

Tutorial 711

Chapter 711: No ill will

"Who's your Handler?" I ask Brich while waving at Victoria, who sees me and gestures that she will join us soon.

"No one who's well known, just one of the newer Handlers I got assigned to."

"Didn't try to change your Handler?"

Brich shakes his head wide. "I won't. She's always been good to me and done her best. There were some more powerful ones who showed some interest later, and my guild even tried to get me to change, but that just isn't happening. Do you think it's stupid for me to want to keep her as my Handler?"

"Why would you care what I think? Just do what you want. As for me, I honestly think it is a little bit cool."

"You! I declare you my new favorite A rank! And it isn't only because of "black mana."" My voice slides in, filtering out the two words, and I start to wonder if this might be the most genius thing I've ever done.

So far.

"So what's your plan with the sword?" I ask.

"Reverse engineering. We have some information on Ego items, but none of us has ever seen one with our own eyes. So it's just the usual stuff! Eldrin, Isolde, and Silverweave want to examine it, while I'll be the one to carry it and continue our efforts to bond with it. It is surprisingly difficult, but it should be possible for Ego weapons, even though Calvorn is a rather powerful example of the category. Plus, its devouring abilities are interesting in their own way."

Brich nods excitedly and reaches over his shoulder to give the sealed sword a tap. "Even a few of them! I might even get them to offer you a low pristine item for a chance to study your "black mana" in detail. They'll probably say no, pristine items are really, really hard to get, but I will try. If you were from a guild

outside the top 10, they would've probably just asked me to kidnap you, but no one seems to want to mess with Primordial Knights at the moment!"

"Why the fuck does every guild in the top 5 seem to be so fond of kidnapping? And why not? Because of Nyssa?"

"Especially her! But Morwag can also be... unpredictable, and after talking to my guild, they seem to think there's a high chance the Doc's been working on you as well. Stealing his test subjects, generally speaking, is not a good idea. You could even say it's a really shitty idea."

"They're really scared of that Catboy?"

"Very much so! Maybe even more than Morwag. You should be worried, too. Eldrin and the others are attendees, but we've all heard enough from our local guild members to be careful around anything connected to the guy. I heard that a hundred years ago, he tampered with the climate control in the headquarters of a top 20 guild, locked them all in, and basically fried them all alive. All because they tried to steal his blueprints!"

Brich laughs at that and continues to blabber, "Then, about two hundred years ago, he was suspected of killing an S-rank with a rare metal that turned out to be toxic. They think Doc sold the stuff to the crafters' guild through one of his contacts, and the guild used it to make an item for said S rank. The metal slowly corroded and released trace toxins into his bloodstream. The poor guy didn't even make it to the end of his tutorial before it killed him. Apparently, because the S-rank joined the Primordial Knights just so he could get an implant from the Doc. And once he got it, he bailed without sharing any info about how the implant performed."

This time, I decide to stay quiet and not tell him that, at least to me, that all seems somewhat reasonable.

That's when Victoria joins us, carrying a small plate of snacks, which she offers to me. "You should eat some, Nathaniel, you must be hungry. Have you been drinking water too?" she asks instead of greeting.

"Thanks!" I grab a few snacks and nod. "Of course I drink water, you know my head hurts when I don't get enough liquids."

“Good.” She nods seriously and turns to Brich. “Greetings. Allow me to extend my greetings to the Crimson Forge as well and offer my assurance that I bear you no ill will for what happened during the event.” rANÖBÈS

Shaking her hand, Brich nods. “That’s good! There are too many people who take these things too seriously and just can’t let go of their ego. It’s silly, and it twists one’s thinking, after all, not everything can go your way.”

Victoria nods in agreement. “Such emotions only ruin opportunities and obstruct logical thinking. I overheard you telling my brother about the Doctor. Knowing him, he probably did not know about any of it.”

“Oh? So he’s one of those?” Brich flicks his eyes between my sister and me.

“Yes,” Victoria said with a nod. “Though he can be perceptive in certain situations, he can be completely blind to others. For example, his current reputation and the way that thing above his head exaggerates things.”

“I’m doing it on purpose, Vic,” I defend myself.

“This is the answer I expected from you, but what I said still stands, Nathaniel.”

“So tell me, are you aware of your reputation?” Brich asks joining the conversation. When Victoria looks his way, he smiles at her and then looks at me. “An Absolute candidate, all but confirmed to be a future S rank. Someone with a skill similar to that of The Last Elf, who is said to be hunted on sight, and also with a mind powerful enough to handle that skill. How rare. Now, Miss Victoria, wasn’t it just a month or two ago that an elite squad from Silent Veil tried to kidnap you for a client, and still ended up dead despite their preparations?”

Not skipping a beat, Victoria continues to look at him. “And wasn’t it just two months ago that Crimson Forge hired one of the well-known mercenary groups to kidnap and deliver a certain attendee?”

“Maybe. Why don’t we change the subject? Want to see something fun?” Even though he is smiling, I can see that gleam in his eyes. All of what he just asked was to test Victoria, just like he did with me.

“Did you come here to steal something valuable?” I ask him.

Brich shakes his head. “Not this time, but I agree that would be fun! If you look at that thylarin gentleman in black near the balcony, the one speaking to the thylarin woman, well, you would be looking at the Ruler of Wrath acting through one of his Vessels in Beyond. I think he has at least two more, a human and a lynthari.”

Both me and Victoria look that way, and as Brich said, a thylarin with six arms wearing entirely black clothes stands there calmly, speaking to a thylarin woman. There are likely some people who’d recognize him, but like Greed, he seems to be keeping his identity secret. Though I would say Greed hides it to a bigger extent than him, given that I have yet to meet anyone who knew it was her.

Looking at him with us, Brich keeps talking, “After I got back to my guild, I started digging for information on that Christoph guy and used the guild’s funds to do it. And if I’m right, the Ruler of Wrath is his Handler.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” I say while Victoria continues to examine the Vessel of the Ruler in the distance and glances at Brich as if to be sure he’s not lying.

“And you are telling us this because?” she asks.

Turning just a bit less cheery and more serious, Brich answers, “Take it as a show of goodwill and a warning. I don’t think either of you is dumb, but that man who started in Beyond is very dangerous, from what I have seen. More so than the usual S ranks. And with Wrath behind him, I don’t know, man, I would be very careful not to cross him.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Victoria says simply and looks at me.

I nod as an understanding flashes between us. “Not at all.”

Looking at us, Brich just shrugs. “That’s the spirit! I’ll be sure to use my guild’s finances to buy all the information I can get on your tutorial, because this is sure to be amusing.”

“Just give me the shards, and I’ll tell you,” I say.

Brich blinks, flashing a grin. “Hell yeah, I will.”

As if remembering it again, the lumoran reaches out with his hand and taps the surface of the crown floating over my head. I let him do it and observe curiously, while relaxing my hold on the crown.

The S rank and Absolute Candidate, as with every other S rank, tries to fight back and stop the crown from absorbing his mana while trying to observe the process. He does it in a way not unlike the method I used so long ago, by using his own mana to observe it, but it doesn’t work. Any mana used for observation gets absorbed and prevents any information from escaping.

His mana starts to get pulled as well. Even though the crown is not made from that much mana, and so the pull should not be that strong, it is made through a combination of my high-leveled and high-graded skills as well as my growing mastery over it.

So I watch it absorb his mana. At first slowly, but quickly hastening as his mana is added to the black crown, strengthening it and accelerating the rate of absorption, strengthening the crown even further in the process. Brich is stubborn and has that curiosity I always admire in people, so obviously, he continues to push, releasing more of his mana and pulling on some of the mana batteries hidden on his person. It is fun to watch, even without doing anything on my own.

When the crown strengthens to the point it starts pulling on the mana around us, I jerk my head slightly forward, feeling a gentle slap on the back of my head.

Victoria looks at me wordlessly, and I start to realize the attention we are getting. It is something she doesn’t usually mind that much, but at this point, it’s starting to become a disruption to the party.

Disappointed, I expend more effort and pull the crown back under my control, stopping it from reaching for the mana surrounding us or taking any more from Brich.

That lumoran looks at me with eyes wide open. “I don’t think I lack for talent when it comes to handling mana, but I have to praise your mastery in turn.” Reaching into his shirt, he then takes out an empty mana battery and hands it to me. “As a thank-you for letting me indulge my curiosity!”

I take it without hesitation, quickly checking its price in the system store. It shows at twenty thousand shards for me to sell, making it a low arcane.

“Do you want it?” I offer the stone to Victoria. I already have the mana batteries I saved from the Armory before the Ruler of Diligence buried it, and they should be better than this. Well, not like I won’t offer them to Vic as well.

She takes it from me, too. “Thanks. While I have no need for it, I can give it to Gloria, who will surely find some use for it.”

“By the way, Brich, Lyraen isn’t where he stood before,” I say to the lumoran.

That makes him turn around wildly, searching for the floating vyssari. Even though he surely doesn’t believe he would be attacked here, he seems nervous.

“Why did you bring Calvorn with you?” I ask, ignoring all that. “Wouldn’t it be safer in the guild?”

For a moment, the man straightens up and, surprisingly, winks. “It would be.”

After that, he waves us off and starts walking toward some other people.

“They are probably taking the opportunity to display their prize, Natty, or using him as bait.”

I nod. “There are at least three people constantly watching Brich, but instead of ill will, it seems like it is for his protection, or whatever they are planning after the party,” I say.

With disappointment, I watch Brich leave, envying his exciting and chaotic life.

Chapter 712: Well-behaved

In the following ten minutes, Victoria keeps berating me for my behavior, asking me that same question that always seems to work. But I can't even be mad at her, after all, it always works, so I'd probably do it too in her place. It's so simple too: Do you want people to look down on me for failing to raise you as a good sister should?

I don't think she even really cares, or what other people might think in general, and it's extremely childish in some ways that she would expect it to work. But from that moment, my behavior changes anyway as I decide to reach into my reservoir of social energy and endure all of this. Five minutes later, Victoria hugs me briefly, then leaves, heading toward the balcony where Nyssa still sits.

There's probably some epic conversation just waiting to happen, and my curiosity itches under my skin as I watch my sister and the albino demon meet with a greeting, with the more sociable Victoria taking over the conversation and introducing herself.

For some reason, Nyssa seems surprised by Victoria's reaction, and the pressure around her rises until I feel it even from here. It's that sharp feeling of having a weapon aimed at you, as if the tip of a blade were resting against your eyeballs.

It doesn't even make Victoria flinch, and Nyssa's surprise deepens as she smiles and jumps down from the railing to greet her properly.

So cool.

But what isn't cool is the presence I feel behind my back. I sense it because everyone here is using their senses, it's just part of the game, and they don't even seem to think it's rude at all. Like it's just ok to hide your abilities if you want to, while doing everything you can to look into everyone else's. I probably don't have to say it, but my trademarked black mana really fucks with the mana senses of anyone trying to catch a glimpse of me.

Anyway, the presence I feel is very familiar, but for a while, I refuse to believe it's actually them. Only after turning around do I confirm it, and find myself forced to accept the reality in front of my eyes.

The most cowardly person to ever exist stands there, looking right at me. Savi, in his full, cowardly, beauty.

The Sword of Aeons is nowhere to be seen, probably having been fully absorbed, and there's a hint of kinetic energy in his movements. Though he doesn't seem to be generating it, just absorbing and reusing it. I'd rate his usage worse than a noble lady's pet, but it's something at least.

And why the hell is he walking toward me? I want none of this.

He stops in front of me, nods his head in greeting, and, remembering Victoria's words, I return his greeting.

"Let me guess, your sister didn't tell you about me?" he asks afterward.

Jumping to the conclusion, I say calmly, like Dumbledore, the one from the movie, "If you tell me that you guys are dating or something, I'll kill you right here where you stand."

"What?"

"... What?"

"I clearly meant if she told you about me cooperating with her group."

"That's what I meant."

"But you-"

"Don't be so backward", I say, interrupting him, "and don't stick to things that happened so long ago. She didn't mention you, but knowing her, this was her version of a joke at my expense, since she knows how much I like you. Isn't that dumb, and yet weirdly cute at the same time? She's so terrible at jokes."

"Sure," Savant says, shaking his head and changing the subject. "Have you met Christoph?"

"Yes."

“And what do you think?”

“I’ll give it a bit longer before deciding. You?”

“I’m the same. I’ve only met him once, but even though there are things I don’t like about him, I think we need him, even if it means he’ll end up becoming our Absolute.”

“Already giving up on the title?” I poke.

“I’ve always been a realist, unlike you, and I think your sister would probably agree with me. If the enemy has Champions and an Absolute, I don’t see any other way to avoid losing during the Pairing except by using everything we have. Even then, it’ll be a huge mess. I’d also recommend you look into the way Pairings usually end up.”

“Not planning to escape Earth or join the enemy if you think it’s necessary?”

“It’s something I’ll take into consideration if I’m left with no other choice. I don’t know what exactly you think of me, but I’ll defend my home,” he says.

As always, used to having the last word, he turns to leave. I ask him curiously, “Not gonna ask me what I’ll do?”

He just turns around with a weird expression. “Isn’t that obvious?” he says, and without another word, he leaves.

What a pretentious guy. Even I don’t know what I’ll do.

Before I can decide where to hide for the best possible defense from the party’s inevitable wide area destruction, a young child approaches me.

The little guy is ridiculously cute. It is to the point that I probably look like some kind of creep staring at him. It's my first time seeing a vyssari kid this young. He has those scaly legs, though he's about half the size of a human child his age. He is maybe around four years old at most, and his eyes are huge. He's wearing a tiny suit, and his hair is perfectly styled, too.

The little guy even stands straight like someone glued a stick to his back, and he likely already has more manners than I ever will.

Before he even says anything, I decide that if he asks me for a million shards, I'll give them to him. No complaints at all. I'm also thinking of leaving the party to run back to the third floor, hoping Lily still has that smartphone she's been carrying, so I can return and take a picture of him.

"Are you Sir Nathaniel Gwyn?" the little boy asks.

I don't know if it's his size or what sort of magic, but his voice is extremely cute as well.

"Yes, I am," I answer softly, holding myself back from ruffling the hair on his tiny head.

"Your Handler sent me to ask you to join her." He turns and points toward a balcony where Greed is standing next to Kindness and a few others. I spot Kaari and Hela among them.

Deciding that I'd let this little guy lead me straight into a deadly trap if he wanted to, I gesture for him to take the lead. "Sure, I'll follow you."

He nods self importantly and starts walking with his tiny steps. It forces me to slow down a lot to match him, but I don't mind it at all.

Out of nowhere, a velnar attendee steps back while laughing and waving his arms, and bumps into the vyssari boy. With a short sound of surprise, the kid stumbles and falls to the floor, as the attendee turns, looks down, and laughs even harder.

"Damn, I can barely see you, little dwarf. I could've stepped on you without ever noticing-"

Before he finishes, a blast of kinetic energy from me slams into him, sending him sliding across the floor. Ripples spread through the transparent sections along the way before he crashes through a table and hits the wall behind it.

The two people he was talking to raise their mana, but color drains from the area before my disruption finishes the rest, canceling out whatever they were trying to cast. At which point they just stand there in shock.

Ignoring them, I help the little guy back to his feet. The tiny gentleman dusts off his clothes and puts on that brave face again.

“Excuse me for the trouble, Sir Nathaniel Gwyn,” he says.

“It’s okay. Do you want me to throw that velnar off the balcony?” I ask, watching said velnar crawl out from under the broken table.

Honestly, I expect the boy to refuse politely and ask me to stop, but the little guy nods solemnly. “Please do, sir.”

I blink in surprise, and he calmly looks right back at me.

Without hesitation, I take a step with Wraith Dance to reach the velnar. The attendee is already standing, his clothes covered in the remains of the snacks and drinks he just bulldozed through, shouting something rude. Before I can touch him, a barrier forms in front of me, shielding the velnar. It’s immediately obvious it wasn’t created by the attendee. Not even an S-rank could have done that. Clear as day, it’s the work of someone at least Champion rank, likely the guy’s Handler.

I track its origin and notice a velnar man standing nearby. “That should be enough,” he says.

Ignoring him, I turn to the asshole who bumped the kid and say, “As a fellow Champion candidate, I challenge you to a duel. If you win, I’ll transfer you a high grade residence. If I win, you’ll have to complain to at least two different locals or attendees every day, for the rest of your time in Beyond, about how the Ruler of Diligence destroyed the Ancient Armory.”

“What?” The big guy looks confused, then snorts and laughs. “Sounds fun! Fine! I accept your challenge!”

The barrier around him vanishes, snuffed out by someone far more powerful and greedier than the velnar Handler, and it’s replaced by a much stronger barrier surrounding the two of us. Once inside, I let my mana seep through the area and reach the velnar again.

His mana explodes outward, his body swelling in size as glowing blue markings spread across him.

A blast of kinetic energy slams him into the barrier. Color drains from the area, and his other skills fail to activate. He charges at me but freezes mid-step, stuck in an awkward pose, before another kinetic blast hurls him against the barrier again. He bounces off, falls, freezes again, and I throw him one more time.

I repeat the process a few more times until he stops moving, and only then does the color slowly return to the area.

Congratulations on winning your challenge.

A notification pops up in front of me, confirming the result. The whole thing barely took fifteen seconds.

The barrier around us fades, leaving the guy’s Handler standing there awkwardly, glancing toward Greed, who’s smiling at him, and waving in response.

Clapping my hands together, I take a breath and strengthen my body before grabbing the unconscious velnar by the leg.

I start dragging him across the floor, and when I reach the tiny vyssari boy, he joins me without hesitation. He grips a torn flap of the velnar’s suit and starts helping me drag him toward the edge of the balcony.

Dozens of people turn to watch. The crowd parts slowly, some stepping back, while others whisper or pretend not to see. The sound of their voices rises and falls behind us as we move, the scrape of fabric and boots filling the resulting silence.

By the time we reach our goal, Kindness appears beside us, breathtaking as she is, and helps us lift the guy and throw him over the railing.

The velnar falls over the edge like a sack of potatoes, vanishing into the glowing city below. A few people gasp, a few laugh, and one woman even claps. Though the noise dies down quickly, replaced by the distant echo of something heavy hitting the lower level, not even half as far down as I expected. So he likely landed on top of one of the towers.

Honestly, the guy probably won't feel a thing. I'm sure even I could survive a much higher fall, and my Constitution is much lower than his.

I dust off my hands and glance over at Kindness. She looks completely unbothered, her expression calm and strangely satisfied. The little vyssari boy stands beside me, his posture perfect, as if this were the sort of thing that happens every day.

Chapter 713: Pathfinder Thane

Kindness snickers the entire time as we leave the balcony, all while the tiny vyssari boy acts as if nothing happened. Once in a while, I glance at the Ruler, wondering if this could be her true body. I'm almost completely sure it's just a vessel. She doesn't seem like the type who'd be capable of holding back her power all that well, as shown by the way she destroyed the bodies of the natives she took over when she was talking to me before.

I don't remember her true body from the third floor all that clearly, but I'd say this one's a perfect copy. So maybe a custom grown vessel? A duplicate? An avatar? A robot? Watching her current behavior, I decide I'll ask when the opportunity arises.

When I reach the group, no one berates me, which I expected. There've been a few similar clashes already, and it even seems like they're being allowed to happen on purpose from time to time. Probably as a means for the Handlers to show off their attendees, or perhaps even so the Handlers can use their attendees to provoke fellow Handlers they don't like. Handler this, Handler that.

Kaari greets me with a short nod, and Hela gives me a longer stare. Their Handlers are there too, two selari women who look like twins. Unlike the velnar Handler, these two feel like Absolutes.

I feel a tug on my clothes and look down at the little guy pointing at a glass of water on the table just out of his reach, so I grab it and hand it to him.

He takes it carefully in both of his small hands, the glass clearly being way too big for him, and drinks a few large gulps before handing it back to me. Then he bows to Kindness, gives a smaller bow to the two selari women and Greed in her secret identity, and slowly walks away.

I watch him for a moment, noticing Kaari doing the same.

When she realizes it, she lets out a short laugh. "It's insane to imagine, but Lyraen probably looked like that as a child."

"He probably already had that deep voice even back then," Hela adds with a smirk, making her Handler laugh briefly.

Her twin nods. "Many of the vyssari Handlers I've met find him charming." She lowers her voice to a whisper. "I heard some have even been sending him love letters and certain... invitations."

"Doesn't Lyraen already have like five wives from back on his planet?" Greed cuts in, though she doesn't seem as interested in the topic as the two creepy selari aunties. The aunties who could likely kill everyone on Earth in a day or two while lazing around.

Both selari twins, along with Kaari and even Hela, turn toward Greed after that bombshell, while Kindness just sits down on a nearby bench, barely reacting.

"What? Are you serious?" one of the selari twins asks, in that tone that tells you she absolutely loves gossip. Is she really an Absolute? Maybe I was wrong.

"I heard it from another Handler. It might be fake information, though," Greed replies.

By this point, I'm sure she knows the truth. She's been watching and studying him, just as she does with anyone she thinks might be talented. As a Ruler, she can do that pretty easily. The twins, though, don't seem to have any idea.

The women keep gossiping for a minute or two, trying to drag more details out of her. From their conversation and behavior, it seems like S-ranks are treated almost like little celebrities here, even by people of higher rank. Maybe because S-ranks are the kind of people that could eventually become one of them, possibly even managing to replace a Ruler. Or maybe just out of boredom.

I'd bet on boredom.

Sneaking away, I sit on the bench next to Kindness. Her cheerful expression from earlier is gone, replaced by a look of calm laced with that hint of faint sadness I always feel from her, no matter what body she's using. She quietly sips her drink, listening to the others talk.

"This isn't my real body," she says before I can even ask, her tone perfectly steady as she says it.

"I've been caught," I admit.

She nods. "People like you always ask that, and my answer never changes: this body is a Vessel, a gift from my friend Greed, grown from my own flesh. While it is comparatively weak, it does allow me to possess a familiar body and move among attendees without having to worry about killing them, even though the Vessel keeps breaking down and needs to be repaired after every use." **räNoBES**

"I see," I say.

"Next, people like you ask, why can't you repair it? Aren't you a healer?"

That sad expression on her face deepens a bit, even as she forces a small, cutesy smile. "And I always answer: I lost the ability to heal anyone other than myself a long time ago. I can't heal people, I can't save people, I can only corrupt and cling to life, or whatever foul imitation of it this is."

"And what do people like me usually say to that?" I ask.

"It varies, but they usually try not to show too much pity, correctly expecting me to dislike it. From you, I'd expect something like, 'That sucks,' or 'I see.' Honestly, I like those answers the most."

"I see."

She laughs softly, takes a sip, and lifts her glass toward me in a small, graceful gesture.

When our conversation quiets down, one of the selari Handlers waves at me to catch my attention. "We were talking, who do you think would win, Morwag or Brich, in a duel? Both fighting at full force, Brich with his items, minus that fancy new sword. The setting would be somewhere like one of the bunkers from the fifth floor of the tutorial, same structure, same ambient mana concentration, baseline density for mid-tier zones. No external flux, no artificial suppression, just their internal reserves and whatever they can pull from their surroundings. No external influence or natives present, and only five seconds of preparation before the duel starts. They'd both start off in the same room."

I stare at her. Are these people seriously having a what-if conversation? And what was with all that extra detail? I forgot half of it before she even finished talking.

Still, the core of the question catches my interest, so I give it some thought before answering. "Wouldn't Brich just bury Morwag down there? It probably wouldn't kill that maniac, but Brich could try to tire him out and wait for him on the surface with a trap."

The selari woman doesn't seem to mind as Kaari answers instead. "People have already tried that against him, twice."

"Make it three, we tried it too, not that long ago," Hela adds from the side.

"Oh, on the third floor during the guild war?" one of the selari women asks Hela, probably Kaari's Handler, since Hela's would already know.

"Yes," Hela confirms. "He dug himself out with tons of earth and metal bound to his body, like a building-sized golem, and even managed to survive the large-scale bombardment afterward."

"Oh yes, the way Morwag uses his Binding energy is quite barbaric, but effective in its own way. It suits him," one of the selari Handlers says.

Her sister nods. "Do you remember that guy from 87 years ago? He was another demon who used Binding energy, but he used it to attach himself to his enemies, to keep them from escaping or something like that?"

This time, Greed joins in. "It was a bit different. He used a combination of active skills to break his opponent's natural barrier, then bound himself to said opponent. Through that binding, the wounds sustained by one were mirrored on the other."

"Oh? That's a surprisingly original method, really diving into the concept. Not what I'd expect from a demon. He must've been high-level. He died in Beyond, though, if I remember right?" the selari asks.

Greed shrugs. "He fought an S-rank healer from back then and thought it'd be a good idea to use that strategy against her. The fight took hours because of her weak attack power, but in the end, her healing outpaced his regeneration, and he died because of the binding and the wounds they shared. Still cackling like a maniac, smiling until the end. He never even tried to break the link between them."

"Primordial Knights?"

"Guildmaster."

"Makes sense."

Everyone in our group nods in agreement.

"Lady Kindness, is Nyssa like that as well?" asks the selari Handler, probably Kaari's.

Next to me, Kindness stops moving and looks up at the woman. Just that short look freezes the selari in place before she gathers herself and meets Kindness's gaze.

Kindness nods. "That demon from 87 years ago died beautifully and happily because that death was for himself. Nyssa isn't like that. She's dumb. Instead of doing the same, she'd rather die for another's sake."

It makes me snort, and Kindness turns to me, giving the selari a bit of relief. There's a question in her expression, so I answer while meeting her gaze. "Does that matter? If she decides to die for someone else, isn't that still the choice she's decided will make her happy?"

"I'm well aware of that view of the situation. Even what you just said, I've heard so many times before."

"You disagreeing with it doesn't make it wrong," I say.

"It does, Nathaniel. I have more experience than you can imagine. I've lived longer than everyone in this room combined, Rulers included." Her voice is calm, almost gentle, but there's something ancient in it, something that makes the air feel heavy as everyone in our group goes quiet.

"Then stop her from doing it."

"I don't want to," she answers.

"Then don't stop her."

"It isn't that simple."

"It is that simple. Damn, at this point I'm just hoping I don't end up like you guys. Every Ruler I've met to this point has some serious issues." I look straight at her. "It's a really fucked up world out there. Hell, I'll probably end up just as bad someday. So if you're still alive by then, come find me, remind me of this conversation, and laugh in my face. Oh, and call me a loser or something."

"I will," Kindness promises, and while the people on the balcony stop moving, turning toward the entrance where the Pathfinder Thane has finally appeared, she asks one more thing. "Would you let someone you love die for you?"

"Hell no. They'd have to beat me half to death and knock me out first. And if I woke up to find them dead, I'd be cursing them forever." I pause, then shrug and meet her eyes. "But I think I'd understand it was their choice to make, not mine."

Turning away from her, I look toward the small podium the Pathfinder is climbing her way onto.

Thane is tall, old, and fragile-looking, a selari woman. Her skin isn't the same shade of pink as the others of her race, if anything, it's a little paler, almost hiding her freckles, and her pink hair has been tied back into a bun.

Just one look into her eyes tells me there's still plenty of life in her, though. They're clear and strong, hard eyes without so much as a hint of weakness in them. When she greets the party, her voice carries across the room, quiet but firm, reaching everyone present.

"You all know I'm not one for long speeches, so I'll keep this simple. Thank everyone of you for being here, and welcome to the new talents joining the system. I've seen the marks you've already left on the Beyond, and they speak for themselves. May your lives be long and full, may your strength continue to grow, and may your worlds prosper. Each generation leaves something behind for the next, and I've had the privilege of seeing that cycle continue, attendees taking their first steps onto the fourth floor, only to later return as Handlers, or even venturing deeper into the Beyond. Pathfinders, as I once was."

She pauses, and the room bursts into applause and short cheering before she quiets them again with a wave of her hand.

"Lastly, I have a surprise for you. I've been working with the Ruler of Humility, and together we've prepared an event for all of you, and for anyone who reaches the fourth floor of the Beyond over the next month, when it begins." A faintly mischievous smile touches her old face, softening her features and making her look years younger. "For now, I'll keep the details to myself, but I can promise the rewards will be worth it. Among them are a residence permit for the tenth named residence, and a low pristine item from the personal collection of the Ruler of Humility."

Another wave of silence settles over the room before it bursts again into cheers, and she raises her voice for the final time. "Whether S-rank or D-rank, anyone who reaches this floor will be given the same opportunity and the same starting point."

And then she leaves, just like that.

What a legend, she barely stayed longer than one minute at her own party.

I turn to Greed and finally ask the question I've been holding back. "Just to be clear, if I had only shown up to the party for one minute and left right after, would that have counted towards completing our deal?"

"Yes," she nods. "The items are already in your residence. They've been there since the party started."

"Damn it."

Chapter 714: The Gray Sun

POV Ruler of Greed

Thane leaves as quickly as she usually does after giving one of her speeches. It's always the same, with the only difference being the event she announced.

Knowing Humility, I can guess what to expect, and I try to work out who will perform best and is most likely to win. Out of curiosity, I go over possible scenarios and recall dozens of events Humility's worked on over the millennia. The decision isn't simple. Even with all that information, I'll have a hard time predicting the winner.

There are too many talented people, and among them are the ones I've come to see as potential weapons to use against Pride once they've developed. And yet his name keeps returning to my mind, even with all these people in the mix.

Nathaniel seems to feel my eyes on him. He turns to me and tilts his head in question.

I just shake my head, and with a shrug, he turns away.

The black crown over his head follows behind him. It feels so weak, so inconsequential compared to what I've seen Kindness do. His body is weak too, constantly creaking, straining to break the moment he stops holding it all together. It is scarred, twisted. Powerful traits and broken constructs from his early floors have burned themselves into his being. All his mistakes and successes are there for me to see, should I wish.

I've come up with dozens of ways to fix it, and dozens more to make him stronger. Events, Beyond quests, secrets on the floors I could hint at, things his sharp mind could notice and learn from, making himself stronger along the way. It's something I've done many times, turning people like him into the most powerful versions of themselves time and time again.

But what for? Most of them lost their drive the moment they even heard a fragment of what Pride is capable of, or saw the battlefields he fought on so long ago.

I think Nathaniel will break. I strongly believe that he won't succeed. Maybe his body will betray him before his mind. Maybe his efforts won't be enough. Maybe the opponents in his way will prove sharper and more cunning.

But I don't want him to die.

In one of my weaker moments a year ago, I connected to the system and recalled what remained from the instance of the second floor he and his group went through. The records of my imitation were still there, the fragments of it. That realization of being caught in a false world, that sense of the end approaching, and something else.

I took it all in and made it mine because of my greed, and I allowed myself to relive the things my imitation felt. A mistake, but it's one I made on purpose and by my own choice.

So here I am, giving him no more than the bare minimum of help, knowing that the other Rulers do more to guide and support their attendees. Even the other Handlers do it. But not me. Sometimes I even make things harder for him.

I don't want to stain him with my hopes and my failures.

The party is slowly coming to an end, but as always, no one hesitates to use it as an opportunity, just as countless others have at the parties of prior years. Nathaniel probably doesn't even realize it's ending, and I doubt he bothered to gather enough information before coming here to know that.

The Handlers take a step back, and the attendees with sharp senses start to notice. The conversations grow louder and the confrontations sharper.

With his senses, he gradually begins to notice too. Many other attendees I've handled would've looked to me for guidance, but he doesn't even give me a glance. He just says something about grabbing a drink and walks into the middle of the crowd, mumbling that maybe this party won't be a failure after all.

Kindness presses against me, and I feel the warmth of her Vessel.

"Ruby," she whispers, "I know you're stubborn, but sometimes you should listen to my advice. What's the most important rule I taught you when you were just a cute little newbie Ruler?"

"Do not mess with the system."

She laughs, and that laugh is different when it's just the two of us here. "But you keep refusing to listen, just like your master did when I told her not to challenge Pride."

"At that moment, she wouldn't have listened to anyone in the entire universe. You know that."

"I do. And I also know about your little project on Eladore, along with the tutorial records you've been tampering with."

"I'm not trying to hide it from you. You know that."

Her hug tightens, and she squeezes me. "I do. He's a silly little thing, isn't he?" she says, changing the subject and gesturing toward Nathaniel.

He stands there surrounded by a group of velnar, including the one he threw off the balcony. Hela's there too, saying something condescending to him.

"He's... not enough," I say.

"Who's saying that, Ruby or Greed?" Kindness whispers into my ear.

The black crown over Nathaniel's head begins to spin and grows slightly in size. As the colors around him drain away and the world turns black and white, the crown's blackness feels deeper, hungrier, more consuming. His Ley Lines unravel into the area, setting up his teleportation marks, completely invisible to any attendees who happen to be nearby, even Hela.

Like an engine kicking the heart of a long-dead Champion back to life, the seals showing their lingering traces of Master Lissandra's handiwork unwind and flood him with thermal energy, which he channels and converts into mana.

Even now, I'm sure he doesn't fully realize the scale of what he's done, or what it means when combined with all the abilities he already has. Or maybe he does and is simply waiting for the right moment to truly unleash it.

Nathaniel already has access to more mana than any other attendee currently in the tutorial or Beyond. Not Kaari, not Hela, not that man from his tutorial, not even Quintan, who's similarly mana-oriented, can compare. That's how much mana he has, as just a third-year attendee.

I can even feel the mark the system placed on him, claiming him as a potential Absolute candidate, refusing to let anyone else declare him. If he succeeds, his strengths will be amplified, and his weaknesses will deepen.

"I am the one saying it," I answer Kindness, and wave my hand.

The left arm of a Handler trying to secretly help those facing Nathaniel explodes. She screams in shock more than pain, spinning to find who did it. When she fails to trace it back to me, she turns pale and teleports away.

Then, like a vortex, his crown begins pulling in the surrounding mana, making every attendee take notice and feel that tug, an attempt to take their mana, to claim it for himself, and make it his own.

Nathaniel stands in the middle of that storm, his hair whipping around his head, golden rings in his eyes glowing with unnatural light, all the sharper in a world drained of color. For a moment, the golden hue of his trait feels like sunlight fighting to pierce through the planet eclipsing it.

His expression doesn't change. That confidence in his eyes looks like arrogance as he stares down Hela, who's trying to activate her spatial skill but failing. He tracks her perfectly, processes every move faster than she can act, breaking each attempt apart and stripping away the combat style she's grown so comfortable with.

He looks almost disappointed, as if he expected her to be more of a challenge. It shows on his face, and Hela's expression twists with anger. But before Hela can react, a figure appears beside her, pulled there by sheer force through the backlash, tearing her body apart.

Nathaniel's sister, Victoria, stands next to Hela. Blood pouring from the torn skin on her forehead drips into her eyes as she attacks the velnar without hesitation. Her body breaks further, and sprouting from one of the pieces is a newly formed duplicate.

Everyone moves at once. Other groups join the fight. I hear Brich laughing in the distance as white lightning flashes beside him. Kaari fires her arrows at multiple targets. Hela swings her arm and activates her rings. And that dumbass just keeps losing himself in the flow, gathering even more mana, which concentrates around his crown as it continues to feed, hungering for more.

The other Handlers watch with interest, interfering only when someone might get too badly hurt, or to raise barriers, or to stop the damage from spreading.

Turning to Kindness again, I ask, "Can you wake up Charity?"

Still hugging me, she squeezes tighter. "He is always grumpy when I do that. You know he'll awaken from his slumber soon anyway."

"He's probably the least grumpy being there is."

"Ha! That's what you and the others think. It's hard to see, but I've learned to recognize it over time. He gets really grumpy when he's first waking up and when he gets hungry."

“Fine, I’ll believe you. Will you do it? You know I usually wouldn’t ask, and I’d normally just wait a decade or three for him to awaken on his own, but seeing how quickly things change, I would rather have him fully awake sooner than later.”

“Okay, Ruby, I’ll do it. But only because I truly want to see him after so long apart.”

“Thank you. I’ll give you the coordinates of a planet like the ones he likes, where he can stay for now. If he wants to, of course.”

I return Kindness’s hug, and as she lets go, I give one last look toward the mess he’s started before moving away.

With the awakening of the Ruler of Charity and the Ruler of Pride’s return from seclusion, the second and first strongest Rulers will both be active, and there’s still much to do.

POV ???

"Wake up, sleepyhead," Kindness whispers softly on a distant planet.

That planet is covered entirely in ancient trees, older than some of the Rulers, set in a snowy world so cold that most Champions would die just being there.

Here, surrounded by trees, something sleeps undisturbed. Smaller animals move through the foliage, either unaware of the presence buried under the snow or used to it, after its long period of dormancy.

Though she isn’t there, Kindness keeps whispering, her voice carrying across the vast distance, slowly waking the sleeping being.

The snow slides off as it opens its mouth in a long yawn, tongue stretching out. It rolls to the side, shaking loose the remaining snow and revealing its thick gray fur. Then its eyes open, orange, glowing, and filled with deep, unyielding flame.

The Ruler of Charity sniffs, twisting his ears and listening to the voice before standing fully and shaking away all the snow covering his body. His presence expands with such speed that it causes a small earthquake, and the snow hanging from the trees is blown away across huge swathes of the planet as the wave moves on, changing and searching for something.

For a spark, the slightest speck of an ember it could use.

He searches through the solar system but finds all the planets dead, devoid of flame. Yet the star is still there, weak and dying, but still akin to a spark of fire.

The Ruler of Charity takes a step and disappears, pulled toward that spark as he appears on the surface of the sun, an incomprehensible distance away. The flames wash over his gray fur, not leaving any damage but warming up a very old body after a long winter slumber.

Finding another star, the Ruler of Charity appears upon its blazing surface in a distant solar system, continuing toward the coordinates he was given. The star roars beneath him, a storm of yellow flames taller than worlds, but its fury bends around him, powerless before his calm stride.

Next, he finds a speck of fire on a planet in the system, moving toward the spark being cast into the air by an active volcano before reaching out again and appearing on the next star.

Dozens of times, he moves like that in quick succession, traveling a distance many civilizations will never reach, and eventually he arrives at his target, appearing by a small fireplace placed there for him by a blonde woman who sits there waiting in a white dress.

With a happy laugh, she stands and hugs his huge body, burying her hands in his warm gray fur, and he rubs his head gently against her.

After their greeting, he lies down beside her, curling in close while she tells him all that happened during his sleep, and he listens with quiet patience.

The Ruler of Charity. Cinderbear. The Gray Sun. The Bear That Survived Time. One of the very few beings older than the Ruler of Kindness.

Chapter 715: The Loot, the Beyond quest, and the two assholes

For now, I decide to ignore the fact that my residence was broken into to deliver these items. Actually, fuck it. What the hell is this crap? Do I not deserve at least some privacy? Just a tiny bit? I will remember this insult, and my revenge will be terrifying.

Coming to a stop in front of my house, I look over the space from a distance. Sure, having a place to myself and another “checkpoint” is nice, as are the facilities, but how valuable is it really to someone like me? The facilities are either comparable to or slightly worse than those in the Primordial Knights’ headquarters. I do realize that for anyone in a guild below the top five or ten, this residence would be amazing. But for me... actually... should I maybe turn it into an Airbnb? Rent it out for shards? Surely others have already thought of it.

Me, a landlord?

Wouldn’t an evil demon king be a lesser evil than that? Do I really want to sink that low just for some shards?

I stop my thoughts there, scared of the answer, and rush over the remaining distance. I open the gate and enter the house through the terrace. There, in the middle of the living room, stands a tree very similar to a Christmas tree. Suspiciously similar. It’s alive too, I note, as I touch and smell it.

Did... did she? No, there’s no way she would go to Earth just for this kind of lame joke. No way. I mean, I’d totally do it myself, and damn if I wouldn’t keep praising myself the whole time I was doing it. I might even cherish that memory for decades after the fact.

I sniff the air around it a few more times and touch the tree. Surrounding it is an array of small boxes packed up in cute wrapping paper with reindeer and all that.

“Are you watching?” I turn toward the ceiling, asking with great suspicion.

No answer comes, so with a groan filled with annoyance, I sit down and start opening the boxes to reveal the items I saved from the Ancient Armory before Diligence blew it up.

Prototype Armament Core (Mid Arcane) - An incomplete resonance engine intended for direct item integration. Its shell encloses a tri-layered rotation chamber where condensed mana can continuously

cycle; it has been designed for adaptive item merging. When embedded in compatible equipment, it enhances output and reduces mana loss during use. The unstable cycle generates amplified resonance and massive internal stress, forcing the Core to regulate itself through momentary energy discharges. This item is classified as unfinished.

Memory Imprint Stone (Mid Arcane) -A mnemonic crystal engineered to copy and mimic structured consciousness wavelengths. The stone contains an imperfect copy of a memory weave suspended in permanent stasis. Each weave carries trace sequences of knowledge locked beneath layered encryption that resists both extraction and erasure. The imprint remains self-contained, constantly replaying to preserve data integrity. Made as an experiment for an Ego weapon, this item is classified as unfinished.

Harmonic Material Alloy (Low Arcane) -Residual metallic shards recovered from failed item assemblies. The piece retains partial inscription imprints. When exposed to mana, the fragments emit faint harmonic vibrations and attempt incomplete alignment to the original item's structure. The alloy composition resists corrosion, extreme temperature, and decay, remaining semi-active despite centuries of dormancy.

Binding Resonant Threads (Mid Arcane) -Filaments composed of strands of a mana-responsive alloy, intertwined with crystalline nodes. The threads can establish harmonic synchronization through micro-oscillation, allowing high-speed information and mana transfer. Their internal structure reacts dynamically to external stress, tightening and reinforcing at varying oscillations.

And lastly, the main item. The tiny red mana stone I got from the pillar at the last moment.

Red Heartstone (Upper Arcane) - When completed, it can be bonded to a user through their blood. A self-optimizing inscription array construct sealed within a heartstone frame containing personality circuitry. Its sub-layers of arrays alternate between node compression and expansion, producing rhythmic surges that resonate in a way that mimics a living mind. When completed, it may be converted into the Ego Core of an item.

In a way, this could be thought of as Calvorn Junior, but the most important piece is missing, the piece meant to "awaken" it. But that's a problem for the future. For now, it's an extremely fascinating item that I'm sure is far more valuable than its rarity implies. Damn, even unfinished, it's Upper Arcane. Once completed and set into a proper item, it could be great.

There are a few more items, though these are definitely the best catch. They'll give me months of work, experimentation, and knowledge to apply to my skills.

I learned long ago that there's a clear overlap between Mana Manipulation and the circuits I etch into items. Someone might call me a madman or a dumbass for thinking that, but what do they know? My level in [Mana Manipulation] is proof that it works for me.

Might not work for others, but that's not my problem.

Anyway.

Beautiful.

Very nice.

Good.

Nothing's missing. I counted all the items while Greed wasn't looking, as it lay on the floor in her office. Just in case she tried to steal some.

MINE. ALL THE LOOT IS MINE.

Screw Diligence or whatever, too.

Now, what to do with all this? I'm sure I could sell some of the items, but looking at the quality, I might not. Each item is at the peak of its tier, and none of them can be found in the system shop.

So the options are to sell them to the locals or one of the guilds. I bet they would go for a lot of shards, being the remains of experiments undertaken by an Absolute from long ago as prototypes for Ego items and cores. The people around here really seem to like that kind of artificial bond. The right person might even buy them all as antiques. I bet some of these things are really old.

I could probably throw a few into an auction. I'm sure they have auctions here. Or I could use them to make something and sell that instead, create some abomination of an item for myself, or hand it off to Group Four.

I'll definitely keep a few batteries for Maya. With their capacity and some time to store mana, she could make something truly cool with her [Armament]. As for me, I'd rather store mana inside my halo or stop being a lazy ass and actually maintain the crown's shape for longer than just showing it off at parties.

I bet I can do it if I try. It'll just take more mental exercises. I love mental exercises, especially the kind where my head spins, my vision blurs, and it feels like someone is stabbing me in the brain. It's one of my favorite things ever.

All things considered, it's been confirmed that the place I visited was likely where the Wraith made Calvorn, and he must have had a reason to tie such a large portion of his power to it. And I'm sure I'll get it out of the memory stone eventually.

There must be a major advantage behind it, considering how huge the disadvantages are. Maybe it was just what he had to do while trying to become nearly immortal and gain the ability to jump from body to body?

It's like Sauron tying his power to a ring only for some furry-footed vyssari to find and throw it into a volcano. Would the Wraith die if Brich and Crimson Forge destroyed Calvorn? Is the Wraith even alive after what Chris did to him? Did he absorb him? Or did he just trap him inside that fancy figure he keeps floating above him?

Some of these questions will need to be answered at some point.

Then there are still the blueprints the crafty guy made for me in the Academy over the course of those loops, the ones Sophie helped me with. A side project, sure, but not something I've forgotten about, and some of the items here could be useful for that, so they can probably stay. Actually, I can leave them here and should try to contact Brich to trade with Crimson Forge and have them help me improve the designs.

I know for sure I'm not giving them prototypes of Calvorn or any information on the Wraith's ego sword experiments. I also know I won't tie my own power to such an item. But I'm very, very curious to see if I

could make an ego weapon of my own. Who wouldn't want a talking sword? Doesn't a proper adventure just scream for that kind of thing? The personality would have to be better than Calvorn's, and I still have no idea how, but it's been done before, so it can certainly be done again.

Even looking at these prototypes, I can tell I could finish some of them, turning them into proper mid arcane items, maybe even upper arcane with enough effort. There are like two dozen different versions of these prototypes here.

Or I could smelt down the materials and create something truly massive. Maybe a huge suit of power armor like the lumoran Champion Feroy from the seventh floor.

So many options, so little time.

There's my long-awaited minion time, the Beyond quest on her planet, then the fifth floor, where Nyssa will probably be dragging me to soon.

Then there's whatever weird ass event Thane and the Ruler of Humility have managed to cook up.

After that comes the tournament pitting us against another planet's tutorial, where Christoph will probably show up too.

All in a span of two to three months.

Leaving my Christmas gifts where they lie, I take myself outside the house and stop for a moment as an interesting thought hits me. This is my property, a house I own in some weird alien city with a lame name, light-years away from the planet I was born on and spent twenty-one years growing up on. Yet this is my house, as strange as that sounds. Well, at least for a few more years.

I look it over, the copper gate, the trees poking out behind it, and the two-story house nestled against the rock. Not that bad. Not bad at all.

And don't I also have a job now, working for a guild or corporation, one of the biggest ones around?

I shake my head to stop these thoughts, but they keep coming anyway. I even have a dog, coworkers, HR breathing down my neck whenever I screw up, and people trying to poach me from my current corporation. And by poaching, I mean kidnapping. Must be some deep rooted Beyond tradition or something.

Add healthcare in the form of that weirdo catboy, and it all makes a twisted sort of sense.

Still thinking about it against my will, I reach the headquarters of the Primordial Knights. Entering the hall, I find Weslin resting in the lounge alone, reading some kind of report or maybe a new study on mana, he loves that kind of stuff.

Surprisingly, he isn't bald anymore. Very short white hair has started growing from his formerly bare scalp, and he doesn't seem to be shaving it off anymore. Even his eyes have a faint red tint to them now.

I notice it, he notices that I've noticed it, but both of us ignore it like the manly men we are. The kind that would rather repress every emotion until they were lying on their deathbed instead of talking about feelings, the kind of men who can see each other for years, greet each other, talk, share drinks, and yet still never learn each other's names, both terrified to ask after so long, just waiting, praying that some random person will say the name out loud so they can finally know, the kind who will communicate entire life stories through nods and grunts, who think eye contact is a marriage proposal, who'd rather wrestle a bear than admit they're friends, who hurl insults at each other that most people would kill them for, and who will die on the hill of "it's not that deep bro" even when it very obviously is.

Sitting down next to him, I summon a set of evil orbs like always and start training with them. Even after all this time, they're still a challenge as I continue modifying them closer and closer to their original, nastiest version.

Out of nowhere, Weslin glances my way.

"You and Malika... are you interested in her?" he asks, something that makes all my thoughts vanish before they finally reboot, confirming I didn't mishear.

Weslin doesn't even blink as I turn to him.

“Weslin, you dog.”

“Oh, shut up, rookie. So?”

“Not interested in her. Not even a little.”

“Got it,” he says, and goes back to reading.

Later that day, I inform Nyssa about my Beyond quest and that it should take a week. She just wishes me luck, saying she’ll soon be heading to the fifth floor and will be there to meet me after I return.

I don’t know if she’s simply not in a hurry or if she felt how badly I wanted to go on this quest. Maybe it was the one-hour speech I gave her about my minion and our adventures together while praising her non-stop.

Either way, it worked out.

As Greed said, a portal appears right on time at my house. Just one step, and I’ll be on the planet where my minion has been living with her gang of delinquents. It reminds me that I probably should’ve asked what this quest was actually about, and that Greed probably should’ve told me.

But... my minion. Does the quest really matter that much? I just need to guard one asshole along with another asshole.

Before stepping through, I open my status to check my Absolute Candidate quest.

A time limit is set to complete the objectives within one year of the quest being given. However, early completion will grant earlier access to the advantages tied to the title.

Your quest objectives are as follows:

- Raise the skill [Mana Manipulation] to Level 75
- Channel 50,000 stat points worth of mana within one second without any external assistance
- Confront a Champion level being without any of its power diminished, alone, for a duration of ten seconds

The quest is so easy, I suspect Lissandra might have given it out.

Fuck.

Closing the window, I grab my baggage and the items I've been wanting to study, even during the quest, then step through the portal as it sends me somewhere impossibly far away.

I appear in a fancy room smelling of a perfume that's probably more expensive than some buildings I've seen. Looking out the window, I see the city in the distance and the vast garden surrounding us, and realize I'm inside some kind of large manor.

Lastly, I glance at the two assholes I mentioned earlier.

A widely smiling Lily and Savant, who meets my gaze for a second, then turns aside as if I weren't there.

Chapter 716: Mythical being

"Your attention, please," the other person waiting in the room calls out. An older woman, sitting on the sofa with some sort of drink on the small table nearby.

She's dressed herself up very well, in the kind of clothes that surely must take half an hour to put on, even with the help of two or three maidservants. Her gray hair is carefully styled up into a sort of bun with wavy hair by her sides, and she has plenty of jewelry as well.

Oh, and she's also a Champion.

I don't even factor in my Handler's advice that the people giving Beyond Quests tend to be Champions, Absolutes, and the scions of powerful families, but also because of the strength I can feel radiating from her.

Lastly, I take note of a red velvet pillow on the sofa next to her. Woven through with golden threads that look softer than a cloud on a sunny day. And on said pillow lounges an animal, observing us with an intelligent gleam in its eyes.

It looks a bit like a fennec fox, but it has six long legs and demonic looking horns growing from its forehead that bend toward the back of its head. Its fur is pure white and well groomed, and the animal looks the very picture of slim elegance.

The fox wears an embroidered red vest tailored for its six legs to fit through. And damn if that fox wouldn't be insanely cute if not for the look it's been giving me. For some reason, it pisses me off. Extremely.

Wait a moment. This place, this woman, it looks like a noble woman and her manor, plus a pet.

Is... is this maybe one of the mythical noble ladies' pets I have heard so much about? During all these days of training under Lissandra, only to be compared to the pets noble ladies of Eladore used to have?

The woman, after getting our attention, begins to speak, "Good, now that I have your attention, I will inform you about what will happen next." The way she talks makes it obvious she is used to having all the authority in a given room.

"Firstly, I'm glad there are no demons among you. I specifically requested humans, but sometimes Handlers forget 'details' like these and send whatever brute they happen to have on hand. Secondly, each of you should be quite capable in your own right, and at first glance, it would seem that, in this regard, I have not been lied to."

The fox quietly turns to her, to which the woman reaches her hand and absentmindedly starts scratching its head, causing the fox to let out a deep purr-like noise I can feel in my chest, even from where I'm standing.

"I'm Magistra Elaren Corin of the Thornehall," the woman says, "and this is Albaris Fen'Thane Vel Corin Del Vassel en Lys Aster Valcour Miradine. I realize that for people like you, his name might be a handful, so just Fen will suffice." She pauses as if looking for a reaction, and I nod, with Lily looking at me for the reaction before copying me and quickly nodding.

Only Savant speaks in a polite voice, "Understood, we will keep that in mind."

"Very well," Magistra Elaren says, "I'm sure you have been informed by your Handlers, so I won't repeat myself. Miss Lily can start with her job tomorrow, and the two of you will be guarding her, as was required by her Handler. I expect a job well-done, and if I'm satisfied with the result, I won't hold back from showing my satisfaction through improved rewards and-"

She pauses as Fen stands up and stretches his six legs before yawning and showing a set of needle-sharp teeth. Then he moves playfully, jumping onto the floor. Suddenly, his movements shift, and he darts forward in a burst of speed. Before I realize it, he has climbed his way onto my back, with his front paws over my shoulder and his head next to my right ear.

I stop myself from reacting as I hear him sniff at me while letting out a series of cute squeaky barks. I feel his cold, tiny nose touch my ear and neck as the little animal examines me.

But out of nowhere, Fen freezes, whimpers once, and jumps off before moving, just as quickly as before, to hide behind his owner with only his head poking out. His ears are flattened in full airplane mode, and he bares his teeth, growling at me.

"Albaris Fen'Thane Vel Corin Del Vassel en Lys Aster Valcour Miradine, what are you doing?" she asks in a measured voice.

That makes Fen turn from me to her, barking a few times in a drawn-out, whining tone, like he's airing a list of injustices only she could possibly fix. Elaren listens for a moment, unimpressed, before shrugging it off.

"So what if he's been marked? Have you forgotten your education? What is this unpleasant behaviour?"

Fen lets out a few more longer barks, which makes her look at me. Seeing his owner look at me, the little fennec fox barks a few more quick times before she turns back to him and very gently taps him on the head. It shuts him up in an instant, and a blank expression of shock appears on his face as if he'd never experienced something like this in his life.

"I apologize for him. He is still very young and temperamental, which shows in his inelegant behavior toward new people." Elaren looks at all of us before locking her eyes on me. "You have been marked by a truly great beast, it would seem, and it has frightened my dear Fen, but that is no excuse. As his bond, I'm responsible for his behavior."

"It's fine," I say.

"Thank you for your understanding. Now then, everything has been said, and the three of you can leave. My butler will wait for you outside and lead you to your residence." She gestures while taking a cup from the table and sipping from it as if this whole thing never happened.

Savant says something polite in response before we head toward the door. Before exiting, I turn around and see Fen still looking at me with a furrowed brow and his teeth slightly bared.

How shameless, after talking shit about me to his owner.

Just before leaving and after making sure Elaren isn't looking, I show the little fox a middle finger.

The noble lady's pet doesn't know the gesture, of course, but he seems to understand what it means. He narrows his eyes, his ears flatten, and he watches me like a spoiled, angry brat until the door closes.

The butler is waiting outside and greets us politely, but I let Savant talk while I immediately start working. A halo forms over my head, and all my overflowing mana starts to flow into it. I feel like it's not enough, so I reach toward my Ignition Heart to add to it, then realize where we are and decide to wait until we reach our rooms to continue.

I end up waiting longer than I expect, because instead of getting rooms, we find ourselves exiting the manor and taking a walk half a mile through a beautiful garden with paths framed by fruit trees and delicate flowers until we reach a smaller manor.

Our “residence.” The entire place has apparently been set aside just for the three of us.

Well, I’ve seen better for sure, phe. This is nothing.

I start gathering mana right away, converting my thermal energy in the process. Though I don’t push it too far since part of my mind needs to keep scanning the area and the countless defensive arrays surrounding the place, but I keep it within my limits. Not enough to seem threatening, and not too little either. There’s a part of my newest quest I think I should be able to complete during this Beyond Quest.

I’m not going to lie, I’m really excited to see how much mana I can channel in one second. I bet it’s much more than that lame quest requires.

Plus.

I have Earth’s best healer with me right now. The system couldn’t make it fucking easier even if it tried.

“Nat, you have that creepy expression you always get before you start blowing things up,” Lily says, tugging on my sleeve.

Savant is already heading upstairs, probably to reserve the best room for himself. What a jerk.

“Lily, I must assure you that’s not true.”

“It’s not?”

“I always want to blow up something, most of the time myself as well, so that would logically mean I should have the same expression all the time. And yet, as you yourself said, the expression just formed on my face.”

“Oh! That makes sense somehow!”

"Right? I think an apology is in order... Lady Healer Lily," I tease her.

Not going down without a fight, she snickers. "I apologize for coming to such a terrible conclusion. You've never given me reason to doubt you over the nine floors of the tutorial in these nearly three years here."

"Good. How are the others?" I ask.

Lily jumps onto the couch nearby and lies down, stretching her legs across it, while I plop into the armchair beside her.

"Tess, Leticia, Luna, Jean, Spacepup, and I have been making pretty good progress on the third floor. We just started with some basic information gathering, you know, Tess, but soon we might start work on the outpost. It's a bit more difficult without a guild, but we should still manage to get to the fourth floor fairly soon."

"Want me to pull some strings?"

"Sure! I don't think the others would mind. We were also joined by Tacita for a bit before she left, as she always does."

"No sightings of the other Earth attendees?" I ask.

"Not so far. Tess said we're lucky that all of us have already met and that the third floor is so huge. Did you know that a guild called Silent Veil tried to hire Tess? They have a guy by the name of Lyraen working for them, he's apparently one of the strongest people in the tutorial!"

"Lily, this isn't a competition, and Lyraen is a ladies' man if you must know. Real creep, he already has like twenty wives or something like that. Anyway, I doubt Silent Veil's the only one offering you positions. What about you?"

“Oh, not at all, but that’s the one she took the most interest in! I think Frontier, the one Soph joined, gave Tess an offer too, and so did Astral Brotherhood. They all seem to like that she can snipe monsters stronger than herself across half a country or something.”

“Such an inelegant way to fight, right?” I mimic Magistra’s tone. “Close-range battles are much more enjoyable, aren’t they?”

“Yup!” she says with a cheerful nod. “I think every guild in the top twenty has sent me an offer since I got that Healer certification Tess told me to pick up.”

“Lily, why are you looking so smug?”

“I’m not smug.”

“You’re the smuggest little jerk I’ve ever seen.”

“I’m not smug. Anyway, Bloodline wants Jean, and Crimson Forge gave Leticia and Luna an offer. Apparently, they want to start making items for bonds and pets.”

“Yeah, Luna should read Crimson Forge’s contract very carefully. I wouldn’t leave that up to Leticia.”

“I’ll pass that on to her for sure.”

“Good. Lastly, just in case, if it turns out to be necessary, we’ll be throwing this quest into the crapper.”

“We will?”

“Yup, this is my minion’s planet.”

“Minion!”

“Yes, yes, and Lily, I’m desperate. I’ve heard she’s gotten herself caught up in some bad company, running around with a gang of delinquents that have surely been having a bad influence on her, and going on some sort of suspicious adventures. Fighting demon lords, taking out old rivals, talking daggers, that kind of stuff. And she used to be so cute...”

“She always was a bit of a delinquent.”

“...when she was younger. I don’t know what happened to her and...”

“I think you made it worse.”

“...what’ll I do about that? Wait what?”

“What?”

“What?”

“Do you think she’s watching us?” Lily asks, changing the subject, as I remain victorious.

“The Magistra?” I ask.

“Or maybe the fox.”

“Likely both. One’s judging, the other’s plotting.”

“Which is which?”

“Yes.”

Chapter 717: What’s this quest about?

It is getting darker, and I'm losing my energy at a much higher rate as I listen to Lily, who keeps talking excitedly about her training. That and a dozen other things she quickly chirps about.

For example, the ninth floor of the tutorial known as The Pit, which they've come to suspect is something like a trashcan. A place where multiple planets dump the bodies of huge Champion grade monsters or higher that they either can't or don't want to deal with.

Imagine someone killing a beast five times the size of Godzilla that was in the process of attacking their country. A normal person would probably find themselves getting a bit excited. Just think of the materials, the knowledge you could gain from the experiments alone.

You might even start examining the body after the beast dies, and all of a sudden, you have thousands of people building a small city nearby to begin working on the corpse. Then, a few days later, those same people start dying. Their teeth start falling out, they start coughing blood, and their hair starts thinning.

Maybe you knew it would happen and used people you could afford to lose to gain even a little bit of extra knowledge and materials. Maybe you're just that kind of dickhead.

Or maybe you didn't know. You did your due diligence, checked the monster for mana radiation, and all that kind of stuff. You gave your people equipment and set up processes to ensure that only people with a certain number of stats invested in constitution could get in.

And yet, they still get sick.

You don't give up right away. You send in stronger people. You can't send your healers, since those jerks tend to have weak constitution themselves, and there might only be a few dozen on the whole planet. So maybe you send the disciples of your Champions, or even the Champions themselves, if you happen to be strong enough to order them around. Or maybe you have your crafters prepare a set of fancy suits and equipment.

And so it continues. This time it takes a few weeks longer, but people start feeling ill again. Everyone except the Champion, and now only the Champion remains.

So you say, fuck it, and beg your Absolute to get rid of that overgrown lizard fuck's body.

At least that's how I'd imagine it goes.

Anyway, the Pit seems to have been one such dumping ground for thousands of years—at least from what group four's managed to learn from the demon natives. Either to get rid of things or for some purpose we don't yet know.

It makes me a bit more curious about the floor I haven't gotten to spend much time on because of my obligations in Beyond. Hearing all this, I should probably go there... sometime... after the tournament or something, so sometime in the next three or four months.

I also bet that the native demon whose body Kindness used to talk to me and Lily was a future Ruler or someone important. I'm a pessimist at hearts so I'm sure it has to be something like that.

These thoughts keep me occupied enough to endure Lily's one-sided conversation, but the least I can do is to pay some attention, asking a question or two once in a while. I don't even try to tune it out and continue listening to her words. It would be too rude to ignore someone who talks so eagerly about things that interest them and make them happy.

Even I'm not that evil.

But through it all, I hear something else. A squeaky, bratty, whiny, howling from outside our residence. Even though it's distant and not really that loud, thanks to my kinetic senses, I can still feel the faint vibrations trembling through the air and against my chest. Possibly all being directed at me, though some means I can't properly sense yet. A noble lady's pet, indeed.

The barking and howling have been going on since it started getting dark, so for a few hours now. It just keeps moving in circles around the residence, likely due to whatever predatory instincts that spoiled beast seems to have awakened. RANÔBÊs

I know who it is, of course, and I'm willing to bet ten points worth of mana on it. I would recognize that complain-y, pathetic bark turned howl anywhere.

It's the noble lady's pet Albacore Fish-Tank Velcro Del Taco en Lice Asteroid Vacuum Mandoline, also known as Fen.

I just knew that little asshole didn't like me, and now he's feeling jealous because he sensed Biscuit's greatness on me. Well, that feeling seems to be mutual, which surprises me a bit. I can't help but wonder if my connection with Biscuit is part of what's making me dislike that thing.

"Give me a moment." I put my hand on Lily's shoulder to make her stop talking as I stand up and head toward the terrace glass door. I open it, which causes the squeaky barks to grow even louder.

Annoyed with the constant barking, I shout into the night, "Are you just going to keep barking out there, you little bitch!? Come here and face me like a man!"

"Rhaff-Rhaff!" the squeaky bark yips louder than before. "Raaoww-Yap-Yap!"

"Fuck you too!" I shout back.

"Raaoooooooooww!"

I shut the door again before turning to Lily. "Can you believe that shit?"

"Do you mean you being brought to the point where you seem ready to start barking back at him?" She puts her hands behind her back as she teases me. Lately, she's been doing that quite often, not just to me but to others in the group, too. It would seem Lily's just playful like that.

Left with no other choice, I reach out and pinch her nose, but instead of letting go after a moment, I hold it and stare into her eyes.

"I cad hold by breaff for quide a while, so good lug there," she says, her voice squashed and nasal.

I don't say anything. I just keep staring at her the same way she looks at me.

For a while, she holds herself together well and doesn't break eye contact or move an inch. Only when Savant comes downstairs and stops for a second to look at us does she almost break eye contact. Savant doesn't say anything and walks away, probably searching for snacks.

"Eashy, I can do id all day!" Lily repeats, but I hear a weakness in her voice, almost like those words are meant more for herself than they are for me.

So I stay quiet even now, and a minute passes. Then I start curling my lips into a smile. I don't make it big or show my teeth. I just lift the corners slightly and tilt my head, letting a few strands of hair fall over my forehead.

"What's wrong, Lily?" I ask, making my voice softer and letting the smile echo in my tone as I lean slightly closer. "Why is your heart beating so fast?"

Her body tenses before she flicks my arm away and turns around to hide her face.

Once again, triumphant over a foe foolish enough to underestimate me, I lift my chest with pride and give the back of her knee a teasing kick with the tip of my shoe. I hope for her to buckle at least a little bit, but of course, her body is stupidly strong, so it doesn't move at all.

Still pleased with the teasing, I use [Focus] to filter out the annoying barks from outside, then head off to follow Savant. I find him in the kitchen cutting some fruit on the table, and taking a piece to smell before biting into it.

"So, what's this quest about?" I ask directly.

His chewing slows down, and then it stops as he makes an expression like he lost the will to enjoy the food, and the taste has turned sour for him.

"We have to protect your healer while she seeks out the cause of the epidemic that's making people in the area sick, and a way to get rid of it. The area has been cut off from the rest of the fief by quarantine wards, so no one else can enter or leave. We, however, have been granted permission to follow her inside. Apparently, the illness spreads fast and is highly contagious, and the local guards have already

fallen ill. They believe it to be magical in nature, so she'll be examining both the sick and the land itself for signs of corruption. Our main task is to make sure nothing happens to her while she works," he says.

"Oh, so we'll get the illness as well?"

"Possibly."

"That sucks. Why didn't they use their own healers?" I ask him.

"They think it's the work of one of their own healers, cooperating with an enemy kingdom. If they hadn't stopped it and sealed off the area, that illness would have already spread across the entire kingdom, so it's quite serious. Before taking drastic measures or paying out what's likely to be a good chunk of their treasury to hire this world's healers guild, they decided to give the attendees a try. They likely heard about an incredibly talented healer currently running through the tutorial."

That said, the super talented healer enters the kitchen as well, already back to her usual self and seemingly unaffected. I can only praise her quick recovery from the damage. She's truly getting powerful.

"My handler's been trying to get me noticed and find good quests for me, and this one really sounded great. I had no idea I'd get you and Nat, though," she says as she pulls a bar stool closer and sits beside me. "But I don't mind it at all!"

Savant keeps slicing the fruit he tasted earlier, his knife moving with careful precision across the wooden board. Each piece is thin enough to nearly see through, the pale fruit glistening as he arranges the slices neatly on a plate. When he's satisfied with the surprisingly beautiful pattern, he slides the plate toward us without a word, with the faint scent of the fruit filling the air.

For himself, he doesn't bother with presentation at all. He simply cuts another fruit in half, wipes the blade on the towel, and takes a slow bite, juice running down his thumb as he chews thoughtfully.

He says, "We don't have many details about the illness yet, and so far it doesn't seem that dangerous for people above level one hundred, but they're worried it might be designed to grow more dangerous, once it spreads a bit wider. It affects both demons and humans, but each in a slightly different way.

There's a rumor it originated from humans, and that it's designed to mutate over time to specifically kill demons, so that's been causing a lot of trouble as well."

I take a paper-thin slice of fruit and put it in my mouth. It almost melts, tasting like a mix of banana and mango. With a hint of cinnamon to top it all off.

"Do you know how to cure an epidemic level virus or something?" I ask Lily, who's already started stuffing her mouth so fast that Savant's started cutting another plate of fruit just for her.

Lily nods energetically. "I've known about the quest for about a week or so, and my Handler gave me a mana stone to study for it. I worked on it ten hours a day. Then he asked a Local healer to give me a test, and I did that too. And I think I probably would've been fine even without studying! It wasn't even that difficult."

Instead of listening to her, I glance at Savant, who senses it and looks up from the cutting board. "It's very difficult," he says flatly.

"It was easy, though," Lily insists.

"Your delusions aside," I say to her, "is this illness known to affect minions as well?"

"Nat, sorry to tell you, but minions aren't their own species."

"How preposterous!"

That makes Lily giggle. "So you plan on finding Vega first?"

"Her and her gang." I nod, growing more serious. "I'm getting this feeling that my handler didn't send me here just to meet her, so much as because she might be in trouble."

Chapter 718: Into the Quarantine

Even though I act nonchalant in front of my teammates, I'm a bit worried. Vega can be reckless at times, and taking all the information into account, she should be in the locked down area, so she's quite possibly being affected by the illness as well.

If what I think is true, and Greed somehow pulled strings to get Lily and me here to help her, I'll be thankful for that, no matter her intention. It doesn't even matter if it's a blatant attempt to make me grateful to her and easier to manipulate. Even after thinking that over, I will just allow it.

And if I'm right, and my minion is out there, ill and possibly set to die, there will be hell to pay for whoever orchestrated it.

I will erase every atom of the fucker responsible for it from the surface of this planet.

We stay up the rest of the night, each of us making our own preparations. I keep storing mana, Lily draws her healing marks for us, and continues working on her pair of bone axes, though at least she's made them a reasonable size this time instead of monstrosities taller than her.

Each new axe, grown from her super-tough, [Disintegration]-conductive bone, has a handle as long as my forearm with a one-sided blade at the top, plain in shape. The problem is that for some reason, they weigh half as much as me, if not more, each. Seeing her swing both simultaneously makes me realize once again that she could, like, seriously throw me around in much the same way.

Lastly, Savant does whatever Savant does. He changes into the clothes he found in his room at the residence, wearing the local style. With no visible weapons on his person, which only makes me wonder what he did with the Sword of Aeons, how he absorbed it, whether he can un-absorb it to use directly.

His [Absorption] is likely close to level 70 or higher, quite possibly, which makes me wonder if he has something huge stored away, ready to release as needed, perhaps something he's had stored away for months.

Hell, he might later be able to store things for years. Then there's the question of whether he can absorb items and take them out later, more or less making himself a knockoff version of a Spatial Cache.

Inside the manor, we're told to wait in the pretty room with the wall that's been entirely replaced with a sculpted mana barrier, offering a view into the quiet morning garden.

Sitting here over our breakfast, I catch myself glancing toward the stairway that leads to the second floor every now and then, and for the third time, I finally catch that presence there.

The noble lady's pet, Fen, lies there sneakily on his belly, head pressed to the wooden floor, staring through the railing in my direction. This time, he doesn't skitter away to hide, he holds my gaze, reveals tiny sharp teeth, and lets his whiskers twitch.

All that bratty effort to look dangerous is ruined by the cute, pale blue vest with golden threads that he's wearing.

I decide to ignore him, feeling myself get annoyed as they start bringing more food and drinks, telling us our guide will come to us in five minutes. Knowing that making things more complicated would only slow them down, I endure and eat some of the food, even taking time to have them pack me some dried fruit, snacks, and drinks. Seeing how helpful they are trying to be, I then ask them multiple times for a bag I could put on my back to carry it all.

The guide appears exactly five minutes later. A young, somewhat handsome, and confident looking man in sleek clothes who greets Lily first, staring at her with eyes wide open. He masks that blunder with a charming smile before barely greeting both me and Savant, almost unable to take his eyes off her.

After throwing a few compliments her way as well as multiple charming smiles, he says, "It is a pleasure to meet you all. I'm Ennith, and I will be your guide until we reach the containment zone, where I will leave you to continue on your own. Unfortunately," he adds with a smile aimed at Lily.

Lily smiles back politely and nods, "Thank you, Ennith. Can I tell you something?"

"Please do, beautiful Lady Healer!"

"I'm not interested in you at all, and if you try to flirt with me further, I will hurt you. Not in the sense of breaking your heart or something silly like that. I will break your arm."

"Huh..." He manages the sound barely, then quickly regains composure. The smile he gives after is sorer, less enthusiastic over the few seconds, as if he's trying to figure out if she is joking before he pushes out of himself. "Understood, Lady Healer. Shall we go now?"

"Please," Lily gestures.

As we walk through the house behind Ennith, I talk to Lily, not caring if the guy might hear, "Breaking bones, how barbaric, and inelegant of you."

Lily shrugs, "You would be surprised how many people keep trying things like that with me. I seem to be very popular. Some are probably doing it because I'm a healer, others because I'm pretty. I'm pretty, right?" she asks, looking up to me with her big eyes.

"I guess. With [Plastic Surgery] and all that, it would be weird if you weren't."

"I only made the tiniest of modifications! I liked how I looked before, and I was pretty on the first floor too!"

"Just a brat, sometimes even a crybaby, then and now. So, is breaking bones really your best strategy?"

Lily shakes her head at the first part of my sentence but ignores it. "Yeah, even if that person is slightly important, they don't punish me for it at all. Me being a healer and all that stuff."

"Some people surely have it nice."

"I like being spoiled, you know. I didn't get much chance to enjoy it before the tutorial."

"Lily."

"Yes?"

"It's damn sad when you say you're more spoiled in Hell difficulty than you were back on Earth. You realize that, right?"

"But aren't most of us the same?" she smiles and points at me. "You," then back at herself, "me, Tess, Dennis and Aaron, Min-Jae, Maya, Sophie, and Izzy."

"Congratulations on doxing our entire group."

"It's fine! I'm sure Savi didn't have it exactly nice either, right?" she asks while turning to the man.

The most cowardly man in existence glances our way before turning away with a simple, "I'm fine either way. And please don't call me Savi."

"But Nat does it all the time."

"One more reason not to do it. But whatever," Savi says, already giving up.

Following the suspiciously quiet Ennith, we head toward the warded-off area. Twice, we use teleportation arrays inside circular buildings surrounded by plenty of guards. Each requires multiple checks that hold us for a while. Between the teleports we also run, though we slow down a little to match Ennith's pace as he leads us.

I have a strong suspicion he carries a mark that'll allow the Magistra to switch places with him in the same way the twins can switch places with each other. The mana wavelengths feel kind of similar. That would also explain why she didn't send anyone stronger, just in case we decided to cause trouble. Even so, I'm sure there will be stronger people guarding the place we're heading to.

The longer we travel, the more used to the area I become. Plenty of planets I've visited in the tutorial had common similarities to Earth, and this one does too. There's a single sun, a blue sky, normal-colored clouds, and all that. Otherwise, the countryside has barely any mountains, only hills of different sizes with large boulders scattered here and there.

The biggest difference is the color of the ground, which is usually a strange mix of deep orange with a hint of red. Like stones you'd see somewhere in a desert, though it clearly isn't, there's too much greenery for that. Well, maybe greenery isn't the right word. Most of the flora here is tall, pastel-yellow grass that seems to cover nearly the entirety of the area, with sparse trees that have white trunks and red leaves scattered among them.

As familiar as this planet feels, those little things make it stand out, striking, exotic even. I find myself enjoying the change of scenery and grow to like it more over time. It's a nice sight, that yellow grass swaying and rippling like waves under the wind. It gives off that perfect fantasy adventure feeling.

As we get closer to our goal, our guide starts talking more. "Once inside, you won't be allowed to leave until your Beyond quest is complete. The other people inside are the same. They won't be able to leave either. Lady Corin will personally come to check on you near the end of your quest, and until then, the rest is up to you. You carry her mark, and our people inside are trained to locate it even if you can't feel it, so they will offer you help or ask the same in turn."

While he says this, I stare at him blankly. Yet another mark. This is getting out of hand.

Ennith, unaware, patiently continues while we slow down to a walk. "The area currently quarantined is fifty square miles, including three villages, each with around eight hundred people, and a small city of five thousand. There should be no noticeable groups of monsters, and only one dungeon, graded as category one."

"How does that rank compare to the others?" Savant asks, voicing what I was wondering too.

Ennith answers quickly, "It's the lowest category. The ranks go from category one to category seven, with seven being the kind of place where even Champions have been known to die. The dungeon I mentioned wasn't cleared yet, and it was one of the first places we examined when the illness started spreading. We found nothing strange about it."

"Understood," Savant nods.

"Not gonna ask him about dungeons?" I interrupt this time.

The way Savant looks at me almost seems sad. "Have you learned nothing at all?"

"I'm not at fault here. I bet even Lily doesn't know anything about dungeons."

"I know a lot! Tess gathered plenty of information and forced us all to learn about them!"

"You should be helping me, Lily."

"It's okay, I'll tell you everything later," she says, then turns to Ennith. "Are there any healers inside?"

He nods. "Two. They've been informed of your arrival and will do their best to assist you, Lady Healer."

"Good!"

Like that, we finally reach the border of the quarantine zone, triggering several alerts along the way, set up by someone much more skilled than the people approaching us, possibly by the Champion herself. The two men coming closer seem strong as well, probably close to level 400, judging by their speed.

Another round of introductions follows, more checks on us and Ennith, before we're finally led to the barrier. Before that, Ennith explains that only we may enter, since we have a pass, and the nobles who oversee this place have an agreement with Magistra to let us in. Anyone else who tries to enter may be killed on sight, and the other nobles would have no right to raise a complaint.

The barrier itself is invisible, covering the entirety of the fifty square mile area like a massive spherical dome. I also notice that it's been constructed to conserve mana, it's reactive, meaning it only activates fully upon detection. I can't see all the details, but I'm sure there are some nasty mechanisms hidden somewhere within it.

One thing is certain, it's far harder to leave than it is to get in. That much becomes clear as we pass through the temporary entrance the guards create for us, syncing together while pressing a key-shaped device to the barrier's surface and channeling specific mana fluctuations through it.

Ennith stays behind as the three of us step inside. From the outside, the barrier was transparent, but from within, it turns a pale red, bathing the entire area in its faint crimson hue.

The barrier blocks sound, yet I can see the guards, and Ennith start to panic as a white blur of movement charges between them just before the barrier closes again. A white furry blur flashes past us too, near impossible to follow with the naked eye, before it dives into the bushes and disappears into a small patch of nearby trees.

The guards and Ennith stare in shock at where it went, then at us, and I wish them good luck explaining this to the Magistra.

Chapter 719: In sync

Weapons of Mass Destruction

I only spend two seconds looking at the guards panicking behind the barrier before turning to Lily. “I’m going to look for Minion. I’ve tied a [Ley Line] to you so if anything happens, just pull on it and I’ll come to help.”

Before I fully lift into the air, she calls, “If she needs help, just teleport me there!”

I acknowledge it with a nod before boosting myself high into the air, then repeat the process a few more times to gather more speed as I head toward the highest point of the cupola. With my speed, it doesn’t take long. High up there, I reach for the mana inside my body to power a wave of perception that I send rippling out through the area in a single powerful pulse that encompasses the entirety of the fifty mile radius.

It is my first attempt at sending out such a wide area scan, but I use enough mana to make it work. The problem is the thousands of mana signatures I detect, as well as some stronger people inside who take notice and start trying to track me down.

I send another wave, which I modify on the spot, this time narrowing the search conditions even further after noticing the differences between all of the signatures. A big part of my mind in the background goes into overdrive and deep [Focus], and it combs through all of the results and their locations before the final result comes to me.

My mind snaps back into place, and I feel the strain it took, then I turn myself to fly in that direction. While I do, a smaller part of my mind is already sorting through ideas regarding the modifications I could be making to my wide area scans to make them more effective.

I detected Minion's weak mana signature in a small house on the edge of what I guess is one of three smaller villages. There are four more signatures there with her, too, likely her gang. But before I get close to the village, a man and a woman fly into the air, preventing me from going further.

They're wearing black uniforms, with a single small gem embedded in the middle of their foreheads, surrounded by faint inscriptions. It seems to serve the purpose of making their faces unrecognizable and disguising their true signatures. I only manage to see through it thanks to my Iris.

They seem to notice the Champion's mark on me, but still get in my way. "Please identify yourself," the man says.

His tone irks me, but I just say, "I'm here with the healer, both of us are here from the tutorial on a Beyond quest. Magistra Elaren probably informed you of our presence. Now get out of my way, I have to check on someone," I add.

He doesn't even blink and answers flatly, "I will ask you to allow us to perform a more thorough examination of the mark that's been placed on you. Magistra isn't aware of it yet, but we had intruders in the area who bore imitations of her marks in attempts to infiltrate."

"Okay, but later," I wave it off and push myself to fly between them, when a light flashes from him, and I reflexively raise my mana to deflect whatever he was trying to do.

My flight stops, and I lift my eyes back to him, which turn cold as he says, "I told you to stay put."

They both stare me down coldly, and I feel my patience run out right then and there.

Looking at him, and acting without hesitation, I raise my mana, and they do the same, trying to match my speed to activate their skills. But neither of them is even close, despite being at a level similar to, if not higher than mine.

In a split second, I channel and compress multiple times the mana they both have combined. Boosted by kinetic energy, two arrows made of black mana shoot toward them, easily tearing through any mana-based defenses and piercing the man's side and the woman's leg.

They both move to remove them but find their mana being sucked away, as their flight falters at the same time. In addition to that, the area drains of the pale red hue that fills this place within the barrier, and I disrupt their attempts at activating their skills. One after another, I observe them and break their efforts apart before they can activate.

As they fall toward the ground, I push them faster with bursts of kinetic energy until they hit the ground hard, tearing up the earth in a blast of dust and debris.

Not giving them another look, I boost myself again. In a few seconds, I reach the place where I sensed the signature. It turns out to be a small house that looks old, if still solid. I notice a few traps placed around and watch as one activates the moment I step in front of the door. A mana-based attack flashes toward my head, clashing against the mana I've raised in defense. A single pulse from me wipes out most of the other traps that've been placed nearby.

My hand stops halfway toward the knob in a moment of hesitation. After all, the signature I sensed from Vega felt so weak and sickly.

I push that thought away and open the door, only to be greeted by a blast of kinetic energy to the face. Using Lioren's Steelroot, I endure it and step into the room, saying, "I'm almost hurt, Minion. Such a terrible show of perception, failing to recognize your master. That's not very common even among minions."

Vega is the only person in the room standing. The rest, consisting of four other kids, are lying on the beds nearby, struggling to breathe and unconscious.

My minion's eyes are hazy, and sweat clings to her forehead, making her hair stick to her skin. Even so, she smiles. "That was a welcome for an intruder on private property."

Her voice is weak, and I can see she's barely standing. Still, she stays upright, gripping a dagger streaked with dried blood from her earlier fights. Wounds mark her body, too.

In some ways, her condition looks worse than any of the kids lying unconscious. Yet this small thing still stands tall, trying not to show any hint of weakness, but I can tell that the kinetic attack she hit me with must have drained her, especially in a state like this.

I pull on the line connecting me to Lily to give her a signal, and she pulls back, letting me know she's ready to be teleported to me.

"You should rest for a while, Vega," I tell her gently, taking a step closer.

She just looks at me stubbornly. "I have to take care of my minions, they're too dumb and weak to take care of themselves, and I'm responsible for them." Then her expression softens, sadness flickering across her face as her voice weakens to a whisper. "I know you're fake, just like before, and I'm hallucinating again. I just wish I could see you again, Master."

As she stands there, her body sways, held up by sheer willpower, but she seems to be running out if her fragile voice is anything to go by, "Am I really going to die like this?"

The sight reminds me how weak she's become and how terrible the past days must have been for her. Otherwise, Vega wouldn't be in a state like this. She wouldn't be talking like this.

A few steps bring me closer. I reach out and place my hand on top of her head before she can attack me. Frozen in surprise, she looks up at me with tired eyes and manages a small smile.

"So warm, just like Mas..." she starts to say, but I don't let her finish.

Using kinetic energy, I gently shake her, knocking her unconscious before she can fall on her own. I catch her body and lift her up, realizing that she's lost weight too. Her body is in a similar state to what it was when I saw her for the first time.

Finally, I pull on my [Ley Line] and teleport Lily to me. She appears and immediately looks around, spotting Vega in my arms, then rushes closer to place her hands on the young half-demon. Lily doesn't say a word. She focuses completely, channeling her healing mana into Vega to ease her symptoms, and then continues examining her for several minutes.

“It’s weird,” she finally says. “I’ll need more time, but I’ve already healed her. I’m just not sure if it’ll come back.”

“That much is fine for now. Thank you, Lily,” I tell her.

Leaving her behind, I step outside, lifting the second seal on my heart and generating more thermal energy, which I redistribute into mana and store in the halo above my head. I give up on form and focus purely on functionality, so I don’t shape it into a crown, and leave it in the form of a simple halo.

Turning toward the place where I met the Magistra’s people, I reach in that direction with a will that turns sharp and cold. Two projectiles made of black mana tear themselves out of the bodies of the man and the woman, and fly at high speed toward me until they come to an abrupt stop as if slamming into an unseen wall. The black projectiles swirl and melt together before forming into the shape of an orb of darkness.

A deep breath. The image of my disciple barely standing on her legs flashes in my mind, and I reach out and grab the black orb in my fist. The pressure around me rises as my passives and active skills activate together, and my eyes start burning inside their sockets.

I squeeze tighter, and a shockwave and a deep thump bursts through the area, kicking up dust, shaking the leaves of the nearby trees, and sending a ripple through the yellow grass.

When I open my hand, the black orb is gone. Instead, particles of mana hang in the air, sucked toward the spinning mana halo above my head.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 72 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 73]

[Accumulation - lvl 19 > Accumulation - lvl 20]

[Eclipse - lvl 50 > Eclipse - lvl 51]

[Eclipse - lvl 51 > Eclipse - lvl 52]

I take a step and appear in the air above the man and woman, right next to the mark I placed on them. They freeze in midair, held in place by my [Redistribution] and by the disruption working against their dwindling mana reserves. Taking my time, I circle around them and stop in front of their faces, letting their eyes move so they can see me clearly.

“You will bring every person working with you and Magistra Elaren to the place we met for the first time. You have one hour. After that, I will track you down,” I say, releasing my hold on them before teleporting again and reappearing inside the house. Lily is already laying an unconscious Vega on one of the beds and healing the other kids.

“Savant?” I ask her.

Glancing up, she says simply, “He walked off somewhere the moment you went looking for Vega.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter. We’ll find him later. Magistra seems to have her spec ops group here, too, and some other side has been sending in spies as well. Either Magistra doesn’t think we need to know, or that information hasn’t been reaching her. Either way, this situation might be more fucked up than we expected. In one hour, we’ll go meet those spies and get some information about what’s happening here.”

Lily nods, not letting this distract her.

While looking at Vega, who now seems more relaxed and finally seems to be sleeping properly, I think to myself out loud, “I usually like to take my time, gather information, and make preparations, but this time we’ll be more proactive right from the start. But tell me, do you care about this quest?”

Lily answers without hesitation, “Not at all, and you know that. Vega takes priority, so we’ll make sure she’s safe before this is all over.”

I knew she’d say that, but hearing it out loud makes me feel better.

“Good,” I say. “Then we’re in sync.”

Chapter 720: Guess who’s back, idiot!

Weapons of Mass Destruction

An hour later, Savant is still nowhere to be seen, doing whatever Savant does.

As I head alone toward the meeting spot, I notice a flash of white fur in the bushes as the noble lady's pet follows me. Fen doesn't howl or bark, just moves along quietly behind me. In a way, he almost looks like some spoiled youngest child who escaped his doting mother and is now exploring the outside world for the first time.

I'm just surprised the Magistra hasn't come to get him yet. Maybe she wants to punish him by leaving him on his own. Maybe she can't enter. That would be strange, though, since we could.

There's also the possibility that they're only trying to keep Champions out, maybe as some agreement between them and the demons. From what Vega's told me, this planet's Absolute is a demon, so it would make sense.

Or we've been lied to, and the illness can spread to Champions, too, and she doesn't want to risk it. And my paranoid mind keeps going, tossing up more possibilities one after another while I prepare in case there's a trap waiting for me.

But as far as I can sense, there is no trap, even though they are well prepared. Instead, a group of six people waits for me. Two more men with crystals in the middle of their foreheads, like the man and woman I met before, along with two women in white clothes, who I assume are healers.

"That's it? This is all of you?" I ask as I approach them.

"You haven't been informed of what to expect by the Magistra or her subordinates?" the man says suspiciously, showing no trace of the beating he took earlier.

"Maybe we were, maybe we weren't," I avoid answering, taking another step closer. "Go on, check your mark."

Instead of doing so himself, he gestures to the woman beside him. She steps forward while the rest of the group stays silent. The crystal on her forehead lights up, releasing intricate mana wavelengths that I see clearly through my eye trait, though they are invisible to normal sight.

It doesn't touch me, and I don't feel any senses spreading through the area. It looks more like it's reading something about me directly.

"At first glance, his mark seems original," the woman says, though she continues her work. "It was placed a day ago by the Magistra herself, most likely. There are no mistakes like those we've noticed with the intruders."

She keeps talking, her words meant for the rest of her group, but I keep watching her closely. Even though they try to hide it, I start noticing it, the same signs Vega had. They don't seem fully focused or comfortable in their own skin. Their body temperature is elevated. Vega and her group had that same drained color, pale skin, and faint blue veins visible underneath. To an extent, this group has that too. Only the healers seem to be exceptions.

Well, so much for the illness not affecting people above level 100 yet.

A minute later, the woman finally stops. "The mark is genuine."

"Thank you, Two," the man says before turning to the other two men. "Three and Four, continue your task. Two, and I will explain the situation."

The ones called Three and Four don't say a word. They just turn and move away immediately. Especially Four. His movement catches my attention. He's trying to hide it from me, but I can tell he's the strongest of the group, very likely above level 400, and strong enough to take the other three at once if he wanted to.

Interestingly, he also looks the youngest out of them.

The man who seems to be the leader begins to explain, "The virus has been confirmed as man-made, likely created in a lab formerly located in this area. The lab has already been destroyed, preventing us from gathering more data. We don't know if this place was chosen to start the spread or if there was

another reason for the lab's presence here. As for the organization responsible, we suspect it was formed by an exiled Champion from a neighboring kingdom known for its hatred of demons. His abilities don't align with this kind of work, so we believe he had help in creating the virus if it was him."

"Possibly an attendee on a Beyond quest?" I ask.

"It is unlikely, but it is one of the options. Another possibility is that he's being backed by an Absolute or a Champion from another planet. Our current Absolute is not exactly known for his efforts to limit this kind of influence."

"The Hornless Demon, that's what he's called, right?" I remember what Vega told me about her planet a long time ago.

"Yes, that's what most people call him. In short, he's a former slave who rose to become an Absolute and a perfectly fitting chaotic representative of his race. As dangerous as this situation is, at least we know he won't interfere unless the entire demon race is in danger or something truly interesting happens."

"And your side? I heard about the Bloody Hero and something about an Undying Dragon? But that's not a real dragon, right?" I ask. Even as I speak, I feel a spark of hope. Vega told me all this back when we first met, and her words stuck in my mind with a powerful dose of curiosity. I want to see a dragon.

"I'm not sure how much the political situation on our planet will help you with your quest, but since it's not classified information, I'll tell you. The Bloody Hero is a Champion who once fought the Hornless Demon for the title of Absolute. He lost in the end but survived the battle. These days, he's retired."

I blink. "Retired?"

The man nods. "In the truest sense of the word. Our intel says he's still wounded from that clash and can only unleash his mana a few more times before his body tears itself apart. Considering that, and the disappointment from his loss, as well as a kingdom that wanted to use him, he secluded himself in a forest. He built a cottage by the lake, where he insists on fishing every day despite his ongoing lack of success. He's said to take disciples every once in a while, if he feels like it, and is considered to be a very... interesting person."

Putting aside the cliché setup, I ask, “And the dragon?”

“It’s just a lesser Tarrasque that made its nest in a nearby kingdom. The common folk started calling it a dragon.”

“How disappointing.”

“It isn’t. A true dragon’s presence here would be catastrophic.”

“I stand by my prior statement,” I reply, repeating myself as we stop in front of the cottage. After I knock, Lily steps out, and I continue, “Your healers can talk with Lily. She’s already been examining some of the people with the illness, so you can compare notes. Is that okay?” I ask, speaking to Lily rather than them.

She smiles. “It’s okay. Vega should wake up soon, so be there when she does. I’ll learn as much as I can and then simplify it for you.”

“For some reason, I’m both insulted and very happy.”

“What are you leaning toward?”

“I refuse to answer,” I say, and seeing that Lily still holds her axes, I’m sure I don’t need to worry about her. In the worst case, I’ll rush in to help.

I watch as she walks toward the two female healers, who stare at her in surprise, and I wonder why. Is it the axes? Her young age? Or something only healers can sense? They bow deeply to her, and even the spy ops man and woman give polite greetings while asking if they can check for Magistra’s mark.

Leaving them to it and planning to come back later with a few more questions, I head inside.

Vega now has much better color, as do the other kids. Her gang consists of a well-dressed demon boy, a half-demon girl with shorter horns and yellow hair instead of white, and a strange dagger at her belt. Then there's a human girl, about six years old, the youngest of the group, and a demon girl roughly Vega's age.

Creating a Mana Block 2.0 chair, I pull it close and put more effort into isolating the mana I'm accumulating in my halo, which continues to grow as my Ignition Heart beats steadily. I focus on controlling the heat as well.

[Accumulation - lvl 20 > Accumulation - lvl 21]

It reminds me once again just how used I've gotten to having stronger people around me who can endure this kind of thing, and how easy it would be to hurt someone on the weaker end of things. Vega is already much stronger than an average human, and the planets we visit are tougher too, especially after a pairing or two. Before returning to Earth, I'll have to put more effort into refining my control.

I take out a dried, mango-like fruit that was packaged for me in the manor and move it under Vega's nose. Anger rises in me when I see her face up close, thinner and paler than before, but I push it down for now and let myself enjoy the presence of my very first disciple.

After doing this for nearly a minute, I start getting impatient and bored. I stop myself from poking her side, taking her condition into account, and instead put the piece of fruit on her nose, then grab more pieces, which I immediately start stacking there.

Minion moves a few times, causing the tower of fruit to collapse and scatter across her face and the bed, but I don't let that stop me. I keep going, building a new one with fresh pieces. I had asked for plenty of fruit to be packaged, so I have more than enough to keep at it.

Just as I start my record attempt of six already stacked pieces, concentrating deeply on balancing the seventh, Vega scrunches her nose and sniffs a few times. The scent of the fruit makes her eyelids twitch before she slowly opens them, revealing her pretty red eyes, one of which has a golden circle around the pupil.

Her horns are still just as small as I remember them, black and pointy, and I doubt they'll grow much bigger since she's a half demon. Her light brown hair is longer now, too, falling past her shoulders, and she's a little taller, too, which somehow makes me feel a bit sad.

They grow up so quickly.

Even before she fully recognizes what's happening, Vega is already gathering both kinetic energy and mana in preparation, and her senses are the first thing she activates before her eyes even focus on me. Her control almost slips when she realizes who she's looking at. Multiple scans wash over me, which I allow. She listens to my hearts and even reaches out to touch my chest right above where they beat.

The great Nosescraper of Fruitenburg Keep is now gone, destroyed, but I don't mind in the least.

"Minion, what do we say when we almost die but pull through in the end?" I ask softly.

She blinks, then smiles brightly. "I lived, bitch!"

"Not that."

"Guess who's back, idiot!"

"Good one, but still not it."

"I ain't done yet?"

"You're a lost cause," I sigh and reach to grab one of her horns, shaking her lightly. "Well, don't strain yourself. I'm here with a friend, and we'll take care of everything."

"Are you going to blow up the bad guys?" she asks, trying to focus on me while I shake her head.

"Possibly. Very likely. Yes. Fucking yes. Absolutely. Without question. So, how are..."

I don't even get to finish. She gets up from the bed and jumps into my arms, pressing herself against me, her ear resting over my chest. She seems to realize it's a bit harder now that she's taller, but she doesn't care and curls up like a small animal, refusing to move.

"What would your minions think if they could see you now?" I ask, looking down at her.

She looks up, confused. "Minions are dumb, Master. It's expected for them not to understand certain things."

Having no defense against that kind of logic, I nod. "I guess."

"Master," Vega whispers after a minute, her ear still pressed to my chest.

"Yes?"

"You're really angry. I can hear it in your heartbeat."

"Don't worry about it, Minion. Now then, will you eat with me?"

"You aren't going to go out? Someone's been knocking on the door for a minute already."

"Just some random secret ops guys I met along the way. Ignore them. They'll get bored and leave soon."

"It isn't important?"

"Not at all."