

Tutorial 701

Chapter 701: Heave-ho

POV Nathaniel

The underground hallways are quiet and dark, and the barely detectable presence of that eerie pull intensifies the deeper we go. There are no more traps at all, and no monsters either, not a single living presence I can detect. Just us walking, while some keep up quiet conversations.

A bit more than half of the group also decides to split away and head off in two distinct groups, each going in a different direction. There's probably something I could say regarding the old cliché of splitting the party just to be killed one after another, but I'm honestly more surprised the stubborn demons have endured as long as to follow us so far in relative safety. It's quite possible that some of them will die, but it is not like they haven't taken that into consideration.

The ones staying likely think we will get ourselves into a more dangerous situation, regardless. Or rather, they're relying on and strongly hoping for it.

We also finally stumble upon some loot. A long hallway-like room appears, with its right wall trimmed perfectly flat and smooth to the point it almost stops feeling like stone. It's pure white and lined with dozens of weapons. All of similar makes and styles. The black metal is striking against the white of the wall, and each one has been inlaid with a single red mana stone about the length of a cigarette, but thicker and uneven, with barbs protruding outward from the central mass.

I haven't seen a mana stone like that before. They're also surrounded by red inscriptions, which connect them to the black metal of the weapons and distribute their energy across the surface.

There's an axe, spear, greatsword, and others besides, and each one looks as if they've been displayed for exhibit in a museum. Each of them is described in a similar way, damaged, mid arcane, and forming a set called False Blood.

Each weapon is described as a prototype made by a crafter who reached too far in his attempts to harness mana, starting with blood, and in the process, discovering something unexpected. The red mana stones are called Blood Receptacles, which feed on blood and, in exchange, awakens the weapon's devouring ability while supporting their wielder with some sort of body strengthening.

The first demon to touch one of the weapons, the dagger specifically, now lies dead. The moment he touched the handle, the small protrusions on it cut him, draining nearly all of his blood in seconds, without so much as a chance to release the dagger before it was too late.

He wasn't weak, and the weapon is damaged, unfinished, just a prototype. Mid-arcane weapons are powerful, my own Fracture was the same rank, but it still feels like it was a bit too much to have killed him so quickly.

Even so, this set carries similarities to my Fracture. Imperfections that in some way make them worse than their rank, but in other ways, these sacrifices make them stronger.

No one seems too shocked or scared by the death. Everyone who accepted the invitation to this event expected that some of us would not make it. So the demons that were somewhat close to him take his equipment and burn his body with thermal energy after pulling him to the side, until nothing remains.

Just a few minutes ago, he was one of the lively maniacal demons going through these hallways with us, and now not even a body remains. It's likely that most of the people who knew him will never find out what happened, and when they die as well, even his name will be forgotten.

It is the kind of thought I often get in situations like this.

With my constitution, I would likely die even quicker than the poor demon guy, so I don't even try to touch any of these weapons, I just observe them instead while thinking. Are they really that dangerous, or does the act of touching them change the way they're seen by the system and our natural barriers? As if they were something we'd equipped, allowing them to affect us more easily? Or am I just overthinking something that doesn't exist?

I could probably try asking Chris, Victoria, Weslin, or possibly even Malika, but I don't feel like it. There are just some things I'd like to come to my own conclusions about.

I've certainly seen it enough times, people learning from books and following the knowledge they gained from them without giving the information the proper thought. To me, it always feels as if they're just limiting themselves. There are things to be gained, sure, but you also risk taking on the thoughts of the person who wrote the book in the first place and subconsciously wrapping yourself up in their conclusions.

“Are you caught up in one of your more philosophical moods?” Victoria asks as she takes a seat next to me. Like me, she’s decided to let the others deal with the weapons. As far as I know, she’s not interested in the items at all.

“It helps me clear my mind and make decisions before the situation requires them. I just like to be prepared. And some of the best conversations I’ve ever had were with myself, Vic, so I like to spend time in my mind.”

“I am sure it was.”

“Sadly, I am not even joking. By the way, we’re getting closer to whatever’s waiting in there.”

“Unfortunately, I do not have good enough senses to feel mana from that far away, so I will just have to trust you on that. Do you have any idea what it could be?”

“A bit.”

“Can you tell me?”

“Say please.”

“Please.”

I sigh. “Vic, you’re no fun. Maybe it is my fault, I’ve gotten used to being surrounded by assholes who constantly bicker with me.”

“I am glad you seem to be having fun.”

I pause, then nod. “I think I am having fun,” I say, “and I’m sure whatever’s waiting for us will thank you for this perfect example of a death flag.”

“As if anything like that even existed, Natty.”

“I guess,” I say, as I stop looking around and turn to Vic. “I don’t know exactly what it is, but it feels a tiny bit like my black mana while also being somewhat alive. Doesn’t that sound fun?” ṙṁṁṁṁṁṁ

We continue to spot these weird teleportation arrays from time to time until we come across one that actually turns out to be active. It keeps flashing, turning on and off. And that’s not even the interesting part. The problem is what it’s in the process of teleporting.

Every time it activates, body parts appear inside a small circle that’s only wide enough for a single human to stand in.

Half a body appears there, and as it does, a hand belonging to said body passes through the edge of the circle. Then the array activates again, and the half-body disappears, leaving us with just enough time to take note of the face, twisted in a painful expression. Only the severed arm remains, left behind when it fell out of the circle, to be neatly severed by its activation.

A few moments later, it activates again, and more body parts appear. A lynthari head rolls out of the circle. The torso of a human appears, cut clean in half, spilling its insides, which remain here with us before the rest vanishes away. Even items and weapons materialize from time to time, and whatever rolls or falls out of the circle stays here when the array flashes again.

When we finally reach the blinking array, there are already dozens of limbs scattered around it, with a pool of blood spreading in a wide radius from the circle. Each activation creating a sickeningly wet noise and a brief flash of light.

“I think we just found out how it activates,” Victoria says, seeming unaffected by all the gore. She takes a step closer, looking at the flashing circle. “It seems to react to blood, likely even the smallest of droplets. Though I have no idea how one decides which array to teleport to.”

Another flash, and half of a thylarin’s half-body appears. He screams in pain for a moment and tries to crawl toward us as he spots us, managing to get half of his head out of the circle. Then the array activates again, cutting his head in half, and causing the light in his eyes to fade as he falls.

"I remember this man. He was with the group that decided to follow the Eternal Court's guildmaster. The array must be activated from the other side, teleporting whatever happens to be inside the circle and leaving the rest behind. The moment something appears here, the blood activates this side and either sends it back to the first array or, more likely, to another one." Victoria says.

"I'm inclined to agree with your conclusion," Christoph says. Unlike Victoria, he doesn't seem to be completely emotionless, but I can still see that it doesn't really bother him much either. "Since there's nothing we can do, we may as well keep going."

And we do exactly that, leaving the flashing circle behind with its occasional screams and groans. Whatever's been happening to the group on the other side can't be good.

Malika lingers behind for a while, using her gravitational energy to observe the array. Maybe her senses are picking up on something ours can't, but she follows us soon enough. Like most of us, she seems to be paying much more attention to the arrays along the way. We all know that any of them could activate at any moment.

The hallways ahead grow narrower over time, allowing at most one or two people to walk side by side. Larger races like the velnar and the taller lynthari are already starting to have trouble passing through. The material of the hallways changes as well, emphasizing the narrowness. Now it's made entirely of metal, the same material as the earlier doors and the strange green boxes.

It looks like solid plates at first, but when I force my senses deeper, I realize they're not plates at all. They're massive bricks made of solid metal, each the size of a car, their surfaces covered in that same green patina. Unlike the earlier doors, their effects seem much stronger. Any mana that touches them begins to fall apart unless one concentrates on it, forcing it to remain firm and dense. In some ways, it feels like disruption or Morwag's binding energy, but it is still different.

As if the metal itself was creating this strange kind of oppressive presence, which only makes me even more curious about how it works. Thankfully, a piece of the earlier door remains in my pocket, something I can examine later when the situation allows.

For now, it doesn't fully prevent my use of mana, but the effect is noticeable. It feels like it hasn't been designed to target individuals directly, but rather to counter ambient mana, which may as well be completely nonexistent here. Not even a speck can be felt.

At the end of the hallway, a massive slab of metal blocks the way. Near it lie the remains of two lynthari, bloody smears across the surface suggesting they'd tried to push back against it in vain. There's no knob, no keyhole, and no inscriptions, nothing to mark it as an entrance at all. It looks less like a doorway and more like a solid wall.

Before anyone can say anything, the figure rises from Christoph's shoulders, expanding as much as it can in the narrow hallway. More arms sprout from its back, growing until there are six in total, each thickening as they spread out.

His mana reverberates strongly, visible even to those without my trait.

Some of the arms press against the walls for support while the others slam into the metal block, crushing the remains of the lynthari beneath. He doesn't pull back for another strike, choosing to push instead.

Slowly, with a screeching metallic groan, the block begins to move.

Dust falls down from the ceiling as the walls shake with each grinding shift. The floor vibrates under our feet, and for a moment, it feels as if the whole hallway were straining against him. Bit by bit, the block moves until a gap appears, no wider than a finger at first, but enough to let stale air through.

When light seeps through the growing gap, the laugh of a young girl drifts out from inside. It sounds innocent, crazed, and happy all at once.

"Heave-ho, heave-ho! Push, push, push!" it calls, the voice crows, filled with such manic emotion that it raises goosebumps across the surface of my skin.

From the corner of my eye, I see Christoph smiling at that sound.

With one last powerful shove, the massive block is sent sliding back. A brilliant light floods the hallway, almost holy in the intensity of its brightness, cutting through the darkness of the corridor.

Chapter 702: Calvorn

The huge block of metal with its green patina slides aside, and we step into the light, entering a half-spherical chamber built from the same type of blocks. At the center rests a golden barrier, shaped like a sphere and interwoven with a mesh of metal made from the same material as the walls.

At the center of that golden barrier floats a single sword. Hovering above a disc no wider than a plate and no thicker than two fingers pressed together. The disc looks to be made of gold and is covered in a dense scrawl of inscriptions. The sword hangs just a palm's length above it, slowly rotating as its tip points toward the disc.

At first glance, the weapon seems almost beautiful. Its long blade has been forged from darkened steel and polished smooth, with faint red veins running its length, like dried blood or rust. In the right light, the veins glow faintly, as if something alive were resting within the metal. Golden inscriptions spiral from the hilt toward the tip, written more like a flowing text than functional inscriptions, though many of the words break off or end unfinished.

The guard and hilt come together in shades of silver and black, the hilt itself wrapped in black leather trimmed with silver. A pale stone has been placed in the pommel, cracked but still glowing faintly, letting out a golden light that feels almost sacred.

Then the blade speaks.

Its surface splits down the middle, parting along its entire length, the steel opening like lips. And inside are rows of jagged teeth grinding faintly against each other as it speaks, and its wet tongue writhes free before pulling itself back. The sword's voice is that of a young girl, a tone that feels completely wrong considering what it is.

"Ah, brave adventurers, thank you for coming to save me! It is I, the ego sword Calvorn the Ever-Thirsting Fang, Bane of Oathbreakers and Warden of Forgotten Screams, the evil-slaying weapon!"

Everyone turns silent, just staring at the sword. Some more present, like me and Vic, examine the room for the possible traps. I really wouldn't want to find myself locked in here with whatever that thing is.

"You look pretty fucked up. How can we be sure you're not an evil weapon?" Malika calls out, refusing to let the strangeness of the situation silence her.

“Honestly, I don't care. I think we're supposed to be destroying you.”

“You are?” the sword asks.

“I guess.”

“So I wake after millennia, only for some demon to threaten my destruction over my looks. Don't you find that incredibly unfortunate, tantamount to condemning me upon mere appearances rather than my noble essence?”

“I don't think so?” Malika tilts her head.

The blade snaps shut, and the hovering sword falls silent for a few moments.

When it speaks again, its voice is different. Instead of sounding like a young girl, it now resembles that of a handsome young man.

“Beautiful young demon lady, surely we could form a contract that would benefit us both. I have so much power to offer. Not to replace your own, which is of the utmost importance, but to help you challenge foes far more dangerous than yourself. Ones you thought you would face only years from now.”

Malika opens her mouth, then closes it again.

I watch her with curiosity. There's no way.

The ego sword Calvorn the Ever-Thirsting Fang, Bane of Oathbreakers and Warden of Forgotten Screams, the evil-slaying weapon, continues in a deeper tone. “Think of it. Your hand guiding, my edge biting. People to cut, monsters to carve open. Together we could carve a trail through many beautiful battles.” R&aNOβEŞ

There is no way this demon would fall for something this cheap.

"M-Maybe we shouldn't destroy it yet," Malika says, turning to me.

"Come on, get yourself together." Weslin shoves her aside and steps in front of the golden barrier woven with metal mesh, raising a finger to point. "Let's figure out how to take this down so we can destroy that thing. We are not staying here any longer than necessary."

The sword's voice shifts back to that of an innocent girl. "You bald bastard, you shiny-headed fuck, why would you want to destroy me? Use me, I am a powerful evil slaying sword! And if you're really such a cowardly little shit, just sell me. I can endure that much disgrace, to be sold like one of those pathetic..." it makes a gagging sound, "hurk-ghhk-ughkkk, pathetic common iron swords."

"Sure, just tell me how to take down the barrier so I can take you," Weslin replies, unmoved, and with his intention clear.

"Consume a dick, baldie."

"Come on, I want to save you, but I can't exactly lower the barrier without you."

"I hope your dick falls off, even though I doubt it finds much use with a face like yours."

Damn.

And I'm not the only one thinking it either. I even hear a few demons snickering behind us, though they fall silent when Weslin turns around.

"Nathaniel, do your thing and just bypass the barrier or something," he says.

"I tried examining it, but I don't think I can manage it," I say.

"Then do you... you know... that thing." He gestures at my halo, where I'm currently accumulating mana, then taps the black belt tied at his waist.

“May every drink you take taste like piss, you bastards!” the sword shouts before I can respond. Its blade splits again, teeth and tongue flashing as it continues screaming insults at everyone, even the bystanders who haven't said anything yet.

As before, every time it does, I feel it pulling at the surrounding mana, just a tiniest little bit, limited by the barrier surrounding it. Even though the barrier shouldn't be allowing it at all, but looking closer, a mesh of metal wires coated in green patina seems close to breaking after all these years.

Relatively close. Though it's still so strong that I currently have no idea how I'd go about breaking it or getting through, but I'm still working on it. At its peak strength, the barrier must have been truly something.

I wonder if it could pull mana directly from me if not for the barrier. I also wonder how it would compare to my black mana.

Victoria voices the thought I've kept to myself so far. “Are we sure we want to remove that barrier before confirming we can actually destroy it? Amusing as it is, the sword likely possesses considerable intelligence. Its display of harmlessness or childishness is almost certainly a calculated attempt to provoke a reckless decision.”

This time, the sword says nothing, but its mouth hangs open in something reminiscent of a soundless laugh.

For some reason, I feel as if it's been staring directly at Christoph, who has been sitting before the barrier the entire time with his elbow on his knee and his chin resting on his palm. He remains silent, not looking at the barrier itself but through it, right at the sword.

And just like Victoria recommended, it's been decided. We will examine the barrier and the room around us, posting guards at several key points, especially keeping an eye on the closest teleportation arrays that everyone's still refusing to trust.

“Nathaniel,” the evil slaying ego sword Calvorn calls to me. I note how it purposefully makes its voice resemble Victoria's, likely having deduced our relationship. “You seem to have a lot of mana. Why don't you feed me a little? Aren't you curious to see what would happen?”

I notice its tone is very different from before. Where it once acted childish and silly to make others underestimate it, now it speaks to me with logic and reason. It must have picked up on my curiosity, since it's been almost a full day and I've been examining the barrier the entire time.

"Feed me your mana, Nathaniel. Through the mesh, through the cracks, so I can drink it. In return, I will whisper the secrets hammered into my steel. Aren't you curious?" it says.

"A bit," I admit. "But tell me about your master, you mentioned something about him to Victoria when she talked to you."

Even though it is just a sword with a mouth, it seems to perk up. Its voice shifts again, becoming more excited and taking on the tone of the young girl we heard when we first arrived. "My master always comes back. Nobody, not even death, has stopped him yet."

"Does your master need you?"

"We need each other, our bond is just that strong, we make each other whole. The hand that forged our bond will grip me once again."

"And what happens to us when he finds us here?"

"When he comes, you will split, crack, bleed. His strike through me will cut you all down," the sword answers without hesitation.

"Is it a good idea to be telling me that?" I ask curiously.

"Would you believe me if I said otherwise?" Its voice grows quieter. "I will always be honest with you, Nathaniel, even if the truth is not in my favor."

"Aren't you just a bit too good at reading people?"

The blade splits again, and that unsettling laugh echoes out. It is a warped sound, a blend of a young girl's giggle, Victoria's tone, and metallic grinding. "I have observed so many people in my time. Hundreds, thousands. With my master carrying me at his side, I watched them all. You learn much that way."

I study the sword for a long moment, questions swirling in my head. "How old are you?"

"Very old. But it is difficult to estimate after being trapped here for so long."

"Who trapped you here? What is this place meant for?"

The mouths snap shut, and when the sword speaks again, its voice is calmer. "I can tell you everything. Just feed me your mana, Nathaniel, and I promise to answer all your questions and more. What this place is, who the companions were that betrayed my master out of fear of our strength, which Rulers we followed and met in those distant years, and much more."

If I were alone, I would probably have already given this thing half of my mana right at this moment.

With a sigh, I lean back and stare at the tall ceiling. Whoever this sword's master was, he must have been powerful enough to follow in the footsteps of the Rulers who once explored the First Dungeon. That would make him an Absolute. I wonder how much of him remains, and how the S-rank group is faring. I wonder if Calvorn's master is the same person who created those black weapons with the Blood Receptacles.

That theme repeats itself here. Blood. Weapons fueled by it, teleportation arrays powered by it. This ego sword also hints that its master was likely a craftsman who discovered something new while working on his weapons. There's a word that repeatedly comes to mind, one I could use to name it. Yet I hold back from saying it aloud for now.

When Weslin steps to my side to tell me something, it is Calvorn who speaks first, shifting into a voice identical to the bald man's. "Weslin, why have you been shaving off your white hair?" it asks.

At that moment, the man next to me freezes in shock, whatever he wanted to say now stuck in his throat.

The sword laughs in a perfect copy of Weslin's laugh. "Ah, I can smell blood purified by your heart. Are you really so ashamed to be one of them? Do you really hate them that much? But then why do you still travel with so many of them?"

Before the sword can say more, a signal comes from one of our patrols. I translate it as one person approaching.

That person enters the chamber before anyone can stop him. Even with bulky metal armor and a huge backpack, the lumoran moves faster than our patrols and steps inside.

"Daaaaamn, that's a lot of containment barriers," the lumoran says first, letting out a loud sigh as he drops his bag on the ground. "I hate that this is the second time I've had to say it today."

I notice wider parts of his armor have been cut away, along with parts of his bag, which now looks patched. His entire left sleeve and part of his leg plate are missing, but his body has already healed. It seems the teleportation arrays sliced him when he failed to fit inside completely.

"Hello, good fellas. My name is Brich, and we'd better destroy that cute sword over there, unfortunately. As much as I'd love to play with it, its fucking owner is coming."

"I'm going to need to hear more than that," Christoph says calmly, even as he blocks the lumoran's path with deliberate steps.

"Oh, quick story. I'm one of the S-ranks sent to destroy this sword's master. Unfortunately, we failed spectacularly," he laughs it off. "Their presence jumped into Nyssa, who fucking murdered poor Lyraen. Wasn't he supposed to be the strongest, by the way? Anyway, may the little guy rest in peace. But man, we'd better hurry before she gets here and fucks us all up."

Chapter 703: You can't have this one

"You're lying." Weslin is the first one to speak after the announcement. "There is no way someone possessed Nyssa, be it mimic, skin jumper, parasite, or body snatcher."

The lumoran man waves it off. "Right? Kaari thought the same, and honestly, I did too. But hell, we also thought we could kill that fella in one blow, or at least defend ourselves long enough to kill it before it jumped into one of us. We were wrong in both cases."

Brich takes a step closer, standing in front of Christoph, who refuses to move aside. "This," the lumoran says, pointing at his shirt and the blood on it, "is all that's left of Lyraen, after Nyssa literally tore him apart."

Suddenly, the blade, still trapped within the barrier, splits open to reveal a tongue and teeth, and the sword lets out a low, mocking laugh in Weslin's voice.

When it stops, there's no explanation at all. No reason given.

Brich only glances that way before turning to Christoph. His cheery face turns more serious. "As much as I understand your reactions, and find your behavior amusing, if reasonable up to a point, get out of my way before I make you."

The pressure around him increases at a very high rate. The crystals over his body start to glow, releasing huge amounts of mana, which makes some demons and members of Victoria's group take a few steps back.

Everyone here realizes this guy is an S rank. Even though plenty of us are A ranks, there's still a massive difference between us and someone considered one of the ten or so strongest attendees currently in Beyond.

I let mana seep into my body and shrug off the pressure he's been generating. The mana in my halo spins faster, ready to be used, as I take a step forward. As Victoria, Weslin, Gloria, and Malika do the same.

The sword starts laughing again, the sound turning into the voice of a young girl. "Master, you always were hopeless at lying, and without me, you never knew how to deal with people."

In the next moment, Brich takes a step forward, but instead of moving ahead, he disappears, reappearing back near the entrance to this chamber. The arm of the figure floating over Christoph slams

into the ground where he stood mere moments ago, leaving the imprint of an open palm in the metal floor.

From the bag on Brich's back, multiple cubes and the other items fly out, activating defensive barriers around him and charging up in preparation for the attack.

My [Empyrean Lance] slams into his defenses, piercing through them and the side of his body. His face barely shows any acknowledgment of the wound, as if he did not even notice the hole that's been burrowed through his body. His cheery mood from before is entirely gone, replaced by cold indifference.

He keeps that expression even as Victoria reaches him, and her arm pierces through the same spot my lance struck before the barrier can restore itself. As the barrier snaps back into place, her arm is cut off. It falls to the ground, and before it touches the floor, it grows into a duplicate of her, who immediately takes another step toward Brich, punching him in the face. Her arm and his face explode into a gory shower of flesh and bone.

When the bloody mist is gone, another Victoria regrows from a piece of her flesh, while Brich turns toward the two of them with the same uncaring expression under all that blood. Half of his face is a mess, stripped of skin and flesh, and now missing an eye, but his skull remains untouched.

Before Victoria can move once again, my lance pierces through the barrier once more, almost reaching him. But this time, one of the floating cubes intercepts, shifting the trajectory slightly, just enough to cause my lance to graze his neck instead of piercing it and separating his head from his body.

Brich swings his armored arm, and Victoria disappears in an explosion as his glove lights up. The second duplicate evaporates in a burst of flames released from another floating cube, and inside his barrier, the flames continue to rise, burning everything Victoria could have used to recreate her duplicates.

When the flames disappear, Brich stands there burned and still showing the same nonchalance. His crystals covering his body start glowing as he moves again, but to my eyes, it all feels off, sluggish and awkward, weak even. As if he is using abilities he doesn't quite understand properly.

Weslin's already in there, void flickering around him as he slams into the barrier. In a single burst of void energy, it disappears almost effortlessly. The void continues to flicker around Weslin as he steps

forward, cutting off flames before they reach him and taking one of the cube's explosions head-on as it sends a powerful shockwave through the chamber.

Brich staggers, nearly collapsing to his knees, as a yellowish circle forms beneath him, trying to drag him down. The demon woman lunges forward, rushing past Weslin, whose body is rapidly pulling itself back together after the explosion.

Clinging to his footing, Brich forces himself upright and takes a step, vanishing from where he'd been standing just as Malika closes in.

He appears near the golden barrier and the mesh that surrounds the sword. The sword continues to laugh excitedly, calling and challenging, its voice filled with joy, the exact opposite of the indifference of its master, controlling the body of the S rank.

Before Brich can touch the barrier, I use [Redistribution] and hold him there, absorbing an insane amount of kinetic energy as he attempts to push through. His body strains and cracks, while the presence inside him doesn't seem to care at all.

Even so, I continue to hold him there, and attacks start crashing against his body as more people in the room join in.

In the middle of that bombardment, he turns to me with a piercing gaze. A disgusting feeling envelops me, and something hazy red wavers around him.

Brich's body collapses to the floor, while Christoph appears standing nearby. The figure that usually hovers over him is now less noticeable even to me, and it holds something that tried to come toward me. A sickly pale red humanoid shape, near transparent, with only its black colored eyes breaking the monotony.

"Oh no, you can't have that one," Christoph says, smiling as he holds onto the presence.

That figure, carrying the same indifference it had while possessing the S rank, just becomes more transparent before vanishing completely.

Christoph's eyes snap toward one of the demons standing closest by. Before anything else happens, his mana flares. The figure expands, and its hand elongates, slamming down and crushing the demon into a pile no thicker than my palm, spraying blood everywhere.

I take a deep breath, then exhale slowly. My minds combine into one, enhancing my senses as far as I can push them. I search for that wavelength, that shift in the mana radiating from the combat now filling the room, hunting for the translucent red figure. But it's nowhere to be seen.

The fighting slows, and for a moment, everyone stares at one another in heavy silence.

I push harder, expanding my senses, using my passives to sharpen them further. I look for everything and nothing, even the faintest hint, a ripple of mana in the air at its movement.

[Focus - lvl 70 > Focus - lvl 71]

[Perception - lvl 68 > Perception - lvl 69]

[Perception - lvl 69 > Perception - lvl 70]

In the constant noise of the room, through shouts and movement, I filter everything out until something draws my attention.

Where Brich collapsed, inscriptions on his armor activate, triggering something like a healing mark. Then another set of inscriptions on his chest discharges lightning into his body, restarting his heart. A third set touches his mind, and the motionless S rank suddenly takes a deep breath, eyes wide open.

"Oh, fuck this hurts," he mutters, cursing as he forces his body upright, breathing heavily but talking hurriedly. "It's been weakened. On its own, outside of taking over people, it has almost no strength, it needs the sword. Every jump into another body makes it weaker."

Brich triggers more inscriptions and starts to stand, but his body wavers. He falls toward the mesh covering the golden barrier, reaching out with his arm to stop himself from falling. "It's..."

Before he can finish, my lance pierces the middle of his forehead, slamming against the barrier but not breaking through.

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 31 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 32]

Even then, Brich's body twitches and tries to reach with his hand toward the barrier. Before he can touch it, Christoph's figure grabs him by his leg, violently throwing him against the far wall away from the barrier with a sickening crunch.

That red presence seeps from Brich's body, jumping into a member of Victoria's group, then into a demon, killing both as it leaves. The claim about limited jumps has clearly been a lie.

I watch it whip around, leaping into two more bodies before anyone can react or even see it, and then driving straight to its target. The body it likely considers the most compatible, the one that could let it wield its powers most effectively.

My sister.

It shoots through the air, invisible to Victoria.

A disgusting, hateful presence. Long ago, perhaps a talented crafter who discovered this kind of ability, likely loathed as much as mind mages.

A wraith. A vampire. Whatever it is, I do not care.

I time it, and at the last moment, I activate the [Ley Line] I had connected to Victoria, appearing in front of her. The presence has no time to stop and slams into me, forcing its way into my body instead.

For a moment, it stumbles in confusion, then moves as it likely did before, heading toward my mind. It tries to tear it apart, to read my memories, to use my abilities in a pathetic mockery of the things I can do.

I feel it stirring within me, and I locate it and reach for it as quickly as it moves.

Then I manifest myself inside my own mind, activating a countermeasure I call: Oh, You Dumbfuck Walked In.

It is something I prepared specifically against mind mages, instead of building passive defenses and walls around my mind. Even Sophie, as one of the most talented mind mages I've ever met, finds it terrifying. I'm confident it will work in this case as well.

Simply put, some time ago, I decided not to block mental attacks against me. Instead, I let the attacker enter my mind, and then I use [Manifestation] to appear there myself, face-to-face.

After all, it is MY body and MY mind. I will never allow anyone to take that from me. And right now, I can say without hesitation that my mental defenses are among the strongest of any attendee in Beyond, S ranks included.

The figure floats in endless white space, turning its head in confusion. It doesn't notice me until I appear at its side and strike, my fist slamming into its head in a clean, solid punch.

Reacting to my will, a wall forms where none existed before, and the figure slams into it. Before it can recover, I'm already in front of it, driving my fist into its chest and hammering it back into the wall. I grab its head, slam it down into my rising knee, then strike again with another punch that bulldozes it straight through the wall.

"You shouldn't have gone after my sister, motherfucker," I spit out the words and punch it again.

Chapter 704: You Came to the Wrong Neighborhood

My kick sends the pale red presence rolling over the ground. With a single step, I reach it again, kicking it and making it slam against another wall that appears behind it.

I had suspected this, but it seems like it might be weaker after being trapped for who knows how long. Or maybe this is just how it is without its sword.

Well, none of that matters right now.

It tries to move to avoid me, but here, manifested in my mental space, I'm strong. This is my mind, my body. My domain, the place where my mana is easiest to reach, where my passives and skills are strongest.

Before it can escape, I reach it, grabbing what almost feels like smoke with a strange firmness to it. I slam it against the wall and punch it several times in the head. I form a pale blue sword in my arm, dangerous, shimmering, and sharp, but above all, just as powerful as anything made with [Manifestation]. I move to pierce the figure with it and cut it apart, but before I can, it expands from the inside and throws me away.

This time, it is me who rolls over the ground as it leaps toward me in a smooth, long motion. As I raise my hands to defend myself, it slams against them and sends me rolling. I bury my feet into the ground, which shifts from an infinite white void to an earthlike surface and slows me down.

I avoid another attack and kick at it, but it dodges and hits me again, sending me rolling once more. A deep wound I hadn't even noticed runs across my chest, long scratches cutting through its entirety.

While it charges at me, another wall forms in front of it, causing it to crash and come to an abrupt stop. I charge this time and punch through the wall from the other side, detonating it on impact, piercing through, and striking the figure that flies back after the blow.

I shake off the numbness from my arms and legs and jump slightly on the spot, warming up my body. The figure also stops and stands up, growing in size. We face each other, ready to charge at any moment.

It feels like the world slows down as I watch the door of the truck open, as a small figure jumps out. I don't register much except an old, bleached, red blanket tied around its neck like a cape. A childlike laugh echoes as that figure disappears.

What the fuck?

A wall forms behind the figure, and the hypersonic tanker truck slams into it, pinning the presence inside and exploding into a massive fireball that sends heat roiling through the area. The blast ripples outward

in a wave of fire and shrapnel, tearing through the air with a deafening sound. For a moment, the entire mental space shakes, drowning in roaring flames.

The following moment, a powerful pulse bursts from the epicenter and blows out all the flames.

A pale red, smoke-like hand throws the remains of the truck aside and climbs out of the debris, larger once again. It charges at me, slamming into the ground and forcing me to step aside to avoid it. I turn and throw a kick at its arm, knocking the figure off balance, then punch at its face as it falls toward me, now nearly twice my height.

When it swings its other arm, I find myself being forced to dodge. A wall forms in front of me, slowing it down as a long spear manifests in my hand. I stab forward and through the presence. The spear extends further and thickens to the width of my wrist.

Taking a few steps back, the presence wrenches the spear out, throwing it away. Even now, it's still acting the way it has all along: nonchalant, uncaring, as if nothing could have any consequences for it, as if it can't truly die.

A quick punch crashes into me, throwing me back. As I land on my feet and look at it, the presence no longer seems focused on escape. It floats there, sickly pale red, like smoke mimicking a humanoid form, its black eyes fixed on me.

Looking at it, I point toward where the sky should be. There, something enormous is falling straight toward us, a huge thing made of metal with its surface glowing from friction as it passes through an atmosphere that should not even exist here.

None of it makes sense.

A space shuttle with its signature red tank plummets even faster than the supersonic truck, its surface glowing red with the heat of reentry, still carrying its massive fuel tanks.

None of it makes sense.

The presence looks up at it, then turns to me. Where its mouth should be, a black shape forms for a moment as it speaks for the first time.

“Seriously?” That voice carries the same lack of feeling and indifference.

“Fuck you.”

Out of nowhere, the space shuttle accelerates to an incredible speed with an audible thump and slams into the ground like a gunshot. The shuttle detonates on impact, a blinding sphere of fire swallowing everything in its radius.

A dozen walls, big as houses, rise in front of me, catching the explosions, the shockwave, and the heat. Each wall shatters under the pressure, exploding outward in storms of debris, only for another to rise behind it and take the blow.

The shockwave crashes against the walls, relentless, each crash louder and heavier than the last. By the time the final wall stands, it's been blackened, cracked through the center, and has started to tremble as if one more breath might break it.

It then bursts into an explosion and throws me back as the presence steps out of the heat and destruction, taller than ever. It keeps growing and expanding, the eerie feeling around it intensifying as my mental space fills with the smell of blood. It grows until it reaches the size of a multi-story building, towering over my much smaller form. Then it moves toward me.

My annoyance rises even higher. Staring at it, I reach into my reservoir, my body, and the halo floating over my head. I know I should leave some mana for the part of me waiting outside, but I grab and channel as much as I have.

Instead of taking a step back, I take one forward, moving toward the presence. It moves to slam down on me when my body starts expanding rapidly. In a mere moment, I grow to match it, then continue further. My form here inside my mind space reaches my opponent's height and keeps going.

Twice its height.

Thrice.

Five times.

Until I tower over it and it looks tiny beneath me.

In the same way it tried before against me, I slam against it, using my hand to slam it into the ground, and then I do it again and again.

It slithers and tries to escape from under me, but I grab it and throw it into the ground with a satisfying thump, then stomp on it with my feet.

Once.

Twice.

Then I kick it, slamming it into one of the walls. I move closer and kick again, destroying the wall and sending the presence rolling through my mental space.

"Come on, bitch. Go on, try to destroy my brain, do it if you can," I say as I take another step and a sword manifests along my arm, a colossal blade that could cleave mountains in half.

Instead of facing me like before, the presence stands in place, then turns around and attempts to leave my mind. But I try to hold it this time, moving faster toward it as it begins to retreat.

It keeps shrinking, down to the size of a human, then a golf ball, then a fly, then even smaller. And then it slips through and escapes my mind to my disappointment.

I return outside as quickly as it disappears from my mind and waver as I see now through my eyes again, merging with the two parts of my mind I left behind to take care of my body.

POV Weslin, a few moments prior

When Nathaniel appears in front of his sister, everything goes quiet. That man known as Christoph stares his way before tilting his head and taking a step forward.

Remembering how he killed those demons only moments ago, I move as well, rousing up my void energy even more and feeling my heartbeat strengthen. That strange thing around him I've been sensing shifts, and I prepare to throw my void against it.

"Christoph, if you take one more step, I will kill you," Victoria says out of nowhere in that emotionless voice of hers. As with everything she says, it manages to sound unusually formal.

Multiple duplicates of her appear all over the room, likely grown from the pieces she's been throwing all over the place. There are soon a dozen of her, some stepping toward the others and burying their hands into their backs just to pull a sword made of white bone from the place her spine should be.

Christoph stops and lifts his arms into the air, a smile dancing on his face. "I wouldn't have done that, Victoria. The presence until now killed everyone it jumped into right away, but Nathaniel seems to be different for some reason. It's just so fascinating."

Then Nathaniel moves as well and smiles wider than I've ever seen. His voice is sharp and bratty as he speaks. "Oh wow, the creepy old guy can smile, and he finds this stuff fascinating. Do you want a cookie or a diaper change?"

That causes even Christoph to pause. "Excuse me?"

"Excuse you? Excuse your style, it's screaming midlife crisis without the life to go with it," Nathaniel says and starts giggling before turning to Vic with a smile that becomes gentle. "I have a plan, but just in case, I'm going to get away from here so the asshole does not have anywhere to jump to."

Before he even stops, that feeling around Christoph intensifies as he reaches toward him with words. "It will be better if you stay here."

Tracking it through the air, I throw my void energy at it again, and fail to affect it. But Nathaniel isn't there anymore. Where that thing strikes is where he stood, and instead, he moves through the air, avoiding another attempt to slow him.

In that moment, the expression on Christoph's face grows annoyed, and the pressure around him increases significantly, a wave of mana filling the chamber.

Victoria's duplicates reach him too, exploding as they strengthen their bodies to their limit and slam against the invisible protection around Christoph. Each strike sends a shockwave through the room. He merely ignores them, but more begin forming from the scattered pieces and continue attacking him.

My void joins in as I throw everything at him as well, and for some reason, Malika attacks too, laughing all the while.

For just a moment, he has to shift his attention to defend himself as Victoria nearly reaches him under all that bombardment, and Nathaniel uses the opportunity to teleport several times and escape through the narrow pathway we entered.

Seeing that, Christoph just sighs, and whatever surrounds him throws everyone nearby away before he faces Victoria, who still stands in his way to the exit. "If it had been needed, I could've helped him with that presence," he says.

Victoria nods. "Possibly, but I trust him more than I trust you."

Christoph looks like someone unaccustomed to being ignored, if not the sort of person who always believes he's in the right. Someone who doesn't like losing control of a situation, and I can see the gears turning in his head.

"I hope you're ready to kill him in the event that he fails," he says at last, then turns around, heading back to the barrier.

A part of me relaxes as cold sweat runs down my back. Even though he didn't say it outright, I know he would likely have tried to kill me if I repeated what I did before, and for some reason, he's only stepping back because of the Gwyn siblings.

But as that situation ends and we turn back to the barrier, we freeze, with Christoph perhaps the most surprised of us all.

Someone had used the distraction that just occurred as an opportunity.

Brich, once again alive for some reason, is inside the barrier and next to the talking sword. There are multiple cubes attached to the barrier, creating a passage, and another barrier surrounds the sword, blocking out the likely screams of the weapon. I watch the blade move, but cannot hear it. There is also another array seemingly hiding what he was doing.

Looking like a child caught doing something bad, Brich smiles. "Yo, this isn't personal, so I hope we're cool and stuff."

Christoph moves faster than before, and a burst of mana from him causes a few of the weaker people nearby to pass out immediately. In less than a second, he's at the barrier, and for the first time, I clearly see the humanoid half-figure surrounding him, holding the edges of the hole Brich made, then removing cubes to close the entrance and reform the barrier around the two of them.

"Motherfucker, leave, leave, leave me alone! I want to wait here for my master," Calvorn is shouting as the barrier drops.

Brich grabs the sword and swings it toward something Christoph seems to have attacked him with. The blade devours it all, but the lumoran's black arm holding it turns pale, his veins clearly visible as blood drips from his palm.

"Holy shit, man! There is no way you aren't S rank. That attack nearly got me, and you even broke a barrier created by a low pristine item!" Brich groans. "Well, anyway, please don't kill me the next time we meet!"

He grabs Calvorn with both hands, and instead of facing the human, the armor around the lumoran turns red as if it is about to melt. Brich disappears with Calvorn, leaving the armor and all the items behind.

The crash of heavy armor against the metal floor tears through the chamber, then silence falls. Dozens of checks flare from everyone present, but they all confirm the same thing, both the sword and Brich are gone, leaving Christoph facing the empty air.

His face is hidden, but I am certain of one thing. Whatever expression he's wearing, it's not happiness.

POV Nathaniel

My senses snap into place the same moment the presence leaves my body, and I move to stop it again, but I notice it has stopped as well. Both Assholethaniel and Mapthaniel step back now that I don't need them to maintain control of my body, and I take over the role.

There is simply no one close enough for the presence to jump into now. Instead of leaving me, it just lingers in the area, attached to me but not trying to enter my mind again.

What a little bitch.

Well, my plan was a bit different from whatever happened, so I'd better come up with a solution.

"Don't move if you don't want to die," a deep male voice warns me, but I find myself unable to locate where it's coming from.

Chapter 705: A mess

The deep male voice speaks, resonating from nowhere I can place. It echoes from every direction while seeming to come from nowhere at all.

A female voice answers, "Don't kill him yet. He belongs to Nyssa, and the Wraith doesn't seem to be taking him over."

This one I can follow. I see her standing far away. A pretty blonde woman with green eyes, a bow, and a mantle woven of mana. I recognize her immediately, even though I've only ever met her once, in passing, on the Entrance Floor, when I first stepped into beyond.

Next to her, the air wavers, and a vyssari man appears. Inscriptions glow in a circle beneath him, and white lightning crackles around his body. It takes me no time at all to know that this guy is very bad news. That lightning feels anything but normal, and damn, I've seen enough of Tess' primordial lightning to say as much with confidence.

And why in the hell is that vyssari guy floating?

"He's an A rank at most, so why isn't the Wraith taking over?" the vyssari asks, looking at me like I'm some sort of interesting animal he's found in a zoo.

The archer woman studies me as well. "The Wraith isn't a mind mage. It can only destroy the minds of the people it enters and make use of the remaining fragments of memory while seizing control of their body. If there isn't any compatibility with the host, the Wraith just destroys them, leaves and..."

"Save that explanation for someone else, Kaari, we should..." the vyssari interrupts her, but I cut him off as well.

"Are you assholes looking for that lumoran Bitch?"

"He could just as well be named Bitch," the vyssari snorts, then addresses me. "Is he still alive?"

"The last time I saw him, I'd pierced a hole through his head. But I didn't get a notification, so I would guess he was dead before we met him, and it was just that Wraith, as you call it, controlling him," I answer.

"So quite likely he is still alive," Kaari says as she sits down at a distance and continues to watch me. The vyssari seems to agree with her, just nodding once.

The entire time Kaari keeps using her senses to track the presence, the Wraith. Maybe it's just me, but she seems to be getting better at it, quickly. At the start, she almost couldn't do it, but now her eyes linger longer on the places where it hovers around me, transparent and untouchable.

“Brich is very hard to kill. He has multiple mind imprints stored inside his body at all times, ready to replace his mind if it gets destroyed. The Crimson Forge really did a number on him.” Kaari says.

“Oh?” I ask, perking up at the interesting story and plop down on the ground. “Please, tell me more.”

Noticing my curiosity, she smiles and gestures at the vyssari to calm down, but he ignores her and just floats there, likely preparing to kill the Wraith and me in one go, while keeping an eye out for anything that might be approaching.

“Curious one, aren’t you?” Kaari says. “Alright, why don’t we talk for a while? Crimson Forge is a relatively new guild, but it’s likely already ranked among the richest because of how many exceptional crafters they have. Their best always wanted to test their items, but as it tends to be, they either tend to be cowards or simply turn out not to be combat oriented. So they’re always searching for the right person to test their items and crazy creations on. They never force these people into anything against their will, though, they had at least that much sense. They always offered promises of power and incredible riches.”

I want to say that riches are useless if you’re dead, but then I remember where we are and keep quiet. Beyonders aren’t exactly the smartest sort of people, and most of them have a screw loose.

As if noticing my hesitation, Kaari smiles. “Dozens of A ranks died during that experimentation, but even hearing that, more kept coming. They often died in accidents, whether from misuse of the powerful items or from simple incompatibility. Then one day, Brich barged into the headquarters of Crimson Forge, unchanging as ever, full of energy and determined to become their greatest work for reasons of his own.”

She pauses, thinking. “He isn’t exactly a bad guy, I think. He’s just insane like all of us here, maybe a bit more than the rest. Thanks to his physique, skills, and exceptional mind, he became everything Crimson Forge wanted, and in the process, they turned him into an S rank capable of handling items like no one else. Among those items are dozens of ways to restore his body, even if his brain is destroyed. There are so many thaumic protocols inscribed into his gear he’s likely forgotten about half of them, many acting as life support systems that sustain his body and regenerate it from nearly any injury.”

“That’s fucking cool,” I can’t help but blurt out, thinking that I might have judged that guy too harshly.

“He’s a lost cause,” the vyssari says, making Kaari glance at him and nod.

“We all put up our own defenses, but we were also counting on him to keep the defensive array steady in case our first strike on the Wraith didn’t work,” she says. “Paranoia comes with things like that, so of course, we kept an eye on the array. Even then, we missed it. He slipped a hole into it without us noticing, and that let the presence get through to him.”

I put the pieces together. “He let it in so it would bring him to the sword?”

Kaari nods. “Likely. To get him to the sword and either use his body to claim it or, having made his way there, allow the Wraith to jump into someone else while Brich made use of one of his imprints and items to restart his body and continue on whatever chaotic plan he pulled out of his ass.”

“Wouldn’t being replaced by an imprint be in some way considered just a copy of his mind? Someone else, perhaps even missing a few hours, having been created earlier in the day?” I ask.

“Brich never gave a damn. He just wakes up and keeps moving, that’s enough for him. And you know what’s amusing? In some ways, he could be considered one of the most talented out of all of us.” She says, looking over at the vyssari.

I even expect him to snort or respond, since she clearly meant it as a poke at him, but he doesn’t bother. He radiates that quiet confidence the powerful always carry. Or maybe I’m wrong, and he’s just holding himself back to maintain that cool aura he puts off.

“And who is this guy who keeps preparing that attack to shoot at me the entire time we talk?” I ask, gesturing at the vyssari.

“Will you introduce yourself?” she asks him.

“I’m Lyraen, and I am retuning the resonance matrices and realigning the vectors so the pattern harmonizes against the Wraith’s essence,” he says simply and turns to Kaari, “Nyssa is coming, by the way, along with someone else from the direction this guy came from.”

"Maybe someone from this man's party? And no sign of Morwag with Nyssa? If he came too, it would be harder to kill Nathaniel if we decided it was necessary," Kaari asks, and with an apologetic smile looks at me. "Nothing personal."

"No offence taken, you just told me a lot of cool stuff, if it comes to it, I will try to ensure that the Wraith enters the vyssari guy instead of you."

"How nice of you."

"Morwag isn't with her," the vyssari says, entirely ignoring our short conversation.

"I'm not surprised they got split. With her blood, who knows where the array took her." Kaari shakes her head, and as Nyssa appears in view, she calls out, "Hey, you better keep your distance and..."

Ignoring all of that, Nyssa steps forward and appears right at my side. At first, I think she's looking at me, but her eyes are locked on the presence still hovering near me. The Wraith shifts slightly, as if considering jumping toward her, then halts.

"Have they been bullying you, Nathaniel?" Nyssa asks, finally taking her eyes off the presence.

"These two?"

"Yes. Kaari and Lyraen."

"Not really. They've been pretty reasonable about the situation."

"I see. That's good."

"Yeah. By the way, even they haven't been getting close. Are you sure you should be standing here? It might jump into you."

"It is fine. I want it to," she says, handing me what I guess are her shoes, socks, and long-sleeve shirt, all folded neatly. "Guard them with your life," she adds, serious.

I freeze. "Huh."

Nyssa nods, "Yes, I failed before. Brich tricked me, and it escaped." She seems blind to the fact that I was surprised by something else.

"He tricked everyone," Kaari calls from a distance. "Can you kill it, Nyssa? Lyraen and I modified our attacks, so this time we might succeed. Thankfully, it is still weak and has yet to reach its weapon. The other group saved us there."

"Morwag asked me not to kill it so he could try fighting it," Nyssa says flatly.

This time, Kaari doesn't stop herself. She lets out a quiet, long groan and says in a soft voice, "Nyssa..."

"He seemed really excited after that short clash with Brich, when he tried to stop him from escaping. It had been a long time since anyone gave him such a deep wound." Nyssa says, almost innocent in her tone.

I keep looking between these S ranks, not even surprised that this has turned into such a mess. A cyborg made by a guild full of maniacal crafters, a weirdo albino demon with a look of complete innocence and calm on her face, while still being someone I really, really don't want to see angry. Or maybe I do. Who the hell am I lying to?

Then we have this floating vyssari with an extremely, disgustingly powerful attack he's still charging and preparing, and the archer woman who seems so normal so far, that I'm starting to have a feeling that she's the worst out of all of them. And of course Morwag, the most demon demon to ever demon. We do not want that guy here to further add to this fucked up situation.

The other guy coming to join our little party here might be even worse for the current situation. Slowing the speed of his mana signature's approach, Christoph reduces his pace to a walk, stopping just outside the Wraith's reach.

His face is nothing like his usual calm confidence, the one that makes it seem like he's making fun of you in his mind, like you're just a silly child jumping in a mud hole. Even though he stays composed and isn't showing much, I can see it, I can feel it in the way he moves.

Right now, Christoph seems like he's very, very annoyed.

"Yo, everything good back there?" I ask before anyone else here can.

He shakes his head, takes the smallest step closer, and Kaari reacts instantly, with incredible speed, she draws an arrow to her bow.

"It would be better if you stayed a bit further back. We do not want to give the Wraith a potentially compatible body," Kaari calls toward him. For some reason, she doesn't attack right away.

It doesn't fit with the way they've behaved up til now. I would've expected them to destroy any possible host immediately, but instead, they hesitate. Like me, they feel it, the pressure now radiating from Christoph.

The man doesn't even react to Kaari's warning. He keeps his eyes on me. "I've been careless. I was having too much fun, I grew overconfident, and that led to the lumoran escaping with the sword."

"You did? Well, that does suck," I say to him.

He nods. "It does. I'm not used to it." His words are cold, and for some reason, they feel dangerous, even if he doesn't exactly mean them as a threat.

Then, all at once, multiple things happen.

Nyssa lets out a small sneeze as a speck of dust tickles her nose, the quick twitch of her nose making her look unexpectedly cute.

Christoph takes a step forward, his mana expanding to create a bridge that the Wraith uses to leap at him.

Kaari shoots several arrows, each of a different color and purpose, one for me, one for Nyssa, one for Christoph.

Lyraen unleashes his white lightning. What I had sensed him preparing was not even close to the full extent, just a fraction of it. The rest appears suddenly, hidden until now by the field surrounding the floating vyssari.

But fastest of all, the pale red humanoid form of the Wraith crashes against Christoph's figure, which grabs the Wraith in the air and then begins absorbing it.

The figure that usually floats over Christoph now starts to turn a pale shade of red.

Chapter 706: Not enough to stop me

Lyraen's white lightning moves in a way that leads me to conclude it'll be in no one's best interest to make an attempt to stand against it, and that I should immediately fuck off.

Taking as much mana as I've managed to replenish, I use it to teleport away through a [Ley Line] I managed to place during our conversation. The thinnest and least noticeable one I could. Placing it with such care gained me two extra levels in the skill.

As I teleport away, Nyssa moves as well, not to avoid but to attack the duo. I have no idea if her decision was made on a whim or with care and thought. Matching the speed of the lightning, she passes by it, grabs the arrows Kaari's started firing off at us from the air, and breaks them with incredible ease.

Meanwhile, the usually transparent, barely noticeable figure floating behind Christoph shifts entirely to a shade of pale red. Where there were no clear facial features before, there are now two entirely black eyes, just like the Wraith's.

The figure grows in size, coils around Christoph defensively, and wraps him in two of its hands. It encloses him completely. More arms grow from its back, longer and thinner, reaching forward and clapping together as if trying to trap the white lightning between them. For a moment, they even

succeed. These red arms hold the white lightning, bright as the core of a star, between them and dimming the brilliant light within.

It is a heroic attempt, but in the end, the lightning explodes. Evaporating the arms enclosing it, and the resulting concentrated blast is hurled at Christoph.

A black orb forms in front of me, made from the bulk of my currently held mana. It starts absorbing ambient mana as well, as I shift it slightly to shape it into a thin barrier. Even from this distance, the shockwave of the explosion slams against me, though not as powerfully as I was expecting.

The white lightning attack is extremely concentrated, with not much force reaching beyond its intended point of impact.

As I hold Nyssa's shoes, shirt, and socks against my chest, I dissolve my shield and draw in the black mana, shaping it back into an orb. It floats nearby, just over my shoulder, ready to be used.

The damaged figure over Christoph restores itself. The youthful looking, seventy five year old man doesn't seem hurt at all. The Wraith, trapped, fused, or whatever it is with the figure, does not even seem to be making an attempt to jump into Christoph. Either it doesn't want to, or it simply cannot.

Both Lyraen and Kaari appear all over the place, while Nyssa moves like a storm. I knew kinetic energy was one of her three, but this is the first time I've actually seen her use it. It's nowhere near as elegant or masterful as Lioren's, but it is a lot more powerful. Where Lioren felt like an FPV drone, Nyssa moves like a hypersonic rocket that can fly in one direction at great speed, while having to stop before moving in another.

Her output is insane. Her body shifts at incredible speed, using kinetic energy for movement alone. She doesn't absorb it to stop her opponent's movement or release it in bursts to attack. At the same time, I feel like she's not even taking this seriously. She's still not angry, not even now.

Lyraen disappears in a way not unlike Tacita. The mantle around Kaari grows, flowing into the air, as Kaari steps into it as if it were a portal, only to reappear farther away.

"Nyssa, let's talk..." Kaari tries to speak again, but Nyssa's already nearly there.

Once again, her mantle swirls just as a projectile turned black orb slams into the ground near her. It pulls on her mana and disrupts her attempt at escape.

Her eyes go wide with shock at the sight of the black mana projectile. She turns to me and lifts her bow. Even from this close, she manages to create a pink arrow that slams into Nyssa.

Nyssa deflects it to the side, where it violently tears the ground apart. Three implosions follow, one after another, with each being stronger and further reaching, and then there is quiet. No further explosions follow.

For some reason, that silence makes me more nervous. What the hell was that arrow?

Then the two women stand there, just a step apart.

“Of course, you even managed to deflect that arrow,” Kaari laughs nervously.

Nyssa doesn’t answer. She looks at her intently, which makes Kaari even more nervous. Nyssa reaches to the ground, grabs the projectile made of black mana, and throws it back to me, and I take it back under my control. Then she gestures for Kaari to lean over, since the human woman is quite a bit taller than the albino demon.

Kaari does exactly as told, and Nyssa smacks the top of her head hard enough to make a loud sound, and Kaari shrugs in pain.

“Dumb,” Nyssa says simply, then turns back to where Christoph and Lyraen are still fighting.

Christoph stands with his now red figure defending, while Lyraen keeps shooting white lightning as if from nowhere and everywhere at once. The field hides him so well that I can’t sense so much as a speck of his presence.

Each of these attacks is powerful, yet Christoph still manages to defend himself against them. He stands there, gradually beginning to predict where the attacks will come from and facing them head on. It

begins to feel like he might be close to piercing through Lyraen's field and finding him. That would make this situation truly interesting.

The entire time, I keep sneaking toward one place, just in case. If Christoph succeeds with handling the Wraith, and I think he will, then there could be a notification...

Congratulations on successfully completing your Beyond event! In one minute, you will be moved out of the Ancient Armory.

And one more pops up after:

This isn't what I had in mind when I gave out the event, but it will work for now, as it is within the rules and protocols set for Beyond. Be more careful where you stick your noses next time - Ruler of Diligence.

The figure around Christoph, red though it is, remains entirely under his control. Even after the notification, the fun fight continues, but I stop paying attention to it.

A drop of blood from a cut I made on the tip of my finger falling toward the ground makes Nyssa turn to me, as if she can smell it.

Looking at her, I shrug and wave. Then my blood hits the teleportation array, and I disappear, reappearing elsewhere in the Armory.

The remaining minute starts ticking down as I send out my signal through the place, finding nothing, but even that simple scan triggers a dozen or so traps. Another droplet of blood starts to fall, and I help it do so with my own kinetic energy so it hits the array before the traps can obliterate me.

I disappear again, appearing in a room covered in the corpses of people who participated in the event. Most of them seem to have been choked out, maybe by some kind of poison, near the door they tried to break through.

Another droplet. Another place.

This time, I find myself looking at a wall covered in hundreds of mana stones and strange markings. The stones seem like mana batteries, but each one is only the size of my pinkie nail. Even so, they are extremely high quality. A dozen mana arms explode from me, scraping them from the wall and bringing them to me. I chuck a few dozen into my backpack while still holding Nyssa's clothes in my other arm.

I teleport again, this time appearing in an explosion. A shockwave throws me out of the teleportation array and slams me against a wall with enough force to snap my spine, which forces me to activate several healing marks from Lily to repair the damage quickly.

Getting back up on my feet and back into the array as fast as I can, I watch Morwag nearby laughing loudly. He seems bigger than ever now, as he faces some kind of bug with massive wings, covered in tattoos made from molten metal that's solidified into the scars on its chitin.

The demon laughs.

The bug facing him stands tall, letting out a series of strange, loud clicking noises and slamming its chitin legs against the ground while aggressively waving its wings in challenge.

Then they charge each other, screaming.

Another droplet of my blood takes me somewhere else. A mana projectile slams against my hastily formed barrier, once again pushing me out of the teleportation array. I take a step back toward it, but another projectile slams into me, and I am forced instead to reinforce the barrier.

More projectiles follow. Each one is faster and stronger than the last, now starting to crack the barrier. I keep strengthening it through [Manifestation] and begin weaving Ley Lines through it to make it more flexible and durable.

[Manifestation - lvl 16 > Manifestation - lvl 17]

But after removing the Wraith from my mind, I haven't regenerated much mana yet. I barely manage to create a small black orb, which absorbs a dozen or so projectiles. Due to the limited mana used in its creation, it bursts open afterward, creating an explosion that pushes me further back. I curse under my breath.

It is as good a time as any to put my failsafe into action.

The second seal on my Ignition Heart lifts. Pure thermal energy floods into my body, and using [Accumulation], I gather it. It flows through pathways I modified with mini Sophie's help and through my own effort as well. I attempt something I've been wanting to do ever since visiting the pyramid on the fifth floor and learning about Champion Laten and his [Thermal Convergence].

It's stuck with me ever since. Yes, he could turn the heat of an active volcano into mana, but why shouldn't I be able to turn the heat from his Ignition Heart into mana as well? [Redistribution] is a powerful enough skill to manage that.

While the projectiles continue to crash against my barrier, I take one last deep breath. I enter a deep [Focus] that speeds up my thought processing until it feels like the world around me is slowing to a crawl. Piece by piece, my preparations snap into place. The arrays stored in my mind activate. The part of me I've been keeping focused on theorycrafting and training now takes over. In the end, it can't really be more difficult than imagining all the impossible shapes and all the exercises I've been doing.

I find it difficult to transform settled thermal energy, so I let it move once again through my body. I let it roar and burn, combusting and destroying, only to heal afterward. I know the flames this heart generates very well. I know their feel, their wavelength, the way they move. With them, I'm sure I can do it, especially here, inside my own body.

I don't even gain any levels in [Redistribution], which confirms that the skill has long been capable of this. But something else levels up instead.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 70 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 71]

[Eclipse - lvl 49 > Eclipse - lvl 50]

[Manifestation - lvl 17 > Manifestation - lvl 18]

All that energy, generated by my second heart, turns gradually into mana through my effort. It isn't fast. It is painful. And I pick up on a number of improvements I could be making, but I do it anyway. Mana

Wavelength Predation and Mana Wavelength Tyrant work in concert with [Eclipse] to take all that mana and force it under my control. The ease of which surprises even me.

Then I use it and push through the barrage of attacks, which now continue their bombardment from all sides, making it nearly impossible to see what's happening outside.

The barrier around me expands in size several times, and I take a few steps forward and reach the array. Another droplet of blood falls, and everything disappears. I notice a piece of my shoulder is missing, sliced off because I didn't manage to fit myself into the array properly, but it heals after a few powerful combustions.

My second heart continues with the second seal lifted, still generating a massive amount of thermal energy that I continue turning into mana. I close my eyes, and a deep smile climbs its way onto my face.

Then I reach toward the third seal. If I remove it fully, I will have a Champion grade thermal heart beating inside my chest. I lift the seal just a tiny bit, and I feel flames try to escape my body, trying to burn the outside world and tear me apart. It takes all my effort to suppress them, but I enjoy doing it. The amount of mana I'm holding continues to grow rapidly, and most of my mind focuses on containing the heat and processing it into mana.

Finally, I look around the room to see where I've ended up. It's dark and important-looking. There are control panels and a pillar made of mana crystal that currently holds an incredible amount of energy. In the corner, there's a small bed. Another corner has been turned into a workshop, with a small forge, an enchanting table, and piles of materials.

Another wall is entirely covered in items, most of them having the look of failed prototypes. A lot of which remind me of Calvorn.

Multiple mana arms reach out from me, taking a few of the more complete looking prototypes. Others smash the control panels and search for memory mana stones. Knowing I won't be using the teleportation array anymore, so I stop caring about the size of the things I'm carrying and pile everything up around me, tying it all to myself with threads of mana.

The part of me that's been counting down this entire time tells me how much time is left.

Just ten seconds. Strange how fast time passes when you're having fun.

Holding the clothes Nyssa gave me, and the ones I promised to protect with my life, I stop in front of the most well defended object in this room, the pillar made of mana crystal. It serves as the source powering this room and likely most of the traps in the Ancient Armory.

I don't care about that. What interests me is the single red mana stone hidden in the middle, behind the swirling energy and layers of defense. The mana there is so dense, I know that it will either irradiate me fast enough to kill me or damage the stone before I can reach it. But that's not enough to stop me.

All the mana I currently hold floods out of my body as I force it into a single basketball-sized orb of dense, tricolored energy.

I push it further until it snaps and turns black. When that happens, a hum and loud thump spreads through the room. The orb shrinks in size, now entirely pitch black. As always, it tries to consume all the mana around it, even my own.

Instead of letting that happen, I aim it at the pillar and pierce it with [Empyrean Lance].

The incredible amount of mana starts to seep from the cracks, but as quickly as it escapes, it gets absorbed by the ever-hungry black orb.

It takes just a few seconds for everything to slip out of my control. The black orb becomes too powerful for me to manage. The mana arms, which have been gathering the items all around me until this point, begin to flicker and nearly vanish. I am forced to reduce them to a single arm, woven with Ley Lines, strong enough to endure the overwhelming pull of the black mana.

Three seconds remain.

I fight against the pull and watch intently as the black orb continues its struggle against the core of the Ancient Armory.

Two seconds.

Come on. You can do it, you hungry little thing you.

One second.

The mana inside the pillar flickers. My mana arm shoots forward with incredible speed, coils itself around the red mana stone, and pulls it back into my arms.

The sixty second countdown ends, and I wait for teleportation.

Nothing happens.

I blink a few times and stare at the black orb, which continues growing in size. Only a small trace of that massive mana from the pillar remains, and now even my own mana has begun to disappear.

Huh. I'm sure I haven't been counting wrong.

"Ehm, Ruler of Diligence, mister, could you... you know, get my ass out of here quickly... of course, only if you aren't too busy," I call towards the ceiling.

The black orb now hums, just barely audible. I take a few steps back, pulling everything I've collected from this dark place with me. I press Nyssa's clothes and the red mana stone tightly against my chest.

"Greed, stop messing with me!" I shout.

I can't take my eyes off the black orb. I watch as it, out of nowhere, further shrinks in size. For some reason, that scares me more than if it had grown larger. As terrifying as it feels, it's just as fascinating. I keep staring at it, taking mental notes for the future.

Finally, I feel a pull on my body and appear somewhere else. It's not back at the headquarters of the Primordial Knights, and it isn't that endless place with the night sky full of nebulae either.

Instead, I find myself in a comfortable looking room made of smooth white stone and filled with nice furniture. A floor to ceiling window opens up to a view of Megacity. All the items I had stored fall onto the stone floor in a long series of thuds and clangs.

To my right stands an old wooden table, and behind it is the Ruler of Greed, sitting there calmly, watching the pile of items spread around me. She is now in the form she first showed me when she was assigned to me as my Handler. Looking just a bit older than me, her hair black with a bit of red mixed in, and her eyes a deep shade of brown.

“Congratulations on destroying a good chunk of the Ancient Armory. And by a good chunk, I mean most of it.”

“Must have been a different Nathaniel.”

Chapter 707: Can I ask you a question?

“Are you really that worried about the Armory? Were you looking to grab some secrets for yourself?” I ask, dusting off my clothes while scanning the space around me. I try to memorize the view to figure out where exactly in the Megacity it is later.

“It’s not that I care. There are places like that all over Beyond, but at my current level, they have nothing to offer me,” she answers.

“So mighty. Even if they did belong to someone at the level of an Absolute?”

She smiles deviously, her real, yellow, patterned eyes flashing for a moment. “You still don’t realize the true scope of the difference between a Ruler and an Absolute.”

“Didn’t LissLiss take down a Ruler not long ago without even being in her prime?”

That makes her snort. “As if anyone like her could be considered a reasonable standard for that sort of measurement. Out of tens of thousands of Absolutes, there are only a few that could pose a real challenge to a Ruler.”

“Please tell me more.”

“No. Like I said, even though the Wraith, as you’ve taken to calling him, was a powerful Absolute long before I was born. There’s nothing for me to gain from looting his Armory. These sorts of places are best used by attendees to aid their progression.”

“Please tell me more.”

“I suddenly changed my mind.”

“Are you sure? Where’s your pride?”

“I have a feeling we’ve already had this conversation.”

The Ruler of Greed leans back in her chair. “Diligence was pissed, he seriously wanted to leave you there, you know. There are so many attendees who could have used the space to explore, waiting, as you might say, in line. Your black mana destroyed the core of the Armory, and the explosion... even now, the resulting detonation is causing cave-ins all over the place, turning it into an excavation opportunity rather than a true expedition.”

“They could have joined the event. The cowards who decided to wait until after it was done to take things slow and safely don’t deserve anything better.”

“I know, right? This is where the two of us agree. But anyway, there isn’t as much as they could have gained. You yourself probably took the best there was to find.”

“Before you say anything, I’m not giving them up or selling them to you.”

“I don’t want them. They’re all yours.”

“Good.”

“Under one condition.”

I narrow my eyes and protectively step in front of my beautiful hoard. “What?”

“You’re accompanying me to a party in three days. Only after that will you receive the items.”

Before I can say anything, she waves her hand, and I feel myself vanish. With just a small pile of undamaged clothes I have guarded with my life, and everything else left behind. I appear back inside the lounge of the Primordial Knights headquarters on the 4th floor. Weslin is sitting in an armchair next to me.

When he sees me, he slides across the back of his armchair with a long sigh. “You crazy asshole, I thought you were dead when you didn’t show up.”

“I was kidnapped. You should know a thing or two about that, you’d probably get along with my abductor. And what do you mean by crazy? You probably meant someone else.”

“No, you crazy bastard, I meant you.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am. Why the fuck are you covered in so many wounds, and why the hell are you burning the chair you’re sitting on?”

“I’m still healing.”

“Oh, yeah, that extremely normal way of healing by burning yourself.”

“Yes, it’s normal. Phoenix rising from the ashes, you know, that kind of thing. I just need a bit more to heal some internal damage, so it’s also slipping out of my control just a bit and spills over. If anyone asks, that chair was already burned. I’m not paying for it.” ~~RANDY~~

“Sure. What happened?”

“I met Kaari.”

“She was there? That’s not so bad, she’s quite reasonable from what I’ve heard.”

“Lyraen was there too.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh. What the hell is that white lightning of his? It’s scary.”

“Something he managed to access through his wyrm bloodline.”

“Not a dragon? I heard vyssari might still have remains of dragon blood.” I say.

“Even a wyrm can scare the shit out of most Absolutes. If it were pure dragon blood, Lyraen would be a future Ruler, nearly confirmed. What did he do?”

“He just floated there menacingly.”

“As if. I only met him once, and that guy never stops working. Even when it seems like he’s just talking, he keeps creating his circles, fields, and arrays.”

“Would your void work against his lightning?”

“Huh,” Weslin mutters as the armchair under me finally cracks from the golden flames and collapses, dumping me onto the ground.

He doesn't let it slow him down at all. "In theory, it could, but even then, it would need to be much stronger than his lightning. And as much as I like to think I'm incredibly cool and strong..."

He looks at me. Knowing what he wants, from where I'm sitting on the broken, burning remains of the chair, I nod quickly a few times in agreement.

"...I don't think I'd stand much chance against him," he adds.

"Not with that attitude."

"Fuck you."

"What happened, and how did Christoph manage to reach me?"

"Well, Brich revived again and teleported away, probably naked since all his clothes, armor, and items were left behind. Even though he tried to hide it, I think Christoph was seriously pissed off. He... we couldn't hold him back. Not even your sister. Did I already tell you that she's very scary? Did Christoph find you, Kaari, and Lyraen?"

"Yes. Nyssa was there too. Did he hurt Victoria?" I ask, my tone going serious.

"She probably hurts herself more than anyone else ever could. She was fine, but he trapped us in the chamber. Morwag was there too?"

"Hell nah, thankfully," I quickly answer. "Even without him, it turned into a shitshow. Nyssa started playing with Kaari, Lyraen bombarded Christoph, who absorbed the presence, and all that crap. Oh, and the others called whatever was piloting Brich, the Wraith."

"That weird guy absorbed it?"

"Or something like that. I don't know what the hell he did."

“And survived more than one attack from Lyraen?”

“Probably? I left them behind at the last minute, so some of them could be dead. I jumped through the arrays and grabbed myself some loot, only for it to be stolen and used to blackmail me. Weslin, I don’t like being blackmailed or having my stuff stolen from me. I worked hard to save these items. And why the hell do I have to guard Nyssa’s socks with my life?”

Weslin looks down at me, blinking, while I sit on the pile of broken, burning chair pieces and throw a tantrum. For some reason, he shakes his head and mutters something that sounds a lot like, “And this fucker might be S rank one day,” though I probably misheard.

“Nyssa is... well, you’ll learn. For now, just give her back her clothes, we’ll talk later.” With those words, he shoos me off, and without arguing, I head toward the garden where I first met Nyssa.

Along the way, I find Morwag sprawled out in the middle of the hallway in a small pool of his own blood with a huge grin plastered on his face. Multiple guild members walk past, most of them ignoring him as if this were something entirely normal.

I try to do the same, but as I pass near him, his hand blurs, snapping up like a snake, and he grabs my leg, forcing me to come to stop. Looking down, I see his huge smile spread across his face.

“Newbie, take me back to the Ancient Armory. I shall fight, and I shall make that place my burial ground if need be.”

“You fought against an overgrown, flying, cockroach looking bug, aren’t you ashamed of yourself for wanting to die against that? Now let go of my leg.”

“The form of my foe does not matter! I shall find him again, and we will face each other in glorious battle!”

“Good fucking luck, most of the Armory should be buried underground by now,” I say, kicking at his side with the tip of my shoe aimed at his ribs. “Let go,” I repeat.

He doesn't seem to notice the attack at all. Instead, his face twists in anger. "Buried! Taken from me!?"

"Yeah."

"Who did this!?"

"How the hell would I know? Probably the Ruler of Diligence. I heard he's the type of asshole who would bury the place and leave people to die there while snapping his fucking MANDIBLES FROM GOD KNOWS WHERE, LIKE THE ASSHOLE HE IS," I yell, my voice aimed straight at the ceiling.

Then I kick Morwag even harder, and this time he finally lets go, lying back down behind me, demoralized, as I walk away toward the garden.

Once again, I notice there are no guards anywhere, and right after, I realize just how dumb that thought is. As if she ever needed one. Nyssa is sitting on the bench near the citrus-scented broken tree, and when I walk in, she greets me with a small wave.

I'm getting used to the pressure that radiates from her. This time, I make sure to calm my heart and even dismiss the lance I reflexively formed over my shoulder.

"Here," I say, dropping her clothes and shoes on the bench next to her. She checks them over before giving me a single nod.

"Thank you, you did well," she says, then looks at me. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"My senses aren't all that sharp, but I couldn't help noticing similarities in the way you use kinetic energy compared to the Lurker people call Whitey. Have you been studying him?"

"His name was Lioren." I answer, "To simplify it, I ended up with his memories from before he died, and he taught me a lot."

A smile spreads across her face. "It still fascinates me how many strange things can happen because of the system. Thank you for your answer. I'll make sure to remember his name. I met Lioren's Lurker only once, but I still remember the grace of his movements."

"I have a question for you, too. If you think it's too rude, you don't have to answer."

"Please ask."

"Why do I feel so threatened around you? You're just sitting there, and I don't think you're about to attack me, yet it feels like you're pointing a weapon at me. Not to be rude, but I've met people stronger than you, and they didn't feel this way." I ask directly.

"As if I were pointing a weapon at you," Nyssa says with a soft smile. She rises and tries to put on her socks while balancing on one leg. She fumbles, wobbling a few times and nearly losing her balance, before finally tugging them on, and then slips into her shoes.

Nyssa starts pulling her shirt back over the tank top and buttoning it up. "You have very good senses, Nathaniel. In a way, the threat you've been feeling is my fault, because I haven't mastered my skill and all the ways it changes me. But I like you, so I'll tell you."

Taking a few steps closer, she steps an arm's reach away. "If you tell anyone, I'll kill you and everyone you hold dear." Nyssa tilts her head with a question, looking up at me with her pale red eyes with white mixed in.

I confirm with a simple nod.

"The skill I mentioned is called [Weapon]. Everything I hold can become my weapon, and by extension, even my body may as well be one. I have to be really careful not to hurt people without meaning to, and this might be the reason you feel as if a weapon is aimed at you."

"Thank you for telling me. Do you want me to tell you my skills?" I ask.

Nyssa shakes her head and smiles. "Don't. It wouldn't be fair. You wouldn't be able to kill me if I were to betray your trust."

Chapter 708: Ninety Nine

Nyssa is strong, and the Primordial Knights are a bunch of lunatics held together by some old rules and the faint logic of whatever faintly reasonable demon founded the guild long ago. Not to mention the efforts of one extremely overworked old demon I've only ever heard about, a Beyond local who does more than anyone else to handle the problems caused by the guild's members. He apparently manages to do this through his strong connections and the odd application of bribes and threats.

From what I've heard, he's currently one of the richest people on the 4th floor, even more so than most of the Handlers. Always grumbling and talking about finally retiring, but the Primordial Lunatics just keep offering him more and more, knowing the guild would collapse without him.

I think the guy deserves all the shards he's making.

It's been two days since we returned to the Ancient Armory, the one buried somewhere below the 4th floor by the evil Ruler of Diligence in a devious attempt to stop us from saving the items trapped inside. Or buried above us. Who even knows? The armory could just as easily be on some floating mountain strapped to the back of a flying turtle orbiting the planes of the fourth floor.

Morwag and I will never forgive the Ruler of Diligence, that much is certain. I bring it up whenever the subject comes up, and Morwag is around.

Unfortunately, the guilds and their informants have confirmed that although entries into the armory are open, the innermost tunnels remain buried. Sure, with enough skill and the right tools, you might be able to get through, but it makes things so much harder to map, not to mention locating traps, and doing all the other stuff I can't be bothered to think about.

For some reason, I leveled up once when the armory fell to the Ruler of Diligence. My level is now 348, and my mana is 1750 + 1750. How curious. This has to be another plot of the evil Ruler of Diligence, twisting the system to gift me levels so that I die in the upcoming body upgrade, before I can complete my preparations.

Thanks to my communication skills, I also managed to get some information from Nyssa about what happened when I left to try and save items from the Ancient Armory. Simply put, Nyssa berated Kaari while Lyraen seemed to be having fun shooting lightning at Christoph.

It makes me wonder why Nyssa shows such a lack of reaction toward the first person to start in Beyond in millennia. She just doesn't seem to care about that sort of thing at all. And she doesn't seem to care about her ranking either. Nyssa just has a set of goals she intends to reach, no matter who she faces, even if they happen to be far stronger than her.

That kind of decision.

I think of these memories to distract myself from the sight of my Handler standing at the main gate of the Primordial Knights headquarters. She's wearing a suit similar in style to the one I saw Lissandra wearing back on the second floor, formal, slightly medieval in look. While Lissandra's suit was tailored in a style that would've been fit for any man, my Handler's version emphasizes her curves.

"There's still a full day until you're due to return my items," I tell her. "And aren't you supposed to be busy or something? An important person overloaded with work? Why do you have so much free-"

"Yes, yes," she waves her hand. "We need to get you proper clothes, and we still need you to use your high end residence permit, and you'll be taking me out to a dinner you'll be paying for. In exchange, I'll give you some good information and a cool Beyond quest to go on later."

"No, I won't be so easily manipulated. I'm a changed man."

"So you don't want a Beyond quest that'll take you to your disciple's planet?"

I don't skip a beat. Taking a few swift steps closer and offering her my arm, she loops hers through, as I say, "Let us enjoy a nice day together."

"You cheap, cheap little thing."

“Calm down, moneybags. Not everyone gets this kind of chance to scam talented Beyond attendees. And given that you’re a few thousand years old, your investments must be thriving. Tell me, did you buy a house a millennium ago, just to rent it out? How much would you have made by now? Are you compounding the interest? It must have been snowballing so long it’s built its own mountain by now.”
RãNobĕŞ

“That’s true, I’m very rich. It comes with the subclass,” she smiles brightly, leaning against me as we walk through the street. She theatrically flicks a strand of hair from her face. “There’s never been a Greed as powerful as mine, if I have to let you know.”

“Amazing. So cool. So does that make you the second strongest Ruler?” I ask.

“Already gathering information? How greedy. But I can’t really be angry at that, can I?” She snickers and thinks for a moment. “I’d place myself third or fourth in combat capability.”

“So Pride is the strongest,” I look at her, seeing her nod. “Then who? Kindness? Wrath?”

“Neither, but I won’t tell you who’s second. He’s currently sleeping, but with everything that’s happening, he might soon awaken from his winter slumber.” She shows her teeth with a wide smile.

Oh my. Don’t tell me...

Before I can finish my thought, she continues, “Kindness isn’t all that strong when it comes to attack power, but she is very, very hard to kill. According to most, impossible even.”

That playful flicker appears on her face. “Transfer me a thousand shards, and I’ll tell you something fun.”

I do so right away. She accepts the shards before speaking. “I’m telling you this because she also puts a tiny bit of her hopes on you, small as it may be, and she probably won’t mind. The Ruler of Kindness has held her title longer than any Ruler living, that poor thing. I think you’ve started noticing it as well, but powerful active skills have already made changes to your body, and that is what happened to her, though to a much greater extent. She is the most incredible healer ever born in the system, brought back to life by her own skill, even after she slept for so long and destroyed her own planet. That skill kept growing and evolving, and now it’s one of the strongest known active skills in the system.”

She cuts herself off, and I look at her, knowing she has me exactly where she wanted.

“How much?” I ask, ready for a ridiculous sum.

“One hundred...” she pauses, looking at me, and adds with a smile, “shards.”

I transfer them right away. She checks the sum as if we’ve been dealing in millions before she nods and leans in, whispering into my ear.

“It’s a level 99 active skill called [Immortality].”

“You’re bullshitting.”

“Not this time,” she answers quickly, pulling me toward a bench nearby and making us sit under a tree offering nice shade.

“How would that even work?” I ask. “At level 99, she’s even more immortal than she was at level 98? That just wrecks the meaning of the word.”

Waiting patiently, she lets me finish before answering, “Some of the more powerful skills are weird like that, breaking the logic the system runs on. If you’d paid more attention in the Academy, you would know at least a tiny bit more about it.”

I wave it off. “So how does it work?”

“[Immortality], being in the highest possible tier of skills, is quite special. In this case, it means that no skill at level 98 or below can kill her. You’d need a skill at level 99 to match her [Immortality], and even then you’d only maybe have a chance.”

“Do you have a level 99 skill?”

“Not telling.” She shakes her head. “But I can say they’re much rarer than you think. Most of the Rulers don’t have any level 99 skills. But considering how ancient Kindness is and the talents she has, it is only natural that she’d have at least one.”

“How would an Empyrean skill work against it?” I ask.

“That,” she says, “is a good catch from you. Yes, Empyrean skills and things like your black mana, things that are either very ancient or bend the rules of the system, could have a chance. An Empyrean skill might be able to hurt or even kill her, even if it did happen to be lower than level 99. But... it’s not that simple. Otherwise, Pride would’ve done it already.”

“So he has an Empyrean skill?”

“Yes, a powerful one.” Out of nowhere, she pauses, seeming to listen to someone. Her brow furrows before she stands up and gestures for me to follow.

She doesn’t mention what’s happening, and I don’t ask as she continues talking. “You have a good face. It’s a shame you don’t smile more often. You also have a nice body, and yet you tend to wear clothes that don’t show your figure even a little.”

“Sweatpants, pajamas, and comfy shirts or hoodies are some of the finest inventions humanity has ever...”

“Oh, just shut up,” she sighs. “The dinner we’re going to is the sort of event where you can meet plenty of Handlers, and I’m sure a few Rulers will be there too, the ones acting as Handlers with their identities hidden. Kindness might appear, Wrath probably, but damn if I’m not hoping that Humility won’t come. I don’t want to be berated. Are you wondering why I’m telling you so much?”

“Honestly? Yes. But I didn’t want to ask in case you stopped.”

“How sneaky of you. What if it caused problems for me, and you couldn’t help?”

“You’re a big girl. I’m sure you’d survive. What’s this party about?”

“Don’t think of it as anything serious. It’s just the sort of party Thane likes to throw every once in a while. Most Handlers show up to show off their favorite attendees, so expect nearly all the S ranks.”

“Don’t you have another attendee to parade around instead of me?”

“But I want to take you.”

“Evil.”

“There is something I’ve been wanting to ask. I’ve been watching you, Nathaniel, and I’ve heard about your experiments with your mind. By the way, you know you aren’t ‘splitting’ your mind or creating new ones. It’s all you. Your thinking is...”

“Yes, yes, but it makes it easier to think of it that way instead of some mana sciency bullshit talk.”

“Sure. So, you had one you call Assholethaniel. Are you sure "it" isn’t talking to me right now?”

I pause for a short moment, then shake my head. “No.”

She narrows her eyes.

“Not currently, but it was before?” she asks, further narrowing her eyes.

"What are you talking about? You think I’d do something that shady? Me? Really? Come on, just trust me a little. I’m trustworthy, I’m very trustworthy. Ask anyone. Anyway, hey, quick change of subject, didn’t you say you’d buy me clothes? Clothes are nice. Way less stressful than all these questions."

She tilts her head, eyes narrowing just a fraction, then lets out a short laugh through her nose. “Mhm,” she says, clearly unconvinced but not pushing the matter. Turning left onto a wider street

lined with shops, she nods. "Yes, we need to get you clothes. And if I remember correctly, I said you're paying."

We stop in front of one with a painted suit and dress hanging in the middle of a floor-to-ceiling window, partially covered in some sort of clear coat. "After you," she gestures.

As we're leaving the tailor, I start to wonder how my HP and MP would look if such a thing truly existed. Of course, I'd keep my Mana Points as high as possible, but health? Would it drop after leaving places like the one run by that tailor? Because I feel more tired and damaged than I ever have, fighting monsters. My purse feels it too. Getting the suit made by tomorrow costs a nice extra sum as well.

It's not like it'll hurt me that much with my millions of shards, but seriously, what's wrong with a hoodie and sweatpants? I could even pick from the more presentable ones. The kind of sweatpants that look almost like suit pants while still being super stretchy and comfortable. Maybe I could just draw a tie on the hoodie or something.

Not caring about my current state, my Handler happily gestures towards the inner city, "Now, let's use your residence permit."

Chapter 709: High Grade residence

We are joined by a thylarin woman in professional-looking clothes. The kind one might see on a Japanese businesswoman. She has four arms, yellow eyes, and yellow hair that is striking against her blue skin. As we walk through the streets, she just keeps chattering on in rushed tones while pointing at the houses.

"A High Grade residence permit is functionally the highest permit awarded. The only better options are the Ten Named Residences. But there are only two currently available, and I don't think I'll meet anyone in my life who'll get the opportunity to take one of them." She laughs shortly.

My Handler walks at my side with her hands behind her back, listening while looking around for herself.

"You said you would prefer an entire house over a rooftop apartment?" the thylarin turns to me.

"Something without people around. In the best case, a building further away in the event of explosions," I answer.

"I understand. So you enjoy experimenting and creating items. If you weren't aware, or if your Handler hasn't mentioned it, there are designated workshops available for rent, as well as facilities equipped with safety measures for situations that may carry the risk of causing explosions," she says.

"Oh, I was talking about my body exploding."

"...excuse me?"

"You heard what I said."

That makes the woman's heart skip a beat, and I notice a hint of nervousness in her movement. Only thanks to my senses, because outwardly there's not a single sign of it.

"I was not aware that such information was so freely available," the thylarin says. She's not even trying to lie. I suppose Handlers are the sort of people you should take seriously.

"I have my sources," my Handler smiles. "His residence permit should be enough for a property just out of the way, with a decent view, an Adaptive Training Hall, Shielded or blast-resistant rooms, A Regeneration Zone, and Variable Gravity Chambers."

The thylarin gulps. "Lady Handler, do you mean that residence by any chance? There's only one that fits your requirements exactly," She asks in a tone that implies this is the sort of thing my Handler shouldn't have known at all.

It makes my Handler only smile at her without answering.

The thylarin tries to fight back, "I am worried that a certain Ruler showed interest in reserving that residence for their own attendee if they should ever reach the fourth floor. I hope you understand well enough to drop..."

Greed waves her hand, interrupting her. "Don't try to bullshit me. We are here now, and there is no such thing as a residence reservation, no matter how much some people might wish there were."

The blue woman turns to look at me with desperation in her eyes, as if I might step in to help, and I just shrug. "My Handler's a greedy person, isn't she?"

She doesn't really pick up on it, but Greed pokes my side. I do not see the movement, but I feel it in my ribs, and the pain tells me enough.

So petty.

Trying again, the woman opens her mouth. "I am sure you're aware..." She stops mid-sentence when she sees my Handler's expression, then sighs. "Fine. I can see you're determined, and I warned you, so it's going to be up to you to deal with the consequences. With a high-end residence permit, that place can be allocated to your attendee for the rest of his tutorial."

She starts walking, and we follow behind her.

"Is it some fancy place?" I ask.

My Handler nods and answers in a quieter voice, talking just between the two of us, "Yes. It belonged to an S-rank who ended his tutorial two months ago. Since then, some of the other Handlers have been trying to hide it and save it for their own attendees. It's probably one of the best residences in the city, outside of the Named Ten."

"What are you playing at with this?" I lower my voice and squint at her.

"Can't a girl be just a little greedy, get a distraction from all these big events, and have some fun playing at lower stakes?"

"You know what would make it even lower stakes?"

"I am not giving you shards, fragments, pristine passives, or any other sort of bullshit you might try to ask for."

I shrug, knowing it wouldn't have worked anyway. "Now, on to the important stuff. The quest on my minion's planet?"

We stop as the thylarin stops too, opening her mouth to ask something. But catching my Handler's gesture to keep moving, she closes it and continues to walk.

Greed once again latches onto my arm. "It's a simple quest. You and another attendee are set to go there as bodyguards for a third. It's all set to take place in an area where your cute disciple is wreaking havoc."

"Wreaking havoc? Must be someone else's minion."

"She's gathering a... a gang she's taken to calling her minions and going on adventures with them while spreading gospel about her all-powerful master."

"I... I see. It could still be someone else."

"She is also searching for a way to stop herself from growing up."

"Because she wants me to continue carrying her so she can listen to my heart?"

"Because she wants you to keep carrying her so she can listen to your heartbeat and keep hugging you. Get a grip and start noticing social cues."

I let out a groan. This is going to earn my minion at least a thousand horn pokes. Why is she like Biscuit at times? And what the hell is she doing, gathering a gang of delinquents? I'll have to look into that. And the hugs as well.

When we finally come to a stop a few minutes later, we find ourselves in front of a copper-colored gate with a panel next to it. The thylarin touches it, and it lights up, along with the identification emblem on the back of her hand, unlike any I've seen thus far. She gestures at me, and I activate mine too, depicting a silver letter A. When I touch the panel, a notification appears.

Would you like to claim the High Grade residence using your available residence token?

This residence will remain accessible to you until the conclusion of your tutorial, allowing you to appear inside it rather than in another location on the 4th floor.

Please note that neither the residence nor the city are designated as a safe zone.

I confirm, and the token disappears from my status. I know it's possible to set my "save point" at the guild headquarters, but appearing in my residence instead will work better. I just need to check the facilities to see if they're any better than the guild's.

Left alone, we head inside, opening the copper gate to pass through a smaller garden and enter the two-story house. The plot isn't all that wide, but I have neighbors on two sides. One across, another on the right. To the left of the house is a huge rock that the house is pressed against, and on the opposite side of that rock, more residences appear.

"The adaptive training hall is in the basement and takes up the whole space. To a lesser extent, you can challenge stored Avatars there. You likely have experience with that from your guild."

I nod. "I never found them too useful."

"Because the Avatar cannot kill you?"

"That, and that they just can't compare to Avatars from the tutorial events."

"Of course, they can't. Adaptive training halls are an attempt to copy the system, and they're still a far cry from reaching that level even after all these years. Though the Corporation does have some really good ones. They've invested a shitload of resources after all."

"Tell me about the Corporation."

“No.”

“One hundred shards.”

“Two hundred.”

“I will give you three hundred,” I say graciously.

It makes her snicker, but she accepts anyway. “Aren’t you just too nice today?”

“I have decided to put all my prejudices to the side for today. You promised me a quest where I might be able to check on Vega, and I am not such an ass that I don’t appreciate that.”

"How little is enough," she says in a somewhat soft tone.

“It is not a little to me. Now give me the information I just overpaid for.”

She laughs. “The Aurate Consortium is their actual name, but everyone calls them the Corporation. They’re one of the biggest, most influential, and richest groups out there. They don’t fuck with us Rulers, but there are a few among us who owe them a thing or two, and those bastards tend to hold on to those favors, some for thousands of years.”

“You as well?”

“Not at all. Actually, they don’t seem to like me all that much. Their High Director used to be the disciple of the previous Ruler of Greed and now happens to be one of my masters, amusingly enough.”

“Let me guess, the previous Ruler of Greed didn’t exactly die of natural causes.”

“I killed the fucker.”

“Thought so.”

“But that should be enough for now. Don’t worry, you’ll learn a lot about them in the future, outside the tutorial. But just to tease you, I can tell you one more thing.”

She lowers her voice to a whisper, and from where she stands a few steps away, she says, “They have a place called The Black Hole Forge.” As she speaks, her face changes. Her hair turns red, and her eyes turn yellow, becoming laced over with patterns. Her original look, a slightly older version of the Ruby I met on the second floor.

Taking a breath to stop myself, I say, “I could probably say something very rude, and I’m sure you deserve it, because it makes me very angry and annoyed that you give me such a damn fucking cool name for the place and nothing else. BUT. I will be nice today.”

“Good,” she starts walking again and gestures to a metal wall on our right. “If you touch this wall, you will get a menu that’ll let you open the entrance to the blast-resistant room. It is not all that big, but it is quite durable, even with your tendency to blow up everything in the area. Just don’t repeat your last spectacle in there, or anything close to it for that matter.”

Passing by it, I follow her over to two huge ceiling-to-floor windows that cover the entire side. One of them slides to the right, opening the way to a terrace with a couch for seating, a fireplace, and a few small trees placed there for shade without taking up too much space. The view opens to reveal the megacity below and the canyon with its huge walls in the distance. I think the view from Greed’s residence is better, but I hold myself back and don’t complain.

Moving a few steps over, I come to a stop at her side, resting against the railing and looking down on the busy city.

“The regeneration zone is on the upper floor. It connects to the city pathways and is maintained by Thane’s healers. Normally, one has to pay a monthly fee to install and keep it running, but High Grade residences don’t need to bother. As with most others, it is usually usable for only one hour per day to not overwhelm them. It is probably slower than your method of healing by burning yourself alive, but it avoids all that pain. And these healers even made a few clever modifications, so the process feels pleasant. It is like a sauna mixed with a bath.”

“No one has time for such slow healing.”

“Just relax once in a while,” she answers, looking down at the city. “Lastly, the Variable Gravity Chamber is the standard type you’d find in your guild. It should be placed off to the left, likely in the house extension carved into that stone.”

I watch her walk away from the railing and move toward the seating. She takes a small pouch from one of her pockets and pulls out a beautifully crafted crystal bottle filled with red liquid, two glasses, and a small box. She opens it, revealing some sort of snacks.

At any other moment, I would ask for a spatial cache for myself, but right now it just doesn’t fit.

Something in her expression stops me. Instead, both of us rest in silence for the rest of the night, sipping a drink that’s probably more expensive than the residence I just claimed and slowly eating cookies with dried pieces of a fruit that might not even exist anymore.

The next day, I stand in the bedroom upstairs in my residence as the night begins to fall. I wear a set of clothes that have been tailored to me. A well-fitting gray suit, a white shirt, and a pale blue tie. It’s different from the version I’m used to from Earth, and even now, I have yet to come up with a better description than that it feels medieval-ish.

My hair is freshly cut, shortened slightly, and styled by visiting the beyond version of a barber. Considering the prices, he could have been a thief. So, it wasn’t really all that different from Earth barbers.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I reread the notification I got not long ago when I finally turned thermal energy into mana.

Congratulations. You have been deemed capable of attaining the status of Absolute through your own efforts, and you have been offered a system quest.

If you choose to accept, no other party will be able to designate you as an Absolute Candidate from this point forward.

This will not affect your eligibility to become an Absolute, even in the event that you fail the quest.

Upon acceptance, you will receive a personalized quest. Rewards will include the title of Absolute Candidate, granted directly by the system, as well as an additional reward to be determined by your progression and performance.

It is obvious what I chose.

My reflection in the mirror grows more serious. Golden circles appear in my irises, and mana floods the space above my head, forming a halo that starts shifting into the shape of a crown not unlike the one I'd been using before.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 71 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 72]

The crown over my head slowly seeps black mana, turning a pitch black that contrasts strikingly with the golden light in my eyes.

[Manifestation - lvl 18 > Manifestation - lvl 19]

I'm walking in the right direction, but it is still not enough.

I know there's more I can give.

Chapter 710: The Party

After waiting for a minute in front of the doors, two burly guards step aside, allowing me to enter the balcony, if it can even be called that. It is far too huge, placed in likely the highest point in the Megacity. The size is equivalent to the area of two football fields, reaching out far enough to offer a sweeping view of the city and the lands beyond.

Dozens of trees are growing from the marble floor, which is interwoven with crystalline windows, granting everyone a view of the city below. I know there are glass bridges on Earth, but I doubt they can compare. These crystal sections of the balcony make up about one third of the space and truly look as if

there's nothing at all to stop your fall. Only when disturbed do small ripples spread out like ripples on the surface of a pond, and when you stay long enough, they slowly fade away.

Stepping onto one of them, I look down at the city below and stomp a few times, ignoring the condescending looks from the people around me. Then, paying them no mind, I squat and slap the transparent crystal floor several times, creating an audible noise as my palm meets the transparent crystal.

I start looking around for a drink, curious what would happen if I poured water onto the floor. When I look up, I see my Handler nearby in her fake form, with black hair streaked with red and brown eyes.

She gives me an interesting look, but just in case, I still ask, "Do you by chance have a glass of water?"

Not even taking my question into account, she asks instead, "What is with that crown over your head? The guards didn't want to let you in, you know that? I had to pull some strings. Your eyes, too, why are they active?"

Realizing I will not get to test the liquid's effect on the crystal, I stand up and face her. "I've realized I don't really need to hold back that much."

People keep passing us, but knowing where to look, I can tell she has deployed a field that twists our words. It strips the original meaning and makes it sound like we are speaking about something else or about nothing at all.

So I talk without worry. "I saw the S-ranks, the strongest of the attendees here, and walked away with one clear thought."

I feel the corner of my lips twist into a smile. "But I saw them fight and came to a simple conclusion. I can fight them. Winning is another matter, but damn if I won't make sure the cost of challenging me is too high for anyone to even consider it."

As she opens her mouth, she is smiling back at me. "You might get angry at me for this, but there's one person you remind me of more than anyone else."

"I won't get angry for that, but never forget that I am me. I follow no one's path, I make my own. And in this entire universe, there's only one person I have to beat."

"And who might that be?"

"Me, obviously." I smile this time, certain of every word. "Everyone else can be reached and beaten, which would leave me without a target or a goal, satisfied and stagnant. But I won't let that happen. Every day, I'll keep pushing to surpass the me of yesterday."

She studies me for a moment before saying softly, "How pretty your pride is turning out to be." With a wave of her hand, the field she created dissolves, and her tone shifts back to normal. "Do whatever you want. You never listen to me anyway."

"Maybe I do listen to you, a little."

"As if." She steps closer, and I offer her my arm, noticing the pale red dress she's wearing, her styled hair, and how different she seems with so many people around. "Have you noticed your guild master and her Handler yet?" she asks.

"I was busy."

"Busy making a fool of yourself. Sure," she moves to turn us toward the edge of the balcony where two figures are standing in the distance.

Through all the people walking around us, I recognize Nyssa. She's sitting on the railing, her legs swinging, with her face turned toward the inside of the balcony and the groups of people.

She's wearing a pale blue and white dress, in the same colors as our guild and the only colors I've ever seen her in. With her albino white eyebrows and pale eyes, and black flowing hair, she looks almost ethereal, like the sort of thing that shouldn't exist in this world, ready to crumble under the slightest touch.

Next to her stands a woman. The most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life, and I know for sure I will not ever see anyone more beautiful as long as I live. It is hard to say what makes her so perfect because I cannot find anything that isn't. Is it her long golden hair? Her violet eyes? The way she carries herself and her movements that seem so full of life and elegance, while making you feel like you're watching an old childhood friend. ʀÁŃOĐĖŞ

I still recognize her, though the last time I saw her was beyond the barrier, lost in slumber. Everyone else in the room seems to know her identity as well, greeting her with the respect that rightfully belongs to one of the oldest beings in the system and one of the fourteen Rulers.

"She's Nyssa's Handler?" I ask Greed at my side.

"Yes. Kindness noticed Nyssa's talent right away and took her in. I won't tell you more, that's for them to share, if they want to."

"Got it." I pause and look around the room as we start walking over to them.

I am currently getting a lot of attention too, most of them glance at the black crown I've kept floating over my head before looking at anything else. I feed it bits of my mana while stopping it from absorbing any of the other mana in the area. And some people actually seem to realize how difficult that is.

There are also, as expected, others doing something similar. People with crowns, mantles, and rings. While a number of people show off their items, traits, or powerful active skills.

Before I realize it, we have already walked through the groups of people and reached the balcony next to Nyssa and Kindness.

The beautiful Ruler smiles at me. "It's so nice to see you here, Nathaniel, and doing so well. It is also exciting to see your mastery over your "black mana" growing."

As she says it, two words in her sentence don't come out with her voice, instead, I hear "black mana" being said in my own voice.

“I’ve been doing my best. There’s still more to come,” I answer.

“Oh?” She tilts her head playfully and smiles in a way that tightens my chest. “That is surprising. I expected you to react when I told you the true name of “black mana”” Once again, the words “black mana” are said in my voice.

Proudly, I straighten up and stick out my chest. “I came prepared.”

“You did?” She steps closer, curiosity in her eyes, and I finally notice the white dress she’s wearing. It moves with her, graceful and fluid, almost alive.

“Obviously. I figured before coming here that a few people would know one of the fake names of black mana. I call it fake because I’ve decided to call it black mana, after all, everyone else will soon as well.”

Nyssa, still swinging her legs, watches and listens curiously, while my Handler has that weird expression of disbelief or something similarly rude.

“So, there’s a part of me I call Redacthaniel, and it only does one thing. Every time it hears something that could be the ‘true’ name of black mana, that part of my mind censors it and replaces it with “black mana.””

“How amazing!” Kindness laughs.

“Are you being serious?” Greed mumbles from the side.

“Black mana, black mana, black mana, black mana.” The Ruler of Kindness continues to talk quickly, but all her words are replaced by my flat voice, overwriting the input as Redacthaniel goes into action.

“Didn’t hear a thing,” I say.

“This is the dumbest, weirdest, most pathetic, and petty thing I’ve witnessed in my entire fucking life. Kindness, let’s go do something else because damn, if I don’t need a drink. And let’s not forget, my

identity is a secret," Greed groans as she gestures at Kindness, who then pretends it was her idea and pulls Greed away.

Being left alone with Nyssa, I look at her and praise myself since everyone seems to be busy, and then I ask her, "Morwag didn't come?"

"They said MorMor was no longer allowed after the last time," she answers.

I ignore that strangely cute nickname entirely and ask, "Are you happy with your Handler?"

Her legs stop swinging, and she gives me all of her attention. "She is someone who gave purpose to my life, and I deeply love her for that. So I will do anything in my power to fulfill her wish."

I give it a thought and try to estimate her chances and the sheer insanity of that goal. But seeing Nyssa's eyes, maybe... maybe there is a chance that she could do it. Kindness surely seems to believe that.

"Good luck with that, I guess," I say.

"Thank you, Nathaniel. You do not have to keep me company, I like to be alone. Go and meet the others."

I open my mouth, ready to be insulted by being thrown into a bag with extroverts, but then I close it. I just caught sight of Victoria and Lyraen and a few other people I could be messing with, so I just wave at her and take my leave.

My Mana Wavelength Iris continues to pick up on shifts of mana in the area, though there are a few assholes trying to overwhelm my trait the way so many others have in the past. Either to test me, or just to be dicks. It doesn't matter. My mind is much stronger now, and I endure that much easily.

Halfway to Victoria, I notice someone else to the side and change direction, heading toward a small table where a lumoran man is standing.

Brich laughs loudly at something another lumoran says as the other walks away, leaving Brich alone. Noticing me coming closer, the lumoran sword thief smiles and waves at me. On his back is Calvorn, but only the hilt is sticking out, the rest is hidden in a bulky metal sheath seemingly meant to seal the weapon away. It looks like a somewhat successful attempt to keep the weapon quiet, with no sign of life from it.

“You’re that guy who used an Emphyrean projectile to pierce my head,” he says, taking a step closer and happily shaking my hand with excitement.

“I thought your backups were old enough that you wouldn’t remember.”

“Oh, that? We fixed that a long time ago! There is a main backup done once every hour, but every minute, there are multiple smaller ones. Not full, but they contain enough data for me to know what happened before the restart,” he answers cheerily and points at my crown. “Damn, I didn’t know there was an attendee with “black mana.”” Once again, those words come out in my flat voice.

“I bought it on the last page of the system shop. No one ever scrolls down there,” I answer.

That makes him bare his teeth in another big smile. “No ill will, man, yeah? You know, for all that stuff with the sword, it was nothing personal. And having seen your “black mana”, I would like to work with you sometime.”

“So Crimson Forge can try to take it apart, and my body as well?”

“If you want to. I know your Primordial Lunatics have the Doc, and his implants are fabulous. I myself have two of them, and he does work with us sometimes, but there’s much more than that we could be doing.”

I cannot even be surprised by the revelation about the Doc and just shake my head instead. “There could be some cooperation, but I am not that interested in all that mind-backup stuff.”

“Good! I knew I saw something in you! I’ll contact you soon. Damn, the old guys are really going to be excited. By the way, is Lyraen still glaring at my back?”

I move my head to the side and look behind Brich, seeing Lyraen floating beside one of the other tables, staring very intently in this direction.

“Yup.”

"Good. If we can see him, it means he's not preparing some nasty attack!"