (Low Pristine) - Cubic containment frame built from seven different mana-insulating alloys, each resistant to extreme elemental saturation. It's been designed to suppress and isolate high-density thermal objects and heat-based entities. Neutralizes surrounding temperature buildup and prevents internal reactions from affecting external environments. Resistant to environmental damage and immune to energy feedback. Remains stable under indefinite exposure.

It's just so very fun, isn't it? Even more so as I watch the expressions of the others while they read the item description and take a note of its rarity, one after another.

After all, the absolute cheapest item of this rarity probably starts at... a shitload of shards.

A fuckton. A lot.

Probably illegal in some countries. Could probably buy a horse. A ridiculous amount.

I mean, like, really, really a lot.

Chapter 670: Like children

Io is first to talk. "Before any of you do something stupid, how about this. We only got this item thanks to Nathaniel and Barion, and it's possible we wouldn't have gotten it without their help in the first place, since I don't think we would have been able to open the door. I think we can all mostly agree on that."

He looks around and waits for someone to argue, but no one does.

Nodding once, he continues. "I would suggest that the item be sold, and Nathaniel and Barion split 70% of the value, while we get the rest."

I understand what he's trying to do right away. In some ways, it could be seen as Io's attempt to help us, even if it looks like he just wants a cut on the surface.

Some of the others probably wouldn't like seeing us walk away with an item like that. How much could it be worth? Ten times the cost of upper arcane? Twenty times? With upper arcane items going for something around a million shards, that's a huge amount.

It is unfortunate that I can't see the tutorial shop here, but after coming into "contact" with my first pristine item, stuff of that rarity should show to me in the shop, same as it did when I found my first arcane item.

So, obviously, the others would feel robbed, no matter how little sense that might make. Maybe they could even convince themselves that they were guarding us or something in the meantime, implying that they deserve a cut.

What Io does should somewhat keep the group working together, for a while longer.

It's insane by itself that we even managed to find such an item here, and behind such comparatively terrible defenses going by its value.

Actually, with Sword of Aeons being one of the most powerful items in Lissandra's world, a world that went through so many pairings, it's likely that it would have been upper pristine, or possibly even the next rarity. It all depends on how scaling works for items of pristine rarity. I still haven't even personally experienced the difference between an upper arcane and a mid arcane item.

It also brings back a thought I had not so long ago. I think if I'm lucky and abuse Beyond and the system shop a bit more, it should be possible for me to acquire millions of shards. Even now, I still have two and a half million of them. So, shouldn't I be able to make enough to buy a low pristine item on my own before the tutorial ends?

Isn't that a bit too insane? Is that one of the reasons the First Generations are so highly revered in the worlds I've visited? The number of ways you can use the tutorial to get stronger and the number of advantages you get can be mind boggling.

At this point, it just feels like it's by design. To turn us into beings no one can stand against when we return to our world. The ones that will decide the direction of our planet, and be the first in line to fight during the Pairings: protectors, leaders, and teachers. Or whatever else we choose to become.

In some ways, it must be truly terrifying to be a normal human at that point. Imagine beings you almost no longer dare to call human, appearing seemingly out of nowhere, launching projectiles at you from orbit, setting cities on fire, outhealing the concentrated attack of an entire military, and moving at speeds no human vehicle can match—just by using the strength of their own bodies.

Well, my thoughts aside, what Io is trying to do in the end relies on people not being greedy. I don't know how much Io actually believes sharing the shards we could get for the item will work, and how much he's just hoping to make the others hesitate.

Malika, I don't think, would cause trouble. And Io... I don't know what to think about him for now, as much as he's made a good impression so far. Barion might be greedy enough to go for it, and the same goes for the vyssari and that gray man.

Only then do I realize I forgot about someone. I turn around to see Tacita squatting next to Barion, who holds the item. She pokes the cage a few times, then grabs onto it and pulls it toward herself when Barion tries to move it away from her. There she leans closer to it and even sniffs it a few times.

Well, in the end, it's not like I'll drop my guard around anyone here, no matter what happens.

"I'll agree to that," Barion says in response to Io's idea, and looks at me. Then gives up trying to get the cage back from Tacita.

To that, I shrug and nod.

Looking around, Io gets similar reactions from the others, and it's decided that Barion will carry the item for now.

When we start moving again toward where we figure the bigger facilities will be, Malika stops by my side with that typical demonic smile of hers. Clearly a sign that she's up to no good.

“How many of us do you think are going to make it, funny human?”

I’m already thinking about why that item would’ve been locked in that room, why it was seemingly so far away from the elf, and why it was even there in the first place, so I barely pay her any mind.

Just as she leans toward me, I glance at her red eyes, then move my gaze higher and look at her horns.

So far, I’ve seen plenty of horn styles. Short, long, thick, bending toward the back of the head smoothly, sticking out to the sides, or projecting forward. There are many types of them. Malika’s horns are on the shorter, thicker end of the scale. They have that somewhat smooth-looking black texture and curl backward, then slightly to the side.

“Want to touch them?” Her words bring my attention back to her.

“Want to get punched?”

“Want to kill the others later and keep the rewards and items to ourselves? Or we could go for it right away if you prefer. I don’t think they can stop us if we really try,” she says out of nowhere, right there, in the middle of the hallway, where everyone can hear.

And I believe she means every word.

Her eyes shine, and she isn’t at all bothered by the others who stop after hearing that. They watch the two of us in a way that makes it obvious they’re ready to fight, depending on my answer.

Malika seems to find it even more amusing, and I can sense her heartbeat speeding up, her gravitational demon heart thumping louder and sending vibrations through the air. All around her, dust rises, and the light twists strangely. That pressure I’ve felt around my brain rises again. Not directed at me, but surrounding everything, ready to snap at the others.

Her white hair rises as well, and her red eyes gleam a deeper red. “That quiet girl seems to be with you, so we can take her in if you want. The three of us would be more than enough for this quest, wouldn’t we?”

“What are you saying, Malika?” Io asks in a firm voice.

Malika just looks into my eyes, and ignores our supposed to be leader. “Just a single word from you, we can kill these weaklings.”

“No,” I answer simply.

She blinks a few times, and the pressure around her lessens. Her hair starts to fall back down. A few expressions flash across her face: surprise, confusion, then hesitation. She looks me over once again, like she’s trying to figure something out.

Gradually, her eyes squint and turn sharp, dangerous, and that pressure rises again, this time directed at me.

“Maybe you aren’t as strong as I thought you were. Maybe you’re just another human after all.”

POV Barion

And here it is again. I just knew I shouldn’t have accepted this quest the moment my handler mentioned other strong Beyonders would be involved. It’s near impossible for people like them to cooperate efficiently, with all that confidence and their personalities. There’s a lack of trust, and everyone just thinks they know better.

Most of all, we’re already suspicious of each other, and this item isn’t helping. It’s truly a beautiful work of art, and better than anything I’ve ever seen, by so much, even. Right now, I really want to drop everything else and just sit here studying it.

That demoness sends out gravitational waves in a way that makes my sensor cubes scream warnings in my head as I watch the danger level rise. It even triggered some of my automatic barriers, which now surround me. Just like before, I anchor one of my explosives to the window, ready to blow it out and run if it comes to that.

And that man just stands there, aligned against her, seemingly not worrying about her at all.

He isn't even using that amazing eye trait he was relying on while we were trying to unlock the door. He doesn't channel that disgustingly high amount of mana through that body of his, that's more conductive than most of the mana-conductive alloys I know. I really want to ask him about it, but I'm worried about how he'll react.

"Maybe you aren't as strong as I thought you were. Maybe you're just another human after all," the demon says, and the pressure rises even more.

More of my barriers trigger, and more warning tones ring in my head. My visor, plated in a thin layer of incredibly expensive liquified voidcopper and fueled by the inscriptions I've etched into it, moves down over my face.

"Yup, I'm human," that man answers.

Through the visor, I see something akin to yellow smoke rise up around the demon. It spreads throughout the entirety of the large hallway we're in and especially concentrates around the two of them. It clings to the floor, covering it. It's a sight I can only see thanks to the visor.

"Yes, you are just a human," she repeats, and that yellow smoke rises further. It follows her, twisting around her body as she moves, and it starts concentrating around the man's head.

I would've expected Io to jump in, but he seems to know more than me and just steps back, letting it all unfold.

That usually collected and calm face of the man changes. I still remember a hint of almost childish excitement back when we were working on the lock, but none of that is here now. His face grows colder, almost arrogant, before shifting again.

He breathes out and lets out a chuckle.

"Like children," he says in an amused tone.

Then mana seeps out of his body. It presses out, and through my visor, it looks like a torrent of water, like the first flaming blaze of a new sun. It makes itself known as a mix of bright pale blue and darker blue swirling together.

More alarms ring in my head, and more of the defensive mechanisms on my chestplate activate. Another visor slides down in reaction to it. My cubes move in front of me, and the battery in each one activates, creating more layers of defense.

Even then, I feel it. A mana level that's just too high, too ridiculous, and moving too fast for anyone at our level to reasonably contain.

And then it rises further.

A torrent of blue waves fills the hallway in a way that makes it feel like we've been dumped underwater, and it only grows denser. For a moment, I see the afterimage of a crown floating over his head, and golden rings forming around his pupils.

"This is getting annoying. So just stop, okay?" he says. Just those words.

And the demon stands there, looking like she's grasping for air. The tips of her fingers shake, and her eyes are wide open. The area around her looks like the deepest trench of an endless ocean.

Malika just nods, and all that mana disappears in a second, pulled back into his body like a whirlpool. And that body of his contains it all.

I still keep my eyes on him, but then another of my alarms beeps. I turn around only to find nothing there. Confused, I examine it to see if it triggered falsely, but there's just nothing. Behind me, only Io, the vyssari woman, and that mute girl stand.

When I look that way too intently, Io moves closer. "Any problems?" he asks.

“Nothing. His mana must have damaged one of my detectors,” I shake my head, but still decide to be careful and check on it. I’ve detected part of the frequency, so I can modify one of my drones to find out if something triggered it, or if it was just a misfire.

“Got it. If anything happens, please let me know,” Io says and passes by, striding toward the demon. “With this matter solved, I think it’s time we move again.”

POV Nathaniel

The mood after the... altercation from a few minutes ago shifts and becomes calmer. People aren’t fighting as much, and we continue deeper into the evil lair of the allegedly pointy-eared megalomaniac. Along the way, Barion and I open a few more doors, and we even run into a couple more gilded monsters.

He asks me about the mana conductivity of my body using the same mana science bullshit jargon types like him seem to like. But he does it in such a polite and shy way that I can't help but feel amused. So I cut off one of my fingers and hand it to him so he can examine it, while using my passive and thermal energy to slowly regenerate it over time.

A few times, the room we’re in closes itself off. Either the Last Elf having finally tracked us down, or some automatic defense mechanisms kicking in to kill us. But so far, everyone’s still alive.

Io shines a few times, too. He teleports us one after another out of rooms that lock us in, and don’t happen to have countermeasures against his ability. They manage to stop mine for a bit, but I’m sure I could break through that kind of defense. Meanwhile, Io just sort of ignores it.

His ability to do that and bring all of us with him is straight up insane, to be honest. I don’t even think I could stop it right now, even though I’ve been observing it and trying to come up with a way to counter it.

We’re probably getting close to the middle of the asteroid now, and eventually enter one of the larger areas. It’s like a huge cave that could easily fit a small city block. One entire side has no wall. Instead, there’s a massive window stretching from floor to ceiling, reinforced with a metal web that probably makes it stronger somehow. It gives us a brilliant view of outer space and the burning planet below.

It's beautiful. The rocky cave surrounding us, the enormous opening covered with glass that seems like it shouldn't be holding up to protecting us from the vacuum, the movement of the asteroid, the darkness of space filled with what looks like infinite stars, and the planet below, it all just hits.

We decide to rest here for a while and continue prepping while looking around and checking over the piles of boxes scattered all over the place.

I spend a lot of that time sitting next to the glass, just staring out the window and taking it all in.

Then, when we're getting ready to move again, I hear a few shouts and stand up to make my way over to the voices.

When I reach the others, they're standing in a circle around something on the ground, hidden behind one of the piles of boxes.

Barion lies there, dead, with his head cleanly separated from his neck and a confused expression on his face.

The low pristine cage is near his body, along with all of his items.

Obviously, the murderer wouldn't bother to take anything.

The mood shifts again and turns darker, even as the others start examining his body and arguing. Everyone suspects everyone else, but no clear conclusion can be reached, even though some are more suspect than others.

Then they take his items for themselves. Leaving them behind would be a waste after all.

I wait until they're done, then take the pristine item I had so much fun getting to while working with Barion. For now, I tuck it into one of the smaller bags I keep on me.

No one says anything about it.

