

Tutorial 731

Chapter 731: Fine gentlemen

The place around us starts to fall apart as I expand the field with kinetic energy and hold it steady. All the debris, even the dust, freezes in the air, but there's one thing I can't stop from moving.

Even through all of this, Morwag climbs his way out from behind the wall I sent him through. Cracks spread around him as more debris rains down, but then even that stops, freezing in midair.

That same maniacal smirk crawls back onto his face, and for the first time, there's a wound on him. It's barely a fingernail-length scratch on his chest, and from it, a single droplet of deep red blood flows down.

Morwag looks straight at me, picks up the droplet on the tip of his finger. His movements push through my kinetic hold by raw force alone, and he licks the blood from the tip of his finger.

An insane amount of absorbed kinetic energy fills me, feeding into what I'm already channeling. Morwag doesn't say a word as he charges at me again.

And I do exactly the same thing. I seize the massive amount of mana building inside me and release it in a concentrated blast aimed right at him.

This time, he tries to hold himself in place, binding himself to the floor, but everything around him shatters in the explosion, and he still goes shooting into the wall. The shockwaves rebound through the space, bursting my eardrums and deafening me once more.

Once again, I watch as he climbs out of the destruction, this time opening his mouth to speak.

I do the same thing again and send him flying in another blast of released mana.

I fire [Empyrean Lance]. I manifest powerful projectiles that tear through the air with booming waves of thunder. I shape orbs charged with thermal and kinetic energy. I weave arrows from Ley Lines.

A constant barrage of attacks rips the whole place apart, and I get to see just how many of them dissolve before reaching him. Threads of mana unravel, energy collapses into glittering particles that drift through the air around us.

After a while, I stop and watch him climb out again. He tries to move fast, but my [Redistribution] slows him down. I've seen his bursts of speed before and can't let him use it again. I can't stop him completely, but I do slow him enough to cut his momentum short.

"Are you getting tired?" Morwag smiles at me.

There are a few more scratches on his body now, but after a barrage that could have erased several city blocks, he still stands there looking virtually untouched.

"Tired," I say, tasting the word, letting it hang in the air for a moment. "No, I don't think I am."

As I speak, I gather even more mana. Unlike before, when I had to channel everything just to break the Champion's barrier, now I'm free to rely on my own reserves and what I can draw in myself. There's no Sword of Aeons and no people to protect. It's only my life on the line.

Pushing through my [Redistribution], Morwag reaches me at high speed, tanking the attacks I throw his way and unbinding them into clouds of loose mana. Just as he appears in front of me, I bury my feet into the ground, mana blazing through my body, all of it focused on raw body strengthening, and I punch the demon straight on.

His fist meets my reinforced body, and my chest caves in as I'm flung back, but not before I see my own fist slam into his face, and then bursting into a mist of bone, blood, and flesh. My hand explodes from the impact, unable to handle the energy coursing through it.

For a second, it feels like slow motion as I watch Morwag's cheek ripple under the strike and his head snap backward. Unlike me, he only staggers a few steps while I find myself being thrown across the chamber, but I don't fly as far as I should. I absorb the momentum midair and land softly, immediately boosting my body with kinetic energy and reaching Morwag again. He snaps his head back down and draws his arm to throw another punch.

I hit him again, using my other arm, slamming my fist into his face with the same result, and his counterstrike caves in my chest once more. This time, though, it hurts less, as I manage to react in time and absorb most of the kinetic force behind the impact.

Catching my balance again, I let go of any plans I had. Thermal energy leaks from my body as I slightly lift the third seal on the Ignition Heart, and I mimic the way that Absolute channeled it for me. Golden flames erupt from my body and blaze outward, lashing like massive molten whips that slice through what remains of the base and leave everything they touch glowing red and dripping metal.

I watch as my arms regrow at incredible speed, bones, nerves, and flesh stretching and reforming. But before I can finish, Morwag is already there, driving a third punch straight into my chest.

In return, I stab a jagged bone from my half-regenerated forearm into his stomach, only to watch it crack and snap under the impact. The heat burning from it scorches his skin, hissing as it melts through.

He doesn't even flinch. Instead, as if savoring the pain, he lets the burning touch linger and grabs my forearm, pulling me closer. For a brief moment, we lock eyes, and then I gather every drop of thermal energy inside me, convert it to mana, and let it explode between us, throwing us away from each other.

Morwag rolls across the ground again while I absorb my momentum and disrupt most of the explosion heading my way. Before I can act, he's already flying through the air at me, an arm raised and ready to strike.

My arms finish regrowing, and all my minds snap into one and [Redistribution]

His binding energy rises fast, trying to resist, but before it can break through, my [Empyrean Lance] forms and shoots toward him. He throws his primordial energy to intercept it, weakening the lance but failing to destroy it completely. It pierces deep into his shoulder and pins him to the wall.

I then can feel him gathering a massive amount of primordial energy, and whatever he's planning isn't good for me.

So I teleport to the surface, but before leaving, I drop a huge tricolored orb to make sure the hideout collapses completely.

When I step into the light again, the ground trembles beneath my feet. The crack we entered through is already buried in the explosions that buried the maniacal demon down there.

Wasting no time, I rise into the air and deploy multiple arrays. One of them pulls at the Ley Lines and begins materializing them behind me, spreading into a massive inscription across the sky. To keep my mind from overloading, I use simpler threads of mana instead of full Ley Lines wherever I can, continuing to expand the formation and guide mana through it.

My Ignition Heart beats faster, flooding me with more thermal energy than I could ever hope to spend. I just keep turning it all into mana. The strain is immense, but I enjoy it. I can't remember the last time I had this much fun.

For the first time in ages, I'm determined to see how far I can really push myself against an opponent who can endure all I can dole out, and even more. There aren't any Champions, no Absolutes, no pristine items dropping into my hands. It's just me. My hearts, my body, and my mind, all driven to the limit.

[Ley Line - lvl 67 > Ley Line - lvl 68]

[Manifestation - lvl 19 > Manifestation - lvl 20]

[Focus - lvl 72 > Focus - lvl 73]

Is it a bit cowardly to run here and bombard him? It sure is, but between losing to that maniac and fighting like a cowardly little bitch, I know for sure which one would bother me more. I don't think Morwag and I will ever get along the way I do with Weslin. In some twisted way, we're just too similar.

Finally, the moment comes. Morwag almost digs his way up to the surface, and I focus several of my minds together, shaping dozens of massive mana projectiles and compressing them until they turn dark blue with the faintest hint of purple. I move them into position within the Ley Line inscription spread across the sky and activate it.

It feels like my entire mana pool drains away in an instant. My heart falters, unable to keep up, forcing me to increase the output of my Ignition Heart. The projectiles expand, each one grows as tall as me and as thick as my arm, and quickly their color shifts through a series of vibrant tricolored hues. They stabilize, heavy and dense, dozens of solid projectiles waiting to be fired at the speed of sound, something I've been wanting to test for a long time.

The earth below explodes as Morwag rises from the ground in a slow, predatory motion. A grin spreads across his face when he sees my preparations and the look of surprise that follows.

The bastard is wearing the low pristine armor that the guild master of the Eternal Court was using before.

The armor is completely restored, the hole he tore through to rip out the man's heart now sealed, as if it had never existed. It's also changed. Gone is the white, plastic-like transparency. Now, with Morwag wearing it, it's turned a deep shade of blood red, still somewhat see-through but pulsing with life.

It fits him perfectly, sleeker and more refined, the surface rippling in rhythm with his heartbeat. The horns growing from the helmet are longer and thicker than before, matching Morwag's in size.

"You cheating little bitch!" I shout, outraged.

"What are you gonna do, motherfucker, fly higher or run away? Get down here!" he yells back.

My response is one of the projectiles. With an audible boom, it fires downward, its surface sparking as Morwag hurls his primordial energy against it. But my mana isn't so easy to unbind. It pushes through the resistance and slams into the armor before dissolving into fine particles at the last moment, scattering like sand caught in the wind as it touches it.

The armor is far stronger than it was before. It's either been made for demons, or it just needed a powerful demon heart to function properly.

Morwag seems surprised by the way my projectile reacts, but not for long. More shots follow, each one launched with its own burst of kinetic energy. One after another, they crash into him, hammering the armor.

The first few attacks break apart into particles like before, but the later ones carry enough force to throw the demon off balance, sending him crashing from side to side. I aim faster, shoot faster, bombarding him without pause, but even then, I can't seem to pierce the armor.

Before my projectiles are spent, I stop. The web of inscriptions fades from the sky, retracting into me as the projectiles merge into one massive sphere, which I pull into position over my head, shaping it into a halo before it begins to spin like a whirlpool, only for me to absorb it as well.

I descend and land, facing the demon.

Morwag takes a step forward, and as he moves, the armor stays behind. He simply steps out of it. The blood-red color drains away, the horns fade, and the armor turns transparent white once more, standing there like an empty shell.

Before either of us can move, I blink a few times, not believing what I see. "Motherfucker," I gasp.

"You are..." Morwag starts, but I interrupt him.

"Not you!" I shout and shift my disruption, match the frequency, and shoot it toward Morwag, weaving it around him and at the armor.

A camouflage flickers out, then a pendant cracks and drops to the ground, revealing Brich already climbing his way into the armor.

Now that he's been caught, the lumoran stops awkwardly and smiles. "Well, fuck. Good afternoon, fine gentlemen! Please, don't mind me, just carry on with whatever you were up to and keep trying your best to murderize each other."

Before he can even finish speaking, Morwag grabs him by the feet and swings him like a toy, slamming him into the ground with an audible crack of breaking bones.

Chapter 732 - Thieving rat

Morwag, still gripping Brich, swings the lumoran a second time and slams him into the ground with another sickening crunch, and this time I see Brich's neck snap.

Before Morwag can swing again, that same neck twists back into place with an even worse crunch, and his eyes open wide. In a burst of quick movement from his back, Brich draws Calvorn and slashes at the demon, who raises his arms to defend himself.

But I don't have time to watch any more than that. Two more figures appear and rush toward the armor.

Fueled by mana roaring through my body, I reach them in an instant, then step aside as a bolt of blue lightning shoots past me. I push mana out in front of me into a barrier and let it deflect the incoming mana based attacks.

Pulling from the mana coursing through my body, I release it in a blast that sends one of the men flying.

The other teleports behind me, and I twist around before he's even fully materialized, mana oscillating across my palm as I prepare to strike. In the last moment, my attention shifts back to the man I blasted away, because he's already recovered and sprinting toward the armor. Brich and Morwag are already fighting somewhere in the distance.

As the teleporting man finishes materializing, I change my plan. I leave a tricolored orb behind and use Wraith Dance, then channel kinetic energy to boost my movement and reach the armor. The man trying to grab it fires another bolt of blue lightning, but my angled barrier deflects it.

I crash down where he stands, sending a shockwave through the area as I stop right beside the armor. Immediately, a barrier made of blue lightning forms around me, shrinking fast. And the edges of the net-like barrier start to glow with sharp new lines that slice through trees and stone like paper.

The world around me drains of color. Then the lightning net flickers and collapses completely.

[Eclipse - lvl 52 > Eclipse - lvl 53]

The teleporting man appears nearby, charging with sword and axe in hand, glowing with dense inscriptions. The visor on his helmet closes, and a burst of blinding light fills the area, forcing me to switch to other senses.

Then, in rapid succession, three crystals in his hand explode. The first scrambles mana across the area, the second sends violent bursts of heat through the air, and the third creates afterimages so vivid they feel like real bodies moving around me.

They either came well prepared or they've studied me enough to counter me.

I don't bother trying to see through it. Instead, I gather mana and compress it in front of me into a tricolored orb and let it detonate. The shockwave blasts all of us apart, me and the armor included.

Thermal energy surges under my skin, healing my wounds as I rise. Locating the armor, I rush toward it again. An attack comes my way from the side, but I grab the armor and raise it in front of me, using it as a shield. The strange metal projectile slams into it, launching both me and the armor backward.

I absorb my momentum and stop midair. Another bolt of blue lightning shoots my way, but I disrupt it along with the dozens of mana projectiles following it. The teleporting man forms a construct in front of him, and Brich steps out of the portal that opens in front of me, holding Calvorn. The blade's mouth yawns open, tongue and teeth showing.

"Okay, fellas, we've got fifteen seconds before MorMor gets back to us! Oh, and hello, Nathaniel."

"Hey," I answer, steadying my breath. "Before I forget, there's someone I know who's been wanting to join Crimson Forge, but he said they wanted to talk to you first."

"If it's for you, just tell him to look for me at the Turtle Inn. The owner knows me and will point him in the right direction."

"Sounds good," I nod, sliding deeper into [Focus]. The world around me slows down as all three of them attack at once.

Chains of blue lightning rise from the ground in every direction, each vibrating at a different frequency to make them more difficult to disrupt. The teleportation guy vanishes and starts to appear behind my back. Two of the orbs floating over Brich pulse together, releasing a sound attack that hits harder than expected, throwing off my concentration and blurring my vision.

At the same time, the boots on Brich's feet flare to life, propelling him forward with movements not unlike Wraith Dance. He flashes right in front of me, swinging Calvorn, and I feel it trying to devour both my mana along with traces of my primordial energies.

At high speed, I force my way through the pull and channel a burst of kinetic energy, making the air around me hum with a deep vibration. When I release it, Brich barely manages to raise the sword to block. Calvorn devours part of the blast, but the remaining force sends Brich flying.

The exhaust nodes for thermal energy on my back open up, and golden flames erupt outward at high speed, surrounding the man who only barely manages to teleport away in time.

Colors fade even more from the world as my [Eclipse] tears apart whatever the lightning guy was building. But I don't stop there. My Ignition Heart thunders, pumping more thermal energy into my body, which I then turn into mana. Excitement surges through me as I unleash mana freely, hurling massive attacks one after another, the kind that would have exhausted me after only a few uses before.

Faster than they can keep up with, I channel more mana and release another massive surge. The resulting explosion smashes into Brich, pushing him back, though Calvorn blocks most of it again.

This book was originally published on NovelFire. Check it out there for the real experience.

An [Empyrean Lance] shoots toward the lightning user, who dives aside, rolling and crawling to get away with fear written all over his face at the sight of the projectile.

And then, with a simple burst of intent and mana, I unleash what I've decided to call Fuck Everything In That Direction Specifically at the teleportation guy.

He dodges, but the explosion obliterates everything nearby. The ground cracks and caves in, trees are ripped from the soil, and the blast reaches far enough to slam into the canyon wall, shaking it until chunks of stone the size of cars begin to roll and fall down like an avalanche.

My senses pull my focus back to Brich. He's holding Calvorn high above his head, the blade split along its length to reveal a slick tongue and rows of sharp teeth. Something about it makes [Eclipse] flicker, and for a moment, colors seep back into the world.

I keep my eyes on Brich and ignore the others. The barrier I raise blocks their attacks, though cracks appear across it under the barrage. Then, the falling boulders from the avalanche slow midair and then freeze completely.

Brich, who's been holding his sword high in the air, notices the change and quickly glances that way.

"You ridiculous bastard, just give me a second to breathe!" he complains just as I hurl a concentrated burst of the kinetic energy I've just gathered at him.

He swings Calvorn, devouring the attack and stopping it. But as he does, the [Eclipse] that had been flickering surges back to full strength, draining the world of color again and expanding even further as I feed it more mana.

Three orbs form behind my back, tricolored and extremely compressed. At their core, just the tiniest sign of a white and golden center begins to show, just the smallest hint of one, even after all the experimentation I've done. Each of the orbs launches toward one of my opponents.

The teleportation guy creates a portal in front of him, sending an orb through it, but it collapses immediately as the portal drains him with the strain of moving such a huge amount of mana.

The lightning guy turns into a streak of lightning and vanishes somewhere into the sky while the orb explodes where he stood, and Brich turns Calvorn against his own orb, as the ego sword swallows the orb and snaps closed with an audible thump. With a hiss, steam starts rising from the blade, and the heat passes through the handle, climbing higher and burning Brich, who's still refusing to let go of the sword.

The teleported and the second orb both explode, sending a huge shockwave through the area that makes even me stumble.

They burst outward in a blinding shockwave that tears through the area, followed by heat that ignites the surrounding foliage. The heat rolls over everything, splitting the ground and searing the barrier. A heartbeat later, a wave of distorted mana spreads out like an EMP, attempting to disrupt every trace of mana in its reach. Barriers flicker, constructs collapse, and the air hums with an unstable frequency.

Then the implosion hits.

The space where the orb was folds inward, pulling everything toward it: dust, shattered stone, and it even tears chunks out of the earth. It squeezes it all together into a dense, twisted ball before it finally stops, and the ball drops into a patch of cracked, melted ground.

Brich steps out of the flickering barrier surrounding him and is about to charge me, but he turns his attention in another direction. Towards Morwag flying through the air after a massive jump. He's about to land on the teleportation guy and likely tear him to shreds.

Brich doesn't react in time, but I do. A burst of kinetic energy shoots at Morwag, making him miss, and the teleportation guy barely gathers enough strength to teleport somewhere far beyond my reach, choosing to escape rather than return, the same as the lightning guy.

"Don't kill anyone, you maniac! I don't want to level up!" I shout at Morwag.

Even that short distraction is enough. Using those boots, Brich rushes at me and cuts through the barrier I've made between us. The glove on his left arm, the one not holding Calvorn, activates, and for a moment, my body halts, held in place by something like [Telekinesis] but mixed with another force I can't seem to disrupt fast enough.

Grabbing the armor while I stand here frozen, Brich disappears along with the armor as one of the mana stones on his belt cracks and activates the connection to the teleportation mark he must have placed.

Morwag, a second too late, lands where Brich stood. Glancing my way at my frozen body, he, after a second of thinking, punches me in the face with a force that makes my skull rattle, flinging me back. He immediately takes off, following Brich toward the Megacity.

Lying on the ground, I blink a few times, shake my head, and groan in pain. A burst of kinetic energy lifts me back to my feet, and Wraith Dance sends me forward, but the hazy feeling in my head makes me misjudge the distance. I appear right in front of a tree, crash through it, and find myself rolling across the ground again as I lose balance.

Another burst of kinetic energy gets me standing, and I rush forward, only to stop and raise a barrier as a mana stone left by Brich explodes behind me, bursting into sticky threads of mana. Instead of trying to disrupt the tricky trap, I extend [Ley Line] into the distance and teleport after them, the two already more than two miles ahead.

When I catch up, I find them both crouched behind a boulder, Brich even holding onto Morwag, who doesn't seem to protest too much or move away. As I arrive, Brich grabs me too and pulls me down behind the boulder with them.

Just before I duck, I see what they're hiding from.

In the distance, between the Megacity and us, a small figure floats in the air. A vyssari with white lightning crackling around his body.

"Fuck," I mutter quietly, then, with a bit more enthusiasm, join the duo behind the boulder.

"You think he saw us?" Brich asks me.

"Of course he fucking saw us," Morwag growls.

"I saw you," says Lyraen in a deep, echoing voice. It sounds like he's behind us, to the right, above, below, everywhere at once. Just as confusing as ever. "Brich, you thieving rat, I've been waiting for you to leave the Megacity, and now that you finally have, you're going to hand over the ego sword, or I'm going to kill you. I have no interest in the two of you from the Primordial Knights, so leave. If you interfere, I'll just have to deal with you as well."

"I refuse! Calvorn and I are best buds now!" Brich shouts, and when he sees my face, he grins.

"So be it," Lyraen says.

A loud crack echoes in the distance, and Brich grabs the surprised Morwag and pulls him in front of himself as a shield. A bolt of white lightning tears through the boulder, shooting straight at Brich, but it slams into Morwag's chest instead, blasting him and Brich, sending them flying into the distance like cannonballs.

Chapter 733 - White lightning

The sky above us grows darker as heavy clouds gather despite the fact that it's still midday, and the wind starts to pick up. White lightning crackles between the dark masses of clouds, but the sound it makes is unlike any other I've ever heard. To the point that it sounds like it's tearing through the sky as it courses along its path.

And Lyraen is floating at the center of that storm, and for a moment our eyes meet before he glances back at the armor lying at my feet, thinking.

I don't like it. Not at all.

In response, my mana bursts out of me like a torrential wave, spinning itself into a halo that I quickly compress, turning the immense amount I've gathered a pitch shade of black. In an instant, it starts devouring every bit of mana in the area it can reach, and I take a step to stand between the armor and Lyraen.

"If I had wanted to take it, I would've just killed you," he says, his voice sounding as if it's coming from behind me.

Then, as he flies off in the direction of the others, his figure fades away into some form of camouflage, whether it be a self generated field, a skill, or some strange item, whatever trick he uses. He disappears so completely that even I can't sense him. And the most insane part is that all the white lightning he's gathered vanishes along with him.

I should still be able to sense that disgusting amount of powerful lightning, even if he's doing everything he can to hide it. Yet I don't.

A few seconds later, white lightning cracks in the distance where Brich and Morwag flew. Even from here, I can hear Morwag's laughter echoing through the air, like he's having the time of his life. Of course, that lunatic survived getting struck by that crazy lightning.

For a while, I stand there, contemplating whether I have any reason to join the fight, especially after my own battle with Morwag was interrupted so suddenly. I'm not even tired, and my reserves are just as full as they were when it started. With black mana, I'm sure I could handle myself well enough, even though none of these three is a fully mana oriented fighter. I could channel it to strengthen my body or amplify my skills.

Yet I hesitate. The moment has passed, and the aggression I felt earlier has cooled. It would feel pathetic to barge into a fight I have no stake in. Maybe I really was hoping that Lyraen would try to take the armor. If he had, I could have used that as an excuse.

I almost leave. I almost grab the armor, teleport the rest of the items to myself, and go.

Almost.

Even while fighting against two opponents, Lyraen somehow finds time to speak, his voice reaching me, talking directly into my ear. "I've changed my mind. I wanted to be forgiving, but your eyes... they irritate me so very much. Consider this a mercy, and a warning."

Before I can react, a thin streak of white lightning shoots from the direction of the fight. It moves faster than I can perceive, faster than even my overclocked senses can follow. It pierces my back, tears through my side, and leaves a burned hole no wider than a thumb before shooting into the ground and vanishing.

The wound doesn't heal, but I know it wasn't meant as an attack, so much as it was a message, a warning.

I stand still. Blood flows from the scorched hole in my body, soaking through my shirt and pants beneath it.

Taking a deep breath, I force myself to calm down.

One second. Two seconds. Three. Another deep breath.

And another.

I let go of the armor and turn around, slowly rising into the air and flying toward the battle in the distance. The black mana halo above my head spins faster, wilder, and I feed it more mana. As always, it tries to slip free of my control, but I split my mind into multiple parts, each one acting to hold it in control, like when you are trying to stop water from overflowing with just your hands.

My eyes burn inside my skull as I watch Morwag attack Brich and try to locate Lyraen, while Brich switches between trying to escape and focusing on attacking Lyraen.

The vyssari attacks from what feels like every direction at once, and neither of the two S ranks can locate him. Both are covered in unhealing wounds and bleeding badly. I think Calvorn is the only thing keeping Brich alive, while Morwag is holding himself together through a mix of primordial energy, willpower, and sheer demonic madness.

"I warned you," that deep voice sounds next to me again.

My eyes open wide, and my concentration sharpens. I notice a flash of white lightning, and a small segment of a barrier composed of dense black mana forms in front of my chest, deflecting the white lightning that bursts on impact. Only the flashes and sparks deflecting from it cause some scars and burns on my body, but the main attack is blocked.

Then I use all of the black mana to power [Eclipse] that expands, covering a mile or two wide area, draining it entirely of its colors. Only the blue flashes of mana from Brich keep their color, and the striking white of Lyraen's lightning.

Within that area, I find it. I find the structure of Lyraen's camouflage skill. I observe it, and even though I do not understand it, I find the part holding it together. Then I pull on that thread, destroying the beautiful structure.

Within my [Eclipse], Lyraen appears, floating half a mile away from Brich and Morwag, with multiple circles made of inscriptions around him and the same number of lightning projectiles ready to cast.

Lyraen shows shock for the shortest moment before he moves again and tries to hide himself, but I know what to look for and pull on that thread again as his skill tries to weave itself together and activate, causing it to fail again.

Two more fast lightning projectiles shoot at me, but expecting that, the small dense segment of black mana I compressed moves in front of me. It's the largest I can form without it weakening. It blocks the attack, causing more sparks and lashes to burn my skin and even my face as I do not break eye contact with the vyssari in the distance. I don't blink at all.

My Ignition Heart thumps, sending golden threads of thermal energy into the area, striking against the black and white around me. They coil around me, twist, and gradually shift into a pale blue spectrum until the thermal energy becomes mana pulled toward the halo starting to reform over my head to replace the black one I used to power my skill. It spins and grows as more mana continues to fill it.

Feeling hot blood dripping from my ears and from the wound he caused, I block three more fast white lightning projectiles and cancel thirty-seven swift attempts to reactivate his camouflage. Each of them is slightly different as he relies on speed and subtle changes, but I read all of them and pull each one apart faster than the last.

Both Brich and Morwag reach him, Brich by growing some sort of mechanical wings from the back of his armor, and Morwag by simply leaping high into the air. After a few clashes, Lyraen is forced to put some distance between them, while shooting more lightning at them and scarring their bodies even further.

A white flash fills the area, and Lyraen cuts through it like lightning given shape, escaping the area of my [Eclipse]. Having gained enough distance, he stops and reactivates his camouflage without a word. The last thing to fade is his dark expression.

Brich opens his eyes in panic and grabs Morwag in what almost feels like a hug, and both of them teleport. A stream of white lightning pierces the area where they stood, as thick as a tree, jagged and cracking, erasing anything in its way with a sound like a power line snapping apart.

I feel the teleportation heading my way, but I let it happen. Brich appears next to me, along with Morwag, punching him. The lumoran puts his hand on me as well, and I sense him trying to teleport me as well.

I have been preparing another barrier of concentrated black mana, denser and more volatile than before, when Brich shouts, "That pompous jerk isn't posturing and threatening anymore! It was fun until now, but you don't want to mess with him when he is like this!"

Something in his voice draws more of my attention to him, and I read his expression.

In the end, I allow him to teleport us all away. I observe the way the item or the marks he has do it. He seems to have placed a mark near me without me noticing because of how dormant it was, masked in a mana signature similar to mine. How shrewd.

We teleport, and my shield made of black mana stays behind. When we reappear, I see a continuous stream of thick white lightning stretching toward it, more than two miles long. That distance is crossed in what feels like the blink of an eye, and the lightning crashes into the black barrier. Sparks and wisps of white lightning ricochet off the surface, twisting and flaring as they meet, each arc bursting into light that rips the air apart with a sharp, violent crack.

Then the lightning fades, and the barrier is still there, albeit cracked.

In quick succession, the second stream of white lightning tears through the air, not toward us but once again at the barrier made of black mana. It destroys it completely, the barrier finally breaking apart into fragments that rain from the air.

Brich teleports us again, and as he does, I pull the items I marked with us, even the low pristine armor. Lyraen tries to stop the teleport and almost succeeds before Brich uses another item, and I step in to help keep it stable.

After a long range teleport, we appear as close to the Megacity as its protections allow, and immediately start rushing toward it.

The hair on the back of my neck stands up, and I form another barrier of black mana, putting it in the path of the next lightning stream, expecting it to hold. This time it fails. The lightning feels different, changed to counter my barrier, and before I can strengthen it with more mana or modify it as well, it pierces through and hits Morwag's leg, completely erasing it.

For a second, it looks like Morwag wants to stop and fight. I can see it on his excited face, but we drag him through the gate and into the city, kicking and shouting.

Just as we cross the threshold, another lightning strike slams into the ground outside. Then there is a short silence before, in a white flash, Lyraen appears in front of the gate, floating just beyond it. He does not attack anymore. He only looks at us, then at Calvorn, then at the pile of items I teleported here, and finally at me, longer than at anything else.

He says nothing. Then he passes through and floats somewhere into the city.

"Lyraen's a good fella. Out of all the S ranks, he's tried to kill me the least," Brich says with a grin while tapping my shoulder. "But when he gets like this, get the hell away unless you happen to be Nyssa fucking Volare. Well, fine gentlemen, I'll be going on my way before my pal Morwag decides to tear off my head. I had that happen once, and it is not a pleasant memory. Unfortunately, it timed out with my mind backup, so it is still here," he taps on his head.

I quickly check all the items, and find everything still there. The lumoran walks away, leaving me and the one legged Morwag behind.

The demon stays quiet, but his emotions are clear in his eyes.

"So, mission completed?" I ask, pushing away the same feelings that try to surface. There will be time for that later.

Morwag looks down at me, then at the pile of items, and finally at his bleeding stump before snorting. "It seems so."

“Good. Try guessing if I managed to repossess a few things from Brich while he was teleporting us away,” I say.

At that, Morwag gives me a confused look, but I catch the flicker of amusement in his eyes.

He can’t hide it from me.

After that, I look at an interesting mana stone and a brooch-like object I took from Brich. Both are mid-arcane. Considering all the loot currently at my feet, they’re not really all that valuable, but still, they make me happier than anything else here.

Chapter 734 - NORA

POV Brich

It’s been a few days since my failure to take possession of that low pristine armor Isolde’d been wanting to study so badly. She paid a lot of shards for information regarding the Eternal Court’s location. Unfortunately, it just wasn’t meant to be! If not for that man’s eyes, then maybe...

I shudder and shake my head, trying to push away the memory of that gaze. Those gray and brown eyes with golden circles around the pupils, so full of potential. I’ve seen attendees with Mana Wavelength Irises before, but no one has handled them like that man did. That damn thieving rat. But at least I got a bit of his and Morwag's blood for our labs.

A knock sounds at the door, and I call out, “Come in! I promise I’m not naked!”

There are a few seconds of hesitation, which surprises me, as the presence lingers just behind the door. Then Nathaniel’s friend steps in. Slim, long black hair, green eyes. Most of all, he feels like a monstrosity, a thin, sharp sword, made of an array of mismatched patches of strange metals, yet still brilliant and perfectly held together.

Alias Savant. From Earth’s tutorial, third year, already A-rank, and currently on the ninth floor of the tutorial. Suspected of having skills that let him incorporate parts of other beings or even items. Usually works alone, no flashy performances on the earlier floors, but people suspect it’s because he always does just enough to avoid drawing attention. Highly talented with body strengthening, judging from the

reports of a fight he had on the third beyond floor with one of the attendees. Other reports have it that he uses kinetic energy, as reported by a demon who happened to sense him, and later sold the information for a chance to challenge one of our guildmates to a duel. May the Rulers bless those simple minded creatures.

By merit of his abilities, it's widely believed that Savant has plans to join Crimson Forge either to steal or exploit our guild's resources.

"You're in!" I tell him happily. "I mean, you'll have to talk to someone from leadership, but just tell them I said you can join, and it should be fine. For some reason, they seem to listen to me for the most part."

Savant stands there silently for a while before saying, "I expected this to be different."

"More formal? Did you think I'd be boring, like the other S-ranks?" I wave my hand dismissively. "Buddy, let me tell you a secret. I'm pretty fucked up, and I'm proud of it. Who else would push their body and mind as far as I have? I'm that guy. That special, good boy, your mom always told you to be."

I lower my voice. "Some days I start to wonder if, after so many times storing and reloading my memories, I'm still really me, or just some strange copy of myself. You know what I do then?"

He shakes his head.

"I stop thinking about useless stuff. It's that simple! You joining our guild sounds like fun, and Eldrin and the others will find it fun too, so why not? Try to steal and cheat as much as you can, while we do the same. Oh, and one more thing. Five million shards for your right arm and whatever's in it."

"No."

"Aw."

"Yeah."

"You're a bit like your friend Nathaniel, though he's got a more... well, let's say, extravagant personality."

"I wouldn't call us friends, but yes, he can be like that."

"Everyone seems to know except him," I laugh. "Give it a year or two, and he'll either turn into another monstrous S-rank or die along the way. And damn, I'm sure it'll be a glorious death. The whole world will stop just to watch, and that creepy stalker velnar with his Parallax eyes will be left drooling over his records."

He seems to relax a bit, the tension I felt from him fading. It no longer feels like my skin is burning under a strange orange light.

I notice Savant trying to match my behavior a little to make me ease off when he says in his own, calculated manner, "And he doesn't realize it at all. He keeps acting like he's trying to catch up to everyone, while it's the others straining to catch up to him."

"You too?"

"I said the others."

"Is that why Earth seems to be so full of cute little monsters?"

"You tell me."

"I don't want to! There are a few theories as to why, and plenty of them tie back to that other creepy guy of yours. Christoph, as he calls himself. By the way, Calvorn is still pissed at him for eating his master."

"It doesn't matter to me. But if you don't mind, I'd like to talk about what I came here for instead of indulging this idle chatter."

“I think I like Nathaniel more than you.”

POV One, Normal Difficulty, Group: Ominous Latin Name

Ten people. That’s how many of us make it out of the tutorial after clearing the thirteenth floor on Normal difficulty, while the rest of our group remains on the lower floors. There are plenty of notifications, but every one of us pushes them aside for one obvious reason.

Before, we were transported into the tutorial with a hundred people and a chunk of a shopping mall. Now, we reappear in the same place, in the middle of the city. The glaring difference being the tall fence surrounding the area, complete with guard towers. There are even tanks, soldiers, and tents with a few drones circling the area.

A loud but strangely pleasant alarm echoes through the zone. Moments later, a woman in professional clothes steps out of one of the tents. Her blouse has a few bits of food stuck to it, like she abandoned her meal in a hurry, and she’s still wiping her mouth while licking the sauce from her fingers.

“Wait for now,” I tell the others, tightening my grip on the spear in my hand.

Together with two soldiers, the woman in a suit approaches us. None of them are armed, and no weapons are being pointed our way.

When she gets close, she smiles and licks her fingers one more time, “Hello! I’m Elisabeth Jonas, and I work as first contact personnel for this division of NORA, the National Office for Returnee Affairs. You might not realize it, but I’m currently among the top-performing officers in the division.”

“What the fuck,” someone from my group mutters.

She doesn’t miss a beat, clearly prepared, and doesn’t let the silence linger. “I’m sure you have a lot of questions, and I’m here to answer as many as I can. We’re not here to threaten you, and should you wish, you are free to leave. We only ask that you continue following the laws you lived by before the tutorial. I hope that’s understandable. Of course, some laws will likely have to be changed in the future, given the nature of such world-changing events.”

Still smiling, she adjusts her blouse. “The current returnee briefing procedure was created by Colonel Jonathan Kane in collaboration with Rafael Vaughn, whom you might know as Channeler. I’ve been informed you may be acquainted with him, Mister...?”

“My name is Oliver,” I reply.

“Ah, Mr. Oliver Williams! I thought it was you. I have a file on you, along with everyone else who disappeared that day. It’s part of our protocols, so I hope you won’t hold that breach of privacy against me. Mr. Vaughn is currently staying in the city, and I’m sure he’s already been contacted. So if you decide to wait, I’m sure he’ll be here soon, and we can let someone you trust more than me get you up to speed. In the meantime, we can offer you a tent and order any food, drink, clothes, or whatever else you might need, just let me or the soldiers present know. Mr. Vaughn will probably arrive in a few minutes, so you won’t have to wait long. But if you decide to leave anyway, please use the exit right behind you.”

With that, she simply turns and leaves.

“Someone high up is motherfucking smart,” Samantha says as she steps to my side, watching the woman go. “Do we wait?”

I give it a thought, glancing over our ragtag group. Tired, armed, carrying every scrap of loot we could, bags filled with it. Ten people from Normal difficulty, probably some of the earlier returnees, so likely some of the strongest beings on Earth currently. Returnees, that’s what she called us, wasn’t it?

“I think we should wait for Channeler. One thing, if any of you jerks even so much as touch him, I will kick your ass myself. You know who he’s working with.”

A silence falls over the area, undercut only by the quiet whispering of names like Mana Maniac, Manahead, Glitch Mage, and, for some reason, Mana Daddy, whispered softly by a woman I can’t identify as something heavy lands near us.

Without breaking stride, straight after landing, the huge suit of armor takes a series of steps, each one making the ground tremble and reminding us of its weight. Even the mana radiating off it is impressive. Channeler might be from Easy difficulty, but damn if I’m not sure he could stomp us all into the ground

with that armor alone. The way it moves is almost nimble, elegant, in striking contrast to its, well... special looks. Maybe there's a hidden purpose I can't fathom behind having made it so ugly.

Shivers run down my spine as the helmet turns toward me, then a hiss sounds, and the chestpiece of the armor opens. A young man climbs out, awkward at first, before landing gracefully on the ground.

Channeler is a handsome son of a bitch. His curly golden hair almost seems to catch the sun, the armor making a dramatic backdrop to his slim figure, while his blue eyes shine in a shade I've never seen in any other human. He smiles and steps forward, fixing the sleeve of his clean black suit.

"Hey!" he greets us with that smile, "I hope you don't mind if I'm a bit more straightforward at first, just to make some things clear. I've had a few meetings like this, and I've found that making them more direct is the least painful for all sides. First, yes, you can leave, but if you start killing people or ignoring the law, you will be hunted down. It's happened a few times already. The president and other important people don't like the idea of superhumans running around and maybe assassinating them. It will be more difficult to deal with attendees from Hard difficulty, but that's a problem for the future. Second, you don't have to work for the army, but it's better to register with NORA and all that. Everyone in my group did it. It's annoying, but we decided we can be patient until the stronger people among us start returning."

His words make the hair on my neck stand up. I've only seen him in the Community before, so I don't know him all that well, but hearing him share something with such serious implications so calmly hits me harder than anything else. This world really is going to change a lot, isn't it?

Channeler pauses, and when no one replies, he nods in satisfaction, "The country is slowly releasing more and more info to the public, but for now it's a controlled process, and I think it's going to work out in our favor. You might ask, Why the hell should you care what someone from Easy difficulty is telling you? Well, go on the internet and watch a few shorts edited by a certain, cute, young, green eyed editor, in which a certain man with heterochromia does some truly wild stuff. Someone from Earth has already taken a bunch of these clips, added a custom track and some professional edits, then uploaded the video to youtube. I think that video has around fifty million views now. Look up "I Can Fix Him - Part 1" The youtuber said they're working on Part 2 and have apparently been getting a steady stream of videos from the other returnees."

Once again, he looks at us, and I notice slow nodding around the group.

"I apologize if I come across as threatening, but these are the very same words I use when dealing with our dear country's leaders. Thanks to that, we returnees aren't being forced to join the army, or finding ourselves kidnapped to be studied, even though trust me, there are many, many people who want to, and I can promise you I will be the first to turn on them if they go sneaking around behind my back. Honestly, it's all a huge mess right now, but we'll fix it together. As much as I dislike the idea, I think in a few years the attendees will be setting the rules, and our leadership knows it. They'll be throwing more money at you than you would've believed in your wildest dreams, all in hopes of preparing for that future. Whatever helps them sleep. But we all know that once the people from Hell difficulty start returning things are going to be a lot more chaotic."

Chapter 735 - Instrument

POV Nathaniel

It's already been a few days since our short mission to the hideout of what remained of the Eternal Clowns, and my wound still hasn't healed. Everything else did, but where that white lightning pierced through my side, where sparks hit my face and body, the wounds remain. They don't heal, in fact, they've been causing me to slowly bleed out, even forcing me to use my thermal healing passive just to keep up. And Morwag still doesn't have his leg back, even though he's healing faster, and a big part of it has regrown, his powerful body resisting the effects better.

That's also when I find myself in one of the guild lounges, waiting for someone to step out of the vice guild master's office and call us in. Morwag just lies here, sprawled on the couch next to me.

I continue our conversation, "So I asked you, and you said you never licked a wall, right?"

"Listen, why the fuck would I lick a wall?"

"Of course you didn't, and I expected that. So, what I want you to do is imagine licking it now."

"I will throw you..."

"Oh shut up, just imagine it for a second. Weslin did it and was surprised. Trust me, you'll like it," I prod, interrupting him.

He stares at me like he wants to leap off the couch, grab it, and slam it over my head, but he holds himself back. Instead, he squints and pauses while looking at the wall behind me.

A second later, surprise crosses his face as it twists itself into an odd expression, "Holy fuck."

"I know, right!" I say, excited, and straighten up in my armchair, "Now imagine licking your shirt!"

Morwag opens his mouth to object, then stops and glances down at his clothes. Another surprised expression blooms as he looks at me, clearly confused as to what kind of sorcery this could be.

Right then, the door opens, and one of the vice guild master's assistants tells us, "You can go in."

I stand while Morwag hops on one leg, somewhat awkwardly. From what I heard, he refused any prosthesis and decided to wait it out this way until his body deals with the effects.

As we pass the assistant, I watch Morwag scanning the room, looking from item to item. Furry carpet, mirror, book, and wooden furniture. Once in a while, he twists his face and shakes his head in disgust, vividly imagining himself licking different objects and feeling their texture and taste.

The door closes, and we are left in a small, almost ancient-looking office with a single man. The oldest demon I've ever seen. His horns coil back long and proud, his eyes a paler shade of red than usual. But even so, I can sense his void heart beating strongly.

"Please sit," he gestures, not even looking up from the documents he's reading.

The vice guild master is rumored to be the one person holding this guild together. Sort of like that IT guy always rolling in late, wearing a Hawaiian shirt and crocs even to meetings with the execs. He then raids the company fridge, empties it without a hint of shame, and disappears soon after. Yet everyone still treats him like royalty, because deep down they all know one thing: without him, there wouldn't even be a guild left to mismanage.

The only difference is that this old demon, from what I've heard, seems to be the only truly responsible adult in the guild.

Both Morwag and I sit and wait a few moments while he finishes reading. He then tears the paper apart and tosses it into the air, at which point it catches fire. Only then does he look at us with an intent gaze.

“Morwag, since this whole shitshow with the Eternal Court is over, I want to ask you why did you kill one of the triplets when I told you not to do so unless absolutely necessary, and why would you ever put a handkerchief stained with her blood and flesh into one of her brothers’ mouths?”

Morwag opens his mouth, but the vice guild master raises a hand. “You know what, I don’t want to hear it. Just know that their handler, Gabele, was furious and has spoken to a great many people, causing our guild to lose a number of lucrative contracts on the third floor, resulting in a loss of five million shards and multiple mid arcane items.”

He flips another sheet and scans his notes. “Then of course there’s the matter of the unofficial rules you broke during the war, attacks within safe zones, and things I won’t even bother naming since you don’t seem to care. There’s the debacle with the Ancient Armory event, but thankfully, most of those consequences are falling on Crimson Forge and that human man.”

His eyes turn to me, “And you, you are lucky that Nyssa seems to need you.”

Because he does not expand on it, I breathe a sigh of relief. After all, I would not want him to question why the Ruler of Diligence decided to bury the Ancient Armory, not in front of MorMor.

“Is it time to finally tell me about the fifth floor?” I ask the vice guild master while glancing at Morwag, who is staring at the old demon’s horns and twisting his face.

The vice guild master nods, “We expected you would be moving there in a week or two, but the circumstances have changed. We suffered heavy casualties on the fifth floor, and so did the other guilds present there. After participating in an attempt to deal with that unexpected situation, Nyssa nearly died, but she is currently stabilized and expected to make a full recovery in a few days, thankfully.”

Morwag stops whatever he was doing, his face turning serious. “I will go there right away,” he says.

“Yes, you can, she even asked for you,” the old demon says, “But all that forces changes to our schedule and requires changes to our preparations.” He looks back at me, “The fifth floor’s quest is fairly simple, at least on paper: there are always ten reanimated beings, and you need to kill one of them for the portal to the sixth floor to open. That portal is for one person only. Before you ask, no, locals cannot enter the fifth floor.”

“I smell a big problem. How strong is one of those reanimated beings?” I ask.

“Each is Champion grade, a true Champion, not a weakened one,” the old demon says.

Thoughts start spiraling through my mind as I begin to put things together. “Let me guess, the one Nyssa wants killed is the mana specialized one?”

The vice guild master smiles, “Correct. A highly mana specialized Champion, a reanimated thylarin. We do not know who it used to be or how long it’s been since they died on that floor. Most of the ten reanimated, well, nine of them have been there longer than a thousand years. Only the tenth has been replaced, and only after a man named Adrian cleared the quest and reached the sixth floor nearly a thousand years ago.”

I gesture for him to continue, and he does. “As you can imagine, challenging someone powerful like that is not easy. There were many attempts, where hundreds of attendees fought against one of them, but there have been very few successes in the long history of Beyond. After all, a lot of these people would end up dead, and only one person would get to enter the next floor. And these are Champions they’d be fighting. These attempts tend to end with a great many dead attendees. So in the past few cycles, the strategy has changed. Slowly, painfully, information has been gathered on each of the reanimated beings. That information has also become extremely valuable because of the difficulty in acquiring it.”

As he says it, I can picture it. Even I can extend my senses for miles, so how far can a Champion sense? How would you spy on a Champion without them noticing? You blink, and they are there, killing you, or maybe you never even locate them and die without ever realizing. And how do you test them to find out about their abilities? You send an attendee near level 400 to fight them? The fight would be over in a second, and that’s with one of the reanimated Champion’s weakest attacks, you wouldn’t even learn anything useful.

The vice guild master continues, “Every guild usually focuses on the being they think they are most suited to face, or whichever one they’ve bought or gathered the most information on, so they can make adequate preparations. All information on one of the reanimated beings is valuable. Specializations,

skills, perception range, reaction time, attack range, mana reserves, and many other factors are put into consideration. Our guild focuses mostly on the mana specialist because our primordial energies can counter a great many mana based abilities. Frontier, on the other hand, identified a weakness to the mind magic in one of the others, and that is why they're currently working with your friend and other mind mages."

He shares that information with me without hesitation, and it makes me wonder how much more they know about me or my group.

The old demon seems to be aware of my thoughts, judging by his sharp gaze, "You going to the fifth floor for now would be a waste. You have to consider that if you leave it and then want to enter again, you will have to sacrifice 15 stat points at the Quiet Circle again. I am aware of your tournament coming up in a few months. Due to system censorship, I can't tell you much, but it won't take too long. For now, Nyssa plans to return to her tutorial for more training. Use this time to improve whatever abilities you might need, finish your tournament, and then decide if you want to take part on the fifth floor. Either way, I am sure Nyssa will do this with or without you."

Flashback Nyssa Volare

A young, barely five year old girl is quietly led through a grand chamber of polished wood and toward the demon seated on the throne. The sides of the hall are lined with dozens of nobles in beautiful clothing, their colors marking their rank. A select few of the high nobles wear gold and black, while lower ranks wear red and yellow. Every demon present is styled and groomed with almost artistic care. Servants, attendants, and bodyguards move between them, tending to every need.

All of them serve one dominion, the most powerful force on the central continent.

The High Lord on the throne wears a single color, white, and he alone is permitted that hue. His eyes track the young girl as she advances, and the chamber quiets when she bows in the ceremonial way she was taught.

"I greet the High Lord," she says, her voice sounding oddly mature for a child her age, even as nearly everyone watches her with clear disgust written on their faces. She alone stands out in the hall, skin pale as milk, eyes a faint red edged with white rings around the pupils, short, uneven horns. Then there is the black hair falling over her shoulders, so striking in contrast with the white possessed by everyone else.

"Nyssa, your mother is dead."

"I have been told, my High Lord."

"I kept my word. I swore she and her kin would be spared while she served my dominion, and I have not broken that promise. But she failed, and she died too soon, not even by an enemy's hand, but because of the same bloodline that runs through your veins."

"Yes, my High Lord."

"Then tell me, Nyssa," he says, his gaze steady, "what is the purpose of your bloodline, and what colors do you wear?"

"Our only purpose is to be an instrument in the High Lord's hands. We do not think, we do not question. We wear the blue of the abandoned ones with a touch of white, the High Lord has allowed us to mark us as his."

"That is correct. You have proven yourself talented, and I have been told your clan's bloodline runs strong in you. From this day forth, you'll train to take your mother's place. You'll serve as my instrument, and in return, your clan will remain untouched. I will keep that promise, as I did before."

The albino girl with black hair bows deeply. "I obey. I do not question."

She does not see the High Lord's faint smile, nor the slow sweep of his gaze as it moves across the chamber, daring anyone in the room to challenge him, the man whom the strongest warriors of their world serve.

Chapter 736 - When the time comes

It takes a few days, but while I'm stuck dealing with the damn wound, I also take care of some other things. I find out it really is possible to rent out a residence, and get a surprisingly high price too. I do so through the Japanese salary woman look-alike realtor.

Of course, she gets a cut, but this way I don't have to deal with people, and I would rather not think about what the residence is going to be used for. I just really don't want to know.

For now, I rent the place for three months, and I'll figure out what to do later. I also go through the items we looted from the hideout, picking a few to disassemble, a few to sell, and I tell the guild to keep the low pristine armor for me to examine, as is my right per our deal.

Overall, not a bad haul. But I push further and give the guild some items I looted from the Ancient Armory, combined with a few of my own, so they can sell them all at auction. Of course, they get a cut as well, but I've gotten used to people stealing from me. That's just the price I pay for my laziness and for my mind being calm as a lake every time I avoid having to deal with people.

I expect a few million shards to be added to my account before the tournament. The combination of auction earnings, rewards, rent, and my increased guild salary should account for that. One of these days, I need to sit down and seriously think about what to do with all of it, and whether I really want to save for a low pristine passive, with the cheapest one sitting at around twenty million shards. But with my current almost seven... well, damn.

I glance at the scorched wound along my side and sigh. I put on a new bandage so I don't bleed everywhere, then put on my clothes. A simple white shirt from Earth that I bought from Gloria. Its print says zero, under it shows a picture of a fox, and below it says given. A lovely design.

I exit my room in the guild headquarters and head toward the location written on the note I received not so long ago, signed by someone calling themselves Mountain Man. It leads me to a small restaurant terrace. It is afternoon, but the place is mostly empty. Christoph sits there, sipping what looks like wine and staring out over the Megacity.

Without asking, I take a nearby chair, pull it close, and sit down.

"You seem to have had trouble with Lyraen," he says with a smile while gesturing at my side.

This man, over seventy now, looks even younger than before, somewhere around forty five, as well kept as ever. And behind him floats that invisible half-figure, its hands on his shoulders. One thing is different, though. It is not pale blue anymore, like it was before, but the same pale red as the Wraith in the Ancient Armory was. But it is also just as hard to notice as before. I bet even some of the S ranks would have trouble seeing it, though some mana-specialized A ranks might.

“Nothing serious, the man has it rough. Having thirty or so wives out of the tutorial, so I understand why he might snap easily.” I say.

Christoph laughs out loud at that and raises his glass high. “Well then, to our poor little friend who has it harder than any of us can imagine.” He takes a long sip, then looks back at me. “But really, thirty?”

“Maybe even more,” I say and thank the server for the glass they’ve brought me, as I pour myself some of Christoph’s wine.

I am about to drink too, but he coughs, making me pause. In his outstretched arm, he holds his glass, waiting for me to clink it against his.

With a shrug, I do it while he asks me, “Do you want me to remove that anti healing effect he left on your body?”

“You can do that?”

He snickers, “I think I might be capable of something like that.”

“Why not then,” I say.

The pale red figure behind him rises, growing a little and stretching one of its arms toward me to touch the wound. I feel a burning sensation for a few seconds and try to observe the process, though not very successfully. Then the pale red arm withdraws, and the figure shrinks, standing where it stood before.

I let thermal energy combust under my skin once more, and this time the wound starts closing almost immediately, even the smaller burns disappearing all at once.

“So, how’d you do it?” I ask.

Christoph looks back at me, “Oh, that? The Wraith I have with me now can handle things like that. So I relied on him.”

“Are you too lazy to do it on your own, or is it that you can’t?”

That amused expression appears on his face, and he playfully raises his glass. “That is something you’ll have to figure out yourself.”

I snort and take a sip as well. I decide to hold back the many questions I have and sit there quietly, replaying the way he removed the anti healing effect. Well, the little bit I was able to observe, so not much.

“I have heard a lot about you and Victoria lately,” he says.

“Anything interesting?”

“People noticed she has a skill not unlike that of the last Elf, and they took note of your black mana, that is what you call it, right?”

“What do you mean, what do I call it? That is its name. Do you expect trouble for us? If so, just give me the address of the people looking try something.”

“Oh, there will always be trouble, so you might as well get used to it. Though not so long ago, I dealt with a group of people I met who wanted to cause problems for you two.”

I try to observe his heartbeat or muscle twitches, but he notices right away, which only seems to amuse him more.

“And you did that because...?” I ask.

He sets his glass on the table and looks at the liquid spiraling under his mana. “You might still doubt me, but I am very fond of you, Gwyn siblings. In a way, you remind me of my children, though I think it is safe to say they would never have done as well as you two have in the tutorial.” Something in his words feels off for the shortest moment.

He looks back at me, as if answering the feeling I had. "Maybe I am just a silly old man, or maybe I simply wish my children were more like you two, even though as a parent I probably shouldn't be saying such things."

"You'll have to tell me what you find so great about the two of us."

"I think you know," he says and stands, as if ready to leave.

"Not going to tell me what you called me here for?" I ask.

He pauses for a moment, studying me with a quiet sort of curiosity, "I just wanted to talk with you. If you want, take it as my whim to talk with you that ended up dragging you out of your room."

"Well, I'm the sort of person who understands doing something on a whim. But thank you for the warning and for healing the wound."

"You are welcome, Nathaniel. I also want to tell you that if you ever want support, I can help you understand your constructs and the troubles you're having with them. I'm confident I can help you grow stronger as well. As full of myself as I might seem, I know there is a great deal I can do for you."

"It sounds like there's a but," I say, leaning back as I watch him stand there.

Christoph nods, his expression turning serious. His voice takes on a tone like he is giving a vow with the system as witness. "I want to protect Earth as its Absolute, and I am certain I can. I ask you and Victoria to stand beside me as my Champions when the time comes, not as servants but as allies who understand the cost of power."

His words ring through the silence. That serious look remains as he puts his jacket back on and adds only, "Please think about it. There's no need to hurry."

With those words, he leaves, and I'm left there deep in thought.

Accept him as Absolute... that didn't come out of nowhere. There's intent behind it. I feel that accepting him as someone above me would weaken my pride if I ever had to face him. A kind of acceptance of him as my better, that would make it difficult to change my mind later, because I would have already placed him over me, and thus affect my pride.

The question is whether he's doing this because he needs a failsafe before deciding to help me, something to make sure I don't turn against him. Maybe it is something normal among Absolutes and Champions, and even expected.

I take another sip of wine.

Maybe it is a mix of all of that, or maybe it is none of it.

Or maybe I am reading too much into it. I probably am. Christoph is currently stronger than me, and his defenses are insane, to be honest. I saw him endure Lyraen's lightning during the Armory event, and he handled it many more times than I did.

When I finish my drink, I stand up and walk back toward the guild branch, passing smaller shops. I even visit a few, checking the items they have on offer and buying a few interesting trinkets and tons of food in preparation for my not so distant return to the best doggo of the ninth floor. The true future Absolute, not that hack Christoph.

When I reach the guild branch, I learn something new almost immediately.

Just a few hours ago, a man named Christoph killed two S ranks and stormed into the headquarters of one of the top ten guilds, where he wiped out its leadership and their A rank elites.

The next day, I meet Ruby, or more accurately, she grabs me while I'm walking through the city and drags me onto a bench nearby. After a short conversation, I accept one of the S rank quests she now has the right to assign to me, even though I am only A rank.

The quest has been specifically chosen by her for me, matching my abilities so well that it becomes almost laughably easy. But that doesn't matter, since her only intent is to stack achievements for my advancement to S rank.

My quest transports me to a planet where one of its Champions introduces me to her child, whom I am supposed to train in creating more durable mana constructs.

Simply and disappointingly put, it is not a dangerous quest.

The Champion needs someone very skilled in mana disruption, the best available for the job, and according to Ruby, with my eyes, [Mana Manipulation], [Eclipse], and if needed, black mana, I am that guy in the Beyond.

Why not find someone on her own planet? I suspect the Champion is ashamed at the thought of others learning that her child struggles so much in this way, as silly as that is.

Why not teach the child herself? Well, simply said, she is a female Jean, so her abilities in this regard are very limited.

There is not much to say about the two weeks I spent on this S rank quest. The Champion is barely around, and her child is, honestly, an asshole. The kind who insults me constantly, slacks off, and cries for his mommy to erase me from the surface of the world.

Still, I do my best, and there is a clear improvement by the end. During the final presentation, I see a happy expression on the Champion's face, and the boy almost bursts into tears at her praise and hugs me in thanks. His mom hugs me too, and breaks most of my bones in the process. I'm not even joking.

It is a short and efficient quest with nothing worth mentioning.

There is no need to bring up the assassination attempts on the boy, or the haywire mana constructs when the Champion tried to mimic me and shape on a whim during one of the lessons, nearly wiping out the entire city with her impressive level of incompetence in handling mana.

There's also no need to discuss the noble ladies and their building sized "pets" this world seems to have, or the sudden appearance of that ancient creature everyone insists was only a large bird, even though it swallowed half a tower.

All of that is completely irrelevant. The quest itself was simple, peaceful, and absolutely uneventful.

And after that, the quest ends, and I return to the Beyond.

My reward is a set of techniques from the Champion, and even Ruby says she's pretty talented when it comes to using her body. I receive training exercises, some martial arts, a few movement techniques, and what Ruby calls a very passable body strengthening method that uses mana.

I also move one step closer to S rank, with my Handler saying that at this pace, it shouldn't take long. Two or three proper Beyond quests, or a bit of participation on the fifth floor of the Beyond, in whatever Nyssa wants me to do.

With that, I return to the ninth floor of the tutorial for a week before Humility's Event starts.

When I appear, the first thing I see is Biscuit sitting on Noodles' head, and I almost step on the huge, pearly white snake. One thing is different about him, though. Noodle now has three eyes on each side of his head.

(Food!) rings in my mind before the corgi launches himself at me like a cannonball, knocking me down, at which point I am brutally assaulted.

Chapter 737 - Investments

Looking at it from any reasonable point of view, it should be impossible for Biscuit to produce this much saliva, not in his puppy form. It's already been five minutes, and I'm still lying there while he continues to lick my face, hair, neck, and anything else he manages to reach.

A few times, he even pushes his butt against my face as he turns around to bite the hem of my shirt and tug at it playfully. That makes him stumble and shove his butt even harder into my face before barking at some invisible enemy who clearly must have caused it.

He turns again and starts jumping up and down, his front paws pressed against my cheeks as he bounces them like rubber. Then he chomps on my nose only to get distracted all of a sudden, and like a hyperactive puppy in full zoomies, he takes a mouthful of my hair and starts pulling again.

The whole time, I just lie there without making any attempt to defend myself, moving only my eyes as I follow Biscuit and watch him have fun showing off his affection. He keeps shouting things like (Happy), (Food), (Friend), and for some reason, he occasionally throws in the phrase (You came to the wrong neighbourhood, motherfucker!). That last one makes me decide that I will find out which absolute idiot from group four is ruining him like that.

His thoughts also spill into my mind as pages and pages of sensations, mostly smells and raw feelings, but between all that, I filter out what's been happening here, and it seems everything's been going pretty well.

Noticing movement nearby, I shift my eyes to the side where Noodle stands, in the exact same place he stood when I arrived, looking down at me with a strange expression. It is safe to assume the polite white snake either pities me or has been stunned by my lack of reaction.

I look at his new eyes again. All six are green, arranged in a reversed triangle shape, two on top next to each other, and the last one in the middle below them. It doesn't look silly in the least, instead, it gives Noodle a dangerous appearance, something like a beast with an ancient bloodline, a world devouring snake. Who knows what happened here? Maybe his Fragment of the Eternal Fire caused it, or maybe it has something to do with his bond with Izzy.

Hell, maybe Izzy now has 6 eyes too.

Finally, after another ten minutes, Biscuit seems to be done, having completely tired himself out. He now lies on my chest with his chin resting on his front paws as he stares at me.

I reach out and rest my hand on his head, petting him slowly. "I've missed you too," I say with a smile.

Biscuit yawns, showing his tiny pink tongue, then closes his mouth and his eyes and slowly falls asleep.

Now that he's asleep, I allow myself to threaten him, and in a quiet voice I whisper, "You bite me one more time, and I swear I will file a complaint with whoever's responsible for regulating hyperactive burrito gremlins." Then I turn to Noodle and say, "If you plan to step in and save me, now would be a perfect time."

The snake blinks all six eyes slowly.

Understandable.

Have a nice day.

With my arms around the puppy, I carefully sit up and then stand, absorbing every vibration to avoid disturbing his sleep. As I do, the view finally opens enough for me to see Tess, who has been sitting on the railing of the balcony since the start, watching the entire brutal attack, even though I couldn't see her earlier from the floor.

Her gray eyes shift from my soaked shirt to my hair and face before she whispers with a smile, "Ew."

"You can keep that reaction to yourself," I say.

I walk a few steps and sit down in the chair on the balcony in front of her, not reacting any further to the undignified comment.

"You are a day later than we scheduled," she mentions.

"I got a last minute Beyond quest. But it got me some really nice techniques from a Champion, and we can break them down to take what works for us if we want." I say in my defense.

Tess nods seriously, but with a playful twist, "Do you still feel like we're just primitives smashing stones together and hoping to get a spark every now and then?"

“Constantly, but doesn’t that have its own charm? We’re frontrunners, explorers. You know that saying about being too late to explore Earth and too soon to explore space? Well, not anymore, Tess. In the future, there will be kids studying in Academies and training their disciples on Earth, while I’ll have the chance to look at all that and say something like: “Things weren’t so easy when I was young.”

Tess chuckles quietly, “You’re right, in a way. We have the chance to explore paths people stuck in more rigid systems probably won’t. But on the other hand, we can still fuck up so hard we lock ourselves out of progressing.”

“I am an optimist at hearts.”

She rolls her eyes, “Do not think I did not notice how much you like to use that phrase lately, and how often you try to find sentences that use ‘heart’ just to end up replacing it with ‘hearts’.”

"I said it because I speak from the hearts."

"Nat..."

"You know I follow my hearts more than my head."

"You are terrible."

"It felt right in my hearts, so I went with it."

Tess laughs shortly, "If your hearts really talk that much, I worry for your brain."

“I am not sorry, and I will continue.”

“I wouldn’t have expected anything else. Did you have any trouble? I heard some rumors in Beyond.”

“Everything should be mostly resolved and fine for now. The schedule for the fifth Beyond floor shifted a bit, but I got some information I can share later. Anything fun for me?”

She takes a moment to think and then nods, “Maya progressed with her [Compounding] and Sophie with thought acceleration. They just got done doing some testing a few days ago.”

“What level did they reach?”

“Level 0 so far. So ten seconds in that mental space Sophie and Maya created, and one second outside, more or less. They’ve been working with the twins, and they’re waiting for you to help. But yeah, it isn’t that useful so far, but I’m sure you can see how amazing it could be in the future.”

“Sounds good. And Noodle’s eyes?”

“Izzy leveled up quite a bit, and we think that, combined with their Fragment, caused some sort of mutation or something. Honestly, nobody’s certain. I have been gathering information about Fragments in Beyond, but they’ve been difficult and expensive to come by.”

“Do you need some shards?”

She sighs, “Go on, tell me how rich you are.”

“Do you remember that one time on Earth I bought you that box of chocolates you liked? Those fancy coffee ones made using the beans the tiny animals poop out so someone can collect them?”

“Nat, you mean civet coffee, and no, they were not that. For the record, my mom liked that coffee, not me, and you know it. I never touched it, and I do not even know why I mentioned it to you. And one more thing, you bought those so called fancy chocolates with money you stole.”

“I found that wallet. But anyway, I’m much richer than that. We’ll see if I can somehow transfer shards to you during the tournament or if we meet on the fourth floor when you guys get there soon. But I’ll give you a million.”

“So generous.” She leans back so far she should be falling from the railing, but she keeps herself there with her [Psychokinesis], and deep in thought before she says, “Give me two, and in a few months I will return all of it with profit.”

“Really?”

A smile spreads across her face as she locks her eyes with mine, “What do you think?”

I notice her hairstyle is different again. This time, she has no bangs at all, her hair has been split cleanly in the middle, so it falls to the sides and reveals her forehead. Her blonde hair waves a little, framing her face and falling just below her shoulders.

“And if I gave you five million?” I ask, meeting her gaze.

“In half a year, I’ll make seven million at least, but likely more. Six will go back to you, one to me,” she answers as quickly.

Thinking it over, I keep petting the sleeping Biscuit and nod. “We have a deal, and we’ll work it out somehow later. But how?”

She jumps down from the railing and walks past me into the room without answering. I watch her go to one of the cabinets and take out a towel before walking back. She stops for a moment, her lips twisting in amusement as she looks at my hair and face covered in puppy drool. And even now, frustratingly, she’s still a tiny bit taller than me. Just the tiniest bit, of course. It also might be only in my head, but I swear she’s packing more muscle now, too.

The towel drops over my head, completely blocking my view. The fabric is thicker than I expected, almost fluffy, with that faint scent of citrus. It clings to my face for a second, holding a bit of warmth from her hands.

Before I can react, she grips the edges and starts rubbing, firm yet soft, like she is trying to erase every trace of Biscuit’s rampage from my face. Her fingers move along the fabric as she works through the mess in small circles that tug at my hair in a strangely comforting way.

I try to move the towel a bit so I can see, but she pushes it back down on my head, and I hear her quiet laugh right above me.

She drags the towel lower, rubbing across my cheeks and jaw. The cloth scratches lightly across the stubble on my chin, then sweeps over my forehead and presses along the sides of my neck.

When she lifts the towel for a moment, cool air hits my face, and I instinctively blink against the bright light. I catch a glimpse of her expression, amused and just a bit too satisfied. Then the towel drops again as she goes for another round on the back of my head.

Biscuit snores softly the entire time against my chest.

Through the towel covering my head, I hear her soft, quiet voice, "If you talked to people and made more contacts, you would come up with ways to make more money too. You just need to be careful and pick the right people, and avoid the ones that just want to take advantage of you. Sometimes you have to invest more into relationships at the start. Even if you don't get your time's worth right away, it will pay off later."

"I talk to people. I know a lot of demons."

She grabs my head through the towel and shakes it a little before continuing to dry my face.

After a while, I ask, "Is it not tough for you? All that effort, constant thinking, balancing so many things, and dealing with people?"

She stops, and for some reason, I am annoyed that I cannot see her face. Then she speaks right next to my ear, "It is tough, very tough even, but nothing I cannot handle. You should know exactly what I mean by that, Nat. Do not think I have not noticed your state. I'm not as naive as the others from our group might be."

Finally, she lets go of the towel and taps the top of my head without removing it. "Take your time to acclimate. You can join us in the main room in an hour or two."

With that, she leaves through the balcony, leaving me with Biscuit in my arms.

Chapter 738 - Seven days

An hour later, I enter the main room, doing my best to avoid any members of the Dusk Horizon tribe who might want to challenge me to a duel. Walking across the way, too strong, man-eating, skyscraper-like tree, I examine it as always, though not too intrusively. It might notice and try to eat me to fill its daily macros by using me as a protein source.

I try to imagine how much stronger one of the reanimated beings on the fifth floor of Beyond is compared to this tree, but I just don't have enough data to do that.

Reaching the room, I create a mana arm to open the door and step inside as the conversation dies down. Even Lily, who'd greeted me so excitedly, goes quiet.

"Nat, why are you wearing a towel over your head?" Maya asks first, breaking the silence.

I shrug, "Tess put it there to bully me, and because I have to keep holding Biscuit in my arms, I was unable to remove it."

"He is bullshitting, right?" I sense Maya turning to the others as she talks, "He could easily blow it off, teleport it, use the same mana arm he used to open the door to remove it, anything."

"I assure you, Maya, there was nothing I could have done," I repeat.

I hear Lily giggle next to me as she reaches out and pulls the towel down. The light blinds me for a moment before my eyes adjust.

"Here, I saved you," she says.

"I appreciate that, you literally brought the light back into my life."

Tess shoots a spark of lightning that twists around me, clearly aimed at my butt, but I create a barrier to block it and quickly reinforce it. That lightning is surprisingly tenacious, which makes me look at her suspiciously. Did she get a new skill, through some combination or improvement or something?

“Welcome back,” Min-Jae calls from my left, and when I look at him, he smiles and waves. Dozens of metal orbs are floating around him in chaotic but intentional patterns.

“I’m back,” I nod and move to sit next to him before I feel a tug on my shirt as Lily pulls me onto the couch and takes a seat beside me.

She puts her legs across mine and smiles, “I deserve this for saving you.”

I look at her while lifting Biscuit carefully and holding him above her legs. She gives me a confused look, then notices Biscuit’s slightly open, tiny mouth and the drool dripping from it right onto her legs.

She jerks back with a very impressive burst speed, which makes me once again worry about my raw physical stats. Once freed, I cross my legs on the couch and hold Biscuit back against my chest.

“If anyone wakes Biscuit, I’ll tell him to expand to horse-sized and drool all over you,” I threaten to make sure no one raises their voice too much. Then I ask, “So what were you talking about?”

“We were theorizing who the Rulers of the floors we visited might’ve been,” Izzy says softly. As always, she sits on the ground, her back resting against Noodle, who is coiled in a way that lets him rest his head on her legs.

At this point, I give up trying to figure out how Izzy is growing so quickly. Is it puberty? Do normal kids grow this fast around thirteen or so? It’s not like she looks like an adult. She still looks like a twelve or thirteen year old girl. It just feels odd since I still remember her as the tiny baby koala I carried around at the start of the third floor. Maybe it’s a problem with my perception.

“Well, my dear misinformed colleagues, I might have more information regarding that than any of you,” I say, and with that, I share all I know.

Then they get into a heated discussion where they start theorizing about the floors we're still missing, and I listen with one ear while talking to Min-Jae with the other. He excitedly shares his progress toward building his floating city. He also asks for some long-lasting mana projectiles, so while we sit there, I start making some, ensuring that they're as durable and as stable as possible. I even try to make them as heavy as I can.

If someone asked me how I make mana heavy, I would tell them to ask someone else and never tell me the answer. That's how I roll, I just feel it. No need to talk about any sort of proto thaumic mass aggregation cycle schema or whatever.

"How are the demons?" I ask him once he's more or less done with his report.

Min-Jae tilts his head. His hair is a bit shorter now, but he's still taller than the twins, even though they are older. Probably almost a full head taller, and I am sure it still bothers those little twerps.

"I do mostly what you told me. I just straight-up beat anyone who challenges me, but I don't kill anyone. I lost a few times too," he whispers, almost ashamed, "They beat me really hard, and Lily had to heal me, but they didn't kill me. And with that, they only seemed to like me more."

"So you didn't just give up?"

"Of course not," he answers strongly, "I even bit the finger off a guy when he got careless, smashing my head against the ground."

"Oh."

"Yeah," he says proudly.

I start thinking Min-Jae might be another lost cause, and I suppress the memories trying to surface of me doing similar things.

"Anything else interesting happen while I was gone?" I ask.

"I got rejected by Tess," he says with a small smile, but he says it much quieter and forms a basic barrier to keep others from hearing. Though it's not like we'd spy on each other, he's just warning people to stay out of it.

I blink a few times and dedicate more of my mental focus to replaying exactly what he just said.

Still, I say, "What?"

"Yeah," he smiles at me again.

The room becomes rowdy then, drowning out our conversation as Maya stands up and starts showing Dennis how to dance while Aaron quickly finds some fitting classical music to play on his phone.

Using the distraction, Izzy escapes and slides between me and Min-Jae, speaking softly so as not wake Biscuit. Though the barriers I stacked around him would probably keep him asleep even if the huge tree we're sitting on exploded. Maybe the barriers would even handle the explosion as well. Now that I think about it, I am not exactly the efficient type to make a barrier just for sound dampening, I just brute force it.

"I made some new videos, want to see?" she asks while opening her laptop.

"Do I want to?" I ask her, sending her an invitation to read my feelings.

"No, you do not," she laughs and presses play anyway.

It is not all that different from her older videos. Same heavy bass music, and the main character is me again. But this one's been edited much better while keeping the raw feeling of the previous ones. I close my eyes a few times to calm myself down and suppress the creeping dread. I only end up noticing that Izzy pauses the video every time I do that and keeps backing it up a few seconds to make sure I don't miss anything.

She talks about how she started using new software, how hard she worked to match the moments to the music better, and how she added new effects instead of repeating the same ones. Something about

composition, lighting, and timing, and other things like that. She also shows me the promotional videos she made for the others.

Maya, with her huge armaments facing off against monsters just as large, is framed in a way that highlights her sheer use of force. Min-Jae appears just as dominant, as building sized boulders break free of the ground while the screen shakes, only to rise into the air around him with what feels like unnatural ease.

It's torture, and Izzy definitely knows it, yet she keeps laughing and leaning against my shoulder while I sit there and listen, still curious about what Min-Jae just told me. But the longer it goes on, the more I start realizing it might be intentional from Izzy. Min-Jae's expression slowly shifts into something more relaxed, that stiffness around him fading, and I start thinking that the little empath came here at this exact moment on purpose.

When I reach that conclusion, she nods and smiles at me, and only then does she leave.

So I do not ask Min-Jae anything about what he said earlier, and instead, we talk about combat. Instead, I mention the Champion's techniques, and together we start examining them. At some point, the information about them spreads through the room, and more people join in, especially Maya, who's taken on the role of a frontal attacker. Lily joins too, but she's developed her own combat style and doesn't seem all that invested in this one.

For the next few days, I move from person to person. I train with Lily, and we examine how her [Disintegration] and its anti-healing interact with me, trying to come up with a way to modify her healing marks to avoid those issues.

Well, she does all of that. Almost immediately, she curses herself for not thinking of it sooner, and a few minutes later decides that modifying her old marks is impossible. So she starts creating a new one specialized in removing anti-healing effects. She wants to combine her healing and [Disintegration] for that. Taking advantage of the two entirely different forces.

If I asked Savant, I bet he would probably tell me it's insane that she could even attempt to do it.

A few days are also sacrificed to me, Maya, Sophie, and the twins working inside the Level 0 thought accelerated mental space being created by Sophie and improved by Maya's [Compounding]. I mess

around with [Manifestation], which is, in some distant way, a mental skill, and the twins support the whole endeavor using [Connection]. We improve as much as we break, only to discover more gaps in our structure as time goes on.

Just like Tess said, we hunch over the table like primitives, all of us linked into the same small mental space. But honestly, the potential of this is insane enough to make me excited every time.

I also feel the urge to go hunting for a bit, but after the conversation with the vice guild master, I changed my plans. Working with Lily, I've already gone over the changes I need to make before the body upgrade and leveling to three hundred fifty. I already talked to Ruby, and I think what I have planned will give me a lot. The system always mentions individual performance and considers many things, and the level 350 body upgrade, even though it's mostly the same for everyone, has slight individual changes to spice things up. But that's not even my main focus, though it will likely be really nice.

Sure, I want to survive my constructs and the mana messing with my body, but I can aim far higher. I like to think of it, at least partially, like an Achievement. If the system sees the fucked up things I do during the body upgrade, if I complete my Absolute Candidate quest on my own, Ruby says my third trait at level 400 will be really something else, not even mentioning what it's liable to do to my Primary class upgrade at 450.

Plus, there is my main intention, to keep my body and constitution weaker so my more powerful active skills can make bigger changes to it, which will, in the end, make them stronger. Of course, it'll be nowhere close to what [Immortality] did to Kindness, but I'm working with that in mind.

So once again, I just need to channel my inner coward and be patient a little longer. Lily says it best: We're built to live for hundreds of years now, so what's wrong with planning things out for years instead of rushing to get everything done in a few weeks?

It's hard to look at things that way, it truly is, but I think part of me is still getting used to the idea that I am not simply human anymore.

I spar with Izzy multiple times, noticing how her combat capabilities have improved. Her Fragment also proves itself to be especially dangerous. I can make my thermal energy hotter than what she and Noodle can do with their flames, but that's only because of my output. If we spend the same amount of energy to create the flame, hers is more dangerous.

That brings me back to wondering if it's just that the Fragment of the Eternal Fire is that powerful, or if it's that thermal energy isn't simply a damage type. It is not like my golden flames are weak, so it is hard to say. Maybe there's still a level above the golden flames I'm currently using, like I just haven't compressed them enough because I've mostly been using them for healing.

Another thing to experiment with.

It's also fun to watch Min-Jae and Maya spar. While Maya uses [Armament] from her Mana Archive, Min-Jae tears up chunks of earth and trees to form golem-like constructs around himself, then uses his [Telekinesis] to move them. I see it more like training and messing around rather than a real combat strategy he would rely on often.

I've noticed this every now and then, but there aren't really many attendees who use huge suits of armor or the like, not like us, or the lumorans for that matter, such as Champion Feroy and his disciples on the seventh floor.

I think it is a part of us that's been influenced by Earth's media, and me, Tess, Maya, and Min-Jae have a really fun conversation about that. In a way, it is safe to assume that other planets might see the use of their abilities being heavily influenced by their own cultures. Just like we are with mechs, kaiju, and the like.

On the last day of my week here, I get some new healing marks from Lily, including the newer ones that should remove any anti-healing effects I encounter. They carry bits of [Disintegration], so they feel a bit dangerous on my skin, but I just have to hope she knows what she's doing.

Surprisingly, she asks for one of my eyes for an experiment she's been working on, something about traits. So I do that, and she carefully stores it inside a bottle filled with some sort of liquid. It is a bit creepy to see my gray eye with a faint golden circle around the pupil floating in there, but I've honestly seen worse things.

We plan out our future schedules and plan our next meeting in the Megacity, as they should enter the fourth floor sometime after the Humility event I mean to participate in.

And like this, the ninth floor remains the most ignored floor of all.

A part of me wonders if people are expected to start seriously dealing with Beyond around the ninth floor, and if the one-year length was chosen on purpose to allow for that.

Or maybe it is a trap for people who clear Hell difficulty more slowly, locking them in here for so long that they don't have much time for the rest.

The system is an asshole, and so are the Rulers, so I think it's probably the second option.

After the goodbyes, I use a Beyond stay token and disappear, finding myself back in the guild lounge of the Primordial Knights. I take a deep breath and look around.

Something shifts near my feet, sudden and quiet, and my whole body snaps back before I can think. I just stare at the spot, caught in that sharp, stunned moment, "What the fuck!"

There, I see a certain little vicious jerk who simply sits back on his butt and barks at me.

(Food!)

Chapter 739 - It had to happen one day

Well, it had to happen one day.

We now have the best doggo of Beyond.

I stare at Biscuit sitting by my feet, and he stares up at me. He's back in his adult form, wearing a cute royal blue vest with many pockets. It even has a bunch of tiny bags filled with pieces of dried meat as if he's been preparing for an expedition.

I blink. He blinks.

"What the fuck is that?" one of the Primordial Knight's demons asks while passing through the lounge.

(Food!) Biscuit shouts, and the demon staggers back under the pressure of hundreds of sentences slamming into his mind at once, almost like a mental attack.

Noticing that, Biscuit quickly switches back to his usual way of speaking and asks me, (Food?)

“Well, sorry. It is not my fault that people in Beyond aren’t as mentally strong as you thought. Just talk like you usually do.”

(Food!) Biscuit shouts, then wobbles on his short legs toward the demon and floats into the air, where he says food three more times directly into the confused guy’s face before returning to me.

Together, we head down the hallway with him floating beside me. His floating speed is noticeably faster than before, easily matching my walking pace. The entire time, he looks around curiously and gets equally curious glances from the demons. Some even sniff at him or reach out to try and sense his heart more directly. Most of the time, they wear very confused expressions. They can sense his primordial energy, but they don’t recognize it. They also don’t sense any kind of demon heart in him, which seems to confuse a few of them.

I keep my hearts in “I do not want to fuck around” mode, suppressing the weaker demons to stop them from challenging Biscuit. The stronger ones, like the A ranks, still look like they might be considering it despite my efforts. Part of me thinks that as an S rank, I would get more respect, but the more realistic part knows I would probably end up being challenged even more.

I ignore one of the lounges where I spot Weslin sitting on the couch next to Malika. They talk together while Weslin, now sporting short white hair, speaks. Malika listens and replies in a playful tone. I almost escape too. Almost.

“Newbie!” Weslin calls, making me turn around.

“I am too old for this shit,” I say to his confusion and walk back toward the lounge. Biscuit floats away from me and stops in front of Malika, who carefully reaches out and touches his nose, which causes him to bite her hand.

"I see you two are getting along well," I say to Weslin, ignoring Malika shouting about how she'll kill Biscuit, while Biscuit wags his tail excitedly.

"It seems that way. Fucking hell, it might be just a phase, but it's been fun so far," he says with a smile.

"Well, I'm happy for you, I guess, and I already gave you my reaction to your choice of partner, so whatever, you do you. And if the two of you crash and burn or get into some ridiculous drama that even you can't pretend to be surprised about, I am giving you permission to drag me out of bed, just once, in the middle of the night so we can sit somewhere miserable, drink something awful, and let you rant until you finally shut up long enough to forget why you bothered in the first place and maybe feel a little better."

"Fuck if that's not weirdly specific," he snorts, "but yeah, thanks."

"You are very welcome."

Meanwhile, Malika continues shouting, and her gravitational energy tries to pull the floating Biscuit to the floor, but in the end, only causes him to tilt his head, flop his ears, and not move at all. Not even a little bit.

Taking interest, both me and Weslin turn to watch as Malika starts bleeding from her eyes and nose, and her gravitational energy begins cracking the floor. It even causes an alarm to ring through the Headquarters.

Quickly, using his access to the defensive arrays, Weslin disables it while Malika doubles her effort. A circle of cracked floor forms under Biscuit, developing clear indentations despite the ludicrously tough material it's been constructed with.

In the end, it is Malika who gives up after coughing up a wad of blood, which earns her a slightly loving look from Weslin that I try to erase from my memory immediately. Is that the pink glasses phase, where you like everything your partner does, even though you hated these same things before?

Malika falls back onto the couch and keeps staring at Biscuit, who wags his tail. "What a ridiculously cute little beast. Nathaniel, I am kidnapping him the moment you show weakness."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Weslin tells her.

Malika shakes her head without breaking eye contact with Biscuit, who innocently stares back with a playful expression. I am sure she's either translated that as a challenge or him looking down on her after an easy win.

It causes her to bare her teeth, and her slightly regenerated gravitational energy rises again, this time reaching inside Biscuit. It is not aimed to attack the way she tried on me before, she's only doing it to test whether she can. Even knowing that, I feel a spike of annoyance and almost move to attack her myself. But I don't have to.

Biscuit's tail stops wagging the moment her energy touches him that way. His expression freezes, then shifts from excited and playful to empty.

Still floating, his eyes take on a purple hue, and the tiny round shadow under him darkens. A ripple goes through it, and it expands in size several times, shadowy tentacles spreading across the floor.

(Not friend?) Biscuit sends that message, and his voice is completely different from before.

He lands back on the ground in the middle of the shadow. The moment he touches it, it rises from two-dimensions to three. Shadowy tentacles rise into the air, and his presence grows even heavier as he starts growing in size. First, he reaches my waist, then quickly surpasses my height. His maw opens. And those huge teeth don't look so cute anymore.

Malika sits frozen, eyes wide, likely thinking of accepting the challenge, and Biscuit meets her gaze.

(Not friend. Sustenance.) He takes a step toward her, and the shadows spread even farther, some rising to partially cover him, twisting his figure into something far more terrifying than his usual corgi shape.

Weslin moves to stand, and Malika tenses, but I reach out and put my hand on Biscuit's back, which causes him to stop immediately. He turns toward me and tilts his head like he's shooting me a question mark.

“She was just messing around. You know demons,” I tell him.

(Sustenance.)

“I told you not to eat humanoids. They’re dirty and have tiny pointy bones. They might get stuck in your throat or something.”

(Asshole?)

“Kind of. Most demons are like her. I am sure some of them aren’t our friends, and if they did what she did, you can play with them, but she is a friend of my friend, so show her some mercy.”

Taking a step closer, he presses his huge head against my chest. The shadows around him fade away, though he keeps his size.

(Understand.)

“You sure do. Such a good boy, such a good, smart boy.” I say, starting to scratch him behind his ears, and his now massive tail swings from side to side as he woofs at me.

“Yes! You are a good boy!” I repeat, which makes him jump excitedly and shove against me, knocking me to the floor. He shrinks down right away and starts bouncing against my chest with his front legs.

Even though these two are staring at me and Biscuit with expressions I don’t like, I can’t bring myself to care at all. Who gives a shit about optics when it’s Biscuit’s playtime? This puppy had it rough before the tutorial, so he deserves everything.

[Lvl 348 > Lvl 349]

I freeze in panic.

Reflexively and almost without thinking, I invest the three gained stat points into mana. Then I realise what just happened and, with tension, wait to see if another notification appears, the kind that would trigger my body upgrade, fuck up my constructs and preparations, and send my mana into chaos.

I wait and wait while Biscuit bites at my neck, but no second notification comes. Only then do I let out a long breath of relief.

What the fuck was that? I haven't attacked anyone since coming here, and I did not fight on the ninth floor either, so how?

My thoughts rush around as I try to figure out what could have caused it until I reach the most likely answer.

Items.

I must have been really close to level three hundred forty nine, and someone used an item I sold to kill a monster. I know from Miwa that the maker of a weapon gets a tiny bit of experience from the process, and that seems to have happened just now.

Holy hell, past Nathaniel and all the shit he did will be the death of me. This could have been really annoying to deal with.

I sit up and grab Biscuit under his armpits, lifting him, which makes him continuously whip his head from left to right while staring at me curiously.

"The Doc would say I almost died here if I'd levelled up again, and plenty of other people would say the same, Biscuit. But I don't agree with them. I can take it all on. Wouldn't you agree?"

(Food!)

"Good. Sometimes I think you're the only one who trusts me. It must be thanks to our connection, right?"

(Food!)

“What?”

(Food Food!)

“Well, congratulations. If that is how you feel, I’ll just eat that ancient deer jerky I had someone from the guild buy at the auction all by myself.”

All of his movements stop instantly, his expression filling with existential dread.

I lower my voice, “But if you promise to be a good boy while we’re here in Beyond, I might reconsider.”

He knows he’s being played. I know it too. Malika and Weslin, who are listening, likely know it as well. But Biscuit doesn’t care and gives a cheerful woof in agreement.

The next day, about one thousand attendees and I gather in preparation for the event that Humility and Pathfinder Thane have organized, while Biscuit stays in the guild headquarters.

I think there could have been more people, but it seems like only the more powerful ones came. The others might have been warned by their handlers about how dangerous such events can be, or they were simply too scared to join an event created by one of the Rulers. Especially when they don’t have any idea what it might be about.

We stand on the same balcony where the dinner took place, which feels like it was a lifetime ago, the same balcony where Kindness, that cute tiny vyssari child, and I threw that velnar guy over the edge. There are no Handlers this time, just a crowd of attendees. Plenty of them left the fifth floor to participate, even though they’ll have to sacrifice fifteen stat points to return to that floor.

I do not see Nyssa around, but Morwag is here, and so are Weslin and Malika. I even spot Io and Kaari. Tacita is somewhere in the room, and Lyraen probably is as well. There are also Brich and Savant, both

arguing about something, which makes me wonder if they're the new duo the Crimson Forge put together. Either to keep an eye on Savant or to balance out that kleptomaniac rat Brich. Probably both.

The lowest rank here is B, while most are A ranks.

Luan and Solae, who is often considered the third strongest after Lyraen and Nyssa, are not here.

Well, they can't be here. Both of them are dead, killed by Christoph not long ago.

I still don't know what to think about it, and neither does Sophie after I told her. At least Frontier wasn't the guild Christoph barged into and wrecked, so Sophie still has somewhere to ask questions. Though she will need to be much more careful now.

I'd hoped to fight Luan someday, and him dying this way is... it just doesn't feel right. He was often said to have been able to match Morwag in head-to-head combat, and he was feared for his strange Fragment. And I don't think I ever hated him, not truly. Definitely not like I hated Faora. How could I? He hurt Sophie the most, yet she only ever felt neutral toward him since he was acting as Faora's bodyguard at the time.

Lastly, no matter how hard I look around, Christoph is nowhere to be seen, so he's probably not taking part in the event.

When Pathfinder Thane finally steps onto the balcony, my attention shifts to her, and I push these thoughts away.

"I will keep this short. Welcome, and I wish you luck. Give your thanks to the Ruler of Humility, because this event exists only due to her power. I myself only handled the simple setup. The event will run for five hours, during which you will face one another under set restrictions. You cannot die during this event because the Ruler of Humility will place a barrier over all of you. If your life reaches the limit, you will be removed and returned to this place. The system notification will explain the rest."

With that, she simply leaves. The more I learn about her, the more I like her no bullshit attitude.

Then the promised notification pops up.

You have been invited to participate in an event organized by the Ruler of Humility and Pathfinder Thane.

If you accept, the following will occur:

- you will be transferred to the event area for a total duration of five hours
- a restriction will be placed on you and on all other participants. You will all have the same number of stats, allocated in the same way, and all system given skills and traits will be fully suppressed, including any natural traits and anything else that could disrupt that equal footing, all to ensure a fair start
- a barrier will be applied to you, and if your life reaches a critical point, you will be removed from the event
- your reward will be calculated according to the amount of time you remain within the event area

Note from the Ruler issuing this event: I want to remind all of the attendees present that we all begin from a similar place. All that separates our paths is often our access to opportunities, moments of good fortune, or talents we did not earn. Some of you have risen to impressive heights recently. Do not lose sight of where you stood only a few years back. - Ruler of Humility

Will you accept the invitation?

Yes / No

I choose yes and vanish, then find myself standing on the street of a ruined city. Piles of debris lie where beautiful white stone buildings once stood, and charred remains of wooden structures surround me. Pale blue cobblestones stretch out under my feet.

Around me, ten more people appear. They glance around in confusion for a moment, then everyone surges into motion.

Chapter 740 - Sticks and stones

There are a bunch of people around me, and one of them, a selari woman, almost tackles me right away. But she miscalculates her speed, and I avoid her, only for another man to tackle her to the ground, where he starts punching her. Someone throws a rock that scrapes the side of my head and sends blood running down my cheek.

I rush in first before anyone else even finishes adjusting to their weakened bodies. My own body feels so slow, so weak. All the extra senses are gone, reduced to their most basic forms like sight and hearing.

Passing the debris, I pull a long piece of wood free and avoid a thylarin swinging at me with his three right arms. Then I stab the shard of wood into his neck. I do not let go of it, instead, I drag it back out at the same moment as a human woman crashes into me.

I punch her in the eye repeatedly before stabbing her in the chest with the piece of wood. Kicking her off me, she disappears from the event, and the thylarin vanishes as well. Looking around, out of ten attendees, only three remain. Me, the lynthari, and a huge velnar. Both of them already have wounds from their own fights.

“Hey, let’s attack him together and...” the lynthari with the black tail says to me, but I rush him first. He staggers back but manages to punch the wood out of my hand before we slam to the ground.

My head smashes into his face, breaking his nose, before I roll away. The velnar, who was about to attack me, instead stomps on the lynthari, who screams in pain.

Rising from the ground, I grab the bloodied spike of wood and drive it into the back of the velnar’s knee. He collapses under the strike and swings at me with his massive fist, but I dodge just under. His other fist hits me, but it’s just so weak, reduced to the same pathetic strength I currently have.

He tries to block my next attack, so I jam the wood into his palm instead, and he jerks back, expecting me to cling to it. Instead, I let go and jump at him, gouging my fingers into one eye and then the other before getting out of his way.

While he staggers around, screaming in pain and swinging blindly, I take a breath and look around. There are no more enemies, so while relaxing my breathing, I move toward another pile of debris and pull out another long, sharp piece of wood.

I kick off my shoes, and my steps become much quieter. First, I reach the lynthari, painfully groaning on the ground and finish him off. Then I circle behind the blinded velnar and stab him in the neck.

When he disappears, too, I am left alone, hearing distant clashes all over the ruined city. With the quiet moment, I examine my body and open my stats.

Lvl 5

Strength: 10

Dexterity: 11

Constitution: 6

Mana: 5

And that is it. Nothing else at all.

It all feels wrong, and I feel so weak. Even though my physical stats without kinetic energy or mana have always been, honestly, pathetic, feeling it this directly is something else.

At least everyone here is the same, though some seem to have forgotten how to fight dirty. As is fitting for the Ruler who cooked up this idea, the event is meant to force humility on people who've grown used to not punching up. But that's not me. I don't remember the last time I was not properly fighting someone stronger than me.

I like this. I really like this event, but unfortunately, there's someone else who will be extremely dangerous with these conditions and stats.

I put a few stones into my pockets, find another sharp piece of wood almost as long as a spear, and head toward the sound of the next fight.

POV Weslin

After a quick series of fights, I run into Morwag.

I dodge his attack and punch at his side, but he shifts his body just enough that my fist slams into bone. I feel one of my fingers crack. I don't remember the last time my body felt this delicate and slow. And the pain. There's nothing there to suppress it. It floods my whole body, and from what I've seen, everyone here is dealing with it through willpower alone.

"Come on, Weslin. Attack me again," Morwag says as he steps to the side, that challenging smile blooming on his face.

Everyone thinks he's just a mindless demon, easy to sway with his emotions, but he's the farthest thing from it. He controls the brutality he carries, letting it loose only when he feels like it. And he's smart too. Surprisingly smart. It is just that he doesn't tend to care about consequences, which is why he does the shit he does.

That's how he's acting now. Like me, he realizes that even with the difference in our body sizes, our stats are the same, and he acts on it.

We rush in at the same time and crash into each other, trading blows. We both wait for the other to falter for even a moment under the weight of the pain. While he uses that tiny bit of mana he has for overall body strengthening, I use mine in short bursts, letting me strike harder.

Oh, how fucking good it feels to punch him in his face. To drive my fist into his cheek and watch his head snap back, or to throw quick, weaker attacks in an attempt to provoke him into aggression, I could exploit.

We fight like equals for a while, but then something disrupts our fight, and I see two humans rushing toward us, not to attack but to escape. They just try to sprint past us.

Morwag moves surprisingly fast for the stats we have at the moment and grabs one of them, making the man lose balance. Morwag then takes his head and twists it, breaking his neck. He does it while staring at me.

Instead of intimidating me, it only makes me take off my jacket and hold on to it, preparing to use it in the next attack. The second human runs past me, but I let him go.

Then we see what they were running to escape from.

Lyraen turns the corner, no longer floating but standing on the cobblestone like one of us lowly humans and demons. Blood covers half of his face and his fist. He stares at us just for a moment.

There's no hesitation in his movements as he takes a step forward.

Morwag turns from me with an excited smile, taking controlled steps toward the much shorter vyssari. And I join him, as we break into a run.

Two short, faint streams of mana, each as thick as a finger, shoot forth from Lyraen. Morwag strengthens his body, and the attack leaves only a scratch across his neck. I, on the other hand, am forced to duck, and even then, the fast attack slices off my arm, cleanly, just below the shoulder.

Lyraen avoids Morwag's attack and slams his fist into Morwag's knee, making it burst open. He tries to slip away, but Morwag moves with another burst of speed and grabs Lyraen's arm before he can escape, pulling him back. Size means nothing as they trade blows. Each of them is using limited mana for body strengthening with a level of mastery that only an S-rank fighter can display, even though it's not their usual method.

I almost rush in when I sense another presence. It is incredibly faint, like someone using camouflage. When I turn around, a young woman is standing there. Long, messy brown hair falls across her face. Her entire body is covered in colors that match the ruins around us, dirt pressed into her pale skin, torn white clothes smeared with charcoal.

But her movements are what grabs my attention. They're so slow and smooth that my mind nearly fails to process them.

I raise my remaining arm to defend myself, but she moves faster than anyone here. Faster than Lyraen, faster than Morwag. She moves like she can use her body with perfect efficiency, paired with a speed that feels impossible with these stats.

Her hand coils around my defense, and a piece of sharp metal she's holding slices through my throat.

A moment later, I find myself outside, and I let myself shout a stream of curses while I do. The balcony continues to fill with more and more attendees, some complaining out loud, others chatting, but most of them stare at the screens all over the place.

I feel lightheaded as I adjust to my stats rising again and the rush of my passives and skills reactivating, while I sort through the screens to find the one I want.

Morwag and Lyraen are still clashing, with Lyraen seemingly winning, but Morwag holds out incredibly well against someone who could be considered the strongest S rank in Beyond. Both of them are fully aware of the young woman who now circles them in a slow, predatory motion. Blood drips from the sharp piece of metal she holds, and I notice she used part of her missing sleeve to make a handle for it.

When she attacks, both of them stop at once. Lyraen shoots a finger-thick stream of mana at her, which she dodges with almost playful speed, then reaches Morwag only to slip past his fists. Mana glows across the surface of the metal shard, and a motion of her hand speeds up as she drives it into Morwag's throat multiple times and dances away without bothering to confirm the kill.

With that same bloodied shard shining with mana, she deflects Lyraen's projectile and bursts forward toward him as well.

For a few more seconds, he avoids her attacks, showing his clearly superior martial arts as he predicts her movements and takes advantage of his smaller stature. But in the end, she's simply that much faster, to a degree that feels impossible with these bodies.

She stabs the shard through his eye, and Lyraen disappears in the same way Morwag did before him.

I watch her, glued to the screen that follows her, as she moves through the area with such ease. She sneaks, she avoids large groups, she picks off those she catches unaware. And she keeps moving in that way that makes everyone else look far too slow.

Half an hour later, after one of her kills, she stops to take a breather, and from behind a building, Nathaniel appears. He spots her right away and stops where he stands. His clothes are bloodied, his face is smeared as well, and he carries several long wooden stakes that drip with blood. In one hand, he holds a big stone ready to throw, and a few more bulge in his pockets.

Above his head, a faint pale blue construct floats. It looks like a halo, and in the next moment, it becomes clear what that lunatic is trying to do. I know him well enough for that. He is gathering all his available mana inside it, and if he's planning to attempt what I think he does, he might be even crazier than I first believed.

Nathaniel watches the woman with the messy hair and stays still. His expression is emotionless, almost machine-like, as he studies her and the area around them.

She stands facing him, shifting her weight to another foot and gripping the metal shard tighter.

I notice the balcony quietening, and more people glance toward the screen with the two of them. An excited murmur spreads. Even Morwag, now standing next to me, shows interest.

Many of the people here were hunted down by her, so everyone's hoping to see her struggle or at least kill a few more skilled people so they can feel better about themselves.

Unaware of all that attention, Nathaniel, still wearing that empty expression, turns around and walks away.

Just like that.

I curse him for ruining my rising excitement, but then I think that maybe he just wants to put some distance between them. Maybe he wants to make preparations as he tends to do.

I switch to another screen that follows him. At first, he walks away calmly, in a way that almost looks cool, but once he judges he is out of sight of the assassin girl, his walk grows faster until it becomes a run as he clearly flees from her.