

Tutorial 691

Chapter 691: Severe mana deficiency

"This will have consequences, Morwag," Hela says.

The demon only shrugs, ignoring her completely, as he continues wiping blood from the lumoran man's face.

"Consequences," Morwag mutters, then shoves the bloodied handkerchief into the lumoran's mouth, forcing it closed. While staring at the man, he continues, "You say it like it is a bad thing."

As he turns toward Hela, the lumoran spits out the handkerchief and starts vomiting, which Morwag ignores. "We have been challenged, Hela, and we will respond without being bound by the rules others set to control the powerless."

"Don't tell me. You know I don't care. I'm only in it for the items."

"I guess you are. But is it good enough to risk your life for?"

"Rumors are already spreading, so I can tell you. The Eternal Court found an ancient armory on the 4th floor, filled with high grade arcane items, some even ranked as high as low pristine. It's incredibly old, and may have belonged to some Ruler's companions, possibly one of the earliest Beyond explorers. Half the guild died just to bring out a few pieces."

"Why not sell them or bring them out of the tutorial instead of wasting them on hiring people to start a guild war?"

"There's a pristine item, a strong one. It requires a great many demon hearts, powerful ones. The guild master is desperate to use it. Which means you're being hunted now."

"Not at all. The Eternal Court are already in talks with other guilds to help explore the armory in exchange for a share of the items. I think they've contacted Bloodline and Frontier, especially." She nods toward Luan.

The thylarin next to Sophie keeps his face unreadable, but Sophie's expression makes it clear she didn't know this at all.

"Good. I will let you leave this time," Morwag says with a smile.

Hela just snorts. I think she shared this information because she just doesn't care, and also because she knew Morwag would "reward" it. She doesn't seem to be afraid of him, but she feels like the type who prefers to be prepared before getting into a fight.

"The trip... twins?" she asks, and the two lumorans twitch at once.

Morwag thinks for a second before waving it off.

In the next moment, Hela grabs them by the arms and pulls. With one step, the air in front of them twists, and all three of them vanish.

"Luan, you sneaky, sneaky thylarin bitch," Morwag says, though Luan's expression remains calm.

Without waiting for a reaction, Morwag heads out of the restaurant.

I tear apart my connection to Sophie so it can't be used for any sort of tracking, then follow closely behind Weslin and Morwag, who doesn't even seem to care enough to hasten his steps. He strolls through the streets while looking around curiously, sometimes at the shops, sometimes at the people passing by.

After a few minutes, he's the first to speak. "Weslin, are you able to detect Hela?"

"I cannot," Weslin admits. "At most, I can keep up the field around me so I know when she's nearby, but it wouldn't be very useful against her."

"That's true. Well, do your best, or you will die. Don't think she'll hold back just because you went on a few expeditions together. Her skill allows her to warp her presence and body. It'll either look like she is

in a different place than she actually is, or it'll seem like she's not there at all. She can also use it for teleportation. That oaf of a woman even kept leaving the restaurant when I tried to scare her a bit, and half of the time she only seemed like she was there with us."

"I thought it worked like that, but she's improved quite a lot."

Morwag snorts. "Child's play. Relying on tricks instead of fighting properly, but I guess it's handy for birthday parties, and cowards."

"I guess. But I wanted to ask. What if, because of what you did, the Black Tower's master allows the guild war to go into a second or maybe even third stage? What if Luan decides to help them, uses the opportunity to join Hela, and fights you?"

"Weslin, in that case, I'd just kill them both."

"You can do that?"

"Yes."

"You are bullshitting."

Morwag laughs and puts his arm around Weslin with a bright smile. "No, I'm not. You think Hela's skill or Luan's fragment scares me? Me?"

"I think not being scared and being capable of winning are two very different things. But let's say you die. What then?"

The demon seems to give it some thought and then smiles unapologetically. "Then you guys would have a pretty big problem, wouldn't you?"

The moment we arrive at the guild branch, the security lady vyssari is already waiting for me. This time, no words are directed at me at all. Instead, she instantly throws dozens of questions at Morwag, with

some complaints too. The entire guild is on full alert, defensive arrays have been activated, and the guards have been tripled. Some of the less secure sections have been entirely evacuated, and people have started gathering in safer zones.

Yet the people from the guild don't seem panicked, it's more like they're just shifting their behavior to fit the situation. Many of the demons even look excited, and without asking, I can bet some are already using Beyond stay tokens to extend their time here so they don't miss out on the fun.

Soon after, a vyssari man arrives at our branch. He doesn't look all that strong, yet the branch leader immediately shows him respect, greeting him as a servant of the Master of the Black Tower. That vyssari wears a plain white suit with a brooch shaped like a black tower, a copy of the one in the middle of this outpost.

Morwag, fully uninterested, leaves for the basement to hand the Doc whatever item Nyssa has sent for him. The branch leader nearly panics while apologizing to the vyssari in the suit, calming down only when Weslin joins the conversation and begins explaining what happened and the background behind this war and the recent breach of the rules. At first, I listen, curious about what will be said, but it quickly turns boring, so I sneak away.

As I walk down the hallway, I wonder what kind of item would need so many demon hearts and why the Clown Council would pursue it like this. Could the guild master not get them from the tutorial? Or from some lonely attendees? How many does he even need? Ten? A hundred? A thousand? Maybe he's stuck on a floor where demons don't exist, but in that case, could he not post quests for others to gather them in the tutorial and bring them to him without starting a war?

Is it possible that demon hearts from the natives of the tutorial aren't as good as those of attendees? Could it be that they discovered the armory months ago, and tested the item, and, faced with no other options and the pull of greed, decided to take this path so that he could use it before the tutorial ends? It is not like he needs to be remembered as a nice guy in Beyond once he's back on his own planet with a dozens other problems.

If I were a cowardly, greedy, weak man, I would probably hire Bloodline or another top 5 guild for protection. I would offer them items from the armory in exchange for help exploring it. Then, if I were an asshole, I would start a war. But that item would have to be a true find. Still, it being pristine, in a class of item a Champion might use, is very possible.

I can imagine him staying in Beyond for the rest of his tutorial under the protection of a powerful guild. He would only need to get the item working and then return to his planet, likely securing his place as top dog there, securing his position as an Absolute for a good while yet.

Laid out that way, it makes a little bit of sense, doesn't it?

There's also the chance that Hela twisted the truth, and the heart he really wants is Morwag's or Nyssa's rather than any of the others.

Another option is that the item requiring the demon hearts isn't meant to strengthen him directly, after all, they may be using it for something else entirely.

Ahhh, it's all just so fun, isn't it?

Near my room, I run into Talon waiting for me. He often does this when something happens, hoping to gather information. In exchange, he usually helps me finish some annoying tasks or shares some of his own information.

As I tell him what happened, his face turns sour and he curses multiple times. A few dozen counts as multiple, right? Most of those curses come when I mention that Bloodline or Frontier might be involved in this mess, along with possibly more powerful attendees for hire.

"You still haven't realized one thing, Nathaniel," he tells me once I've shared most of it. "If that armory really does hold a pristine item, the resulting mess is going to be huge. You don't care about items all that much, but fuck, some assholes here would commit murder over a low arcane. If it's like Hela said and the rumors are spreading, the 4th floor will be a fucking disaster of a mess. I wouldn't be surprised if people from the 5th floor rush there too. Eternal Clowns members will be hunted down, all of them, tortured in an attempt to force the location of the armory out of them. The top 10 guilds will form coalitions, and Bloodline will cut a deal with the Eternal Clowns. Everyone's going to want a piece of it."

"I mean, pristine items are nice and all, and you can make shards, but in the end, it's just an item," I counter.

He stares at me without blinking. For a moment, I think he might pull that black bow off his back and try to beat me with it, but instead, he just sighs and walks away.

What a weirdo.

Finally alone, I head into my room and drop onto my bed, staring at the burned section of the ceiling. While I study the charred wood, I think of ways to locate Hela. I pull the things I've seen her do from my memory and compare it to the way Ruby used to teleport, since it feels similar, along with the other abilities I've seen with similar effects. In some ways, it resembles Ruby's warp-type teleportation, but it's likely been mixed with another skill like [Projection] or [Replacement].

I still find it fascinating how different people find their own ways to grow powerful, even though we all started from nearly the same point, just two starting skills, with everything snowballing from there.

While I think, I continue to accumulate mana in the halo over my head. So far, it's been the simplest and easiest shape to maintain. I can make it look like a crown, but right now, it's less efficient and requires more effort. Still, once I improve it, I will.

My new skill should also let me store primordial energy in the halo, but so far, I've only used mana. Mana can be turned into kinetic energy through my heart, and my Ignition Heart can pump enough thermal energy into me to kill me, so there's been no need to accumulate it there.

But mana? I need more. I am starving.

I'm literally suffering from severe mana deficiency.

I let my mind wander while focusing on the shape of the burned ceiling. At the same time, I form a few evil pyramids that float around me as I continue with my daily mana-shaping exercises.

I bring up my status screen and reread the description of my newest passive.

Mana Wave Predation (Unique Arcane) - You've become the natural predator of all mana. Your body and senses are refined to predate upon, seize, and bend all wavelengths of mana you can perceive to

your will. This passive's strength is directly tied to your mana usage, and the more you channel or consume, the stronger the effect of the passive becomes.

I really need more mana.

Chapter 692: The Finger

When morning comes, we're one of the first groups to leave the guild branch. We receive no reinforcements, unsurprisingly. After all, we have Morwag now.

We step outside, and I'm not surprised when he changes direction, heading toward the Minefield outpost, where the fights broke out the night before. I thought about going there, too, as morbid as that sounds. If everyone in that outpost died, it is highly likely people from the surrounding outposts will head there, though they'll likely be more interested in looting than searching for survivors.

The further we get from the city, the more people I see gathering, all moving in the same direction Morwag went. He's already almost out of sight. So far, he has yet to use kinetic energy for movement, and I doubt he even has it. Weslin already told me what primordial energy Morwag has. And for the moment, I believe he only has the one, and I am waiting for him to reveal it clearly so I can observe it.

I set it as homework for myself, something to muse over during guard duty, and to think about how it could "work". I also take my guard duty far more seriously now with Hela around, since I have no idea what to expect from her.

If she sneaks up on me like last time, I could end up very dead, very quickly. That is why most of my effort goes into detection, mostly searching for any small window of warning I might be able to get if she uses her skill before reaching me. Of course, there is also the chance that it is not a skill like I think, but rather a fragment or maybe even some kind of primordial energy. Hell, it could even be an item.

Weslin knows her somewhat, so I'm sure he'll be doing the same. Reliable as always. When I met him, he was a mid A-rank, but now I can say with confidence he's reached the peak of A-rank, and without hesitation, I would grade him higher than Io. He completely lacks the weakness that cowardly thylarin had.

"I'll be watching for Hela. If she attacks, I'll take her first strike, then you can step in," Weslin says simply.

I don't bother asking if he is capable of that. I have fought by his side enough times to know when to trust him.

"In that case, I'll get ready and either place a mark on her or stop her entirely," I answer, already dividing my mind into three parts: one preparing a mark, another preparing disruption, and the third to take care of the other stuff.

Isn't that just a little bit cute? They're like children. Silly demons.

That, of course, applies only to the ones weaker than me, totally not for Morwag.

"Did you get the skill you wanted from your combination token?" I ask Weslin as we reach the outpost and set ourselves apart from the others while on guard.

"I haven't used it yet. I want to level up the skills I'm planning to combine first."

"Sounds like the smart thing to do. Smart, but boring."

"Are you still annoyed that there aren't any five-skill combination tokens?" Weslin snorts.

"You know what, I'm sure there is. You said you heard rumors about a four active-skill combination token, so why not five? That Diligence asshole is just hiding it from me."

Neither of us sits down. We keep scanning the area, keeping our bodies warmed up and mana circulating, ready to be unleashed in an instant. In some ways, it's unnerving, in others, it's boring, because I know we will remain like this for hours. Yet at the same time, it is exciting: a fight to the death that could start mid-sentence, mid-breath, with the enemy exploiting any hint of vulnerability we might show.

"I still can't believe you actually met his projection. It only makes me more curious how you managed it," Weslin says.

"I told you, I cannot say. I mean, I probably could, but it would piss someone off if I talked about it too much. So you just have to live with the knowledge that I saw his projection, somewhere, sometime."

Weslin waves it off. "I do not mind that much. You know, when you traded me that insanely expensive information..."

"It was very cheap."

"...that it is possible to meet Rulers on the floors, I actually thought the Living Tree was going to become the Ruler. When we went to the old capital, it caused us so much trouble."

"Did it fly?"

"It could fly?"

"Yup."

"It didn't for us."

"You missed a lot. By the way, aren't all 'leader' ants queens? The First One led his Colony, and everyone called him a he." I muse.

"Does it matter? He started as a result of an experiment. I always thought most of the other ants were created as his copies, or shared his genes, maybe some of them were modified to be queens." Weslin glances at me for a moment.

I start to reply, but then notice he's not looking at me. His eyes are fixed on something behind me, and I freeze, every nerve tightening as my attention sharpens. My body coils, ready to explode into attack at the slightest movement.

Weslin does not move, nor does an attack come.

"I think she's nearby," he mutters.

I nod and take a step to the side to make some distance between us, only to find myself somewhere else. Not teleported like Io would do, but as if I had stepped through an invisible portal, warped space placing me somewhere entirely different. What surrounds me are the destroyed buildings of an outpost. Some are still burning, others have entirely evaporated. Blood is everywhere, along with clear signs of the fights that happened here.

In front of me stands Morwag, his expression tilted in faint curiosity.

"I thought I snuck up on her, but it seems that she used her tunnel to swap places with you," the demon smiles. "She inverted the flow at the last instant. She was already focused on you, but instead of drawing herself through it, she tied it into Warp Step's fold. That turned your position into the exit point while erasing her own. How sneaky of her. You were with Weslin?"

"Yes. Our outpost."

Morwag nods, and in the next moment, he vanishes with an audible shockwave that rips through the area, throwing ruins and debris away from us.

I rise into the air and follow in the direction he left, watching him sprint across the ground. Each of his steps sends another shockwave, tearing the land apart and sending him far ahead.

Even as I push out as much kinetic energy as I can, I cannot catch up. His movement looks inefficient, it looks slow, and yet he's still far faster than me.

Multiple times, I try to activate one of my marks in the outpost to teleport there, but their end trajectory warps, trying to send me somewhere entirely different. Having experienced it before, I take notice, even though it's very well hidden, so I avoid using my marks.

As I finally reach the outpost, Morwag is already there, clashing against Hela. It seems like she can't use her skill to escape as Weslin's void flickers around her and the area.

And Weslin, well, he barely stands there, almost collapsing, with a long dagger stabbed through his chest, piercing out the back. The blade is transparent, with a mana structure shifting inside it, clearly trying to suppress his void, and even succeeding to some extent.

Even so, Weslin holds out, managing to stop Hela from escaping. His forehead scrunches with an expression of deep concentration. Both of his eyes are now noticeably red, and his heart thumps audibly in an erratic rhythm.

Morwag continues to clash against the velnar that towers over him. While she is faster and smoother in her movements, Morwag moves like something unstoppable. Every one of his attacks evaporates anything it touches, not unlike Lily's [Disintegration]. But where [Disintegration] erases matter entirely, Morwag's primordial energy unbinds connections, causing matter to break apart into an ever-changing mist of color. Sometimes it is brown like the stone he strikes, other times green like the grass, or blue like the mana projectile he swats aside. It always takes on the color most present in whatever he destroys..

Morwag has a single primordial energy called Binding Primordial Energy, and now he's using it in his attacks in an attempt to cancel out whatever it is that binds Hela's body together. At the same time, he increases the forces that bind his body together, making himself extremely durable.

In just a few seconds, before I even step into range, these two S-ranks move all over the outpost, exchanging dozens of blows. Multiple rings on Hela's fingers glow, automatically activating barriers, attempting to counter Weslin's void, trying to hide her presence, or increase her speed and strength.

But it all still seems to fall short against Morwag. His strength swells through his body while his primordial energy binds him from breaking apart, allowing him to push himself further and further with fewer consequences. Durability, strength, speed, and attacks meant to dissolve bodies into particles stripped of their bonds. Like an unholy abomination, a twisted fusion of Jean and Lily, given form in this demon man.

My [Eclipse] spreads over the area, and a black orb forms above my head as dozens of barrier segments flash into existence, blocking the attacks raining down on us to support the other members of the guild in the area.

I don't even try to attack Hela. While Morwag might be fine with Weslin using void on her since she attacked him first, I am absolutely sure he would not look kindly on my attempts, even if it meant she would escape otherwise.

Instead, I start building up more defenses, throwing lances and attacks where needed, and overall drawing more and more attention to myself from the other enemies.

I land near Weslin just as he staggers back with a groan, his void weakening and nearly disappearing, just enough for Hela to push through.

The air around Hela wavers as she takes a step forward to disappear. Morwag attempts to stop her, in what I guess is an effort to bind her to this place, but he fails. Like many others, while he is extremely talented in some aspects of his abilities, other areas are lacking or simply not as refined.

So the velnar escapes, and I let it happen without trying to stop her. For a moment, I ignore the rain of attacks. Even as multiple weaker and faster ones slip through my defenses and damage my body, I deflect only those meant for Weslin. Instead, all the rest of my attention, the entirety of my Mana Wavelength Iris, is locked on observing the way Hela teleports, reading every frequency and fluctuation.

I watch mana move outside of her body as she rushes to do so. I even see movement inside her body as her shielding weakens and her attention focuses elsewhere, and I study her skill, weaving and activating.

For a fleeting instant before she vanishes, her eyes snap to mine, wide with disbelief.

Then she's gone.

Weslin, barely standing beside me, giggles through bloodstained lips, his eyes still glowing a deep red. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and grins.

"Ah beh she din' expect' tha'," he mumbles thickly, then spits something into his palm.

It lands with a wet thud. A severed finger, delicate and pale, though it's much bigger than mine. A golden ring is still clinging to it. Hela's.

I can only stare at it in shock while Morwag's unhinged cackle bursts out behind us at the sight of the finger.

Chapter 693: News from the Fourth

After Hela escapes, the attacks stop as well, though I think the real reason has more to do with Morwag's arrival rather than the velnar's retreat. Morwag charges toward the source of the attacks, letting the projectiles crash harmlessly against his body or turning them into colorful mist before they reach him.

Weslin, seemingly unfazed by the long dagger still lodged in his torso, studies the ring he took before tucking it away into his pocket and tossing the severed finger behind him.

Just in case I burn the finger, which earns me a raised eyebrow.

"You ok?" I ask, pointing at the dagger.

"Pulling it out feels risky. Whatever it does can wait until I'm back at the branch, with Doc there to hold me down. Until then, the pain is bearable." As he speaks, the red glow slowly fades from his eyes.

I nod and decide to respect his decision.

When the attacks finally stop, work resumes, and the outpost nears ignition. Only around a week remains.

The rest of the day is uneventful with no more surprise attacks, even though Morwag still seems to be having fun somewhere in the distance.

When we reach the city at nightfall, Weslin goes straight to the basement and signals for the healer on duty.

The next day, we barely return to the outpost when the long-range bombardment starts up again. I pick up the defense, mindful of my reserves. I track the projectiles and activate the barriers only where needed. It is a riskier option, but it's also much more mana-efficient. It just requires fast channeling, good tracking, and enough processing. And unfortunately for the assholes attacking us, I have all of that.

The black orb is already floating next to me, and I send it into the trajectory of the stronger mana attacks. So far, it's been easy to call the orb back and control it, but the more mana it gathers, the harder it becomes.

If there is an attack based on fragments or primordial energy, I manifest a more powerful segment of a barrier to clash against it.

In some ways, it's actually kind of fun. Sometimes they just send a few strong attacks at a time. Other times, they try bombarding us with a volley of weaker ones from every direction. And they keep trying to be sneaky about it, too, throwing in traps, disruptions, and other bullshit.

So far, I've come to recognize the mana signatures of around five people, three more with primordial energy based attacks, and two more using fragments. Over time, I learn these signatures and connect them to their attacks, slowly learning the tendencies of each user.

For example, there's this one bastard I am sure has the Regeneration upgrade for mana. He or she prefers weaker attacks but creates a lot of them, usually trying to change their direction at the last moment to counter my strategy of activating only the necessary barrier segments.

Another one with Potency likes to compress their projectiles as much as possible and shoot them straight ahead, leaving a trail of mana behind it. The idea is likely to make the projectile move faster than my black orb can devour it or outstrip my reaction speed. These attacks usually come in the middle of the heaviest bombardments, too.

I had hoped some of them would be at the level of Tess's railgun-like projectiles or my lances, yet none seem to have quite that level of piercing power. Even though I would be in trouble if they did, I still hoped for it. It's the sort of thing I'll need to overcome sooner or later. **Ra?oBES**

This particular group of ten always runs when Morwag stops by the outpost. For a while, they tried attacking even with him here, but after a few minutes, he got pissed off at the bombardment and charged them. So they disappear, clearly having some kind of teleportation they can use to escape.

I even thought about charging them myself, but every so often, they split into two or three groups to attack from different sides, so it would leave the outpost exposed if I attacked at the wrong time.

Lately, they've even learned to stop their attacks when Morwag passes, since they know it annoys him and makes him charge. Instead, they wait for him to leave before resuming the bombardment.

And of course, I constantly expect Hela to appear and strike, and something tells me Weslin would appreciate the rematch. Maybe he wants to chomp on more of her fingers.

A day ago, we heard that more guild members were attacked near several outposts, and a few were even killed. The demon members of the group were found with their chests cut open, their Demon hearts missing.

Currently, the Primordial Knights have stopped recruitment for now, trying to prevent spies from slipping in. Some newer members are being examined, too, after suspicions of information leaks.

The outpost in Black Tower is the safe zone where we have the biggest guild branch, but there are several others nearly as large.

Morwag is clearly being hunted and targeted, or they've at least been trying to hunt him down. So far, there have been three major attacks on him, always led by Hela and backed by multiple powerful A-ranks. They've tried poisoning him, ambushing him with a suppression field. They tried to lure him into a warren of confined tunnels somewhere deep underground. Assassins, strikes from the shadows, attempts to wear him down with swarms of lesser attacks before moving in for the kill.

The only outcome is that Morwag appears to be enjoying himself. Sometimes he joins us just to talk for ten minutes straight about the latest "fun" attack they've made against him.

Just his presence here shifts some of the pressure off us. The question is whether they're targeting him because he is the strongest member here, or because they want his heart.

Well, the others can think about that anyway. Talon, the Branch leader, and some of the others have already been discussing it extensively as they gather more information. Somehow, it's amusing how Talon snuck his way into our leadership. But I guess there just aren't many people here who like to deal with that kind of stuff. A big portion of the Primordial Knights are demons, and demons are not exactly diplomatic or patient enough for that sort of thing.

I cut off my thoughts as another barrage of attacks rises. This time, I dig deeper into my reserves, connecting to the array and covering the entire outpost in a translucent pale blue barrier.

Its surface wobbles and ripples from the impacts as dozens of projectiles smash against it. Up above, a green cloud forms, and soon a green rain starts falling, droplets gliding along my barrier and corroding it in the process. More clouds gather, the rain intensifies, and the other attacks light up the area in colorful flashes.

“Need help with that crap? It’s some kind of weird fragment, but I can cut it off with my void,” Weslin says next to me.

“No need. Keep watching for Hela.” I answer as I focus on the attack. In some way, it is pretty to watch that green cloud, and rain fall against my barrier in a constant attempt to melt a path through it.

Ten minutes later, he asks again, ‘Why aren’t you getting rid of it? You could have, you know.’”

I nod. “I could, but it’s fascinating to watch. Probably not all that old or strong of a fragment, but I have to keep modifying my barrier, and that thing keeps evolving to counter it. I’m using it for training. Also, it is connected to someone five miles away, so I’m carefully tracking the connection.”

“Why?”

“That dumbass has been keeping it in place for feedback so he can modify the clouds and the weird rain. But where there’s a way in, there’s a way back. Sure, there are a few safeties in place, but I think I can do it.”

At this point, my Mana Wavelength Iris is at its limit. It takes ten minutes longer, but I manage. By then, it had already been half an hour since I started gathering a mix of thermal and kinetic energy inside an orb shielded from any prying eyes.

One of my Ley Lines is also reaching out in that direction. This one is made to be single use, as undetectable as possible, even compared to the obscurity of the normal ones. It will break apart when I send the orb through, unable to handle the load with how thin I made it, but it’ll be good enough for a single strike.

In a few more seconds, everything falls into place. The frequencies align, the orb is ready, and the dumbass is attacking again, his concentration slipping in the process.

My mana flares up along with my [Eclipse]. My control rises like the moon obscuring the sun, overshadowing and taking over as I match the frequencies.

The orb disappears, and I cut off the connection so they can't just send it back. Another pulse from me shoots toward the clouds, disrupting their base and causing them to start breaking apart.

I count the following seconds.

Three.

Two.

One.

No kill notification, disappointingly.

So I channel my mana, making it roar through my body and spill outside. There is so much of it that my unique arcane passive strengthens from the sheer amount. A tricolored orb forms in front of me, as big as my fist.

Then I send it to the mark I left hidden inside the first orb I sent through. A tiny core no bigger than a grain of rice, yet still serving as a [Tether]

This time, there is an explosion a few miles in the distance, but it bursts in one direction only, which means they likely redirected it or defended only the side they were on instead of containing it fully.

Quite competent, aren't they?

I send another tricolored orb, and this time, a bigger explosion rocks the area. Though this time, I've also sent one of my mana constructs along with it: another rice-sized sliver designed to track the closest mana signature. I give it a few seconds. A low-frequency signal pulses back from there as the tiny orb spends its allocated mana and triggers, which means someone tried to remove it after it successfully latched on.

Yet another of my orbs teleports through.

[You have defeated Ward Enforcer - lvl 364]

[You have defeated Ember Conjuror - lvl 366]

[You have defeated Line Breaker - lvl 341]

[Lvl 346 > Lvl 347]

I gather more mana and quickly send another orb. This time, it explodes properly, with nothing blocking it. The mana construct placed there does not latch onto anyone, even as I wait a full minute. The conclusion is simple: they ran away.

"Got three," I tell Weslin.

"I can see you want to check things out."

"Weslin, maybe their cowardly friends ran and left the bodies and items behind."

"As if they would've left anything intact."

"I guess," I say, disappointed.

For a moment, I try to examine my feelings, to see how I feel about killing real people, not just natives from the tutorial. I find no regret, no disgust with myself. It is simple, kill or be killed, and it was them who started this oh so eagerly. I feel no regret for ending people like that.

When Talon moves in closer, I redirect my attention to him. From his expression, I already know it's not good news.

"I got a message from the branch leader. Morwag destroyed a branch location belonging to one of the smaller mercenary guilds in the city. He killed three dozen of them and damaged a good sized chunk of a street. One of the servants to the master of Black Tower got super angry and threatened him, saying he would be jailed and exiled from the city at nightfall."

"That's like threatening him with a good time," Weslin mumbles. "Anything else?"

Talon nods, serious. "Both Nyssa and Lyraen have left the 5th floor and entered the 4th. Everyone's shitting themselves."

Chapter 694: No

Lyraen is a member of The Silent Veil. Just that guild's name alone reeks of some kind of phantom invisibility assassins, cloak swirling, voice dropping to a whisper, eyes glowing in the dark for no practical reason, bullshit class. Their guild isn't in the top 5, though it often shows up in the top 10.

It's well known for an elite guild with relatively few members, the lowest of them holding an A rank. People tend to think of it as an elite mercenary guild. Hela apparently used to run with them before she bailed for some reason.

As for Lyraen, he's placed among the top 3, maybe even the strongest. Nyssa, Lyraen, and Solae M'Karn, the guild master of Bloodline. I've asked about those three before. Out of those names, Nyssa has the most time left, Lyraen comes second, and Solae has the least. Not much different from Hela.

What's interesting are the rankings.

Individual Rankings

1. Adrian (Ivory Tower)
2. Lyraen (The Silent Veil)
3. Nyssa Volare (Primordial Knights)
4. Solae M'Karn (Bloodline)

They reset once every thousand years, and the next reset isn't far off either. It'll probably happen sometime in the next 10 years. Yet the top 5 already have 3 currently active people. That fact hasn't escaped me, and it sure as hell hasn't escaped anyone else in Beyond either.

Some say it's luck or coincidence, others say it's always like this, with maniacs from the last rounds of the tutorials pushing hard before the thousand year reset. This generation has the highest number of risk takers and the most casualties, and the most clawing their way higher. Others claim it is yet another sign that big changes are coming to the outer world, with ancient monsters stirring into wakefulness and new talents rising to carve their mark into the system.

These individual rankings come from your performance in the tutorial, while exploration rankings are tied to Beyond performance. Mostly floor exploration, with some weight from quests and events.

Exploration Leaders

1. Adrian (6th Floor)
2. Voss (5th Floor)
3. Nyssa Volare (5th Floor)
4. Orion (5th Floor)

5. Zenith (5th Floor)

In this iteration of the top five, only Nyssa remains active. Rumors say she might soon overtake Voss, a beyonder from almost three hundred years ago, and might eventually come to match Adrian.

Sometimes I wonder what drives her to push like that. And sometimes I wonder how she turned a bastard like Morwag into the kind of person people call her hunting dog. I wonder about a lot of things. For example, why is Biscuit so cute, and why is his nose so pleasant to boop? Important things like that.

RÀNỐBÊŞ

It's already night again. Monsters are roaming outside the safe zones, and Weslin and I are serving as Morwag's entertainment. After what he pulled today, there's a mark on his forehead for everyone to see, a black tower, branded into his flesh by the tower's master. A local Champion, or something close to it.

It works like one of those ankle bracelets for house arrest. And damn, how the most demonic demon to ever demon hates it. It's probably costing him ten years of his life not to storm the black tower and tear it down. Every ten minutes. Or five. He only held back because someone reminded him of Nyssa's words, or something along the lines of what she would think if he went against her. She sent him up here without much oversight, but this time, he figured she wouldn't approve. So he gets to remain alive instead of being exiled into the night.

Now the only places he can walk are our branch, then straight out of the city through the streets. No other buildings. And I might have mentioned it already, but damn, how he fucking hates it.

While everyone else avoids him, I'm sitting in a chair right across from him. I'm already sure he'll leave this outpost tomorrow, either to hunt Hela or to cause trouble in another one. I might have worried more before, but now I think I'm better prepared to face Hela.

"Can you tell me about Binding Primordial Energy?" I ask him.

"No."

"What about the item Nyssa sent to the Doc?"

“No.”

“Can you tell me about Nyssa?”

“No.”

“Say no if you’re dumb.”

“No.” He answers with an aggressive smile crawling across his lips.

“Interesting.”

“Human with two hearts.”

“No.”

“Say no one more time, and I’ll tear off your arm.” He threatens.

Something about the way he says it irritates me suddenly and intensely, the kind of irritation that crawls under the skin. It is the way he tosses it out dismissively, not even bothering to look at me.

“You’ll have to come up with something more threatening than that,” I answer.

“Do you want me to? Unlike the lumoran triplets back then, you’re a member of the same guild as me. That earns you a certain level of goodwill.”

Once again, that tone.

"I know, it's one of the pros of being kidnapped and forced to join the guild everyone's been calling the Primordial Lunatics," I say.

"They call us that?" Morwag asks in surprise, "I hadn't heard that one."

"What would you do if someone called it that in front of you?"

Morwag smiles widely. "That might be one of the reasons. But, human, who taught you how to use kinetic energy for movement?"

"Someone must have taught me, otherwise, there is no way such a lame human like me could use it that way?"

"Something like that."

"Since you are an ass who never answers questions when I ask them, I'll only tell you a little. It was a lurker, the others call him Whitey."

"Ahhhh," he says with an expression that clearly means he knows who I am talking about. He observes me for a while, then laughs shortly and shakes his head. "I see, I see."

"So damn mysterious. Not very demon-like."

His expression hardens. "Who are you to decide what a true demon looks like, human? You may have a pair of strong hearts, you may have learned from a great one, you may even share some of our tendencies. But your judgment means nothing, because you're still just a human."

"And you're wrong."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because if I prove myself stronger, then my opinion is right and yours is wrong. Even if I claim that proper demons wear pink dresses at all times."

He starts cackling, clapping a few times. "Exactly. Until then, you are wrong and still just a human. Now, tell me, how did you learn anything from that demon?"

I look back at him as the mood shifts.

The quiet of the room grows louder, the kind of silence that screams in your ears, and I know what is going to follow. Yet still, I have already picked my answer.

For some reason, I do not feel like sharing this at all.

As a smile climbs across my face, I look at him and answer.

"No."

Of course, I put up a fight. I try to hold him in place. I strengthen my body with kinetic energy and mana. I am even quick enough to create a barrier around my skull and launch a burst of kinetic force at him.

Yet he still moves like a tank, grabbing my arm and pulling it off exactly like he said he would.

Then, instead of destroying it, he drops it on the floor in front of me. It is something halfway between a polite gesture toward me as a guild member and a laugh at my expense. A gesture that says he did not destroy my arm, so I would have an easier time reconnecting it without having to regrow it or beg the healers for help.

But to me, it seems like he spat in my face, a clear provocation and challenge.

For a while, I stare at my arm in that mess of the room, nearly all of it evaporated in our short clash. Dozens of alarms are ringing out loudly somewhere in the background.

I reach down, pick up my arm, and stare at it for a short moment. It is a weirdly unnerving feeling, the weight of it, the way it balances in my hand. And, of course, it's my left arm again.

Then I throw it at him.

Morwag catches it with a short cackle. He opens his mouth to say something, but the arm in his hand explodes, holding nearly all of my mana, which I had channeled there in that short moment I held it, forcing it to destabilize. Nothing too fancy or powerful, just the kind of simple, inefficient explosion I used to make on the early floors. A single droplet of blood falls from my nose from the strain.

The arm swells up, fingers twitch, and all that mana detonates.

Morwag's binding energy goes into overdrive. He not only hardens his body but twists the explosion into pale blue mist that bursts through the room like a crashing wave.

For a heartbeat, the room settles into that pale glow, quiet as falling snow. The mist like particles curl between the shattered furniture, soft and almost beautiful.

Morwag stands in the center of it, shoulders loose, expression unreadable. He brushes a flake of ash off his chest like it was nothing at all.

Then another arm lands at his feet before he can say anything. My right one.

This time it contains, as some might say, a shitload of thermal energy from my Ignition Heart. I lifted the second seal entirely to fill it.

As the golden light starts seeping from it, ready to explode, I look at Morwag.

And I say, "I said NO, you bitch."

Another explosion fills the room. This one becomes a golden mist that crashes outward like a wave, but like a shockwave, bouncing off the walls.

Bursts of kinetic energy rocket through my body, carrying me in front of the demon while two arms made of mana grow from my stumps. The air around us drains of color. Running on what I would call fumes, but still holding enough to be equal to the mana pool of an average attendee, I reach him.

He keeps his eyes locked on my mana arm as it reaches for his face. Just like before, his primordial energy rises to unbind my mana.

But not this time.

My mind, my skills, my passives, my domain, my focus, everything flares up to stop him, and even despite his attempts, my fist reaches him and crashes into his chin.

His face does not show pain or recoil, but his surprise is obvious.

This is my mana, and it will not be unbound so easily.

In the next moment, multiple people rush in, Weslin included. Some of them literally throw themselves at Morwag, in a rush to hold him down, though he just stands still, looking only at me. His deep red eyes glow, and his heart tells the truth. It thumps through the wreckage louder than the alarms and louder than the shouts of the people. He looks as if he hasn't even noticed them swarming around him.

Then, as if nothing had happened, his heartbeat stops. In the next second, it returns to normal, and the mood around him shifts just as quickly.

Without saying another word, he leaves the room.

A few days pass, and looking back at that clash, I start to think Morwag left so the blame would fall on me. But as amusing as that would be, I believe he left before he had to fight me with everything he had.

Some would call it very undemon-like to walk away from a fight like that, but to me, it fits demons perfectly. Maybe not the younger ones who throw themselves into every brawl, desperate to show aggression at every chance. But from Morwag, it felt right. Demonic.

Even while he carries the same violent energy as the others, he can still bring it all under control if he chooses. After all, from his perspective, wouldn't it be pathetic to let anything control you, even your own emotions?

Since that day, I have not seen him, only heard rumors from Weslin about his clashes with the Ethereal Clown Band. More mercenaries keep appearing, too, but even with their numbers, it's not enough to stop him.

The same goes for the attacks on our outpost. Without a powerful demon heart in the area, they don't amount to much.

The days roll into next week, and Hela disappears from the third floor. Rumors say she went to the fourth.

Morwag follows just a few hours later.

Multiple powerful A-ranks, especially from the top guilds, head down there as well, all of them acting on information I don't have.

But it's obvious. Something big is going to happen there, on the fourth floor, deeper inside the First Dungeon.

I am growing impatient to head there, and thankfully, the rest of the outpost construction goes well, up until only the last step remains.

This time, more people from the guild are with us to "claim" the outpost. It is not like we'll actually own the safe zone after we ignite it, but as the ones who built it, we'll get a cut of the taxes and a good bit of influence in how things are run. At least that's how Talon explains it to me, simplifying things since he knows I'm not really all that interested. I'm sure it's far more complicated than that, dealing with locals, finding someone strong enough to defend the place and enforce order like the master of the Black Tower, all that shit.

The ignition itself is... well, something. After all our work, the mining, the gathering, there's a big circular platform, wide enough to hold a large building. This will be the core of the base, the same way the Black Tower is the core of, well, the Black Tower safe zone. The attendees really don't seem to give a fuck about creative names.

In the center is a single hole in the ground shaped like a cube, and above it floats another cube, about the size of a package, large enough to hold a few thousand slabs of deer jerky all crammed in together. It's extremely delicate, and made of a number of rare materials, and represents hundreds of hours of labor following some blueprint the Primordial Knights bought. It drifts down and slides into place, locking in perfectly, leaving no visible seams or gaps.

And that is it.

There's no insane waves of mana, no thunderous eruption of noise, no control panels to light up one after another while someone in the background screams about the power levels being too high.

There are no sudden accidents turning out to be sabotage, or summonings of monsters for us to fight in a panic as half our members end up dying, no need for Weslin to bite off the monster's fingers, and nothing forcing me to lose my left arm just to finish it off at the last second, as I break through my limits and level up, unwillingly, to 350, unlocking a body upgrade only to die in the very next moment.

None of that.

All in all, it's a good day. At least I get a notification this time.

Congratulations on completing your Beyond floor quest!

You have received:

14-day Stay Token

100,000 shards

Activation stone for the portal leading to the 4th floor

So cheap. After I finish reading the notification, I glance over at Weslin, who already seems to know what I am thinking.

"Let's head down to the fourth floor," he says.

Chapter 695: Mistake made perfect

Welcome to the 4th floor of the First Dungeon!

There are no safe zones on this floor.

4th Floor quest: Permanently sacrifice 15 stat points at The Quiet Circle

Rewards:

14-day Stay Token

100,000 shards

Activation stone for the portal to the 5th floor

I had heard about this "quest" before, but a part of me always suspected it might just be a joke Weslin was trying to drag me into. Reading it now though...

"I told you," he says at my side, already knowing what is going through my head. "But let's get to the Megacity before something finds us outside."

"I thought you preferred it that way. Said it was easier to remember."

"That doesn't mean I can't complain about it."

He mumbles something, probably something insulting about me, but while we run, I keep examining the fourth floor, or at least what I can see of it. We're currently passing through a canyon, its walls rising miles into the sky, towering over us like cliffs of stone. The place is enormous, oppressive, and yet strangely still.

Soon after, we exit that canyon only to enter a wide valley surrounded by even taller walls, enclosing us on all sides.

The mountains and cliffs look fairly normal at first glance, just scaled up to absurd levels. The valleys are covered in greenery, knee-high grass, patches of shrubs, and even an array of exotic plants, somehow growing out of the rock itself.

We continue running for more than ten minutes, and I don't see anything resembling a broad plain or open flatlands. Mountains crowd the horizon in every direction, as if some mad cartographer got drunk and scattered them all over the place like a lunatic. It's just as Weslin described. And, as he said, we don't meet any monsters this close to the Megacity. We even pass a few attendees heading out on hunts, a reminder that the areas nearest to the city are deliberately being kept safer.

The fourth floor used to be unlivable thousands of years ago. Beyond explorers and the descendants of attendees who came here almost always died, unable to resist the monsters and establish any footholds without the protection of standardized safe zones. Back then, they were forced to hide in caves, build tiny camps, and never move in large groups for fear of drawing the monsters that loved nothing more than hunting them down.

That was until she entered the fourth floor. The current strongest Local in all the Beyond. The Pathfinder Thane.

She started the same way as everyone else, hiding in caves, burrowing underground, running from monsters with nowhere to stay for long. But her story stretches across decades. She gathered other Locals, sometimes earned help from the early attendees, and slowly built up her forces.

Still, it wasn't all teamwork and happy cooperation. No, it was her power that made it possible. Her power and her power alone. She was the daughter of two powerful attendees who had died in beyond long ago, and she grew into something beyond them. People were drawn to her like moths to flame, and

under her lead, they carved out what became the first real base here: the Megacity. Not a true safe zone, but a city, guarded by her alone.

We exit another canyon, and the view opens.

The Megacity doesn't look like something planned. It looks more like something that just happened. Built where the canyon widens into a massive bowl-shaped valley, the place feels half-carved and half-grown out of the mountain itself.

The outer zones sprawl across wide terraces stacked against the canyon walls like the steps of a giant staircase. They're packed with rough housing, stalls, forges, and crowds of people. These layers look newer, pieced together from stone, bone, wood, and scavenged metal.

The deeper you go, the more ordered the city becomes. The middle zones climb higher up the terraces, fortified with walls and guarded gates, streets paved with cobblestones worn smooth by countless steps. These parts feel older.

Above them sits the upper city, carved directly into the cliffside. Wide balconies, fortifications, and halls cut into the rock itself, lit by softly glowing lights. According to Weslin, this is where the old families and the rich live, where the guild branches are located, and where the descendants of Thane's first companions keep their residences.

At the very center, on the highest plateau, lies the innermost zone. Safe, beautiful, luxurious, the place where the Handlers are rumored to gather. Its gates are marked by the skeletal remains of some colossal beast, half a ribcage arching overhead, bone fused with stone, bleached white against the dark cliffs.

Some say it once belonged to a Champion-grade monster Thane slew when defending the city during a month-long siege. Others whisper that it was already here, buried in the rock long before the dungeon itself truly formed. Either way, the bones are bigger than buildings, and their shadow looms across the inner city like a permanent reminder of her power.

From outside, the Megacity looks like a great spiral fortress climbing the canyon wall, layers upon layers, chaotic yet holding some strange order. And above it all, like a crown, sits her residence, cut into the highest ridge, overlooking everything below.

Weslin and I enter the Megacity without much trouble, though I immediately sense multiple scans and marks being placed on me, the same kind Spark and Marble spoke about back on the second floor of the Beyond.

Just as it looked from a distance, the zones farthest from the Pathfinder's keep are the newest and likely the least safe. Still, I doubt the others would just sit back and watch monsters chew through the outer districts without lifting a finger.

Slowly, the mood shifts the deeper we go. The main difference, though, is that we get stopped by guards more often as we pass through the gates, the marks on our persons changing to grant temporary access to each new zone as we head toward our guild branch. The deeper we go, the prettier and cleaner everything becomes, and the more expensive the residences are.

It is possible to buy a residence permit or get one from your Handler as a reward, and even those are split into tiers, low-end, mid-end, and high-end. There are even rumors of "named" residences, ten of them in total, almost impossible to obtain, even for S-ranks.

The city itself is divided in much the same way. Low city, mid city, high city, and the inner city, where Handlers are rumored to live as well. With Weslin, I pass into the high city and toward the guild branch located there.

The street is quiet, lined with tall green trees, the color standing out sharply against pale gray stone. Vines climb the walls, adding streaks of red, purple, and gold. Immediately, I notice the other guild branches as well, Bloodline, Frontier, and Crimson Forge. Every guild in the top ten has a presence here, along with a few others.

Our branch isn't quite as large as the one on the third floor in the Black Tower city. It's just a black gate that leads into a pathway through a small, well-kept garden and then to a multi-story building in the center. Behind it lies a terrace and a few small sparring areas.

Inside, it doesn't seem overly decorated. In fact, there are almost no decorations to speak of. Just stone that radiates a sense of firmness and copper-colored inscriptions etched into the walls, with soft lights framing the hallways. The open rooms have sparse furniture in white and pale blue, the same colors as our guild uniforms, the same ones I'm wearing now.

All the demons here are behaving themselves. Tame, almost. No one raises their voice. No one tries to challenge me. They just move about, quietly doing their jobs.

As we pass through the rooms, we come across Morwag. He's seated in a white armchair that looks a bit too small for him and talking with a demon woman at his side. When he spots us, he gestures casually in greeting.

"Nyssa's in the garden," he says simply, then turns back to his conversation. The woman giving us a lingering look as we pass.

Passing through another long hallway, we finally end up alone. Weslin glances at me, opening his mouth like he wants to say something, but then he shuts it again. Without a word, he opens a door and gestures for me to step into the garden while he stays behind.

The garden isn't large, framed on three sides by buildings. In the middle stands a single tree, its trunk surrounded by a circular patch of grass and a lone bench. The tree is pale white, its thick stump scarred by the damage that's clearly split it in two. One half remains dead and hollow, while the other half grows into a new trunk, living and strong.

As I walk past it, I catch its scent, it smells like freshly cut grass with a faint hint of citrus. I stop for a moment, taking a few deep breaths, then move toward the figure waiting at the far end.

Nyssa Volare stands at the far side of the garden. The garden is open there, not walled in by buildings, and instead reveals a view of the Megacity below and the valley framed in by the mountains. The square opening looks almost like a portal, a window cut into the fabric of the world.

When I approach, she turns. Nyssa is not much taller than Lily, petite even, and her appearance is that of what I would almost call an albino. Her skin is unnaturally pale, her horns are the same color, and her eyebrows and eyelashes are all white as well. The horns curve in a style similar to Vega's, but they're a bit longer, and her left horn is shorter than her right. Her hair is raven black, falling to the middle of her back. She wears the same style of pale blue shirt and white pants I do.

Her eyes lock with mine. Unlike other demons, hers are a pale shade of red, fading into white. The edges burn crimson, but near the pupil, the color grows increasingly pale until it forms a white ring around her irises.

And she smiles. It's not sarcastic, not fake. It is almost gentle, a true smile. Like sunshine.

"You have very pretty eyes," she says, her voice soft, matching that smile. She takes a step closer. "I am Nyssa Volare. I am happy to finally meet you, Nathaniel."

Somewhat awkwardly, I take her offered hand and shake it. "Nathaniel Gwyn. Nice meeting you."

She lets go and steps back, the view of the city and valley framing her from behind. She stands close to the edge of the stone platform with no railing, nothing between her and the drop.

"Do you have any questions for me?" Nyssa asks playfully. Her eyes dart around like those of a hyperactive child, rushing to catch sight of something amusing.

"I heard you needed me on the fifth floor," I answer.

Her eyes tick back to me as she half-smiles. "I do, but that'll have to wait for now. Just do your best to survive until then. But that wasn't all you wanted to ask, right?"

I shake my head. "I heard you have three energies. Kinetic and two of the rarer ones. I've only heard of one other person with three."

"Professor Feran from the Academy, isn't it?" Nyssa nods slowly. "What a tame lost demon that man was. But you are right, I have three. Would you really like to know about them?"

I keep watching her, searching for a flicker of danger in her tone, a shadow of hostility, a crack in her composure. Yet there's nothing there for me to find. And slowly, painfully, I understand why.

Nyssa does not see me as a threat. Not even a tiny bit. She looks at me the same way I would look at a child devoid of power.

"Yes," I manage to say, the words catching in my throat.

She gives a short laugh, tilts her head, and nods. "One of them is Primordial Blood. The other I will keep to myself. But Nathaniel, if you tell anyone, I will be angry."

"I'll keep it to myself," I answer.

"Good. You can go now, and please send in Weslin as you leave."

I do exactly as told. Out in the hallway, I slump into a chair just as Weslin enters the garden behind me.

Only then do I notice what my body has been doing on its own. My Mana Wavelength iris has flared into activity, hitting its absolute limit. The second seal on my Ignition Heart is still lifted, pulsing violently. A black halo spins above my head, while kinetic energy bounces inside my body with every heartbeat.

I look at my hand trembling in front of me, and a rough laugh escapes me. Shaky and bitter.

An hour later, Weslin and I are sitting in one of the guild lounges when the notification appears.

Emergency Beyond Event in Progress!

Participation Parameters:

Location - Fourth Floor.

B-Rank and above.

All individuals currently engaged in the guild war declared by the Eternal Court against the Primordial Knights, and all individuals interfering with the Ancient Armory located on the Fourth Floor.

Special Conditions:

S-Rank participants will be transferred to a separate event zone. They will be assigned higher-risk objectives, distinct from those of the lower-ranked participants.

Primary Objective:

Prevent the threat contained in the Ancient Armory from awakening, escaping, and annihilating all Locals and Attendees present on the Fourth Floor.

Time Constraint:

Maximum duration: seven days. Duration may be reduced without prior notification.

Rewards:

None other than what can be taken during the Beyond Event itself.

Note from the Ruler issuing this event:

It's your fault this is happening, so you'd better take care of it or die trying. - Ruler of Diligence

Do you wish to participate? You have ten seconds to decide.

Yes / No

I glance at Weslin. He stares back with a shrug, then taps at something in the air. A few seconds later, I do the same. The moment I confirm, a pull drags me away, and I vanish, reappearing in a wide underground hall. At its center rises a massive stone pillar, thick as a tower, with glowing vines spiraling upward.

Around me, people are already gathering and beginning to arrive, one after another. Some I recognize as Primordial Knights by their uniforms. Others belong to other groups, mercenaries, and different guild members. Just as the notice said, all of them are at least A-rank or B-rank, possibly even a few of the same bastards we fought against not so long ago.

"This is going to be a mess," Weslin mutters beside me, scanning the room.

Then, without warning, a severed finger drops onto the floor in front of us with a soft plop.

I stare at it.

Weslin stares at it.

"Don't eat it!" I shout to Weslin.

"Motherfucker, I only did that onc..."

Before he can finish, a figure grows out of the finger. A woman, black-haired and beautiful, roughly my height. Her eyes are brown, and one is lighter than the other. Her clothes are casual, comfortable, but well cared for. There is not a single piece of equipment on her body.

Her face lights up in a rare smile, and she opens her arms wide just as I rush forward. I pull her into a hug, feeling a smile climb its way onto my lips.

"I'm not even surprised you're here, Vic. How the hell did you get caught up in this?"

"It is a long story, but you don't need to worry. I'll tell you anything you want to know. For now, let's head over to the others. Gloria is there, along with someone else I think you'll want to meet."

"Sure. Weslin..."

"It's fine. Just go. I'll check on the others from the guild and regroup with you later." Weslin's voice is calm, but the surprise is clear on his face as his eyes flick from me to Vic and back again.

It's probably rude not to introduce them right away, but I'm not exactly known for my social skills. Especially when I choose not to be.

I follow Vic through the growing crowd while talking to her. People around us are splitting into groups, forming circles, and scouting the area. She leads me toward a smaller group of about ten. Some I remember from the tournament. My eyes catch on Gloria immediately, she's wearing an oversized pale yellow shirt with a crying cat printed on it.

But my focus drifts elsewhere, almost without me realizing.

A man stands slightly apart from the others. I estimate his age to be somewhere around forty, though with the stats we've been gaining, he could easily be much older. He's tall, seems well-kept, while his black hair is marked with faintest gray at the temples, and his jaw clean-shaven.

"Is this your brother, Miss Victoria? The resemblance is obvious," he says politely, his tone calm.

Victoria nods. "This is Nathaniel. Nathaniel, this is Christoph."

"Hello," I say, taking his offered hand and shaking it.

"Hello. Chris is fine, no need to be so formal," he replies with a faint, observant smile.

My eyes have been active since the moment I arrived, and I pick up the faint movements of mana around him. Incredibly delicate, fragile even, and yet it's been woven into an array of intricate patterns.

He smiles, tilts his head slightly, and adjusts his posture just enough that my kinetic senses scream at me, picking up every shift and the gesture.

For a moment in my mind, his figure overlaps with someone else entirely.

He releases my hand and says, "It's good to see more people from Earth made it to the fourth floor."

POV Rafael Vaughn, aka Channeler

Jessica finishes her examination of the old cat, who lets her hold him without complaint. Grumpy's fur is disheveled, and he's partially blind, his eyes clouded with the layers of white that come with his state. Yet, unfitting to his name, Grumpy lets it all happen. Even as Jessica sets him down, he leans forward and licks her hand a few times in a gesture that looks almost thankful.

Grumpy then turns around, takes a few tired steps, and lies down on a very old, torn blanket before closing his eyes to rest.

"How does it look?" I ask.

"Do you even realize how difficult this will be?" Jessica mutters, "He probably awakened, sure, because he's in our presence. But he's old, weak, and fragile. And in case you forgot, he's a cat, not a human. I know human anatomy far better, and even then, there's more room for error, especially with attendees and their superhuman bodies. But if I make a mistake here, he'll die instantly, and it'll fall on me. Rafael, I don't want it to fall back on me."

"I knew healing was difficult. I saw it marked as easy difficulty under capabilities, but I thought it would be simpler for someone from Normal. Especially since you already cleared your thirteenth floor."

"You, my dear, have been spending too much time around Grumpy. And by Grumpy, I mean Lily fucking Chen. Don't give me that look. Her real name's been an open secret for a while."

"Oh."

"Yes, oh, and for your information, I'll do my best. I won't sleep, I won't eat, I'll spend every hour of the day digging through every book on cat anatomy I can find. I'll pay tens of thousands to contact the best feline vets alive, if I can find any who'll talk to me. I'll even call in favors from healers I know and force them to work on it with me."

"That sounds like a lot of effort, Jessica."

"Please, don't act like you didn't expect that when you called me."

"I'm sorry. And I hope you won't be angry if I ask, but what do you expect to get out of this? I have an idea, but you were already hard for me to read before."

"Are you trying to pick me up? I won't say no if that's the case. After I'm done here, you can invite me out on a date. But no pressure. As for expectations..."

Her eyes cloud over a little, and a smile spreads across her face. "I've spent some time with Lily. I've heard her talk about this cat more than some of my group members ever talked about the children they left here on Earth. If I do this, and she gets out... I have no illusions about my potential of becoming a Champion, or even hitting the higher levels. But if it's her, she'll be able to prolong my life quite nicely, I believe."

"I agree with you there."

Jessica smiles again. "Just how insane is it? The only thing on Earth that made us all equal, no matter if you were rich, pretty, ugly, talented, or useless. At most, you could squeeze out two, maybe three extra decades, if you had a team of doctors around you at all times. And now, even this, life itself, is about to become currency."

POV Earth

"Colonel Jonathan Kane, we've received information from one of our Returnee contacts."

"Is it from Codename Channeler?"

"No, this came from a Normal difficulty Returnee assigned as the president's bodyguard. The notification appeared to him just thirty minutes ago, and I rushed here to deliver it."

The man in the suit clears his throat and pulls out a tablet, reading from the glowing screen.

Congratulations. Enough attendees have completed their tutorial to move into the next step.

Dungeons will start gradually opening all across Earth, trapping a certain percentage of dangerous awakened animals inside and allowing those who enter the opportunity to gain levels.

Each dungeon can only be cleared once, and their number will continue to grow over time.

No information about dungeon tiers will be provided. Extreme caution is recommended.

POV Nathaniel

I appear inside my mental space, this time manifesting there myself. The place looks like that endless white expanse again, no walls, no floor, no ceiling. The only thing in it with me is a small bed with unmade sheets and a few pillows piled on top.

I walk closer and stop at its side, giving one of the legs a light kick.

A grunting noise comes from underneath.

"Come out," I call.

"No! I'm hiding!" The voice is young, muffled from under the bed.

"I know what you're doing. I came because I need you to hide something."

The noises shift into an annoyed groan. A figure crawls out from beneath, shuffling forward on all fours. It's a young boy wearing worn-out clothes and a single sock. Around his shoulders, tied loosely at his neck, is a red, bleached-out blanket pretending to be a superhero cape. He stands up and meets my eyes. One is gray, the other light brown.

Sneakythaniel tilts his head, looking at me. He doesn't say anything, just smiles faintly. His eyes are lively, and there's that strange, gentle warmth radiating from him, like he's happy just to exist.

"Where's your other sock?" I ask.

"It's been hidden somewhere," he says.

"Aren't you supposed to be pretty sneaky yourself? How could you lose one of your socks?"

"How many times did you lose your favorite left sock? No matter how sure you were that you put it into the washing machine, and that it had nowhere else to go. It just disappeared, as if it'd been thrown into a black hole. Aren't the left socks the sneakiest, most phantasmic things to ever exist if you really think about it?"

"I can't fight with that logic," I sigh as I kneel in front of him.

It feels strange to look at him like this, knowing this is how I looked when I was younger. The same bed, the same worn clothes, the same cape tied around my neck.

"You can't have it," he says, watching me glance at the cape. "It's for heroes only."

"As if I even wanted it."

"You're me, of course, you wanted it, no matter how much you try to hide it." He smiles brightly and pats the top of my head. "We always wanted someone to save our sister and mom, a hero just like in the stories."

"It's silly."

"It is. But wasn't it a beautiful dream nonetheless?" His smile softens, and then he hugs me. "This hug isn't from me, it's from yourself, you know? Because I don't exist, and it's just you here. I am you. So I'm hugging you, us, for being crazy enough to create me, who is you, even though the others would just think you were giving yourself a mental illness."

"Yes, yes."

He laughs harder. "Now, what do you want to hide from yourself?"

"I want you to hide this information about Christoph until the third tournament, possibly longer. Don't let me connect the dots or come to that conclusion again."

Sneakythaniel touches my forehead, eyes serious for a moment as he observes the information and my intention, then he nods once. "Got it!"

I look at him, confused. "You got what?"

"Not telling!"

"Ahhh," I groan, realizing what must have happened. I must have given him the knowledge of what I just gave him to hide. I want to ask, curiosity starting to torture me, but I know I wouldn't have made myself do this without a damn good reason.

Sneakythaniel seems amused. With a giggle, he spins in a circle, the red blanket twirling around him, then drops down on all fours and crawls, clumsily, back under the bed, his movements childlike and carefree.

Shaking my head, I stand up and turn to leave. After a few steps, he calls out from behind me. "Hey!"

"What?" I ask, glancing back.

From under the bed, in a space that somehow looks a lot darker than it should, only his head peeks out. Sneakythaniel smiles widely, his eyes shining. "I know it'll annoy you, so I want to tell you. You've already been here before today, and you already had me hide something else from yourself."

I just wave him off and keep walking, but he keeps laughing. "After you leave, the memory of me existing will get hazy and hard to remember. But don't worry, I'll make sure we remember it all and tell you when it's time. So get stronger!"

As if I needed the reminder. Getting stronger is the only plan I've ever had.

Chapter 696: Beginning of the Beyond Event

POV Weslin

After the deadline to join the Beyond Event passes, I find myself surrounded by about five hundred people. It feels like a surprisingly large number, considering our guild only has about fifty members here, and I would estimate that even fewer are being fielded by the Eternal Court. The rest must be either those who allowed themselves to be hired by the Eternal Court or those with some sort of connection to the Ancient Armory.

The highest rank present being A-rank means the guild master of Eternal Court is likely to be here as well, even though I haven't seen so much as a trace of him so far.

With only fifty members to our name, we should probably be thinking of ourselves as a possible target if the others decide to gather their forces, and yet I don't think that will happen. Everyone knows the Primordial Knights. You just don't attack a bunch of demons unless you're ready to bleed for it.

I just hope someone from our guild doesn't attack first. Up to this point, they've been following my orders, since I am the highest ranked member here, meaning likely the strongest.

Maybe this event will even bring me closer to the S-ranks now that I think about it. Not long ago, I thought that goal would be nearly impossible, something the others had exaggerated, but ever since I met that maniac, that asshole, that little shit, that annoying arrogant jerk, that motherf... ehm, I've found it impossible not to push myself forward.

Even if he hasn't realized it, he's pushed me to strive harder, and by now, I can be certain that no one else in the tutorial is as skilled with Primordial Void as I am.

"Weslin, we should attack them first. I bet we could take down a good chunk before they even realized what was happening," one of the demons at my side says.

The one next to him nods seriously. "Morwag would've attacked them."

"So you want to wait for now?" the demon asks as if it is something weird to do.

"For now. We didn't come here to fight them, but if they show any sign of attacking, don't hold yourself back." I tell him.

"Calling me a fucking demon is a clear sign of hostility, right?"

I look straight at him, and he stares back. "No, it fucking isn't."

"Oh," he mutters sadly.

"Weslin, you haven't been on the fourth floor for quite a while. What gives you the right to order us around like this? Is it possible that you've grown weaker lately?" the woman, Yela, asks.

The worst part is that she's not even a demon. She's a velnar, but that doesn't seem to matter in the slightest with her. She behaves exactly like the demons, and the respect they show her confirms it.

This is why I hate dealing with these things. It's always the same. It's not just difficult, it's tedious, and it makes me feel dirty. That rawness that's so evident in demons is something I share to a degree, and I hate it.

I am about to step toward her to deal with it when I feel a notification from the mark Nathaniel placed on me. Within the next two seconds, he appears by my side. The shocking smile I saw on his face when he first met that woman is gone, replaced by the usual resting bitch face. RÁNO-BÊ S

“Weslin, I have to introduce you to a few people, and damn if I haven’t already noticed some fun and annoying people here. Io’s here. If you see that fuck, tell me, I have to kill him. If you see a demon called Malika, tell me too, I’ll need to hide, and...”

He pauses, and before he can continue, Yela steps closer, interrupting us, standing above us, and trying to push on with her attempt to take over leadership. There are probably two or three other demons looking to do the same, and who are stronger than she is, but they respect her enough to let her try first since she moved first.

Nathaniel glances up at her. “The fuck you want?”

His words are ice cold, and he instantly catches her intent. Unlike me, he doesn’t seem to care. He’s told me this many times, but he thinks the demons’ behaviour is kind of cute, and that likely extends to this velnar, who acts like one. Meaning that he doesn’t really mind playing their constant game of who is strongest.

The beat of his hearts grows more audible as thermal energy dances across his skin. The same golden colored flames appear around the velnar facing him.

“I said that maybe Weslin doesn’t deserve to be the leader after spending such a long time stuck on the third floor,” Yela says with a provoking smile. She must have heard a lot about Nathaniel, and now she’s excited to test herself against him.

Nathaniel tilts his head in confusion. “But Weslin’s still much stronger than you. I’d have a harder time with him than you.”

As he says that, the thermal flames surrounding Yela vanish.

Her expression widens more and more as she generates new flames, but they disappear just the same.

Yela is known as one of the more powerful A-ranks in the Primordial Guild, with one of the highest capacities for generating thermal energy. Her flames are known for their intensity and their propensity to scorch even reinforced magical barriers. Yet now she's finding that she can't even handle the human in front of her. He takes it all away from her while channelling it with incredible ease.

That part of him sometimes worries me. I know how much he's sacrificed and how far he pushed himself to be able to do this, and I don't think he has any plans to stop here.

"Weslin," Nathaniel whispers, though loud enough for everyone around us to hear, "you told me about that velnar who can generate a lot of thermal energy. Just to be sure, this is her?"

Yela's face tightens at his words.

"That's Yela," I confirm.

"Well, that's awkward. She must've gotten weaker since the last time you saw her, right?" He takes a step toward her even though she still towers over him.

Yela flinches, even if only slightly. She tries to hide it by pushing more flames into existence, golden arcs surging around her arms and shoulders, but they blink out again the moment they form. Her jaw clenches, and I can see her pride grinding under the pressure of what Nathaniel is doing to her.

She tries again. And again. Every time, she finds the blaze being stripped from her body until nothing remains.

That effort shows. Sweat beads on her brow, and her breathing turns ragged. Each attempt is weaker than the last, and by the time the fifth wave of fire collapses into nothing, she's just standing there. Chest heaving, shoulders trembling from the exertion.

He looks at her, and she holds his eyes for a moment before groaning in disappointment and turning away.

"Anyway," Nathaniel says, turning back to me. "I'll introduce you to my sister. But if you start hitting on her, I'll be angry."

He gestures for me to follow, already heading off. Before leaving, I stop by Yela. "Please make sure the others don't fight without a reason for now. Good reason," I tell her.

She nods after a moment, and I leave.

Watching Nathaniel's back, I follow as he weaves through the crowd, his constant senses spreading out into the area to search for danger. In some ways, he's one of the most paranoid people I know. And now, that little jerk actually seems to be in a really good mood. I can see it in the way he acts and talks. It is almost like seeing a huge smile on his face.

He sometimes acts like this, especially after defeating a tough monster, levelling up a difficult skill, or making some other big leap in progress. Right now, it probably has something to do with his sister. He knows a lot about me, since we've spoken so much, but I've learned plenty about him in turn. I've always wondered what Victoria was truly like in person, since his descriptions of her never really seemed reliable.

When we finally come to a stop near a group of about a dozen people, I see her again.

She's truly a lot like Nathaniel. The near identical expression, the same shade of hair, and they even have similar eyes. The biggest difference is that she looks much colder. While Nathaniel seems like someone who suppresses his emotions, she seems like the sort of person who has none at all.

From the bits I've learned about his childhood from Nathaniel, I can guess at the truth. She's always been this way, and the young Nathaniel grew up imitating her. It was his way of coping with his childhood, finding the strongest person he knew and copying her to the point he nearly became like her.

Nathaniel introduces us properly this time, and as I shake her hand, she studies me with a calm, intent gaze. She remains polite yet distant. Sharp, cold, fair, but capable of extreme cruelty. That's what comes to my mind when looking at her.

“And this is Christoph. He’s from Earth’s tutorial as well,” Nathaniel says. I think he wants to add something else, but he holds back for now.

“Just Chris is fine,” the man says, shaking my hand.

After letting go of his hand, I almost want to dismiss him, to push him into the background as someone unimportant, but then I stop myself. Why would I do that? I don’t usually treat new people that way.

Forcing my void to circulate through my body, I fix my attention back on the man. He seems well maintained, but at the same time, he’s unassuming. He doesn’t look threatening or dangerous, only collected and calm as he watches Nathaniel talk with his sister.

Every so often, a gentle smile crosses his face as he watches the siblings, as if touched by something almost nostalgic. At the same time, he’s constantly scanning the surroundings for danger.

Then I focus deeper, observing the movements of the mana around his body, and I find myself more confused than ever. They seem intricate, yet unassuming, normal, and extraordinary, all at once. I can’t even begin to grasp what he’s doing, nor can I sense any primordial energy radiating off him or even any hint of a fragment. It just seems to be pure mana.

Part of me wants to look closer and take in more, but I hold back, aware that it could be taken as rude, even as a provocation. Just in case, I run multiple deep checks to see if my mind is being affected. I carefully examine myself for any signs of manipulation, pressure, or subtle influence, and I go through each possibility thoroughly to make sure I remain in control. And I find nothing.

Then his eyes turn toward me. Gray and firm, they clearly show that he knows exactly what I’ve been doing, yet he doesn’t seem to mind. He even smiles with amusement and mouths something I cannot translate. Then he joins the conversation between the siblings.

As he speaks, the flow of mana around him shifts into something entirely different. I sense the way it moves like a living thing, too intricate for me to comprehend. The change sends shivers down my spine, unlike anything I’ve ever felt from any other attendee, except perhaps Nyssa and Lyraen.

It should feel overwhelming, yet it doesn't. It's quiet, restrained, as if he is showing only the smallest fragment of what he can do. And that's what unsettles me most.

Just what kind of freaks is Earth spitting out of its tutorial?

Chapter 697: Man from the Earth

POV Nathaniel

After talking for a while with my sister, I step back to let Victoria do her thing and organize everything with Weslin. So far, the two of them seem to be getting along well, and knowing Weslin, things will likely end with Vic being the "main" leader. He doesn't like dealing with this kind of stuff either. And I don't think Victoria will have any problem dealing with the demons.

As expected of the best sister ever, she is already an A rank and apparently without being a member of any guild, even though she's received offers from members of the top ten that were looking to bring her and her group members in.

I also think it is outrageous that she is still not an S rank. Honestly, it feels unfair. At this point, I am convinced there has to be a conspiracy against her, probably involving shadowy councils, secret meetings, and at least one guy with glasses who fidgets with them constantly as he plans it all out.

So far, Victoria's decided to increase her value as much as possible and keep from joining a guild until after she enters the 4th floor. Apparently, she's already in discussions with some of the top ten guilds. But now with the event coming up, that plan has paused, and she has the chance to raise her and her party's value even more.

Though she seems to be considering something else after meeting Christoph. It is unusual for her, but I can see that she respects him for his power and knowledge, and the fact that he seems to know exactly how to behave around her.

They met on the 4th floor, at a point when he'd already been hearing rumors about an earthling woman who liked to throw her fingers around, so he'd been searching for her for help with one goal or another.

I hesitated when I saw him for the first time and tried to think of something else, but in the end, I had to accept the facts in front of me.

Christoph is very likely the First Beyonder from our round of the tutorial. And even though there are nine more rounds of Earth's tutorial, I think it's safe to say he is the first Beyonder, even if those are taken into account. He started in Beyond after all, you can't get here any earlier than that.

"You started in Beyond," I say.

"It seems like that's the way things have turned out."

"Are you some sort of world class martial artist, or did you awaken mana through meditation before the tutorial? Or... do you have a corgi for a bond?"

"Corgi?"

"A dog species. Very cute, stubborn, food obsessed. They sometimes, fairly often, end up burrito shaped."

"I'm aware of the breed, I'm just surprised by the question." He chuckles slightly and shakes his head. "I'm sure you are aware that everyone awakened their mana only after entering the tutorial, as the system altered our bodies, gifting each of us a mana heart."

"So how?" I ask.

He returns my gaze before looking away and scanning the area.

"How, indeed." He takes a breath and smiles. "I'm 75 years old, if you'd believe it, Nathaniel," he says before turning back to me. "I have children and likely grandchildren too, who I haven't seen yet, and who are out there living their lives on our slowly awakening planet. My wife died ten years ago, and I spent those years living alone in the Alps."

He pauses and laughs shortly, almost self deprecating at the memory. "It was one of those days when I thought my life was all for nothing, and that I would die alone of old age in my mountains. But then..."

His eyes close, as if replaying the memory. "I found myself there, on the surface of Beyond, fighting for my life for three days before I found a portal to the Entrance Floor. With no food, no water, and many monsters lurking around. Just me, with my old, broken body, hiding."

Finally, his eyes open and he looks at me. "Would you believe me if I said those three days were some of the most joyful days of my life, despite being some of the most dangerous?"

"You must have lived quite a life on Earth if the surface of Beyond was only one of the most dangerous," I note.

That gets a laugh from him. "That sounded dramatic, didn't it?" At the same time, he reaches out with his hand, and the mana surrounding him, like a living being, moves with that gesture, seeming to caress and protect him.

"You, Nathaniel, are like your sister," he says. "I have met many untrusting children like the two of you, and I realize that you, just like her, look at me with deep seated suspicion. The others will as well. I've come to learn what starting in Beyond means, and how differently some people will treat you because of it. It comes with both opportunities and dangers."

The noise around us fades as I focus only on his words and the tiny twitches of his muscles I can sense.

If he notices, he doesn't seem to mind, holding my gaze with a steadiness. "I don't mind answering your questions, because you, as a tournament winner, are one of the most powerful beings from Earth. I would rather have both Gwyn siblings on my side, so please, ask. Allow me to satisfy your curiosity and hopefully ease your suspicion towards me a little for the start. The rest I will prove with time."

"You're not an S rank."

"That's true. I have reasons for that which I do not feel inclined to share with you right now."

"So much for answering my question."

“Trust goes both ways. There are some questions I will not answer.”

“What are you planning to do on Earth?”

“Our first steps should be to deal with the Pairing, and so I’m doing my best to prepare for that.”

“Deal with the Pairing, under your lead?”

“If need be. You must have seen how most worlds with the system work, and I have heard of many others, by having conversations with attendees that went on for days.”

“How did you survive? Sorry, but people in their 70s aren’t exactly known for being nimble enough to run from whatever monsters lurk at the surface of Beyond.”

“I was able to kill a high level monster and invested my stat points in a way that seems to have worked out. I’m the last person to shy away from praising myself, but it seems I have a talent for my skills.”

“What did you do all day, living out in the mountains on Earth?”

“I read, mostly. My cabin was small, but the shelves were not. Old novels, new scientific papers, anything that could hold my attention.”

“You just sat there reading for years?”

“And I spent time writing. I also went on walks, taking things slowly because of my body, but I refused to stop. No matter the weather, I kept climbing as high as I could, holding on to every step and every view.”

“You sound like a bored professor.”

“Perhaps. I studied physics in my youth, then abandoned it for history. Later, I tried finance and languages. Nothing ever stayed. But the curiosity never went away.”

"So you were a dabbler."

"A relentless dabbler. I long since learned enough of everything to understand how little I truly knew."

"What was the point?"

"The point was to keep my mind awake when my body was already failing."

"Did it work?"

"Some days. Other days, it felt like madness. It's humbling to see how small a single life can be."

"And yet here you are."

"Here I am, more obsessive than I ever was in my younger years."

"Obsessive about what?"

He smiles. "For example, about not dying over nothing. There is so much I can do now."

"Is your subclass patience?"

"That makes yet another unexpected question."

"I keep asking you things in a rather rude way, yet you do not seem to mind."

"I have noticed that, but I also realize part of it is intentional, while part of it is your curiosity. I'm sure there is much more you want to know. I would have been the same, maybe even worse, in my younger

days. But as I said, you, your sister, the others from Earth exploring Beyond, we're all in this together. So I can endure that curiosity a little. Lastly, my age might play a part in it."

"How so?"

"I'm still much older than most of you. As arrogant as it might seem, I can understand most of you. I've been a teenager, I've been a man in his prime, I've even gone through a midlife crisis, and I have been a man whose body started to betray him. You learn a lot of patience that way."

Throughout the whole exchange, he answers me with words, but he also uses something else to answer. He knows words alone are not enough, so he shows me through his actions. His mana moves around his body, shaping itself into intricate constructs that constantly surround him, shifting, changing, adapting.

It moves like a mantle, it forms into armor around his body, and it creates an armored figure behind him as if guarding him. It is all scarily intricate. Something that looks like that cannot be anything other than extremely dangerous.

It feels like a calm, well trained dog. The kind of dog that'll let you pet it, pull its ears or tail, that allows little children to jump on it, maybe even hurt it without ever lashing back.

But at the same time, you know. You know it's not just a family pet. It's a monstrosity of a dog, as large as a bus, that eats grizzly bears for breakfast, and yet it still allows all of these things to happen.

And you know that if it decided to, it could strike back.

So the question comes to my mind. Who would win in a fight, Nyssa or Christoph? And what about my black mana? How would it fare against him? Should I even try? It sounds more than a little risky. As much as he might seem like a pushover right now, it also feels like he's only acting that way because, as he said, he wants us to cooperate. Everyone has a line, and if I cross it, he will snap back.

Then there was that fight when Faora and Luan met us for the first time. It's likely that we only survived because they were worried about Christoph's reaction. In that way, I probably owe him. As annoying as it is to think that Faora and Luan treated him as if he were our future Absolute, while we, as high-

ranking attendees, were expected to be his future enforcers, and he might have been annoyed at losing us.

But in the end, Vic seems to already have a plan when it comes to Christoph, since she's both dealing with and cooperating with him. I trust her decision making more than mine, and even if it hurts my pride a little, I can hold back for now and let her do her thing.

I have to channel my inner Savant. Maybe I could even create a new part of myself called Cowardthaniel, to be patient in my place.

Let's put off dealing with Christoph for now. For now, let's observe, learn more, and focus on becoming stronger, because only strength can open more options for me. Until then, I'll try to get as many answers out of him as I can.

"Nathaniel," Christoph says, bringing my attention back to him as he speaks as if he knows exactly what is going through my head. "I can tell you this one more thing to make your decision simpler."

He waves his hand, and just for me, for the briefest moment, a line of text appears above his head.

[??? - lvl 403]

"Instead of clashing now for whatever reason, let us use this chance to build strength side by side."

Even after the text disappears, Christoph stands there quietly, his mana shifting like a storm held in chains.

Chapter 698: Something dumb

The first few hours of my first Beyond event are fun. I mean, really fun. I couldn't imagine them being more fun. They're full of talking, dealing with a few members of Primordial Lunatics, standing nearby in anticipation of being attacked, and other things like that.

Also, around fifty people die.

Fifty. That's five zero. Four dozen plus two. B and A ranks. Beyond attendees, each one representing the top 100 participants out of the 37,500 people in their respective tutorials.

Sure, the premise that they're the strongest out of 37,500 people might not fully apply. Maybe there were stronger people from their tutorial who simply decided not to enter Beyond, but my point still stands.

We found ourselves in a sort of welcoming room built long ago, likely by companions of early Rulers who cleared the First Dungeon, possibly even before connecting it to the tutorial and building Beyond over it.

Though that's still only an unconfirmed suspicion, but it would certainly make a lot of sense. As far as I and the others know, the 4th floor only became livable after the Pathfinder Thane created the Megacity and acted to defend it, since there are no safe zones.

But Christoph came up with a counter to that. What if the 4th floor was once occupied by a different city, much like the current one? Built by previous generations, only to be destroyed and erased. What if Thane wasn't even the second to make the attempt, but one of many? It could have been a feat repeated many times over.

After all, the leaderboards reset every thousand years. Who is to say that some especially powerful attendee did not reach the 7th floor, while everyone today is amazed that hundreds of years ago, some jerk reached the 6th floor as the only person until now?

It's a fascinating thing to think about.

Even though this Beyond event is about stopping whatever's awakening here from wiping out the attendees and locals on the 4th floor, these now dead people don't seem to be taking it all too seriously. I mean, they are in a sense. You just don't get this far by being stupid or weak. Though they may have relied a little too much on the fact that S ranks were given their own event, dealing with dangers we can't handle. That likely gave them just enough of a sense of safety to wander into one of the hallways connected to the chamber we're in.

After all, this is an Ancient Armory, the sort of place where pristine items have been found, enticing even those among the top five guilds.

So now, while I ignore Malika, who unfortunately has found me, to her eternal joy and likely that of her descendants, I listen to the others speaking over each other in panicked bursts.

"I think you should give us all the information you have," one of the more powerful A ranks says, facing the guild master of the Everyday Clowns.

"Where's the skittish girl? She did not die, right? I survived, so she probably did too. What did you do after we got split? Did you break the base?" Malika pokes me from the side.

"Bael, you don't actually believe I'll actually tell you everything and reduce my value just like that. No, you'll all have to make sure to keep me alive and very healthy if you want any information at all," the guild master of Empiric Clowns shouts, looking around at the people surrounding him and his guild mates.

He looks ragged and has huge circles under his eyes. He's a tall, selari man with the same pink skin, pink hair, and white freckles iconic to his race.

"Did you see? Io's here as well. I haven't attacked him yet because I thought you might want to kill him first. You should appreciate me for waiting and reward me for doing so." Malika says, lowering her voice, and for some reason, goosebumps run across my skin.

"Maybe we should just torture you for the information. A dickhead like you is liable to use us as fodder the same way you've been using your guild," some demon calls out, with a 90% chance that he's from the Primordial Knights. Though looking at his blue and white clothes, that chance immediately shoots up to 99,99%.

"Just try it, you goddamn lunatic. I want to see whose side everyone here will take if you attack me." The guild master smirks, almost hoping for it.

"You think we care?!" the demon shouts proudly. "We can take on all of you weaklings at once!"

"We cannot. Most of us would die." Weslin steps in.

The demon tilts his head in visible confusion. "And?"

Not even bothering to answer, Weslin gestures for him to go away like he's dismissing a child and turns to face the selari guild master. I think his name was Peanut.

"Beanut," Weslin calls towards the selari. "I can hold off my guild for now. But Rulers be my witnesses that we have every right to kill every one of you dickheads. But for now, let's not fight. Let's find out what our role will be during this Beyond event and kill each other after."

"The Null King himself," Peanut snorts. Io stands not far from him, along with a few other powerful-looking A ranks, likely hired help. I really wonder how many items they had to gather to hire all of them.

Peanut then continues to shout insults at Weslin, while Weslin throws his own back. I noticed, but this bald man is really good at shit talking. After a while, they seem to vent it out of their systems and move on to threats.

Peanut threatens to have the others wipe out Primordial Knights, while Weslin tells him that even if they do, Peanut, the dickhead, will die first, along with most of the people here.

Malika at my side keeps shouting excitedly. She hasn't even taken a side, and yet she'd excitedly join any fight to the death, likely for the honor of fighting both sides. Her group paid a large amount of shards for information that pointed to the estimated location of the Ancient Armory. Getting there, they nearly fell into it by sheer luck after days of searching.

Her entire party is already dead, caught up in the fifty that went into the hallways. Their bodies are still there, or at least what remains of them, pierced by the insects that poured out of one of the walls after they triggered some kind of trap.

Well, they're more than insects, really, more like tiny metal constructs. Shiny, imbued with mana cores, extremely durable, and capable of generating an oscillating field that helped them pierce through the unfortunate attendees.

I can still remember their screams as the creatures burrowed through their living flesh.

Some people here seem to be looking at the bright side, though, and only two words echo through their heads: More loot. They're already trying to figure out a way to fish out the undamaged items without triggering yet another trap.

Maybe it is too much of me to make fun of them, since I had the same thought myself. The difference is that right now my priority is Io, and trying to come up with a way to catch up to him before he can teleport. There's certainly a chance I could do it now. A small chance, but it may be worth it.

The problem lies in the consequences that would follow, not that I'd care, and the fact that Io is very, very skittish right now. He keeps looking around, sweat beading on his blue forehead, as if a certain emoticon-loving scrawly girl might appear behind him at any moment. I think he thinks she's here because I am, so just for the fun of it, I pretend to talk to her a few times and draw a few glowing emotions into the air.

For some reason, the innocent joke makes him panic even more.

It must have been fun for him back then on the asteroid base, after I had to leave, all because the pettiest of all elves broke the base just to spite me.

But there's a reason I haven't acted until now, it's simple curiosity. I want to see how Christoph deals with this whole situation. He and Victoria are already planning something, they even brought Weslin into it. From what I can tell, we won't be staying with the main group.

There are likely to be advantages to relying on the information the Emerald Clowns have gathered, but there is also a huge chance they'll try some sort of fuckery. And anyway, everyone in our group seems to believe we can do better than they have when it comes to exploring the Ancient Armory.

Of course, the question remains, how capable are we of dealing with the danger we've been called here to stop, or, for that matter, helping our S ranks keep it from awakening in the first place?

I would say we're currently in a pretty good position. Weslin is very close to reaching S rank, and Christoph is certainly one already in every way other than it being official. I still wonder how he managed to level so fast. He either killed massive groups of weaker monsters or a few really strong ones. The only places where he could have done it are the five Beyond floors, the Beyond surface, and Beyond quests.

That also brings me to the question of who his Handler could be. From what I know about how things work, I'm almost sure that it must be one of the Rulers. I doubt any Absolute or Champion acting as a Handler could outbid a Ruler.

"Which hallway would you take if you had to choose?" Christoph asks, suddenly coming to a stop at my side, and speaking in a calm voice.

Malika opens her mouth to protest the interruption, but he waves his hand, and a shimmering field around us blocks out all the sound coming from her. At that moment, the mana resting on his shoulders awakens, rising behind him as a transparent torso that moves to place its hands on Malika. She freezes, her eyes wide open.

While keeping my gaze on the mana construct restraining Malika, visible to me only through my trait, I point toward one of the hallways.

I've been observing all of the hallways almost since we first arrived, and I point to my choice. Not because it is the safest. Quite the opposite. It is by far the most dangerous, and like a cold, eerie wind, a mana chill flows from it.

"Good pick. Let's go there then," he nods, heading back to Victoria and the others.

Did he see the same thing I did? Was that a test? Did he want me to help with my eyes?

I look away from him and turn to Malika, who's still just standing there. There are bruises on her neck, shoulders, and arms from where the huge half-figure held her like nothing more than a toy. I also know she tried to attack Christoph dozens of times during all this, with no success.

"That guy seems to be stronger than me. Why don't you go annoy him instead?" I throw the line out.

She finally shakes it off and only smiles. The bruises on her body begin healing at a visible speed. "Seems to be stronger?"

“Seems to be,” I nod. “I haven’t fought him yet, so I can’t tell for sure.”

“Want me to join you? We can ambush him and kill him, together.”

“Nah. No funny business like challenging him. I want some peace so I can think. I know you don’t care about your life, but you’d probably die if you challenged him.”

“What do you mean? I do care for my life. That’s why I act to live it the way I want.”

“But would it not be nicer to live a few decades longer? Imagine how many people you could challenge, all the fights you could have.” I tempt her like a mechanic, swearing that duct tape is the all-time premium upgrade.

Her red eyes narrow, and her voice softens. “The person living in that future is not me. The decisions I make are for the one living in the present.”

“Well, that is the dumbest thing I’ve heard today.”

“Want to hear something dumber?”

“Go on.”

“You, acting like you’re above all this chaos while drooling at the thought of it.”

“That is indeed, really dumb.”

“You, pretending you don’t like my company.”

“Even dumber.”

“You, trying so hard to ignore me and clearly failing.”

“That might be taking it too far.”

“You, pretending that frown of yours doesn’t just make you look cute.”

“Huh, okay?”

“You, pretending those pants of yours weren’t fighting for their life back there.”

“What do you mean by that?”

She gives no answer. She just turns and walks away while giggling loudly and maniacally.

“What did you mean by that!?” I shout after her, but no answer comes.

Chapter 699: Where is the loot?

Victoria’s duplicate suddenly stops, coughs up a green liquid, then collapses to her knees, literally falling apart a second later. The head rolls across the floor, the arms tear off the torso, and the legs fall apart as the body crumbles.

Real Victoria shows no reaction. “Some sort of aerosol. It hit me in the face, but I do not know what activated it. It mutated extremely quickly, first breaking down my organs before going after muscles and ligaments.”

“Morwag would’ve survived it,” one of the demons behind mutters, several others nodding eagerly as they slide into the conversation, trying to guess whether they would be able to endure.

I am fairly confident they wouldn’t have. Vic has one of the most durable bodies out of anyone here.

“I noticed it activating. Just give me a minute, and I’ll work out a way around it,” Christoph says simply, still staring in the direction where it happened.

“Do you want me to send in another duplicate?”

“Thank you, Victoria, but there’s no need.”

Hearing that, Vic stops by my side. She glances at the temporary mana halo I’ve formed to help me accumulate energy more easily and asks, “Are you preparing?”

“Obviously. It never hurts to have a bit more mana, Vic. Actually, I think you should invest in the mana stat a bit more. It is not healthy how low your mana levels are. How are you even capable of creating that many duplicates?”

“Vic, your party sounds like a bunch of nerds.”

“It worked out to be the most efficient solution for me, Natty,” she smiles just a little. “How’ve you been doing? I thought I would’ve met you on the 4th floor earlier, given your capabilities.”

“A lot happened. And you know me, I always thought it was cooler for the hero to hold back his strength, only to suddenly leap ahead of everyone.”

“That indeed sounds like you. Sometimes. You’re with the Primordial Knights?”

“I was kidnapped and forced to join. It worked out in the end, and I don’t mind. Please don’t kill anyone.”

“I will not.”

“Thanks. What guild were you going to join?”

“I am considering Frontier or Bloodline, but I am waiting for a better offer.”

“Aren’t they really strict with their members in Bloodline? I heard they only take in people with powerful traits?”

“Natty, are you saying your sister has weak traits?”

“Vic, I would rather lose ten points of mana than ever say that.”

“Good. When we have more privacy, I will tell you other things, including the details regarding my traits. For now, I guess we should go.” She gestures at Christoph, who creates an orb over the palm of his hand.

Breathing into it, the orb turns into tiny particles that fly ahead, clinging to the edges of the hallways. When these particles hit a set of specific points, they move erratically and begin to duplicate, they appear to deal with traps before settling down.

I don’t know if it’s the best trigger she could have chosen, but after that, Victoria twists, rips off one of her fingers, and throws it to the ground. From it, her duplicate reforms.

Would she still be able to do that if her constitution were higher than her strength? Probably yes, knowing her. I also know she doesn’t care all that much, but why won’t she come up with something cooler? Couldn’t she grow a duplicate from a drop of blood, or maybe a single hair? She’s probably tested it, so does that mean the finger is more efficient, since it contains blood, bone, flesh, and skin?

I’m sure there’s a lot of fun to be had in testing the limits of her skill and her mental power. She did tell me that she’s the one controlling the duplicates. I haven’t asked yet whether that is because of her decision or some sort of limitation, nor have I asked how difficult it is.

But, as much as I love her and as much as she is my sister, I realize how monstrous this is from a certain point of view. Her mind, controlling multiple bodies, possibly even seeing each one as an original. The strain it puts on you, and the kind of thinking it would require, would be almost like turning yourself into a machine. After testing that kind of stuff myself, I realize that even more.

Simply said, Vic is cool as hell.

Her duplicate starts walking away from us toward the spot where the last one fell apart. Halfway there, it suddenly explodes.

"You have walked exactly the same route as you did before," Christoph says, scratching his chin and thinking.

"I did," Victoria confirms.

"Adaptive defenses? Something that reactivates a dormant trap further back in case someone decides to use methods like ours to progress?" he starts thinking out loud.

"Possibly, or one that activates and deactivates at preset times."

"It wasn't mana-based either, so it was likely a mechanical trigger that activated a shielded inscription powered by a hidden mana battery."

"Or you could both be wrong," I say, and Vic and Christoph turn to me. It almost makes me want to smile seeing them. "What if the traps were set not to stop people from going in, but to stop something inside from getting out?"

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I ignore the clear excitement of the demons around us at those words. "The first trap that melted Vic would activate the dormant one further ahead, and from our point of view, that would be further back."

Weslin is one of the first to pick up on it, he shouts at the Primordial Knights, "No one fucking move!"

"Oh my," Christoph smiles, his senses expanding across the area in a way much like my own, though less forceful and using less mana.

If I'm right, Vic's duplicate may have triggered a trap, and that could have awakened another dormant trap somewhere else. Maybe even right where we're standing, ready to go off with a big, satisfying boom.

It smells like the work of someone who wanted to be mana-efficient. Someone who set these traps up to last for years, often putting them into "sleep mode" to avoid draining batteries.

It's also quite unfortunate, since we are already quite a ways into the hallway I chose, unable to even see the area we appeared in at the start of the event. We're also the only ones who selected this path.

A few seconds pass with everyone standing still, in deep silence, as if a single word could trigger one of these insane traps. The entire time, I feel my fingers tingle, and my senses sharpen.

These traps are, simply said, insane. They were made by someone who was clearly very talented, not to mention straight up twisted. It's to the point where Christoph said that he's fairly sure that some of them could hurt even someone approaching the rank of Champion if they were careless about it.

I dismantled one of them further back, and its pieces are currently in my bag for later examination. I'm so pleased with it that even if I gained nothing else from this place, I would still consider these scraps a win.

"It seems that we were lucky this time. There might not be as many dormant traps activating each time. Or the one that just activated is further back. That also means you'll have to reconsider things if you want to return the same way," Christoph says simply before turning to Vic. "Victoria, if you will," he gestures, and we continue.

The Ancient Armory makes for a really cool name, and everyone should agree with me on that. The. Ancient. Armory. It has a great ring to it, it stirs up all kinds of expectations for great loot, and plenty of it. Weapons, armor, and other things left here long ago, just waiting for the brave heroes to come and claim them.

So why the fuck does this feel more like the Ancient Minefield? It is just trap after trap after trap. Did the Elemental Clowns come this way as well? Did they take things slowly, avoiding the traps, or did they brute force it by sacrificing people, and forcing monsters through to trigger them?

Where are the guardian monsters? Where are the statues depicting abominations that come to life whenever someone steps on the wrong cobblestone, revealing it to have been a thin layer of stone hiding a real monster inside?

Or the all time classic, mimic chests. I want to see some random demon, maybe Malika, rush over to open one, only to be eaten as the chest opens into a huge mouth full of teeth.

Where is the romance of it? Where is the adventure? And where is the loot?

At this point, I feel like if Christoph had wanted to, he could've cleared this whole place on his own, and faster. But the man just doesn't seem to be in a hurry. He always takes his time, explaining how the different traps are likely to work and what he's doing to counter them. Right now, it feels like he either enjoys being the center of attention, with everyone listening to him, or is taking the opportunity to show off.

And there is a lot for him to show off. His senses are amazing, likely some of the best I've ever seen. While I can match him when it comes to mana by using my Mana Wavelength Iris, supported by my passives and physique, he seems to possess a different kind of sense, one that's not so focused on mana.

So, even as my opinion of this place keeps dropping lower, at least I can listen to Christoph and the mana sciency talk that he so obviously enjoys. When I ask a question here or there, he even recommends books and the places in the Megacity where I'll be most likely to find them. The prices of the most valuable books often climb to half a million shards each.

It's in these moments that he begins to look like a simple bookworm happily recommending his favorite book to a friend he hasn't seen in years, only to start spamming that friend with messages a few days later, asking if they've gotten around to reading it yet.

Still, a whole day has passed in these halls without casualties, though I doubt the other groups have been quite as lucky.

After that, we finally exit the hallway, stepping into a chamber with a single pillar at the center, not unlike the one where we found ourselves at the start of the event. But unlike that chamber, this one has no branching hallways. There is only the one we came through and a wide metal door on the other side.

The doors loom over us, towering twice my height and twice that in width. The surface is darkened metal streaked with green corrosion in the cracks. Despite that, it feels like the kind of metal created to outlast bone, stone, and maybe even time itself.

Up close, I see faint carvings lining the surface, dulled almost to nothing. Whatever they once showed has clearly been lost to decay.

We only take a few minutes to study them, not moving much further, very aware of possible traps hidden here in the chamber.

I start wondering what attack I should use to break through when mana rises around Christoph. For a moment, his face looks bored, almost cold. A half-formed figure grows around him, swelling in size until it matches the door for size.

Once again, I realize the others cannot see it, with the possible exception of two or three of the more perceptive people around us. At most, they can only feel the mana surging around him. Unlike them, I watch that half-figure straighten. The head turns out to be the most unnerving part, providing only the suggestion of a face with features reduced to faint ridges where eyes and a nose should be, and a hollow dip where a mouth might have been.

The arms move with weight behind them, and the fingers drive forward. The first strike lands with a thunderous crack, the sound of steel giving way under the impossible force. The door groans like a submarine under pressure, low and deep.

Again, the figure strikes. Each impact is a brutal hammering noise followed by a grinding shriek as the fingers dig deeper. The door shivers with every blow, sending echoes down the hallway like distant drums.

Then the figure forces its fingers into the punctures. The chamber fills with a roar as the steel bends. The tearing grows louder into a metallic scream.

For a moment, I deactivate my eyes, simply watching Christoph stand there while the unseen figure tears into the door in front of him, twisting and ripping it apart.

Once it is done, I reactivate my eyes just in time to see the figure shrink, move over Christoph, float behind him, and rest on his shoulders.

Without a word, he takes a step inside the breach, not even asking Vic to send out another duplicate, and we follow slowly. As I pass through the torn metal, I think I sense something, so out of curiosity, I touch the door. Any mana that meets the metal starts to unwind, as if the material were actively unraveling my mana. It takes extra effort, but I force my mana to stabilize.

I find a small fragment of the metal on the ground and pocket it for later examination while the room lights up from a single source at the top, a yellow disk embedded in the stone ceiling.

There are two exits from the chamber this time, but something else draws my attention.

Dozens of sealed metal boxes have been stacked against the walls, each one made of the same sickly dark green metal formed into the same size and shape, their edges eaten by a covering of rust that only makes them look meaner.

Even untouched, they radiate a pressure that makes me think twice about standing too close. The seams are too precise, too tight, as if they'd been welded shut, not to protect whatever lies inside but to protect everything outside from the contents. The surfaces are covered with patina, yet the material feels thicker than any weapon crate should ever need to be.

If someone told me these were meant to hold dangerous, radioactive materials, I would certainly believe them.

Chapter 700: The Presence

"Weslin, ten thousand shards if you take care of Malika so I can examine these things in peace."

"You know I can hear you too, Nathaniel. I'm standing right next to you and the void guy. Are you that worried about being around me?"

"Twenty thousand and I'll do it."

“Fuck off, baldie, don’t interfere,” she says.

“Deal,” I say.

Free at last, I move away, already hearing Malika start to complain while rousing her gravitational energy. Unfortunately for her, it has no effect on Weslin. His void flickers, and it is all gone. And as expected, her attention shifts from me to Weslin, even if it is only to try to kill him.

In the best case, he can hold her back without hurting her too much. In the very best case, he might impress her enough that she focuses on him instead of me.

“Are we opening a box?” I ask, coming to a stop next to Christoph.

He turns from the boxes toward me, then, after a pause, smiles. “I don’t think it’d be worth it, but if you really want to, we can.”

“How would you proceed with opening it?” he asks.

“Come on, don’t act like a teacher here,” I groan.

He gives a quick laugh. “Maybe I have gotten a bit too used to that old act. I’ll try not to. But the question remains.”

“You know what’s inside?”

“I have a strong suspicion.”

“How?”

“I recognize the material and what it was being used for. Considering where we are and how old it’s likely to be, I can make a decent guess.”

“Something dangerous?”

“Very, but not in a useful way.”

“Valuable?”

“If you mean in terms of selling it to the system shop, probably. But likely not as much as you’re thinking.”

“There won’t be any funny business like a Handler stepping in to take it away from me before I can open the box?”

Christoph moves and jumps up to sit on the box he moved before asking, “You sound like you have experience with that.”

I watch as he taps the box with his palm a few times, and follow the way vibrations echo through the material.

“A bit. I tried to sneak white sand into Beyond,” I answer, watching for his reaction.

“White sand?”

“It comes from the Mana Desert of the sixth floor. It was some kind of construct that looked like grains of white sand, it was very aggressive and sensitive to mana. Apparently, it had been made by some Absolute or other, and when it came into contact with mana, it charged up and whipped itself into a murderous frenzy.” ß

“Sometimes I wish I could enter the normal tutorial floors too,” he says. “Funny enough, I might get a chance soon if the tournament goes the way I want.”

For a while, I watch him without speaking, long enough that he turns to me.

"Any problems?" He asks.

"I don't think you've lied to me yet."

"I try not to lie," he nods, then asks, "But?"

"But I don't know. It feels like you've been making fun of me somehow."

"Such is the privilege of the older generations."

"You know what's funny?"

"Please, tell me."

"You talk about being old, but there are people hundreds or thousands of years old. The fifty or so years separating us is nothing. We're both children in the eyes of someone like that."

"That's an interesting thought. It makes me want to ask you something. Would you like to hear it? I promise I won't sound like a teacher this time."

"Go on."

"Can you really call someone who's lived a thousand years truly old? What if that person was talented and powerful, and had always lived in a body that never felt a day older than twenty or thirty? Some people on Earth believe wisdom comes with age, as the body produces less testosterone and people begin taking fewer risks. The brain also continues developing its ability to recognize danger. It's not fully mature until around the mid-twenties. And that goes hand in hand with recognizing one's own mortality and grappling with the thought of death."

“Honestly, I have no idea. You could ask someone who’d lived a thousand years the same questions, and he might not know the answer, or he might just pretend to. So how the hell would I know? Just twenty years ago, I was learning to tie my shoes, and now I’m expected to answer something like that? Nah.”

Christoph opens his mouth, then closes it, then opens it again. In the end, he lets out a short laugh and shakes his head. “I would say that’s a good answer.”

In one smooth movement, he jumps down from the box and turns toward the hallways leading out. “Shall we leave? Something about this conversation made me excited to continue.”

“You don’t want to open the box anymore?” I ask.

“The boxes contain depleted reactive crystals. They’re the byproducts of creating certain mana reflective alloys. These crystals, or what remains of them, tend to be stored in boxes made of materials similar to this one and the material used for the doors. I bet you’ve noticed it as well, just like with the piece you took. It is nothing worth staying for, as in the end it is only a byproduct of processing and could be considered little more than trash.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“A bit. Having been stored here for so long, the pressure has likely built up, and opening it would release a strong burst of mana radiation, which I was curious to see how you would deal with. That is, of course, only if I am right. I could also be lying, and the boxes might contain some of the most valuable metals known to man, which I may intend to sell to the system shop when I return here later on my own.” As he says this, he stares at me with a blank face.

We leave a few minutes later, exiting through the hallways. Christoph seems to be in high spirits, almost like he’s found himself in an adventuring mood, and takes the lead instead of Victoria’s duplicates. We still head toward the source of that eerie mana I’ve been feeling, and spot a few teleportation arrays along the way, all of which are dead and completely inactive.

At first, I was surprised. If our small theory is correct, this place once served as an armory, or at least it did before being converted to keep something trapped inside. So why would there still be teleportation arrays, even if they had been deactivated? Wouldn’t you want to destroy them entirely to be sure?

Around this time, the number of traps decreases sharply. That's when we come to a stop, and I take time to examine one of the deactivated teleportation arrays. The one I find myself examining is extremely unusual, it's unlike any I've ever seen before. First, it requires something other than mana to activate, and honestly, I have no idea what that something is.

Second, the arrays are small. They allow only a single normal human sized person to teleport. Anything larger would be torn apart when pulled through. This restriction is hard coded into them, impossible to adjust without constructing entirely new arrays with fresh components.

Lastly, there are no set coordinates, and no way to add them.

And a fun thought comes to me. What if the traps here were also meant to keep anyone who found their way inside from leaving?

And for that matter, why do I feel as if something's started pulling on my mana?

POV Morwag

After a full day of dealing with these annoying traps, I finally reach the cave in the center of this section of the Armory. Some of the others are already inside, waiting in the enormous cavern, its walls and ceiling covered with dimly glowing red crystals.

In the exact center of the cave stands a single humanoid figure. It's fossilized, encased in stone, so other than knowing it's a humanoid, I can't even start to guess the race it belongs to. Whatever it is, it's probably what we've been sent here to stop.

I want to fight it. Whatever binds it, I want to tear it open with my bare hands. The thing here deserves to test its strength against mine.

"Morwag, don't," Nyssa says, sitting on a boulder nearby with her knees pulled to her chest.

I just nod in response and remain at her side, waiting as she does.

Lyraen is already here, as is Kaari. Lyraen floats in the air the whole time, as usual, while Kaari rests with her back against the wall and her bow laid out in front of her. She notices me looking her way, her blonde hair shifts as her green eyes turn to me. I'm sure she's making fun of me as her mana mantle rises from her shoulders, moving as if it were alive or caught in a gust of wind. Its edges glow with a pale blue gradient, darker at the top, and filled with tiny purple stars shining inside.

That mantle reminds me of the time I failed to unbind it, the same as that human who challenged me so beautifully. How shameful it is that I won't be able to face him at his strongest within the tutorial. That would have been a beautiful day.

A crackle of white lightning brings me back. Lyraen floats closer, ignoring me as always and addressing Nyssa alone. The vyssari are small, and Lyraen is no different, but his power makes size irrelevant. Strength is all that matters, and Lyraen stands above me for now. I will not waste breath mocking what I cannot yet surpass. Only Nyssa can face him as an equal.

"I expected Hela to be here as well," Lyraen says in a deep voice that's never seemed to fit him.

"If she had come, I would've killed her. She's smarter than that," Nyssa answers simply.

As if he only expected this confirmation, Lyraen nods. "Solae will not be coming, and neither will Quintan. At most, I would expect Brich. He showed interest in the Armory. Perhaps Luan, if he managed to leave the third floor with that mind mage of his."

"Let us wait then and see," Nyssa nods, and it grows quiet again.

Glancing her way and receiving a small gesture, I sit down in front of her with my legs crossed and close my eyes to begin training to entertain myself as we wait.

An hour later, Brich appears. Smiling as always, full of energy. "Sorry for being late! There were some really fun traps I had to examine," he says. A lumoran man, carrying a large backpack and wearing heavy armor.

Every step he takes makes a noise like the clanging of a rusty bucket until he stops near Kaari, winks at her, and glances at the figure in the center. "Daaaaamn, that's a lot of containment barriers."

“And I bet you missed most of them. I’ve seen holding cells for Champions with fewer layers of defense, even if they were less eroded by time than these ones.” Kaari smiles at him, and a ring of mana appears on her finger as she waves her hand, materializing half a dozen arrows. Each one is a different color, stabbing into the ground near her, ready to be drawn. I still remember the strength behind each one.

“You want to kill the poor guy over there?” Brich widens his eyes. “I would strongly recommend against that. The quest clearly said to stop it from awakening.”

I rise, my body sharpening with heat, every muscle eager for the clash that must come. “What better way to stop it than by killing it?”

“Nyssa, my dear, please tell Mister Morwag not to look at me like that. The last time we fought, I escaped fairly and honorably. I do not deserve such brutal, uncivilized looks, nor to be attacked in the middle of a fight.” Brich complains as always, but he sets his bag down and pulls out a shield, inserting different mana stones into it after examining the trapped figure.

“Just shut up. Today I will let you be,” I answer, then look over at Nyssa and Kaari, who is now standing next to her, asking a question.

“Nyssa, there are circles meant to defend against possession, so we can assume our prisoner possesses such abilities. The defensive circles aren’t set against mind manipulation, but against things like skin jumpers. You have the strongest defenses against it, so be ready to kill any of us if it comes down to it. The presence should be weakened enough for us to kill. But if we fail, it could regain its strength and try to attack the other group, taking whatever they’ve been sent to destroy. If it escapes after getting that, it might even defeat the Pathfinder and destroy the city.”

“Megacity,” I remind her.

“Morwag, shut up. I hate that stupid name,” Kaari says and glances at Nyssa, who nods in confirmation.

“But I cannot imagine it will survive what Lyraen is preparing.” Kaari sighs, then, like me, turns to the vyssari. He floats higher than usual, his mana trailed by white lightning as it moves through the air, leaving glowing inscriptions behind. A massive circle spreads under him. Whatever trait, item, or skill he

uses generates an immense amount of pure lightning. Occasionally, it lashes outward, evaporating anything it touches.

White lightning is something only this guy possesses, as far as anyone has seen. Lyraen, said to be a vyssari of one of the purest bloodlines, rumored to descend from a wyrm, maybe even a dragon. He's also known as the attendee with the strongest attack.

Maybe I should ask him to fire it at me. I am sure I could hold my body together.

"Morwag, don't," Nyssa says from my side.

So I do not, because it was she who told me. Instead, I watch as Lyraen readies his attack, charged and humming with the kind of energy that would terrify many in Beyond. Then he does something that would scare many more people shitless, as a field envelops him. All that pressure, all that coiled lightning, disappears, hidden entirely by the field.

"Fucking monster," Brich sighs nearby, Kaari only nodding. Even she couldn't pierce that field.

"After you, Kaari," Lyraen's voice says, echoing in such a way that I can't even be sure where he is.

Nyssa sits, her white and red eyes locked on the figure. Brich prepares to rush in after the opening attacks. Kaari nocks a purple arrow with a white core. The inscriptions on her bow glow, the arrow swells. The ring on her finger begins to shine along with her mantle.

There is no more talk. She loses the arrow at the figure, and it's immediately followed by Lyraen's white lightning. The lightning writhes as a beast loosed from chains, twisting on itself, biting the air with fangs of light. It hits like a hammer made of light, and strips color from the world, searing inscriptions into the walls, and leaves the smell of burnt air in its wake.

I send a burst of my primordial energy out ahead of me and Nyssa to unbind the aftereffects of whatever reaches us, while Brich raises his shield to defend himself and Kaari. I count two heartbeats, bind my body, and ready myself to rush in, even while the remnants of the attacks charge and pulse around, enough to evaporate anyone weaker.

But there is nothing to rush against, no presence at all where it was before.

Then I hear Kaari sigh, her voice trembling, “We failed. It has jumped into one of us.”

As all movement stops, something else seizes our attention. Nyssa finally stands and drops from her boulder in a smooth motion. She reaches down and unties her shoes, then takes them off, along with her socks, standing here barefoot. She unbuttons her shirt and removes it, revealing a blue tank top that shows her slim, almost fragile looking, pale shoulders and arms. Unhurried, she folds the shirt and places it atop her shoes, which she moves to the side.

She is perfect. Perfect because she burns herself with her own strength. The most perfect demon I have ever met. Every breath drives her closer to death, yet she refuses to weaken.

Nyssa is dying. Born with Primordial Blood, that power destroys her body while only growing purer and stronger as it has found a perfect host. But for Nyssa, it’s simply impossible to grow strong enough to match her blood. There are no known Absolutes or Rulers alive with Primordial Blood, they all died before reaching that rank, if not soon after. Just like she will.

The Primordial Blood is her gift. It flows through her body and turns her heart into something no demon can rival. For while she is alive, she will blaze brighter than anyone, until death takes her.

What could be more demon-true than this? To be driven to grow stronger with every breath, knowing death waits, and yet carving a name into the world that no one can erase.

And as expected from the demon I most admire, she speaks words without hesitation.

“I am sorry, but if I cannot find who’s holding the presence inside them, I will have to kill you all.”

As sure as I am of my power, I know I’m included in her statement.