

Tutorial 761

Chapter 761 - Eight gold coins

After calming down, he faces me fully. "I'm sorry for teasing you, Nathaniel. And you don't have to beg or plead. I even give you my vow: Neither I nor anyone under my control will hurt or threaten your family or friends, at least until your tutorial ends. After that, we'll see what our relationship turns into, whether you accept your place by my side or if we fight. I'm inclined to think we'll fight, but I'm still hoping for the opposite."

Some of the words resonate through the System. In the way certain vows and challenges do, he's invoked the System as his witness.

I stand there, clutching the mana I've been gathering since I arrived. He doesn't have to tell me, I know I'm ready to fight and die if I have to. A part of me even thinks that if I can't straight-up kill him, I can make him pay. I could cripple him for life, forcing him back into the pathetic state he was in before his rebirth.

Oh, how much I want to do it. Even though he hasn't touched anyone I care about yet, it doesn't matter to me. Just the fact that he stands over me, holding that power, irks me to my core. It's just like being on the first floor of the tutorial. My emotions are exactly the same as they were back then, in those weeks I lived in uncertainty, until I became strong enough to be comfortable.

The fact that first-floor Nathaniel is still here, in a way, relieves me. I sift through my emotions, realizing that I meant what I said before. All these millions of people around me could be sacrificed. Men, women, even... even children. Just so the people I care about will be safe. And the realization that it might need to come to that means one thing. I'm simply not strong enough.

There is nothing else to be said. No need for machinations or anything. I'm just not enough, and I won't be making excuses for myself, like focusing on the fact that he's much older and more experienced. None of that would change that simple fact.

I chuckle in the end as I take a deep breath. "I accept your vow," I say to Adrian. "And I agree, you've won."

"It is true that I cheated, but if I'm honest, I'll continue to do so. But I like how you said it, that I won, instead of saying you lost. Just a little twist on wording, but it says a lot about you. How much longer do you have before you return to the tutorial?"

"Three hours and change," I answer, relaxing, though not fully.

Adrian stands there in what seems like a better mood. "An Earth Stay token is a weird reward. In a way, it's extremely valuable, and in another, not so much. It allows you to return to Earth, yes, but you can't enter the World Dungeon, not that anyone below Champion would survive it. You could use the token to kill other attendees and set your rule in a day, yes, but you could do that in a tournament just as well. So its value comes with knowledge."

He fixes the sleeves of his suit as he continues talking. "Every planet with a Sovereign Spark also has a fragment somewhere on the planet. Though we never know why. If it is connected to the Spark or if it's the opposite. As for the fragment, it is usually a fairly pure one, and its power tends to vary a lot. Though it's safe to say it's purer than almost anything found in the tutorial, with the exception of the most powerful ones. But what's truly incredible is its value. There are people in Beyond who would buy one for tens of millions of shards, offering a lot more than they would for the ones from the tutorial. Other than the fragment, there are less noticeable advantages. The system remembers you stepped here before your tutorial ended, like one of its darlings. It becomes easier for you to become Champion of this planet, and you might find yourself just a little bit luckier in the World Dungeon, and-"

A signal reaches me, and it causes Adrian to stop talking.

He notices that I've received a pulse through a [Ley Line] connected to something far away. The line is much thinner than a hair, weak, worthless for anything except sending that signal before breaking apart.

I didn't even know about that line until it activated and broke, and in that moment, memories flood my mind.

"Nathaniel, what was that?" Adrian asks in a slightly threatening tone.

Taking in all these new memories, I, rather than answering, remind him, "You gave me your vow."

Then my vessel, piloted by Mapthaniel, steps out of the teleportation mark placed on my back, and more of the memories I've been hiding from Adrian flood my mind as I remember the existence of Sneaky. I don't remember all that he's hidden from me, but it's just enough to make me understand.

A flash of a memory of me appearing on Earth, manifesting my vessel, letting Mapthaniel pilot it, and search the coordinates I received from someone whose identity I no longer know. Bits of memories from Mapthaniel surface, along with the effort he spent searching while I moved around.

"I have to go," I tell Adrian.

As expected, he tries to stop me, but my vessel moves, already prepared. I don't even pretend to try to face him or avoid over-relying on black mana. I use it right away, and the vessel turns black with pale scars shining across its form, my evolved trait glowing more than before against that background of pure dark.

For just the shortest moment, the vessel contests Adrian and his efforts to stop me before it is entirely blown away. That short moment is enough for me to teleport and erase the tracks behind me so he can't follow.

But before I disappear fully, something bites into my leg. Looking down, I see Septa clinging to me. We teleport, reappearing in the place where my vessel located the dungeon holding the fragment that lies on Earth.

The night swallows the horizon entirely. No stars reflect on the surface, no moon shines in the sky. The ocean at night is like a moving darkness, broken only by the violent rise and fall of black water with each wave collapsing into the next.

I ignore Septa as I plunge beneath the surface, and the world above vanishes instantly. There is not a second to waste, as I know he'll be here soon, angered that I am trying to take the fragment away from him, the one he so arrogantly left there to take later. It isn't even me who predicted that he wouldn't claim it yet, but at the moment, I don't know who told me.

The sea grows calmer the deeper I go, but that calm feels wrong, unnatural. The currents pull at me, strong, yet leaving the surface above deceptively still. The darkness down here feels ancient.

I form a single thermal orb above me, and light erupts outward like a spear of light. For a brief moment, the water glows, revealing moving currents and distant shapes that vanish as soon as the light reaches them. The darkness presses in on that light as if eager to snuff it out.

Three shapes emerge from the black, sliding into the light with terrifying silence and smooth movement. Sharks, each big as a ship. Their bodies are pale only by contrast to the darkness.

[Shark - lvl 299]

[Shark - lvl 230]

[Shark - lvl 239]

A laser-thin stream of thermal energy cuts through the water, not giving the depths a chance to cool things down. It lights the darkness and cuts each of the sharks in half as I turn it in a wide, sweeping arc as I continue to rush down.

I see the entrance to the dungeon below me when the sea explodes. Miles and miles of water disappear, split and moved apart, revealing a transparent red figure floating high above with Adrian in front of it. A projectile launches at me just as I reach the entrance. The notification asking me if I want to enter pops up, but I barely read it before I confirm and hurry to enter.

Once inside, I stagger and cough while I rest my hand against the wall. I take a deep breath and close my eyes for a few moments. I spit up clogged blood and wait for my body to heal, a big part of my back that is now missing after Adrian's attack.

But of course, the wound on my back refuses to heal, taking me only a moment to recognize it as damage caused by the Fragment that Luan once held.

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I use Lily's healing mark on it, which causes it to heal slowly, and I patch it up with layers of mana.

Then I swing my leg, and Septa finally lets go, acrobatically twisting in the air before landing on her spider legs. She lowers her body and stares at me.

Observing the leg she was biting, I use several more healing marks on it. I then coat my hand in mana and cut it off entirely, burning away the remaining toxin with massive releases of thermal energy from my body, as much as I can stand. I leave the rest to be handled by Lily's marks.

I already have experience with this, so I know how to fight against it, yet it is far more dangerous than the one she used on me at the Academy.

After all that, I regenerate my leg while facing the spider.

I don't worry about Adrian entering, after all, the dungeon with the Fragment only allows for a single person to enter.

Not much time remains, so I get ready, triggering my combat sub-minds, preparing arrays, and changing the movement pattern of my mana. Then I head into the dungeon, only to sense Septa following behind me.

As I go over my memories once more, a single cold thought settles in.

Did you really think I gathered all that mana just for you? That I would let you throw me around like trash? I already have your vow. That was all I needed.

And now, I will take this fragment from you as well.

Flashback Nathaniel

"I have a question for you," I say to Ruby.

"Ask."

"What does he plan to do?"

"I can tell you, but if you aren't careful, the people you care about will die," Ruby says.

"Tell me."

She pauses for a moment, studying my expression. "He wants to use a difficulty change token and move from Beyond to the tutorial. He's probably hoping to complete it in around a year and a half in its entirety, but Diligence will invoke his veto for sure, and I know what kind of vote to expect from the others. They'll throw him onto the Thirteenth Floor instead, and it'll result in him completing his tutorial while allowing him to feel as though everything is still going according to his plan. Some of the people on your planet will die, the humans he looks down on. He won't hurt your family, nor the families of anyone else from the tutorial. At least not yet, and that will be to your advantage. But you can't beat him. Not yet."

"Not yet," I agree.

Ruby nods. "Adrian is broken. He's always had Pride set as the target of his envy. He used to be brilliant, he truly was, especially during his round of the tutorial. Showing him the record of Pride's battle may have been the turning point. Right after that, I saw him mentally close himself off, convincing himself he would never be enough, even if he didn't fully understand it. Though it could also have been those five decades he spent as a human on Earth, when he believed he'd failed."

"What-"

She doesn't let me finish. "Knowing him, he'll tell you more on his own. Though he's been broken, Adrian still has all that knowledge and talent. It's as if he's continuing to move in accordance with his plan, without realizing he's already lost, that he's already lost something important. But he's still dangerous, like a mortally wounded animal continuing to push itself along."

"And yet you're still helping him."

"Yes, I am, because of the skills he possesses. Because sometimes, such an animal can, in the spur of the moment, become the most dangerous thing around. And I've also been wrong before. To explain it better, I will tell you a bit about Pride."

"I won't say no to that, you know it."

"I know. Pride uses his [Mirror] in a very different way from anyone else who possesses that skill. Pride's body is at this point stronger than a dragon's. He is one of the beings with the highest physical stats in the system. So Pride likes to [Mirror] his opponent. He reflects his opponent's much lower stats onto himself and restricts himself to enjoy the battle just that little bit. With Adrian, we had hoped he would [Mirror] Pride's full stats while Pride dropped down to Adrian's, giving him a little chance to put up a decent fight or at least enough of one for someone else to take advantage of the situation."

Before I can say anything, she stops me again. "Yes, I know how pathetic that is, so just continue to listen. Another one of Adrian's skills, and he would instantly kill you for knowing about this, is [Possession]. That's the one that helped him take over the newborn baby that later became Christoph. That's what allowed him to take over the Wraith, and that's what he's probably planning to do with you or your sister. To raise you up and then take over one of you. You for your body, traits, and talent for mana, or your sister for her [Duplication], which makes her so similar to the Last Elf he admires."

I stand up and walk around, doing my best to keep calm. "And you knew that."

"Yes."

"Tell me, would you mind if he took over me or my sister?"

"Yes, I don't want that to happen."

"But you wouldn't mind it if it meant a better chance at killing Pride."

"I'm not a good person."

"Fuck's sake, Ruby."

"I always tried to make you understand my greed. But I can tell you with absolute certainty that I'm willing to help you over him. It will be difficult, and it will require sacrifices, but if you do what-"

"No," I say simply.

"Nathaniel, I-"

"I said no. A question. Since he's possessing Wraith, can he use his skills?"

"You figure things out too quickly sometimes. Yes, some of them, it's limited though. Some of the skills he might not understand enough to use to their full potential, and some might not be as powerful without Calvorn."

"Great. Why didn't Diligence want to give me the Earth Stay token? What makes it so valuable?"

"There's a Fragment on each newly awakened planet. Pure, not recreated by the system, so that makes it even more valuable."

"Is Adrian the type to go after it right away or leave it for later?"

"Later, he's still getting used to the other fragment he got recently."

"Great, give me the coordinates."

"I refuse."

"Why?"

"Because you're being stubborn. Just do what I say. My plan-"

"No."

"Don't you trust me?"

"Even you have to admit how bullshit a question that is after all your talk about greed."

"I can give you a vow. I can swear to help you. I can take the System as my witness that I think you have a better chance to fulfill my wish than Adrian ever had. But if I do that, the other Rulers will listen and know. If Wrath finds out, it could end badly."

"There's no need to," I wave it off. "I won't lie and say that what you did makes me happy. But I always knew your motivations, and in a way, I like knowing what stands behind every one of your acts. I can even use it all against Adrian. A poor, betrayed Nathaniel, coming to him to die or beg," I snicker. "The asshole likes reading my feelings so much, I may as well let him have some fun."

I look at her properly then. She stands still, shoulders tense, quiet in a way that feels unfamiliar.

Taking a step toward her. Slowly, deliberately, I reach into my pocket and pull out several golden coins. They glint faintly in the light as I hold them up between us. She hesitates before lifting her hand.

I let the coins fall one by one into her palm.

Smiling to myself, I say softly, "I still remember your imitation back on the second floor. She paid gold for me so Lissandra could examine me. Damned monster, even as an imitation, she'd begun to realize this was a tutorial, and suspected that I was an attendee. Back then, Ruby took a hundred gold from Lissandra, who had no idea it was actually only eight gold they asked for me."

I let the eighth coin clink against the others as I look back at her face. "Now I'm paying you eight gold for the coordinates. I don't need vows. I don't need promises."

Ruby opens her hand and stares at the coins. "These really came from the second floor. Where did you get them?"

"I have my sources."

"You must have just bought them from a Beyond attendee who kept them." She pauses, "This is so stupid." For some reason, she looks more taken aback than I expected, her emotions clearly written on her face.

I say nothing and wait for her decision. Finally, she closes her hand and slips the coins into her pocket.

"For those few coins, you'll only get a rough estimate, narrowed down to the size of a small country," she says finally.

Chapter 762 - Fragment

I continue walking through the dungeon, not stopping for a moment as I count down my remaining time. The tunnels I'm walking through are basically just a tube with a stone floor, and the rest of the arch and walls are transparent, showing off the glowing water surrounding the place. An array of huge animals are swimming through that water. Whales even bigger than normal, sharks as big as ships, jellyfish glowing in a multitude of dangerous-feeling colors, along with many others.

Once in a while, they throw themselves against the wall and burst into the tunnel with a cascade of water as they do their utmost to get to me and attack. Each time they do this, I barely pay them any mind, raising my barriers and killing them without hesitation. My mana flares up into powerful projectiles. Arms form from the mana-saturated air and tear them apart, or I fight back the water with my flames.

A whale swims right over me, dark red in color, with big black eyes. With a keening call, it gathers speed like a race car and crashes through the tunnel to smash me down.

One of my mana arms forms next to Septa and throws her towards me. Then the barrier forms around us, rippling on the surface as the whale hits it. It opens its mouth far too wide, with its jaw breaking as it tries to bite against that barrier. Mana around me rises further just as it bites, taking the entire barrier into its mouth.

I expand it to multiple times its original size, dislocating the beast's mouth and breaking it. Water mixes with blood and blubber as a spike grows from the barrier, taking on a purple hue and piercing through

the entirety of the creature's massive body, leaving it to twitch a few times before it finally stops moving and floats passively in the water.

I continue to walk as a dozen sharks throw themselves against the corpse and start devouring it. Meanwhile, Septa, who's bitten into my leg again before moving a bit away, follows me.

"Can he see me through your eyes?" I ask her.

The spider stops and tilts her body to tilt her head while staring at me with her many pairs of unblinking eyes.

"I guess that's a no," I answer.

Another whale appears, this one attacking me with a sonic stun that vibrates through my skull. I just wave my hand, and my mana gathers as I proceed to channel it. A projectile as long and thick as a ship's mast skewers it all the way through before detonating and releasing the kinetic energy gathered inside, causing pieces of whale flesh to rain down throughout the tunnel.

I stomp on the floor, sending a burst of kinetic vibrations out ahead just as a multitude of octopuses fill the tunnels. Then I fire off a few more bursts of kinetic energy after that, breaking them apart and piercing their bodies as I continue on to stride over their corpses.

I manage to form a barrier just as a series of attacks make contact in the form of high pressure water-jets, and my kinetic pulse bounces off something trying to hide behind the wall of water in front of me. Mana gathers in front of me, spinning like a whirlpool, then explodes outwards in a torrential wave. Just raw, compressed mana. Before it even hits the target, the expenditure is replenished through my Ignition Heart and my conversion of its thermal energy into mana.

I repeat the same thing three more times, all in a mere two seconds. When it stops, the remaining mana in the air buzzes deeply, and I can almost taste it on my tongue.

The wound on my back stretches, sending pain through my body as I take an elongated step with my kinetic movement, launching me toward the opponent. More barriers form in front of me, deflecting the

narrow streams of the water jets, as I stare at the source, and my mana projectile bounces uselessly off the shell of the turtle I find there, as does the next one, though I've compressed even further.

Then I simply throw an Empyrean Lance, and a notification rings through my mind.

[You have defeated Great Turtle - lvl 320]

Another barrage shoots my way, which I block again. Another lance fires in, causing a second notification to ring out. Continuing to walk, I shoot one after another, racking up more notifications.

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 35 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 36]

Gradually, the tunnel starts widening. Outside it, a myriad of differently colored, shining jellyfish swim, not attempting to attack. I shoot one of the lances at the wall, but it just bounces off, unlike the monsters, which seem free to pass through to get inside.

The widening tunnel opens into a chamber where a single animal waits. An eel, with lightning flickering across its skin, swims through the air as if it were water. It looks to be about as long as a car or two, and its body is nearly as thick as my torso.

That lightning around it shoots at me. Though it's entirely mana-based, so I let mana gather in my eyes. I peek through the attack and read the wavelengths as a few of my sub minds merge into one to deal with the information and calculations. Under my gaze, the structure of the attack unwinds, and all that's left to crash against my body are just the harmless mana particles of the dissipated strike.

Multiple bolts follow. Each stronger and faster than the one before. They come from all sides, some even aiming at Septa.

Still, each of them breaks apart exactly like the first.

The eel grows in size until its body nearly fills the chamber, and lightning forms into the shape of three pairs of huge, luminous wings. The blue color deepens.

I reach out with my hand and manifest a single orb of mana, throwing it to the side. All of the lightning shot at me twists through the air and crashes against the orb as if attracted to a lightning rod.

Then a barrage of my compressed projectiles rains unendingly against the floating eel, tearing holes through its body.

[You have defeated Lightning Eel - lvl 356]

When the eel is dead, I turn around and approach Septa, who stands up on her four back legs and raises her upper body, threateningly spreading her front four legs. She even shifts from side to side. I tilt my head in confusion at the display and take another step closer, offering her my leg.

"You aren't going to bite me?" I ask.

All those eyes look at me. Deep black orbs lacking eyelids and making it difficult to read any emotion.

Septa then lowers herself onto all eight legs and moves a bit closer. She taps on my leg a few times while looking up at me. I just nod and stand there. She swiftly bites into my shin before jumping back, returning to her threatening position on her back legs with her front legs spread wide.

Seeing that I don't react, she lowers herself again and stares at me. Then she comes closer and bites me longer and deeper before letting go and walking away.

Once again, I observe how her venom spreads through my body, continuing to evolve and mutate. As before, I realize that if I didn't have Lily's healing marks on me, it would be killing me. The poison, toxin, or whatever its specification is, just evolves far too quickly and modifies itself to become stronger. It even corrodes mana, and that's the part I observe the most. With my new eyes, there is a lot I can learn from it.

It is possible that I could fight against it with an abundance of thermal energy or black mana, but I know how much it would require. In light of that, Lily's improved healing marks are... just scary. She changed something about her healing after the last time I came to her with wounds I couldn't heal. It started after we met Luan and Faora for the first time. In the end, though, it's a good thing for me.

Spitting out a glob of clotted blood, I turn away again and head deeper into the dungeon, where I sense more powerful signatures.

I don't let the toxin or the wound on my back bother me at all. After the hell that was the body upgrade, they barely qualify as a nuisance.

It takes me about an hour to reach the end of the dungeon, which has been growing more dangerous the deeper I go. The monsters or awakened animals, or whatever they are, start getting closer and closer to level 400. I think it is safe to say that this is currently, by far, the most dangerous dungeon on Earth, though more lethal ones are sure to appear when the tutorial ends, particularly when people start reaching the rank of Champion, and as the Pairing progresses. Of course, the one holding the Sovereign Spark will be the most dangerous of all.

Still, considering the value it holds, I consider this dungeon way too easy. Getting out of the tutorial early could mean a sure Fragment, though I still think the average Beyonder would've probably died attempting it. Even so, it's not that simple. For example, I don't think I would have been able to find it so quickly without the coordinates given to me.

As for the last boss standing in the huge chamber between me and the small room holding a fragment, it's a leviathan, floating in the air just as the eel did before.

It's about the size of a Boeing airplane, and its body coils through the chamber, so massive that the walls seem to have been built around it rather than serving to actually contain it. Dark scales overlap like armored plates, each one deep blue and green. The air almost visibly bends around it like waves dragged by its sheer presence.

The head is massive with a blunt, armored skull and jaws lined with inward-curving teeth longer than spears. And when it breathes, mana spirals out and in toward its mouth.

Two pale, luminous eyes lock onto me. The pressure of its gaze presses against my mind like the weight of an entire ocean. It uncoils further, claiming the space, certain that anything facing it will break.

[Lesser Leviathan - lvl ???]

I let a deep breath out.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 75 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 76]

I lock my gaze with the leviathan, and the mana flooding through me surges out, riding the currents I've created.

[Current - lvl 24 > Current - lvl 25]

[Current - lvl 25 > Current - lvl 26]

[Current - lvl 26 > Current - lvl 27]

[Current - lvl 27 > Current - lvl 28]

[Current - lvl 28 > Current - lvl 29]

[Eclipse - lvl 63 > Eclipse - lvl 64]

My eyes burn in my sockets as I look at the monster and the mana that surrounds it.

Our mana explodes simultaneously. Its power spreads like an ocean, while mine surges like torrents of water clashing against its fury. It feels like it's been ages since I last let my mana run wild, continuously channeling it in its raw form.

The more they crash and the more I channel, the stronger my Predation passive becomes and the more I get used to my eyes. Every attempt to push at me or to avoid me, I face down with a cold, calculating mind and eyes that see through everything.

Without using the Ignition Heart to get more mana, the Leviathan easily possesses more than I do. Yet, my torrential waves and my currents aren't being pushed back at all.

I move my hand, and my mana responds, flowing in sync. It collides with the ocean of mana, overtaking it as I channel it through myself. My gaze shatters any control the monster once had over its mana, and I claim it, watching the colors drain from the area. Only black, white, and the brilliant blue of mana, shimmering like water, remain.

That whirlpool of energy twists between us, entirely under my control, before exploding forth once more. With a single, devastating surge, it strikes the monster, dragging it beneath its waves. And the mana continues to batter it, tearing scales from its body and grinding flesh until the bones beneath are revealed. The relentless energy hammers on, and slowly, the creature ceases to move, finally falling still.

[You have defeated Lesser Leviathan - lvl 399]

[Lvl 367 > Lvl 368]

Wraith Dance brings me closer. I grab a few scales and pieces of the heart, storing them away before I make my way into the small chamber.

A Fragment hovers in the air in the middle of the room, and I read the text floating over it.

Fragment of the Nameless Tree

The crystal is a translucent light green, with swirls of soft yellow, blue, and deeper green shimmering within.

Without hesitation, I touch it with my left hand and watch as it sinks into my finger.

It moves under my skin before it settles on the back of my hand, mostly submerged while leaving part of it to poke through.

Chapter 763 - Just as I like it

The moment I take the fragment, the dungeon starts shaking, and the walls start to fracture, letting in more water.

I don't know if every dungeon is like this, but this one seems to be falling apart without offering an exit. So, as one of the walls breaks, I exit through the hole to find myself back in the dark, cold water. When I manifest a thermal orb to light it up, I look back at Septa, curious about what she intends to do. The small, dog-sized spider moves all eight of her hairy legs and swims with impressive speed towards the surface, and I do the same.

Adrian is nowhere to be seen, but just in case, I make a quick visit to Sneaky to have him hide some of the memories I've regained at least until I'm back in the tutorial. However, that doesn't seem to be necessary.

I don't see Adrian even as I exit the water, nor do I see him as I start flying towards where Channeler is, with around half an hour remaining.

Septa climbs out of the water too, standing on the surface and shaking it off. Just for a moment, she stands on her four back legs to wave two of her front ones as she wiggles from side to side, though this time it doesn't seem quite so threatening. She then falls back to her original eight and starts running in the opposite direction of my flight path.

My flight takes me back to the island, where I land and re-enter the room with Jessica and Channeler. Several massive waterproof boxes sit in the middle of the room, the kind of hard plastic containers the military always uses in the movies.

"Hey, welcome back," Channeler says swiftly, noticing me looking at the boxes and skipping straight to the point. "I've prepared everything you wanted. Snacks, food, be it microwave dinners, fresh ingredients, or other stuff. Along with solar panels, plenty of phones, tablets, laptops, a gas generator, with gas, a number of ebooks my guys already have sorted out in neatly organized files, some instruments for Maya, and documents detailing what happened on Earth."

He starts naming everything off, but I don't stop him and instead listen curiously. Meanwhile, I keep my senses and guard up, looking for any sign of Adrian.

"Then there are some more experimental devices our scientists have made with some of the metals and crystals brought out of the tutorial. I don't know if they'll be all that useful to you, but there are camera lenses and some weird sensors that those guys seemed to be rather proud of. And a few of the scientists also asked if you could measure a few dozen things in the tutorial. They've provided some devices for

the purpose with explanations on how to operate them, but you should feel free to throw them away if you want. I'll just hand over a few of your manabloc plates, and they'll be happy. What else do we have... oh, you asked, so I put as much as I could in there on smithing, creating alloys, and that kind of stuff. Drones, some guns, you can try, grenades, and other explosives. This one is from me. I gathered several 3D printing pattern samples that I thought you could use in your manabloc creations. Some of the internal structures should allow items to be hollow while still making them more durable than fully solid builds."

"That does sound interesting," I agree with him.

"I thought you would like it. Then there are plenty of clothes, telescopes, and radios you could use to prevent someone from spying on mana channels or to improve your communication. Oh, and there's plenty of deer jerky in there too, and other kinds too, as well as some vests for Biscuit."

I nod, but this time I'm unable to ignore the corner of the room and ask, "Is that Grumpy?"

Channeler looks the same way, solemnly, and says, "It is. Jessica is already scared."

"I'm just a Normal difficulty attendee, Rafael. Cats are miniature lions, did you know that? Or tigers. Sure, I could probably play with and forcibly pet a normal lion or tiger, but this is too much. I observed the process a bit, and Grumpy's muscles are getting stronger, and his bones are much denser than they need to be."

"Lily said she wanted to make his body more durable," I note.

"Sorry to tell you, but this cute and grumpy kitten, as she likes to call him, is already stronger and more durable than most Normal difficulty warriors I've healed," Jessica mutters.

Taking one more look, I can only think about how it can't be that bad. Sure, Grumpy's now the size of a Bengal tiger and will probably grow a bit bigger. Maybe once? Twice?

Lily's gently smiling face flashes behind my eyes.

Yeah, let's just say thrice as big, at least.

My phone rings, and I cancel the call before I move closer and start taking photos of the sleeping Grumpy, just as Lily asked. I boop his nose and take a photo, I even turn him on his back and caress his belly to take another. Then, I take a video of him sleeping. Another phone call tries to connect, but I cancel it as well.

"Nathaniel, how long have you been dismissing that call?"

"Quite a while," I say, taking the last photo. I turn off the phone and pocket it before straightening up to look back at the blonde man. "I think you guys should be safe, but honestly, you'll need to prepare for some big changes."

Channeler opens his mouth but closes it without saying anything, to think of his words. Finally, he says with a smile, "We can only do our best, as always."

I observe his face for a moment before I nod, this time a bit more seriously, "I wanted to visit the government or the generals or something to make things easier on you, but it doesn't matter now. Some other guy'll be taking over. The less I tell you about him, the better, but simply put, don't try to push against him too much, and try to be reasonable. Though I don't know why I'm even telling you. It is not like you don't know how to deal with people."

Glancing at the countdown, I only have a few minutes left, so I ask. "Anything else?"

"My sister wanted a photo with you, but maybe next time," Channeler says. This whole thing's been fairly unexpected and surprising to the point that it makes me wonder if he didn't throw it in just to improve the mood that I, incorrigible party pooper that I am, seem dead set on bringing down.

I snort. "Why?"

Channeler smiles. "She is a bit... well, unique, you'll see. It's a little awkward, but she's actually stronger than me now. She awakened while on vacation in Greece when she and some friends wandered into a cave that turned out to be a dungeon. We've been connecting more lately, and she's been asking a lot of questions, using your weapons, and studying all the tutorial videos we have."

"So, nepotism."

He doesn't even skip a beat. "Yes. But honestly, I think she probably missed out on getting into the tutorial, otherwise she probably would've ended up in Hell difficulty. Though she's still a spoiled brat."

Looking at me, Channeler takes a swift step closer. He reaches out and fixes my hair and my shirt a little with quick movements.

"Much more presentable like this," he notes with satisfaction as he takes out his smartphone and stands next to me to shamelessly take a selfie. "I'm an older sibling, so I have to tease her a little. I apologize for this."

"Name that photo, Broody Dark vs. Golden Charmer." The, until now, quiet woman on the couch calls. For some reason, her heartbeat is racing, and her cheeks seem flushed.

"I hope Grumpy grows five times his current size, Jessica," I say as I step towards the boxes. "Take good care of him. I've already memorized your name, and I'll be passing it on to Lily. She would be very disappointed if she found out you left poor little Grumpy scared and alone after all that talk."

"I'm the scared one here."

"You'll survive," I answer as I stick out my left hand and observe the fragment on the back of it, protruding from the pale skin. I give myself a moment to watch the reflections before I start cutting off fingers of that hand.

I let mana oscillate on the fingers of my right hand and use [Focus] to filter out the pain as I always do. Cutting each finger into three segments at the joints as I start explaining, "Lily left some healing marks for you guys. To make them last longer, and because of something about bone being a more fitting medium, she placed them there."

As those fingers drop to the floor, I move thermal energy around them and burn off the skin, flesh, and muscle so only the bones remain. There are fourteen in total.

I continue to explain, "She spent a lot of time working on these. Each bone is a single healing mark, but they need to be activated. They'll activate with blood, but the person providing that blood needs to hold the bone while it adapts to the body, it needs to heal. I want to give you a very, very strong warning that the blood MUST belong to the person who is being healed. Lily said she doesn't know what will happen otherwise. That's just for the finger bones. The two thumb bones are different."

Looking at my hand missing the fingers, I say, "They should be able to do something similar to what is happening to Grumpy, though it'll be nowhere near that extent. These bones can't carry a mark as powerful as the one I had. She made them so they'd work only for humans, they should be able to strengthen the body, heal illnesses, and possibly reverse aging. We don't know how much, though, so don't use it on anyone under the age of thirty. The others will heal even a mortal wound. Lily said she tested it, and they should even be able to reconnect a severed head and restart the body. Don't ask me how she tested it, I don't want to know."

Meanwhile, thermal energy blazes on my hand, and my wounds heal as my passive combusts. Bones reform, and flesh and skin grow back to cover them. The process on my pale left arm goes faster than on the rest of my body, certainly faster than it was before the body upgrade, even though the upgrade made me stronger. Then it occurs to me that Constitution influences healing significantly.

Channeler and Jessica are quiet, so I glance at them, surprised by the shocked expression on Jessica's face as she watches my hand and the bones at my feet. How? She was Normal Difficulty, something like this should...

"Well, thank you. We will make sure to use them well. I'll even save some for the Group 4 families just in case they're needed, and use others to gain an advantage, for sure." Channeler moves first, picking up the bones and placing them on the table. I notice that for a moment, he is surprised by how warm they still are.

"I'll see you after the tutorial then," I say, stepping towards the piles of boxes and tethering them to myself with my mana.

"If you don't get back here before then somehow," Channeler smiles. "You seem to have a talent for breaking things."

Hearing these last words, I feel myself being pulled away again and back into my room in the Headquarters of the Primordial Knights.

As always, an alarm starts ringing, but I filter it out and check the wound on my back that still hasn't fully healed, along with the remains of the toxin in my body.

I allow myself to take a break, sitting down to observe both forces.

Later, as they start weakening, I switch my focus to the fragment on the back of my hand. I'll need to find out more about it, but currently, I'm thinking one thing, I'm not selling it. If my early observations are correct, this thing will be very useful.

While thinking that, I cut the top off the box where I located the snacks and find a thermobox with frozen pizzas. I take one out and, after unpacking it, start using thermal energy to heat it according to the instructions. Unlike before, my control over thermal energy has improved enough that it comes out near-perfectly, with a charred bottom to add to the taste.

Sitting there on the floor, resting against the side of the bed, I block the doors to my room and hijack the defensive arrays to keep people from barging in to interrupt my thoughts. I think for hours, deeply and gradually, with all my memories returned to me.

I observe my body and its changes from the body upgrade. I take Lily's and Group 4's capabilities into consideration, and I even remember the question the Warden of the Parallax Eyes still owes me.

A bit later, I move outside to one of the Headquarters' gardens and Fragment of the Nameless Tree reacts to my will, shrinking by half. Half of it remains embedded in my hand, and the other I put into a small hole I dig out and close the dirt over it. After just a few minutes, the flat surface bulges and a small sprout with a tiny leaf pokes out, and with it, many ideas spring to life as I observe it and its nature.

There is a feeling that I can take it back and let the rest of the fragment in my hand reabsorb it. Looking at the tiny sapling, I continue to think about everyone whose machinations are continuing to mess with all of our lives, considering all of the Blights and Radiances.

Lastly, I think of my pride, the pride of its Ruler, and everything I've heard. Some things snap, leaving me with a certain kind of ill-informed sense of things, others are more complicated. But the base of my plan has been made.

A man to kill, rules to abuse, people to be made useful, items, finally, to be utilized, and the abilities needed to pull it all together.

I take another bite and feel the pizza crunch against my teeth. It stains them black, but I eat it all anyway.

Everything building up towards one single massive fuck you to the system, and all the people so arrogantly standing above me.

Just as I like it.

Chapter 764 - Three Months Later

Three Months Later

POV 12th Beyond Floor

The mountain shakes and then begins to move, rising up to reveal itself as a mere portion of an enormous snake made entirely of stone.

It coils and shifts in a single massive motion that causes the entire region to shudder, as its immense body sweeps across the land and smashes a neighboring peak into rubble. The air fills with thunder and the sound of falling rocks as the monster stands, gigantic and unstoppable. Each movement is slow, carrying incredible weight, and the monster towers, its form extending miles above the ground, and casts an equally enormous shadow.

[Colossal Rock Elemental - lvl 589]

It slowly approaches and then comes to a stop before a mountain where two people stand waiting. One of them is a young looking human woman. She has silver hair and amber brown eyes. One of these eyes

is closed, missing entirely. Several fingers are gone from her hands, and raw, healing burns mark her right arm and leg.

Her companion is a tall lynthari woman with white hair, gray eyes, and a horizontal scar across her nose. She has gray cat ears and two matching tails, which are now standing perfectly still. Even though she stands two heads taller than her human companion, she clearly holds no position of power here.

The elemental opens its mouth slowly. Huge rocks fall out, each the size of a small building, slamming into the ground with earthshaking force. A deep, vibrating noise echoes through the area in a rhythm that suggests words or an attempt at communication.

Facing the two women, the snake's voice shakes the area around, sending weaker monsters into hiding from the sheer terror of its presence. Only the human woman seems to listen intently, seemingly understanding the beast.

Once the elemental stops talking, she waves her hand dismissively. The colossal snake bows its enormous head toward the woman, who may as well be nothing more than a speck of dust in comparison to its size, and turns around to lie in the same spot it had before, triggering another earthquake as it settles.

Both of the women then move off the mountain, sliding down the face before running at a speed that turns their surroundings into a blur.

They move without pause for a full day before reaching a new territory where they finally come to a stop.

"Your mana," the human woman asks.

The lynthari obeys immediately. Having grown accustomed to the demand, she puts her hand on the silver-haired woman's shoulder. Her Mana Heart surges, sending all her gathered mana into her companion, who stands facing the nearby peaks.

"What did she say, Lady Lissandra?" the lynthari woman asks while they wait.

"Little kitten, how did you know it was a 'she'? Have you finally managed to improve your otherwise lacking perception?"

"Her eyes looked very cute and womanly."

"I see. A lost cause, then," Lissandra says. "She called herself The One That Never Followed the Call Upward. She told me about our target. We should be able to reach the one-winged wyvern in another week or two, but I want to confirm something else with another elemental first."

"Another week," the lynthari woman sighs. She kicks a stone at her feet and watches it plummet down the mountainside. "Lady Lissandra, I'm bored and sick of this floor."

"I am well aware of that, unfortunately."

"That's too harsh. But Lady Lissandra, I have a request."

"How surprising," the human woman answers simply, maintaining her controlled expression. She handles the questions and her companion with the bearing of someone long since accustomed to such complaints.

"When you talk to him through the disciple communication token, take me as well. You can do that, right? Just do your fancy stuff with that black dagger," the lynthari asks.

"I'll think about it."

"Thank you! I promise I'll stop bothering you for today," the lynthari says happily. Though she maintains an easygoing mood, her eyes stay sharp, and her fangs glint dangerously as she speaks. Throughout the exchange, something like glitter forms thousands of multicolored surfaces, reflecting the light around her, ready to move in accordance with her will. This lethality is the only reason she isn't being berated by her master or compared to some noble ladies' pet.

Soon after, another mountain begins to stir. It reveals yet another stone elemental, this one shaped like a lizard and formed from a much darker sort of rock, with glowing veins of magma pulsing through its body as it digs itself free from the ground.

[Volcanic Obsidian Elemental - lvl 629]

This one does not react kindly to the two presences near it. It shakes wildly, causing rivers of molten magma to spew everywhere from its over mile-tall body, leaving it standing even taller than the previous elemental.

It thunders in that same deep voice, a sound that causes surrounding mountains to crack and sweeps away the clouds in the sky, briefly revealing a beautiful crystal ceiling before the vapors rush back in to cover it. Beams of light still pierce through these clouds, illuminating an area that has been turned into a hellscape filled with flowing magma, crumbling mountains, and ridges tearing open in the ground.

The elemental turns its head toward the two figures and opens its mouth, releasing a long, resonant bellow that rolls across the land like a seismic pulse, shaking the molten plains and echoing through the shattered mountains.

At first, only the sound comes. A breath of superheated air follows, melting the side of the mountain where the lynthari and her master stand. Then, like a spark striking a fuse, flickers of red flame with white core appear deep in the elemental's throat. These flames are about to blaze out, thunderous, the sound of their ignition already spreading through an area the size of a small country. The air dries up instantly, and distant forests catch fire as the temperature skyrockets.

The lynthari watches this all with fear in her eyes. Though she has grown used to such sights over the months spent with her master, the terror remains. And yet she still doesn't move an inch, showing absolute trust in her master.

Lissandra Hawthorne speaks then. Her words are reminiscent of neither human nor elemental language, but they carry themselves through the area. They are not overwhelming, and yet they're louder than the flames, louder than the elemental itself.

A single offer. A mercy.

And the elemental refuses. The flames shoot from its mouth with an even higher pitched screech, a concentrated, quarter mile wide torrent of pure red fire with a white hot core.

Accepting the decision of the being facing her, Lissandra nods simply. She raises her hand, mana dancing across her palm, and swings it down in a single, swift gesture.

The flames rushing toward them split apart, passing by them as if split by the prow of a ship. The heat is incapable of piercing the field flickering around them. Instead, the two mountains on their flanks heat up until the rock and stone evaporates as the red flames pass through, continuing to carve a hole through the entire mountain range.

The flames vanish from the elemental's mouth, stopping abruptly as the colossal monster blinks. Life drains from its gaze while its body splits cleanly into two vast halves, the rupture running the entire length of its form.

For a single, suspended moment, the pieces remain upright, the veins of magma dimming and flickering. Then gravity claims them. They crash down with world-shaking force, the impact tearing the land apart and sending a final earthquake rippling through the already ruined mountains.

The bisection exposes an enormous heart of molten rock, pulsing with lingering heat. It sears the remains of its former body before spreading outward, melting the surrounding mountains into rivers of glowing slag. The molten tide devours everything in its path, leaving a scarred, smoldering landscape that will remain for decades to show the power the elemental once held.

Looking at the destruction for a moment, Lissandra turns around and leaves, followed by the tall lynthari. They do not teleport, such forms of movement aren't possible here.

The one winged wyvern's domain, encompassing the entirety of the 12th floor, does not allow it.

POV Drom, New Member of Primordial Knights, B Rank

It's my last year in the tutorial when I decide to join the Primordial Knights. My Void affinity is rare enough to get them to accept me, and the contract isn't even all that restrictive. I was even able to

sneak in some of my own demands. Honestly, I managed to get a surprising number of them through, to the point that I'm actually starting to worry.

But it's not like they're desperate. The Primordial Knights currently have four S ranks among their members.

Even before they reached that level, I heard about the annihilation of the Eternal Court. An entire organization wiped off the map by these lunatics. Those few short weeks are whispered about in the Megacity like a modern legend.

It was a sequence of dangers that threatened to destroy the city entirely, a crisis that caused even the Ruler of Diligence to grow enraged enough to destroy the Ancient Armory, burying all its secrets and opportunities with it.

Another demon passes by, looking at our group of new recruits in a way that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. I've had enough experience with them to know exactly what that look means. Yet another challenge.

But I'm prepared to face them, the rewards are just that good. Though I didn't join when the guild was still ranked 5th, I still think I might be early, as it's widely considered to be a fact that the Primordial Knights will take the 1st rank after the next reset.

There are many reasons for that, and I gathered all the information I could before joining, but it's clearly mainly thanks to the efforts of their four S ranks, the Beyond quests they've cleared, and their performance on this floor.

Even though Nyssa's been gone for months, rumored either to be dead with her guild hiding the truth or trapped elsewhere in the tutorial, people still remember her talent. They remember the Beyond quests she cleared that hadn't been touched in a hundred years, and that one 1,000 year Beyond quest she dared to take on.

As our group walks through the Headquarters, I keep looking up at the massive tree that stretches as high as the main building. It wasn't here just a few months ago when I last passed this street.

Even this tree has become the subject of rumors, especially because of the arrays surrounding it. Most of them haven't even been set up to defend it, so much as to lock it in. It arouses its own set of rumors that the Primordial Knights are planning some kind of mess in the city, though some say something with this much preparation would be unfitting for a demon.

That tree pulses with a rhythm that feels disturbingly alive. As a Void user, I tend to be sensitive to the absence of energy, but this tree feels like the opposite. It has a dense, pressurized core of mana. Looking at it, it almost looks normal, but I can see faint, swirling veins of blue and yellow light beneath the surface of each pale green leaf, moving like slow motion lightning.

It doesn't even feel like a plant, so much as a silent, growing explosion surrounded by massive containment arrays, the kind you would use against an S rank.

As a glowing, transparent leaf drifts down, the ambient mana in the air spikes so hard my vision blurs for a moment. I watch it slowly flutter through the air, falling behind a building out of sight.

The mood in the area shifts. I look toward our guide, a demon from the Primordial Knights, who is staring at two figures, a demon and a man.

The demon has pale red eyes and no horns, marking him as a half demon, but a single moment of sensing his heartbeat tells me who he is. Weslin, The Null King, the 3rd S rank in the Primordial Knights.

He isn't all that tall, but he is well built. His Void is what truly takes my attention. It moves around him constantly in unpredictable spikes. It isn't just powerful, but also deliberate and efficient to a point very few ever reach. It is an obvious sort of mastery that renders all but the best mana, primordial energy, and fragment users useless.

He seems to be angry about something, complaining and gesturing wildly toward the human man at his side. But that anger seems to disappear just as quickly as it came, then he laughs and pokes the human as if they were long time friends.

Meanwhile, I feel my breath freeze as I look at the human's face. He is staring right at me, radiating untouchable confidence. It is obvious that, unlike Weslin, he's noticed that I've been observing Weslin's Void.

He is taller than Weslin and slim. The pupils in his gray and brown eyes are surrounded by a golden circle that constantly moves and flickers, like a light trying to escape or a show of force in suppressing it. His cold gaze feels arrogant and confident beyond reason.

Above his head hovers a dark blue crown, spinning slowly. Rumor says it holds enough mana to challenge a Champion, controlled by an extraordinary mind and a mastery of mana that comes closest to Champion level among all the current tutorial attendees.

Nathaniel Gwyn, The Mana Tyrant. The newest S rank and rumored future Guild Master of the Primordial Knights.

Chapter 765 - Mora

POV Nathaniel

I ignore the newbies entering the guild Headquarters on the 4th floor of Beyond and continue to listen to Weslin. He's talking about a new way he came up with to use his void to fuck over mana users. Obviously, I listen to this carefully and think of countermeasures as I like to do.

Weslin's void, Morwag's unbinding, and any other form of disruption. As someone who likes to rely a little bit on mana, a tiny little bit, it is in my favor to know about such things.

In exchange, I, of course, tell Weslin how I would deal with his methods. I'm sure it'll only be a week or two before he comes up with a way to get around that, too, and I will adapt as well.

I could probably spend some time talking to new recruits. At least, it's something the vice guild master would like me to do, seemingly thinking I'd be easy to order around, but I refuse. Of course, he doesn't push much as contract renegotiations are coming up soon, and he doesn't want to sour our moods before that.

I interrupt Weslin. "I need to head out, I have a meeting with Crimson Forge in a few minutes."

"Oh, that item you guys have been working on for what? Three months? Ever since your 3rd tournament ended? When are you going to tell me what this is all about, newbie?" he asks.

“Probably in a few more months, but likely before your tutorial ends, so you'd better be here if you want to see.”

“Any hints for your good pal?”

“Well, it’s going to take advantage of their specialization, my blueprints from the Academy, and a few more crafters from the tutorial floors, a shitload of arcane materials I’ve gathered, and loot I acquired from the Ancient Armory before the Ruler of Diligence buried it. Especially the Red Heartstone. It’ll also include input from our guild’s favorite crazy catboy, along with blueprints and materials Brich stole, our examinations of Calvorn, and a bit of inspiration from several low pristine items owned by our guild and Crimson Forge, plus a few additional pristine items we rented for a day or two for a few million shards. Also, my bones and pieces of my flesh, which are apparently way too mana conductive, that we had Lily grow like it was some sort of plant while making it more durable.”

“So, low pristine rarity?”

“Weslin, my bud, I haven't cried since I was a child. The closest I got was when Biscuit shared his childhood memories, but even then I held back because I’m a true manly man. But damn, if this item doesn’t come out at least low pristine, a growth item, an ego item, or some other ridiculously fancy thing, I’ll be knocking on your door late one night to sit down and cry for hours. Manly tears, of course.”

“Of course,” Weslin nods.

I nod as well and, preparing to leave, I ask, “Malika?”

Weslin answers, “It's going pretty well between us. She’s still annoyed that I’ve risen to S rank, so she keeps going on dangerous Beyond quests, and I worry about her at times. But I’ve gotten used to how she is, and even if she dies, she’ll be doing something she loves. That’s just how she is.”

“Okay, pause, stop here,” I put away my departure a bit and lean closer to him. “It is all fun and games because she’s a demon, right. I mean, haha, they like to fight and die. Typical demon, right? But Weslin, they’re still like children. They’ll only listen if you prove yourself worth listening to. If you’re okay with her dying on some difficult quest she takes because she is trying to become equally strong as you, that’s fine. But if you would like her to survive and live her best life for as long as possible, as the most delightfully maniacal lunatic she can be, just kick her ass in a duel. I mean, not what you usually do,

where you hold back. Make it embarrassingly obvious she can't keep up. Then talk about how you don't think it's a good idea to do the dumb shit she's been doing."

"Will that work? I mean, I know demons..."

I don't let him finish. "Of course it won't. She is a demon. You need to do it repeatedly. You're still half human, so you might not fully understand, and be worried she'll end up hating you or that your relationship will change. But what I can tell you is that she'll be annoyed for a while, and then she'll listen. Not 'listen' as in do what you say, but 'listen' as in finally hear what you have to say and take it into consideration."

As many times before, Weslin reaches up to scratch his bald head, but once again, his hand twitches as he realizes there's hair there. And as with the many times before, he touches it and then continues to scratch his head.

"I guess," he answers, just that.

Crimson Forge Headquarters in Megacity, located on the 4th floor of Beyond, is dug into the side of the mountain from which the city grows. There isn't even a single building out here for anyone to see. In exchange for more space and safety, they sacrificed light and any view of the outdoors.

Once again, I find myself fascinated by the defensive arrays set up all over the place. There are even webs of metal alloys spread densely through the entirety of the walls as far as the Pathfinder will allow. A few of the defensive mechanisms are even small tunnels through which a special, trademarked secret mix of molten metals flows constantly. Multiple tunnels, multiple speeds.

That movement of the special molten mix at specific temperatures and speeds generates a field that I still have a hard time properly understanding, given that it doesn't really interact with mana all that much. It's clearly been inspired by the prison cell of that deer champion that was trapped in the Astral Prison floor. It's not to that extreme, but they're clearly attempting to mimic it, or possibly just experimenting for the love of the game. I wouldn't be surprised, knowing the main trio of crafters.

As always, when I come here, I examine the mana based defenses and sneak in my control to take over a few different parts. My Preeminence Eyes and other abilities are just way too good for me not to do it. There is even a part of me constantly dedicated to handling and using the eyes, whose abilities I've only

continued to improve. And at this point, my sight alone can carry my will and allow me to influence mana.

It doesn't work by sending my mana ahead and then using it. I just look, and it somehow works. I don't think there's any spatial component or anything like that, like Min-Jae seems to think. And I don't think it's manipulating others' mana either, as Sophie says. I think it's still making use of my mana, though I have to work out how exactly it reaches into the distance.

An alarm from an array I've dug into too deeply brings my attention back, and I glance at my guide. He is an A rank from Crimson Forge, a thylarin with six arms and wearing a fascinating set of armor with two sets of folded mechanical wings on his back. It is something I know these lunatics have been working on.

He smiles at me and waves his hand, using a bracelet on his wrist to stop the alarm. "Isolde was sure you wouldn't notice this trap she set for you, and said it holds a signature as close to yours as she could make. She said that in your past five visits, she used simpler traps to ensure that you'd get careless, and that each of them has been wildly different from this one."

"That's cheating."

"She said you would say that and asked me to say: 'hahaha.'"

"Damn," I sigh.

Meanwhile, I continue what I have been doing since I noticed that trap thirty seconds ago.

I use that dumbly similar mana signature to sneak in more of my mana, setting it so even if they notice a higher level of it, they'll just end up blaming the raised signature they used on the trap itself. I set a logic core with my preprogrammed sequence on one of the defensive nodes nearby.

In a day or two, it should cause all their magically flushing toilets to stop working.

Who the hell even makes a master sub system that solely deals with magically flushing toilets? I understand it allows for simple mana redistribution, less work, less materials, and easier upgrades, but damn.

"Is Brich here as well?" I ask my guide, just in case it gets his attention away from what I'm doing.

Meanwhile, the two-winged door made of matte silver metal with dragon head ornamentation closes, cutting off all sound, air, and light while reflecting mana and primordial energies. The two of us continue to walk through the dimly lit, if extremely wide hallway, built to allow for the movement of enormous machinery. Somewhere in the distance, I hear the clanging of huge machines that they've built along with the noise of a few other kinds of facilities.

"Brich won't be here today. A few days ago, he, Savant, and Kaari set out on an expedition to one of the floor's more dangerous locations."

"Oh, Kaari's still in the tutorial?"

"Yes, but this should be her last expedition. In a few days, she's going to make a push for the 13th tutorial floor before their tutorial ends."

"I see. Has Savant stolen anything from you guys yet?"

My guide chuckles and, as if affected by that, the mechanical wings on his back flicker for a moment.

"Mostly blueprints, knowledge, and a shoulder bone from a Champion we were holding in our treasury. He's either holding himself back, or we haven't noticed the other things he stole."

"What was so interesting about that bone?" I ask curiously.

The thylarin shrugs. "That Champion used to have a trait, skills, and passives that allowed him to grow wings at will. Isolde thinks Savant wants to use it to gain the ability to fly."

I snort. "If he had improved enough with his kinetic energy, he wouldn't need that."

"Sir Nathaniel, I think you sometimes forget just how impressive some of the things you do are. Such control, using kinetic energy to fly in the way you do, is very extraordinary."

We pass by a smaller group of crafters who head to their lab, and they slow down, taking their time to look our way. A few of them take a moment to bow in my direction and then continue to whisper something in between them.

"Nah. I could already do it back on the third floor." I answer my guide.

"And how many people with kinetic energy have you seen fly that way?"

That causes me to pause. "Not many?"

"Exactly. To be able to constantly channel and radiate kinetic energy for uninterrupted, smooth flight is extremely rare. It's easy enough to cause a short burst of energy and move in 'jumps' or 'bursts'. But your ability to handle the mental strain of constant channeling is extraordinary."

"I'm not lending you any money."

That causes him to laugh out loud and wave his hand. "You always say that, yet you're always nicer to me after I compliment you."

He continues walking first, and I stop and stare at his back.

Am I really that simple of a creature?

I take a step and then follow him again, thinking about it for a moment before I come to the obvious conclusion. Yup, I am. Sometimes.

We've almost reached the main facility of the Headquarters, and I observe the process as he unlocks the massive metal door. Then we pass through a short hallway where he unlocks a huge crystal door.

Another hallway follows, and the next set of doors is entirely made of wood. When they open with a creak, we enter a perfectly smooth half sphere.

The floor is made of pale blue stone. Above, a cupola projects a moving, beautiful view of nature. There are pointy, rugged mountain peaks in the distance, unlike any I've ever seen on Earth. Though it's day, the clear blue sky is illuminated by polar lights of yellow, orange, and green colors, all blending together. The rest consists of hills and plains, all covered in tall yellow grass that sways as if caught in a breeze. There are just a few trees, but they're white with red leaves.

All of it feels a bit off. The mountains are too big, and the grass is too tall. It's as if every part of the scale is ever so slightly off.

I know this is the world Eldrin, Isolde, and Silverweave are from. They're the top three crafters of the entirety of Beyond. All of them were attendees from the same tutorial and even the same group, taking the first through third rankings in the leaderboards for crafters.

And they're here as well, each standing twice my height. They are taller than any lynthari or thylarin, even taller than most velnar. Though unlike velnar, they are very slim. Not bulky, not wide. Just very tall. Their bodies are slim to the point where the length becomes unsettling. Long legs, long arms, long torsos, everything stretched just slightly past what feels right.

They look light, almost too light for their size, and yet they don't feel weak. The way they stand makes it obvious that they're balanced perfectly, built for movement and speed rather than strength. Their skin is a pale shade of red, smooth and even, marked with gray tattoos that seem to have grown across their skin rather than being painted on. Each of them has different tattoos from the others.

Their eyes are large and pale yellow, and they're a bit wider than human eyes, while their ears are slightly short and pointed.

The three of them feel similar, the way most members of the same species do, but not identical. Tall, slim, dangerous in a calm, effortless way. That's the vibe they put off, even if I know each one is a weirdo in their own way. They are from a race called the mora.

"We have a problem," Eldrin says first. He smirks faintly, not at anyone, but at the idea that this problem could be fun if pushed far enough. "We are missing a material, and we will not be able to get it here in Beyond or the tutorial."

Chapter 766 - Domus

As if expecting my question, Silverweave steps closer. She's slightly shorter than the other two, though she still towers over me. My guide, already forgotten and used to receiving this sort of treatment, takes his leave.

Silverweave, meanwhile, bends lower to show me some graphs tracking multiple lines of data and starts talking about different materials and their properties, along with other information they've gathered.

Even without me asking, she agrees that Eldrin might be too greedy and wasting time searching for a perfect fit, even though we could make do with other options.

The male mora hears this and only snorts in annoyance before moving away. Just two swift steps take him toward the control pillar, where he starts changing settings.

Silverweave continues to talk about how they came to their conclusion and about a material they've managed to track down. She confirmed its properties with the Local crafters, and yet it apparently cannot be found on any of the floors.

This goes on for ten minutes as she goes more and more into detail. Of course, I remember it all and store it somewhere in the deep, dark parts of my mind, all while translating certain parts that I need to keep at the surface so I can think about them.

When she says, "Eldrin is fixated on achieving a zero-loss superconductivity loop, which is why he wants to use Everwood. My data shows that if we utilize a layered sintering process, alternating thin sheets of refined voidcopper around Everwood, we can create a 'buffer-wave' effect. Using Everwood replacements would result in roughly a 15% loss of total output due to heat dissipation, even though overall stability would remain within acceptable margins. We need a material that doesn't reach the point of mana and primordial energy fatigue within the first few minutes of operation."

I translate that to: Eldrin needs a conductive material, and Everwood seems to be really good for that.

“Eldrin, do you really want Everwood because of that, or is it just some new material you’ve heard about and find yourself wanting to experiment with?” I ask.

The mora turns toward me from the control pillar at the question. Standing there tall and towering, he smiles, showing off the fangs all mora have, which are strikingly similar to a lynthari's. He smiles even wider, like a savage or like he was raised by wild animals in the forest, which is totally unfitting for one of the most brilliant crafters in Beyond.

“Yes,” he says.

“Yeah, I thought as much,” I wave it off.

Silverweave explains, sounding disappointed and a bit sad, “We wanted to send Brich, but there are some things he’s been wanting to do, so he rejected us.”

“The horror,” I shake my head before turning to Isolde. She hasn’t said anything until now, but she has a satisfied smile on her face, likely from the thought of me triggering her trap. “What are you smirking about?”

Isolde doesn’t get to answer because Eldrin activates the pillars. This causes a circular hole, which had been invisible until this point, to open in the floor. “We were thinking of using a piece of your Fragment of the Nameless Tree, but if I’ve guessed correctly, it’s still a pretty long way from being fully mature?” Eldrin asks.

I confirm that with a nod. “I told you it would take years. Did you think I found some kind of magical fertilizer or something? It just continues to grow while I try to steer it in the way I want it to grow. It is a really powerful fragment, but it’s going to take a bit of time. And what even is Everwood?”

Another pillar rises from the hole Eldrin opened. It is transparent glass, and inside it are the assorted parts of our project. There’s the Red Heartstone, a material we’ve converted into a network of logic cores and nodes, mana stones, materials we’ve purified, and various pieces of my bones and flesh. All of which is slowly condensing into the shape I’ve chosen for it.

The Chestplate.

Eldrin flicks his hand, causing the ring on his finger to activate and weaken the barrier. He reaches inside to take out a piece of metal, bringing it with him to set on the table.

As he walks, he explains, "Everwood is a bio-metallic alloy that physically fuses high-density timber with reinforced metal ore into a single material that continues to grow even after harvested. It possesses near perfect conductivity, which causes a broad range of energies to travel through its fibrous grain with almost no resistance. We simply couldn't find a material more conductive than your body, the floors are just poorly chosen, and the deck has been stacked against those of us with a love for creation." He lets out a long sigh. "Everwood should also be able to continue to grow in strength, as we would hope for an item we wanted to strengthen as it matures."

His head turns around, almost to the point where I think he might snap his neck, and he stares at me again with his pale yellow eyes. "Maybe I'll forget all of that and simply take your body. I'm certain I could find a healer to constantly regenerate you while I took you apart piece by piece. Imagine the items we could make. You would just need to sign a simple contract, and I promise we would put more resources into you than into Brich."

"Not interested."

Eldrin's eyes narrow, and he nods with a smile, but he doesn't say anything to that.

Silverweave answers instead, "The three of us specialize in item crafting. We are not bio-engineers. Converting living tissue into a permanent, functional conduit requires a deep understanding of somatic mana conductivity that only someone like your 'Doc' or a high-level healer possesses."

She tries to show me another graph she's quickly drawn out on her tablet. "Our current knowledge of biological preservation is limited. If we attempted to integrate too much of your body into the item, as conductive as they are, we'd face a necrotic feedback loop within months or years. The mana and your primordial energies would simply 'cook' the organic cells once they lost their natural regenerative connection to your body. As of yet, we lack the tech to prevent thaumaturgic rot in living specimens. We already have to restrict ourselves to harvesting specific, high-density body parts and not many of them. We have to focus on the pieces we can stabilize and seal to ensure they don't lose their inherent properties or suffer degradation."

Once again, I listen to her and nod once in a while, which seems to make her happy, and encourage her to talk more.

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

For the first time, Isolde speaks to interrupt her fellow crafter. "To cut out the unnecessary details: we want Everwood. It will be good for the chestplate, and therefore good for you. It will also be good for us. Your handler should be able to help you find a quest that would allow you to gather some. An A rank quest, S rank quest, 100 year quest, or 1000 year quest, or perhaps she can get you into some kind of event. It doesn't matter."

"What are you so smug about?" I ask her again, annoyed by her smile that doesn't at all seem to relate to anything she's talking about. I am almost at the point of telling her what I did to the toilet subsystem, but I hold myself back. "Okay, I will ask my handler. Is there anything else you need from me?"

"I have some interesting information about the Ruler of Diligence that I learned not that long ago. Want to trade me for it?" Isolde smiles more. Just like me, she has an insatiable sense of curiosity.

Meanwhile, Eldrin is already fully ignoring us to the point that I'm sure a first floor version of me would be able to sneak closer and steal something from his pockets without the mora even noticing.

Silverweave, a nerd who's completely uninterested in this kind of talk, heads toward the pillar to grab a piece of my bone from it. It's part of my arm, but in her hand, it looks so small. She sniffs at the bone, then licks it, and then writes down some notes.

"What do you want?" I ask Isolde as I watch Silverweave nibble on the bone this time, and note something down again. After a while, I take my eyes off Silverweave and focus on Isolde instead.

"I want something from that healer of yours, Lily Chen. Since she joined Bloodline, it's gotten difficult to even attempt to contact her, and she just rejects the messages I send through Bloodline's leadership."

"There are a lot of people bothering her," I answer. "So, what do you want from her?"

Isolde's fangs show slightly, though she doesn't act as savagely as Eldrin or as weirdly as Silverweave. Isolde is more of the observant type, though she has that weird sense of humor.

"I have a side project of my own, and for that, I want a piece of her spine that I'm sure she can easily regenerate," she says.

"I would expect this from the catboy, but not from you."

She shakes her head. "Can you do it?"

"That depends on your information. I'll either get you a piece of her spine or arrange a meeting, which I'm sure you would prefer," I say, as I try to imagine petite Lily standing opposite a mora who's twice my height. Then I realize that, even in such a case, Lily could probably grab Isolde by the leg and swing her around like the brutish bulldozer she is. I glance at Isolde and imagine the scene, which causes her to misunderstand my stare.

"My information is very good, the kind you like best," she says quickly.

"Go on," I invite her.

"I accepted this information as payment not long ago, so it's still pretty fresh for me as well. First, how much do you know about him?"

"Not much," I say, deciding not to reveal anything I'm not sure she already knows.

Realizing this, she smiles and looks down at me from where she stands, tall and imposing. "The Ruler of Diligence, who also used to be known as the First One, and his past self can be met on the 4th floor. He was born from the experiments of a lynthari Champion in an attempt to create a weapon formerly known as the Colony. The First One was supposed to be the core of that: a hive mind, a node to channel all the thoughts of the Colony. A protector of queens and their general. Of course, it all went very wrong."

"Of course," I nod.

"Virelia fell, his [Hive Mind] evolved, and all that. He became an Absolute and fought against two other Absolutes who intended to erase the Colony together. There were a number of pairings, challenges, his well-known feud with the young dragon, the Corporation betrayed him and tried to sell him out, the Slayer was hired to erase him, and in the end, the First One challenged the Ruler of Diligence and won. All that is more or less well known."

I blink and just nod, trying not to let anything show on my face while thinking about how I want a five season, twelve episode series of that with a proper budget for CGI effects.

"What I wanted to tell you," Isolde says, "and what I find the most fascinating, is where the Ruler of Diligence is now. I thought about it and made some simulations of how I imagine things to be."

She pulls out a big sheet of glass and taps on it. Colors flow into it from multiple containers connected to the glass, mixing and creating pictures. At first, it shows an image of a solar system with what seems to be a dying star. There are ten planets, each with multiple moons.

"This was his planet back when he just became a Ruler, the one Virelia was on. The star was dying because of the lingering consequences of the fight against the previous Ruler."

The images start moving, and gradually, the planets change their orbits around the star and start moving closer and closer toward the planet with Virelia. It feels sped up, as if I'm watching something that must have taken decades or centuries in reality. One after another, the planets crash into the main one, throwing off debris that circulates the globe before later raining onto the surface or burning up and connecting. They do this one after another.

"He wanted to artificially strengthen his planet, not just through pairing, but also like this. While it isn't nearly as effective, it does create a bigger home for his Colony, which is still hidden deep below, while the surface is bombarded by the fragments of other planets, turned into a living hell. Deep underground, somewhat safe from the Absolutes, safe from the Slayer, and safe from the many others attempting to kill him."

She talks as more planets appear, pulled from greater and greater distances, and solar systems far away. Asteroids follow, all slamming into it and turning it into a burning hell, yet growing in size.

"That planet grew and grew. It took millennia upon millennia of careful planning and execution, but one day, when it was finished, Domus became one of the biggest planets in the system. Bigger than some stars." Her eyes light up, and her voice quickens with excitement. "Imagine it. Stabilizing a star of that mass would be insane enough, let alone a planet. And then preventing the planet from collapsing into a black hole? Just how much knowledge and power would something like that require?"

The simulation shows it, the planet is now enormous, taking up most of the solar system and possibly more. The star now orbits it instead.

"And the old, dying star wasn't enough. So the First One, in a display of the talent we crafters all bow to, created an artificial star. He seeded it into the core of an old one, used its remains as a spark to kick things off, and made it grow, placing it in orbit around the Colony's home planet, Domus. Then he brought in another star, forced it into a stable orbit, and now both of them are circling the planet!" She laughs in happy disbelief.

At high speed, the simulation changes. The planet cools off, its surface is eventually covered in greenery, water, and enormous mountains as tectonic plates shift, though many gigantic craters where the other planets' crushed remains are still visible. The stars expand in size, still not comparable to the planet, but they glow brighter nonetheless with a healthy orange-yellow light.

I ask the question Isolde likely wants me to ask, "How many ants are there in the Colony?"

The mora smiles. "Quadrillions, for sure, but possibly more. Maybe quintillions? Sextillions? However, this is the information I had for you. Now, respected S rank, Absolute Candidate Nathaniel Gwyn, may I know if I have satisfied your ever hungry curiosity, and what is the word regarding my payment?"

I look at her and then back at the sheet of glass. "I will put in a very good word for you, and Lily can decide if she wants to meet you."

Chapter 767 - Alone

When I return to the headquarters, the atmosphere is filled with an aura of pure panic and excitement. Demons are moving frantically in every direction, and alarms are ringing out as waves of primordial energy pulse through the area.

Noticing me, one of the A rank demons rushes over to report something, but I ignore him and take a single step that carries me through the hallways. My senses sweep the area once again, and I shift my direction, entering the training hall where most of the guild has gathered.

Just in time, I step to the side as a massive body flies past me and smashes into the far wall, visibly cracking it.

Unbothered by the impact, Morwag slides to the floor and stands back up, shaking the dust off his frame. Binding energy surrounds him again, making his body much more durable. Yet, even then, there are deep wounds in his side, and all across his arms and legs. All of them bleed profusely, unable to be stopped even by his primordial energy, despite his status as one of the S ranks with the most durable bodies in beyond.

I track his gaze to land on Nyssa, who's standing on the other side of the training hall. She's barefoot, dressed in her pale blue tank top, and white pants. Her jacket, socks, and shoes are neatly folded and placed on a nearby bench.

"I have made my decision," she declares with a calm expression. "Neither you nor anyone else can stop me. But if you try to force your will on me..."

Nyssa takes a short step back and switches into a relaxed combat stance. Her heart beats steadily, and her black hair rises in sharp contrast to her albino skin and pale red eyes.

That feeling of a dagger's tip resting against your eye, ready to be pushed in, is back. Morwag faces it all, even as most of that pressure is being aimed specifically at him.

"You think I care whether you live or die? That choice is yours alone. I simply find no merit in allowing your death to be so empty. Me? I can afford to die in vain. Anyone else standing here can die in whatever shameful way they wish. But you? I expect more from you."

"Morwag, since when do you have so little trust in me?" Nyssa asks with the same coldness as before.

They stare each other down before Morwag is the first to step back, acknowledging her strength and her leadership in extension.

"Do whatever you want," he snorts before walking away, leaving a pool of blood behind him and trailing more of it with every step.

The demons and other members look around, confused, unsure of what to do, and many of them glance at me as if I should have the answers. I simply gesture for them to leave, and they quickly clear out of the training hall, soon leaving me and Nyssa standing there alone.

The Guild Master of the Primordial Knights sits on the bench and begins putting her jacket, socks, and shoes back on. When she finishes, she taps the space beside her, gesturing for me to sit.

"Long time no see," I say as I take a seat.

"That's true," she answers simply, without seeming that she will say more about that.

I let the silence sit for a moment before asking, "I've always been curious. Why do you wear white and blue, and why did you make the rest of the guild do the same?"

Nyssa smiles. "There are many reasons, but it is mostly so I don't forget. There's still something I have to do, and only then will I be able to feel that I can stop wearing these colors."

"Oh, so it was just a whim, and now the rest of the guild has to suffer?"

"Suffering might be too strong a word," she looks up at me. "But yes. Because I am the strongest."

Those words carry a hint of challenge in them, something similar to what I'm sure triggered Morwag into fighting her. For the first time, Nyssa talks to me that way, acknowledging me as someone she needs to prove her superiority over, though there isn't a speck of uncertainty in her voice about who would win.

Without raising my mana or primordial energies, I look down at her. She's every bit as petite as Lily, and I see the reflection of my evershifting trait in her pale red eyes. Thoughts flash through my mind. Plans, predictions, and combat arrays ready to be triggered. There is a lot I could throw around with all the mana at my disposal.

"I will challenge you when I'm confident I will win," I say eventually.

Nyssa nods and turns around, swinging her legs playfully. "You would lose right now," she answers simply.

"No need to be rude. I think I have a 20 to 40 percent chance of winning, and damn, that's a better chance than I've had in many of my fights," I snort.

Chuckling, she says, "MorMor got angry at me. He thinks I'm throwing my life away because of what I'm planning to do. It's strange and unexpected... and a little bit cute coming from him."

I look at her, thinking that Morwag might be many things, but "cute" wouldn't be one of them. After all, even now, he is called the most demon demon to ever exist by many people here in the Beyond. However, I don't argue and wait for Nyssa to continue talking instead, and eventually she does.

"Seeing these rankings update and seeing the way that man cleared the 5th floor alone, I've changed my mind, Nathaniel. I'll be going to the 5th floor, and I will be challenging a different champion than the one we'd planned. Alone. The one we planned for will be for you and the guild to handle by yourselves."

She stands up. Her simple pale blue and white clothes are all painfully clean. She carries no weapons, and even her heart beats slowly and with confidence.

Nyssa shows only a tiny bit of her kinetic energy while her Primordial Blood flows through her veins, killing her and making her stronger at the same time, unnoticeable to anyone. Her third primordial energy is something even I don't know yet.

"After all, what worth has a weapon that's never been truly tested? How can it be trusted, or expected to serve its function, if it has not proven its edge and endurance in battle?" She takes a deep breath. "Please pass that on to the Vice Guild Master and the others. I am leaving and won't be returning. After I clear the 5th floor, I will head to the 6th, where I will remain for the rest of my tutorial."

"I'll tell the others," I answer simply.

That causes her to smile further, and before she leaves, she says one more sentence. "I hope to see you there."

"Yes, I'll see you there," I say.

A notification appears when I am barely halfway toward where Ruby's been staying when she's here in the Megacity.

You have been invited to meet with your master for 10 minutes. Will you accept?

Yes/No

With a sigh, I sit on a bench nearby, which causes a lynthari sitting there to stop eating. He looks at me and mutters with a full mouth, still chewing, "Hey?"

"Do you also have those days where you feel like a lot is happening and you can't even find a bit of time to sort it all out in your mind? And yet more people keep popping up out of nowhere just for the purpose of ambushing you?"

He finishes chewing and gulps before he says, "I have no fucking idea what you mean."

"I guess you wouldn't. lynthari are highly extroverted anyway, so you guys wouldn't have those sorts of problems."

His tail flickers as he takes another bite of what looks like a baguette with a lot of meat in the middle. "Aren't you the newest S rank from the Primordial Knights?" he asks somewhat carefully.

A notification pops up again.

You have been invited to meet with your master for 10 minutes. Will you accept?

Yes/No

"I guess I am," I answer. "It's still a bit fresh, though most people already seem to know."

"I was prepared to shut my mouth and just nod politely, but you seem more chill than I expected," the lynthari chuckles.

"I'm the one who invaded your personal space. It would be a dick move to be an asshole without a good reason after that. Though, honestly, if it helped me, I'd probably throw you off a balcony. Don't say anything. Just imagine that throwing you off a balcony would actually hurt you."

The lynthari nods, and I use my mark to teleport to my room in the guild headquarters. Teleportation in the compound is against guild rules, even for guild members, so some alarms begin to ring, but I just shut them off for my room before accepting the invitation.

Then I find myself in that never-ending white space where you have no idea where the floor meets the walls, or the walls meet the ceiling. To my surprise, instead of Lissandra, I find myself facing Myrra, who is smiling brightly with her fangs showing. Meanwhile, my "master" stands somewhere behind her, further away, as if to avoid being a part of it for now.

"Feral one!" Myrra takes a long step closer and then lowers herself so our eyes are at the same level. "How much did you miss me?"

"No."

Her ears twitch, and her tails sway... tails? I look down, and she notices.

"I have two of them now. My body upgrade was kind of special," she answers playfully while already standing straight, walking around me in slow circles, and poking me at times.

"Was it your doing that brought her here?" I ask, immediately blaming Lissandra, but the Absolute doesn't seem bothered at all. Myrra walks in front of me to block my view of the silver haired woman.

"I've got only five minutes to play with you, so pay her no mind! I swear, feral one, there hasn't been a lynthari who's suffered as much as I have on that boring floor with no one to talk to." She gently pokes my scar, stretching from my left cheek through my neck. "I have a similar one," she says, gesturing at the horizontal one going across her nose.

"I'm happy to hear you are doing well and that the person over there kept her promise. I really am," I answer her, which causes the tall lynthari to take a step back.

But it only takes a moment before she smiles and moves back into my personal space. "How cute, feral one. Should I start calling you 'the tamed one' again? By the way, we're fellow disciples now, you know that, right? Our bond grows ever stronger. And what is that crystal in the back of your left hand? And your eyes? They're prettier than ever! Now that I look at them, calling you 'tamed one' would be a mistake. They feel very focused and dangerous, as if you're constantly prepared to bite me. Do you want to bite me, feral one? Do you want to pull on my tails?"

"I want to throw you off a balcony while the Ruler of Kindness and a ridiculously adorable vyssari child help me to get you over the railing."

"Is that some sort of cipher?"

"No, I'm being honest."

"How mysterious!" Her tails sway as she walks around, finger on her chin, as she continues to mumble theories about what my "cipher" might mean.

Seeing her act so overly excited, I start to realize how much she's actually enjoying this meeting. The lynthari are like cats addicted to new stimuli, whether it's interesting events or observing interesting people. She's clearly been suffering from a lack of both on the floor they've been staying on.

I don't mind it that much when she moves around like a hyperactive child and keeps asking questions. In a way, I can't help but be okay with it.

As I said, I'm happy to see she's doing somewhat well, though I'm sure she's hiding a lot under that surface. There's just no way things are really that simple. They never are. She just seems to have too many small wounds that seem to be healing slower than they should. Her Aurora Glass, constantly moving around her, is far too dangerous for there not to be a price attached to becoming that strong.

I try to find out if she's been declared an Absolute Candidate yet, but then I stop myself. This is Lissandra we are talking about. Of course, she hasn't.

In quick succession, I tell Myrra as much as possible, watching with amusement as she devours every word to muse over later. I tell her about the floors, a brief summary of what happened, some of the interesting people I met, the Ancient Armory buried by a spiteful Ruler, Biscuit's annoying friends on the 9th floor, how Group 4 is doing, updates on my minion, and some of my future plans.

She also quickly tells me about her months on the 12th floor, though very little, as even here, much of it tends to be censored. She mostly spends the time complaining about Lissandra, who stands nearby, unbothered, as if she's long since gotten used to it.

After all that, Myrra grabs my hand. She holds her finger over the vein in my wrist, sending her senses through my body to ensure she notices if I lie. "So why such a hard gaze? Why do you feel so cold, feral one?" she asks.

The thought that something so simple would be enough to catch me out almost makes me snicker, yet I don't do anything to stop her. I allow her to sense whatever she wants. Though when I think about it, it might just be her knowing I wouldn't bother trying to hide it from her.

"It's okay, Myrra. There's just a person I need to kill to protect some people. Nothing more, nothing less. And if anyone stands in the way of me doing that..." I do not finish the thought.

Her tail and ears freeze the moment I return her gaze. Her ears move back, pinning themselves flat against her head. She stays like this for a moment before her ears return to normal and her tail flickers swiftly. Her tongue sticks out as she licks her lips, her fangs showing entirely.

"Ah... feral one..."

She doesn't get to finish. Lissandra's mana signature rises from the back, and Myrra swiftly straightens up and moves to the side. "...As if you couldn't turn around and give me a few minutes longer," Myrra mutters, sounding disappointed.

Feeling as though I just escaped a grave danger, I focus on Lissandra.

"Little pup, congratulations on attaining the title of Absolute Candidate. I do believe you must have put in a lot of effort, considering the state of your body, your upgrades, and your trait," she says formally, as if it is something expected of her to say.

Just as formally, I answer, "Thank you."

"We don't have much time, but before we talk, you'll have to do something about your, honestly pathetic, Mana Cycling."

Expecting nothing less, I just nod and prepare to listen.

Chapter 768 - Scram

"Just do it like this," Lissandra says.

While I watch with my Preeminence eyes, she allows a bit of mana with Myrra's signature to seep from her body, where she circulates it.

At first, it confuses me because of how simple it looks, but then I start getting more information from my trait. Wavelengths shift, each moving in different trajectories at highly calculated speeds. There are spots where the circulation, seemingly without any good reason, starts moving faster only to stop later. All without any sort of rhythm I can currently pick up on.

More information floods my mind, and the longer I stare at it, the more I realize this is likely the way someone at the verge of Champion would move their mana. Well, by Lissandra's standards, at least.

As with many of the things she does, it feels ancient. Raw and almost primitive. It's like the way people used an infinitely less powerful computer than a modern smartphone to get to the moon half a century ago. Meanwhile, we have people nowadays who rely on much more computing and computers, or in

this metaphor, a system, rather than going through enough calculations to create a head high mound of notes.

Yes, I will do anything in my power to continue with this Cyclist Destroyer metaphor.

Observing what she does, I gather as much as I can, and yet I still decide that I'll only be taking the parts that I want and modifying the rest so it fits my body. I'm reasonably sure that what she's shown me would fit me well as it is, but this is simply what I like to do because I know that, through making my own version, I can continue to improve.

Seeing that I am done, the mana pulls back into her body, and I ask her, "Do you need more black mana or any mana in general?"

"I don't, little pup. Honestly, this meeting might've been a waste of time, but the little kitten wanted to see you, and her begging was starting to get even on my nerves."

I glance at Myrra, who just smiles and shamelessly sways her tails. Turning back to Lissandra, I ask, "How many disciple meeting tokens do you even have?"

"I have three more."

I blink. "Three?"

"Yes, three. I gained them during the 5th floor of the tutorial. But enough idle talk. Do you know how to use the Fragment you now possess?"

"A bit. Some things I came up with on my own, and others I have..."

"Which is to say, next to nothing."

"It is one of my greatest joys, discovering how things work on my own and finding my own uses for them."

“Little pup, sometimes it hurts me physically to watch people who behave like you. It is as if you’d rather run face first into the same wall again and again before considering that you could simply turn aside. All the while, someone else keeps telling you to go left, but you just keep screaming like a gray lizard, so you can’t hear it.”

“...I’ve heard quite a bit about these gray lizards. One of these days, I’ll have to find one. Are you in one of your ‘pass on knowledge’ moods? Go on, tell me about the fragment, but don’t expect anything in exchange.”

She stays quiet, and I give her time, yet seconds pass, and her face turns focused instead.

I’m about to speak when her eyes drift past me, and she starts talking again, her voice settling into something colder and filled with power. “I have stood at the summit of one of the most powerful planets in the universe for longer than most of you could endure. My mana blazing like a dragon’s breath, vast and unending as the Dark Oceans of Eladore. Your pathetic bunch was forced to tear pieces from my memory just to keep my shadow confined to the tutorial. I have already faced one of you. When his life ended, he looked at me with nothing left in his eyes but shock and tears he failed to hide.”

The presence around her rises up, and it has nothing to do with mana. It’s as if I can feel the capabilities of the body in front of me. This body holding the brain and memories of a person, only the Ruler of Pride could have faced.

She does not look at me. Even her words are not meant for me. Her gaze rests somewhere beyond my shoulder, fixed on a distant point only she can see.

Lissandra stops after a few steps, staring in that direction with a cold expression. “Even in the state you see me in now, I am more than capable of facing whatever trash dares to call itself a Ruler these days. This is more than enough. If you’re afraid to face me, then stop eavesdropping and scram,” she shouts.

I don’t even realize it at first, but the black dagger is already in her hand. She swings it. The air shudders, and the endless white flickers, swallowed by a cloud of pitch black, before snapping back again. It happens again and again. When it eventually stops, the never-ending white space remains, split by a long black scar stretching into the distance. Slowly, almost reluctantly, the scar begins to close.

Lissandra already has her attention back on me. “There is nothing I want of you, little pup.”

Trying to ignore what just happened, I gesture at the dagger. “You didn't have a problem wanting me to make that.”

That dagger is now slightly different. It is still pitch black, but in some weird, twisted way, it feels more firm and materialized. It is as if it'd been forged from the darkest of metals instead of mana.

Looking at it as well, she lifts it and twists it slightly to observe it. “It is indeed a useful tool. But that's it: a tool.” Her eyes snap back at me. “Is it a tool for you as well, or is it something you've grown over-reliant on and allowed to stifle your growth?”

“Why don't you tell me?”

She smiles for a faint moment. “Good. Now, back to your fragment, and I don't want to hear any more of your silly talk. I'll only tell you a little so you can have your “great joy.”

I lift my left hand where half of the fragment of the Nameless Tree lies embedded. It is a pale green crystal with green, yellow, and blue lights swirling inside. “As far as I've been able to observe, it needs time to mature, and it will grow to match my person, while in a way I can influence it.”

Lissandra shakes her head. “If we really must talk about it in such simplistic terms, so be it. If you are able to, try to find someone to teach you about the true nature of the Fragments and how they came to be. We don't have much time left, so I won't start that story, as it is something I would want to give proper time. As for your Fragment, in a way, you're correct. The Nameless Tree takes its meaning from that very absence of a name. It exists in a state of waiting, without nature, without design, without even a name. Because of that, you may imprint all of those things upon it. The tree that now grows where you planted it can be reabsorbed by you. When you then plant it again, it will begin from the start, but it will grow faster, because it remembers what it once became. You may also feed it to accelerate that growth.”

She taps on the crystal, which is the size of my fingernail in my hand, and makes a circular movement with her finger. This causes the lights inside to swirl in that same motion. “This fragment is capable of granting both great power and leaving you an utter weakness, depending on its owner. In the hands of a true Absolute, a fully matured fragment, raised correctly, can rank among the strongest of the

fragments. Some shape it for combat. Others refine it into materials or cultivate extraordinary fruits. Most often, it's raised up as the heart of a Domain. In that role, it serves as a central node that does not weaken or decay, allowing its owner's influence to extend far beyond their usual limits. Antenna, node, storage, it can also be forged into a weapon, staves, bows and spears."

"But you seem to have a recommendation for me in particular," I supply.

"Yes. The path you are walking on is one of constantly doubling down. So, push blindly in one direction and continue to deepen your weaknesses until your strengths grow so overwhelming that those flaws simply cease to matter. Though it's ridiculously dumb, given your abysmal level of talent, what you have done to your body is absurd. Even so, I admire it. I see the purpose your clumsy constructs serve, and I can feel a hint of what you can materialize to endure your mana in your stead. Continue to do that, because if you have any talent, it is for mana. Do not allow anything to take it from you, and do not rely on something else to bear it in your place. Carry it with you at all times, and train your body and mind to endure what others would require items to survive."

Lissandra gestures for Myrra to come closer before she turns back to me. "Grow your tree for the sole purpose of enhancing your primordial energies, so you can torture your body and mind to channel even more."

I give it a bit of thought. It is the sort of thing I've been considering myself, as the tree seems to be even more malleable than I'd initially believed. My primordial energies... using it this way... that could work.

"I'll think about it," I say, replying to Lissandra.

"Do whatever you want," the Absolute answers. She turns to Myrra. "You have ten seconds before it moves you out of here."

With that, Lissandra disappears, leaving me and the lynthari alone. Before I can think of anything else, Myrra crushes me in a surprise hug. The force makes me take several steps back to keep us from falling. Some of the confidence and cheerful mood she'd put on earlier is gone now that Lissandra's left. Myrra squeezes me strongly but carefully, aware of the limits of my body.

"Is it that bad there?" I ask her in a whisper as I hug her back.

She halts for a second. Without answering, she squeezes me even tighter. This time, I think a few of my bones actually crack, but I don't really care all that much, and I allow it. I somewhat awkwardly pat her back a few times.

When the time is almost up, she lets go and turns around. I don't even get to see her face as she waves with her back toward me, then disappears just as Lissandra did.

Finding myself back in my room, I allow myself to sit for a few moments before I stand up and stretch. Looking through my window, I stare at the Nameless Tree growing there, surrounded by a multitude of barriers. Like lightning, a myriad of ideas flash in my mind, and I take a moment to enjoy going through all of them.

Meanwhile, a powerful presence is heading toward my room. I also observe it with curiosity. The presence doesn't slow one bit, and as it reaches my door, it just steps through. The visitor pushes right through the metal-reinforced door, which I'd reinforced with inscriptions, mana stones, and other materials.

The most demon demon to ever demon simply walks through, ripping the door from its frame and tearing several large chunks of wall free with it.

Some of the alarms I'd set ring out, warning me of an intruder. One after another, I turn them off while never for a second taking my eyes off Morwag.

I can feel his aggressive heartbeat. Being taller and more muscular than most demons, his presence feels especially overwhelming in the confined space of my room. His steps are long and powerful, and yet quick and agile. After a few more strides, he stops before me, never breaking eye contact for a single moment.

"I broke your door," he says.

"It seems like it," I agree.

"What are you going to do about it?"

I open my mouth to say something quippy, but looking at him, I close my mouth back again.

Then, I chuckle and say, "Scram."

My blast of kinetic energy crashes against him with such speed and volume that he doesn't have time to react or gather enough of his own primordial energy to stop it. His body hits the wall and crashes through it. He rolls across the hallway and then through another wall, disappearing from my sight.

Combat subminds activate, and pre-prepared arrays rise to the brink of activation, and I slowly walk toward the hole in the wall, step over the broken bricks, and enter the hallway.

After gesturing for a few nearby demons to get out of the way, I start walking toward where I sense Morwag's signature and his primordial energy rising at high speed.

Chapter 769 - Bound together

A metal door shoots my way, cutting through the wall and forcing me to duck before it embeds itself in the stone behind me. A brick follows, which I deflect with a pulse of kinetic energy.

I generate more kinetic energy and shape it into a Needle Point. Unlike Lioren, I don't make it as thin as a needle. I make it as thick as a tree trunk. It smashes against Morwag accurately, but nothing else happens. His signature doesn't move at all.

The alarms ring annoyingly, both the audible and the hidden ones, so I reach through the defensive array and disable them one after another, throwing the hallway into silence. The sound of crumbling stone cuts through the quiet as Morwag walks out through the hole in the wall. His Primordial Binding doesn't flicker or radiate into the area, but rests on his skin and seeps through his body.

There are a few questions I would like to ask. Morwag has been holding back a lot in the past three months, and he hasn't challenged me once. For any other demon, this would be extremely undemonic behavior, but for Morwag? I think it fits him. There is a deep rooted violence inside of him, but with it comes a personality that considers such a lack of control to be pathetic.

Morwag is surprisingly smart, and I've seen it many times, but when he decides it's time, he turns into a brute like any other demon. Right now, it feels like he's been saving me for months. Like a dessert to eat

at the end of the dinner. Whatever happened with Nyssa must have pushed his hand. It's perfectly obvious to me without any words needing to be said, I don't even need to ask.

I watch as my Needle Points crash against his body and explode like icicles falling to the ground. The distance between us shortens as he moves his muscular body at impressive speed. I wait until he's just a step away, then release a more powerful blast of kinetic energy, which he unbinds. Ten more blasts follow, each almost equally powerful.

He unbinds and endures the first few, but I channel them too fast and with too much power for him to consistently gather enough energy. His body shoots away like a cannonball, rocketing through the door.

At the same time, I find my own body being pulled ahead as if there's a rope tying us together. A binding he's created out of his primordial energy.

My mana surrounds me as I crash into the wall and roll into the kitchen, where a few dozen guild members are eating. From between the broken tables, Morwag charges me. I attempt to teleport but find him binding everyone to this place with the intent of disabling teleportation. A part of my mind instantly separates, observing how it's been done and deploying countermeasures.

Meanwhile, I use Wraith Dance to avoid his charge. More Needle Points shoot toward him, causing him to stagger but failing to wound him in the least.

He uses the energy binding us together to pull me toward him, but I absorb my momentum and hold myself in place while using [Redistribution] on him. Morwag halts on the spot, held there by my will. Before he can free himself, I grab what looks like a tomato from a table nearby and throw it, causing it to splat against his cheek.

"Fuck you," I say.

The demon stays quiet, an almost unbelieving expression on his face. The red of his eyes deepens, and he sticks out his tongue, licking the juice flowing down his cheek. In the next moment, the immense strength of his body breaks through my hold. At the same time he pulls me, he binds me to the spot where I stand and charges at a speed that would tear his body apart if he weren't binding it together.

His fist comes close to my face before I teleport outside, finding myself in one of the training areas. I take a few steps into the center of it before grabbing the bond that ties us together. I pull on it with all the force I can gather and enough kinetic energy to evaporate a skyscraper.

Breaking through a dozen walls, Morwag's body bursts through the wall and metal shielding and crashes into the training area, where a tricolored orb slams into him, throwing him to the side.

A few demons in here shout in excitement, and one of them attempts to join the fight, but a burst of my kinetic energy sends him flying to the opposite side before I throw more orbs at Morwag. They explode one after another, shaking the training area, which endures impressively, having been built with even this sort of damage in mind.

I catch sight of the two deep red glowing orbs that are his eyes before he steps out of the explosion undamaged. All the lingering mana in the air turns into fine particles that rain down like dust, reflecting the lights in the training area.

Morwag twists his head, his neck cracking audibly as he steps in front of me and pulls off his shirt, revealing his bare chest. What catches my interest are the vest and arm bands he wears just over his elbows. Standing there, he cancels whatever effect binds them together, and that vest, those arm bands, and a pair of cuffs around his legs slide down and fall to the ground.

A series of heavy thuds echoes out, far heavier than expected. The demon facing me takes a deep breath and disappears in a blur. At the same time, I use Wraith Dance to move.

The ground where I stood explodes under the force of his attack as his leg smashes into it. He doesn't stop and moves again as I observe twitches of kinetic energy around him while he shifts his body. As before, I use Wraith Dance to move away, but I leave an orb filled with golden thermal energy where I once stood.

As Morwag reaches the spot, the golden flames wash over his body and reach into the area, but he stops them before they can expand any further. He binds these flames to himself, pulling them to his hands, which start glowing with those golden flames.

He moves faster than before and follows me through another series of explosions and teleportations before he catches up to me and throws a punch at me with a fist wrapped in golden fire.

The flames die out as they reach for me, drawn back under my control. His movement slows just that little bit as I try to hold him there. I dodge his punch, twist around him, and slam my open palm against his chest, releasing sequential waves of rippling kinetic energy in an effort to pierce his body.

Morwag takes a few steps back, and pain twists his face, but he clenches his teeth and his muscles tense up in a way that sends a pulse of vibrations into the area, suffocating the kinetic energy I've been pushing through him.

I don't wait for him to regain his composure. From point-blank range, I unleash a surge of raw mana. The floor beneath us rips apart, the ceiling splits with a sharp crack, and the force slams outward, tearing straight through the wall.

Stone, metal, and debris are blown away in a violent burst, opening the area to daylight and the rush of outside wind, which rushes in as the structure shudders around us.

Still sensing him nearby, I gather kinetic energy and release another blast to send him flying, following it with a few more, but this time, he matches my speed. He doesn't use his unbinding at full power, just enough to weaken the effect so his body can endure the rest. Where ten sequential kinetic pulses had overwhelmed him before and sent him flying, he now stays in place, absorbing each impact and adjusting with every strike.

My body is bound in place, and he pulls on it, jerking me around like a ragdoll.

I fly through the air and use a few short bursts of kinetic energy to twist just enough to barely avoid his punch, flying past him outside into one of the gardens, where I absorb my momentum and slide on the grass until I stop and my back touches one of the trees.

I duck immediately, and that tree explodes into splinters under Morwag's swing. He follows it with another downward strike, and I evade it. The ground under us cracks, exploding into a crater and sending debris into the air, where it clashes against many of the barriers set there.

Moving a distance away, I raise my mana. The area drains of color, and in that black and white world, my Preeminence eyes glow as I [Eclipse] the arrays and take them under my control. I disable the part that disables flight and rise into the air just as Morwag reaches me.

He jumps up anyway and shoots toward me like a rocket, only to be met with a combined blast of kinetic energy and mana, which throws him to the ground and through one of the guest buildings, which explodes apart violently.

I sense no signatures around, so I let thermal energy from my Ignition Heart flood me. Golden flames burst down like a huge stream as thick as a building, blasting the debris of the house and surrounding Morwag. The metal and stone melt, and I disable more alarms from the defensive arrays.

That stream of golden flames continues to narrow. The thickness of a car. The thickness of a tree. An arm. A finger. A laser thin golden stream pierces the air in a way that causes it to screech like a jet engine.

Yet, despite the stream's intensity, Morwag steps out calmly. There is no more damage on his body than before, and that thin stream of flames burns straight into the middle of his chest, causing only reddened skin and burns.

Not breaking eye contact with me as I hang suspended in the air, Morwag takes a small step to the right so the stream of flames now burns exactly over where his heart beats strongly.

Then, the binding energy he's been gathering reaches toward me in a way I can't avoid. I can't even disrupt it like I can with mana. There are many ways I have learned to deal with primordial energies, and I try all of them. I use my own primordial energies against it, I use my mana, and I try to rely on my skills.

But in the end, it is just too different, focusing on me in a way I don't have experience dealing with.

The moment the binding connects us, I know what just happened and twist the laser stream away from his heart, just as Morwag weakens the forces binding his body together.

His chest is sliced deeply, blood appearing and vanishing as it's instantly burned away, leaving a streak of sizzled, blackened flesh from the center of his chest to the other side of his right shoulder.

Morwag lets the blood that oozes from the wound collect on his fingers and palm, turning it over and feeling its warmth. He then moves his hand into his long white hair and dyes it with the deep red blood, slicking the hair to the back of his head.

With a streak of red in his hair, he looks at me and then at my chest.

Narrowing my eyes, I put the palm of my hand on my chest and press the white shirt I'm wearing against it, causing a bloody line to appear that mirrors his own.

My heartbeat speeds up erratically, and a whiff of fear washes over me as I watch the expression of the demon below me. The determination etched into his face clearly says he's still got more in him. An almost intoxicating confidence, a controlled menace that radiates outward.

Under the force of my will, the beat of my two hearts gradually calms down and begins to sync, both of them beating out the exact same rhythm. In front of me, that golden thermal energy gathers again as I continue to compress and strengthen it. It shoots ahead faster and more deadly than before in a sweeping move across Morwag's neck, attempting to cut off his head.

He remains standing for the first sweep, and after that, dodges under the second that follows, attempting to do the same.

There is sizzling skin across Morwag's neck and blood flowing down from it across his bare chest as he starts laughing roughly with his vocal cords damaged.

The very same wound appears on my neck. Burning and painful, the sensation is emphasized much further by my body being so much weaker than that of the demon I'm facing.

Chapter 770 - Fight between two S-ranks

I allow thermal energy to combust under my skin while Morwag relies on his natural regeneration. Each wound I inflict on him appears on me now that he's forged this connection with his binding. These wounds burn and hurt more than usual, as if [Focus] can't filter the pain out for me. But the same goes for Morwag.

My [Empyrean Lance] skewers him easily through his stomach and pins him to the ground.

Pushing through it all, he awkwardly stands up, the glowing lance sliding out of him as he rises. The way I hover in the air remains constant, not shaking even a bit, even as a hole appears in my stomach and blood pours out. A bit of blood flows from the corner of my lips from how hard I end up clenching my teeth.

Standing there with that hole in his body regenerating, Morwag looks towards me menacingly. He moves his right hand and stabs it into his left side, where he squeezes something, sending bursts of pain through my body.

Golden flames burst and seep out through the holes in my body. The mana I've been gathering spins around me in swift currents. I raise my right arm to the side, and all that mana swings down, cutting the limb off cleanly. Before it falls down, I grab it and press it to my shoulder so it can reattach, then teleport to appear directly in front of Morwag.

With his right arm cut off, but still stabbed into his side, he turns to face me with his left. I let my mana destabilize at my ankle, snapping it and his as well, which causes him to lose his balance. My punch crashes against his chest, and before he can fly back under the impact, a mana arm forms from my back and grabs the arm stabbed into his body, holding it and forcing it to slide out.

I chuck the severed limb to the side, where it breaks a window and falls into someone's room before I use Wraith Dance with my remaining unbroken foot to reach Morwag.

His missing arm is already regenerating, but with how powerful his body is and how much he has to focus on his healing, it will take a while. Meanwhile, mine is already nearly fully reattached.

This time, he's the one struggling to avoid my attacks. He doesn't care that he steps on his damaged ankle, sending a spike of pain through both of us, and he swings his head down, slamming it into my forehead.

I absorb all the kinetic energy from the impact, and once again, the area drains of color, disrupting whatever attempts the city guards are making to intervene. The sheer flood of my mana pierces through his natural barrier, which has weakened along with his with his binding. Then I touch him and teleport both of us outside of the city and into a canyon surrounded by towering cliffs.

Falling through the air, we exchange punches. Mine cause more damage than Morwag's because he's not even trying to defend, while his strikes are being stopped by my kinetic absorption. Forming a tricolored orb, I detonate it between us. We are thrown in opposite directions. Morwag crashes into the cliffside while I slam into the ground.

There, I gather more thermal energy. It shoots ahead in a stream as thick as a tree trunk, hitting the side of the cliff where I can still sense Morwag. I track his body with the beam, which almost makes it look like I'm drawing on the cliff, melting through rock and causing lava to flow and drip from the point of impact. A few times, burns appear on my body, scarring my face, my leg, and my back before they start healing.

As Morwag falls to the ground, both of his legs break as he stops holding his body together and even seems to purposefully weaken it. The shared wound causes me to stumble and fall to my knees.

His regeneration heals his legs faster than my combustion can recover, and, appearing standing in front of me, he kicks at me. He hits only my right arm, breaking it and throwing me to the ground. With his right arm missing, there is no corresponding wound on his body.

He pulls on his binding and, like a ragdoll, he yanks me back toward him. My mana bursts and surrounds me in a suit of armor that grows to twice his height. I allow myself to crash against him, and two more arms form from the dark blue mana armor as kinetic energy moves to power it. I twist and grab his body with two hands while the other two start battering his face and chest.

Morwag's binding energy flickers across his skin. He slashes with his remaining arm, cutting the mana my armor is made of and disrupting it for a moment before more mana rushes in to reform it. I get back up and, still holding him, I swing and throw him against the cliff. Multiple thermal, kinetic, and mana javelins follow, bombarding the area.

Then I stagger back in pain and breathe heavily through my mouth, as my nose alone doesn't feel like it's taking in enough. Blood flows from my mouth and down my chin.

A loud cracking noise and movement draw my attention as a rock giant steps out from the cliff, standing several times taller than me. Morwag is binding the surrounding stone to himself, compressing it and moving it with the insane strength of his body. The ground shakes as he takes a step and swings down at me.

Watching that movement as if in slow motion, I let more mana flood me. My armor grows in size to match his, and I catch that rocky arm. A burst of kinetic energy pushes me forward as I slam him against the cliff.

Audible cracks boom through the canyon. Stones, starting at the size of a fist and ending at the size of small buildings, begin to fall upon the two of us, crashing against our forms.

A punch sends me back, and I absorb my own momentum. Then, all the falling rocks slow down and stop moving as well. The dark blue armor around me darkens even further, while light blue and purple mana start flowing through it as well.

His stone fist shatters against me while I locate his body and punch straight through with my enormous fist, piercing a hole in the rocky giant. I feel no impact, and no wounds appear on my body even as my strike reaches him. When I pull my hand back, the giant is gone, nearly all of its stone unbound.

In the next moment, I let go, and all the mana from my armor swirls around me, turning into a single tri-colored orb floating in front of me. I shoot it toward Morwag's signature with an audible impact and allow myself to land on the ground. Once there, I use Wraith Dance, appearing a mile away after a few more uses.

The power of the explosion reaches me even here. A thunderous shockwave bounces off the cliffs of the canyon, followed by a heatwave and a powerful implosion that sucks the air and dust from the area.

There is still no damage being reflected onto my body.

Morwag appears from within the epicenter and reaches me in just a moment, slowing down to a walk with the crumbling cliffs and molten rock in the distance behind him. There is armor around him now. It's that low pristine set we retrieved together from the Guild Master of the Eternal Court. It is blood-red, still somewhat see-through, but pulsing with life. It is sleek, the surface rippling in rhythm with his heartbeat. The horns growing from the helmet are longer and thicker, matching Morwag's size.

The right arm of the armor hangs along his body uselessly, while in his left hand, he holds a weapon I've only heard rumors about, partially wrapped around his forearm. One he rarely ever takes out. The weapon he's bound to himself and can summon at will.

The Obsidian Spine Chain.

It is made from the fused vertebrae of a long-dead, once powerful monster. Each segment is thick and uneven, black like polished obsidian and rotating along its own axis. The pieces grind against each other as they move, adjusting constantly rather than simply staying aligned. The weapon bends in a way that almost feels like it's alive, as if it remembers being a spine. It's also bound directly to him, feeling like an extension of his body and reacting to his intent.

The Spine Chain explodes in a sudden movement, burying itself into the ground only to explode back out a moment later. Still keeping its shape, just growing much bigger. Thick as a sequoia tree, it holds its form and twists like a gigantic snake lunging toward me. In the next moment, two more follow. One explodes from the nearby lake, made entirely out of water, and another emerges from the air, invisible, but I can sense its presence.

Like three colossal monsters, they move through the air, destroying everything in their path as they head toward me. The pressure around Morwag increases, and the surface of his blood-red armor ripples in the frantic rhythm of his heart.

Then both of my eyes burst, destroyed instantly as Morwag destroys his own to strip me of my trait.

I swap my senses, observing the vibrations spreading through the air and tracking the signatures of shifting heat. I close my eyelids over the ruined remains of my eyes.

Morwag begins to say something, but I clench my teeth and bite off my own tongue, spitting it out. Across the distance, only choking noises escape the demon.

Emerging from my body, all my upgrades and constructs manifest as my vessel behind me. I don't even have to see it to describe it, and I don't need my eyes either. It's a figure mirroring my own, slightly taller and lacking fine detail. It's dark blue, and yet bright in the places that mirror the scars from my body upgrade. My constructs show upon it as well, leaving it densely covered in inscriptions.

An incomparable amount of mana seeps from my hearts. Both of them. Mana flows from my Kinetic Mana Heart and thermal energy from my Ignition Heart, which I convert to mana instantly. Like a pillar and a flame combined, that mana rises into the air and toward the sky, channeled through my vessel.

I move my hand in a swinging motion, and my vessel follows.

In an instant, everything lying in the direction of my swing is erased.

POV The Cerulean Parlor

"It's been a long time since we got to watch a proper fight between two S ranks. Lady Kindness, who do you think will win?" the man asks the woman, said to be among the most beautiful who ever lived.

The two of them, along with two dozen more Handlers, sit in a cozy looking lounge. In one corner, a huge fireplace burns, and the floor is covered in thick furs from monsters capable of obliterating an average Champion. All of the handlers present are at least Champion rank, along with a number of Absolutes and a few hidden Rulers. They watch the two S-ranks fight on a screen created by one of their number, which constantly zooms in and out to match the scale of the battle, while others use their own senses to observe it directly.

Kindness, from the seat where she sits alone, looks up from her hand and smiles politely, observing the screen for a moment. Huge explosions are tearing the ground apart repeatedly and sending shockwaves that reach even the Megacity as the two figures move across the field in brutal combat.

In the end, the blonde woman shrugs and turns to a black-haired woman with streaks of red in her hair. "Nathaniel is your ward. What do you think? Will he win?" she asks.

The woman, the Ruler of Greed, her identity hidden from everyone here, other than Kindness, just pretends to look at the screen while she uses her own senses, which easily overshadow anything the others here can do.

"I'm fully willing to bet on Nathaniel, Lady Kindness," she answers.

"Well, it would be mean to bet against your own ward," the man who initially spoke to the Ruler of Kindness chuckles. "I am willing to take your bet and put mine on Morwag. His binding energy is extraordinary and powerful, and with two pristine items bound to him, he can overpower any amount of mana his opponent might hold."

Another handler jumps into the conversation. Starting from the waist down, she has the body of a spider, including the head, while from the waist up, she would appear to be a human woman. When she talks, it is not obvious if the upper human part speaks or the lower spider one. "No one below the rank of Champion can use a low pristine item to its full potential. Morwag will run out of resources faster than his opponent. With the insanity that was his body upgrade, Nathaniel needs only to wait it out and keep his distance. So, I bet on Nathaniel."

Several people in the room chuckle at that. Realizing what they are laughing at, the half-spider woman laughs too, then speaks again in her flat yet strangely charming voice, "Is it too late to change my bet?"

"You've already picked your favorite, it is too late to make any changes. I personally am willing to bet ten million shards on Morwag and-"

"One hundred million," the black-haired woman with the red streaks says, staring the man down. "And that upper-pristine item you commissioned from the Ruler of Diligence for your disciple. I bet on my ward and will match your bet."

"How do you know..." the man, a powerful Absolute, says in surprise.

He is about to reject the offer, but then he notices the expression on the Ruler of Kindness. It is a gentle expression, yet in a way, she doesn't even realize that it's also condescending. As if she is looking at him like he's a child. She does it to everyone. Given her age, it's easily forgiven, yet right here, in this moment, it provokes the man's pride.

"Deal," he says finally. "Your ward will lose."

The Ruler of Greed, her identity still hidden, smiles and addresses everyone in the room. "I think you underestimate my ward too much. With Nyssa Volare already on the fifth floor, only Lyraen and three others can match him. And once Lyraen's tutorial ends, those three will be all that's left, all born on the same planet as my ward."