

Tutorial 671

Chapter 671: E-3

"I think that crazy girl did it," the vyssari woman says once again.

Despite having been so quiet up to this point, she now stands tall and points at Tacita nearby, who just lifts her eyebrow with a curious look.

"Io, I also think it was her. You saw what she did to me when I just touched her," the gray, lanky man says, joining the vyssari in blaming the mute girl.

Before Io reacts to that, Malika joins as well with a smile that shows she doesn't give a shit about Barion's death, along with just how much she's enjoying the chaos and dangerous situation.

"I agree as well, it's probably her, we should kill her," she says. "Right, Nathaniel? But if you say no, I'll be on your side. The deal I offered, maybe we can expand that to the three of us, we can still get rid of the others, it still stands."

Demons really do act like little kids sometimes.

Finally, Io gets his words in. "We can't be sure who did it. Any of you could've been the one to do this, and if you look at it from your point of view, it could also be me. Lastly, there's still the option that the Last Elf did it, or that some of his gilded beings have managed to hide from us."

Meanwhile, Tacita doesn't seem to mind it at all. She is confident as always and looks around in a way a cat would at a bunch of mice grouping up to fight her.

That and Io's words seem to disappoint the gray, lanky man, and he looks at Tacita with anger.

Tacita meets his eyes and then smiles in that almost innocent-looking way only she can pull off.

She takes a step forward and disappears as her body fades into barely more than a blur. The next moment, she stands in front of the lanky man, and her dagger moves in a swishing motion to stab through his heart.

Before she completes her movement, she vanishes, teleported away by Io, who starts sweating profusely and staring wide-eyed as he does his best to react to the incredibly fast movement.

For a moment, Tacita stands where he teleported her, her face toward one of the walls, and her back to us.

Slowly, she turns her head around and locks eyes with Io.

I count one second as she makes her decision. Then her dagger flashes, and she moves.

She reaches the thylarin in a blink, and her dagger stabs its tip into Io's chest right over his heart. But before it can pierce deeper, Tacita disappears, despite her field being modified to counter Io.

This time, he teleports her to the opposite side of the huge room, but Tacita quickly regains her bearings, reorients herself, and moves again, almost reaching Io before he teleports her again.

After that, she moves again, crossing the massive room even faster than before. She is almost on him before he can reactivate his skill, and her blade draws blood from his neck.

I know it's only a question of time before she kills him, assuming he doesn't chuck her into outer space or tries something else, but he seems to be avoiding that for some reason.

Maybe it is because he needs her, or because he knows I would step in if he did. That would likely pull Malika in too, turning this into an even bigger mess.

Tacita is just too dangerous in this kind of combat, and Io will either run out of mana first or lose focus before she gets tired.

But that's also when Malika moves into Tacita's way, while as always having that demonic expression. She probably doesn't even care about protecting Io, she simply can't resist joining the fight taking place in front of her.

Tacita moves around the demon with ease and fully avoids her even as Malika tries to slow her down and use the same skill she used on me. Tacita even stabs Malika in the side twice as she passes by.

Thanks to the slowdown, she doesn't reach Io and gets teleported toward one of the walls.

The gray man, who disappeared when the fight started, reaches out from one of the shadows, and the shadow itself creates dozens of ropes that reach out for the mute girl.

I slide deeper into [Focus] and watch as Tacita slows down, steadies her body, and breathes out. Her hand turns into a blur, and the dozens of shadowy ropes find themselves being cut short by the blue glow of mana shining around her dagger.

She dances around and avoids the lightning projectiles the vyssari sends her way as she joins the fight in turn.

The lightning projectiles crash into the wall and erupt into dozens of smaller bolts, scattering in every direction. But none of them touch Tacita. She weaves through the chaos with impossible grace, slipping between crackling arcs of energy that tear through the air around her. Each bolt lights up her figure for a split second, casting flickering shadows as she dances just out of reach.

The vyssari lifts her hand, and a ring of crackling lightning coils around her finger. In an instant, she creates dozens more lightning projectiles, each one sparking to life in the air around her.

But even then, it's nowhere near close.

A second dagger appears in Tacita's other hand. With which, she deflects the incoming projectiles in fluid motion. Then, without hesitation, she throws the blade forward with blinding speed.

The dagger slices through the air, pierces the barrier the vyssari creates, and buries itself in the vyssari's arm. The strike comes within inches of her neck, just barely avoided at the last moment.

Malika, even though wounded, tries to use the opportunity in a perfect show of timing. Tacita just dealt with a mass of shadowy things, is wary of the gray man, and her body is slightly in the air from avoiding the lightning projectiles.

Even then, like an acrobat, Tacita twists in the air, evades Malika's incoming strike, and her field flickers to counter whatever the hell Malika might be doing. Tacita's dagger heads to stab itself through Malika's eye and into her brain, but she is teleported again.

Stolen from its rightful place, this narrative is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

Reappearing again, she lands softly on the ground. Her feet touch down with barely a sound as she rises smoothly, already preparing to strike again.

"I mean, shouldn't we stop for now?" I use the brief pause to say.

When the pause increases and no one moves to attack again, I add, "I mean, it's fun to watch, but I think someone is going to die if it continues."

"Then why won't you help us? Are you with her? Did you kill Barion?" the vyssari growls, her voice strained as she yanks the dagger from her arm, blood running down her fingers.

Even then, I see poison beginning to spread as she uses her lightning to burn the flesh around the wound. Behind her is a circle of lightning, spinning rapidly, ready to fuel and create more high-speed projectiles, and the lightning ring around her finger crackles dangerously.

"Wouldn't you guys already be fucked if I was the one who killed Barion and decided to join her to deal with you?"

"Probably, but wouldn't it make for a beautiful fight?" Malika says first. She doesn't seem to mind her two bleeding wounds at all.

"This is the most dysfunctional group I have ever been part of, by far," Io says, seeing that Tacita doesn't rush his way to cut off his head. He wipes the sweat from his forehead and touches the scratch and blood on his neck. "Not only did I get stuck here with a demon, which is bad by itself, but there's this girl who only communicates through whatever weird drawings she makes and does everything she can to stab everyone through the neck."

"At least you have me," I say.

"You are as bad as any of them. What are you, some kind of half-demon or something?" Io asks, regaining his composure. "So far, I've held back because I want this group to stay together. But if anyone tries to kill anyone else again, I will not just teleport you across the room, I will shunt you into outer space."

"Can't you teleport people inside the walls? You know, to squish them inside and stuff? Or just teleport half of them? Maybe just a brain?" I can't help but ask.

He just glances my way before heading towards the vyssari and gray man, possibly to scold them. He doesn't even attempt to do the same with Malika, and I'm not that surprised.

With the situation solved, I glance towards the boxes where Barion's body has been left and head towards one of the panels in the wall. It's open and shows that the man was working on it before he got killed.

I barely knew him, but even then, I feel a bit of something that I identify as regret for not being able to get to know him better. I rarely get that feeling, but he just seemed like someone I could've gotten along with. A man who stayed in his lane, working on his own things, and exploring the things he got excited about.

The best I can do is to kill the one who did it.

I form a few Ley Lines to connect to the panel. Before, I would've done it differently, but after seeing Barion and his wires, I found that creating a direct connection helps a lot, especially if you place them in the right places. It's possible to get through without it, either by direct thought or "wirelessly", but with

more delicate or difficult locks, it can have its advantages. Also, [Manifestation] has made materializing them easier.

That skill just keeps on giving. It also worked really well back then when I released my mana to pressure Malika. And that's only the start. It is just unfortunate that I can't use it with [Empyrean Lance] yet because of my limited understanding of that skill. But once I do... maybe I'll finally be able to create multiple projectiles, and not just a single lance.

Thinking of that, I also continue to work on the panel, and as I work on that, I notice a movement nearby, and Tacita sits on one of the boxes by my side and faces towards the others.

"Are you guarding me?"

She nods.

"I'll cover your back as well."

Another nod.

No more is needed to be said, and the panel and lines it is connected to require more of my attention. One of them is seemingly connected to one of the working tables in the corner and has something that I figure must be something akin to records. They likely belong to the replica of Last Elf, but I'm suspicious now.

Why would he keep records? For a being like him, I would've expected him to be able to keep them all in his mind. Maybe to share them with the other replicas? But wouldn't that mean he had something like a web for communication? Even our group has something like that. Or maybe they're records left over from a time when he was much lower level and couldn't pull that off? Limited by his brain capacity, he kept them either as reminders or as something to share with the other low level replicas?

That part of the evil base system feels fairly old and rough, so I wouldn't be surprised.

But there is also always a chance they were left there on purpose. My paranoid mind just keeps thinking it might be that.

Even so, I sacrifice a bit of my time to pull them out. Because of the encryption, I don't get them fully. And as I do so, some of the information gets deleted by the safety protocols.

[Log 018.1_Core_Response_Log_A]

...held past projection. The gilded subject remained functional beyond the expected threshold. No instability recorded across the first three phases. Local containment adjusted 0.2.

[Log 019.0_Command_Override_Trace]

Command received via encrypted channel. Source authentication: inconclusive. Mission parameters updated. Priority shift from long-term analysis to asset collection. Before leaving, some leveling will be required to unlock more memories and to allow creation of blueprints... Destination classified: E-3.

[Log 019.6_Vector_Adjustment_Calc.v2]

Base trajectory modified. Current orbit decoupling in progress. Slingshot path through [REDACTED] system estimated to reduce travel time to E-3 by 17.03%. Estimated arrival window: 221.6 years at current mana draw efficiency.

[Log 036.7_Reactor_Load_Distribution]

...18% of reserve diverted to long-range vector core. Field distortion detected across Deck 4. No feedback loop triggered. Structural risk...

[Log 090.1_E3_SurfaceScan_001]

Initial survey complete. The planetary surface shows signs of catastrophic ignition. Origin unclear so far. Burnout likely occurred post [REDACTED] tutorial closure...

[Log 091.2_Mana_Reserve_Audit]

... reserves at 23.4%. Compression rates within acceptable limits. Spike in core temperature during artificial gravity realignment logged but dismissed. Continue monitoring for anomalous fluctuations every 2.4 cycles.

[Log 0105.6_Contact_Trace]

... a conclusion has been reached. [attendee] returned to E-3. The subject carried a Fragment of...

Then there is a huge number of logs missing, and the last sentence I managed to get out of it.

...blueprint for Low Pristine item modified. Containment pathways integrated into the revised design. Preparation sequence initiated. Resource gathering restructured at 94%.

With that, I open up my bag and look at the cage I threw in there.

Just what the hell are you for?

Chapter 672: Chocolate

How interesting, logs to be deciphered. But I should also take into consideration that this might be a plant, left behind to confuse us.

Or the Last Elf just doesn't care.

That second option is also very likely, because so far, all the attempts on our lives were half-assed. At this point, I think I would prefer my next opponent to be a demon. At least in that case, there wouldn't be any mysteries to solve, none of the backstabbing stuff.

Holding yet another halo from the Last Elf's gilded monsters, I give it a thought and place it on top of my head. The vyssari woman next to me gives me a look that still says she suspects I might be

communicating with the guy. She isn't wrong, to be honest, but it's not like I'm doing it to sell them off or anything.

"What?" I ask her.

"I don't trust you," she says simply.

There's something about her that feels off. Compared to everyone else, she would seem to be the weakest based on what she's shown thus far. Her personality also seems to lack confidence and edge. I strongly suspect she's hiding something, and that parts of her personality are just a mask she's put on for our benefit.

"You do you," I shrug. I don't say as much, but if I had wanted to fight them, I've had plenty of opportunities. "Can you tell me about vyssari?" I ask.

She looks up from twisting the ring on her finger. It's a simple thing made of some kind of white wood.

"I'm curious."

"Good for you."

"Please?" I try.

"I can't tell if this is some kind of mask you've put on or if you're really just that weird. "

"You people always say that about me. That I'm weird, half-demon, twisted, or some other stuff. You know what's funny about that? So far, I've found myself to be the most normal member of all the groups I've joined. You should've seen my tutorial group, the people from our first Beyond expedition, my guild, or any damned Champion, Absolute, or Ruler I've ever met or heard about."

"You talk like a typical concentration skill user."

“I’m not even using it for my emotions.”

And with that, she gives me an ugly looking smile. “I wasn’t talking about that. You don’t have to answer, but from what I’ve seen in your behavior, you started with a concentration skill. People’s starting skills are always at least partially based on either the personality or the talents of their owners, at least from what I’ve learned. Many people have told me that the system always prefers to strengthen and evolve what already exists. Starting with a concentration skill means you were probably like that even before the tutorial. A weirdo, constantly suppressing and hiding their emotions, or you were just the sort of person who was highly capable of controlling them. Or, in your case, someone who doesn’t seem to take things seriously.”

“Is that something you’ve really confirmed?”

“It comes from experience.”

“I see. So, the vyssari?”

She looks at me for three seconds before shaking her head. “I didn’t really know anything about it either, not before I appeared in that forest back on the first floor, but apparently, my race is an experiment set in motion by one of the Rulers. We haven’t even figured out their subclass yet.”

That self deprecating smile is back. “My lord, my creator, my god. Long dead and almost forgotten. Some asshole obsessed with dragons who couldn’t get a hold of any of their genetic material, then used the blood of a powerful wyrm to play god by creating us in a lab.”

She laughs. “On our planet, we had two main religions. Some believed in a single, all-seeing, all-powerful god. Others believed in a trio of goddesses that created us and the universe. And then we show up here and find out we were just an experiment, and the one who did it had the nerve to die already. Funny, isn’t it?”

“If you say it like that, it is. So your legs are part of that wyrm bloodline? Also, wyrms, dragons?”

“Give me that thing I saw you eating in secret with that absurd look of pleasure on your face.”

“It’s very expensive.”

“I am telling you everything and tolerating your questions when I suspect I might be about to die in a day or two, maybe even by your hands. I deserve that much.”

I give her a longer look, then reach into my bag and take out one of my chocolate bars. It’s been broken up, melted, and reformed a few times, but it’s still the same brown sugary matter so many of my people are addicted to.

After I unpack it for her, I offer it, and she takes a few pieces, throwing them into her mouth. I take a few too, and side by side, we eat it.

“Not bad,” she says and closes her eyes for a moment. “Dragons are entities that existed in the distant past, and possibly still do, from what I’ve heard. I met an A-rank vyssari in his last year of the tutorial, and he shared some rumors he’d heard about our race. Apparently, some vyssari from the purer bloodlines have a chance to gain powerful traits from that little bit of genetic material held over from the powerful wyrm the Ruler used to make us, who knows how many generations ago.”

“And wyrms are related to dragons, but weaker?”

“From everything I’ve heard. I don’t know how many dragons or wyrms are left, but since there’s so little information about them, they must be very well hidden, very powerful, or very dead.”

I offer her another piece of chocolate and take two of the bigger ones for myself. Unfortunately, she notices and quickly grabs a few more.

“Are you disappointed after finding out how your race came to exist?” I ask.

She seems to give it a longer thought and absentmindedly reaches for another piece, which she throws into her mouth in a hurry.

“Before the tutorial, I was viewed as a kind of religious leader. Do you have people like that on your planet?” she asks.

"I guess. The best example that comes to mind is the Pope, head of a religion consisting of over a billion people. But I think his role is mostly ceremonial now. He has some influence, obviously, he does engage in diplomacy and stuff. Still, he's a figurehead. He says a lot, but I doubt he really rules over much of anything. Maybe it's even by intent that he doesn't."

She chuckles with a half-bitter smile, licking a bit of chocolate off her thumb.

"I see. Then maybe I was something like that, though on a much smaller scale. I spoke, guided, wore beautiful robes, and people listened to the things I had to say, and that was the role that had been passed down to me. It all felt important at the time. But now, knowing we were made in a lab, for fun, by someone who came from normal people like us, it just feels... hollow."

"Does it really matter?" I take one more piece and offer her the rest, which she accepts. "I mean, your origin was the same, before the tutorial and now. It's just that now you know the truth."

"Same origin, huh."

She doesn't say anything for a few seconds. She just breaks off another piece of chocolate, eats it slowly, then finally speaks.

"You're technically right. I didn't change. I was like this before the tutorial. These legs, this blood, all of it. Just didn't know what it was."

She points the chocolate at me a little.

"I think you're overlooking something, though. Most people aren't so logical. Knowledge does matter. Information changes people, how they see the world, how they choose to act. In my faith, we believe that our emotions were given to us for a reason." She pauses, shakes her head, and laughs softly before looking at me, "Emotions are not flaws to overcome, but they're part of what makes us. Logic has its place, but it's not the whole picture. I think, deep down, you know that too."

"You think so?"

"Obviously, otherwise you would just be like every other concentration skill user jerk who keeps their skills active all the time."

"I guess." I nod.

"Now leave me alone. I want to prepare for the coming fights."

I leave without any further words.

An hour later, I'm working on a lock when a disruptive wave washes over the entire room, blocking all my senses for a few seconds, and a big crack appears in the massive window. The suction starts pulling the air from inside the room until Io and that gray man get there first and patch it up with some items lying around and some mana.

The lights in the room flicker, then fade, until most of the glow comes from the planet below, spilling a dim reddish hue across the room.

As I regain my senses, my suspicions are confirmed. With a quick use of Wraith Dance, I reach the body resting against the wall.

The vyssari woman, whose name I didn't even know, is resting against it with her mouth agape and blood flowing from the corners of her lips. Both of her eyes are gone, exploded into gore and pieces. Something has been stuffed in her mouth, and I quickly recognize the color and material. It's the plastic package of the chocolate she and I shared.

The movement of my mana isn't even the slightest bit affected by the sudden spike of emotion. My hand doesn't shake, and I remain calm as I reach out towards the body. When I touch her to check over her body, it's still warm, and I note that her brain has been reduced to mush, as it had been squeezed in a big fist.

The gray man starts panicking audibly and shouting at Io. He points his finger at Tacita for killing Barion, and now he blames the crazed demon for killing the vyssari, and he points his finger at me for being greedy and organizing it all for better rewards.

Barely two days have passed, and two out of the seven people who came here are dead.

I tune out most of the conversation and let Io handle it. I take the chocolate I opened earlier, break off a portion for myself, and leave the rest in the wrapper. I place the closed package in her hand, curl her fingers around it, and cover her with a cloth from a nearby box.

After a bit of working on the locks, Io stops by me and asks, "How does it look?"

"I had to start all over again. That pulse, whatever it was, reset and changed the defenses. You remember that thing Barion mentioned the room with the cage had, right? There's one here as well."

Io groans audibly, and two of his hands cover his face as he wipes it down. "So we're locked in here? The door we came through locked again? Am I correct to assume they've all been reset?"

"Yup. I also think there might be bigger groups of gilded monsters behind them now."

"Understood, thank you. Please keep trying. We'll try to come up with another two or three ways to get out. Moving through the void of space is an option, but I would like to avoid it, given that it's the most risky, and the replica will likely be prepared."

"Okay," I confirm.

He moves away, just a few steps. This time, we all stay clustered together. Everyone, trying to keep the others in their line of sight.

It might just be because I have what's probably the lowest constitution here, if not the lowest after Tacita, but I start feeling lightheaded and my head hurts as well. Either the replicas are trying to poison us, or a bit of air is still leaking out. Even though I'm sure at our levels we don't need that much air, so I would probably suspect some poison or something.

Not that elegant or satisfying, but a simple way to deal with intruders. Just like a bunch of ants being sprayed down with Raid.

I allow my sealed ignition heart to beat slightly faster, and more thermal energy floods my body, activating combustion and sending a bit of healing through my body. In combination with the healing marks Lily left on me, I should be fine.

Just a glance at Tacita tells me she's doing fine too, and noticing me looking her way, she draws something in the air with her finger.

(▽) / ♪ ♫ • • • ♪

This time, I don't have so much as a clue what she means by that, and I lift my eyebrow to show her my confusion.

She smiles and tilts her head while moving the hair covering her ear. It reveals a wired white earphone resting there. I follow the cable, which leads into one of her pockets, where she likely has a smartphone or some other kind of music player.

It's safe to say she isn't all that worried.

Chapter 673: Planet below

(I see it is you once again.)

(Oh, you picked up already. Is this the same guy as before or a different replica?)

(You should assume that it does not matter. Was it your intent to speak with me about removing the intruders here?)

(Not really, you already seem to have found someone to work with you.)

(That is an interesting assumption. But while it makes sense to suspect me, it could also be simple greed, and you seem to have some experience with its Ruler.)

(Has she left a mark on me?)

(Indeed. She likes to leave them on those she thinks of as candidates to become her weapon. These marks are usually meant for the other Rulers, but if you know where to look, with some effort it is possible to detect them.)

I pause and think. Some kind of scent mark from Biscuit, the mark from Lissandra's probably still in place, and now one from the Ruler of Greed. This has to stop somewhere.

(You know what's fun?) I ask.

(The tutorial system does not seem to be censoring anything here. So I can get some decent information from you.)

(Doesn't that only work if I decide to cooperate and share such information?)

(I mean, keeping up the conversation is to your advantage, since it allows your hypothetical coconspirator to make preparations to kill someone else, right? Sorry to disappoint, but I already know who did it, and next time they're dead. That is, of course, only if you have a coconspirator. If we want to pretend there isn't one, you can excuse having the conversation by saying you are bored.)

As he talks, I can hear amusement in his voice. (Did you know Greed rarely picks people from the Pride subclass as candidates for her weapon? She, The Warden, and some of their collaborators consider it impossible for anyone under the rank of Ruler to be capable of challenging the Ruler of Pride. And you, as a Pride subclass, would not be able to become Ruler before challenging him.)

(Is he that powerful?)

(Wyrms, the Corporation, ancient families bearing powerful traits, dragons, beast clans older than most civilizations, forgotten Rulers, old Gods, and countless others, no matter how mighty they are, still fall short in front of his power. You seem to have met The Absolute. Long ago, she was thought to be capable of facing him. That day, dozens of the most powerful beings in the system watched her challenge. But even she was proven insufficient.)

He pauses, and I turn away from the panel to look out the window, where the cracked portion has been plastered with materials salvaged from the room. The crack keeps spreading even now. The lights are entirely off now, and only the red glow from the planet below gives any illumination.

(Never trust Greed. There are reasons most other Rulers despise her. Right in front of their eyes, she's trying to raise people to accomplish what she could not, people who would become Rulers in their place. She would not hesitate to replace most of the current Rulers with her weapons, in the hope the chance of killing him would be higher.)

(Ah, do not worry about me. I don't trust any of the Rulers.)

(Then Wrath should interest you. The Rulers of Wrath are often among the most formidable when it comes to combat, which is why Greed so often seeks out those with that subclass. As you might expect, the current Wrath finds this displeasing and takes some delight in making trouble for Greed.)

I almost chuckle at those words. Trouble for Greed likely means a dead weapon candidate, also known as a poor attendee. But that can only be expected. As much as she can be friendly and nice at times, the Ruler of Greed has a single goal in mind.

Killing Pride.

Even at the cost of her own life, thousands, millions of others, entire tutorials, and entire planets. All ready to be sacrificed for that single greed driven goal.

(How nice of you to talk with me for so long.)

(Do not think I am unaware of my own inclinations. I have long known that all replicas at this level share such traits, carrying both the tendency to look down upon those they deem weaker and the unfortunate habit of oversharing. This alters in time, as they reach higher levels and unlock more of the abilities and memories of the original body.)

(That poison seeping into the room, is it being released by you or your coconspirator... I mean, the hypothetical one?)

I'm already having trouble breathing, even though I tried to do it as little as possible. I feel blood in my mouth, and my passive healing is trying to mend the internal wounds it causes.

(I regret to say I have no knowledge of what you speak.) The elf lies.

The replicas of the last elf sure can be annoying at times. But at least they are talkative for being replicas of someone so old, or maybe they are as talkative because they have memories from when he was younger. Perhaps I wouldn't want to meet a more powerful replica before getting stronger. Plus, I think they have a right to be annoying, since we're the ones breaking into this place on a quest to eradicate them.

So who are the baddies? Us, or the replicas, with people being sent to kill them for whatever their main body wants to do?

(What happened to the planet below?) I ask, deflecting a few more attempts from the presence I've been talking to, as it tries to connect to the deeper protocols of the golden halo.

The attempts continue the entire time and do not stop even as the elf answers, (Is it not remarkable, the sheer level of destruction here?)

I turn away from the panel and glance outside through the cracked window. Calling it a window feels wrong, since it's basically just a towering sheet of glass that stretches from floor to ceiling. Beyond it, the burning planet glows like an ember, a splash of burning red color against the endless black.

There is a strange beauty in that view. It is raw and dangerous, the kind that draws you in even as it hides the countless lives it's taken.

The replica continues, (Even though the planet has not undergone any Pairing and remains extremely fragile, the extent of the damage is fascinating nevertheless, as are the fires that continue to burn after hundreds of years.)

(What kind of fragment is it?)

After my question, the voice falls silent and comes back just as I wipe a drop of blood from my lip and use more thermal energy to heal the damage.

(It seems you have stumbled upon some of my old records. I had all but forgotten them. It is a Fragment of the First Star if you have to know.) At the end of that sentence, the last elf may not laugh, but to me it sounds no different than if he had.

(What is so funny about that?)

(With great difficulty, I was able to figure out what happened here. Would you care to hear it?)

(Yes.)

(Are you certain? How is your body holding together? Have your lungs begun to fail? Do your thoughts feel heavier, and is your healing weakening as the poison adapts?)

(Something like that. So?)

(Oh, you people with the Pride subclass. Would you believe me if I said the holder of the Fragment of the First Star that caused all of that was also Pride? A powerful Beyond attendee, but arrogant and lacking where he should not have been. Even with that Fragment in his possession and after becoming an S rank, Greed did not consider him worthy of being a weapon candidate. But that matters little, for our poor attendee knew none of Lady Greed's plans and hopes. Powerful, and the victor in three of the tournaments he entered, luck favored him, but only until he was able to get his hands on the Fragment on the thirteenth tutorial floor. But I suppose, had you asked him, he would have thought it nothing other than amazing luck, at least until the final moments of his death.)

I notice movement and watch as Tacita stands up and faces the gray man approaching her. He shouts something at her, at me, all the while coughing up blood. Malika stands nearby, slightly swaying from side to side with a faintly empty expression on her face.

(He was of the velnar people, his body was already powerful, and it only strengthened further during his time in the tutorial, until at last he stood among the strongest attendees who'd been seen in a thousand years. Supported by all the traits and passives he had gained, it was able to hold that Fragment, one of

the most dangerous ones. But that was only if he had refrained from using it. He had been warned many times, told to be patient, to wait. But then, after his tutorial ended and all returned, he stood surrounded by those he had led or bent to his will. Facing him was another group, the Beyonders, who had never accepted him, joined by others from his own planet who had been swayed to their side by attendees from lower difficulties who had finished their tutorial earlier.)

I watch as Io moves toward Malika.

(So he chose to show them his blazing power. In his pride, he believed himself strong enough and believed he'd made enough preparations. He, an Absolute candidate. And so the Fragment, for the first time since he had claimed it, awoke. It burned the body the velnar had taken such pride in, without resistance. It burned away everyone in the area.)

I get to my feet and turn toward Io, who is currently facing down Malika. Malika looks as if she is about to collapse, and Io is trying to help her.

(It set the sky of his planet on fire. Flames with nowhere to go spread downward, like rain made of heat. Oceans split. Steam carried the fire further. Rivers boiled in their beds. Forests never burned, but vanished. Cities fell in seconds. Animals ran. People ran. There was no escape. Twelve hours passed before the planet fell silent, and days more before even the most powerful tutorial attendees perished in their hiding places. And the Fragment stayed. It is still there now, burning, with no one left to burn.)

I charge at Io, activating my eyes and with [Eclipse] draining the colors from the area. Projectiles form around me and shoot forward, and I use Wraith Dance to charge, reaching him at the same moment my projectiles do.

The thylarin faces me, and the world around me shifts. All the preparations and countermeasures I've set up activate at once, and I feel confident that I've done enough to counter his ability.

But it is all for nothing, and I find myself weightless in outer space, with the asteroid base passing half a mile in front of me and the planet behind me slowly pulling me toward its burning surface.

(Such is usually the way Pride meets its end.) And even now, the last elf does not laugh.

With a burst of thermal energy, I melt the halo above my head. The voice cuts off as the metal turns to liquid, breaking into glowing droplets that drift before cooling and hardening again.

The asteroid base, now drifting farther away, looms large in my view. It's a massive gray rock, its surface split by deep cracks that glint like they're filled with gold. Hundreds of windows are scattered across its surface, some no bigger than my palm, others as large as the ones in the huge hangar-like room we left behind.

On the sides of the asteroid, three huge creatures are holding onto the rock. They are all entirely gray, with golden halos fixed above their heads, all of them turned to face me.

Chapter 674: Outer space

I'm drifting. The base spins slowly in front of me, getting smaller as it moves farther away. Still, I strengthen my sight and look through the glass wall on the side of the base, just in time to see Malika come back to her senses and attack Io, who is desperately searching for someone.

At the last moment, he teleports the demon away, and I see her appear in outer space to my left. She quickly regains her composure, moving back toward the base as attacks from the gilded monsters silently explode around her.

Io doesn't move and stands there until Tacita appears beside him and strikes at his neck. But a moment before that, before even finding her, he gives up, teleports away on his own, and runs.

Tacita reaches out with her hand, and mana glows around her finger as she touches the space where he stood. A faint trace of mana glows around her eyes before disappearing, and she looks towards something deeper inside the asteroid base.

Then she glances out the window, just once before the air around her flickers, and she disappears, becoming undetectable even to me. If I am right, she intends to hunt Io, who I think had hoped to avoid this. The next time, he won't be detecting her until he falls down dead, his flawed senses sealing his fate. For the rest of the quest, he will be forced to constantly look over his shoulder and pray she does not find him.

I've thought about it before, and yet I find myself turning the same question over in my mind once more. Just how much did Io have to sacrifice in exchange for the ability to teleport people without

regard for their defenses, even those as strong as those protecting Tacita and me? Just how many passives, traits, and active skills went into doing this?

Is he regretting it now, since he can only use it on living beings one at a time? Is that why he did what he did, desperate for rewards, and maybe even items to help him get around that weakness?

The asteroid base moves farther away from me, and I watch it as I continue to drift towards the planet.

I allow myself to feel what I imagine I would have felt before the tutorial, and these few short moments before I start using kinetic energy are some of the scariest in my life. Scarier than the phantom goblin hunting me, scarier than hiding from the Veil Guardian, and almost as scary as those twenty-three hours I spent with my face in the dirt after our meeting with Faora and Luan.

One of the gilded monsters clinging to the asteroid base fires a wide, thick green laser at me, silent as it speeds through space.

I use kinetic energy to push myself, moving much farther and faster than I thought I would.

Of course. There is no gravity or air resistance to hold me back.

The first few seconds in outer space aren't quite as bad as I'd expected. I guess even though my constitution can't really be called impressive, I'm still superhuman after all.

There's a deep pressure building in my head, like everything inside is trying to push outward. It's not sharp pain, but it is constant and growing.

My eyes burn. There's no moisture left, and blinking doesn't help. I can still see, but it's harder to focus. The light from the burning planet stabs at the edges of my vision, the glare making everything feel more distant.

My chest is tight, and I can feel the damage spreading. There's blood in my mouth. Warm at first, then cold.

My movement is slow. Every small motion drags.

My limbs respond, but they feel disconnected, as if they aren't fully part of me anymore.

I let out all the air I have left and watch it freeze as I do so. More thermal energy moves through my body.

Another projectile passes by me, and I push myself toward the asteroid, gradually adding more and more force. My speed keeps increasing since there's no resistance, but with so few points of reference, it's hard to estimate my actual speed.

I twist, I dodge, I disrupt incoming attacks, and keep moving back. Even in the vacuum of space, golden flames dance across my skin.

An [Empyrean Lance] forms over my shoulder, and I gradually feed it more mana.

Even with my healing, my lungs feel like they might rupture. I start feeling lightheaded. My skin feels like it's starting to swell and potentially burst, and my vision is getting blurry.

A wide-range attack from a huge lizard with a similarly huge golden halo crashes into me, stripping away my skin and pushing me back until I observe it enough to counter it, and pass through.

Another blindingly fast laser attack crushes the arm I lift to protect my face, tearing through the layers of barriers I've stacked there.

My lance pierces the barrier surrounding the base and the window with ease, tearing into the defensive mechanisms inside.

I teleport through the [Ley Line] I've thrown ahead, and with a few more boosts, I crash through the cracked remains of the windows I destroyed with my lance. The room on the other side is empty, but I see multiple doors leading further inside.

A huge panel starts sliding down from the ceiling like a guillotine to cut off and secure this section of the base, and the lights flicker as the vacuum of space starts pulling at the air inside.

The huge gray lizard with its golden halo follows me inside, breaking what remains of the window as its body forces its way into the room. A mana-based attack fires toward me, and I activate my eyes to read and disrupt it. The monster swirls and rushes toward me, mouth wide open, moving with a speed that feels unnatural for such a massive body.

It slithers under the closing metal panel, and the field around me expands, mimicking one of Lioren's favourite uses of kinetic energy.

The lizard freezes in place, unable to move, not even to twitch.

I sense it building up a strong mana-based attack, but the metal panel above it comes down and, just like a guillotine, takes off its head.

[You have defeated Gilded Beithir - lvl 365]

[Lvl 326 > Lvl 327]

The door seals shut with a hiss, sealing off the section. The space becomes quiet and still. The sound of the alarm fades, leaving only the flashing white light on the ceiling.

I take a deep breath and remain still. Thermal energy gets to work on healing my wounds, and, just in case, I activate one of Lily's healing marks.

Then I look down, dust off my clothes, examine the head for a few minutes, and step back into the base, this time alone.

After a few hours, as I'm slowly moving through what looks like a complex of gardens, I climb up and sit on the body of a gray creature I just killed. It looks like a mix between a spider and a giraffe, which is the best way I can describe it. What a creepy thing this is.

Its big halo now floats over my head, and after bridging the connection, I send my message.

(I am still not sure if Io was cooperating with you, or if you just had similar goals.)

(That's an interesting welcome message.)

(I think we can skip niceties and get straight to the important stuff at this point.)

(Like satisfying your curiosity?)

(Like satisfying my curiosity,) I confirm. (You do your evil monologue, which makes me sit here and listen, giving you time to prepare to kill me.)

(I wonder what you would have thought if that behavior had caused your end. What would've been your thoughts in your last moments?)

(A lot of cursing, I would guess.)

(How very human. As for your unfortunate colleague, what can I say? Desperation draws people into desperate acts. Foolish ones. The sort that leads one to try their hand at playing every side at once, and in doing so, ensures that they inevitably stumble.)

(Sounds about right. So he was working with us to use the threat of our presence to shake a better deal out of you, while reducing our numbers to get better rewards, all the while planning to screw you over in the end, finish the quest, and maybe even reduce the numbers further?)

(What a simple and direct way to put it.)

I turn the other way to place the spider-giraffe's head out of view and face the patch of trees that seems to stretch about half a mile into the distance. Somewhere, I even hear the sound of a waterfall, and note the artificial wind blowing through the area, carrying either the scent from the flowers or from a hidden scent dispenser.

Something activates in the ceiling, and a liquid starts dripping from it.

I push my mind into overdrive and examine it. After confirming it a few times, I stay where I am and make no move to dodge it.

The liquid doesn't turn out to be acid, nor is it poison. It's just water, artificial rain. Even the scent changes to that of the ground after rain, and the sound of droplets falling on the leaves of the trees fills the room.

My hair gets wet as the rain pours down on me, and I comb it back with my fingers, flicking the water away from my forehead.

(What a dick move,) I send.

With a hidden sense of humor and amusement, the elf answers, (So then, what is your plan, candidate for Greed's weapon?)

(There are a few, but in the end, it comes down to who ends up stronger, who can improvise better, and who can push themselves further without breaking.)

(I will allow myself to disagree.)

(That's fine. So your goal is to go to E-3 and collect the Fragment of the First Star in your pristine cage?)

(Indeed.)

(I am a bit confused here. Apparently, the Fragment destroyed an entire planet. But at the same time, it could be held by someone who hadn't even reached the rank of Champion. Also, there's the matter of an item at pristine rank, suitable for someone at the level of a weak to average Champion, has no problem trapping said Fragment. Champions usually top out at the level of continental destruction, only growing stronger with the help of items or by sacrificing their lives, while Absolutes are planetary destruction. This Fragment seems to be at the planetary destruction level.)

And the elf who likes to hear his own voice, at least the replica as it is at this level, answers with the same amusement, which implies that he's looking down on me without seeing me as a valid opponent.

(The more powerful Fragments, such as the Fragment of the First Star, are not as simple as you might believe. Some planets are far more fragile than others, especially those that have never experienced a Pairing. And after burning for centuries, the Fragment on E-3 has weakened, just enough that even a Low Pristine item could contain it.)

(Lies.)

This time, he laughs softly, very shortly, and quietly. (There are other preparations I have made, ones that will aid me in containing it. That, however, is not something you need to hear about. As for the rest...)

The doors behind me open with a hiss.

I comb my hair with my fingers, sweeping it back over my scalp, and turn toward the replica of the last elf, but even now, I do not see his body. Instead, he's clad in an angular suit, made up of rigid panels of a golden metal that catches the light like a polished suit of armor. The heavy helmet tapers forward into a narrow, slit-like visor, leaving only a thin line for him to see through. Every surface gleams with heat-reflective plating, giving it an uncanny presence.

"I have made my preparations, so there is nothing more to discuss," the somewhat muffled voice says, and the artificial rain stops.

Chapter 675: The Replica

Weapons of Mass Destruction

Unlike our conversations over the telepathic link, he doesn't monologue anymore and proceeds to immediately attack. He moves surprisingly quickly in that bulky golden suit.

My kinetic attacks crash against it without it as much as registering the attack. My concentrated stream of golden thermal energy blazes across the surface, but barely seems to do anything, just scorching the air around it, causing it to waver around the suit.

As he moves around, a green light seeps out of him as he draws inscriptions in the air.

As my eyes activate, he does something else to overwhelm them, clearly prepared for my trait as well. But this time I am ready too, it would be weird if I wasn't after so many people have tried to abuse it and overwhelm my trait with information.

The part of my mind that I dedicated to using Mana Wavelength Iris shuts off, but another replaces it while another, smaller part observes the methods he's using to overwhelm it and records it for reference. When that mind shuts off as well, another replaces it, that smaller part already has the information collected and begins modifying a replacement.

Even with how quickly the elf moves to draw, I observe the inscriptions, countering the effects. Most of them are wide-range attacks, meant to punish my comparatively low constitution while dealing with my quick, confusing movements.

When I try to teleport, the activation fails. I detect the inscriptions he's drawn behind his back to do so, then begin deciphering and countering them.

[Empyrean Lance] materializes, but as I shoot it at him, the chestplate of his armor opens and sucks it in in a blue whirlpool that redirects it there. A blender-like noise erupts, and exhaust-like pipes on his waist violently spit out black smoke in which the remains of the lance flicker. The opening in the chest closes as quickly as it appeared, yet there is damage. By my estimate, he can manage it only a few more times.

Another of his wide range attacks activates again, making my mana sluggish and corroding the projectiles I've stacked around me. Another sends a cutting wind my way. At which point it proceeds to follow me, by means of what I believe is a mark stealthily placed on me.

The barrage is relentless, and he counters most of my abilities. Kinetic energy is absorbed by the golden suit, thermal energy just heats the air around it. Projectiles are disrupted. Teleportation is blocked.

I sense movement as two gilded monsters break free of the forest behind me, a gorilla-like one with pincers instead of hands, moving on four legs, and a praying mantis thrice my height. Both of which are entirely gray with golden halos over their heads.

I push through the disruption in the area and activate a set of arrays stored in my mind inspired by Maya. A dark blue suit of armor surrounds me, darker blue than ever before, as I push it further with [Manifestation], affecting whatever parts I'm knowledgeable enough to create with the skill.

Surprisingly, it is not the gorilla that crashes into me, but the praying mantis. It moves blindingly fast, cuts a few times, smoothly snapping through the armor, and almost through my body, that I just manage to shift at the last moment. For its height, it moves very nimbly on its many legs. And I can't help but admire the elegance of its movements.

More mana seeps out of me even as a barrage of attacks from the elf in golden armor hits my back, and I send kinetic energy through the armor to attack the mantis.

It avoids them, jumping to the side just as the gorilla shuts its pincers and a sonic boom echoes through the garden. The trees in the way evaporate into nothingness, and the shockwave slams into me, obliterating the armor in front of me before hurling my body through the air, bouncing me across the ground.

I absorb my momentum, freezing midair. Where I would have landed, the mantis appears, slashing through. I use kinetic energy to push myself along the ground, then unleash Wraith Dance.

Another wide range attack from the elf shakes the area where I stood, this time incorporating vibrations tuned to disrupt my kinetic energy based movements.

A healing mark from Lily restores my body just as I reach the gorilla, but at the last second, I change my direction as the second pincer shuts and explodes everything in front of it. Unfortunately, it does not hit the mantis behind me, which still dodges every bit as swiftly as before.

I use [Manifestation] and a single, extremely simple sword forms in my hand. It is almost like the design of a wooden sword you might buy for a child. Still pale blue but with an unearthly shine to it.

I lift it and deflect the claw of the mantis's scythe-like foreleg. The kinetic energy of the attack flows through me, all absorbed and easily channeled, preventing the attack from moving me at all. The sword doesn't even crack as I block an attack from a much larger and physically stronger monster.

[Manifestation - lvl 7 > Manifestation - lvl 8]

Before the mantis can strike again, the last elf's attack strikes it. In a blink, the gilded monster's body bulges, cracks, then bursts open.

[You have defeated Gilded Severis - lvl 379]

[Lvl 327 > Lvl 328]

The last elf makes an attempt to block my movement, but I push through with my sheer mastery of kinetic energy and use Wraith Dance to escape.

When the mantis explodes, everything around it gets covered in a gray liquid that melts through everything in its path. It even destroys the metal floor and drops down, eating into the rock in the big area. The liquid clings to the manifested armor around my body. I drop the affected pieces to the ground, where they continue to corrode as the liquid eats through them and the floor beneath.

An alarm starts to ring. Additional metal plates seal over the already closed doors. The metal around the holes in the floor begins to melt, flowing to seal them.

The sword in my arm dissipates, and the mana it once contained manifests into a hexagonal segment of the barrier I use to block a combined force from both of the gorilla's pincers snapping closed at the same time. The shockwave from that strikes my shield, then ricochets outward, uprooting trees throughout the area.

[Eclipse] drains the colors from the area, making the shimmering pale blue of mana even more striking. The sounds I hear fade into a distant murmur. The smells disappear, even the flashing of the light becomes muted, and I combine multiple parts of my mind.

The restricting array the elf put around me shatters under my gaze, as a golden circle flares around my pupils, and a single [Empyrean Lance] shoots forth, boosted by kinetic energy at a speed much faster than the gorilla could ever hope to move. It pierces its chest, then continues forward into the wall behind it, through that, and out of the base.

The distant sound of an alarm intensifies. Where I struck and pierced the metal wall, the surrounding segments begin to melt, and inscriptions dance as they work to close the hole.

[You have defeated Gilded Bruteclaw - lvl 368]

[Lvl 328 > Lvl 329]

My Ley Lines stretch through the area, and even as a few snap with the last elf's actions, I use the ones remaining to move around, avoiding his attacks as I make my approach.

When I get there, he just stands there unmoving.

My [Empyrean Lance] pierces the head, and the armor reveals its interior. Its arms extend and swiftly move to coil around me, holding me in place as it explodes, releasing all the thermal, kinetic energy, and mana it's stored.

I don't even make a move to escape.

Standing there, I absorb all that heat and kinetic energy back into my body. A small black orb forms in front of my chest and absorbs all that mana, hungrily drawing it inside.

When it is all gone, I move the black orb over the top of my head. It spins and expands into the shape of a black halo, not all that different from the golden ones the gilded monsters have.

And for the first time, I face the replica of the last elf who had left the armor before he set it to trap me and explode.

"I thought you would be stronger," I say to him.

The last elf looks like a man in his mid twenties. Bright orange long hair combines with his perfectly shaped face and piercing dark blue eyes.

He is beautiful in a way that feels wrong, an unsettling kind of beauty that makes my skin crawl. You can tell instantly that such a person should not exist. His face and features are impossibly perfect, carrying an otherworldly beauty that feels as unnatural as it is flawless, like a divine being, sculpted without a single flaw. He looks like an angel sent down to earth not to save it, but to cleanse it of the human race.

Or maybe it is because of his expression, which looks almost dead and empty, with a hint of cold amusement. There's not a speck of fear in him.

Lastly, he has those pointed ears. They are not overly long like some depictions, but of moderate length, angled to the side. Though they are perfectly shaped and sharply defined, as if crafted with the same impossible precision as the rest of him.

"Yo," I greet him, "I thought you guys only showed yourselves if you believed you were capable of surviving or killing your opponent."

He moves with the confidence and elegance I would expect from someone with his face. Wearing a simple white loose shirt, partially unbuttoned at the neck, and black pants, he takes a few steps closer.

"Sometimes, when our available resources are not enough to test our target, one of us appears to gather more information for the others," he says.

"So you're just a sacrificial lamb to make me reveal more of my abilities?"

"Indeed."

"Did you guys draw lots?" I ask, letting him come close, just within arm's reach.

He's taller than I am, and as cold as his perfect face is, it is easier to read his expression now. There's still the faintest trace of superior amusement in it, just as I heard in our conversations.

His arm stretches out, and with the tip of his finger, he carefully touches the black halo floating above my head. As he does, I notice there is not even a speck of mana left inside his body.

"I am not even joking, but I swear I will let you live if you tell me its name," I tell him.

The replica of the last elf lowers his head, and a strand of orange hair falls across his dark blue eyes.

A second passes as I face his gaze.

Then he laughs.

He laughs as if it is the funniest thing he's ever heard.

His arm moves, fingers pressed together. I notice a shine of mana forming around it, shaping a sharp barrier as he thrusts his hand toward my eyes.

I realize he has somehow stolen a fragment of mana from the black halo.

My body moves faster than his. My palm slams into his chest, kinetic energy drilling a hole through his heart and bursting out his back.

He staggers before finishing his attack, then collapses to the floor.

Looking at his body, I feel something close to a sense of loss as I watch the light fade from his eyes.

[You have defeated Replica of the Last Elf - lvl 101]

He's much lower level than I would've expected. If the other replicas are the same, then they just sent us to kill someone more than 200 levels below any of us.

I know level isn't everything, and I've seen that proven so many times before, but the number still pokes at my pride. I have not been paying all that much attention to the halo above my head, but... how did he manage it, especially at such a low level?

The conclusion is the same as always: I still have a long road ahead of me, but I don't think I'd have it any other way.

Chapter 676: The Containment Protocol

I could probably say more about my time here in the base, but the days are impossible to track without the system's countdown for this beyond quest.

As interesting as the first few days were, the ones that follow are fairly boring. There are a few more attempts to eject me into outer space, along with a few attempts at poisoning me, and encounters with man-eating fauna, including a parade of gilded monsters.

There was even an attempt to cook me alive when I was moving through one of the rooms with a glass wall, and the local star appeared in the distance. The replicas somehow turned the glass into a magnifying lens and concentrated the light into a thin beam that melted half my body before I managed to defend against it.

Another fun one was when metal particles started shedding from the walls of the room I was examining. Over time, I breathed them in without noticing. Then they attempted to solidify inside my body.

Oh, and I can't forget a few simple, but very effective, traps. The replicas left interesting items scattered all over the place, making them explode whenever I tried to examine them, no matter how sure I was they shouldn't be able to. Just by using some weird vibrations, frequencies, or radiation, the replicas caused explosions in otherwise normal or even solid-looking items.

But as exotic as these attempts are, they're all but useless against me.

With one and a half seals on the Ignition Heart lifted and my passive feeding on the generated thermal energy, my body restores itself quickly. My hearts and brain are kept in a barrier at all times, not to mention the other defenses I've built to keep them safe.

My body might not be the most durable, but damn, I am a tough bastard to kill.

Plus, there's still my "fuck you and this base" card.

The last elf can't be very happy with having to constantly patch the holes my lance has caused, so damn, I love that thing.

But in the end, even I can see that these attempts on my life are not as serious as they might seem. They only serve to gauge my abilities, observe my healing, and study my defenses in preparation for the true attempt at killing me.

The replica I met said as much as it died, having no problem sacrificing itself just to gain more insight. The last elf is not combat-oriented, but he is an extremely inventive jerk when his replicas haven't reached a high enough level to face their target directly.

I think it is a good thing these replicas only unlock their memories as they level up, likely as a result of a limitation in his [Replication] skill. If they had all his memories and knowledge from the start, I think with some resources, even a clone closer to level 200 would be enough to threaten me. Not as oppressively and easily as Lissandra could, but still.

Anyway, no one likes that guy. After my days here and with around five hours remaining, I glance over my level and stats.

Lvl 333

Strength: 274

Dexterity: 261

Constitution: 466

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1705 + 1705

My strength, constitution, and dexterity have continued growing, even now, as I make careful use of my Burden Enhancement Inscriptions and Restrictive Training Emblem.

Some might call it madness, but they would be wrong. My stats keep going up, so who are they to disagree?

At last, my mana has broken into the 1700s.

It is a good thing.

With my Reservoir, that is a shitload of mana, but nothing I can't handle. At this point, my body is a well-oiled machine, running on a ton of mana and a questionable degree of optimism.

My skills are also rising nicely, with most of them gaining a level or two, and [Manifestation] hitting its first bottleneck.

Active skills (8/10):

Focus - Lvl 68

Perception - Lvl 66

Redistribution - Lvl 67

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 68

Ley Line - Lvl 59

The narrative has been taken without permission. Report any sightings.

Eclipse (Pride) - Lvl 42

Empyrean Lance - Lvl 27

Manifestation - Lvl 9

It has been quite a while since I freed up two active skill slots, and they have stayed free thanks to my deliberate choice. I have decided not to experiment too much with getting new skills until I know exactly what I want.

There are some I would prefer to have, while I am hoping for one that would help me with my mental abilities—like splitting my mind, thought acceleration, and the new mental exercises I've continued to do even now.

But even without that, the grind never stops. There are already new problems being caused by my constructs, so I have to divert more of my attention to fixing what I can and monitoring what I can't. It is a careful balance of fixing some stuff, while creating new fuckups that I inevitably have to fix again, and then getting screwed over by things like stronger active skills making slight changes to my body, my stats causing imbalances, or a slightly relaxed seal on my Ignition Heart.

That kind of stuff. It keeps screwing up the balance. I fix it, and then it screws itself up again just to spite me. A truly neverending cycle, like a snake eating its own tail and pretending it has no other option.

As the hours tick down, I start to wonder how the others are faring. Mostly Tacita. As for Io, I think he might be dead by now. I just can't imagine a scenario where he could actually be able to face her. Maybe he could survive if the elf locked him up somewhere in an isolated room, but that is probably all the thylarin can do.

That gray man should still be around somewhere as well, since I haven't actually seen him die, but to be honest, I don't really care about him all that much.

Oh, and Malika, of course. There is a fifty-fifty chance she is either still alive and throwing herself into every fight or dead at the first trap she came across. I still do not know what to think about her.

Dealing with Malika reminds me of my first minion. I hope she's doing well enough that she doesn't grow up to be like her. As her master and with her as my disciple, I still have that token that should let me communicate with her. I could use it once I finish this quest and sort out a few things.

I want to poke her tiny, pointy horns.

At least after all this time here, I have this place mostly mapped. A poor part of my mind, I lovingly named Mapthaniel, is currently running at all times with a single target - to keep a mental map of this place alive so I do not have to.

Using kinetic energy, thermal senses, and everything else I could, I mapped out what I could. Now, I head toward its front, where I think I can find the remaining replicas, with all of them likely very well prepared for me. The words that when the last elf shows himself to you, it is usually because he thinks he can kill you, come to my mind. If that does not sound like a clear challenge, I do not know what does.

But as I reach one of the thicker, more important doors, I stop, taking a few steps back.

I check with Mapthaniel again, and there should be a door on my left side, since there is a room there.

But there is no door.

As many times before, I release one and a half seals on my ignition heart, using a laser stream of thermal energy to start melting the surface. I narrow it even further, continuing for fifteen minutes until I feel a change in pressure. Instead of melting rock, the stream suddenly shoots ahead.

Then I stop and send [Ley Line] through the hole, teleporting inside with my defenses ready. I've fallen into similar traps too many times before not to be careful. But this time, there's nothing like that. Instead, I find a dead teleportation array on the ground and a single huge panel on the wall.

One of my thermal cubes floats up and, without me even realizing it, turns into the version that gives off light with sounds similar to a crackling fireplace.

Realizing it, I shake my head and swiftly change the mode, converting it into a normal cube to light the small room.

The teleportation array is dead even as I examine it. I realize it has been like that for a long time, there are pieces missing, likely scrapped for materials to use somewhere else. But the panel is still working even though it has no power at all.

Multiple threads of mana surround me as I start connecting to the surface and nodes under the panel. I modify the frequency of my mana to match the mana crystals placed inside, all with my Mana Wavelength Iris activated. Then I start powering it up.

Right away, something makes an attempt to cut off my connection, but I track these attempts through the walls. When I locate the source and the nodes deep inside the pathways leading here, I form a lance, shoot it through the wall, and destroy one. Then repeat the process three times, destroying three of the possible access points and cutting off access to the replicas.

Each lance pierces the stone and metal like it's nothing, then shoots out of the asteroid, probably on its way to lay the smackdown on some unsuspecting UFO. I honestly have no idea how far it will travel without any air resistance.

Then the base obviously starts patching itself up.

Just in case, I move the black halo from its place over my head and form it into a simple arrow-like projectile. Remembering how the replica stole mana from it, I pour the entirety of the mana from my Reservoir into the black projectile, making it more unstable and harder for him to interfere with. The projectile eats it all, as always, without slowing even for a moment.

When it starts reaching toward me for more, I launch it through the walls toward the place I think the replicas have hidden themselves.

Dozens of alarms activate, the base shakes noticeably, thrusters fire, then cut off as the structure changes direction. It seems I've already caused some trouble. I imagine the black projectile appearing in the middle of the room, possibly lodging itself in one of the control pillars or panels, as multiple replicas start rushing around in panic to get rid of it.

That should entertain them for a while.

Then I return to one of the base protocols I noticed earlier, something called The Fragment Containment Protocol. It includes dozens of sequences intended to activate one after another when the time comes to use the Pristine Cage I still have in my possession. Just as I suspected, the cage alone is not enough, and the entire base has been made from materials that should aid in the process.

I delve deeper to activate some of the sequences manually, but a warning tone rings in my ears. The engines fail me whenever I call on them, and so do the inscriptions etched deep into the evil lair of the pettiest elf in existence.

I spend the next few minutes creating [Empyrean Lance]s and shooting them through the wall toward where I estimate the control center is. I fire enough of them that I have to make myself stop before my mana drops further. The skill consumes a lot, but with the incredible piercing power it has, I'm not exactly surprised.

Afterward, I try to get into the system again, only to disappointingly meet the same result, with warnings beeping as I try to activate the sequences.

I check the timer and allow myself a minute to think.

Then I shrug.

It seems I'll just have to cut the base in half, separating it from the replicas, so I can take over. Even though it will be more dangerous to contain the Fragment, the protocols seem like they'll still work even with a smaller piece of the base. Half should still be enough.

I fire off another lance and send a mark through the hole to exit into outer space. Then, as the time limit runs down, I move to destroy the engines, push us closer toward the planet, and set up the charges that will split the base.

Chapter 677: A World on Fire

I considered it for a few seconds and came to the smartest possible decision in the current situation. As much as I think there is to gain from meeting more replicas and killing them to improve the quest's rewards, I still keep coming to the same conclusion.

How the hell could that even compare to getting my grubby little hands on the Fragment below?

Do these elves think I'm the sort of dumb fool who'll just run straight at them after they spent seven days straight preparing to kill me?

I mean... I still want to... but maybe next time.

So as the base splits into two, the piece I am on starts falling toward the planet. I checked it properly, and I'm pretty sure I'm alone here, leaving the rest of my colleagues back on the other half.

I watch as the other piece uses its thrusters to keep itself in orbit. At the same moment, more of that metal melts, covering the holes I've created and blocking my view into the base.

There is no question that I would love to have a face-to-face talk with Io and find out how much I'd need to twist his neck before it snapped, if he's still alive. I would also like to see the face of that gray asshole, if he's managed to survive. But damn, I'm just too curious about the Fragment to pay them much attention. I just separate a small part of my mind that I lovingly name Assholethaniel to do the mental trash talking, which makes me feel better right away.

While the base around me shakes, I keep checking the timer tracking the end of the quest, and my bearing through the panel in front of me.

I can't really do much except rely on the calculations the last elf made and watch the trajectory while feeling the vibrations as the base tries to hold on. I could probably try to absorb the kinetic energy of the entire base, but at the speed it's falling and with all the mass it contains, something in the back of my mind tells me that would be a bad idea.

At least this plan seems to be working well, as expected of the most smelly elf in existence. Even with only half of the base, it manages to change trajectory, deal with missing parts, force out propulsion, and follow the protocols that guide it to the Fragment's location.

This is going suspiciously well...

I surround myself with as many layers of mana barriers as possible, infusing them with thermal and kinetic energy to absorb the heat and the impact.

The base explodes around me, breaking apart into dozens of massive chunks and hundreds of pieces the size of cars and buses. All of that, along with myself, continues its fall to the surface.

Two golden suits nearly the same as the one I saw before appear among the debris and charge to attack me, one of them riding a lizard-like gilded monster with six legs and two heads. Unlike the last time, these suits also have glowing blue inscriptions peaking out through the gold plating.

Either the replicas triggered a self-destruct protocol from the section of the base still in orbit, or it's been set off by the two replicas on this section that I've somehow missed.

How petty of him to destroy it, and with it an aid that would've helped me collect the Fragment.

Using kinetic energy, I move behind one of the huge chunks of debris, which explodes as the two heads of the lizard both shoot orange lasers at the same time, one from each eye.

I absorb the momentum of the debris in front of me to hold them in place, then send bursts of kinetic energy their way, launching them like shotgun pellets toward the lizard and the elf in golden armor riding it.

The lizard darts forward, leaping from one piece of debris to the next with incredible agility.

Even now, we continue to fall toward the surface, speeding up the closer we get to the burning planet.

My body moves, almost on its own, as I sense mana building up, while the place where I stood is struck by a barrage of nearly invisible cutting attacks. They carve deep holes into the side of one of the larger pieces. So I continue to zip around, flying here and there, moving between bigger and smaller pieces, using them as footholds and launching them at my opponents.

At this point, I'm not even taking the fight seriously because I have a much bigger problem. Most of my mind is focused on modifying one of the arrays I've been keeping stored in the back of my mind.

To keep the replicas from getting too cocky, I fire an [Empyrean Lance] or two in their direction while making sure I still have the Low Pristine cage on me. As much as it might not actually help, and despite the fact that it'll probably end up being unable to hold the awakened Fragment without the base and its protocols supporting it, I still have a plan.

The planet below us fills more of my view, and the falling debris starts creating bright streaks of flames as it plunges downward. Smaller pieces start breaking apart under the stress of the heat, splitting into even smaller fragments.

I dedicate a part of my mind to creating and maintaining a lightly pointed barrier in front of me, absorbing the heat being generated around it. Gradually, the air resistance builds back up, and the sense of weightlessness disappears. And the entire time, I continue to burn through the healing marks Lily left me, still having plenty of them left.

Out of nowhere, intense shockwaves surge through the air, created by the explosion of one of the larger chunks of the base, pushing the smaller pieces farther out of the way, while creating an even bigger field of debris. The pieces with weird shapes start twisting, spinning, and changing direction as they tumble unpredictably. One of them crashes into the piece where the lizard and the elf are standing, and both of them are sent flying through the air.

The lizard is already burned to a crisp, but the elf in the golden suit seems completely fine. Before they can reposition properly, my lance pierces both of them.

[You have defeated Gilded Scintilizard - lvl 381]

[You have defeated Replica of the Last Elf - lvl 102]

[Lvl 333 > Lvl 334]

The remaining elf tries to use that distraction, but the chunk of the base he's been standing on explodes as I teleport one of my tricolored orbs there through a [Ley Line], and he finds himself being hurled

through the air, spinning wildly as he shoots off in another direction, moving faster than I toward the planet.

A case of theft: this story is not rightfully on Amazon; if you spot it, report the violation.

I give it a few moments to see if he uses some sort of propulsion or item to head back toward me, but nothing like that happens. He spins, continuing to plunge downward uncontrollably.

The remaining pieces around me start glowing even more, and tails of the superheated material trail behind them, something I probably should have learned about in school.

I push myself toward the piece I was on when it all started. The panel where I was watching the trajectory and reaction is still here, though of course it's not working. A burst of kinetic energy I create pushes it away from me. I continue strengthening the barrier around me while slowing myself down.

The debris beneath me streaks toward the planet like a rain of fire, crashing into each other and breaking into more fragments that almost instantly evaporate.

I halt my movement once I decide I am low enough, then float in place.

A new suit of armor I've been working on forms around me. It is not much different from the one I usually use, but it is bulkier and at least partially inspired by what the last elf was doing. Of course, the effect of my subclass still refuses to allow it to be ugly, so some shapes change automatically to make it more visually pleasing while retaining the simple design.

The timer tells me there's only five minutes remaining when I finally boost myself toward the area I sense emitting the highest concentration of heat.

Somewhere below me, the first pieces of debris slam into the planet and send another shockwave roaring through the air, in a blast I can feel even up here. The temperature keeps climbing, and when I pass beneath the clouds of smoke, lit from below by the flames burning on the surface, I finally see the planet itself.

A molten wasteland stretches as far as I can see, with patches of solidified stone that only wait to be melted. The air itself feels like it is burning, and something like a powerful wind coming from the Fragment's location keeps sending twisting lines of flame spiraling through the air. It is just like one of those close-up videos from the surface of the sun.

I head straight toward it with complete confidence that I should be able to endure it for a few minutes at least.

[You have defeated Replica of the Last Elf - lvl 104]

Getting the notification surprises me. I would've expected him to survive longer with that suit on.

The wind-like pressure keeps pushing against me, forcing me to use more strength. It becomes so unstable, and there are so many wisps of flame cutting through my armor, that I'm eventually forced to land. And as I get closer, I continue forward on foot.

The armor around me expands to create larger buffer zones as the heat rises. I keep channeling that heat, absorbing it, moving it through my body and armor, then releasing it out of my back to shed and use it as propulsion to move faster.

Barely a minute remains, and I attempt to speed up.

[Redistribution - lvl 67 > Redistribution - lvl 68]

I let my mana manifest to create a pale blue hexagonal shining barrier segment in front of me, but it starts melting immediately, even as I keep remanifesting it, attempting to stack more layers. Whips of flame lash against it, cutting through and melting it, but I keep pushing through.

[Manifestation - lvl 9 > Manifestation - lvl 10]

[Focus - lvl 68 > Focus - lvl 69]

A bigger flare explodes toward me. My fragmented minds all connect and go into overdrive, trying to absorb as much heat as I can. I take it all into my body, where it swirls, trying to free itself from my control, bouncing inside until it can destroy me. My heart, even without me doing anything, speeds up. I can hear it pounding in my ears.

Ba dum. Ba dum. Ba dum.

A constant rhythm of heartbeats, strong enough to shake the world, is nearly drowned out by the screaming flames around me. Then I realize I am screaming too, from the pain and the pure thermal energy flooding my body. My passive healing struggles to keep up and feels ready to fail at any moment. Thermal energy keeps combusting under my skin, restoring the bits that burn away, but there's far too much of it. I grab some of the energy I gather, gather it, and move to push it out.

[Redistribution - lvl 68 > Redistribution - lvl 69]

I take all that bouncing energy inside my body and channel it through me, detonating it behind my back.

Congratulations, you have acquired a new skill!

[Accumulation]

[Accumulation - Level 0 > Accumulation - Level 9]

[Redistribution - lvl 69 > Redistribution - lvl 70]

It launches me forward through flames. Even with all my defenses, the heat melts the skin from my body and chews into my flesh. The sheer magnitude of the temperatures here makes my passive combust constantly, sending healing bursts through me. I start using two healing marks from Lily at a time whenever the flames begin to damage anything important.

Then I see it.

The Fragment of the First Star.

Not floating in the air or lying on the ground, but glowing, just behind the forehead of the velnar's kneeling body. His form barely resembles a living being, having been reduced to a charred statue.

When I lift the Pristine item, I notice its surface is already starting to melt. I open the cage and shove my hand into what remains of the velnar to grab the Fragment. The charred figure crumbles. As I draw my arm back to place the Fragment in the cage, I realize my hand is gone, burned away, and disintegrated up to the elbow.

The Fragment lies on the ground. It looks like a pinkie-long transparent pale orange crystal with orange and white flames dancing inside it, surrounding a core hotter than anything I've ever seen.

I collapse weakly to my knees, my movements sluggish and awkward. I press the cage into the dirt and scrape earth over the Fragment to force it inside. It takes a few tries, but once it is in, I slam it shut.

As if someone flipped a switch, the heat from the Fragment vanishes everywhere except my immediate surroundings. It is still enough to turn me to ash in minutes, but after what just happened, it feels like a cool breeze in summer.

Then the cage starts melting from the inside.

I watch it and glance at the timer, morbidly curious about which will happen first: the fragment melting through and killing me, or the quest duration running out.

In the end, I'm lucky. The timer ticks just as the cage begins to break, and I feel myself pulled away, reappearing in my handler's room. The pristine cage floats in the air near me, but the Fragment inside is calm, unmoving, almost as if it were afraid of upsetting the being in this room.

My handler sits behind her table, red hair, yellow eyes, not bothering with pretending to be someone else.

I stand while turning my back to her, activating my last few healing marks to restore my body, and using my passive too. It takes a few long minutes, during which neither of us speaks, but slowly my body repairs itself. It is far too quick for the wounds I had, so I'm pretty sure she's helping somehow, though I don't say it out loud.

Only then do I slowly realize I'm butt naked.

Before turning around, I weave a rough pair of mana pants, just enough for now. Then I make a manabloc chair and weakly sink into it, sitting across from her. I can't remember the last time I felt this drained. My head throbs with a dull ringing, but at the same time, I'm calm. As if every emotion had already burned itself out.

"Hello, my dear, favourite handler. My most favourite, even."

"What in the unholy fuck is your problem?"

Chapter 678: Pay up

"Can I get some proper clothes?" I ask very politely, hoping my suspicion about how she will answer is wrong.

"It was all set so simply that even your little brain should understand. You go there, gather all the information you love so much but can't seem to get in the tutorial, steal everything not bolted to the floor or carve it out along with the floor itself, maybe even learn something from the pointy-eared fuck, kill him, then leave. Congratulations. You've become stronger, your Beyond rank has increased, and I can finally send you on the Beyond quests I want, plus have you take part in all the events you couldn't before. All while there are millions of ways for you to die during this quest, since otherwise you would just sit in the corner sulking like the petty little bitch you are."

"So, no pants?"

"No pants," she confirms, her face settling back into a calm expression as she lets out one long sigh.

Her chair gives a faint creak as she leans back, eyes drifting past me toward the nebula horizon. I follow her gaze, half expecting some new spectacle, but it's the same endless swirl of colors, slow and heavy like thick smoke rolling through water.

The wood of her table has been darkened and scarred with grooves that cut deep into the grain. There's a box on the far side, crammed with mana stones. The light inside them isn't still, it moves in slow spirals.

"Don't touch those," she says without looking at me.

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"You would, and it would end badly."

"You'd die."

"Quickly?"

"Not quickly enough."

I glance back at the stone. The light inside swirls faster when I stare at it. My hand twitches, but I hold myself back. I'm almost proud of myself.

"Who made it out? And what rank did I get?" I ask.

My handler tears her eyes away from the partially melted cage, the fragment inside it, and looks at me.

"If I hadn't stopped it, the fragment would have melted through and killed you."

"I know."

"If I hadn't brought you here before returning you to the 3rd floor, it would have exploded and killed tens of thousands of attendees and locals before any of the stronger ones stopped it."

“Possibly. But it happened before, when you stole...”

“I sold it and gave you a big cut.”

“... when you stole that white sand from me. So I expected the same thing now. Honestly, I had hoped to unawaken the fragment like the elf planned and store it, but he was super petty and ruined my plan. The cage got damaged in the process, but I think that much is fine. The fragment will be worth more than some low pristine item.”

“Much more. I have seen bigger ones, but this is unusually large. But it’ll need some recharging after burning for so long.”

“What the hell is the 13th floor for that velnar to have even been able to get it?”

“Can’t tell.”

“Of course you can’t. So who made it out?”

“Surprisingly, Io, your skittish friend, and the demon. Only Rendy died. Also, congratulations on becoming an A rank, one of the youngest ever, with the rare jump from C straight to A. Don’t ask me how. The system decides that on its own, using its own weird metrics. I still have no idea how you didn’t rise to B rank after killing the Harvester. But don’t get too big headed, you’re still at the bottom tier of A rank.” She waves her hand, and on the back of mine a new letter glows for a moment before fading away, a shimmering silver A.

“Rendy who?”

She sighs. “The gray one.”

“Ohhh. How did he die?”

“It was kind of... brutal, but also pathetic. His handler’s a decent guy, so I’ll keep that to myself.”

That only makes me more curious. Maybe I could use my information allowance to ask about it?

I push the thought away. "I want to kill Io."

"You'll get a chance when you reach the 5th floor."

"Okay, I'm surprised you guys are so chill about him cooperating with the elf."

"In the eyes of the Rulers, it is not much different from the things you've done. There were times when everyone who even came into contact with the elf without immediately killing him was... removed."

"Ehm, how about we change the subject?"

"Sure." She leans back, arms crossed over her chest. Her posture tells me she is leaving the choice to me. She doesn't bring up the information I learned from the elf, and I feel no need to mention it.

"So, about this," I point at the trapped fragment floating there.

There is no visible barrier, but all of its heat is perfectly contained. It does not damage the cage any further.

"Want me to hold on to it and give it back when you return to Earth?" She asks.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Are you sure? Where is your pride? I bet you could channel all of it."

"Would you unawaken it for me?"

“No.”

“Yeah, I don’t feel like burning down my planet.”

“Why burning? I bet you would improve enough by then to channel it all.” She repeats.

“No fucking way. That thing, as it is now, could probably kill a weaker Champion. Maybe not instantly, but it would overwhelm them until they couldn’t contain it.”

“It would. But you still endured it for a few moments. Come on, accept my offer, you worked so hard for this fragment.”

“All my healing marks are gone, and I used everything I had to endure a few seconds around it. No, thank you. As much as I would fucking love it, and even though I will be getting much stronger and could get some help with the preparations and... hmm... maybe I should.”

“You should not. You would fucking die.”

“I guess,” I sigh.

Even now, I feel severely disappointed. Terribly disappointed. Very strongly disappointed. I want this fragment. But I also feel it in my bones, I would die. If it were unawakened, like it was for that velnar who got it, I would take it without hesitation and learn from his mistakes. But awakened? I would burn, and take Earth with me.

Thankfully, I can look for it on the 13th floor. If that thing is there, and I can only imagine there’ll be even better stuff.

“I’ll be taking it then,” my handler says.

“What do I get?”

“Nothing.”

“I refuse then,” I answer, and she halts. “You either pay up or I will take it with me to the Beyond.”

“Just give up on the Fragment, it will make things easier.”

“For you, maybe. Pay up.”

“I won’t.”

“Then I will keep it.”

“Listen here...”

“You can’t just take it away from me without me agreeing. So either pay up or I take it to Beyond.”

“Do you really think you can blackmail me?”

“A little.”

“I can still let you reach the Beyond, wait for it to kill you, step in to stop it before it can hurt anyone else, and take it from there. The longer I spend talking to you, the bigger a fan I am of that option.”

“You can’t do that,” I answer, though I’m not as confident as before. I’m strongly relying on there being rules limiting that kind of interference.

There is a long pause. Just as I start to get nervous, I remind myself—she can’t do that, right?

"Two million shards, and I know Diligence is already going to complain. You could have gotten much more for the item, but nooo, you had to be smart, and damage the cage," she says through her teeth at last.

"HA! No fucking way." My confidence returns instantly as I feel her moment of weakness.

"That cage is already too damaged, so don't expect anything close to ten million..." she starts, but I cut her off.

"Low pristine items are worth ten million shards?"

"They start around that price, but you shouldn't be expecting anything close. If you're lucky, you might be able to sell it for about five million shards to a top-ten guild, one of the top three merchants, or a powerful local on the fifth floor."

"Sounds terrible, but I could live with that."

"If it weren't damaged. Now it's worth one to three million at most, mostly for the materials."

"The real prize is the fragment. That beautiful little thing is worth much, much more."

"That thing melted your face off."

"I love it like my own child."

"You damn, stubborn dumbass." She groans and waves her hand, summoning a bottle and two wineglasses. The bottle is beautiful, like a brilliant diamond cut into a stunning shape, with a small amount of red-colored alcohol inside.

She pours it into both glasses and slides one toward me. This time, she does not seem to be in a hurry, nor does she seem concerned about my time limit here.

I take the glass and sip. As expected, it tastes just like the alchemical wine Ruby poured me on the 2nd floor.

For the next few minutes, we continue to take small sips out of it, as I allow memories to swirl inside my mind.

To me, it looks like she's only pretending to try to scam me out of my rewards. I suspect that she's only acting like she's annoyed, and deep down, she is pleased with how things turned out.

"What are you plotting?" I ask her.

"Nothing," she answers shamelessly while taking another sip. "According to the rules, the simplest way to deal with this Fragment gained out of the tutorial is to give it to you after your tutorial ends. You would get both the damaged cage and the fragment, then it would burn your planet and everyone on it."

"I'm not a fan of that option."

"Me neither. The second option is to give it to you now. You return with it to the Beyond floor, where it kills you and thousands of attendees and locals before someone powerful stops it. Or before the handlers or Rulers are allowed to act and stop it."

"Is there some percentage of attendees that have to die before you can act?"

"Something like that."

"I think you also like to bullshit a lot and follow rules that fit you while twisting the ones you don't like."

"That is true. The third option is that I buy it from you, but there's no set price. With White Sand, it was simpler since there are ways to keep its properties intact while making it less dangerous. Fragments are different, especially the truly old ones like Fragments of the First Star."

“Twenty million shards?”

“More,” she sighs, “before you ask, I can’t give you that much. But why the fuck am I dealing with this crap alone? Diligence, get your ass over here.” Her head tilts toward the sky as she shouts toward it.

It takes only a few seconds, and while I do not see anyone else, a voice makes itself known, almost like a whisper in my right ear. “This is all your problem. You know that. This quest was fully under your jurisdiction. I also truly do not appreciate you revealing your identity.”

“Oh, come on, everyone who spends their time messing around does it at some point. Don’t be so uptight, and at least don’t be rude, send us a projection or something.”

"You want me to use my projection to reveal my identity to that attendee of yours. I can see that."

“What are you talking about? I’m just saying you’re rude,” she replies without hesitation, then smirks. “Besides, if I really wanted to, I’d come up with a better excuse than this.”

A faint pause, like the voice on the other end is weighing whether to keep arguing or hang up on the whole conversation.

“You’re irritating,” the voice says.

“Thanks, I try.”

She winks at me and whispers, "This one’s for free."

A sharp clack of mandibles sounds, and this time, when I turn to the right, I find a figure standing there.

An ant, its head level with mine if I were standing, stares back at me. Its compound eyes hold thousands of tiny reflections of me, and its black carapace seems to swallow the surrounding light.

Chapter 679: Reward negotiation

Diligence turns to Greed, "Give him something other than shards. Not enough to make him much stronger, but enough to satiate his greed. You should know a thing or two about that."

"I want a 5 active skills combination token," I say from the side.

The huge ant glances at me and then back at Greed, "Is he trying to figure out if such a thing exists from the way I answer?"

"He can be very shrewd at times," Greed nods. "I also thought of what you said, but I know you will only get angry if I give him something and you think it's too good. So it is better to have you here and pick something you agree with. We can even get Kindness to join in, in case it comes down to a vote. Wrath can just fuck off."

The ant takes a few steps. Even though he is a projection and I can tell it is immaterial, it is almost too perfect. It completely tricks my eyes, along with every perception based on them, and the same goes for my ears.

"That makes sense," the ant agrees. "What were you thinking of?"

"Two day Earth stay token? The value should be comparable?"

"No," Diligence disagrees right away. "While possible, it is not applicable to this situation, and it does not fulfill any of the other rules required to earn such an award. May I also ask why we're even speaking this way, at a speed he can process?"

"It would be rude to ignore him."

"Or what? Will you and your Colony come to my planet and..."

"Enough."

Even though the ant is not present here, that single word has an incredible presence to it. It causes the manabloc chair under me to flicker and disappear, and I have to regain my balance to avoid falling down.

My pants made of mana disappear as well.

More than anything, this seems to surprise the ant, and in his compound eyes I see thousands of reflections of... I unhurriedly reform the pants and then the chair into which I calmly sit down again.

“That man has many reasons to hate you, and you see how well he behaves himself. Meanwhile, you only bring shame to yourself,” Greed provokes while mostly ignoring what just happened.

The First One sounded almost weary. “Please do not remind me of my mistake in choosing that era of my life for the floor. Unfortunately, I have not yet found one that fits my intent for the floor any better.”

That black body turns to me again, “I apologise for my behaviour just now.”

I notice he does not at all apologise for what happened on that floor. I still remember Hadwin’s death so vividly that I feel blood boil in my veins, but at the same time, it is... difficult.

I know he wasn’t the one who truly did that, even if he bears some responsibility. I also know our group shares the blame. That floor had too many ways we could have cleared it, and in the end, it was our weakness that decided the outcome.

“Pristine passive?” Greed asks before I can react in any way.

I push these emotions away and quickly add instead, “Mid pristine?”

“Low,” she says firmly.

“Low is only what, twenty million shards?” I complain. “If not that, from Kyralon I heard Diligence can make a Spatial Cache, I could take one of those. I won’t even be greedy, even one of the smaller ones would be enough.”

“What the fuck do you mean, only twenty million shards? And do you even have any idea how much a Spatial Cache is worth? Even if that fragment were three times its size, it wouldn’t even come close to the value of the smallest Spatial Cache...”

Diligence cuts her off. “No Spatial Cache, that’s out of the question. Not even a pristine passive. If he is diligent enough, he might earn one such passive on his own before his tutorial ends, but granting it here would be far too much.”

I mutter under my breath, “I could just take the blueprints for a spatial cache. If you’re all going to be such dicks about it, I’ll make my own.”

Diligence ignores what I just said. His voice sounds thoughtful as he walks around, chitin legs clacking with each step. “Unawakening the Fragment would be stretching the rules too much, as would taking the Fragment or fixing the cage for him. My recommendation is two million shards along with two or three smaller rewards.”

Diligence looks at me for a second. “1st stage trait strengthening token, and two active skills combination token, together with two million shards, should be enough.”

“The Fragment is worth well over 20 million,” I protest.

“Only if you were capable of using it. Awakened, and for someone like you, it is currently worth almost nothing. You cannot hold it, you cannot store it.”

Greed takes a sip out of a wineglass. She still lazily sits behind her wooden table, “It is still too little. He’s also due a reward for his participation in this Beyond quest, so we can combine them.”

“Just give me a low pristine passive and we are all good.”

“Nathaniel.”

“What?”

“Shut the hell up.”

As I look at her, she returns my gaze. She seems to have some kind of plan, but it annoys me a little. I know she probably wants to scam Diligence and get some fancy things for me. It feels childish, but with an annoyed sigh, I pour myself the last of the alchemical wine and then deliberately knock the bottle off the table.

I don't know which one of these petty assholes does it, but the bottle halts just an inch from the floor and hangs there instead of breaking.

“How about two upper arcane passives so he can use his combination token, a first-stage trait strengthening token, five million shards, a high-end fourth floor residence permit, a twenty-four hour Earth visit token, and the possibility of me giving him Beyond quests normally intended for S ranks. Also, a ten-year Beyond visitor pass for after his tutorial ends.”

“Are you serious?”

“I am.”

“Just that visitor pass is worth more than the Fragment itself.”

“I would say they are of similar value.”

“You purposefully did not take into consideration that the Fragment is awakened, needs recharging, and is not usable by him, thus drastically reducing its value.”

“Did I?”

Diligence ignores her playful tone, “No ten year Beyond visitor pass, and for sure no token to visit his planet.”

“Come on, you know something is messed up with it, too. When was the last time you saw such a new planet in the system start a Pairing without even having an Absolute, and against a planet that’s already been through multiple Pairings?”

“If Humility were here, she would berate you endlessly for revealing so much information.”

“There wasn’t even the slightest censorship spike from the system.”

“It is because... oh, nice try. One year Beyond visitor token, and that's only because I give him a high chance of not surviving the tutorial, given the way he goes about things. No Earth visit token. Three million shards and a residence permit reduced to low tier. The rest is acceptable.”

I keep looking between the two of them as they continue to talk. Once again, Greed falls silent and takes a few sips while my mind goes into overdrive to try to estimate the value of all of that.

Two upper arcane passives combined would be around 2 million, making it 4 million total. Then, a first stage trait strengthening token, which really isn’t all that valuable, never mind that I’m sure I’ll get one from a side quest sooner or later. As much as I would love to visit Earth, even if only to replenish my stock of sweets, I think I can go without it.

Overall, these rewards seem fairly disappointing. The question is whether the Beyond visitor token is that valuable, or if the ability to take on S rank Beyond quests makes up for losing on the Fragment and the cage.

Finally, Greed leans back and smiles, “All your recommendations are fine, but allow me a small change. High end residence permit, four million shards instead of three, and we stop blocking the communication attempts by slightly lifting the spatial locks.”

Her answer confuses me. When I look at her with a question in my eyes, she returns my gaze. Her words are directed at Diligence, but at the same time, they sound like they’re really meant for me.

“In the end, she is his master and should be able to use her minion communication token.”

In the end, I ask my handler to split 30% of the shards I get between Tacita and Malika. Somehow. I just hope she doesn't keep a cut of it for herself. It is possible that in the current situation, the deal we made for the pristine cage does not apply, but I decide to go through with it anyway.

Shards:5,346,999

After that, my shards look better than ever, to the point that I have to think the others in the tutorial are lazy. With my salary in Primordial Knights growing, if they haven't kicked me out for being late, with the addition of crafting plus a few more Beyond quests, I can make quite a lot. Before the tutorial ends, I smell the possibility of low pristine passives.

I can also pick two upper arcane passives now, and I'll need to do that soon. I should choose the two that would combine best into a unique arcane passive, while selling the ones I no longer need as much.

I open my status to examine my passives.

Mana Kinetic Conversion Reservoir (Unique Epic)

Mana Fortified Mind (Low Arcane)

Mental Attunement Loop (Mid Arcane)

Mana Wavelength Tyrant (Mid Arcane)

Subdermal Combustion Weave (Mid Arcane)

I know I said the rewards were a bit weak. If Diligence or Greed had asked me, I would've cried over how badly I got scammed, but damn. That Fragment has to be something else to be worth such a fancy array of stuff. The Beyond visitor token especially confuses me. I heard it was possible for Champions, Absolutes, and a few others to be allowed into Beyond and certain floors of the First Dungeon, but I

have no idea how valuable that is. Another thing I'll have to figure out later, along with the residence permit.

The trait strengthening token is good enough to finally get my Mana Physique to its 1/3 stage. It's been stuck on 0 for too long.

I can't wait for the pain it'll bring.

Most of all, I am curious about the last two parts. The ability to take on Beyond quests meant for S ranks sounds cool, though it also sounds like a quick way to die. I already asked my dear handler to get me one, but she told me to fuck off.

Then there is that thing about not blocking my communications. I think I know what that's about, but for now, all I can do is wait.

With the quest done, I finally appear in what I quickly identify as my room in the branch building of Primordial Knights.

I barely look around for a few seconds when a voice sounds in my head, (Got you, you little shit, you're finally back! I already let the branch leader and Weslin know. I hope you get your ass kicked, you petty little bitch. I know it was you who got into the high rank pantry and broke all my bottles of Evening Dew. Just wait...)

Once again, I reach toward the structure in the air while disrupting it to make the voice of the security lady fade away. People in this guild sure are nasty. The number of things that get blamed on me for some reason is incredible.

A few minutes later, someone knocks on the door. "Rookie, will you open the door for me?"

"I don't like your tone of voice, Weslin. I think we should all calmly sit down to talk about what happened as adults."

"Rookie. The. Door."

“Yes, sir.”

I open it so my partner can walk in. Slightly shorter than me, shaved head, rocking those white and pale blue clothes of Primordial Knights. As always, I can sense the strength of his body just from the way the area around him reacts to each of his movements. I don't think he's a pure Strength enjoyer like Jean, but he definitely went hard on the physical side with traits, skills, passives, and raw stats.

When he closes the door, I start to get a bit nervous, even as he moves calmly and sits down in one of the armchairs. He crosses, looks at me. Very intently.

“I guess I could say I am sorry, but...” I start.

He interrupts me with a smile, “Rookie, why don't you try apologizing by offering me your shards? Maybe as a thanks, just like before. For me, being patient for wasting a week of my stay token while sitting on my ass here. For enduring the Doc who keeps asking me where you are, for the branch leader who keeps asking me what kind of little shit we accepted into our guild. One of the oldest, most prestigious guilds in Beyond, with a history longer than many Absolutes.”

“I think you'd actually accept the shards this time, so I'd rather not.”

He smiles even more widely, “You have one hour to sort out your stuff. If you are not ready by then, I will personally ask them to activate the clause that backdates your absence as a ‘breach of contract’ and let the guild reclaim every shard you earned this month.”

“There is no way something like that was in there, or that you would be able to do it.”

“Try me, bitch.”

And with those last words, he leaves.

Chapter 680: Look at you now

POV Aaron Dalton

Nat left two weeks ago, and now Tess, Sophie, and Lily are leaving for Beyond, and leaving us on our own. I mean, almost. Even though Izzy's still not quite back to herself, she keeps an eye on us. I've noticed Noodle slithering around and spying for her recently.

Then there's Maya. Damned Maya.

I don't know what happened, if it was after the Beyond incident or if she just woke up some new side of herself, but damn, she's been getting kinda scary these days. When in full [Focus], her eyes remind me of Nat, an impression that seems to be strengthened by the way her armor's started to resemble his. Honestly, I like the badass tattoos, the ones even Nat's been coming by once in a while to copy. The problem is, he keeps teaching her a bunch of scary things in exchange, like manipulating tricolored mana.

We don't need more people with tricolored mana orbs.

Thankfully, she prefers to use it for armor and weapons instead of blowing it up and hoping it causes more damage to her enemies than it does her.

(We seriously need to train more. Min-Jae's getting stronger, Maya's catching up, too. And Izzy... she might end up on her own training arc or something,) Dennis sends over, seeming to easily know what is currently on my mind.

(Izzy's gonna go on some arc where she finally awakens the full power of her Fragment. Or maybe Noodle's the one who'll end up awakening some ancient bloodline or whatever.)

(If you think about it, if it weren't for Nat, wouldn't that make all the most powerful members of our group girls?)

(You wouldn't have a chance if you went up against them on your own.)

(You dumbass, we're twins, so we count as one, even in 1v1s.) I send back.

(That's true. Tess is probably the strongest, though, and there's no way we're beating her.)

(I don't know, man, I'd rather fight Tess than Lily.)

(Fair enough... so who's up next in the power rankings?)

(Us?)

(Huh?)

With that, I respond, (I'm telling you, Maya with her [Focus] could probably take Sophie... if she, like, really, really tried. She is stronger than her in close and mid range combat. Maybe Sophie would have an advantage in long range, especially if she could get away with setting traps, but if Maya were to resist her mental manipulations, I'd be more than willing to bet on her.)

(True true. I bet we could face Sophie too.)

I stop, and Dennis comes to a stop at my side. In the distance, we watch as Biscuit, in his puppy form with his tiny antlers budding on his head, stops and sniffs. Both of us are quiet until he sneezes when dust gets into his nose.

He takes a few steps and sneezes one more time. He waits a few seconds, thinks it might be done, then takes another step and sneezes again, shaking his head as he does so. A few quick, angry woofs burst from him at whatever absolute monster could have caused him to sneeze, while he wipes his nose in the grass on the ground.

When he starts walking again on his short wobbly legs, I send, (If we surprised Sophie, we might be able to beat her. But damn, she went full on mindblender skill tree as of late.)

(At least she's our mindblender. How about Min-Jae?)

(We would kick his ass.)

(Totally, easy fight, no sweat.)

(Yeah, that fucking neeeerd.)

(Neeeeeeeeeeeeer.)

(Neeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeer.)

(Doesn't even have time for his best buds, constantly studying, and going out solo hunting.)

(Asshole.)

(Asshole!)

(Food food, asshole, sustenance! Be not afraid, bitch!) I send, mimicking Biscuit's voice.

Dennis pauses and looks at me. (Damn, that was a good impression.)

(Thanks, I've been trying to teach him some new lines to surprise Nat, but Biscuit just won't listen to me.)

Both of us go silent again as we come closer. We've long since learned how dangerous it is to talk that close to Biscuit, since he can connect to even our most private links. We cannot have that while spying on him.

Biscuit is standing in the middle of a small clearing. And I realize there's another presence nearby that we haven't marked on our map of the area. This is a place we don't really visit often, since we noticed one of the demon tribes moving around here too much.

But what walks from behind the enormous jungle trees is not a demon.

It's a dinosaur.

A goddamned dinosaur.

(A goddamned dinosaur,) I hear Dennis in my head.

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

Both of us quickly move to duck and hide behind the branches and leaves. We watch Biscuit sniff in our direction. I almost think he's caught us, but then he sneezes again. A series of angry barks burst from him as he jumps around, annoyed with himself. It distracts him enough to keep him from looking our way.

The dinosaur tilts its head and lets out a series of noises similar to Biscuit's barks, almost as if it were mimicking him. I feel my mouth open, but force it shut. That dinosaur most of all reminds me of a T-Rex. Huge head, massive legs, long tail, dangerous eyes behind armor-like scales.

Lastly, over its head floats a crown. A pale blue crown, the same crown Nat once had.

[Rex Coronis - lvl ???]

Biscuit comes closer. He looks so tiny in comparison. The T-Rex seems even larger than the ones I saw in the movies, maybe twice as big. The corgi doesn't seem to care and begins to grow as well. Biscuit becomes the size of a big dog, then the size of a horse, then a car, then a bus, and grows further until his head reaches the chest of the dino.

Even then, Biscuit retains the proportions he had in puppy form with his tiny antlers. My vision blurs as I try to take it in, as if my brain is telling me I'm seeing some kind of optical illusion, after all, the corgi just should not be that big.

Taking a few jumpy wobbly steps, Biscuit reaches the T-Rex and headbutts him as the beast lowers his head. For a few moments, they push against each other until the T-Rex sidesteps. Biscuit pushes further but cannot stop himself, rolls, and crashes into a boulder. He gets stuck on his back with his legs waving in the air as if he were swimming and twisting in an attempt to get up.

The T-Rex lets out a few deep barking noises and, with its massive maw open, takes a few steps closer before lowering it. For a moment, I imagine him tearing into Biscuit's belly, but instead, he nudges the stuck corgi so he rolls over to get back on his legs.

Biscuit woofs a few times and rushes at the T-Rex again to play, the ground shaking beneath him as he jumps.

"The best T-Rex of the 9th floor," Dennis whispers next to me.

Both of us crank up our Sneaky Mode and leave the two big beasts to their game. Before we head out, I pull out my phone, record a quick video, and snap a few pics.

POV Tess Hansen

As we appear in Beyond, two figures come into view. Lily does not hesitate and reacts even faster than I do. She uses [Sacrifice] three times in a row, shooting ahead at a speed that feels like it should be impossible for her tiny body to handle.

All my javelins shoot forward too, imbued with as much primordial lightning as I can force into them. They whistle as they cut through the air. I channel more lightning and let it flicker through my body. The ground bursts under me as I use [Psychokinesis] to prepare for the leap forward.

Lily crashes into the monstrously tall four-armed thylarin with burning symbols carved into his forearms. Her [Disintegration] flickers everywhere, erasing everything it touches from existence.

All except Luan.

(Go, help Lily. I'll handle it here.) Sophie shouts through our connection, and I do not hesitate. I fly high into the air, channeling more primordial lightning to craft something much more dangerous. Something I've been working on for a while.

I don't just let the lightning flicker through me. I force it into shape. Arcs bend and curve around the javelin until a spinning ring forms around the haft, a circle that grows brighter as it tightens. The air hums and shrieks under the pressure as currents collapse toward the weapon. Metal groans. Even the hardened body of the javelin begins to glow, heat rising as the circle compresses tighter and tighter.

The instant I release it, a flat metallic snap cuts through the air, followed by a boom that shakes the ground.

The javelin vanishes from sight, leaving only a jagged white-red line tearing across the air. It's not smooth, it flickers and breaks apart as plasma bursts along the path, each fragment collapsing almost as quickly as it forms. Dust and stone rip upward in its wake, pulled into the vacuum.

Far ahead, the projectile reaches its target almost before my eyes can follow. A compressed air bursts outward from the collision. The delayed thunderclap crashes through a heartbeat later.

I see through the dust easily, and Luan's eyes lock on mine. In his hand, he holds the javelin, glowing red-hot as if ready to melt from the friction and speed I launched it with. The weapon is lodged slightly into his chest, but he holds it, stopping it from going any deeper.

Two of his hands snap the javelin in half. The other two, for the first time since the fight started, move as well. They slam together in a clap. The burst of shockwave that follows is strong enough to send the charging Lily flying.

Instead of being thrown away, she crosses her bone axes in front of her body. The gray mantle behind her back expands in size and extends in length while leaving an eerie feeling in its wake.

But before anything else can happen, a scream tears through the surroundings.

Sophie falls to her knees, pale, bleeding from her eyes, nose, and ears. She coughs dryly and groans in pain as she sways, then collapses sideways.

I dive down in front of her, preparing another projectile for Faora. I should have targeted her first. We should have killed that feylith. I should not have left it all to Sophie, no matter what she said—

I stop.

Faora lies on the ground, unmoving.

“Did you really think you would get me a second time with that shitty skill?” Sophie cackles weakly behind me, coughing up blood. Lily’s already there, healing her body immediately. Healing her mind, though, will take far longer.

“Did you fucking think you would get me again, bitch!?” Sophie climbs back to her feet, pushes Lily away, and tries to move past me.

She screams, every word growing louder than the one before, “Did you really think you’d break me? You wanted me on my knees, begging for mercy? Look at you now!”

Luan moves almost too calmly. In a few steps, he reaches the feylith’s body. Her hair and eyes are both white. I can barely believe what I’m seeing.

Faora is dead.

Luan is as surprised as I am. I tense as he observes the body at his feet.

He whispers something as he reaches down and closes Faora’s eyes. He hunts out some items from her corpse for some items before standing up. Then he turns to leave.

Just like that.

I stop Lily from rushing him. He doesn’t seem to want to continue the fight.

Then Sophie calls out, "I can do what you needed her to do."

Luan stops, his back still turned to us.

She continues, "I'm stronger than her. I have a lot more time left in the tutorial, and I saw it all in her memories."

"You would have to join Frontier as well, and be willing to work with me," he says as he turns around. His wounds already healed. I feel an immense pressure radiating from his body as he takes those few steps towards us. Not even for a second does he seem to think we would be a threat to him.

"I know," our mind mage says.

(Sophie,) I whisper.

(I'll tell you everything back on the 9th floor. Trust me, okay?) She answers in an uncharacteristically soft voice.

I watch as she passes by me, and I let it happen. She walks to Luan's side and follows him as he starts walking away once again.

Worried, I turn to Lily, but the expression I expect is not there. She doesn't look desperate, doesn't seem scared of being left behind again. Lily's not that girl anymore.

"Well, Sophie has some explaining to do," she says with a weak smile. She seems to trust our friend, and maybe I should as well.

"It seems so, but let's trust that she knows what she's doing," I sigh, and look at the feylith's corpse. It looks like we've got yet another monster in our little group. I'll have to keep working hard.

I switch back to scouting while telling Lily, "I have a way to contact Leticia and Jean on the 2nd floor, so let us clear this one quickly and see if we can group up."