

Tutorial 681

Chapter 681: The Open Path

POV Nathaniel

You have been invited to meet with your master for 10 minutes. Will you accept?

Yes/No

It's been a week since I returned from my Beyond quest, meaning I still have at least 2 weeks left on my stay token, maybe longer, since it's being boosted by the Primordial Knights.

During that time, I've been getting bullied by Weslin. Something tells me he didn't like having to wait for me. But it's all good, since we still get some work done advancing the progression of my quest, along with some side stuff he claims he needs to take care of in order "to make a living."

"Hey, I need ten minutes," I tell him.

He looks around to check for danger, then sits down on the ground in the next moment. "Go on."

As a man of developed taste, I create a manabloc chair and sink into it before confirming.

Just like when I meet with my minion, I find myself in a never-ending white void. Everything's just... white. There are no walls, floor, or ceiling I can see, but when I walk, I feel the ground beneath my feet. With a few steps, I reach a figure standing ahead of me.

"Rough day?" I ask.

Even in her state, she smiles with absolute confidence. "It reminds me of the good old days, before I even took on the rank of Champion."

"So, it could've been better, I guess?"

“Likely, but I had a promise to keep. Little pup, I didn’t think I would see you for a while, not until you came to Eladore.”

“That is what I thought too. Did you get fucked over?”

“It was a result I had expected, and nothing I can’t handle.”

“I see, even without a heart?”

“How very perceptive. Little kitten has been sharing her mana with me, so it’ll be enough for now.”

“Just for now?”

“Yes, for now. Little pup, I might have changed my mind. I will stay here a bit longer, dig deeper, and see what this is all about.”

“At least until they kick you out?”

“They’ll need a strong majority for that. It’s not impossible, but it’ll be difficult. Even if they did manage it, things would still work in my favor, since it means I would be sent out of the First Dungeon, along with our little kitten. After that, I would return. But enough chatter. Do you know what I want from you?”

“My black mana?”

“Exactly.”

“Will it even work? I mean, where the hell are you?”

"We are on the twelfth floor of Beyond. It's been spatially sealed, though the seal is, honestly, rather pathetic. Unfortunately, without my heart, there's not much I can do, but a few days ago, they loosened it enough that I could connect to you."

"What even is the First Dungeon?"

"I do not know." She smiles, and this time it's a big, excited smile. Damn, she really seems to be enjoying herself.

I try to see if I can channel and compress my mana. At first, it moves strangely, having grown sluggish in this place, but the moment I compress it enough to turn black, it flows more easily. As if this space can't really affect it as much.

"Can you even take it? We're not meeting in person, after all," I say as I shape it into a dagger, almost the same as the first one I created.

"Thanks to its inherent properties, it should be possible."

"They won't try to stop it?"

"It's not breaking any rules, so they can't interfere. Little pup, will you not ask me for the name of your... black mana?"

"Nah, I'm done with that shit. I ask. You'll just tell me you'll reveal it next time, or feed me some other bullshit. The number of times it's happened now would probably surprise you. So, now I've reached the point where if someone comes to tell me what it is called, I mean to tell them to fuck off, then simply force everyone else to call it black mana as well."

She blinks her single open eye a few times and reaches her hand forward, "For some reason, that makes me kind of curious about how many times it must have happened."

"It would surprise you. What do I get for the dagger?" I ask, still holding the dagger close to my body.

"Information. A small hint from me, left for you to think about on your own."

"Aren't you getting a bit too cheap since you took the greed subclass?"

"How very amusing, little pup," she says as she moves, and I allow her to take the black dagger from my hand.

She immediately starts working on it. Unlike the replica of the last elf, who only managed to pull away a few scraps of the mana I fed into the black halo, Lissandra goes further. She uses the same method as before, strengthening and shaping it so it becomes solid enough to be used as a proper bridge between herself and the outer world. That way, she can let the dagger absorb mana, which she will later draw out as needed.

Without lifting her eyes from the dagger, she says, "There is something you should know about Absolutes and pairings. An Absolute is at their strongest on their own planet, which is why they almost never leave. But when one does, the system reacts in a very particular way, little pup. The moment an Absolute steps onto another world, that world's Absolute is alerted. They are told another Absolute is present, and the system forces them to choose between two options."

When she finishes whatever she was doing, she glances at me. After I give a nod, she stabs just the tip of the black dagger into my arm. I make no effort to fight against the pull on my mana.

As she looks at the drop of blood flowing from the wound, she continues, "The first option is simple: nothing happens. The second is far more interesting. You can treat the presence of another Absolute on your planet as a challenge, and if you choose that path, you may proceed to begin a Pairing."

When it is all done, she pulls the dagger out and slips it behind her belt.

The last few seconds of her visit begin to run out.

"Take care of Myrra, okay?" I say.

"How foolish you are, little pup. I gave you my word, and I will keep it, even if it costs me my life. You may not see it that way, but I would never break a promise to one of my disciples."

With a final smile, the space around us breaks, and I find myself back next to Weslin.

Dozens of thoughts swirl in my mind until suddenly the need for my ESM strikes.

"Ten more minutes," I tell Weslin as I use my minion communication token.

Thankfully, my minion is online. Before Weslin can even react, I'm already appearing in that endless white space once again.

"Master! You haven't forgotten me!" My minion greets me with her mischievous smile, just like always. Her brown hair is longer now, her horns are sharper, even though they remain short. I just hope the other demons don't bully her for it.

"Who are you?" I ask, tilting my head and feigning confusion.

She does not even slow down, only giggles louder. I think she might leap into my arms, but instead, she suddenly comes to a stop in front of me. She lifts her arms up, asking me to pick her up.

I do it right away. She quickly nestles her head against my chest, shifting until she can listen to both of my hearts. As always, her pointy horns poke against the underside of my chin.

"Are you eating well?" I ask.

"Yes! I even got my first minion, and now she cooks for me! She's a half demon, too, and she swore to serve me in return for saving her life."

"Your what?"

"She also has a cute talking dagger! I'm glad I didn't throw it into the volcano when we fought in that Demon Lord's castle."

"You were where?"

"A big fancy castle, master! It even had a lake full of man-eating fish. You need to get a castle like that! I went there because I was poisoned. And there was a healer there who could help me, so I joined a small group of thieves to get inside, but they betrayed me. I had to kill most of them."

"The hell?"

"I met the leader of these thieves in jail, where those silly villagers had locked us up so they could feed us to the monster they called their god! I almost died, but I killed it instead. Then I burned the whole village down! But don't worry, I stole anything of value first."

Her face beams with excitement while she rushes through the story of her adventures. Since we only have ten minutes, she pushes herself to share as much as possible. She doesn't even let me get a word in, but I don't mind it at all. With a smile spreading across my face, I listen to her, praising her whenever I can while reminding her to be careful.

I only wish she would not always answer, "I'm as careful as master is!"

When we're finally getting down to the last few seconds, I finally stop her. She realizes how little I spoke and starts apologizing.

I wave it off and describe in a few sentences what I have been doing. My smile seems to calm her down.

"What will you do now, master?" she asks.

I think about it. My smile stretches further. "The only thing I can do, minion. My best. And if that's not enough, then I will make it enough."

POV Rafael Vaughn - Channeler

I'm alone in the room now. It feels strange, remembering how cramped things were scant a few months ago, if only because this one is so much larger and far more luxurious. The wide windows stretch almost from wall to wall, opening onto a breathtaking view of cliffs and the restless sea in the distance. From here, I can see two helicopters lifting off the helipad beside the house, carrying the Easy Difficulty attendees. Out on the water, a smaller ship waits to take them the rest of the way.

I look away from it, and for a while, I just stare at the phone in my hand. Then I dial the number I received only hours ago.

"How did you get this number? Who are you?" a female voice asks after just a few rings.

"Jessica, it's me, Rafael."

"Channeler? How the hell did you get this number? I just got it today."

I lean back on the couch while clicking through photos on my laptop. "I'm in the good graces of the US Army. They give me things if I ask for them."

"They caught you? Do you need help?"

"It's not like that. We're cooperating with them. You already know who I work for."

"Gwyn."

"Yes, the mana mania... oh right, Gwyn."

"I guess that makes them think twice before messing with you. So why are you calling?"

"First, congratulations on finishing your tutorial. I think you're one of the first from normal difficulty."

"That's right!" she says, her voice rising with excitement. "I thought it would be a total mess here, but it's actually okay. Sure, a few monsters are appearing every now and then, like weird animals, but the Hard Difficulty guys will take care of them as soon as they get out. And it's only been one week since I arrived, but I've already made more money than I have in my entire life."

"If I remember correctly, you used to be a surgeon?"

"A Cardiologist. I made half a mil a year. But now? People just keep throwing money at me. I'm sure I can make billions. Oh, wait, is this call secure?"

"I'm not dumb, Jessica," I say. Then I wait, letting her talk, because I know she likes to show off in front of people she believes to be high up in the hierarchy. And now, thanks to my connections, I count as one of them.

"I guess you're not dumb. You never were." She laughs. "Anyway, in a few weeks, I might even manage to cure baldness. You can't imagine how much money there is in that shit. I can use my healing skills to create a temporary solution and sell it. Not a one-time cure, but something like a subscription. People will be paying me forever. I'll be drowning in money."

She looks pleased with herself, waiting for me to say something. I take a moment, then finally speak. "Jessica, I have an offer for you."

"I was wondering why you called. What is it?"

"I want you to be a personal healer for around two years."

On the other side, there is silence until she finally replies with caution, "Go on."

"It's for a cat. It's old, sick, and close to dying. I already tried throwing millions at it, but no vet or doctor could do anything."

"So you thought a healer from Normal Difficulty would do the trick?"

"The ones from Easy Difficulty aren't enough."

"Rafael... really? A cat?"

"It belongs to Grumpy."

I expect a long pause, but it lasts barely three seconds. "Tell me where you are. I'll be there tomorrow."

POV Warden of the Parallax Eyes, Kyralon

Kyralon rises from the low table. A layered field surrounding him, strengthening the reach of his trait. His expression is unreadable as his gaze fixes on a single point in space. Looking over the shelf, he selects an oval mana stone, which unfolds into the form of a transparent blue book.

From his pouch, he draws a wooden pen. With it, he writes the date in the private system only he uses, then begins recording.

16:00 -The Ruler of Pride has entered Beyond. All active Rulers were notified, and those available shifted their focus accordingly.

16:01 - The Ruler of Pride descended directly to the Twelfth Floor. A brief exchange occurred between him and the imitation of Absolute Lissandra Hawthorne. Without confrontation, he turned and departed, moving toward the center of the Twelfth Floor.

16:11 -The Ruler of Pride cleared the Twelfth Floor and entered the Thirteenth.

18:12 -The Ruler of Pride cleared the Thirteenth Floor and stepped onto the Fourteenth.

18:22 -The Ruler of Pride has departed Beyond. A message has been sent through the system itself, a reminder that his seclusion has ended, and his strength remains unmatched.

Kyralon pauses, his grip tightening around the pen. His eyes lift to the starlit sky, following paths invisible to others. When he writes again, his hand trembles slightly, though his lines remain precise.

For the first time in thousands of years, the path to the Thirteenth Floor stands open. Not through the effort of many, but through the power of a single being. The First Dungeon remains a mystery, its meaning and purpose still hidden. Perhaps it holds knowledge of the system itself, knowledge Pride seems to grasp more clearly than anyone else.

But the question remains: who among the Rulers will dare to follow?

After all, on the Twelfth Floor, a wounded Ancient Monster now awaits. Placed there by the Rulers to die, she remains, licking her wounds as she waits for those who cast her down.

Chapter 682: If you're reading this, I'm probably dead

If you're reading this, I'm probably dead.

Damn, I've always wanted to say that.

Anyway, in my hunger for knowledge and abilities many would call unnatural, I dug too deep. Well, not actually dug, but metaphorically dug. Assuming you're not a crayon eater, you know what I meant.

Anyway, again, maybe I should have paid more attention to the early signs. They were all there, but in my pride, I ignored them.

But before we get to that.

Months have passed since I returned from that quest during which I met the pettiest elf alive. I still cannot forgive him for splitting the base in half, then trying to kill me by detonating the bits I was on. In an incredible show of greed and pettiness, he did everything he could to stop me from saving the Fragment of the First Sun from the planet's surface. I mean, it was lying there for hundreds of years, so clearly no one else wanted it.

Ever since that quest ended and I got my rewards, I've been asking my handler when I would finally get the promised S rank Beyond quests and events. So far, the answer remains the same:

Fuck off.

My handler remains cryptic as always, so I can only hope it will be soon. She says if everything works out, I will understand why she chose the rewards she did.

I fought back, too. Literally.

Turns out blowing up half of the guild's sparring zone makes them give you a bit more respect. Those fancy clauses suddenly became less strict, and I got my escalators leading to better pay. Not like I need that many shards. I doubt there are many Beyond attendees with more shards than me, but it would feel wrong not to demand what I deserve.

Weslin acted like a big tsundere about it when I blew up the sparring zone, screaming at me, complaining with that vein bulging on his temple like it might pop. But I believe, deep down, he was happy for me.

My progress to clear the third floor to reach the fourth, where I might meet Nyssa, continues well. With Weslin's help, we're working on creating a safe zone for the Beyond floor quest. Of course, we're not going for a small one either, having decided to focus on building a larger one. I am fine with that, since it is more dangerous and more interesting. The branch leader and the security lady also say it should help build up the standing of the Primordial Knights. So we're gathering materials, building outpost arrays, and killing monsters. Lots of monsters.

There were a few times where it got dangerous, but my partner and I are a good combo. Weslin gets punched in the face, and I blow up the area, often as he uses his primordial void to strip defenses, where the enemies make attempts to block it.

Once in a while, Weslin leaves to train alone. For some reason, even I see it, a spark inside him reignited, an ambition to get stronger. I also think he and the security lady were together for a few weeks, but they must have broken up. Maybe that's why. The same kind of thing that motivates people to hit the gym after a breakup, except Weslin's hitting monsters instead.

Anyway, Talon tells me there are rumors that Weslin might become an S rank before the tutorial ends. That would make him the third person currently in the Primordial Knights to do so.

I even found out a bit more about it in my curiosity, but both Luan and Weslin have similar amounts of time left in the tutorial, while Nyssa has even more months left than they do. It's even been said that she might soon be the strongest S rank in the tutorial.

Overall, I like Weslin. He is a cool guy, and I bet if I keep acting this way, it won't be long before I've got him saying, "I'm too old for this shit."

I really want to hear it.

So, if I really am dead as I said at the start, someone please give Weslin my collection of antomic bombs, sparrow obliterators, and all of my prototype items. Especially the mana batteries shaped into crowns and halos. I think they might suit him.

Do not, for any reason, let the Doc get my body. I repeat, DO NOT LET THE CATBOY GET MY BODY.

Burn it if you have to. Now that I think of it, even if I'm dead, it should still be resistant to fire, so I don't know... throw it into a volcano or shoot it into outer space.

Group 4 is also doing well, from what I've seen on the ninth floor. It's a one year survival challenge, so I'm not worried about spending most of my time in Beyond. I think it'll help group 4 prosper in the long run. Those beautiful lunatics just keep getting stronger.

Sophie killed Faora. Just like that, she ended her. May that feylith bitch find herself revived one day so Sophie can kill her again. I always knew Sophie was a terrifyingly talented mind mage. I even told her to stop being a scaredy cat and start using her abilities again, but now that she has, I'm actually a little scared.

Thankfully, my mental defenses are better than ever. I gave up on having mental defense passives and developed a new way to protect my mind instead. When I was training with Sophie, it seemed to shock and even scare her.

That must be a good thing.

Instead of defending against mind mages with labyrinths and walls, I went for a better strategy. I lovingly call it “Oh, You Dumbfuck Actually Walked In”.

Tess continues to develop her [Declaration] and even got a fancy new skill to boost both the range and purity of her primordial lightning. After she found just the right metal for her javelins and started using that railgun-like attack, she’s become far scarier than before.

The piercing power of her attacks is now comparable to my [Empyrean Lance], but they’re much faster too. I mean, much, much faster. And she can shoot those things off from miles away with really high accuracy.

She’s also started sparring more with Lily to reduce her weakness in close range combat, and damn, the bouts really get close sometimes. Tess and Lily are now on the second floor as well, while Sophie, with help from Luan and some support from Frontier, is on the third.

As for our petite bulldozer? Well, she grew her own unholy mech. A massive suit of armor made from her own flesh and bones, stored in our camp so she can wear it when the need arises. It allows her to go toe-to-toe in melee against much larger monsters.

I don’t know if we’ll be able to drag it up to the tenth floor, but there is still plenty of time on the ninth. And damn, if it isn’t likely to turn into something truly terrifying. Lately, she’s also been experimenting with growing wings, and the other day I saw her pummel a bunch of level 350 monsters without using even a speck of mana. She did it purely with the power of her body.

And Min-Jae hasn’t been slacking either, and his flight speed is the fastest after mine when it comes to group 4. Well, only he, Tess, Biscuit, and I can fly, but it is still impressive.

And now he has a better hold on his gravitational primordial energy through his work with [Telekinesis]. He’s also started experimenting with that thing Malika once tried to do to me: the thing where you pierce a person’s natural defenses and compress their brain.

And he reads. A lot. Sophie made a wooden cabin for him, and somehow, he made it float a few hand widths above the ground while storing books, mana stones, and other things inside. He has to recharge it, but it is the first step toward making his very own floating island.

I've already reserved the second one from him. He agreed to make it for me after he completes his own. We've even been thinking of stealing one of those huge aircraft carriers and making it float. We both agree that those ships have always looked cool, and making them float will only make them better. And if I'm not wrong, they only cost a few billion dollars, so we can probably just have Lily heal a few CEOs or something for some quick cash. If we don't just steal it.

The twins can now place marks on items and teleport to them whenever they want. These marks last for a long time, and they love putting them on the daggers they like to throw around. It reminds me of something, but I can't recall what exactly. They've also been investing heavily into Dexterity while working on their [Haste] and stat sharing. I think when one of the twins stacks all their stats and they go all out together, they become almost as fast as Tacita for short bursts.

They have also created a few nastier ways of using [Connection] in their fights, and they're getting better at using their opponents' skills against them, thanks to the efforts of their combined minds.

I've spent weeks with Izzy, too, hoping to understand her Fragment of Eternal Fire. After losing the Fragment of the First Star, I am determined to improve my channeling and get a new fragment on the thirteenth floor.

Both Izzy and Noodle are really good at burning stuff now. I tried to compare their fragment to my thermal energy, and it's actually really difficult. I think when it comes to raw damage, their fragment is stronger. Thermal energy just feels like it's focused in a different area.

I talked about it with the Doc while applying the trait strengthening token to my Mana Physique, letting him observe me as I squirmed in pain. He just said he doesn't care about that stuff.

Good enough answer.

When I also applied my second token to push my Mana Physique to the second stage, I thought the Doc would jump out of his skin with happiness. I passed out, but he collected a lot of data, which I went over later with Lily. We've spent many long nights studying and theorizing.

As for Maya, I keep getting more and more jealous of her tattoos day by day, the way she stores mana and even her mech blueprints inside them. She's become really good with tricolored mana and honestly uses it more often than I do. Where I like to overwhelm enemies with quick attacks using normal mana, she's precise, like a sharp tool. She trains in martial arts for hours every single day. And she spends every night playing the instruments we borrowed from the Academy.

Before, I thought she might not be able to reach Champion rank, but now I am almost certain she will.

I also met Biscuit's new friends: a T-Rex, a Chameleon, and that creepy-murderous maniacal-little-shit-ferret-looking-spawn-of-the-devil.

It makes me worried, but Biscuit's cute, so he can do whatever he wants.

So here I am. Things are going well. I have everything. Money, houses, a dog. I might even get myself a car. Young, no loans, secure for life.

But it wasn't enough. Not for me. The more I level up and put stats into Mana, the more I feel my body breaking apart. And my constructs have only pushed it further, and my mind has been strained beyond the limit. I have become very good at it, though. Escher's Cube, Penrose Triangle, the Klein Bottle, and Möbius Strip. I can see them all clearly in my mind. They look real to me, and in my mind, my mana moves through them even when it shouldn't work.

That was my calling. It made my mind far stronger, and Mana Cycling much easier. It allowed me to accumulate more mana than ever before, and it let me split my mind into a lot more fragments. I set the basis for techniques and optimizations I've named Sequence Pinning, Load Rotation, and Parallel Mapping.

But then something changed. At first, I barely noticed, just small hints, but over time, it became impossible to ignore.

My separated minds began to optimize themselves, only by the tiniest fraction, about 0.05 percent, and only on occasion. Especially the older ones, I've kept running for months, like Mapthaniel and Assholethaniel.

I kept them running because I needed them.

After all my experimenting, I discovered not every mind fragment had to be the same. For example, for Mapthaniel, I slowly stripped down useless functions, increasing efficiency and freeing processing power. Some fragments need more raw power, others require more speed, and others need things like stability, durability, or long-term persistence. And I've come up with ways to do that.

Then I found out about something Mapthaniel did behind my back.

It had one job, one simple job: to maintain the map of any area I enter so I wouldn't have to.

But that part of me, Mapthaniel, split itself, creating a new sub-sub-mind. Then it gave the sub-sub-mind a single task.

To maintain the map so it no longer had to.

So if I am dead, it is probably my own fault. It wasn't the butler this time.

Anyway, my new unique arcane passive is strong, but it's turned out very different from what I wanted and expected.

I considered selling Mental Attunement Loop (Mid Arcane) and buying another low arcane passive to combine with Mana Fortified Mind (Low Arcane). And that would have left me with the original three passives plus the new one:

Mana-Kinetic Conversion Reservoir (Unique Epic)

Mana Wavelength Tyrant (Mid Arcane)

Subdermal Combustion Weave (Mid Arcane)

But this wouldn't have left me with a slot to get two more upper arcane passives. I still don't want to give up any of them, and if I had to, it would probably be my unique epic. But for now, I wait. I think I am really close to turning kinetic energy into mana, thanks to months of observing this passive at work.

So that passive combination token (low arcane) will likely rot in my inventory forever.

The only choice left was to sell both Mana Fortified Mind (Low Arcane) and Mental Attunement Loop (Mid Arcane).

After that, I got Retinal Fractal Interpreter (Upper Arcane) and Wavelength Signal Differentiator (Upper Arcane).

That, in turn, got me a new passive. Something called Mana Wave Predation (Unique Arcane).

Even without strengthening the trait, my Mana Wavelength Iris is stronger than ever before, while at the same time, I can process much, much more than ever before. All in preparation for choosing my third trait far in the future, with help from the advice I got from the trait grandpa.

Simply said. If you use mana and face me, you're fucked, assuming you aren't A LOT stronger than me.

P.S.: This letter will destroy itself in five seconds. I tried to estimate your reading speed and time it so that it burns right as you reach the end.

P.P.S.: But enough jokes. I know we already talked about most of these things, Weslin, but thanks for reading anyway. I just really wanted to write a letter like this. I also set it so that it would only show to your mana signature. Please tell the branch leader I will be back in two days instead of a few minutes. I want to check on my group, and that asshole threatened me with a fine for breach of contract or some other bullshit. I will...

Before the man can finish reading the letter, made of yellow paper with visible threads of mana woven into it, it bursts into wild flames. A massive blaze of golden fire shoots up to the ceiling of the room, setting it on fire.

Multiple alarms ring all at once.

(You petty little shit, what have you done this time!) A voice echoes in the room.

“It is me. Nathaniel’s not here.”

(Oh.. I..)

Weslin ignores her apologies. He brushes the ashes from his hands and with a single pulse extinguishes the thermal flames. For a moment, he stares at his empty hands where he once held the letter.

“What the fuck.”

Chapter 683: Dusk Horizon

After returning to the 9th floor, I send a scan through the area after realizing the base has disappeared from the place I’ve appeared. My scan finds the mark, the kind we developed locates only markers we have made. It has a huge range, doesn’t use much mana, and since it’s only looking for these markers, it’s hard to notice as well.

Doing that, I take a few steps and find a small pile of rocks piled up against a tree. Buried under it is a small sheath of metal with carved words on it.

“We had to move again because of Skippy. Be careful, he might still be in the area. We’re temporarily located in the Dusk Horizon village.”

And immediately, the noises of the jungle sound more dangerous. It feels like Skippy could be hiding behind any of these trees.

And I really don't feel like meeting Skippy.

I reduce my mana signature even further and start moving, keeping myself pointed at the demon village. I know it’ll take me a few hours to get there, but I’m not in a hurry. After the weeks of constant grind in

Beyond, I take it as an opportunity to rest. But even so, I refuse to let myself slack off and start examining my mental techniques.

As funny as the thing with Mapthaniel is, it also makes me cautious. Even now, I can't help but think of my mind as the most important part of me, so not fully understanding parts of it annoys me and could be dangerous.

I have a theory, though. I have long known that powerful active skills gradually change your body. Not to the extent of passives, at least not at the low level mine are. But I have reason to suspect the changes my active skills are going to bring could be greater at higher levels, especially given that some take years to level up just once, giving the skill enough time.

So I have to wonder. Could my low constitution and my powerful skills be doing that already, if only slightly? I know they do, but maybe they're doing it to a greater extent than I thought.

I suspect it could be [Manifestation] or [Focus] that's causing my split minds to behave this way, especially the ones I've kept running for longer periods of time. I still do not think it is anything close to what happened with Duplicaniel, and I don't think it will ever reach that level. It is probably just my mind evolving, maybe it's just something you need to go through. But that doesn't mean there isn't still a chance for it to go terribly wrong. Faora was a good example, with all the pieces of herself trapped and tortured in her Mind Palace.

Maybe 9th floor Nathaniel will finally be the first to beat the living legend, the 3rd floor Nathaniel. Damn, that guy was cool. I wanna be like him one day.

Do you agree, Mapthaniel?

There is no answer. Thankfully.

For now.

I don't know what the hell's even happening anymore.

The tribe we've been staying with is called the Dusk Horizon, as is their village. Tess would probably know why, but I don't. I didn't even bother to ask.

The demons stay mostly on one of six trees clustered together, often connected by powerful branches. This place is relatively safe thanks to the fact that the main tree, the one the others grow around, eats monsters.

If anything bigger than a human-sized snack comes close, it opens its single huge eye on the trunk, and crazy shit happens. I haven't seen it in person, but Dennis and Aaron have been swearing that it's super

Otherwise, the flesh-eating tree doesn't bother to attack, likely because the Dusk Horizon tribe has been feeding it. I wouldn't have been surprised if it actively demanded sacrifices, but as it turns out, they just lure in monsters, which have started avoiding the area, cutting out a source of protein for the tree.

I don't know the exact level of the tree, but it shows as three question marks, so at least it is below 450, though probably not by much.

It doesn't seem to care when demons climb, sleep, eat, or do any of their other daily activities all over it, and it needs to be seriously damaged before it reacts. Though it really doesn't like fire, not at all. Dusk Horizon members mostly have gravitational demon hearts, so that works for them. Similarly to Malika, they have strong bodies and move in a way not unlike Min-Jae.

Even though Min-Jae isn't really aggressive enough for their liking, they probably like him the most out of group 4. They seem to respect and challenge Lily the most, but they spit on the ground whenever Tess walks by. They really don't seem to like lightning primordial energy users.

I think Tess beats the crap out of one or two demons per day, but never gives in to the urge to push further, so they pick on her, exploiting her kind heart. Though now that I think about it, she might be doing it on purpose so that she can use them as training. How scary.

Meanwhile, on my first visit here, I almost killed ten of them. This tribe is shameless as hell. I expected one-on-one challenges, but after I said, "Let's make it quick, just attack all at once," they took me up on it and came at me as a group of ten.

I mean, I know I said it, but I didn't expect them to actually do it. I guess it's just the results of growing up in a tight knit tribe, and them behaving slightly differently than the demons I met so far. As I noticed over time, they even take things you wouldn't otherwise expect seriously. So if you tell them to attack all at once, they think you're either powerful enough to back it up, making it okay, or you're dumb enough to deserve to be fed to their tree.

In this new area, I can already join the web of Ley Lines. It is a secret cupola-like construct that Sophie and I have set up in a number of places to serve as defensive zones.

[Ley Line] is used to create the base, and everyone from group 4 gets a mark that allows them to connect to it. Then they can use some of the functions. My skill makes the construct long lasting, and I fill some of the nodes with my mana every time I leave. We also modified it so Sophie or the twins can charge and connect to it as well.

Soon, Min-Jae might be able to do it as well, and I've seen how much that annoys the twins. This is something they're really good at, and here Min-Jae is, catching up to them. Honestly, I think it'll only make them push further, so it is a good thing.

The web we've made has been heavily inspired by the Veil from the 5th floor and a number of defensive arrays we've seen, including the Academy's. So far, none of the demons have seemed to notice it, or at least they've just been ignoring it. Either option could be true.

Not far from the main tree, I brace myself and take a few deep breaths.

As with almost every other time I've been here, a bunch of demon kids come rushing in while screaming. They all have white hair, red eyes, and thick, short horns. They are tall and slim, leaping from lower branches or hovering down as if they can levitate.

"Two-hearted one!" one of them shouts.

"Human demon!"

"Nya!"

“Mana Daddy!”

“Who the fuck said that!” I ask, looking around.

Giggles echo, and a bunch of demon kids aged three to twelve laugh as they circle me. A few try to sneak in some punches, but I just absorb the impacts.

“You’ve been away for a long time!” A five-year-old girl shouts, jumping on my back and climbing up higher. As always, when she does, she goes through my hair, searching for horns, still refusing to believe that I’m not just a demon who dyes his hair.

The smallest one, a three-year-old boy, clings to my leg and bites me right above the knee, leaving drool everywhere.

That’s new.

I start walking with the girl on my back and the boy clinging to my leg, while the others move along with us.

“I went somewhere to train,” I answer. As always, I’m still a bit curious how much the system truly influences the natives when an attendee leaves for Beyond. Some of my excuses no normal person would believe, but when it is connected to Beyond, the system seems to ensure that they accept it more easily.

“Did ya, kiw somewan stronk?” The boy asks, taking a break from biting my leg and looking up. His red eyes look huge.

“A few strong monsters,” I nod.

He giggles happily and starts biting me again.

“Still no horns,” the girl sighs, disappointed, and taps my head multiple times.

"He's already told you loads of times, he's not a demon!" one of the older girls shouts to the little one.

"My mom said he must've been born with hidden horns, and my auntie said she's going to check someday to be sure he's not hiding it in his pants!" the girl on my back insists, stubborn as ever. She shakes my head left and right while digging through my hair again. "Maybe they're just slow to come out."

"They're not coming out," I answer.

An older boy snorts. He is probably around twelve, his horns already longer than the rest. "It doesn't matter if he doesn't have any. He fought ten of my uncles, and they lost."

The hell? Was it his entire family that grouped up on me? What a vile bloodline. I should've known from the way he was punching harder than the others.

The group goes silent for a moment. Then the little one, still chewing on my leg, pipes up through a mouth full of cloth. "He tastes like metal."

Some of the older kids burst out laughing so hard that a few nearly fall from the branches. The girl on my back tugs harder, frustrated. "No, he is hiding them! I'll find them!"

At the same time, the three-year-old finally lets go of my leg, leaving spit everywhere. He grins up at me, red eyes glowing faintly in the shade. "Can I have your horns when they grow?"

"They're not going to," I answer, shaking my head.

"Yes, they will!" the girl insists, and now two more kids start digging through my hair while others shout out their bets on when my horns will appear.

The one from the vile family smirks. "If they do come out, I get to be first to fight you to the death."

The others cheer at that, voices overlapping as if it is the most natural thing in the world. Fight to the death, laugh about it, then run back to play.

“Sure,” I say flatly. “If I ever grow horns, you can line up behind the rest of your family.”

The girl on my back taps my head again. “See? He admits he has horns.”

“I did not,” I mutter, but no one listens.

Another kid shouts, “When they grow, we will all fight you!”

Great. I can already see them setting up a little death tournament the second I sneeze wrong.

The drool monster at my leg looks up, still chewing on my pants. “If he dies, can I keep his bones?”

I sigh and kick my leg with enough force that the drool monster loses his grip and goes flying into the air. While he’s up there, I use [Redistribution] to freeze him in place. Before his movement fully halts, his face twists into a wide, happy grin.

The girl on my back moves and tries to dig my eyes out with her hands. She always does that.

I freeze her movement as well and take a step forward, leaving her body hanging in the air in the position she had been clinging to me.

The remaining kids charge at me all at once. Someone kicks at my crotch, someone else pulls out a dagger, and the vile one tries to punch me with gravitational energy surrounding his fist.

All of them freeze mid air.

It almost looks like some sort of twisted painting. A bunch of white-haired, red-eyed kids with horns, attacking me with wide smiles on their faces.

Knowing she hates it, I step toward the girl who was searching through my hair and start poking her tiny horns. I tap them multiple times. From the ground, I pull up a bunch of grass and put it on her hair. Noticing her mouth is slightly open, I shove a few flowers inside. I finish by moving her hair into her eyes so that she can't see anything.

I walk between the floating kids, hands in my pockets.

The drool monster gets his nose tapped, then I wipe the spit from my pants onto his forehead in an awkward motion while lifting my knee high into the air. For good measure, I press a patch of grass between his teeth so he looks like he's been trying to snack on the lawn.

The dagger kid gets a quick poke in the ribs. Then another. Then another. I keep going until I'm satisfied he'll feel it the second he unfreezes.

One of the older girls has her mouth slightly open. I drop a tiny pebble inside. Not big enough to choke her, just enough to leave her spitting it out in disgust later.

I do similar things to all of them, and finally, I step back, satisfied. I'm not even sorry. Not in the slightest.

A cackle escapes my mouth, and I secretly use nearly invisible threads of mana to tie their shoes together, weaving them just wide enough that they can waddle about. I set it to dissolve after one hour. After that, I release my skill and teleport away.

I stop by the home belonging to the leader of this tribe. An old demon man with his name showing three question marks. I walk over to his usual spot, in a house made of wood, built at the top of the man eating tree. I'm sure he sensed my presence as soon as I approached the village.

Once there, I greet him with a simple and respectful nod.

After looking at me for a moment, he nods back, and I leave, teleporting back to our temporary base. As scheduled, everyone's already here, sitting around the table with some snacks on it.

“Hey,” I say, greeting everyone and getting a chorus of greetings in return.

(Food!) Biscuit shouts, sounding the most excited of all of them, as he jumps into my lap the moment I sit down. He expands in size until he’s about as big as a Labrador and snuggles against my whole body.

I wait until he settles, then look around him to see the others. They all seem a bit quiet, as if wanting someone else to speak first.

Tess takes that role. “Before we have our meeting, I think we should share some of the information Sophie managed to gain.”

Her tone sharpens my interest, and I glance over at Sophie, who gives me a strange smile in return.

And Tess continues, “It seems that our round’s first Beyonder will be participating in the 3rd tournament.”

Chapter 684: Get them!

I tap on Biscuit, signaling him to shrink so I can focus on the others. He seems to misunderstand, though, and instead of shrinking his body, expands even more, forcing me to strengthen my manabloc chair before it cracks. He snuggles against me playfully, and I can hear his breathing close to my ear while his wet nose pokes my ear.

My body is barely visible under him, and I peek to the side so I can look at Tess. “Where did we hear this from?” I ask.

Instead of her, Sophie answers, “I learned it not long ago, from Luan.”

I push against Biscuit and move him slightly. He seems to think I’m playing and pushes back with excitement, rubbing his head against mine. I peek from the other side this time, bringing Sophie into view.

As if she’d been waiting for just that moment, she meets my eyes. “Luan didn’t tell me much about the man, not even his name or even what guilds he could be in. He only mentioned it as a warning. I’ve tried to learn more, but Frontier still refuses to explain. Maybe I will get a bit more once I reach the 4th floor.”

"If Frontier knows, isn't it possible that the Primordial Knights know something too?" Tess asks, looking at me.

I give up peeking and mumble from under Biscuit, and answer without looking at her, "I've never asked, to be honest. I could try, maybe Weslin knows a thing or two. But isn't it more likely that Luan's bullshitting? It's a strange thing for them to know about, much less for him to share with you so casually."

I can't actually see Sophie, but I can just imagine her shaking her head. "Luan is... difficult. He follows that odd sense of honor he has."

"Does that honor include attacking a bunch of Beyond newbies?" I ask.

"He didn't do a very good job guarding her."

"I think that was deliberate, probably under orders from Frontier. I saw him fight more than once, Nat. Luan is insanely strong. If he had truly done his best to protect her, it would have ended very differently."

"So they wanted you instead of Faora, and you fell for it by just offering yourself up?" I ask.

"I think it was more than they already had a replacement for Faora in mind. I just made the offer myself before they could bring their replacement in, and Luan decided to accept me. Frontier seemed to agree. If I'm not good enough, I'll probably end up the same way that feylith bitch did."

"Dead."

"Yes, they'll probably kill me off."

"Izzy, what do you have to say to that crap?" I call toward where I think she's sitting, leaned up against Giga Noodle.

"If Sophie dies, I think I may die too. I am too weak to survive alone," our empath says simply.

"Is that some kind of emotional blackmail?" I ask, not expecting such words from her.

"Maybe. Who knows. Sophie certainly doesn't. I can feel it, even when she tries to hide it. She can't hide anything from me. So yes, it's very possible that if my dear sister Sophie, whom I love more than anything, dies, I'll die too."

Daaaaamn.

Silence fills the room. No one knows how to respond to Izzy. Ever since we pushed her to act on her emotions instead of always trying to please us, she's started acting out like this. Just like a feisty teenager, using her powers every now and then to get her way.

I don't think for a second that it's ill intended or meant to hurt any of us. Even someone like me can see that. It's just the result of Izzy trying to find her place instead of constantly bowing to our feelings, even if it does mean she acts this way from time to time.

Honestly, it makes me kind of happy. It feels better, and somehow right, even if it does make some things more difficult.

Biscuit expands even more and then bites at me, taking my entire head into his mouth. I can smell his breath and see his tongue and teeth. He grabs me gently, playfully shaking my head before letting go and licking me with a tongue bigger than my torso.

"Eww," Dennis blurts out, making the obvious mistake.

"Biscuit, get him," I say.

The giga corgi jumps off me, breaking some of the furniture in the process, and rushes at the poor twin, who vainly lifts his hands in front of his face. He might even try to teleport away, and I might even disrupt that attempt.

Lily stands by my side. Looking up, I see her offering me a towel. With a nod of thanks, I take it and wipe off my head, while Lily sits in the armchair next to me.

Tess is already speaking again. "So far, it seems right to assume that the First Beyonder is going to be stronger than anyone from Earth's tutorial, judging by the way the others treat him. The top guilds seem to know more about him than we do, yet they're still acting like this."

"So, S rank then?" Lily asks from beside me.

Tess shakes her head. "I don't think that's it. While yes, he could be S rank, that alone wouldn't earn him so much attention. From what Nat's told us, we know more Rulers are meddling around as Handlers, so it's possible they've been telling their attendees more about this man. It seems to be less about his current strength and more about his potential."

"Every S rank is considered to be a future Absolute, so are you saying the First Beyonder is being seen as a Ruler candidate?" Min-Jae asks.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Sophie sneaking nervous glances at Izzy, who is sitting on the floor against Noodle. And Izzy meets her sister's gaze with a wide smile, which only seems to make Sophie even more uneasy.

"It's hard to say. Lyraen, Nyssa, and Solae are all considered powerful future Absolutes, but no one's calling them Ruler candidates. No one's called our First Beyonder anything like that either, and yet at the same time, it feels like some important people are giving him way too much respect," Tess says.

"What even is he? Some kind of mass murderer with an insane talent for mana? A hermit who meditated for decades in the mountains and awakened mana before the tutorial? Another monstrous corgi, maybe a member of Biscuit's family, just to make it dramatic?" Maya snarks, waving her hand.

Biscuit, hearing his name, stops and turns toward her, away from Dennis, who is still hiding his face from Biscuit's giga form. Maya immediately realizes her mistake, but it's too late. With a squeak, she lifts her arms, trying to shield herself from the attack of the now horse-sized corgi.

Everyone else ignores her, and only Dennis gives her a quick salute, silently thanking her for her sacrifice.

“He would’ve had to survive the surface of Beyond as a level 0, assuming he started there like the rest of us. Even now, people are saying the surface is often more dangerous than the fifth floor, even S ranks have been known to die there,” Lily says.

“Wouldn’t he have to have gone through three trials before that?” Min-Jae wonders. “All of you did, right?”

“Well, we can ask him. If he really does end up joining the tournament.” I say, lowering my voice, not wanting to draw the attention of the beast now pressing its huge nose against Maya’s face while she giggles and struggles to push him away. “Sophie, did you find out what they need you for already?”

“It’s the same as with you. While Nyssa’s hoping you’ll help her to the sixth floor, Frontier hopes my mind magic will do the same for them, though in a different way than the Primordial Lunatics. Apparently, Bloodline started stirring things up as well and got Crimson Forge to join them. My Handler said it’s been a long time since he saw people racing so hard for the 6th. He also mentioned a rumor that something big happened on the lower floors.” Sophie shrugs after glancing away from Izzy.

“Yeah, the Cockroach is there. Also, really? Primordial Lunatics?”

“Everyone calls you guys that. And I think your master being trapped there isn’t the only thing that went down. Something else happened on the lower floors.”

“That’s for others to trouble themselves with. Do you want more explosive cubes or temporary tattoos?”

“Not really, but I will take a few more of your mana woven clothes. That shirt you gave me is insane. Some guy offered me a lot of shards for it.”

“He was likely interested in industrial espionage, trying to obtain the design or replicate my patented process. And Sophie, it is not mana woven, it’s manatex.”

"Screw off. I'll give you the design and work with you on it."

"I'm hurt," I say, turning to my right. "Are you seeing this, Lily? This is what I have to deal with. Will at least you defend me?"

"No," she says with a bright smile. "Your designs are terrible."

"First floor, Lily would've defended me."

"First floor, Lily would be blushing and staring at you in secret," she says with the same smile.

"Typical lust subclass girls," Dennis sighs.

"Biscuit, get him!" Lily says right away while pointing at the twin.

Looking up from his place on top of Maya, Biscuit lifts his head and tilts it, ears flopping. A smile-like expression spreads across his face as he stands up and charges Lily, who squeaks and falls to the floor.

The brutality of the attack is too much to watch, so I turn away and look at Tess. "How is your Beyond party doing?"

"It is going quite well. We have Leticia and Luna joining us. Jean, Lucien too, and..."

"Lucien?"

She sighs. "Spacepup."

"Oh, I see, that little shit."

"Then we met up with a few more of Leticia's and Jean's beyonders. We were working with Baek for a while, too, if you can call it that."

"No sight of Vic?"

"None at all. I bought some bits of information from the guilds. She was seen on the 2nd floor a long time ago, so I suspect she might be on the 3rd already or maybe even making her way to the 4th."

"I tried looking too, but I could only find scraps about her. Did you know there is an option to pay off the information guilds to keep them from sharing your info? I mean, people will still sell it if someone offers enough, so it ends up being a matter of who pays more, you to make them shut up or the other party to buy your details."

"Yes, I know that. On another note, Lily and I should be able to reach the third floor soon."

"As long as some guild doesn't kidnap me and try to force me to join them," Lily calls from under Biscuit, who does not even move, just lies on her with a proud expression.

"Any serious trouble?" I ask her.

"There's always some kind of trouble. Most of the time, the guilds are super nice and generous, though when I reject them, they tend to get annoyed and try some shit," Lily mutters.

I glance at Tess, who shrugs. "We've long since known Lily was a highly sought after healer. But I'm keeping an eye on her, as are the others in my party. Plus, it helps that even if they get through us, that just means they get to face Lily."

"The Bulldozer," Aaron whispers with a dark face.

"The Terminator of Lust," Dennis adds in the same tone.

"Biscuit, get them!" Lily calls from underneath.

Unfortunately for her, the corgi only expands in size more, totally obscuring her beneath his bulk. He yawns and settles in more comfortably.

After an hour or two, everyone calms down, and the conversation continues more smoothly, and I share some of my own information.

Working with Min-Jae, we go over his library, while he recommends a few mana stones that I immediately take for study. In exchange, I tell him some things I learned from the Doc, like how to get the most out of the Gravitation Wavelength Eye he has, and how to make it fully integrate with his body.

There also turns out to be something like an improved version of what Min-Jae does with gravitational energy to train his body. I got it from one of the demons from Primordial Knights. I bought it cheap, too, I just had to beat the guy until he almost died.

It's been a long time since I saw anyone as happy as that, so I think I may have gotten scammed. Somehow.

After getting a design from Sophie, which she sometimes comes to check on as I work, I start weaving a shirt from manatex. It is something I started doing out of boredom, clothes made with a base of Ley Lines. So far, I still can't make them entirely out of Ley Lines, so I have to thread them together with Mana Weaving, in a manner similar to the way I used to apply [Knitting].

I switch between these techniques as I go. I'm not all that good at it so far, but I want to learn where to use Ley Lines, where to use more flexible knitted lines, and where I should weave in more durable threads. All for maximum comfort and defense. I even had Maya tell me a bit about tailoring, since she knew some things about it from before the tutorial. That learning session ended with us coming up with new ways we could apply it to our armor.

It is weirdly calming. Stretching threads of mana, compressing them, using [Manifestation] in different spots. I am still not sure how long they'll last, but they should hang around a few months at the minimum for sure. Each of these pieces has durability on the level of mid to upper epic armor, just without any added effects. For now.

As I do this, I let my mind wander. Part of me listens to the low murmur of conversation, part of me observes Biscuit resting against my leg, and another part opens my status, which I stare at while I work and plan my next progress.

Name: Nathaniel Gwyn

Title: Champion Candidate

Difficulty: Hell

Rank: A, Shimmering Silver

Guild: Primordial Knights

Floor: 9 - The Pit

Time left until forced return: 2y 84d 19h 59m 6s

Lvl 346

Strength: 291

Dexterity: 272

Constitution: 476

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1744 + 1744

Primary Class: Mana Weaver (Unique Arcane)

Sub-class:[Adept of Pride]

Active skills (9/10):

Focus - Lvl 70

Perception - Lvl 68

Redistribution - Lvl 70

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 70

Ley Line - Lvl 65

Eclipse (Pride) - Lvl 49

Empyrean Lance - Lvl 31

Manifestation - Lvl 16

Accumulation - Lvl 19

Constructs:

Reinforcement

Mana Regulator

Mana Sovereignty Mantle

Kinetic Mana Heart

Sealed Ignition Heart (Partially Sealed, 2/3)

Mental Frame

Thought Maze Circuit

Thermal Flux Regulator

Passive skills (4/5):

Mana Kinetic Conversion Reservoir (Unique Epic)

Mana Wavelength Tyrant (Mid Arcane)

Subdermal Combustion Weave (Mid Arcane)

Mana Wave Predation (Unique Arcane)

Tokens:

Send a single item to your disciple (up to epic rarity)

Passive skill combination token (low arcane)

Beyond visitor token - 1 year (unlocked after tutorial)

Beyond 4th Floor High end residence permit

Beyond 7 day stay token

Beyond 14 day stay token

Beyond 14 day stay token

Shards:6,686,111

Chapter 685: Pride in the Burden

I do not sleep in my room at night, even though I have a mattress there. I gave the twins a lot of good things in exchange for it. They'd stolen a dozen of them from the Academy. Some of the demons got their hands on a few as well, which made it really profitable for the twins. In a way, it almost reminds me of people getting gold from natives in exchange for glass bead necklaces.

Still, even with a fancy mattress, I end up on one of the highest branches of the man-eating tree, in a patch where the branches thin out enough to offer a view of the night sky.

I receive a question and send back my answer, and soon after, a floating burrito-shaped corgi appears near me and plops down on the branch. This time, Biscuit is in his adult form without the antlers. He's wearing a vest, showing that he doesn't plan to expand in size anytime soon.

The vest is something Izzy made for him with the help of some of the women from Dusk Horizon. It's been woven from the black threads of a dangerous spider often found in the area north of here. On it is a set of embroidered images, colorful and cute. And pockets. Lots of them. Biscuit likes to keep things in them, mainly shiny stones.

"You still don't want to come to Beyond?" I ask.

From his lying position, he lifts his head and shakes it. (Food.)

That single word contains dozens of sentences interwoven with images, memories, and flashes of the scents he's experiencing. As always, I look very different through his eyes from how I see myself in the mirror.

I'm not black and white as I would've expected, having always heard that was how dogs saw the world. In Biscuit's eyes, I look much bigger, and the colors around me are warmer than the rest of the area. Through the shared sense, I feel what he feels when I pet his head, an incredibly soft and gentle sensation. My voice also sounds different, softer and clearer, as if not a single word I said could be missed.

There is much more, but even these surface thoughts, memories, and feelings, all shared in less than a second, would be enough to overwhelm some people at my level and might even kill a normal human outright. It feels crazy when I think about it from the point of view of my pre-tutorial self.

In answer, he nudges my hand. He continues until I pet him again, while he keeps looking up at me.

"You really should stop playing with that ferret thing, it is creepy."

(Friend!)

"I would rather it was sustenance."

(Asshole!)

"That thing is so much worse than me."

Biscuit bites my finger, shaking his head while holding it between his teeth.

"How scary."

(Asshole.)

"Yes, that's me. What do you want to ask?"

(Happy?) He stops shaking his head and instead looks into my eyes.

I give it a thought, but not for long. "I think I am, and you?"

(Friends. Happy. Food. Happy. Stay. Always.)

"Well, if we want it to stay that way, we'd better take out anyone who tries to interfere, shouldn't we?"
I say. Though I do notice that he's put friends before food.

(Fuck up!)

"Yeah, but please don't say it too often, the others will complain."

His voice turns deeper, the kind you would hear from a dark sky with the distant rumble of a world-ending storm. (Be not afraid.)

"You little jerk, I'm not afraid of them."

(Gone. Weak.)

"Yeah, yeah. Brave words from someone who shows his belly for the smallest piece of deer jerky. Have you met up with your disciple through your token?"

(Meet. Happy.)

"That's nice to hear. Hopefully, you get to summon him during the 3rd tournament. This one will be spicy, though, so we'll have to be careful."

(Be there. Help.)

I ruffle the top of his head. "Yes, if we need it, I will ask."

(Help. Now?)

The words catch in my throat, heavy and difficult to force out. "No need," I manage after a pause. "I can endure this much. The others haven't noticed, so don't tell them. Okay?"

He bites at my hand to get my attention. (Friend.)

I take it all in, the sentences, the flashes of memory and feeling. They are warm.

"I know my body is getting more and more fucked up as we go. But I have a plan. Several of them actually."

He stares at me for a while longer. (Stay. Together. Always.)

The sound of these sentences is not the same. Each word comes out softer, carried on a voice that sounds weaker with each one.

I look at him for a bit before reaching out and slapping his back near his butt, making him twitch and woof in surprise.

He attacks me right away, in a way that makes me wonder if the drool monster demon didn't learn his ways from him.

I return to Beyond feeling refreshed. We set up more plans, well, mostly Tess and the others. Even though we are not strong enough to avoid being thrown around by much more powerful people, there are still ways for us to fight. Soon our time will come too, when we will stand as the top dogs of Beyond, replacing the monsters who've already finished their tutorial.

Back in my room in the branch of Primordial Knights, I look at the burned ceiling and wonder what the hell could have happened in here. Did the security lady do that?

So far, there's no one knocking on the door, but I am sure people have been alerted to my presence. While I wait for them, I make my preparations and continue to think.

There's no way for me to hide it from Biscuit, but thanks to my effort, the others from group 4 do not know. Lily might suspect something soon, especially if we want to experiment on my body, and I will not let her. I already have countermeasures in place for that.

It is silly to hide it, I know. As cliché as it sounds, I don't want them to know. Not because they would worry, but because they would treat me differently. They would try to take on some of the burden I've placed on myself. But my pride tells me this is the right way to go about things. I want it that way.

Maybe in the end, it is not just a slightly selfish act that I've forced on myself. Instead, it's my pride telling me that I can handle it, that I can endure it.

I will continue pushing my body. I will not stop leveling up. I will get my next body upgrade soon, which will make these problems worse. My partially unsealed heart. All the constructs I've been strengthening, and having to fix more and more often. My active skills as they steadily grow too powerful for my body, leveling too quickly for how low my constitution is.

Even then, I feel it is not enough. I can push myself more. I can become stronger.

I'll stop raising my constitution, and I will change my restrictive training emblem and burden enhancement inscriptions so they no longer increase it. Just so I can see how the higher-leveled active skills affect my body. In the process, I will master these skills to an even higher degree.

Lissandra said I have five to ten years to come up with a way to solve all of this, and I plan to do so. I will continue running downhill, gaining more and more speed as the slope grows steeper, just so I do not fall.

I hear a sound and watch as a letter slides from under the door. I stare at it for a bit, but it does not explode or burn, even after I do a few checks on it. Taking a few steps, I grab it and read the contents.

The branch leader angry. Security leader angry (more so than usual). Weslin and Talon are waiting for you at the foundation of the new base.

I recognize the handwriting as belonging to one of Talon's underlings.

Without hesitation, I move quickly, taking a few of my prototypes and some items I think I might need. I don't bother with the door. Instead, I reach toward a [Ley Line] I know they haven't discovered yet and teleport. I know it will trigger dozens of alarms, but that's a sacrifice I'm willing to make.

Outside the guild branch, I use Wraith Dance a dozen times in a row. Some simply take me around large groups of people, others take me across entire streets. I channel one after another in quick succession. When I finally come to a stop, I examine my body, pleased to find no damage at all.

Exiting the city-like outpost, I lift into the air and head in the direction of the outpost we've been working on. There are a few monsters along the way, but this time I ignore them and just continue forward.

In about ten minutes, I reach the meeting place while sending a signal through the small brooch pinned to my shirt. As for my clothes, they are mostly white, like a uniform, with a pale blue shirt beneath. Out of the multiple styles offered, I picked the most comfortable ones that still looked the least formal. The brooch, after receiving my mana, decodes it, confirms it is me, and then activates while sending a single ping of signal towards the others.

This is already the third one I've gotten, since I dismantled the others, yet so far, I still can't mimic how it works, no matter how much I try.

Once inside the camp, the ones responsible for security deactivate part of the defenses. I get marked, and after that, I'm allowed to pass. There, standing on the edge of the camp, Talon waits for me.

He is waving and smiling brightly. Unlike me, his clothes are more formal and well taken care of. On his back rests a pitch black bow, and the sleeve on his left forearm is rolled up to his elbow, showing an emblem etched into his skin. I know that emblem helps him concentrate, letting him channel his Primordial Stellar Wind and form projectiles from it. It also helps him to create arrows made purely of mana.

"Long time no see, Nathaniel. You look good! I just got a list of complaints from one of our scouts. He said he could barely feel your mana or notice any of the kinetic energy radiating off of you. He only realized you were near when you got close enough to send a ping."

"Isn't that his problem?"

"Oh, come on! The guy is trying, and despite being a demon, he's one of the more reasonable ones." Talon waves it off.

He takes me to the edge of the outpost, and only there stops to face me. His voice becomes quieter. "He has good hearing, so don't provoke him, please? Nathaniel, I swear, he's going to challenge me again if he hears you say that. I am tired of lunatics trying to fight me the moment I look even a little available. I didn't sign up for that shit. Every single time, every damn time, the moment I breathe too loud, somebody comes running with that smug demonic grin. 'Oh, Talon, I've been waiting to test myself against you!' Test yourself? Test yourself on what exactly, my nerves? My patience? My good heart? Because I'm starting to get fucking fed up!"

His voice lowers even more, and his expression twists into something almost as maniacal as some of the demons he's been complaining about. "You know how many nights of sleep I've lost already? Do you know how many dinners I had to leave going cold because some lunatic thought it was the perfect moment to test themselves against me? I can't even eat in peace anymore. I sit down with a nice roasted dead fucking bird, and boom, challenge. I sip water, boom, challenge. I sneeze." He pauses and takes a deep breath. "I FUCKING sneeze, Nathaniel, and suddenly I am in the middle of a duel like it is some sacred demon tradition!"

A sudden grip on my shirt pulls me forward, his gaze darting around. When he sees no demons standing nearby, he shakes me slightly. "And don't get me started on the bow. Ever since I got it from the Primordial Lunatic treasury, it's been the same thing. 'Talon, BUDDY, let us see how long I last against your arrows!' You know how long they last? Ten seconds. Maybe fifteen if they're particularly stubborn. And then somehow I end up being the bad guy because I went easy on them. What do they expect me to do, fucking kill them right away? Do they even understand how many shards I would be fined with the clauses in my contract?!"

His grip becomes stronger. "And every time I complain to the branch leader, that asshole just laughs in my face and says: 'Oh, Talon, that's just the price of power, you should be proud!' Proud?! Proud of what, exactly? Proud that I suffer from mana deficiency because of all the constant fighting? Proud that

my shirt sleeves keep getting ruined in the process? I liked that shirt, Nathaniel! Do you have any idea how hard it is to find one that fits properly?"

After finally letting go of me, he takes a step back. His eyes are wide open, and he smiles far too brightly. "I swear, if one more person tries to ambush me in the bath, I'm quitting. I will walk straight into the wilderness and live off mushrooms and grass. They'll never find me, not before I return to my tutorial."

I nod and think about giving him some advice, but from the look on his face, I can tell he's not interested in hearing it. He just wanted to vent. So instead I ask, "So what happened, and why are the branch leader and security lady angry?"

"Oh, that? The guild currently holding seventh place in the rankings just declared war on us."

Chapter 686: Eternal Court

Talon leads me through the base while the others offer their greetings. The group here is mostly the same as the one I've been working with for the past few months, so I know most of them already. Usually, it's somewhere around ten to twenty people, mostly from Primordial Knights with a bit of hired help mixed in.

Me and Weslin usually take care of security. While others focus on building the core of the future base and handling logistics. As for Talon, I think he's mainly there to organize things. Most of the people from the Primordial Knights don't even care that he might be weaker than themselves. They're simply glad they don't have to deal with it themselves and can just focus on their own tasks.

"Do you know how long it has been since there was a proper war between two of the top ten guilds?" he asks me, clearly excited. A part of me thinks it might because the demons from our guild are about to be too busy to keep challenging him. Though it's more or less his fault, somehow he still doesn't know how to treat them properly, and that's why they keep coming at him.

"No idea," I answer.

"Three decades. The last time it ended up pulling in seven guilds in total. When it was all over, three of them completely dissolved. Four hundred attendees and three dozen locals died in the process. Because of that, most of the old guilds like ours made some kind of informal pact to avoid future guild wars. They rarely bring anything good."

We stop as Talon greets a man who's currently working on creating an alloy out of three of the metals we've managed to mine here. He pours it into a mold made of stone, also gathered here.

With a satisfied nod, Talon smiles at the thylarin man before continuing. "I tried asking the branch leader about these accords, but apparently my rank's still too low and I have no clearance," he snorts.

"I know nothing of it, if that's where you're heading with this."

He stops and stares at me. "Not even for a moment did I suspect you were going around asking about that kind of thing. I still checked with Weslin just in case, but he doesn't seem to care either. I need more information! This is egregious."

"It's fairly likely. They're going to exploit the fact that Nyssa is on the fifth floor at the moment, along with our second S rank and all of our elites, are on the fifth floor. That's left us quite vulnerable here, and it's not like we've been trying to hide what we've been doing. Plus, they might be looking to target Weslin before he becomes an S rank."

"His strength won't really increase all that much when he becomes one. He just gets a fancier identification emblem." I note.

"That is true, but just getting that rank counts greatly toward the guild's performance. I think they consider us the most vulnerable of the top five currently. The dumb fucks. They probably think they can exploit it, push us down, get some points while doing so, and then slip into the top five before the next reset to grab better bonuses and other stuff. Also, Weslin is currently the strongest member we have on the third floor, so they might think they can steamroll us once he is dead."

While observing Talon checking on our dedicated detectors to keep the area scans up, I think about the current situation. Honestly, it is a bit annoying. We're not that far from finishing the core of the outpost and setting off its ignition.

Once it is done, my third beyond floor quest will be complete. The Primordial Knights would gain a solid amount of points for future guild ranking calculations, and the path to the fourth floor would open to me.

It could have been finished sooner if I had gone with a smaller base, but I let Weslin change my mind. I can only guess this is what he went with after discussing things with leadership. So we started gathering the materials, clearing the space, and defending it from monsters. We avoided staying here during the night, though we did cut it pretty close on occasion.

This floor is the kind of setting that makes nights extremely dangerous, even to S ranks. The safest place is always within the outposts, each has a strict limit on how many people it can hold, based on size. Usually, the limits are 10, 100, 1000, and the largest can hold up to 10,000. If the night comes and even one person above that limit remains inside, the entire outpost loses its safe zone status. Whatever prowls the floor at night usually kills everyone.

I heard about one such case from Weslin. Ten years ago, there was an outpost with 10,000 people, they were even hosting one of the strongest locals on the third floor. Whether it was an act of deliberate sabotage against the place, bad luck, or some other reason, one night that number went over.

Everyone died. The newcomers later found the whole city wiped out. Not a single destroyed building, yet every person inside, attendee and local alike, had been torn apart so badly that the body of a single victim was found to be scattered across the entire city. There wasn't even a single sign of anyone fighting back.

The quest of this floor is to participate in building yet another safe zone.

We reach Weslin, who is standing near one of the demons from Primordial Knights. Their conversation is short, and I can hear how annoyed Weslin is. Not with the situation itself, but seemingly with the demon.

In the end, Weslin does not even have to fight. The demon simply steps back, rushes off in a blur of motion, and heads off toward the Black Tower outpost I came from.

"Good news?" Talon steps closer, fist clenched with an excited smile.

Already used to this shameless guy's behavior, Weslin shrugs. "They're sending Morwag to our floor."

"Oh fuck," Talon breathes out, eyes wide open.

The mention of the name piques more of my interest. Morwag is, after all, the second S rank in our guild and Nyssa's "hunting dog" as some people have taken to calling him. He's known for many things, but being delicate is not one of them.

"Yes, my head already hurts. How long until we can ignite the outpost?" Weslin asks.

"A week, maybe two," Talon answers.

"That is not a very accurate number."

"Unfortunately, I can't really give you a better one. A lot depends on the quality of our molds and how much we're able to mine. We've already exhausted a few veins, so we had to start searching for new ones."

"I guess," Weslin sighs, then looks at me. "Rookie."

I glance around.

"Don't look around, you little shit. I meant you." Weslin specifies.

"Oh, come on, Weslin. At this point, I'm established enough to be a senior member of the Primordial Knights, a highly valuable A rank. A great future prospect..."

"That A rank stands for you being a pAin in the Ass and nothing else. I can say that from my unfortunate personal experience. First of all, you and I will be guarding this place. No more monster hunts in the area, no explorations. If we leave, it's possible that everyone here will die, and we do not want that."

I nod. "No, we don't."

"Great. We leave last, just a few minutes before nightfall, to make sure some asshole doesn't try to destroy what we've built. We get here first thing in the morning to ensure the same."

"That would be annoying." I turn to the other side. "Talon, what are the rules surrounding guild wars? Are there any? Or is it something less formal? I checked the rankings for the 7th guild's name, but I don't know anything about them."

Talon replies, "Guild wars have three stages. These are based on informal rules, since no official system rules exist. But the guilds will hold to them most of the time. Those who don't risk pissing off both the Handlers and the locals. The Kings of the three cities on the third floor, and the one on the fourth, especially hate it when you go against them. If you mess around too much, you can say goodbye to your progress on those floors."

"And we don't want that?"

"We do not want that," Talon nods. "The first stage is targeting combatants only, and only outside of the safe zones."

"Oh, that means us here."

"Yes, that's us. Most guild wars are 'solved' during the first stage. You kill the important members, steal their supplies, and all is good. This stage lasts two weeks. If, after that time, one of the guilds is still unhappy with their level of progress, the second stage begins. One week during which you're allowed to target non-combatants belonging to the enemy guild and guild buildings inside safe zones. Some damage to the city or outpost area is accepted, but if you kill non-participating attendees or locals, you'll be in some really big trouble. Usually, you end up paying out a large amount of shards or receiving severe punishment. But if you are a dumb fuck or don't do your utter fucking best to avoid casualties with the locals, the Local Kings will come down to fuck you up."

"Can you hire other attendees to help?"

"That's the third stage. It also lasts a week. During that, you're allowed to get other guilds to help or hire outside people."

"So it is just guild versus guild for the first three weeks?" I ask.

“Are you really that naive? Everyone fucking cheats,” Talon sighs.

Next to him, Weslin nods. “If you cheat, make sure there are no witnesses. Do not kill the favored attendee of a powerful Handler. Otherwise, you risk the handler doing everything in their power to screw you over. They keep records on their attendees, which they can use against you later. Usually, they don’t seem to care, and even if they do, it is difficult to press it. But the more powerful ones, and those willing to put in the effort, can do it.”

“Weslin, that sounds like a jinx, doesn’t it?”

“You’re right, rookie. Eternal Court...”

“Why don’t we call them Eternal Clowns?” I ask.

“I second that,” Talon joins in quickly.

Weslin doesn’t even skip a beat before repeating, “... The Eternal Clowns have the triplets, and all three share the same handler. Their handler is strong, maybe even the real reason they matter. People say it’s either Tandu or Gabele. Tandu is the spiteful one, Gabele is the one with connections.”

“Oh? The Triplets joined them?” Talon asks, surprised.

Weslin nods. “Not all that long ago.”

“Please don’t make me ask who,” I mutter.

“They’re A ranks, all three of them. Upper mid A rank?” Talon turns to Weslin.

The bald man shrugs. “Closer to the top. I heard they got some fancy new skills.” Then he looks at me. “They’re lumorans. Two males and one female. I think they’re at the end of their fourth year of the tutorial. Some have even taken to calling them rising stars. They did well on the fourth floor of beyond and have likely made their way to the eleventh floor of the tutorial by now. They’re quite mysterious

because of their abilities. Some say they hold powerful fragments, others claim they have one or two primordial energies. Some say each has a different trait, and by working together, they combine those traits extremely well. They always fight together.”

“A few more words and they will pop up from behind the corner with boss music playing.”

At that, Weslin only smiles. “That would be nice, wouldn’t it? The Eternal Clowns don’t have any S ranks, but they do have quite a few A and B ranks. Their leader is an A rank himself, but he’ll likely never reach S rank. Same problem as Io, some sort of weakness holding him back.”

“And they thought it would be a good idea to challenge us in the Primordial Lunatics,” Talon sighs and turns to me with a plea.

As I have many times before, I create a manabloc chair. And he slides into it with a comfortable groan and continues. “They probably don’t have much experience with demons. Even fucking Bloodline won’t mess with the Primordial Knights. Poor clowns. They’re probably counting on Nyssa or Morwag not joining in.”

Weslin gestures, and I create another pair of manabloc chairs for him and myself. We sit down. And the bald man goes on to say, “They’re right. Nyssa will not leave her floor for them alone. She would only move if even more guilds grouped up against us. And damn, knowing the demons here, they wouldn’t want her here even if they were on the brink of extinction. I am still surprised she sent Morwag. It must have annoyed her a little that the seventh place guild dared to poke at us like we were an easy target. Do you have any idea when Morwag will be here?”

Talon takes a few moments before answering. “A day? A week? From what I’ve heard about him, I don’t think he’ll be in a hurry.”

They continue talking. I only listen with half an ear, while the rest of my focus remains set on [Accumulation] and on the faint pale-blue halo floating above my head. It’s the simplest design I was able to manifest and maintain. Inside it is a single thread of [Ley Line] forming a circle while the halo surrounds it, mana swirling and spinning inside. Like a calm river, slowly and steadily, accumulating.

It’s still far too imperfect, but that doesn’t bother me. I know I’ll manage to improve it. My excess mana begins filling it while I continue working on making the construct more stable.

Chapter 687: All yours

As night comes, I rush into the basement of the branch house to avoid an array of annoying questions, complaints, and the endless chatter. It is one of the tricks I use to escape them by applying some of the sillier parts of the contract I missed.

Everyone does it.

The Doc is down there. His two tails are swaying like they're arguing with each other as he bends over the table. His thick glasses sit crooked on his nose, and he mutters to himself while poking what I recognize as my pale left arm, the one I cut off for him a week ago in exchange for some of his research.

"I want to meet your healer," he blurts, not even glancing up. His pen scratches over a notebook filled with cramped symbols. "Would she let me experiment on her? Hmm?"

"Probably for a price?"

"Great! Glorious! Decapitation?" His ears twitch as if the word tastes good.

"Ehhh, maybe?"

"Wonderful! Would she be willing to try growing two separate bodies, one with a head, one without, then switch the heads back and forth?" He slaps the table with both hands.

"I don't want to know what her answer would be."

"How nice of you. We are at war, you know?"

He waves one hand like brushing away a fly. "Yes, yes, yes, war. Always the same, always dull, always bodies for me to cut open." His head tilts. "Ah, but Nyssa. She promised Morwag would bring me something fun from the 5th floor. She always delivers."

"What is she like?" I sit on the steel table beside him.

The Doctor's expression shifts. It softens, just a bit.

"She is beautiful. A mistake made perfect," he says. "Something that should've never existed, yet I am grateful I was allowed to linger in her presence. As much as I'm just a tiny footstep in her journey."

"How poetic."

"I am always poetic! My entire work is poetry. What else could be more glorious than discovering the secrets of our bodies? Aren't people always saying to look inside yourself for answers?" He taps his pen against his old arm, grinning. "I just do it literally."

"I think you got that a bit wrong. And Morwag?"

His glasses slip, and he pushes them back with one finger. "Morwag is a perfect representative of the demon race. If you boiled every demon bone, ground every horn, shredded every tendon, simmered it all for two weeks, three hours, ten minutes, fifteen seconds, stirred counter-clockwise the entire time, then let the steam condense into a single drop to get an essence of demons... that drop would be Morwag. The most demon demon to ever demon."

I nod. Talon's going to love the guy.

"You were right about my constructs. They are getting harder and harder to remove. Even the old ones and the earliest changes I ever made are almost seeming to come back to life."

"I told you!" He nearly shouts, tails thrashing. "But no one listens. Please, don't stop, never stop. Make more constructs, ten more, twenty, no, a hundred. A hive inside you! In the best case, get many more of them before the body upgrade. I'll watch them grow until you crack. Beautiful cracks."

"You theorized the body upgrade could kill me."

He raises one finger like a teacher correcting a child. “Not the upgrade. The disruption it’ll cause. A hammer smashed into the nest of wires and strings and bones you dared to call stable.” His grin stretches. “I want to see it. I want front row seats when you break. And if you don’t break? Even better.”

“Yup, that. I’ve been making preparations to counter it, so everything’s going to be fine.”

He exhales slowly, almost dreamily. “Mind and body are indeed mysterious things. Combine them with mana that defies the natural order, forcefully awakened within us, and you get an accident waiting to happen. Oh, to be young and wrong again. To be able to fail so gloriously. I envy you.”

“Good for you. I came to check on the orb.”

The Doc freezes, his ears snapping upright, then he practically vibrates in place. “The orb! The glorious little parasite, greedy bastard, hungry child!”

He doesn’t wait for me, already skipping toward the corner of the basement where the voidcopper door waits.

It takes a minute to open. Both of us have to work together. A precaution set in place so he doesn’t mess with the orb without me here. A deal that was forced on me by the branch leader after the... incident. Barely an inconvenience in my opinion.

The locks click, and the door swings open.

We step into the voidcopper chamber, the walls plated with the same metal the door is made of. The room is just large enough for two people to breathe without touching shoulders.

In the middle, on a small pillar, the black orb the size of my fingernail floats over the palm of a pale left hand. My severed hand is connected to tubes running into containers filled with red, blue, and gray liquids. The hand itself is covered in carved inscriptions, a mess of my work and the Doc’s scribbles blended together.

And the hand is moving slightly. Fingers twitch, curl, uncurl, like they are resisting sleep.

The Doctor exhales, "So beautifully conductive. So obedient, yet so hungry. Adapted to your black mana. Your body, your beautiful broken body."

He rushes closer, crouches low, then begins stroking the pale hand like it is a pet. The hand twitches again, harder this time, jerking toward him like it wants to grab his throat.

Good boy.

While he blabbers, I examine the orb for a few minutes.

Then, testing, I reach out with my hand like all the times before. The black orb reacts instantly. It stretches toward me, trying to drink from my mana.

I don't simply let it happen. The same way it reaches for me, I reach back.

From inside it, I pull a thread of mana. My Mana Wavelength Iris works on full throttle, my unique arcane passive Mana Wave Predation supports me, and I just do it. The orb's hunger for mana is met by my own.

A part of its mana fuses with mine. That mana, entirely unwoven from a part of what used to be the black orb, joins mine, stolen and ready to be used.

It feels wonderful, and wrong, and like a cheat all at once.

The Doc gasps sharply, glasses sliding down to the tip of his nose. His golden eyes seem to glimmer. He sees what I am doing, and his voice trembles.

"Yes, take it, devour it, claim it! Push it as far as your will and effort can carry you. Again and again, push past the edge until all mana will be yours!"

I cut off my connection to the black orb and take a step back with myriad thoughts flashing through my head.

The doc staggers a step closer. His voice becomes quieter, but still carries that insane excitement he constantly shows. "A god born in my basement. A god I will dissect."

The moment I leave our branch to head toward the outpost, someone places a mark on me. More than anything, it feels like being slapped with a wet noodle, even though I notice the effort they've made to hide it.

My mana flares as I take the mark apart, leaving only the connection to its origin. Then I follow it and spot a single lumoran standing in the distance. Like all of them, this one has black skin and golden eyes. The usual web of crystalline features is embedded in his flesh, covering his arms and neck more than anywhere else.

When our eyes meet, he smiles at me and turns to walk away. A single step with Wraith Dance takes me just a few paces behind him, and I follow through the street.

There, at our goal, the lumoran who escorted me is holding a restaurant door open. His golden eyes track me the entire time, unblinking, until I pass inside.

At the table sit two more. A man and a woman. The three of them are nearly indistinguishable. The same obsidian skin, the same web of crystalline features, the same faint smile waiting to spread. If not for the minor differences in where the crystal spreads across their bodies, they could be copies. Even their posture mirrors one another, like reflections set at different angles.

I sit. My escort takes the chair across from me, sliding into it. The other two fold their hands on the table at the exact same moment.

"You're paying for the food?" I ask.

Both men glance at their sister in the same instant. She tilts her head, still staring straight at me, and smiles. "Yes."

I gesture with my hand. When the server comes closer, I say, "The most expensive food and drink you have."

The server hurries off. The grinning brother starts drumming his fingers on the table in some erratic rhythm, but the sound cuts off the moment I look at him. His sister leans back, utterly relaxed. The quiet one remains still.

"So, to what do I owe the pleasure? Do we talk about the weather first? Or will we skip straight to threats? Perhaps you're stalling me while someone else hits the outpost?" I ask.

The two men look at each other, but the woman keeps her eyes on me. "And if we did send someone to the outpost?"

I shrug. "S rank?"

"No," she answers.

I observe her heartbeat, the twitches of her body, the movement of her blood. All of it confirms that she's not lying. It makes me relax a little more, and the mana I had been accumulating seeps back to circulate through my body.

"In that case, I don't think I need to be in a hurry," I reply.

At that moment, the food arrives. Some sort of steak from a high-leveled monster. One bite would likely have been enough to last the pre-tutorial me an entire day. The drink is light purple with blue swirling inside. It is slightly fizzy, bitter, and sweet at the same time.

"You have a lot of trust in your Null King," she notes.

"Weslin hates that name. If you ever do meet him, do not call him that," I say in between bites, then pause. "Or you know what, do. I want to be there when it happens."

I can almost hear the three of them exchanging mental communication, but I do not bother trying to spy on them. Instead, I pay attention to my food.

“Are there many of you here on the Third?” I ask.

The man on the left snorts. “You don’t seriously think we would answer that, right?”

His male triplet joins in. “He does not. He’s just looking for lies and reactions.”

Lastly, their sister, who has not taken her eyes off me for even a moment, smiles again. “Let us say there is someone much more powerful than the three of us coming.”

“Strong enough to fuck up Morwag? And please don’t act like you didn’t already know he was coming,” I say.

She shrugs. “Maybe.”

This time, I cannot even properly estimate what she means, but I judge that even she herself does not know for sure. She seems to think that the person is either equal to or stronger than Morwag. Interesting. I thought the Eternal Clowns didn’t have an S rank.

“Anyway, I’ll be leaving now.”

For the first time, the two men show a hint of aggression, their mana surrounding me. Some kind of field forms, trying to keep me here.

“I would really appreciate it if you stayed here with us a while longer,” the sister tells me warmly.

“Nah. Fuck you. And by the way, nice attempt, but good luck trying to remove the marks I placed on you.” Saying that, I stand up, let [Eclipse] surround me, as I teleport through their field.

I appear near the entrance to the guild branch where I placed a mark just before following the triplets. From there, I quickly reach the edge of the city, rise into the air, and head toward the outpost. The marks on my radar remain in that restaurant while, with a few powerful pushes of kinetic energy, my speed picks up and my surroundings blur.

On the horizon, a dark sky covers a massive area. It almost looks like night itself hanging over one place. The location of our outpost. From within it, I sense the unmistakable vibrations of Weslin's attacks and pulses of his void energy. The defensive array we've set up there is also fully active and in use.

I fly higher, letting my sight encompass the entire area, drowned in darkness. Quickly, I locate a few sections hidden by shields and powered by massive, almost industrial sized, mana batteries.

Multiple javelins of pale blue mana manifest around me. Each one shoots ahead with a booming crack, shockwaves reverberating through the air. They pierce the barriers as if they were paper, damaging the inscriptions that have been placed there.

The moment that happens, the darkness starts wavering and dissipating, and I enter.

A shockwave shoots towards me, tearing through the three barriers I've stacked in front of myself. Another follows right after, stopping only when it collides with the last barrier I manifest, and still manages to push me farther back. Something below roars, the sound carrying a force that feels like it could disintegrate all of the material around us. That roar is followed by a violent pulse of void energy and tremors like an earthquake.

The darkness vanishes completely, revealing a monster below with Weslin standing against it. The creature is distantly humanoid, but much taller, with massive gorilla-like arms and dark brown fur covering its body. Its head is elongated like a hyena's, full of dangerous teeth, and four white horns grow from the sides of its skull.

[Gorakth - lvl ???]

As the last of the darkness fades, the monster screeches even louder and bolts away, throwing itself against a nearby hill. It digs straight into it at incredible speed, clearly using some kind of skill. The hard stone simply moving aside as if it were foam.

“You good?” I ask, landing near Weslin, both of us facing the direction the monster fled.

“Yeah. We got lucky that a stronger one didn’t come out. But even this one was in the 400s, so don’t get any ideas about following it. Our objective is to defend this place.” His tone is steady, but I notice wounds across his body. Not life-threatening, but I know well how durable he usually is.

“As you wish, boss. I met the triplets and left marks on them.”

“Will they be able to remove it?”

“In a few days, maybe. I placed the annoying self-replicating one.”

“Good. Next attack, you're on defense.”

“Please say: next attack you're on defense, because I’m too old for this shit.”

“Fuck you, Nathaniel.”

Chapter 688: Above the battlefield

We return to Black Tower City once the light starts creeping out. In the distance, roars, screeches, and deep vibrations echo as powerful monsters make their way into the shadows. Even within the safety of the outpost, we can sense these powerful presences circling around.

It is also the hour when all city guards and the local “king” sitting in his towers make sure the number of people inside hasn’t exceeded the limit. They watch from afar in every direction, and I am certain that if any attendee or local rushing into the city were to cause that number to be exceeded, they would be killed from a distance, no matter who they were. Either that, or they would be forced to stay outside, far away from the city.

Sometimes I still catch myself thinking how crazy it would be if the city had exactly ten thousand people, and then one more person slipped in, somehow breaking the defenses, however they’re supposed to work.

Weslin and the others separate, each heading to their rooms, the guild facilities, or into the city to blow off steam. I find myself heading back to the basement, into that voidcopper-plated room, waking up the sleeping Doc in the process so that we can unlock it.

I want to train. The sheer possibilities opened by my effort and experiments will not let me rest.

And after all, I know there's going to be more attacks tomorrow.

Once morning comes and we return to the base, my work starts. I find myself being peppered with complaints as I do so, but I ignore them, connecting to the array surrounding the base. I begin modifying it while taking it fully under my control.

When the ones in charge of it raise their voice for me to stop, I face them with a simple: Make me.

I stare them down, letting my two hearts beat in a twisted, combined rhythm, while the halo over my head spins wildly as my accumulated mana rages inside it.

I erase a few of the supportive webs and change the shapes of others. I drain mana storage batteries as I expand the web and connect it to my halo. A few threads float around me, coiling around my arms and shoulders, sticking to them like a sort of 3D tattoo.

It could be said that my work is going smoothly. It's something I have wanted to do for a while, hijacking this kind of array and reshaping it entirely to support my own plans. It takes a few hours, but soon I am done. There are no signs of the triplets or their goons, no trace of that weird field they made before.

Plenty of time remains until night, so I move toward one of the mines. I enter and walk between supporting wooden beams. Every few steps, a symbol has been carved into the wall with a tiny mana battery fueling it, making the hallway glow with even light.

There's a shaft heading straight downward. Wide enough to fit the entire length of a bus. Instead of waiting for the elevator or using stairs, I simply drop myself straight into the darkness.

As I fall, inscriptions around me react to my presence and light up, only to turn off as I descend.

Near the bottom, I absorb my momentum to land gently on the floor. A few more steps take me into another wide tunnel where I find a demon and a velnar loitering near one of the veins. It looks like lightning made of molten copper with a bluish shine.

You cannot sell it to the system shop. It has no name. Its mana conductivity is average at best. Weapons made from it are neither powerful nor special. I tested that much myself, just as many generations of locals and attendees before me have. The only real use for this metal is building up the core of the outpost, according to a set of blueprints left behind by who knows who.

At first, I helped mine it in hopes of increasing my participation and securing better rewards for this floor. Then the doc explained it to me in his own twisted way, even if it was easy to translate.

Simply put, completing Beyond floor quests from already cleared floors will never be as rewarding. Beyond is different from the tutorial. While it exists on the edge of the real world and the tutorial, it's not really the same as either. There are parts of it that even the Rulers don't have much influence over, and one of those is the way rewards are given.

The only exception is clearing the 5th floor and advancing to the 6th, something only a rare few are able to achieve. Otherwise, the other floors have been cleared many times before. At first, by the Rulers who found the First Dungeon. After they reached floors they could not clear, they tried to connect the dungeon to the system and the tutorial system, succeeding in some places while failing in others.

In some ways, it could be said that there are three separate systems. The main system, which seems to cover the entire universe as it continuously expands, forcing newly initiated planets into Pairings. Another subsystem for the tutorial. And still another for the First Dungeon. Similar to the other two, but nonetheless distinct.

To simplify it further, while my participation needs to be acknowledged for me to complete the 3rd floor quest, it does not need to be impressive, since the rewards will not improve much. I already mined plenty, killed monsters, and did my best to protect the outpost's construction. That much the system will take into account.

It also confirms what I have suspected for a long time. For an average attendee, trips to Beyond might not be all that worth it. But the more powerful, lucky, or smart attendees can gain a lot from it.

Information, connections, Beyond quests, Beyond events, any one of these can be more valuable than tutorial floor rewards, yet at the same time, they can also be far worse.

In the end, it truly is a place between the real world and the tutorial. It grants advantages to the First generation, though they are muted, and rewards those who put in the effort.

“Came to mine with us again, mana boy?” the demon asks first, using my appearance in the mine as an excuse to sneak in a cheeky break.

At this point, I don’t even bother trying to stop him. I’ve broken his arm multiple times, but it’s only made him more determined to call me that. A part of me suspects he might have heard Talon say it once and decided to keep using the nickname.

“One day I will bury you down here,” I note.

The demon gives it a thought. “That would be interesting to try. I wonder how long it would take me to get out. It’s half a mile to the surface, the rock surrounding us is...”

I ignore him as he starts making calculations with a bright look in his eyes, and turn to the velnar. “Ehm, I might have broken the array that kept the air circulating down here when I was taking over. I tried to fix it, but it has a terrible design that I hate.”

The velnar just stares at me without saying anything.

“Soo... I was hoping you could fix it, like before.”

“Fifth time,” he says.

“Ehm.”

“This is the fifth time you’ve broken it and then asked me to fix it. You say it is a terrible design, but that’s only because I had to patch it up after you broke it the first time. And the second. Then the third. And then you and Weslin kept telling us to hurry, and you never gave us time to make a new, proper

“I mean, your patch worked pretty well.”

The velnar stares at me again, and in the background, the demon continues to estimate how much rock falling on him would be required to crush his body.

I initiate a transfer, sending five thousand shards to the velnar.

He rejects.

In response, I make it ten thousand.

He accepts.

I quickly leave, feeling his gaze on my back until I disappear around the corner.

As night starts closing in and I finish a conversation with Talon, we finally see movement. The three marks inside the Black Tower moving away from the city, heading our way.

Talon’s words fade into the background as I stand up from the chair I’ve been sitting in. The mana inside my halo spins faster, and the array I took over awakens. My Mana Wavelength Iris activates, aided by my Mana Physique and my unique arcane passive.

When Weslin looks at me, I gesture to him that I’ll take care of it, even as more presences start appearing and encircling the outpost. I detect multiple powerful items and mana batteries filled to the brim. These people cooperate with each other, setting up an array just beyond the edge of our own, though it’s not the same one that created the darkness before. And they wait for the triplets.

I follow my marks, sharpening my sight in their direction, and see the three lumorans appear just out of range.

They stand there. Watching. Calculating. Dragging out the moment. Predictable, almost dull, and most of all, disappointing.

I stand ready to accept their challenge, but they hesitate and wait, delaying the attack, as if their hesitation makes them clever.

A snort escapes me without my realizing, and I rise into the air.

POV Talon

The moment he rises into the air and Weslin's void energy starts to flicker around us in defense, I know things are about to go crazy. And they do.

All around Nathaniel, segments of his barrier light up as attacks rain down while he makes himself a target. That halo over his head grows an even darker shade of blue, and the mana inside starts spinning faster and faster while the flash of the incoming attacks explode around him. Then the halo expands to ten times its size, and in the next moment, condenses and turns pitch black.

The parts of our defensive array he took over light up, supporting him in whatever the hell he's doing, and our industrial rated mana batteries drain in a few seconds. Then that black halo starts pulling in all the mana in the area. Mana from me, mana from the offensive array our opponents set, even drawing in the ambient mana around us.

He's still just floating there, most of the attacks aren't even reaching him now, breaking into mana particles before they even manage to get close, serving as fuel to be devoured by that black halo.

A pulse erupts from Nathaniel, and the world around us drains of color. The effect spreads further outward, swallowing even the area around the attackers. Only the golden rings around his pupils remain, burning all the brighter against the dark.

While the enemies scatter around us, erratic in their attempts to counter him, he calmly lifts an arm into the air, palm facing the sky. The projectile forms there. Threads of luminous mana coiling and fusing, as they pulse with a heartbeat all their own, forging a lance whose core blazes with a golden-white light. It shoots forth, near silent, and leaving a trail of pale blue, white, and gold, much more vibrant in the black and white shades surrounding us.

The lance pierces through whatever defenses the enemy prepared and even kills one of them.

Another lance forms right after, repeating the process.

The triplets in the distance gather together a circle of pale-blue mana glowing around them, spinning wildly. Their crystals glow, and similarly glowing white tattoos appear on their black bodies. The air trembles with the sense of danger radiating from their attack. A single purple projectile forms, a pyramid with a blazing white core, before shooting toward Nathaniel. It burns like a falling star, the sides of the pyramid flashing with shifting hues.

Nathaniel doesn't move to evade. He halts the formation of another lance and simply watches the incoming projectile as it shakes the air around it.

But just like the previous attacks, before it can even come within reach, it starts to dissolve at the edges, already starting to break apart. Halfway through the process, it explodes, a countermeasure likely set in place by the triplets. The explosion paints the sky purple before it drains to black and white. Nathaniel still floats in place, untouched, the only change being the larger halo glowing above his head.

A smile spreads across his face, his eyes wide open like a demon's, the golden circles of his trait burning with an endless, unnatural light.

Once again, he lifts his arm into the air, palm facing the sky. That movement is faster, more energetic, and almost playful. His smile widens.

Then a purple pyramid with a white core starts forming there instead of a lance. The pyramid spins, each side reflecting the nonexistent lights in the area. A thread of mana stretches from the black halo, latching onto the pyramid and pouring mana into it until it swells to three times the size of what the triplets created.

I sense Weslin near me moving into action now, and more of his void energy seeps into the area, stacking defenses around us while he mumbles something, but the entire time, I find myself unable to take my eyes off that pyramid.

The assault on Nathaniel intensifies. Dozens of projectiles, each molded in different colors and shapes, crash toward him, some dissolving into mana before they reach him, while others land, sparking his barrier to life in brief flashes.

His domain, draining all color, expands even further and engulfs the enemies attacking him. Like me, they discover they cannot use any skills to manipulate the mana outside their bodies, and only my Stellar Wind still answers.

With a roar like tearing metal, the pyramid rips ahead, the air shuddering under its speed, far beyond what the triplets managed.

The pyramid slams into the spot where the triplets once stood, the explosion catches them as they run away. The blast expands, the area around it warping under its heat. The surface ripples like liquid waves, stone melting and surging forward before hardening into a jagged sheet of glass. A moment later, the glass itself detonates, bursting into a storm of fine, razor-sharp particles that ride the shockwave outward, grinding everything in their path to nothing.

I start turning back towards Nathaniel when hundreds, thousands of finger long projectiles made of pale blue mana pass through the black sky, each trailing a line of glimmering mana behind them. They pour across the sky like a storm of falling stars, all streaking toward the triplets as more and more follow in their wake.

Another lance shoots off in the opposite direction, breaking the barrier and skewering an attacker with effortless precision. A moment later, a second lance follows. Attack after attack kills B ranks, and maybe even A ranks, without them even being able to stop them. Unable to use most of their escape skills at all, with mana constantly slipping out of their control.

In these moments, his mana feels bottomless, surging without end. Just the fact that it's enough to sustain that monstrous domain is difficult to grasp.

Then the black halo above him finally unravels, and the last threads of mana are drawn back into his body. And when it's gone, he looks unchanged, as if he hadn't spent anything at all.

Above the battlefield, Nathaniel hovers untouched.

Bit by bit, color seeps back into the air, painting over the black and white world. Yet it feels fragile, as if it could vanish the moment he wills it.

Chapter 689: In the restaurant

POV Nathaniel

I land back on the ground with a disappointed sigh. "The triplets ran off. Those assholes removed my marks, and they had some kind of movement skill I couldn't disrupt in time. But I think I still got a few of their buddies."

Weslin turns to me with a snort. "You think you got some? The triplets escaped into the outpost, so it's good you didn't follow them there. We don't want to pick a fight with the Black Tower's master."

"How shameless, little shits," I note.

"You would do the same if you thought you needed to."

"Yup," I confirm.

He looks at me for a while longer before asking, "Are you okay? It's been a while since I've seen you this exhausted."

I wave it off. "It's fine. I tested some new stuff, it was more difficult to process than I expected, but I've already started making modifications. Next time things will go much smoother."

He sits on the ground next to me, resting against the same boulder. "Nothing like testing new things in combat."

“Me neither,” Weslin smiles. “Want me, as a void energy specialist, to point out a few weak points I noticed? There aren’t many. You’re better than me when it comes to dealing with mana, but I just might have seen something you missed.”

“You know I won’t say no to that. Just give me a few minutes to rest, I feel like I might throw up that nice steak I ate earlier. Also, your eyes are slightly red.”

Weslin reaches to touch his face, but his hand freezes midway before he puts it back down. After a few long breaths, his heartbeat calms, and the faint red hue in his eyes disappears.

He, like everyone, has his secrets. I’m just glad to be one of the people he trusts with them.

“Thanks, I seem to lose control more often lately,” he says.

“It happens. Were the triplets really that fast?”

“They used teleportation. I almost cut them off so you could finish them off, but they pulled out some weird shit that still confuses me, and used that opening to escape. It cost them, though, they had to drag one of the triplets into the city because he blacked out from the backlash.”

“Did they not even want a proper fight?”

“I don't think they were prepared for what you just showed them,” Weslin says with a clear note of mockery. “I think they’ll give it a lot more thought before messing with you again. Was that what you’ve been working on?”

I confirm with a nod. “There’s still a lot of work left, but it could turn into something truly great.”

“I can imagine. And you still plan to avoid increasing your constitution.”

“You know the answer. High risk, high reward.”

"And you know I've called you fucking dumb more than once. All that teasing bullshit aside, and all the jokes, I'd prefer not to see you die because of it."

"I know."

"And yet."

"And yet," I repeat with a nod.

"You said your pride tells you the winner is the one alive in the end. Doesn't that clash with your approach?" he asks.

My body is already feeling better, the movement of my mana growing less erratic. It slides back into control as I use Mana Cycling to guide it through pathways and circuits, across my conductive body.

"There are things I value more than my life," I answer.

"Nathaniel."

"Yes?"

"This is the most fucking cliché thing I've ever heard from you. I'm cringing just listening to it."

"Fuck you, Weslin."

"Fuck you too." He snorts and looks toward the fake sky in the distance. "But I can't say much. I'm just the same as you, I'm quite fucked up myself. As much as I think you're dumb, you think I'm dumber."

"That is very correct. Sorry to tell you, Weslin, but you are indeed very dumb."

He glances at me and grins. Then he looks back upward. "In one thing, I think you are right. If your planet really is caught up in a Pairing, and it's possible you face Champions or maybe even an Absolute, then you all need to become stronger and fast. Even if it's only about protecting a few people at the cost of the entire planet."

"I'm glad you specified that. Protecting an entire planet of people I have never met and will likely never meet? What am I, some kind of selfless fairy tale hero? I'd never do that."

"But if you had the strength to do so easily, would you?"

"I mean, probably yeah. I'm an asshole, but if it were easy to do, even I wouldn't just let billions of people die. At the very least, I'd want a good life without having to deal with the kind of mess a mass extinction would cause."

Weslin nods. "I do agree with you on that, you are an asshole."

"That is correct."

"An asshole addicted to progress and the thrill of danger. An asshole who only digs himself in deeper every time someone tells him he's being stupid. An asshole who believes he can push through impossible situations with nothing but sheer, obsessive dedication. A prideful, arrogant, infuriating little shit of an asshole."

"Please carve that into my tombstone if I die."

Night creeps closer, and there are no more attacks on our base. Still, we come to the conclusion that The Clown Brigade, or whatever they're called, will likely strike again. As much as I believe them about having someone stronger than the triplets on their side, I doubt they want to rely on that person showing up sooner than Morwag.

But what can they really do? They can't do much against me, and they don't have the people to face Weslin either.

There has to be something they're still holding back. I just can't believe someone in the top seven would challenge Primordial Lunatics without at least a half-decent plan. Maybe they're planning to pull something against us on the second floor? But we don't have all that many people stationed there. So perhaps they're planning something with a different outpost on the third.

The fourth floor feels like a stretch for them to mess with, especially since it's so close to the fifth. One wrong move there and they would have Nyssa on them in an instant. So it's just obvious they'd try some sneaky shit.

Just like now, as we return to the city with darkness already closing in. Monsters begin crawling onto the surface, their roars echoing in the distance. Several powerful signatures appear just as we reach the outpost.

With perfect timing, an array of mana stones I hadn't detected, buried deep underground, suddenly activate, ripping through a mile of earth and shooting into the air above us after breaking through the surface. A web of arrays sparks alive, meant to hold us here until the monsters can finish the job.

This time, I don't interfere. Instead, I watch as a monster appears on the cliff while Weslin's primordial void energy flares to deal with the trap.

I step away from the others to face the monster and slow it if needed.

The creature towers on its spidery lower body, eight legs with far too many joints, each step clacking against the ground like knives on stone. Its upper body mimics human muscle but swells in grotesque proportions, cords of flesh and veins under armored hide gleaming as if it were drenched in oil. Where a face should be, a cluster of eyes sits blinking out of sync, black and wet, and beneath them opens a vertical maw lined with hooked teeth.

[Skreth - lvl ????]

"Weslin, I think you should hurry, like really hurry," I say.

Something in my voice keeps him from asking questions, and in the next second, the barrier around us shatters, just as more monsters climb over the hill. They're all twisted and broken like the first one, but

instead of attacking, they stand still, watching in silence as we rush toward the city. Only when we finally cross into the safe zone do they turn back, retreating behind the hill as their screeches return.

In the distance, a sudden burst of fire lights up the night, flames shooting into the sky. Dozens of attacks detonate in rapid succession, explosions scattering across the horizon like a battlefield igniting all at once. I recognize the direction and already know what it means, yet Talon still confirms it from my side, his face set in a grim mask.

"That's an outpost called Minefield. Or it was. It was set up for a thousand people," he says.

For a while longer, I watch the storm of attacks raging in the distance, bursts of fire and light tearing the night apart as defenders desperately try to hold the line or escape. The sky flashes again and again, each explosion marking another desperate stand. A part of me swears I can hear their faint screams being carried on the wind.

When I finally force myself to look away, the others head toward the guild branch, while Weslin and I make our way into the city, following the lit streets where a few people still wander. We don't even speak, moving in sync as I track the faint remnants of the marks I left, gathering fragments of information from the air.

Following those traces, I find the triplets and enter a crowded restaurant with Weslin right behind me. The lumoran triplets sit there as expected, showing no sign of the fight earlier today, and daring as always. But someone else catches my eye. At the table near them, a tall thylarin with four arms seated beside a black-haired woman with green eyes.

I blink a few times at Sophie, who only shrugs and gestures a quick "later."

Luan doesn't even glance my way, continuing to enjoy his food. I know he noticed me, and Weslin, too, who stares at him longer than I do. I nudge my partner and head toward the triplets, sitting opposite them at the largest table in the center of the restaurant. Next to them is another empty seat: a massive chair with a plate already set, as if waiting for someone.

I open my mouth to say something, but a huge hand gently lands on my shoulder. Goosebumps rise across my skin. I hadn't even felt the presence behind me, although I should have. Especially now, since my kinetic, thermal, and mana senses are running at all times. Yet somehow I missed her?

"Thank you for joining us," the woman says in a smooth, deep voice. She's a velnar, tall like every other velnar I've ever met. She wears casual clothes, and I notice rings on eight of her ten fingers, each one a powerful item.

"Hela, don't tell me you joined their guild," Weslin says next to my side, as the woman releases my shoulder and moves to sit near the triplets, towering over them. Her movements are smooth, nimble, and entirely unfitting for someone of her height.

Facing Weslin, she answers without apology, "They pay well."

"Enough for an S rank? Don't you have better things to do?"

"They..."

Before she can continue, one of the male triplets interrupts, "Please, keep the details of our deal to yourself, Lady Hela."

The velnar woman tears her gaze from Weslin, then stares that triplet down for a solid ten seconds before turning back to him until the lumoran looks like he is about to collapse. "As I was about to say, they offered me an item from their treasury. My tutorial ends in a month, so why not take it?"

"You'll never get it if you die."

"Was that a threat, Weslin?"

"A friendly warning. Nyssa sent Morwag."

"You are sweet, Weslin, but I considered all that. And I've already met Morwag. Assuming he doesn't leave the Black Tower to fight the monsters that seem to be having such a great time out there, he should be joining us soon."

At that, Weslin sinks into his chair defensively, earning an understanding smile from the velnar.

And just as she said, the doors swing open and a tall figure enters.

The moment he steps inside, everyone in the restaurant turns to him. Not in admiration, but in that wary way one watches a ticking bomb when they have no idea how much time's left on the clock.

Morwag, the most demon demon to ever demon, is muscular and very tall, as tall as Luan, although both remain shorter than Hela. From beneath his white, wavy hair, which reaches his shoulders, two thick black horns peek out. They're not overly long, but they grow from the sides of his head near the ears, twisting forward in a dangerous curve.

His eyes burn redder than any demon's I've ever seen.

Only after taking in the entire room does he start walking, his boots heavy against the floorboards. He moves between tables without haste, each step pulling every eye until he stops at the largest table in the center. Without asking, he drags out the empty chair over beside Weslin and drops into it, leaning back like the seat had been waiting for him all along.

Chapter 690: Morwag

"Weslin," the demon says.

"Yes, Morwag?"

"Why aren't you an S rank yet?"

"Why did your mom drop you on your head as a child?"

Holy fuck.

I keep glancing between the most demonic demon to ever demon and Weslin. Luan sits there, completely unbothered. Sophie makes a face that is somewhere between pity and finally understanding

what the Primordial Lunatics are really like. The triplets and their S rank velnar don't really seem to mind the situation either.

Morwag laughs out loud, not showing the slightest sign that he ever took it as an insult. He pulls Weslin closer and hugs him with a strong, shaking movement. I'm pretty sure if he did that to me and I didn't strengthen my body, it would've killed me.

"Ah, this reminds me of the good old times when we used to be a duo. It was so fun back then, when I was showing you the ropes. I hear you're doing the same for our human boy over there." His red eyes turn to me. There's hardly any gradient to them, just a single vibrant blood-red color with a vertical slit pupil in the center.

"You probably know more about him than I do," Weslin says with a shrug.

"And that's why the Primordial Knights are going to drop out of the top five," the velnar says from the side. She easily towers over everyone here.

"Hela. I swear, every time I hear you talk, I want to punch you. But more than that, I want to punch my blue friend over there. Hey Luan, why don't you group up with this lumbering oaf of a woman and fight me two versus one?" Morwag's eyes are wide open now, and his heartbeat feels oppressive, yet it still hasn't pushed too far.

"I'm not interested," the thylarin next to Sophie says simply, without even looking up from his food. The glowing lines on his arms don't even light up as he maintains his calm demeanor.

Disappointed, Morwag leans back and glances at Sophie. "I thought you were being dragged around by that feylith bitch. Is she finally dead?"

"Yes, Faora has passed away," Luan says.

Morwag's smile widens. "So you got a replacement. Another mind mage for Frontier's silly attempts at reaching the sixth floor. I wonder, if I killed her, would you be more willing to fight me?"

"Yes," Luan says, taking a slow bite of a pink dessert shaped like a small animal, chewing without concern, and only then does he lift his eyes to meet Morwag's.

They lock eyes as they stare each other down until Morwag suddenly shifts his focus to me, like a wild animal. He studies me for a moment, then bursts into loud laughter. "I knew I felt something. You're angry, just like that mind mage over there, aren't you? Do you want to fight? Is she your bud, rookie?"

Not seeing a reason to hide it, I nod, further drawing his attention to me.

While Luan and Hela remain calm and controlled, Morwag continues to feel like the most dangerous person here, if only because of how unpredictable he is. He seems like he's being completely led by his emotions. Out of the three S ranks gathered, he's the one who's most likely to snap and cause chaos, and everyone here seems to realize it, while being sure not to antagonize him too much.

"You could say that," I confirm.

"What a fucked up situation. What would you do if I killed her?"

"Well, first, I don't think it would be that easy for you. She is a pretty nasty mind mage."

"Ahhh."

"Then that douchebag, stick-in-the-ass thylarin called Luan, said he would try to protect her."

"Yes, he said that."

"And I would use the opportunity to sneak up on you."

"Your own guild mate?" Morwag asked, feigning horror.

"Without a speck of hesitation."

Hela starts laughing, and the triplets seem amused too. Out of them, the sister says, "Maybe we should just wait it out and let them clear themselves out."

Morwag laughs too, for a couple of seconds, before suddenly stopping as if someone pressed pause, and turns to the triplet, "Lumoran, I will paint the walls with your insides."

The silence that follows makes me realize the other people sitting around were listening, and at hearing that, all of them stopped. It almost seems like most of them want to leave, but they are scared of what their reactions might cause in the demon.

Seeing that none of the triplets even dares to breathe too loudly, Morwag turns back to me. "Your name was Nathaniel, right?"

"I thought you knew nothing about me."

"I lied. Don't you think anyone foolish enough to believe anything they're told, or blind enough not to see through a lie, is beyond hope?"

At that moment, Luan breaks the silence to order another portion of whatever he's been eating. I see it annoys Morwag, but he says nothing and keeps his attention on me.

The server, hands shaking, confirms Luan's order and quickly rushes into the kitchen.

"Anyone who feels tired should probably leave this place. Don't forget to leave a massive tip," Morwag says to the restaurant at large, though his eyes never leave mine.

For a moment, silence holds. Then someone moves, dragging a chair across the floor. When nothing happens to that brave soul, the rest burst into motion, scattering and clearing the place within seconds.

Morwag drags his chair closer, far too close, and locks his eyes on me. I do the same, looking back almost without blinking. I know for a fact that he's listening to my heartbeat as well, but I return the favor.

I observe the rhythmic, calm beats. Even when he seems annoyed, happy, or outright angry, they don't change in the slightest. His control over his powers is absolute, and I realize that any aggression he shows is a deliberate choice, him allowing his emotions to break through.

"Do you think I could kill you?" he asks.

"Probably, but you won't do it."

"Why not?"

"I haven't given you a reason."

"Not because we are in the same guild, or because Nyssa told me not to?"

"I don't think any of that would stop you."

His smile widens at my answer. "Do you want to fight?"

"Not really. I'd rather fight you when I'm stronger."

"Oh." Morwag seems disappointed. "So you're scared of losing, of getting wounded?"

"No." I shake my head, pulling his attention back to my face. "You just seem like the kind of person I would learn nothing from, and it would annoy me to no end to lose against you. I don't know why, but I want to stomp you into the ground the moment I think I have the slightest chance."

As I say that, I notice how hard it is to control my hearts. I still do it, it is my power after all, but there is a constant push to release everything I hold against this guy sitting so close to me. I haven't felt anything like this in a long time.

Glancing at Weslin, Morwag asks, "Why aren't you more like him, dear Weslin?"

The bald man ignores him completely, which only seems to amuse Morwag even more. He scrapes his chair across the floor with a loud screech as he shifts away from me, aiming to bother Weslin instead.

Deep in thought, I stare at the demon's back when I notice Hela watching me. The huge velnar woman lifts an eyebrow as I meet her gaze. "I heard you messed up the triplets pretty good."

I glance at the lumoran trio. Even though they try to hide it, I can see it bothers them.

Looking back at Hela, I shrug. "Not like it was anything difficult."

To my answer, she just nods, as if confirming something, and I look away. This time, I meet Sophie's eyes.

The moment we do, she creates a connection between us, and I accept it. It's a much improved link, and completely unlike the twins' [Connection]. More relying on her mindbender abilities, subtle and much harder to detect. I have no illusions that the S ranks here could've missed it, but at least it will not be easy for them to listen without us noticing.

(Up until this morning, I didn't even know I would be here.) She explains her presence.

(It's okay. Did Luan come here to pick a fight?) I ask.

(I think he just wants something from the master of the Black Tower before we leave. What's happening?

(The Primordial Knights are at war with Clown's Emerald, or whatever they're called. The triplets are from the other guild, and our big girl here is an S rank who seems to have joined them. You know Weslin from my descriptions, and this creepy demon is the most demonic demon to ever demon, apparently. He's an S rank too.)

(I know you probably can't help it, and it wasn't your fault, but why do I feel like this mess all started because of you?)

(Malicious rumors deliberately spread to tarnish my unblemished reputation.)

(Surely.) I can almost hear a sigh in her voice. (Need a hand? I could try to trick Luan into helping out.)

(I think it is better if you don't. Morwag and Hela are already big enough problems without Luan complicating things even further.)

(I've heard things about Morwag, and I'd expected him to be different. So far, he seems a bit... restrained. But yeah, it is not as if he'd go around breaking the rules in a guild war.)

For a moment, I think about saying something, but I decide against it. I figure it'll be a good reminder for Sophie of how demons can truly be. She already has something of a grasp on it after dealing with the Dusk Horizon tribe on the 9th floor, but Morwag is a more... raw version of what a demon can be.

Luan and Weslin both seem to know what's about to happen. Hela probably knows too, even though she doesn't seem to care enough to try to stop it.

And so the bomb continues to tick down towards detonation, though no one knows when it'll blow. The restaurant feels eerily quiet without the other guests, but the servers and other employees still move about, serving us while everyone picks at their food. The conversation keeps going as well.

Hela leans toward Weslin, trading words as she does. Morwag turns his attention back and forth between Luan and Sophie, poking and provoking. Sophie, to her credit, keeps her reactions measured. She answers politely, but with enough firmness in her tone that it doesn't sound like submission.

The longer we sit, the more the rhythm falters. Food cools on plates, drinks go half-finished, and the steady murmur of voices disperses into scattered fragments. Nothing happens, yet the atmosphere settles into something hard to define, not hostile, just drawn out.

When it finally looks like it is about to end, Luan stands to leave, and then Hela and the triplets follow, I feel myself tense up even more.

The triplets are just passing by when, as if remembering something, Morwag stops them. "Just a moment," he says as he rises.

Weslin doesn't even try to intervene, knowing it would be pointless, while Hela watches on, uncaring.

For the first time, the lumoran triplets begin to realize what most of us already knew.

As Morwag turns to them, one of the brothers stammers, "The rules, you..."

Before he can even finish, Morwag swings his arm and the lumoran sister explodes, as if her body were no more solid than a pile of feathers. She vanishes in a burst of pink mist, her flesh and blood splattering over her brothers and spraying across the wall behind her.

With a nod, Morwag picks up a napkin from the table and calmly wipes the blood from his hand.

As I watch the shocked, horrified lumoran men touch the pieces of flesh clinging to their faces, I realize that Morwag never tried to drag it out. He didn't insult them, he didn't explain why, and he didn't care about the rules at all. He simply did what he promised when the lumoran woman interrupted him, a woman he already considered an enemy, yet not killed instantly, in what he saw as a show of politeness.

At the time, the triplets had taken his words lightly, but now they see he meant every word.

Morwag dabs at the lumoran's cheek with a napkin, wiping away some blood as the man stares back in horrified disbelief, too stunned to move. "Messy, isn't it? So much for your rules."