

Tutorial 721

Chapter 721: Fundamental theorem of minions

“So, Minion, let me get this straight,” I say, grabbing her horn to make her look at me. “Your gang consists of some demon guy, who used to be a noble, and once kicked you when you were still a common street thief, and since then, his grandfather got eaten after trying to challenge what your people have been calling the Undying Dragon, nevermind that it’s not a dragon in the first place, and that guy has joined your gang after meeting you once again, by chance.”

“Yes! Tami said it’s a family tradition to challenge the Dragon, and that his father will challenge the Undying Dragon sometime in the next few decades, and after that, it’ll be Tami’s turn to challenge the Dragon too. Until his father does the challenge, Tami is disowned and sent out on the road to gather experience and become stronger!”

“What a lovely family tradition. And you took him in, despite the fact that he kicked you?”

“I beat him up a lot of times for that, and I still do it once in a while, just so he doesn’t forget that I’m still the leader! We’re also using his money to finance our group. He has a secret bank account his mom set up for him, so he’s very rich.”

“Good job, Minion.”

“Thank you!”

“The blonde half-demon girl with the talking dagger is your cook and healer. You saved her from villagers who tried to throw her to a monster they were worshipping as their deity?”

“Yup! She’s from an old family that went broke, and she found her dagger in a secret room in the ruins of their old house. Master, that dagger has a very nasty personality too, so watch out, but please don’t destroy it. Liira likes it a lot.”

“Yes, yes. The human girl?”

“And the demon girl?”

“She’s my rival, Tykka! She’s strong and very mysterious, never talks about herself, the only thing we know about her is that she complains about her father sometimes. But she saw my greatness and joined my group of minions. You can be rude to her and call her heart weak, Master. Actually, please do it!”

“Okay. I’m sure I’ll forget their names in a matter of minutes, Minion.”

“It’s fine! They’re my minions, and by extension, yours too. They need to earn their names.” Vega nods seriously, and it makes me remember giving her hers.

"That is true," I agree with her, "minionship is a transitive property as proven by the fundamental theorem of minions."

"I have no idea what that means, but sure!"

After that, she continues to ramble on about her adventures. I look at her and feel a bit sad. It’s a strange feeling, seeing her move about on her own without me, living her own stories and life.

Then she says something outrageous, and I focus back on the conversation. “You did what, Minion?”

“We heard there’s a big weapon under the lake that can blow things up and...”

“Not that.”

“We delved into the cave of a Wolfbear?”

“Not that either.”

“Oh! Our plan to sell the dagger at an auction and then steal it back afterwards?”

“Minion, the last thing you mentioned.”

“The part where we were staying in an inn and the dagger heard, through the wall and a barrier, that someone was talking about a virus that still needed a bit more work before it was ready, and that no demons would survive once it was done?”

“Yes, that. How did the dagger hear it?”

“Oh, the dagger doesn’t have eyes or ears, so it listens to vibrations or something fancy like that, Master. It said it can translate them into speech. It’s very cool but also very dumb. The dagger said people who set privacy barriers aren’t used to its kind of senses. I think it was trying to show off.”

“Seems like it. Do you know what the people talking looked like?”

“We never saw them.”

“So you heard about it and decided to stay here?”

“We wanted to sell the information, but we got sick and...” she pauses, lifting her head from my chest to look at me. “Master, when you came here... was I... weak?”

“What do you mean, you tried to blow off my head.” I ruffle the top of her head and press her back against my chest while I think out loud, feeding her pieces of fruit that she nibbles on. “This Beyond quest stinks.”

“I pwomise it’s not me, I wash a loth,” she mumbles with her mouth full, still chomping on the food I give her.

“Minions do not stink because their master taught them to wash regularly, even though they resisted when they first met him.”

“Yesh!” she chews and talks at the same time.

“What do we do with stinky minions?”

“We throw them into the volcano!”

“Good,” I say, tapping the top of her head. “Don’t forget to drink too. They had some nice things to drink, and I brought some along for you, so don’t let them go to waste. And save some for your group, too.”

“I will. Master, are...” she stops mid-sentence as the doors open and Lily enters awkwardly, a slight smile on her face.

“I’ve been knocking for a while, so I thought you might not have heard,” Lily says apologetically from the doorway.

“It wasn’t the spy guys trying to annoy me while I’m resting with my minion?” I ask.

“Not really. I gathered the information, dealt with them, and sent them away a while ago.”

“Lily, you know you could have come inside any time. This place is my minion’s fortress, and its no suspicious spies are allowed, but you healed her, so you get entrance for life. Right, Minion? Tell her right away.”

“That’s true!” Vega says. “But this place isn’t mine, we’re just renting it from a guy called Randy. I think he’s scamming us, so we’ll steal the money back afterwards, along with everything not glued to the floor, just as you taught me, Master.”

“See, Lily, you’re allowed in.”

“Nat, why do I have a feeling you ignored a big part of what she said?”

“Don’t sweat it. The spies?”

“As you said, they work for Magistra. This place is currently under her jurisdiction and that of two more of the kingdom's Champions. To enter, you need to follow procedures. Even Magistra can't come in without the others noticing or allowing it.”

“How about the other spies our spies met?”

“It's likely a Champion from outside this kingdom, stronger than any of the three here, who's able to enter freely. One and Two think this Champion might be behind the lab and everything connected to it. Or, if you want to be more paranoid, they lied to me, and it is something else.”

“Yeah, I wouldn't trust them too much. Did you learn anything from the healers?” I ask.

“They... they tried their best, but they aren't very good at this, Nat. They didn't even notice they were infected themselves, and they couldn't heal One and Two, so I cleansed all of them.”

I look at this petite black-haired healer and wish I'd seen the expressions on their faces when she did that. I doubt they expected her to be this capable. At this point, I even suspect she may have removed the illness completely, not just suppressed the symptoms and recharged their bodies.

“Don't they have any better healers?” I ask her.

Lily shakes her head. “These are some of the best this kingdom has. Most of the stronger healers belong to the Healer Guild, and they're located in an impartial Kingdom. They work for money, items, and promises, staying neutral to any kingdom, demon, or human. But they don't even have a Champion healer here. The best one is just under level 400. Demons aren't great healers, and the humans still haven't quite recovered since the last world war.”

Turning to Vega, I ask, “Is that true, Minion?”

“I have no idea, Master.”

“As expected, my minion’s mental abilities remain insufficient, proving once again that minions are too weak to think for themselves and must depend on their master.”

“Master?”

“Yes, Minion?”

“You said you came here on a Beyond quest. Did you know what it was about before you came?” the sneaky little devil asks.

Lily giggles from the side, but I keep the same expression and hold Vega’s gaze. Without answering, I pick up another piece of fruit and shove it into her mouth. When she tries to speak, I push in another, then another, until she can’t talk anymore and has only two choices, either spit the food out or chew. But I know her. There’s no way she’ll waste food, so she keeps chewing with determination.

Once again, I turn to Lily. “Still no signs of our most cowardly companion?”

“None.”

“Sounds about right. So, what do we know about the virus?”

“Not that much. They don’t know how it spreads or where exactly it came from, though they suspect the destroyed lab. The process starts slowly, with slightly increased temperature and fatigue. You stop being able to keep anything down, then your body starts getting colder, muscles stiffen, and you lose control over movement. Around that point, hallucinations begin. After the hallucinations, you pass out and might wake up once or twice if you’re strong enough. Then comes the coma, and so far, they haven’t been able to awaken anyone who reached that point.”

“That it?”

“Yes. During the coma, you continue to weaken, probably having a few more hallucinations along the way, and without waking up, you slowly starve or die of dehydration. Higher-level individuals can probably endure it for weeks, maybe months, if someone takes care of them.”

“Are Vega’s friends in a coma?”

“I think so. But if I did it properly, I healed them, so they should wake up soon. Vega’s been really strong, you know. They all seem to have been infected around the same time, and she lasted the longest.” Lily smiles.

As silly as my minion is, I can feel her heartbeat speeding up at the compliment, even though she tries not to show it.

So weak.

An hour later, the kids start to wake up, too. I give up on remembering their names and simplify them for my own sanity. The noble asshole demon boy who kicked Vega so long ago, the little human thief girl, the half-demon girl with the talking dagger, and the mysterious demon girl, Vega’s rival.

How much better the world would be if everyone were named like that.

The first to wake up is the mysterious rival demon girl. Like Vega, she immediately starts scanning and reinforcing her body, but she freezes when she sees Vega sitting on my lap with her ear pressed against my chest.

“I won, Tykka! I beat the illness first!” my disciple lies shamelessly.

The mysterious girl blinks, then glances at Lily before turning her eyes back to me. “Going by the way you look... are you her master?” she asks.

“Yes.” I nod.

“It’s all your fault she’s like this,” she says flatly, leaving me wondering what exactly she means. As far as I know, Vega is perfect the way she is.

“Vega didn’t mention you had any healing skills, so I guess correctly that the one who healed us is this woman?” The mysterious girl gestures toward Lily.

Lily answers before I can. “I’m Lily, and yes, I’m the one who healed you. But please don’t think you owe me anything.”

“In that case, thank you, Lady Healer Lily. My name is Tykka.”

“Nice to meet you, Tykka.”

Before their conversation can continue, the two others start waking up, rolling around on their beds, and groaning from the leftover pain. The noble demon boy and the half-demon girl with the dagger start talking over each other, asking questions nonstop.

The mysterious girl answers some of them, Vega mocks them, I introduce myself, and Lily does the same.

Then the dagger starts shouting. Apparently, it had been asleep along with its owner until now.

“Where are the simpletons who dared to put my wielder in such a state? And who are these two failing to kneel before my presence? Release me against that wretch, my wielder, before I mistake your hand for vermin and curse it to rot! And you...” The blade calls toward Vega, “Loudmouthed brat with the intellect of boiled cabbage. How many times must I endure your screeching before I consider splitting my own edge just to end the misery? Were you not the leader of this band of idiots, I might almost pity you. As for you, my wielder, how could you have fallen into such a state? I’ve met liches with more vitality in their bones than you have in your sickly body. And what is this I see? A healer? You have the presence of one who acts innocent and hides a mischievous mind. Do not feign modesty in front of me, woman! I sense the confidence of one who knows her craft too well to ever be gentle.”

After that long outburst, silence fills the room. When I look down at Vega, she just looks back at me with a shrug. “It always talks like this. We’ve gotten used to it,” she whispers, as if trying not to let the dagger hear.

Then the dagger continues, louder than before. "Now, which of you halfwits wanted to put me up for auction? Speak quickly so I can decide whose tongue to remove first. I'd rather spend eternity buried in mud than tolerate another hour among such a collection of delinquents and fools. Honestly, if this is a company of heroes, as you, who call yourself our leader, have claimed, then the world deserves to burn."

At that moment, a knocking sounds on the door. This time, I bother to check the signature outside before calling, "Come in."

The door opens, and Savant enters, his clothes slightly burned and showing signs of damage, probably from a fight. The dagger starts shouting again, even louder.

Looking down at Vega, who's shouting back at it with clear joy in her eyes, I can't help but notice how much fun she's having.

Savant stays near the door, taking it in with the patience of a man too tired to care.

Chapter 722: What the doctor said

All of us stare at Savant, who simply stares back. His eyes turn toward Vega resting against my chest, then to the rowdy bunch of kids. At least the dagger stays quiet, shut tight like it's scared of this man. I notice it hasn't trash-talked me either. Smart thing, I was fully ready to throw it into the water to let it rust or rot or whatever.

"Yo," I greet Savant.

"Hello," he answers while entering the house and walking straight into the living room, which already starts looking crowded. "Can you heal me? I think I got infected as well," he says, directing his words toward Lily.

Without even moving from her spot, Lily furrows her brow a little. I feel the faint movement of her mana brushing against Savant. Then she says simply, "Done."

Everyone in the room goes silent, so quiet that Lily shifts, clearly uncomfortable. "W-what? I've already removed it twelve times, and I changed the formula so I could do so across a wider area. With a proper [Sacrifice], I could probably channel it through a small city block all at once."

"I see," I nod, then look at Savant. "Is that normal?"

"Nothing about how she heals is normal," he says. "Aside from that, while you two were busy with whatever this is, I've been examining the barrier and this place we've found ourselves in. I absorbed portions of the virus at multiple stages, along with part of the barrier for examination, and checked a few locations. I think I've more or less pieced things together."

"It's the barrier, right?" I ask.

Savant opens his mouth, then closes it again.

"To make it more deadly?" I ask and watch the small human girl pass by him to grab some food from the table. While she does, I notice her slipping a few extra bits away, hiding them in what looks to be dozens of pockets stitched all over her clothes.

"That's something our healer should be able to answer soon," Savant says.

At that, we all turn to Lily again. She gestures for the human girl to come closer, then offers her another piece of fruit. The girl snatches it fast, silent as a shadow.

Lily says, "I have my suspicions, but I'm not sure yet. I think some people would survive even without healing, and the coma would stop after a while. Many of the low-level ones would die of hunger or thirst, but not directly from the illness itself."

"But even if the coma ended, the illness wouldn't disappear completely, right?" Savant asks. When the little thief walks past him again, he stops her, holding out his hand and saying, "Give it back."

She freezes, staring up at him with big eyes, but Savant doesn't move an inch. The girl digs into her many pockets, pulling out mana stones, crystals, and bits of metal, which she returns to him. Savant takes them, then turns to Lily again.

"I don't know," Lily answers his question.

I look at him. "What do you think?"

"I think someone grew the original virus in a lab for whatever reason. Then the Magistra noticed it and, instead of dealing with it, decided to use it. She and the others released it, built the barrier, and made changes to let the virus develop further using what they found in the lab. The goal is likely to make it seem as though the virus was cleansed, when in fact they only intend to make it dormant and undetectable to the few healers this planet has. Then they would've removed the barrier, let the people leave, and infect others with the new strain. We were probably invited here so no one would suspect them, and so they could develop it further."

"How cowardly!" the noble demon boy interrupts, "Magistra Elaren is known to hate demons, but to take it to this pathetic extent? She should have just challenged and killed as many of us by herself as she could!"

My minion's rival shakes her head, "Even among the people of this kingdom, she's not very well liked. If she went around killing thousands of demons without a reason, one of the Absolute's enforcers would notice and deal with her."

I tap the head of the minion in my lap, "Minion, who are the Absolute's Enforcers?"

"I have no idea, master."

"I guess it doesn't matter then. You can always let your minions deal with these kinds of things. But minion, you should still try to pick up a little on your own, at least while you are still weak."

"I will!"

"You!" a strong voice interrupts, stopping all conversation. It is my minion's rival, pointing a finger at me. "You are nothing like what she told us about."

"Am I not?" I ask with a tilted head.

The girl, who seems to be a noble like this demon boy but is trying to hide it, shakes her head vehemently. "Firstly, she said you are the most handsome person we would ever see. That is not true. Even this man, who just arrived, is better looking."

Catching the stray compliment, Savant lifts his eyes from his hand, the same one he was already drawing on with mana-conductive paint. His long black hair flows down from his head, and his clear green eyes look at her curiously. The demon girl even blushes slightly at that.

But she doesn't stop. "All these nice things you did for Vega, she told us about them. Handsome, strong, caring, just like a demon prince from the stories. I really wanted to see what you would look like. Meanwhile, here you are, just like her."

"Fight me to the death! I won't let such an insult to my master pass!" Vega shouts, and I hold her in my arms, covering her mouth, causing her to mumble something into the palm of my hand.

Turning to my minion's rival, I shrug. "Don't think I'm not taking things seriously, Teeka. I do. I just don't see any reason to be so somber and serious all the time. I had enough of that before the tutorial. I like to enjoy the small things in my life as they come. Things like bullying my cute minion." As I say that, I keep Vega's mouth covered but use my other hand to tap on her tiny pointy horns.

My grand-minion faces me for a bit, and I calmly return her gaze until she looks away while mumbling, "My name is Tykka."

"Tykka, I think he's cool! He has multiple hearts, just like the Hornless Demon!" the noble boy calls out, standing up with a swift movement. "Cool for a human, of course," he adds with a bright smile.

"You, sit back down," I say.

As quickly as he stood, he plops back on his butt. I let go of my hand from Vega's mouth. "Vega, you said the girl with the dagger is your first minion, healer, cook, and something else, right?"

"Liira also deals with finances, so we don't get scammed. Tykka and Tami have no idea how much things are worth and tend to pay ten times more than they should, and Mini would just steal any money she got," Vega says happily. "Liira is also good at talking to people without insulting them, so they don't

want to fight us all the time. She's really good at coming up with excuses and acting innocent. She also cleans the house sometimes because the others are lazy, and..."

"Okay, okay, what a sad girl," I say, gesturing at the blonde half-demon with the dagger. "Are you okay with that? I can tell Vega to stop."

"It's okay. I owe her my life." This is the first time I hear Liira speak, and her voice sounds more mature and responsible than all the others combined.

"If you say so. But Vega is dum... silly sometimes, so she doesn't always notice things as she should. If it gets to be too much, or if you want something, tell her directly. She's a good girl in the end. Also, I heard you're a healer. Is that true?"

"I can heal a little, yes."

"Good. Lily can show you a trick or two while we work on my plan. Can you?" I turn to Lily.

"No problem at all," the tiny bulldozer smiles. "But Nat, you have a plan?"

"Yup," I say simply, "In the end it's obvious, and the fact that Alfalfa Fennel-Tart Velveeta Corndog Del Muffin en Lint Asphalt Valhalla Macarena is still outside proves I'm right."

"I have never in my life heard a name butchered so much. You know it's Albaris Fen'Thane Vel Corin Del Vassel en Lys Aster Valcour Miradine," Savant says from the side, clearly trying to pick a fight.

I ignore him, and I lean back in my chair, petting Vega on top of her head like she is some evil lair master's cat, and explain to the kids gathered, "The lab belongs to Magistra, and someone destroyed it before the virus was ready. So she and the two other Champions made a barrier that she modified to slowly finish the work, assuming that wasn't always the plan. Maybe the other Champions are gullible, or maybe they're in on it. Next, she sent in some of her spy ops, submitted the beyond quest, but make no mistake, every one of these people is an acceptable sacrifice to her, so she can distance herself from this. That's why she also abandoned that six-legged rat. She couldn't find a better healer to work with, so Lily, being one of the best healers in Beyond at the moment, is here so Magistra can observe her final work and modify the virus further."

"That's a lot of assumptions," Savant says without even lifting his eyes from his hand as he continues painting his inscriptions.

"I could be wrong about a thing or two, but that should be the gist of it."

"Before you do anything rash, we can still spend a few more days trying to confirm that theory," he says.

"Sure," I answer back to his obvious surprise. "Let's be patient, right?"

I stand up and set my minion back on the floor before moving onto the bench next to Savant and putting my arm around his shoulders. "Savi, we're buds, right? Old rivals, friends even! Just remember all the memories we've built together and all the times we tried to kill each other."

"Stop touching me. What do you want?"

"Come on, Savi, I know you've got some mana hidden away, a lot of it even. Honestly, a scary amount. You're sitting there pretending like you're tapped out, but I can smell it. It's got this faint tingle to it, like ozone."

"You can't smell mana," Savant says.

"Oh, yes, I can. It's a gift. Or maybe a curse. Either way, you reek of it. Don't even try to hide it. I just need a little bit of mana, that's it, I swear."

"I'm not hiding anything. I'm empty."

"Empty? Ha! That's exactly what someone with too much mana would say. I know you have some. Really, just a little bit, Savi. Just a drop... though all of it would work better."

"You're ridiculous."

“Ridiculous and suffering from severe mana deficiency, that’s what the doctor said, right?” I turn to Lily.

Taken aback, she quickly regains her composure and nods a few times.

I turn back to the man. “Don’t make me start sniffing around like a truffle pig, because I will. And it won’t be dignified for either of us.”

“How can you sense it?” Savant asks, dropping the drawing and looks at me after pushing my hand away.

I let the golden circles of my Mana Wavelength Iris glow in the dimly lit room. “I have good eyes. I can see the Sword of Aeons and where it’s been absorbed into your body. And even though you’re trying to hide it, I can see the amount of mana you’ve got stored away in there. Did you naturally generate it over a long time and store it, or did you come up with a new way to absorb others' mana and keep it there?”

For a long moment, he seems to think before ignoring my question entirely and asking, “What do you want it for?”

"It's simple, really. We're going to break the barrier and make a show so big that the Absolute shows up to check it out, hoping for a good fight. Trust me, Savi, I know demons. That asshole will come running."

Chapter 723: That’s what I’ll do

It’s been a day. I spent some of that time exploring the area, even talking with Magistra’s spy guys, trying, out of curiosity, to get a bit more information about the woman and why she might hate demons so much. I do it carefully, trying not to throw them off in case they might actually be working with her.

I learn nothing. My communication skills remain just as pathetic as always, and I find myself missing Tess, Channeler, and any other high level extrovert.

Lily told me she removed the virus from me without me even noticing, and that she will do it again if needed, so I don’t worry about catching it again as I walk between the quiet villages. Plenty of their people are staying inside their rooms, soon to fall into comas if they haven’t already. Others are barricaded in, the lucky ones who haven’t caught the virus yet and refuse to let anyone near them.

The guards are overworked, doing their best to keep people from killing each other while hoping that whoever put the barrier in place will come to help them, not realizing they're like a bunch of rats thrown into a box to be experimented on. Rats that will spread a virus capable of wiping out a good chunk of the demon race.

On the second day, I'm once again out on one of my strolls while Savant and Lily stay near my minion and her minions. My eyes glow most of the time, active, watching the barrier and its fluctuations. It's insane work. Inscriptions overlapping, self-repairing layers, reaction chains built into reaction chains.

I let my mind ride the small shifts in wavelengths of the barrier like waves. The glow in my eyes flickers every now and then as I test a section, then pull back before it notices. It's fascinating, actually. Only my mental techniques and experience with evil orbs, combined with [Focus], keep my mind from sizzling out my ears. After all, the barrier was made by at least one Champion, possibly with modifications from two more.

There's no question in my mind that I can break it. It doesn't matter how many protocols there are or how much higher level the person who made it might be.

I can't kill Magistra with my own hands, but I can make sure to attract someone who can. That's what I said I'd do, and that's exactly what will happen.

Later that night, I return to the house, only to notice my minion outside near one of the bushes, leaning over something. I hear wet slurping noises and tiny growls that make Vega's muscles tense up.

Walking a bit closer, the view opens up. Fen is there, skittish, his head barely poking out from the bushes as he hungrily eats some sort of wet food that looks like one of those cheap cat-food pâtés. The six-legged fennec is slurping it right from Vega's bare hand, and she's smiling as she feeds him.

The noble lady's pet is disheveled, his perfect white fur from a few days ago is dirty now, matted, and burned in spots. The luxurious vest he was wearing is nearly gone now, just a few scraps of cloth held together by hopes and prayers.

I have never seen something so undignified. As he eats, he dirties his fur even more, with nearly his whole mouth smeared with whatever food he's devouring.

“Master,” Vega notices me and speaks softly so she doesn’t spook the little animal. “Look what I found. He was so hungry.”

Fen looks at me too and barks, clearly reading my thoughts from my expression, then chomps on the food at a speed and hunger that makes it look like he might choke.

“I think he was dying of hunger, and I saved him,” Vega continues to explain.

Fen barks at me again in that whiny tone that’s practically begging me to stop looking at him like that.

“Holy fuck, dude, it’s only been two days,” is all I manage to get out in a response.

A tear appears in the corner of his eye as he keeps eating, looking like he’s about to cry, and that makes him choke a little.

Vega, unaware of my past with the animal, keeps smiling. Behind her back, she reaches for something I think might be more food for the hungry fox.

It is a knife.

Vega pulls it out of sight of the tiny animal, and in that same soft voice, she says, “He’s quite big, and even though dirty, he seems healthy. He’s bigger than the rats I used to eat before I met you, master.”

Fen’s chomping slows down by a half right at that moment.

That makes Vega stretch her hand toward him more, smearing his snout with whatever she’s feeding him. “Master, I’m not sure how he survived to adulthood. He’s so dumb, and just a bit of food got him to come this close. But it doesn’t matter. I’m sure he’ll taste nice, and I’ll prepare him for you so we can share the meal together,” she continues in that soft voice to not spook her target and whose tone doesn’t match her words at all.

At this point, Fen isn't even eating anymore.

Vega swings her dagger, but Fen dodges swiftly and moves out of her reach, barking as he runs away.

"Raaoooooooooww! Yap-yap!"

"Master, get him!" Vega shouts, standing up to run after him, but I halt her movements with kinetic energy and just look at the back of the incredibly quick, fleeing animal.

Maybe this isn't one of the mythical beings Lissandra was talking about so much.

Or maybe her comparing me to them was an even worse insult than I thought?

On the third day, I spend my time in the minions' home base preparing. At first, I wanted to run around inside the barrier to hunt whoever was responsible, but that responsible asshole is already outside the barrier, so all my energy goes into screwing her over.

Savant and Lily visit a few villages while Lily checks on the people, mostly confirming her theory that they're in no real danger for now. Still, she heals as many as she can with her reserves, focusing mostly on children or the old and weak. Knowing her, I'm sure she'd heal the entire eight-hundred-person village if she could. But she can't. As I've told her so many times, she just needs more mana.

They get attacked once while returning, the clash ending with Savant killing the people who tried. None of them were from Magistra's spec ops, and we still aren't sure if they're just throwaways or if they've been sent here to make sure things go according to plan.

A tug on my clothes pulls me out of my thoughts, and when I look to my left, the young thief stands there, gesturing first at Vega sleeping with her head against my chest and then at herself.

Getting what she wants since she's done it before, I ask, "What are you willing to pay?"

Smiling faintly, she quickly reaches into her clothes and takes out a small piece of dried sweetened fruit, the one she must have noticed I enjoy the most. I'm also sure she stole all the pieces I'd been saving just so she could use them for trade like now. How shrewd.

"Okay, your offer is accepted," I say and reach out to take the piece from her.

She pulls her hand back and shakes her head, making me stop as she outstretches her hand instead to feed me the fruit.

I notice bits of dust and lint from her clothes clinging to it and furrow my brow. Then I look back at her as she smiles at me, quiet and shy.

Like the animal I am, I chomp on the piece of fruit and start chewing.

The tiny thief then rushes away and comes back with her own blanket. She lies down with her head on my leg, curls up, and covers herself before falling asleep with impressive speed.

Unable to move anymore, I close my eyes and continue working on the array in my mind and the mental protocols and processes I plan to launch once I've got everything ready.

I know my black mana attracts Champions like moths to the light, even if only out of curiosity, but for the Absolute to notice, it will need to be truly large scale. Coincidentally, likely big enough to fulfill one of my Absolute Candidate quest requirements. Totally coincidentally.

That much should be enough to erase this shitty barrier, with Lily and Savant handling the remainder. After all, my black mana only really affects mana itself, and whatever modifies the virus will probably release some weird, if useless particles once the mana powering it is gone.

At least that's what Savant said, and that guy absorbed a piece of it, so he'd better know.

I can't even bring myself to be all that annoyed with him. That man is patient to the point it's probably unhealthy, but he keeps improving. I've noticed him using kinetic energy, and it's not bad. Then there's

the Sword of Aeons, which he's stuffed to the brim with mana, and he still refuses to tell me if it's his or something he absorbed, hiding his true capabilities.

He must have seen me holding all this mana and gotten jealous, deciding to use the best mana battery in Eladore, even if it has been nerfed and broken.

Not that long ago, he told me he absorbed a tiny piece of my black mana during our duel in the tournament. So I wonder if observing it helped him improve his [Absorption] to the point he can now absorb other people's mana.

Who am I even lying to? I'm sure that asshole did exactly that.

"You shouldn't try to summon the Hornless Demon here," my minion's rival says, interrupting my thoughts and speaking quietly. More than worrying about waking up my minion and the thief girl, she also seems like she's afraid of waking up the dagger, which finally shut up a few minutes ago.

"Do you know him?" I ask.

"No, I don't," she says, but even without using my thermal or kinetic senses, I can tell she's lying. Just a ten or twelve year old girl, still lacking experience in this sort of thing.

"Well, too bad," I answer.

"You could die."

"I could die falling off my bed in a funny way, and breaking my neck."

"You don't know how he is."

"Neither do you."

"I..." she stops herself and groans. "You're just a stupid human."

"That's xenophobic," I say.

She looks like she's about to start throwing things at me, so I continue simply, "Let's say I don't do anything, and in a few days, we return to Beyond. We stay inside the barrier until then, and Lily heals as many people as she can. Let's also say that by the time we leave, no one has the virus anymore."

I look at her, but she stays silent, so I go on. "The barrier will stay. Magistra will modify the virus using what she's learned from watching Lily heal it, then she'll do it again. My minion, you, and your whole gang will get sick again, only to be released later and spread it over the coming weeks, maybe years, or however long the dormant stage lasts. Or she might just kill you all since you've been in such close contact with us. Maybe her spies are here to do exactly that."

As I say this, I raise my mana, mark my minion and every other kid here, and let kinetic energy circulate through my body. My eyes shift toward one of the walls, sensing something in the distance beyond it.

A cold smile spreads on my face.

How amusing. They're trying something like that against me?

I turn back to my minion's rival. "Don't move, okay?"

Then the attack reaches us, and the entire house around us explodes in a large-scale bombardment. At the same moment, I raise a barrier around us all.

Chapter 724: Under attack

The debris fills the air as I slide into deep [Focus], powered by black mana, causing the world to look as if time itself has slowed.

Minion is sleeping against my chest, the little thief with her head on my leg, and my minion's rival closes her eyes in a flash.

My mana reaches out and fills the area as [Eclipse] drains all color from the space around us. Everything halts midair, held by my [Redistribution].

Another attack is heading our way, but I look in its direction and send my mana ahead. Reading its fluctuations and observing how it works, I tear it apart, turning it into a barely dangerous gust of mana. [Eclipse] grows stronger, draining all the mana in the area. I put up a barrier around the sleeping children to block off the sound, while my kinetic energy smooths out the vibrations.

Another three attacks shoot towards us as I continue to sit there, fully observing them all even before they are halfway here. I just glance at the only conscious demon girl, who stares at me now with big, wide open eyes. I gesture for her to be quiet with a finger over my lips, and the halo over my head spins widely. Like liquid, my mana gathers over us and expands further like waves crashing outwards, covering the place in a mist made of blue mana now rendered visible to the eye, especially in the black and white area.

An attack crashes against it, and two more follow, causing it to blow up, grow in size, and then shrink as I choke out the explosion. Like a whirlpool, I move my mana and turn it into a barrier that deflects another attack to the side in an explosion of bright light, then the last one hits, a projectile that breaks apart into the particles that crash against the barrier. They bounce into the air, looking like a myriad of glowing stars.

I gather all that mana, compressing it down into the form of a single projectile that takes on a tricolored sheen before it starts glowing bright white and shoots off with a sonic boom toward the attack's origin. The boom of the launch only slightly ripples the water in the glass next to me, and my minion furrows her brow, but quickly calms down as I place my hand on her head, and she continues to sleep.

My eyes pierce through the concealment barriers set in the distance, and I see multiple attacks being prepared. It is one of the spies, the young man called Four, channeling more mana and replenishing it for further bombardment.

The next attack I shoot at him bounces off a single segment of an angled barrier and flies high into the air, where it explodes against the pale red barrier the Magistra herself has set.

His channeling speeds up even more, and three differently modified projectiles start to float near him.

With a pulse of kinetic energy, I send all the debris around us away in a burst, then create hundreds of mana orbs floating all over the place. They gather higher in the air above me, and I place marks on some of them before infusing them with thermal energy. I launch them forward, glowing like a stream of bullets from a warship's minigun.

Four raises his barrier, even sacrificing one of his three attacks to reinforce it. My projectiles hammer against it, some exploding on impact while others ricochet away in glowing arcs, lighting the area with bursts of golden flames.

Even though that, he continues preparing his attacks and is about to launch another one when I compress a chunk of my mana and send a tricolored orb through the mark on one of my orbs just before it hits him. The huge tricolored orb materializes there, exploding and sending a shockwave followed by heat from the friction before everything rushes back in a powerful pull to fill the vacuum.

Four isn't there anymore, but I track his signature and watch as he steps out of a nearby tree trunk, as if walking through it.

Before he's even fully out, [Empyrean Lance] reaches him, and he barely dodges by leaning back, returning to the tree to teleport again. That tree explodes in another barrage of thermal projectiles, and once again, he lifts his barrier to defend himself.

The two attacks he launched before teleporting away don't even reach halfway toward us. I expand my [Eclipse] even further, choking them out, tearing them apart from a distance with just a part of my mind focused on it.

The debris fills the air as I watch him touch a piece of wood and vanish, as if he is pulled inside of it. His teleportation does not seem to be long range, and I track the shifts of mana far in the distance, and I've already grasped his signature.

He appears half a mile away, but my projectile is there before he even steps out. Tied to that projectile is a [Ley Line].

Just as he exits the tree, a blaze of thermal energy explodes there, reaching high into the air and burning the area in wild golden flames that move like a living creature.

My mind strains as I sense multiple signatures. He tries to confuse me, but I filter them out and lock onto the correct one just as he steps out of another tree, though he's faster this time with the shorter distance. His body is burned, and the skin on his face is sizzled and blackened, blinding him in one eye.

Instead of another attack, a cloud of my mana fills the area before he even enters it. As I once did long ago in the tunnels under the Old Capital and the living tree towering over it, I materialize translucent mana limbs from the new cloud. They grab his arms, legs, and throat. I push more mana through the [Ley Line] that connects me to that place and disrupt his attempts to teleport, which I can read clearly from where I sit.

For a moment, it looks like he might escape, but I form a small projectile made of black mana in front of me and launch it at him while my mana limbs hold him in place so he cannot dodge. The projectile stabs into the middle of his chest. It is not large or dramatic, barely as thick and long as my pinkie, but it shatters every attempt he makes to escape.

He reaches for the items on his body, but then I pull. My mana arms tear off his legs, and the limbs holding his arms slam him into the ground. Before he can react, two more mana limbs pull in opposite directions, and one of his arms rips free from its shoulder socket.

I cannot hear him, but I watch his face twist in pain and his mouth open as he screams again and again, maybe calling to me, maybe to someone else.

Impressively, he regenerates his limbs and starts to move again, activating an item that pushes my mana away, but it lasts only a moment before a dozen mana arms, driven by my will, reach for him again, grasping, holding, pulling.

Who does he think he just attacked?

His torn limbs fly into the air, only to be consumed by fire as I ignite the area, erasing any chance of his escape.

He knew exactly who was staying here with me. So why all this?

I stop.

Still holding his unconscious, bleeding body in the air with only his left arm still attached. I remember my level. I remember that he is higher level than me. And I remember that I really do not want to get a body upgrade right now, at least not before I can finish my preparations.

The black mana projectile dislodges from his chest and floats in front of me, while in the distance, I pull back my mana, clearing the area and extinguishing the flames. Then I set the man gently on the ground.

I start thinking about whether I should leave him there. He will likely regenerate a bit, and he won't die immediately, and once he wakes up, he can focus on healing. But what if something else finishes him off? I would still gain most of the experience for that kill.

I move to try to teleport him here, but the crystal in the middle of his forehead flares up, blocking me. And it does so in a way that tells me it would take far too long to bypass. I could probably tear the stone out, but there is a chance it has some kind of dead man's trigger that would kill him. Maybe it is even designed to stop a mind mage from pulling information from his head.

Then, in the distance, an orange light fills the air as Savant uses his [Dawn], and from that direction, I sense Lily's [Disintegration]

I stand up swiftly, and Vega and the little thief fall to the floor as I stomp down, sending a pulse of kinetic energy into the ground beneath us. It meets the attack gathering there and deflects most of it.

The flooring still creaks under the strain, bulges, and tears apart, chunks of it blasting into the air as the surface ripples outward under our feet with the strain.

I pay no mind to it and block out the startled shouts of the kids. Turning toward the direction where projectiles are heading our way, I release a raw burst of mana that tears through the ground and everything in its path with pure pressure, the kind that once killed Witherclaw during the tutorial event.

Another attack descends from the sky, a massive boulder of stone.

My projectiles shatter it into pieces, and a wide stream of golden flame coils like a serpent, evaporating the fragments before they even hit the ground.

A pained whimper escapes the little thief, and I turn to her at once. She and Vega are both covered in a thin layer of ice, their skin turning pale as their body temperature plummets from the attack I failed to perceive.

Another projectile crashes into my shoulder, throwing me to the side while I barely manage to form a skin-tight barrier in time to stop it from blowing my shoulder apart. I ignore the pain and immediately regulate the temperature of the air around the girls.

Splitting my mind into multiple parts, I push all of them into overdrive. I break apart the incoming boulders, burning the rest into nothing with bursts of flame, while continuously forming shields to block other types of projectiles. I detect the attackers, and with a sharp crack that breaks the sound barrier, I launch my own projectiles toward them.

At some point, I stop bothering to destroy the stone boulders outright. Instead, I deploy a kinetic field and halt them midair. At first, I only bother to stop a few, then a dozen, then several dozen. After rushing toward us at high speed, they come to an abrupt stop above, some as big as me and others the size of small cars, all held in place by my will.

A pulse of kinetic energy from me throws the noble demon boy to the side just before a spear pierces the barrier and, with a thump, stabs into the ground where he stood. Before it explodes, I encase it in a barrier, and the blast flashes within, blinding me.

I instantly switch to other senses and block another attack aimed at Vega, but two projectiles crash into my back. The barrier on my back cracks and sends me stumbling forward. Turning toward the source of the attack, I draw in more mana and fire a projectile in retaliation. It vanishes in a blink, then detonates far away in a burst of fire. The impact ripples through the air, shaking our ground, but my barrier stops it.

A small part of my mind notices the frostbite on Vega's fingers and more on the little thief's nose and arms, marks left by the earlier attack.

A single powerful pulse attack breaks our barrier completely, and in the next instant, dozens of smaller, faster shots swarm in from every direction.

I release my mana completely, and the sheer pressure of it crashes into the area like a wave and obliterates them all. Blood drips from my nose as I push my control to the limit to keep the kids from being crushed under the pressure.

When the attacks stop, my mana pulls back to me, and with a heavy thump, a new barrier forms around us, then another around that. I keep layering them, stacking one over the next.

Anger fills me, and the air around us shakes with the kinetic energy I'm releasing. It reverberates through the space, shaking the stones that still float above us until they crumble and fall, turning to dust. Then a wave of fire sweeps through, evaporating the remnants, leaving tiny pieces of glass floating and glittering in the air.

For a moment, there is silence. Just as quickly as they began, the attacks stop, and I am left standing there, watching the distant flashes of [Dawn] burning on the horizon.

A flash of light reflects from the sword as it slams into the ground just beyond the barrier, its blade flickering with fading orange light.

One glance is enough to tell me that Savant's Sword of Aeons holds far more mana than I ever would have thought.

Chapter 725: Accumulation

A single step with Wraith Dance takes me outside the barriers I created and closer to the sword. I reach out and wrap my hand around the handle. The mana stored inside is not the kind anyone can use. Its frequency has been tuned exclusively for Savi. But that doesn't pose a problem for me.

Sensing more attacks heading my way, I turn toward them, boosting my body and swinging the sword in my hand dozens of times in succession to deflect and cut through the incoming projectiles.

I use Wraith Dance at the farthest distance possible, then again twice more, reaching my attacker. One of the spies, the one they called Three, stands there beside a healer, both surrounded by a barrier.

I deflect further attacks with the sword and resonate the mana across my skin, matching the barrier's fluctuations. I step through it and drive the sword into the stomach of the healer woman before kicking her away.

Using Pulser Stance, I move, unpredictable and fast, reaching Three as well. I slice through the defense he's rushing to form and cut through his arm at the same time. I accelerate further and take off his other arm before stabbing through his chest, careful not to kill him.

Kicking his body, I fling him into the wounded healer before teleporting away through the line I left connected near the kids.

The instant I reappear there, I surge my mana outward, pushing back against a massive area attack heading our way. I narrow its wave, compressing it until it collapses and destroys itself from the center. In the cloud of flickering mana particles, a single black orb appears, formed from my compressed mana. It hovers there, absorbing the loose mana left from the clash that couldn't have raged nearly as long as it felt.

I pull on the link connecting me to Lily, and when I feel her signal, I immediately teleport her to my side.

She appears with [Disintegration] flickering on her axes, her hair shorter than before. Her clothes are torn in several places, and I notice a wound on her arm just before it closes in the blink of an eye.

"Can you heal the kids?" I ask Lily. "Vega and Mini have frostbite, and the others have mild mana poisoning and possibly damaged sight and eardrums."

"Will do. I'll keep an eye on them, so go do your thing," she says, pausing mid-step before turning back to me with a small smile. "Be careful, and remember, you don't want to level up yet. We still haven't finished the preparations."

"Yes, I know," I nod.

With that, I lift off into the air, rising higher. The black orb floating nearby follows me. More attacks fire my way, but they're all mana-based and break apart, getting absorbed by the orb.

High above and far enough away, I break apart the halo I've been using to gather all that mana, even with the thermal energy I've been converting.

I do not send it into the black orb. Instead, I pull it gradually into my body. Mana Cycling takes over, moving it instinctively, supported by my preparations and the parts of my mind I've assigned to handle it. All that mana floods my body and the air around me, while more attacks try to reach me, only to be devoured by the nearby orb.

[Accumulation - lvl 21 > Accumulation - lvl 22]

I take note of the places where the attacks came from, and I see someone else as well. Savant moves from one point to another, the orange glow of [Dawn] flashing in every area the attacks originate from, snuffing them out as fast as they appear, even without him wielding his sword.

Raising my hand higher, I examine the weapon I'm holding.

Sword of Aeons (Low Pristine) -An immensely durable and sharp relic blade that functions as a pure mana battery. It cannot be used for anything else. The sword can store vast quantities of mana of any frequency, preserving it almost indefinitely with nearly no loss or instability.

I have no idea how he managed to get it to this grade, and I am sure there's a huge adventure behind it. But for now, it is in my hands, lent to me by its owner, who, after some consideration and after learning something he still hasn't shared with me, decided it could be used for my plan. And I will use it for that purpose.

[Focus] clears my thoughts. Nearly all sound fades into the background, and the world drains of color, as my senses dull. Only a small part of me keeps watch on my surroundings, while most of my mental capacity divides into five segments, each racing to complete its task.

The first brings the array I stored to the surface and activates the protocols I prepared inside my body using something similar to a Logic Core.

The second releases the second seal on the Ignition Heart and begins redirecting the generated thermal energy into mana.

The third fully activates my Mana Wavelength Iris, filtering out any unnecessary information so it doesn't overwhelm me.

The fourth protects my brain and hearts, redirecting any destabilization elsewhere if necessary.

The fifth oversees the rest, monitoring all mental divisions, balancing their efficiency, preventing interference, and calculating predicted mana wavelengths while automatically adjusting priorities throughout the process.

My physique does what it was built for, and my passives prey on all that mana, strengthening my control as more of it fills the air.

Then there's me. I alone gather and channel it all.

[Accumulation - lvl 22 > Accumulation - lvl 23]

[Accumulation - lvl 23 > Accumulation - lvl 24]

[Accumulation - lvl 24 > Accumulation - lvl 25]

[Redistribution - lvl 70 > Redistribution - lvl 71]

[Accumulation - lvl 25 > Accumulation - lvl 26]

[Accumulation - lvl 26 > Accumulation - lvl 27]

I take the raw, foreign mana stored within the Sword of Aeons and restructure it into wavelengths I can use. I disassemble incompatible frequencies, harmonize them with my own signature, and condense them into a form I can manipulate.

Multiple attacks crash into me, but with the sheer amount of mana surrounding my body, they behave unpredictably. Some swell and grow stronger, others vanish completely, while a few simply merge into the swirling vortex around me, all drawn inward where my control over mana is the strongest.

A notification chimes, signaling that I have fulfilled one of the requirements for the Absolute Candidate quest, but I barely acknowledge it. Half the mana I need still remains inside the sword, and I pull it all out, transferring it through my body, making it mine, merging it with the immense amount already gathered.

[Accumulation - lvl 27 > Accumulation - lvl 28]

[Accumulation - lvl 28 > Accumulation - lvl 29]

Dozens of wounds tear through my body, but the flames under my skin keep combusting, healing them faster than they can form.

Then all the divided parts of my mind snap into one, and I grab every last trace of mana I've gathered.

[Accumulation - lvl 29 > Accumulation - lvl 30]

...

[Accumulation - lvl 41 > Accumulation - lvl 42]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 73 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 74]

I push further and compress it all, all the tens of thousands of points worth of mana, and [Focus] it into a single spot. An orb.

[Focus - lvl 71 > Focus - lvl 72]

The orb floats in the air beside me. Small, whereas its presence is anything but. Its surface shifts between liquid and solid, like molten glass trying to decide what form it should take. The color is black, yet not completely so. A faint shimmer crawls beneath the surface when the light catches it just right.

When I focus on it, I can feel the density inside, compressed mana, folded again and again until it finally reached this state.

Every time a stray fragment of mana touches it, the orb consumes it instantly. There is no noise, no flash, only a quiet ripple and then stillness again.

Before I lose control, I shoot the orb at the highest point of the barrier. Even as it swiftly flies there, I feel it pull on my mana while my mind returns to a normal level of focus. In that short moment, the orb breaks through my natural barrier and devours all the mana I have left without any difficulty.

It all leaves my body so cleansed of mana, I feel like I did before the tutorial. Only my primordial energies remain. My constructs and passives shut off, my split minds disappear, all my skills, all signs of mana are gone. The seals of my Ignition Heart are back in place, but without even a bit of mana to use [Redistribution], my primordial energies are harder to handle.

I find myself starting to fall toward the ground as I clumsily take over kinetic energy, and even with how far I have flown, the orb continues to devour any mana I could gather. All attacks still reaching me disappear, and the ambient mana around me starts getting pulled toward it.

With only normal human eyesight and hearing, I watch the orb reach the top, where it makes contact with the red barrier.

For the shortest moment, it looks like nothing might happen, but then the barrier ripples and is sucked in completely, like someone pulling a tablecloth from a table in one swift movement.

I blink as the light now feels so different and bright without the pale red filter over it, and only now realize that the entire time here, I haven't felt the wind. It comes rushing in, that amazingly refreshing breeze against my skin, and I take a deep breath.

The black orb isn't that much bigger than usual, about the size of a smaller tangerine, and it gradually shrinks as it continues to devour all the mana it can reach now that the barrier is gone. It pulls from the people below it, thousands of them losing their reserves, no matter how small or big, while any items powered by mana deactivate.

It reaches even toward the spies and Lily and Savant below, but before it does, an orange light flashes once, and I feel a pulse of Lily's healing mana spreading below through the area, likely starting their preparations to get rid of the virus.

"You shouldn't have done that," a voice next to me says.

Before I even turn in that direction, something slashes diagonally across my chest, digging a deep wound into it from which blood starts gushing out.

Magistra stands in the air next to me, still in her luxurious clothes more fitting for court, and she holds her hand up, my blood showing on her nails. "I will make you regret it. Why couldn't you just do what you came here to do?" she sighs, but barely looks at me. Instead, she stares at the black orb with a furrowed brow. "What a disgusting thing you have made."

Then her eyes turn back to me as she lifts her hand, but stops mid-movement. Her expression turns to that of pure horror, and she bows her upper body so low her head is at the level of her knees.

"I greet the Absolute!" she calls in a greeting, and I can hear her voice shake at the end.

A blunt thump of a heart fills the area, or maybe the entire fifty square miles. Then another beat, reaching twice that far. The third, I don't even dare to estimate where it went. The fourth makes my teeth shake, and my bones rattle. The fifth makes me feel like it has spread through the entire planet, and I'm almost sure the sixth one would kill me.

But the sixth one doesn't come, and instead, there is a silence that makes me feel as if the entire world halted all movement in the presence of this Absolute. Clouds above us halt mid-drift. Dust in the air stops falling. Even the black orb seems to hesitate before continuing to devour mana at a slower pace.

I feel a push on my back, and I am flung toward Magistra before spinning and turning toward the person standing there.

The Hornless Demon, the demon Absolute, floats in the air, and in his hand is a heart, beating wildly. It keeps spraying golden flames across his chest, but they never touch him. They just curve away, avoiding his skin.

Then I recognize that heart.

Blood spills from my mouth and stains my shirt. Only now do I register the hollow through my back, scorched by thermal energy, where one of my hearts has been ripped out.

Chapter 726: Hornless Demon

Weapons of Mass Destruction

The Hornless Demon is, as the name says, a demon without horns. Red eyes, long white hair tied into a ponytail, and horns that look like they were cut or sawn off just above where they grow from the top of his forehead. He wears relaxed clothes that sharply contrast with Magistra's formal outfit, and I can't see any weapon on him either.

He stands tall and thin, yet every movement shows the tension of those wiry muscles. And even now, without my mana, I can sense them. The hearts beating in his chest.

Five of them.

Four kinetic and one thermal, all packed together so tightly it feels wrong, like they just shouldn't fit in the small space they occupy within that strange circle inside him.

Plus, he holds an additional thermal heart in his hand. Mine.

I feel my energy drop as I stand there, gradually bleeding out. My spine is heavily damaged, and with that black orb tearing my mana away, any bit of mana I regenerate is instantly taken. I can't gather more kinetic energy, only scrape together what's left to keep myself upright and move a body that no longer listens to my other signals due to my ruined nerves.

The Absolute isn't holding me in place, nor is he stopping me from trying to heal. But my thermal healing is gone, and Lily's marks are useless now, all their mana drained by that orb still floating there, pulling more and more mana from the air.

Yet I stand tall, even as my body weakens with each passing second and my mind begins to slip.

"A human heart, and yet it's still somewhat strong. Almost too strong for someone as young as you," he says slowly, his voice matching his presence, casual and calm. "But it looks like someone powerful made preparations for you. I think. Who the hell knows? Not me for sure, I was never too good with mana, and this is some ancient and fancy stuff."

He even smiles, then looks straight at me, locking eyes. It feels like he's counting down my life, watching the blood drain out, curious about what I'll do, whether I'll beg, run, or fight.

I do none of that. I just stand there with a hole in my chest, alive only thanks to the little bit of physical stats I do have to keep my body functioning and the kinetic energy I'm using to keep me standing and moving.

Next to me, Magistra is still bowed over, deeply, trembling.

"Did you make this?" the demon asks, pointing at the black orb, now the size of a grape and far more dangerous, pulling mana from a wider and wider area.

"Yes," I answer, surprised by how weak my voice sounds.

The edges of my vision blur, and I feel the beating of my Mana Heart slowing down as it begins to give up.

"My Absolute, if you let me explain..." Magistra starts to say, but the Absolute does something I can't even perceive, stopping her instantly, like she was slapped.

"I'm trying hard not to be 'rude,' as you humans like to call our behavior, and instead... How do you guys say it? Talk it out?" he says, taking steps through the air. Each step sends waves of raw kinetic energy across the area, even though he's clearly holding back his strength.

Stopping in front of her bowed figure, he asks, "Did I ask you to speak, my little Champion?"

"N-no. I apologize," Magistra manages to stammer.

He sighs. "Sometimes I think I might be too kind to you humans. But well, I made a promise to that man, and unlike your treacherous kind, I intend to keep it."

Turning back to me, he asks, "Now then, what happened here, little guy?" There's no threat in his voice, no sign of what he might do if I should lie, and he doesn't need to. I have no illusion that I could lie to someone like him anyway.

I move kinetic energy through my body to help myself stand and look him in the eyes as I explain, "I'm here from the tutorial because of a Beyond quest she gave out. During the quest, we found out that she had created this barrier and that she was using it to infect people with a virus meant to spread and kill demons only. To make sure my disciple and her friends could survive, I broke the barrier in a way that I hoped would catch your attention."

I stop there. He stares at me like he's waiting for me to continue, but I don't. Everything that matters has already been said.

He laughs shortly. "I don't remember all those treaties and rules we agreed on, but I'm sure this breaks quite a large number of them. Little Champion, tell me, why couldn't you just declare war on a demon Champion or two and fight for their territory?" His voice sounds almost disappointed as he talks to her, still not looking away from me.

This time, Magistra keeps silent without being told to. I notice her body shaking, the faint tremors of fear she's trying to hide. The Absolute surely reads every twitch of her muscles, every nervous breath.

"Human boy, what should I do?" the demon Absolute asks.

“How the fuck would I know?” The words slip out before I can stop them, my tongue getting the better of me. I snap back to reality and force my hazy mind to focus.

“Maybe I should kill everyone below us, just to make sure we’ve gotten rid of that nasty virus.” The Absolute puts his hand on his chin and smiles at me while my Ignition Heart keeps beating in his other hand.

The first thing I feel hearing that is anger. More blood gushes from my wound as I tense my body, and for the shortest moment, the black orb floating above us halts, almost as if it were listening to something. The thinnest thread of mana reaches out of it, extending toward me, looking like a spider thread trying to escape a whirlpool.

Then the moment passes, and the thread disappears back into the hungry black orb, which then continues its devouring anew. I cough and feel more blood fill my mouth.

Laughing, the Absolute walks a few steps around, seemingly thinking for a moment, before turning to Magistra. “We don’t want this fine young lad to vanish when his quest giver dies, so I’ll spare your life for now and allow you to live a few minutes longer. You will go and challenge one of my Enforcers to a proper demon duel right away. Go, little Champion.” He waves his hand dismissively.

Magistra leaves without a word. And that’s it. Even with my body in this state, it sends shivers down my back, seeing how easily the man in front of me commands someone of her level. And the fact that she didn’t even try to resist makes it even stranger. It makes what she tried to do feel that much crazier. What was she thinking? Have I missed something?

Before I can even process it, I feel a sharp push against my chest. Looking down, I see the Absolute’s hand buried in it, punching another hole straight through, this time from the front instead of the back.

He pulls his hand free, and inside my chest, I feel my Ignition Heart exposed and trembling.

Then, this insane demon uses his will to force the third seal fully open, flooding my body with a Champion grade torrent of thermal energy. But before I can be burned to a crisp, the Absolute guides it, controls it with patterns similar to mana cycling, and yet somehow completely different. The sheer amount of thermal energy drives my passive ability to full activation, using that overwhelming energy to its absolute limit.

It only takes a few seconds, but when it's done, he pulls his presence back, and the seals fall back into place again. My body is whole. Weak, but already regaining its strength.

"There are a few reasons I've decided to let you live," he says with an excited smile as he explains. "First, and the second most important one is that I liked your answers. No bullshit, no pretending, straight to the point. I am a busy man, so I appreciate that. That was a lie. I'm not busy at all. Another reason is that I sense my daughter's primordial energy on you, and I can tell that you've spent a few days with her and those kids around her down there. Your desire to save your disciple and her friends, probably included her too, so that's it. You also remind me of that man when he was younger. Damn, if that human wasn't something truly glorious in his bloody rage."

He takes a step forward, and that typical demonic maniacal expression spreads across his face. His eyes open wide, his pupils shrink, his eyes glow even redder as he leans close and whispers, "But most importantly, I sense a mark on you. Not the one from the Ruler, not even the one laid by that creature with the strange primordial energy, even though that one fascinates me too. No, I mean the one that was left by someone truly powerful. If you meet her again, tell her to come here and challenge me. Tell your master that. If you don't, I've made it so your heart will explode in the next five to ten years. I'm not sure exactly when."

Straightening up just as suddenly as he leaned in, his hearts beat once, and he waves his hand toward the black orb. A pulse of kinetic energy hits it, launching it high into the sky and off into space, to become someone else's problem as per usual. Then the Absolute disappears, and the force of his departure wipes the sky clean for hundreds of miles, leaving a clear ring without clouds that could be seen from orbit.

Only then do the sounds return as the wind starts to blow through the area, and I know that I and everyone below are alive only because he chose to limit his power so much. That guy didn't feel much weaker than Lissandra, almost as strong as she was back in the last days of Eladore.

Once mana starts filling my body again, I take a deep breath of relief. Then I put on a brave face, push aside the thought of how close that was, and let myself drop lower, gradually landing near the remains of Randy's house. As my minion leaps forward to hug me, my eyes flick to Tykka, and I notice how her face shares some resemblance with the guy who just left. Still, I decide to stay quiet about it.

The kids are all healed and fine, so I let Lily heal me too, even though I'm sure it's mostly for her peace of mind. While she does, I focus on reactivating my constructs and all the nodes, arrays, and systems I now feel almost naked without.

"Thank you," I tell Lily.

"That was one of the craziest things you've ever done, Nat," she says seriously.

"So far," I correct.

"So far," she nods.

"Next time I'll do better," I reply, glancing around to locate Savant as he appears nearby.

There isn't a single wound on his body. Even his clothes look perfectly clean, which tells me just how easily he handled his fights.

What an annoying guy.

Stopping in front of him, I take the sword in my hand by the blade and offer it to him. He takes it with a short nod, and I watch as the Sword of Aeons sinks into his right arm. Sets of inscriptions flashing brightly for a moment before the light fades and the markings vanish entirely.

"We've got a few minutes before our quest giver dies and we get sent back to Beyond. I guess this time there won't be any quest rewards or bonuses. You could probably go around and do some looting if you want."

"It's okay. I've already absorbed a few interesting things I managed to get my hands on."

"The virus?"

“Obviously. And a few more. Lastly, I have a feeling you owe me.”

“That is true. What do you want?”

“My handler told me you know Brich from Crimson Forge?”

“Somewhat.”

“Good. Just help me get a meeting with him. I want to join Crimson Forge, but not under one of those contracts these crazies usually like to hand out.”

I look at his hand, the one that absorbed the Sword of Aeons, and remember that Crimson Forge is one of the richest guilds in Beyond and currently number one in crafting.

At this moment, Savant’s eyes look far too honest. Those are the eyes of a person planning something illegal.

Chapter 727: Interesting person

A few minutes isn’t that long, but that’s all the time I have before Magistra finds an Enforcer to challenge for her duel, ends her life out of spite, or maybe even tries to throw an attack at the Absolute, who will then kill her.

Not far away, I notice Fen as well, left without his master. The soon-to-be-not-noble lady’s pet lingers there, abandoned by his owner, who clearly thought her goals were more important than him. A tiny part of me almost pities the six-legged rat. That horned, fennec-like fox. But then I hear his yapping, and I change my mind immediately. He sounds just as spoiled and bratty as before.

My minion’s first minion is already eyeing him. Remembering her role as cook for the others, I hope it’s not for the reason I think it is. Still, I have a strong suspicion she’ll be asking Vega if their group can keep him soon, and so Vega won’t try to cook him. Fen might even end up joining the gang or following them from a distance in hopes of scrounging some leftovers.

As amusing as it is to talk trash about that little animal, I doubt anyone in the gang could catch or hurt him anyway. Even though he is spoiled and has been slow in awakening his wild instincts, Fen is strong,

especially in terms of speed. He's already fast enough to rival some of the quickest humans back on Earth.

Lily, in just these few minutes, has already run several checks of the area again. She confirms with fairly high confidence that the virus is now extinct. She also explains that just before I created the black orb, she and Savant deployed some kind of bouncing mana pulse that wiped out the virus throughout the entirety of the quarantined zone. Well, more like purified it. They spread some sort of mana-based healing radiation that targeted the virus specifically, something close to a self-replicating antivirus effect. That effect should even hold for a while longer and target anything that remains of the virus, so likely even after Magistra dies and we get kicked out without the quest giver and forfeit our rewards.

In my opinion, it was worth it.

"Vega," I say, watching my disciple turn toward me as my tone hardens. "You guys need to leave this area as soon as possible. If anyone tries to stop you, tell them the Absolute told you to fuck off, right after he sent Magistra to die."

The change in my voice makes her expression sharpen. For the first time in a while, I see that look in her eyes that reminds me she has a skill called [Concentration], though she usually drops it around me.

"Will do, Master," she says seriously.

"It's a shame we couldn't stay longer, but maybe we'll get another chance soon." I reach out and ruffle my disciple's hair, placing a mana stone into her palm. "For your training, okay? And don't think I didn't notice, you've been ignoring mana again to focus on kinetic energy. That's fine if that's what you want, but it's better to be at least a little bit versatile. Think of it like giving yourself more trump cards."

Vega furrows her brow, then sighs and nods while squeezing the stone in her hand. "I will," she replies.

"Good. I don't know when I'll disappear, but you're doing well, so keep it up."

"Am I really?" Vega asks, unusually shy and quiet, her voice meant only for me.

I crouch down so our faces are on the same level. "I think so," I say with a small smile. Maybe it's my low mana reserves making me weak, or maybe it's how close I came to dying, but I pull her into a hug and whisper words meant only for the two of us. "You know I'm glad you're safe, right, Vega? I'm thankful to you for so much, and you feel like family to me."

Her small arms tighten around me, and for a moment, I swear I hear her sob and feel her body shake. But that can't be true. Minions don't cry.

When she lets go, her eyes are a little wet, probably from dust in the wind, and she whispers, "It is the same for me." In the bright light that breaks through the clouds and falls on her in that moment, her smile looks especially radiant.

"Go to your minions and leave now, okay? You guys be careful. And one last thing, Vega, please don't eat that six-legged animal."

"The dumb overgrown rat, Master?"

"Yes. He's got some fight in him, too, so if he decides to stick around, take him in. I don't think you'll lose anything by it."

"I'll think about it. Later then, Master!" She chirps with one last quick hug and a bright grin as she runs back to her group.

Still smiling, I watch them. I notice Tykka glancing my way, but she quickly looks elsewhere when our eyes meet.

Lily steps closer. "I'll check on them again and stay with them until we leave, just in case. Savant wanted to talk to you, so go ahead."

"Thanks again."

"If you're really so thankful, I'll remind you of that later," she says with a teasing smile. "I'll see you on the ninth floor, right? According to the schedule?"

“Yes, once I’ve taken care of a few things in Beyond.”

“Then later, Nat.” With that, she turns and heads back over to the kids, who she’s already tricked into liking her somehow. Maybe “tricked” isn’t the right word. She’s always been kind, that’s just how she is.

Savant comes to a stop beside me, watching her as well. Then he says simply, “You should be very, very careful about her. There were already rumors about her in Beyond, and after this quest, even if it’s marked as a failure, there’ll be a lot more.”

“She’s always been a good healer.”

“No.” Savant shakes his head. “You really don’t get it, do you?”

“Then stop being cryptic and tell me,” I answer.

“What she did with that virus is something even some healers over level four hundred wouldn’t have been able to pull off. And she didn’t even realize how difficult it should be. The way she heals others, too... There are plenty of people who can instantly regenerate their own limbs, but she does it for others. Do you understand how much harder that is? You have to sync your healing mana with their body and keep the flow stable while compensating for resistance and fluctuation. That means reading the body’s entire structure in real time, and rebuilding it cell by cell. Even one wrong resonance and the tissue warps, nerves misalign, or the limb grows unevenly. But not her. She makes it look as easy as breathing.”

“I see.”

“No, you fucking don’t.” His tone sharpens, snapping my attention to him. I meet his eyes, caught off guard by the curse, as he continues, “Listen. There are already quite a few rumors about how she’s one of the best healers since Kindness. They get dismissed most of the time, laughed at even, but every few months, there’s another silly person or two saying the same thing.”

I glance at Lily in the distance. She’s laughing as my minion swings a dagger at her because she tried to touch her horns.

Savant's voice stays steady. "It might not be a big problem during the tutorial, but it sure as hell will be after. We're not part of any coalition, and Earth has no backers. Someone powerful might try to use her. You probably don't know much about Kindness, but you should learn. What she could do was beyond what people believed possible. If Lily can do even a tenth of that, or if someone just thinks she can, people will burn entire planets to reach her."

"Gotcha."

"You don't..."

"I said I get it." I cut him off. After everything that happened and after feeling so powerless in front of the Absolute, I'm sure I don't sound as confident as usual. Still, I know I'm doing my best, and I'll keep doing so.

Before I can say anything else, Magistra dies, and I'm pulled away.

As expected, I appear in Greed's usual space. But this time she isn't sitting behind her desk. Before I even register it, she's in front of me, pressing her hand against my chest.

Surprised by what feels like a straight-up assault, I try to push her away, but she doesn't move an inch, and I stay frozen where I am. After a second, she releases me, and I stumble back.

"At least take me out for coffee first or something," I manage to say.

"Oh, shut it," she snaps, her tone sharp. "I just fixed the shitty job that hornless lunatic did with your thermal heart. Who does that bastard think he is, trying to tamper with something Master Lissandra's imitation created? He ruined her handiwork without even realizing it, and I had to fix it before your heart exploded tomorrow."

"What the fuck."

"Yes. Talented as he is, there are things that lunatic's absolutely shit at without even having the common sense to realize it." Her voice drops lower as she mutters, "All these idiots running their mouths about my master's ancient techniques, calling them old-school and pretending to understand even half of what she did. Dumb Fuckers. And you, you're the same. After the Last Elf debacle, I expected something like this, but holy fuck. Did you really think that was a good idea?"

"Y... yeah."

Greed slides back behind her table and, in a very unladylike way, props her legs up on it before turning her eyes back to me. "You were lucky this time, more so than you realize. A single twitch of the wrong muscle, an off tone, or a single sentence he didn't like would have been enough to get you killed."

"I thought as much."

"No, you didn't. Even your disciple uses her brain more than you do."

"Minions have no thoughts. This is an established fact. Scientists across the entire system have tested it repeatedly, dozens of times in fact, using scans, interviews, puzzles, mirrors, and even clipboards. Researchers attempted long term observation and found the same result every time. Empty head. Perfect silence."

"Sure." She rolls her eyes. "Anyway, how did you like the Hornless Lunatic?"

"He was an interesting person. Why do you ask? Are you planning to tell me more?"

She smiles. "Maybe. I told you before, there's information only I can give you to feed that greedy little hunger for knowledge of yours. And today, thanks to how badly your healer's handler screwed up, I've got a lot more leeway than usual."

I create a manabloc chair and sit opposite her. "Please continue."

"Hornless modified your heart, hoping you'd run to your master, who'd get angry and challenge him."

"I figured as much."

"Yes, that part's simple. But did you know that guy almost became the Ruler of Wrath? The current one barely won in the end."

My thoughts freeze. I stare at her, and she smiles, clearly pleased with my reaction. "I did not know that," I say.

"Well, now you do. Hornless is one of my candidates for a weapon against Pride, so that's that. You probably didn't realize it, but he's far stronger than he lets on."

"How strong?"

"You noticed his hearts?"

"Yes."

"Well, he brute-forced his way into mastering spatial expansion just so he could fit more full-sized hearts into his chest."

"What?"

"I think it's partly sentimental," she says, unbothered, "Back when he was still a slave, and the planet was ruled by humans, he and his people fought for freedom. I watched it all from his beginnings as a talented child born into slavery, to when he joined the rebellion. He's quickly grown stronger over the years, becoming a leader, gathering allies, and building his army. But it wasn't easy for him. His sister, father, best friend, and daughter all died along the way, each powerful in their own rights, but hunted down nonetheless, because his enemies couldn't kill him. And that man kept each of their hearts inside his chest, growing them stronger with him so his beloved could keep living that way. At its peak, the war he led was one of the bloodiest in the world's history, spreading across multiple planets. Dozens of Champions and several Absolutes died in the process."

"Oh."

“Yes, oh,” she says. “I’m telling you because there’s a chance you’ll meet him again in the future. Words don’t matter much to him, so always make sure your intentions are true to yourself. There are a few things he hates more than people who put on a mask.”

Chapter 728: The most beautiful woman to ever live

“So you’ve been watching us the entire time?”

“Of course I did. You’re mine after all. I’m just greedy like that.”

“There have to be some protections against that. Some kind of system privacy rules, you know, stuff like that.”

“None at all.”

“Well, one of these days, I’m sure there’ll be an attendee labor union to fight for those rights. By the way, I have a question.”

“The answer is yes. I already know what I want in exchange for helping you save your beloved disciple.”

“Not that, but since you brought it up, go ahead. What is it you want?”

“Call me Ruby.”

“That’s it?”

“I see. I’ll try then, Ruby.”

“Thank you. Now then, what would you like to know?”

“You seem to be enjoying this situation. Did Lily’s handler really screw up that badly?”

“Her handler is Wrath, by the way. He either didn’t bother to check the quest properly or didn’t have anyone else do it for him. We have some basic protections in place so that while attendees can be sent on dangerous missions, it’s at least within reason, especially for someone like her. As he likes to do, he ignored it all. Let me tell you, most of the Rulers aren’t very good Handlers.”

“Are healers really that valuable?”

“Healers in general? No. Healers like her? Yes.”

“And all that stuff about her being the most talented healer since Kindness?”

“ ... ”

“Please stop laughing.”

“ ... ”

“I’m getting annoyed.”

“Nathaniel, there’s a reason why you and that Savant guy are both so very wrong. Yes, Lily Chen is talented, very much so. I’m sure that in a few decades, maybe centuries, she’ll become an impressive healer, possibly one of the most gifted of this generation. But comparing her to Kindness? There’s so much you don’t know about that pitiful woman.”

“Then tell me.”

“Is that what you really want to know? I won’t be able to tell you much else if that’s your choice. Even though it’s not a secret in the strictest sense, it’s still about one of the Rulers, so it carries weight.”

“It’s fine. I want to know.”

“As expected of you. Anyway, I’ll keep it short. There are parts of her past that only she can tell you, and some things she’s told me will die with me. Kindness and the Cinderbear, before he became Charity, were both there when the system first began expanding into our universe, during these early millennia. The lights in the sky and the mana rains you saw on the first floor came from that time, they were signs of the system spreading. When Cinderbear became Charity, he just chose that era for his floor, and we had to heavily modify it after the fact. Some say he chose that time because those were his last peaceful days before Kindness found him, and by studying his body, became what she is now.”

“What...”

“Don’t ask. I’m not saying more. Even this hint is very valuable, so think of it on your own. This is just the setup, a short introduction. If you meet Kindness again, she’ll likely tell you more if you ask. But what I can say is that she grew immensely stronger after meeting Cinderbear. She experimented, learned from his body, and that phase of her development lasted a long time. Later, she even worked with Pride for a while, and some of the races you see today are their creation.”

“What...”

“I told you not to ask, and just take the hints I am giving you. And yes, I’m saying some of this just to torture that curious little brain of yours. It’s fun watching you squirm and seeing your head almost smoke from trying to piece it together.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“Of course you will. You’re petty like that. But as I was saying, a very, very long time passed, and she decided it was her time to die on her planet, surrounded by her beloved King and his warriors. It must have been beautiful, her empire, I mean. I’ve only ever heard stories and seen fragments of old records. Dozens of planets under her rule, from before she became a Ruler, because she didn’t want to and instead lived as an Absolute. Her healing aura spread through all of those connected worlds, and her people lived free of illness, with lifespans multiplied many times over.”

“She was that powerful?”

“And much more. She outlived the rise and fall of entire civilizations. Some even worshipped her as an immortal deity. She was the most beautiful woman to ever live, they said. But for a reason I will keep to myself, she’d decided she’d had enough and tried to take her life. She destroyed her brain, her heart, everything she could reach, and closed her eyes, thinking it would be the end of her long life. Yet her talent and power would not let her die. She fulfilled some twisted condition that evolved her abilities into [Immortality], merging several of her most beloved skills into something monstrous. It took away what she loved most. Healing and helping people.”

“Ah.”

“Yes, ah. She woke up years later to find her world and all its connected planets turned into death traps. Her healing aura, once miraculous, had twisted into something no one could stop, killing billions. You’ve probably wondered about that, but some of the floors, even though they’re based on the Rulers’ histories, are heavily modified. Otherwise, no attendee would survive them.”

“I thought as much. And what did she do after waking up to find all of that?”

“I’ve been thinking while talking to you about what I could tell you, but how about I show you instead? I’ll create a small window so you can see what a truly powerful Ruler is.”

“You know I won’t say no.”

“So be it. Just look... and see what she’s asking you to destroy.”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“Do you see now? Do you understand how foolish your words were?”

“ ... ”

“Do you have no words at all?”

“H-how... What is... What am I looking at?”

“This is Kindness. Or at least, what remains of her original body.”

“That thing? That can’t be her.”

“Unfortunately, for her, it is. Tell me, Nathaniel, describe for me what you see.”

“How the hell would I describe this? You opened a window to space, and we’re looking at a black hole surrounded by a halo made of flesh, bones, and... god knows what kinds of unholy gore orbiting it. There’s so much of it, enough to make multiple planets. The sheer scale is hard to grasp. That can’t be her.”

“But it is. What you’re looking at is the Black Hole Forge that the Corporation now operates with the permission of Kindness herself, as she clings to the hope that they’ll someday find a way to kill her.”

“How is that even possible?”

“Time. A lot of time. Someone like Pride or the Elf could probably tell you exactly how long, maybe a few others, too. But honestly, I think most people would rather not know. When her world ended, and she failed to die, she spent ages trying to end it again. She cast herself into blazing stars. She battled dragons. She awakened forgotten gods and hunted the Old Rulers across dying worlds. She faced many ancient beasts and challenged Pride again and again.”

“This is so fucked up.”

“It is. I agree with you. Every attempt only made her [Immortality] stronger. What used to be an active skill she could control turned into something else entirely. Now she serves as an eternal warning for

anyone chasing power, a reminder to be careful with the highest grade skills. So, in the end, she risked it all and hurled herself into a black hole, but even that went exactly as she feared it would. I don't even want to imagine how long she was tortured there. Broken and reformed again and again as pieces of her were devoured or cast out. Just how long did it take? Tens of thousands of years? Millions? Her body refused to die, endlessly regenerating until it grew into the abomination it is now, crawling its way back out of the black hole with no one knowing how much still remains inside of it. Some say even the system pitied her, allowing Cinderbear to become Charity just to save her, and put it to a stop. Maybe Cinderbear pitied her too, since it was from him she learned the secrets that led to her [Immortality]."

"Is there really no way?"

"Maybe one day. Trust me, there's no being in existence hoping for that more than her. What you saw orbiting the black hole, all of that is her flesh, bones, nerves, skin, organs. Quantities even a Ruler can barely comprehend. Her body floats there, left for the Corporation to harvest. Most of the strongest items they sell are forged from that same flesh and bones, and she allows it. In exchange, every hundred years, they must attempt to kill her. Ninety percent of their entire budget, and incredible resources, go into those efforts under the contract she made with them. I oversee it, alongside my Master of Greed, the High Director of the Corporation, to make sure they actually try, not just pretend to avoid destroying the source of their wealth and power."

The window closes, cutting me off from the horrific view. I look at Ruby, who now seems more solemn than before, and I can't help but feel some of that weight settle on me too.

"You should go now," Ruby says, waving her hand.

And just like that, I disappear.

Appearing in my residence, I take a moment to look around before moving to the terrace. I sit down in a chair and let my eyes drift over the city below. It's night outside, and the streets are lighting up gradually, one by one, until the view begins to glow like veins of gold throughout the dark.

For a while, I let myself relax, to truly rest, but even that is impossible to do completely. My body still complains under the strain of mana refilling my system, forcing me to use Mana Cycling just to keep it moving. Compared to how it usually feels when my mana is full, this is easier, almost soothing. It has been a long time since I could feel that.

So I just sit there, watching as the city fully lights up. An hour passes, then another, then two more.

Only then do I stand and head for the door, moving without kinetic energy or any mana beyond what I need for cycling. I walk at the pace I would have before the tutorial, slow and human.

I have about three days left since the quest was meant to last seven. There were no rewards, but I'm still sure what I did will count toward the calculations of my Beyond rank and my goal of reaching S rank, even if it is just for bragging rights. With the option to take S rank Beyond quests as an A rank, I am confident I will get there faster than most people. Well, except perhaps monsters like Nyssa.

Maybe I could speed up my schedule and head to the fifth floor early. Or maybe there is something else. The best move now is to check with my guild, so I do exactly that and make my way to our local branch.

With people here barely needing sleep, the place is just as busy as during the day. There are even faces I do not recognize, probably night owls or those on shifted schedules.

I find one of the Vice Guild Master's assistants, one of those Local guys who keeps the Primordial Knights running smoothly, and give him a brief report. He writes everything down carefully. I have learned that doing things like this helps when it comes time to renegotiate contracts, better pay, fewer responsibilities, and all the usual perks.

In the end, I am assigned a short three day mission that fits neatly into my free time. When I hear the details, I almost groan but manage not to show it. The Vice Guild Master's assistants are sharp, they pick up on irritation easily and remember it to use against you later.

With the new mission in hand, I move to one of the guild lounges to wait for my partner for the duration of this mission.

To wait for the most demon demon to ever demon. Morwag.

I'll be joining him on a mission to kill the Guild Master of the Eternal Court and wipe out the remains of their forces hiding in one of their secret bases here on the fourth floor of Beyond.

Chapter 729: Primordial Knight Morwag

Morwag towers over me, standing uncomfortably close. His expression keeps shifting in confusion as we stand outside the Megacity, deep enough into one of the countless canyons of the fourth floor of Beyond for it to have vanished from sight.

“But I was given this mission alone,” he repeats, this time with a harsher voice.

I have a feeling he’s been waiting for us to be alone. I heard the vice guild master scolded him not long ago, so maybe he didn’t want to risk possibly splattering me against the wall while I was still within the vice guild master’s reach.

“They told me to join you for support, mainly to keep watch so no one escapes, and to help you get into shielded rooms,” I say.

“I can just break the walls myself.”

“Look, I’m just doing this for a better contract in the future, not because I like it. You can kill everyone in there, honestly, I don’t even want to level up.”

“Is that it?” His eyes narrow, and the pressure on me increases.

In a flash, I remember what he did to that girl from the triplets and how he traumatized the remaining two.

“It is,” I answer, thinking that as beatable as some S ranks might look, they really aren’t. Most of them are probably going to be future Absolutes of their planets. And since I didn’t get a promotion to S rank even after what I did with the black orb, that says a lot about their strength for them to deserve that rank.

“Is that it?” he asks again and takes another step closer.

I take a step back, look around, and seeing no one else to listen in, I say honestly, “Look, they want me to retrieve any valuable items we find there, especially that pristine one their guild master was trying to fuel with demon hearts or something. One of the vice guild master's assistants made me agree to those

terms before even giving me the location. I only agreed because they promised me some very good rewards, and I likely wouldn't have found the hideout on my own."

"Oh," Morwag sighs, disappointed, "how pathetic."

"Man's gotta eat. And I already made a deal that'll allow me to study any items we get, maybe I'll even take some of it as my cut instead of other stuff. If I decide to, they won't even be allowed to sell them until my tutorial ends, in case I want to study them before then."

"How boring."

"Your fucking face is boring," I snap.

"Huh? What are you going to do about that? Throw your arm at me?" His teeth flash in a daring smile. "Go on, I want to see you do it again, just like one of those damn gray lizards."

"No, I won't throw my arm at you. I'll take yours and shove it up your ass."

Morwag laughs out loud at that, then turns to walk again, and I follow behind him while he says, "Nyssa told me to erase what's left of them, and that's just what I'll do. If you steal my prey, I will kill you."

He says it in the same tone he used when he told the triplet he would kill her. I don't doubt for a moment that he would do it if it came to that, even with my status as a guild member. I've learned a bit about him during my stay at the guild. Some from the rumors, others as first hand information from guild members.

In a way, the threats Morwag throws around are cruel because of the sheer certainty that he'd actually follow through on them. But from another point of view, they're a warning and a mercy, him drawing a clear line beyond which he knows he'll snap.

As much as it irks me at times, I also realize I'll probably never find an easy person to cooperate with, not this deep in Beyond, littered as it is with lunatics counted amongst the strongest from Hell difficulty. And in a way, I prefer his clear warnings over the scheming of some backstabbing asshole.

I follow in his steps while constantly checking for enemies or traps laid by the Eternal Clowns. We aren't that far from Megacity, so I don't expect monsters in the area, but I can't let that make me too relaxed.

Meanwhile, with my free mental capacity, I keep replaying what happened during the Beyond quest. Especially the moment when I accumulated all that mana, the feeling of the black orb, the way the orb so weirdly reacted to me, and lastly, the way the Hornless Demon cycled thermal energy through my body. He did it with the full output of Ignition Heart by using a technique not unlike Mana Cycling.

Where Mana Cycling, which I still call the cyclist destroyer, feels complex and layered, the thermal cycling technique he used felt more straightforward and simple, as expected from a demon. It moved through the smallest number of pathways possible, letting it frizzle on the edges and spill through the body. The way it moved felt like a rope of flame through which a whirlpool spun up and down, calibrated for a certain amount of inefficiency and spillage.

I'm sure someone could describe it in fancy mana-science terms. Even I could if I wanted. I've picked up dozens, maybe hundreds, of obscure terms while studying the many mana stones that I've kept in my possession from the bunker on the fifth floor and the Academy through Min-Jae's efforts.

But I won't. Fuck those pretentious assholes.

Instead, as always, I try to remember the feeling itself, because even as my body burned alive, I made sure to observe it all as any other normal person would.

You could be reading stolen content. Head to the original site for the genuine story.

For a moment, I refocus on Morwag, who stops and sniffs the air for a moment. The entire time, he's been checking the mana stone he holds, likely using it as a map. Now that he's in hunting mode, he's quieter, less approachable, and even more dangerous than usual. Combined with his massive build, like Jean's, his long white hair, and thick horns, it makes for an intimidating sight.

"They have traps set to trigger alarms," I tell him, referring to a thing I noticed a moment ago with my eye trait, already knowing what he likely senses.

Morwag nods. "Of course they do." Then, without thinking much, he snaps his eyes toward the ground with a wild expression.

His primordial energy swirls around him and gathers on his palm, the raw force of binding primordial energy now tuned to unbind the connections around it. It cuts off the near-imperceptible lines of the teleportation arrays below, rendering them useless, and doing it all without triggering any of their alerts.

Then he waves his hand and the stone under him cracks open, widening into a tunnel heading deep below the ground, and I watch as light shines from the bottom as it pierces into one of the light tunnels underneath.

Morwag jumps down, and I follow right behind him.

POV Eternal Court

"Can't you feel it? I swear I felt a draft," I tell the man standing beside me. That asshole pisses me off, especially since he managed to get a few nice things from the Ancient Armory, but for now, he's too strong for me to do anything about it. He is a fairly decent A rank after all.

He answers with an annoying smirk, gesturing toward the hallway lit by mana stones. "We're underground, how the hell would there be wind? Maybe Shyla's been experimenting with her new item?"

"It could make wind? I thought it had ice-based powers," I muse.

Before he can answer, another voice cuts in, cold and calm. "There are two ahead of us, and three more further down the hallway to the right."

I don't recognize the voice, but hearing their steps, I wait. Something about those words, and the tone they expressed, feels wrong, so deeply wrong.

Then they appear from behind the corner, a huge demon smiling widely at me, his red eyes glowing brighter than the tunnel lights, and next to him a young man with golden circles in his eyes, and an emotionless expression, soaked in arrogance.

“Morwag... It’s fucking Morwag!” the asshole next to me shouts and turns to run, but it’s too late.

The huge, muscular demon moves faster than I expect, reaching us in an instant, and I feel his hand grab my head. The last thing I see is that asshole’s head coming close to mine until they crash together. I hear a crack and the sound of a ripe fruit exploding, and then only darkness.

POV Eternal Court

“N-no, no, no, no, no, please, go away. GO FUCKING AWAY!” My throat hurts as I shout from behind the enchanted crystal glass with a dozen or so layered barriers around it.

I’m locked inside the contamination testing room we’d designed to endure large-scale explosions. It’s still contaminated, but I’d rather be trapped here than caught in the room on the other side. I even destroyed the control panel so they couldn’t get to me.

The room behind the glass is an all-white clean room, filtered and ventilated, but now it’s full of corpses. Ten or more bodies scattered around the chamber. Some have been torn in half, others have been completely disassembled, leaving what used to be their bodies splattered across the white walls.

In the middle of it all stands Primordial Knight Morwag, dressed in a white and pale blue uniform, holding the head scientist by the skull, lifting him high into the air.

The man twitches, still trying to fight back. He throws lightning at the demon, fires light projectiles, and even pulls out a dagger and stabs at him a few dozen times.

None of it matters. None of his attacks hurt the demon, who stands there looking at him, seemingly curious. His body is covered in blood, and there are even drops clinging to his face and staining his skin. Only his long white hair remains untouched by it all, still so pure white. His red eyes look as if they’ve absorbed the blood itself to enhance their color.

Looking at me, the demon squeezes. The head of the scientist bursts in his hand, and the body falls motionless to the ground. The demon then swings his arm, flinging the brain matter stuck to his fingers across the walls.

"I can break it, but I don't want to trigger alarms and scare the vermin away. Can you do it?" His words sound almost like a challenge as he turns to the other man in the room. The way he looks at him feels much the same as it did when he looked at the people he just killed. It almost makes me feel hope that he might attack him too, even though they both seem to be from the Primordial Knights.

"I DID NOTHING, I SWEAR! I only joined them a few weeks ago, I swear, I promise! Fucking please!" I keep shouting until my voice cracks, but no one hears me. The room's sealed tight, soundproof, closed off from within. My screams only echo back at me.

In desperation, I start hitting the crystal glass. The other man only glances my way for a moment and says, "I already cut the alarm they tried to trigger, so I can get through the barriers too."

For some reason, his voice is just as terrifying as the demon's. Calm, collected, confident.

He turns toward me, a faint shimmer rippling around him. The gold in his eyes burns deeper, pulling me in as the world around him fades to black and white. For a moment, he's the center of everything, the gold of his eyes the last color in all the world.

Then, with a shock, I watch the barriers shatter one after another in quick succession until none remain.

Seeing that, the demon steps forward and doesn't even bother breaking the freshly disenchanting crystal glass. And though the glass is still as thick as my arm, stronger than most metals, it means nothing to him.

He walks straight through it. The surface ripples like liquid for a split second as his face and body press against it before the glass cracks open, causing shards of glass that slide off his skin without leaving a mark. Every movement sends more cracks racing through the surface until the entire wall collapses and bursts apart in a cascade of glinting shards.

The demon doesn't pause or flinch. By the time the last fragments hit the floor, his hand is already on my head, lifting me off the ground with ease, leaving me hanging in the air.

"Nyssa Volare sends her greetings to the Eternal Court," he smiles.

His fingers tighten. I hear a wet pop before pain floods everything. My body jerks once, then nothing.

The last thing I see is the golden light of the other man's eyes reflecting off the shards of glass scattered across the floor.

Chapter 730: Feral animal

POV Nathaniel

The secret base isn't as populated as I thought it'd be. I think the final tally lands somewhere around fifty people, or at least that's all that remains of the Eternal Court. Everyone else is either dead, left the guild, or scattered across the other floors. Even from these remaining numbers, only around ten percent are what I'd think of as Locals, with most Locals tending to be on the smarter end of things, they probably left in greater numbers.

But Morwag doesn't let that fact stop him at all, and he doesn't bother to differentiate between them and the attendees. Not that it could truly be called a fight, since he just gets rid of everyone. But the longer it goes on for and the lesser the challenge, the more I start to sense him glancing my way.

Meanwhile, I point out directions, eventually directing him to the treasury, at which point I take the most valuable of the smaller items for myself, and send the rest to a depot outside through one of the many Ley Lines I've been stretching out behind me.

And we do find some interesting low-arcane items, but I can't bring myself to give them the same kind of attention I would have not long ago. Unfortunately, so far, I've seen nothing higher ranked than that. Well, at least not in the treasury. We found a few better items on a couple of the bodies. But even with mid-arcane items, these people didn't last more than a few seconds, having been surprised by intruders in their own base. Though some of them sensed us from further away and caused more of a racket before they died.

Funnily, the part of the base that shields it from being located from the outside also makes it difficult for detection-type skills to work through all the strange shielding alloys they've used. I can tell by how much trouble they give my senses, especially my more mana based ones. There are protections against thermal and kinetic scanning as well, but not to the same extent. I'm not that surprised by the lack of shielding against primordial senses. After all, our guild does have most of the experts on primordial energy.

So we move, swift and deadly. I try to avoid touching anyone with my mana, other than to sense them, to avoid gaining any shared experience for the kills, and Morwag just kills his way through.

Before long, we find ourselves in the most heavily shielded part of the base. It almost looks like a second, smaller hideout within the larger one as we stop in front of the circular metal door. Morwag doesn't wait for me to try opening it. He slams his fist against the center, sending a burst of binding energy through the door, reducing it to a pile of metal shavings scattered across the floor.

This time, an alarm rings out, and I raise my attention, quickly cutting off any new attempts at teleporting away and sending a new wave of scans inside, throwing all thought of stealth aside.

The metal of the walls reacts to his gesture and, like a crumpled ball of tinfoil, bends and seals shut, sealing us off from the outside.

This time, I keep a bigger distance between us and follow behind, sometimes leaving him to go into rooms to loot them while Morwag fights, taking his time against the more feisty opponents we've found.

The metal around us creaks as shockwaves rip through the tight space tear apart my eardrums multiple times. Explosions bounce off the walls only to grow stronger, and all the while, I'm looting private rooms, workshops, and storage, finding much better materials as we go, which I send out with the rest of it. I also don't forget to keep cutting off any attempts at teleportation outside.

Multiple defensive arrays activate, too, but all of them focus on Morwag, allowing me to move around with relative freedom.

A couple of times, someone tries to burrow through the walls to dig their way out toward the surface, but each one is swiftly hunted down by the most demon demon to ever demon.

The explosions intensify, and the waves of binding energy from Morwag do as well, signaling that the fights are quickly coming to an end.

At that time, I turn to my Ignition Heart and start transferring more thermal energy into mana. I also start gathering a good amount of kinetic and thermal energy on the side. I decide not to risk it and don't use the Thermal Cycling I have started developing, and instead keep to my old ways of handling it.

While working through these preparations, I still make sure to send all the most valuable items out of the base. I eventually find what seems to be the guild master's private treasury, with its wall broken by the fight and the inside exposed. From there, I gather all the items, among them multiple mid-arcane and even a few upper-arcane items as well. As much as I want to start examining them right on the spot, I leave it for the next time and send them out before heading out to see how the battle's been going.

A barrier flickers around me while the debris and energies swirling wildly inside clash against it, and I walk around the corner to take a look.

It is a mess, with Morwag facing that guy who seemed oh so charming during the Beyond event in the Armory. Now, even though he is just an A rank, he seems to be handling Morwag pretty well, though I think all of it can be attributed to the low pristine item he risked so much to get. An item that could have helped him destroy the competition once his tutorial ended, helping him become Absolute by being the only powerful individual left standing.

The low pristine item he is wearing is a suit of armor that seems to have been constructed from a transparent white plastic-like material. And inside the chest plate, is a thicker spot where three hearts have been set in no particular pattern. There are a few more hearts as well, one in one of the legs of the armor, another in the shoulder, and one more at the crown of the helmet. I don't even bother to count them.

The hearts are all covered in blood, contrasting strikingly against the translucent white of the armor. They even continue to pump blood through a series of channels etched throughout the armor, allowing some to escape from the top of the helmet and form a set of long horns that seem to be formed entirely of blood.

Weirdly, as much as I'd been expecting, the hearts don't seem to be generating any primordial energy, confusing me as to why there was even a need for real demon hearts. It makes me think he might not be using the armor to its full potential.

Instead, it seems like the armor might simply be converting the primordial energy into something else, if it's even using it at all, perhaps it's relying instead on the vitality of the hearts to power itself.

And power it has.

Standing there, dressed in the armor, the Eternal Court's guild master is actually slightly taller than Morwag, and each of his attacks throws the demon against the wall or easily overpowers him in raw strength. And the suit's speed is impressive, even though it might not seem like it, particularly since the pilot simply doesn't have proper instincts, perception, or experience to operate at such high speeds.

Each attack Morwag lands against the armor only ripples across the surface, causing the hearts to beat faster. Even his attempts at unbinding it don't seem to be doing anything, as if his primordial energies are simply refusing to work properly, either because of the armor itself or the material it's made from.

But each time, after each new attack that throws him against the wall or sends him crashing through the rooms, Morwag just stands back up, his smile growing wider and wider the longer they fight. His clothes are torn to shreds by now, leaving his upper body bare and revealing a set of muscles that look like forged steel, and even after all that, he doesn't seem to have sustained a single wound.

The demon screams something, the guild master shouts an insult back, and they crash against each other again, forcing me to put up a barrier to block yet another shockwave. The metal walls around us begin to crumble and groan like a submarine diving too deep, on the verge of being crushed by the pressure.

It continues like this for another minute before, after yet another punch, Morwag doesn't stand up and simply lies there in the pile of debris he fell into.

"Hahaha, that's it? Is this really all the famous Morwag can do? DO YOU FINALLY UNDERSTAND YOUR PLACE, YOU FERAL ANIMAL?" the guild master shouts as he starts laughing in mixed excitement and relief. He moves his hand and touches his forearm, as if typing at something.

The hearts inside begin to beat faster, sending blood surging through the transparent white material, while the blood red horns lengthen and the pressure radiating from him intensifies.

“I’ll tear out your fucking heart and add it to my armor! It will make a fine addition to my collection...”

His words freeze as the dust rising from where he threw Morwag begins to settle, revealing the demon buried in the ground, as if he were just taking a lazy moment after a fall. There isn’t a single wound on him, but his expression is different now.

“That’s it?” Morwag asks, his red eyes glowing from behind the hair falling across his face. “I thought you said it would get stronger the longer we fought, but instead it feels like you’re starting to feel weaker and weaker.” As he stands up, the debris around him crumbles and falls away. Gone is the maniacal grin. In its place is a level of anger and disappointment that feels far more terrifying.

“You...” the guild master starts, but he doesn’t even get to finish before Morwag is suddenly in front of him, the air shaking with a heavy thump from the speed of his motion.

This time, the punch feels different. Morwag slams his fist into the chestplate, making the guild master stumble back. There’s still no visible damage, but a stronger ripple than before spreads through the armor, and one of the hearts in the leg explodes, splattering blood inside the transparent material.

Morwag punches again, sending the man reeling, and another heart bursts. Before the guild master can even react, Morwag starts to pummel him relentlessly. Every attempt at defense fails as the demon catches his arms, twists them aside with ease, and drives his fists into him again and again. No matter how the man struggles or tries to strike back, Morwag controls every move, handling him like a toy in his grip.

He keeps slamming him against the walls and beating him without pause until each heart within the armor detonates one by one, taking the damage in place of the armor and the man trapped inside it.

Only then does the guild master manage to mumble, “P-please, wait just a mo-”

He doesn’t finish. The demon’s massive arm punches through the chest plate and into the man’s body, then rips his heart out in one brutal motion.

Right in front of the dying man's wide, disbelieving eyes, Morwag lifts the slowly beating heart to his face. He doesn't even give it a light sniff, instead, he takes a long, deep breath, even smearing the tip of his nose with blood as he presses it against the heart.

Then he smiles. "So weak," he says, crushing the heart in his hand as he watches the man die, sinking to his knees, and toppling to the side. As Morwag looks down at him, his hair slips forward, hiding his face from my view.

Silence fills the room as I begin gathering more mana and partially activate several arrays while splitting my mind into a set of combat-oriented subminds.

I can't see his face, but Morwag's voice alone is enough to tell what his expression has turned into.

"Nathaniel," he says, "you would be more fun to fight, right?"

He still doesn't look my way. His upper body shakes a little as a laugh slips out. "You wouldn't let me down like this vermin, right?"

Finally, he turns to me, his face lit by the flickering light of the ruined base, and for a moment, his expression freezes when he sees mine.

I'm not sure what expression I'm wearing that gives him pause, but I answer, "What do you think, bitch?"

Before he can move, I hurl every scrap of mana I've been gathering at him. Morwag stands there for a moment before he is flung away at high speed, breaking through steel walls. Only later does the shockwave arrive, too slow to follow.

My raw mana surges out like a tidal wave, destroying everything in its way. The walls shatter as they cease to exist, torn down to nothingness. The air distorts with the sheer force of the shockwaves bouncing through the base until they finally start to weaken, and open up a view of the sheer scale of the destruction around us.

Then there is silence. The light dies slowly, leaving the base trembling and the air thick with the hum of fading mana.

Even then, I don't stop, not for a moment. More mana floods my body and coils around me as I spin it, unleashing a barrage of attacks on the demon.