

Tutorial 791

Chapter 791 - Internships

Only when the notification confirms everything's over do I allow myself to slump to the ground, then groan as the lingering heat of the blue flames washes over me. Just as I sit there, I teleport closer to where Morwag and the body of the Champion are.

Even this strains my already tired mind, and now that the fight is over, I find myself feeling the effects of my wounds and all the effort this required. Even so, I lift my hand towards Morwag, and black mana seeps out of the body of the Champion.

I move to flick it away, launching it into the distance to be someone else's problem. I feel too tired to fight it and break it back down into mana.

"Don't!" Weslin says quickly, reaching my side and interrupting me. "We've already caused a huge commotion. The other Champions are really far away, but if by any sort of shitty luck we attract one, we are dead."

From my place on the ground, I look up at him, and in my mind, I compare the risks, but in the end, I sigh. My minds combine once more, and my skills reactivate as I begin to fight what remains of the black mana until I break it apart. Causing particles of blue mana to rain down around us, but I don't even bother to pull them into my body and let them linger there.

My crown is gone, and with it that insane amount of mana I had stored and the addition from my brother, Rex. I can't... I force myself to put the thoughts of the more analytical parts of my mind on hold and turn to Weslin.

"How is Morwag?" I ask him.

"I'm fine," Morwag answers instead from the ground.

"He is not fine," Weslin says.

"Dying?" I question.

"As if something like that could kill me," the demon growls, despite the holes through his body and many other visible wounds he bears.

"As if something like that could kill him," Weslin agrees. "But we should still get him to the healers. Quickly."

I nod and hesitate for a moment before I ask, somewhat quietly, "The others?"

"They are..." Weslin begins, but Morwag interrupts him.

"What the fuck is with that tone of yours, you arrogant prick?" he barks at me right away. "Everyone here walked onto this battlefield knowing the risks. So the plan went to hell, big fucking deal. No one's looking for your pity. They did their best and fell to a superior opponent, there's no shame in that. You more than did your part, and you won't catch any of us carrying the goddamn weight of their deaths. Get that through your head."

"What he said," Weslin says, and then kicks Morwag. "Move so he can claim it. You know he deserves it."

"Weslin, don't mistake me for some pathetic thief." And as he says this, even with the state his body is in, he moves to the side.

As asked, I move ahead and bring myself to a stop over the body of the Champion and look down at it. In defeat, all that terrifying talent and the abilities that must have taken years to master are gone. How weird it is to find myself looking at a defenseless body now, so void of the mind that powered it. Now, even in death, it's beginning to release some mana radiation.

I touch the body with the tip of my shoe, and a notification appears.

Would you like to claim the portal key? This key permits a single use, creating a teleportation gateway to the Sixth Floor of Beyond for one individual.

Upon claiming the portal key, a tattoo will be imprinted on your body and will remain until the key is used. The key may only be activated on the Fifth Floor of Beyond.

The tattoo can be transferred or retrieved from your body upon death.

I read that notification for longer than I probably should. A single thought continues to appear in my mind.

Could I maybe challenge a Champion alone? Do something like what Nyssa and Adrian did on their own?

Then I replay the fight. Even with how big the advantage was and how strongly I countered the Champion, I would've been dead if I'd challenged him alone. Morwag and Weslin helped immensely, as did the other A-ranks. Though their role wasn't as flashy as that of the S-ranks, they supported Weslin and Morwag with their abilities and fed their mana and primordial energies into arrays and formations.

Well, I can think about it later, and if I decide, I can sell the key. For now, I claim the portal key.

As I accept the notification, I feel a sting as the tattoo with deep red glowing lines burns itself into my right forearm. It coils around my wrist where a watch would be, and then from the inner side of the forearm, a single line goes up to the middle of my forearm with shapes spreading to the side, almost reminiscent of the shape of a key.

Arm... that's a dangerous place for it to be. I wonder if I'll lose the key if something unexpected happens to that arm. Actually, what the hell is going on? First, the fragment on the back of my left hand, and now a key on my right forearm? Does this mean I can't afford to lose my arms anymore? Have I been severely nerfed? I feel like my combat power has dropped by at least fifty percent.

Also, the body of the Champion is gone, as I was warned. I've asked around, but there is no way to cut parts off to save them. Everything just disappears once you claim the key.

Of course, I thought of some other stuff, but you can't even carry it out of this floor and claim the key later. And calling someone here for examination is dangerous because of other Champions, and also costly because of sacrificing stats.

How annoying.

Then I check the rankings.

Exploration Leaders

1. Christoph (7th Floor)

2. Adrian (6th Floor)

3. Nyssa Volare (6th Floor)

4. Nathaniel Gwyn (5th Floor)

5. Voss (5th Floor)

6. Orion (5th Floor)

...

And here I am, the current top of the 5th floor, likely because I'm holding a portal key. That either means Voss and Orion under me never gained the key, or they gained it but never used it, and I only managed to surpass them by gaining more "performance points" during the fight. Who the hell knows? The system for sure won't tell me.

I also confirmed something I heard some time ago. You truly can change your system alias once, if it is to your true name. And that's what I'm rolling with from now on. It's not even like I've been hiding it anyway.

It also makes me a bit happy that information guilds can't make shards out of telling people that Nathaniel Gwyn is Noname. Screw those guys.

I watch as Weslin helps Morwag stand up. The tall, muscular demon doesn't show it, but even with how durable he is, he is severely wounded. A few other A-ranks are in a similar state, so we don't waste much time here and leave.

And of course, I haven't forgotten. The new Ruler of Envy... if he's still alive by the time I get strong enough, there will be a price for him to pay.

Only half a day after returning to the Megacity, I find myself seated in front of Ruby. My wounds are healed, though some of the exhaustion remains. My fragment is now back in its place on the back of my left hand.

Even now, I feel some pressure from my Preeminence Eyes as their second strengthening continues its application. The trait is permanently activated, which is a clear disadvantage, but it is balanced by how powerful the trait is. The Mana Wavelength Iris' evolution changed a lot of things, and the second strengthening has changed the way I see the world even further. Just sitting here in front of Ruby, she seems different to me.

Her eyes seem to have a faint glow to them, but I expected that much, as I always thought those yellow eyes with their complicated patterns were a trait. From watching the way mana waves react to her, I've also begun to suspect that the Ruby I'm meeting isn't just a vessel or a projection, but her real body.

She might just be one of the very few Rulers who can control her mana so perfectly that her mere presence isn't killing me. And with that said, I am 100% sure that if she released her power, I would die in a heartbeat. But being Lissandra's disciple, I guess it makes sense that she has such a high degree of control. LissLiss would never allow "such a pathetic lack of control, beneath what even noble ladies' pets' pets are capable" or something like that.

Now that I think of it, back on the second floor, I was infinitely weaker than I am now, yet when I met Lissandra, I barely felt anything. Even if it was limited and weakened, her shadow must have been stronger than any Absolute I've met so far.

What an annoying woman.

"You've been scammed," Ruby repeats, and this time I allow the words to register.

"You look different from the last time. It's a bold change, Ruby. However, I'm a bit disappointed. I liked the brilli-ant display from last time. Honestly, it's a bit of a downgrade. I was really starting to vibe with the 'giant household pest' aesthetic."

"I said you got scammed."

"Wow, why are you so ant-agonizing out of nowhere? It's very un-pleas-ant."

"You could have gotten two million shards for each member of your group, and likely for you as well. If you had really pushed, a low pristine passive would have been possible, if only for you alone."

I slump in my chair and sigh. "I know. Back then, I panicked when he said the other offers wouldn't include the others."

"Diligence is very shrewd."

"As expected from someone willing to destroy the Ancient Armory just because-"

"Yes, yes. Also, do you realize how close you were to death?"

"In which case?"

"..." Ruby blinks a few times. "Point taken. I meant with the Lycan."

"Who even is that guy? He was scary."

"Only what's probably the most dangerous werewolf currently alive. While his blood isn't as potent as Primordial Blood, it also isn't killing him like it is killing Nyssa, and it gets close to being just as powerful. Hell, I'm sure his bloodline is more potent than some wyverns'."

"I should have gotten more for the hand."

"You wouldn't have gotten more than what I just told you you could get."

"A destroyer and a thief. I will-"

"Sure. Do you need help with your trait selection?"

"Nope. I already have my favorites picked out, but I think I'll wait for my eye strengthening to fully apply before I select one."

"If you do it, I recommend doing so after your Beyond quest, as you might have some opportunities during it that would... well, I won't say more. But the optimal way would be to do it here in your guild headquarters after you get back instead of on the 10th floor, but-"

I interrupt her. "Ruby, what is happening on the 10th floor?"

"Nothing as of now, but things are about to get... really messy. It is all your guys' fault. You have time, and it shouldn't be that dangerous for your group just yet."

I take a moment to think it over, and only then do I say. "I will trust you then. By the way, why did I have to deal with Diligence instead of you?"

"Just annoying politicking. We were the four Rulers in charge of this cycle of the tutorial after Tyven died, but now that one of his Masters of Envy became a Ruler, we are five. It restricts me in some cases, such as any time that guy decides to be an ass."

"I get the feeling. So, how about the quest? Anything with Everwood?"

"Multiple, but I think I found a perfect one for you. The duration is only one week, and while it doesn't explicitly give out Everwood, I know that guy at least keeps it in stock. You should be able to ask for a bit if you do well."

"What is the quest about?"

"You join a few others to serve as assistants for the guy and do whatever he asks of you. Likely nothing too dangerous, if you don't want it to become too dangerous, but that guy is very demanding, so make sure to listen and do well."

"Oh, a quest with other attendees?"

"Not this time. You will be the only attendee. The others are people on something not unlike an internship where they, even if the chance is low, are hoping to become his disciples."

"His? 'He'? Why so mysterious? You're hiding something from me. Who is this guy?"

"I can tell you that people generally call him the Magi. So, N-ant-haniel, do you accept?"

"That is so fucking lame it doesn't even-"

"Do you fucking accept!?"

"Sure, why not?" I hastily reply.

Sitting there behind her old wooden table, she waves her hand, and a door appears nearby.

There is no need to hesitate, so I stand up and head over to it. One last time, I turn around to look at her, only to see her waving her hand at me in a dismissive gesture, so I just step through.

Instantly, I am welcomed by a young lumoran man standing in front of me. He is taller and slimmer than I am, wearing a sharp suit with his hands folded neatly behind his back. Even as he looks at me, it feels as though he's completely focused on my eyes with a curious sort of intensity.

He seems to confirm a thought before he smiles. "I am happy to finally meet you, Nathaniel Gwyn. I am Noll." He gestures for me to follow, and I join him as he begins to lead the way through the hallway.

"Why 'finally'?" I ask.

Still smiling, walking with an air of nobility, he answers, "I completed my tutorial twenty years ago as an S-rank, just like you, though I did not match some of your more impressive achievements. It might be a bit awkward, but I like to check the Beyond records once in a while to see how the other talents of our generation are faring."

On the right side of the hallway, windows of black glass appear, letting in strange light that draws my eyes. I pause to look out and see a star, realizing then that we're in orbit around it, likely aboard some sort of spaceship. Of course.

Noll stops patiently, allowing me to take in the view. After a moment, he speaks again. "Let us continue. Master Elian does not like to be kept waiting."

Chapter 792 - Adjusting the objective

Following Noll, we reach a door that automatically slides open as we approach, leading into a massive circular room.

The ceiling is a half-spherical structure dominated by windows, separated only by a frame of white metal. These windows offer a view of a space crowded with stars and what looks like an asteroid belt in the distance. Half of the circular wall, on the inner side, contains multiple doors leading deeper into the spaceship or base or whatever this is. The other half consists of similar windows. However, these panes are heavily tinted and constantly turned toward the sun we're orbiting, which is, in my opinion, too damn close.

A single tree grows in the exact middle of the room. It isn't particularly tall, but it has a wide crown full of green leaves that sways constantly as if caught in a perpetual breeze.

Under that tree, is a man sitting on a bench. He's slightly taller than I am, with hair of an even more vibrant shade of blonde than Tess's that reaches just below his shoulders. Only now do I notice that he's already looking up at me from the book he was reading. He wears circular, thin-framed glasses, which he removes slowly. The motion somehow makes his violet eyes even more piercing, highlighting the golden circles shining around his pupils.

Professor Elian, just as I remember him. I was once an Assistant Professor under him at the Academy, back on the floor tied to the Ruler of Envy, Tyven. Now he sits here in front of me, not as a replica from the tutorial but as a real person. He looks like he hasn't aged a day since the events that the floor was based on.

"I find I am disappointed by your handler. It is your first day, and yet you're arriving late, treating our agreement with a most unwelcome indifference." God knows how many billions of years it's been, but he still talks in that same tone I totally enjoyed during my time on that floor.

"I just accepted the quest a few minutes ago."

"The details of our agreement were settled between your handler and myself two days ago."

I blink and swear at Ruby in my mind.

"I want to hear no excuses." Elian places the book on the bench and stands up to fix his suit. "What is your current level?"

"That is something I want to keep to myself," I answer.

"I find it remarkably foolish that you believe me incapable of discerning your level by sight alone." He turns to the lumoran who led me here. "Noll, what is your estimate of this man?"

The lumoran perks up, standing straighter, as if someone had permanently glued a metal rod to his back. He intently looks at me as if seeing me for the first time.

"I can make one based on his mana displacement, Master Elian," Noll begins, his eyes scanning me. "I've been tracking his footprint since the airlock. The local mana flows around him in a way that suggests high-density saturation."

Noll tilts his head, his voice clinical. "His conduction pathways are silent, there isn't much leakage or noise. Calculating the ratio of his internal mana pressure against this ship's artificial atmosphere, and

taking into consideration his achievements in Beyond and the rumors we've been hearing, I estimate him within the Level 370 to 380 range."

Elia hums, his violet eyes narrowing. "A fair assessment, Noll, though remarkably imprecise. I requested an estimation, not a range so broad it becomes meaningless. Remind me, Noll, what level were you when you finished your tutorial?"

The lumoran remains unfazed and answers swiftly, "Level 416, Master Elia!"

"Well above the average. Still, I must inform you that Mister Gwyn here is currently level 402." The Magi turns back to me. The glow of his eyes intensifies for a moment before he shakes his head. "Such a pitiful body. Still, the fact that you survived and Disciple Noll failed to properly grasp your mana proves you possess some talent. You have been marked as a disciple by Absolute Lissandra Hawthorne... or rather, that shadow of hers that's currently ravaging the Beyond. Did she truly allow you to fall into such a state?"

"I mostly do things my own way. Why would I follow the path of someone who died in the end?"

"This," Elia emphasizes, "is the most arrogant thing I've heard in quite some time. Further emphasized by the fact that you actually mean it. While some of her techniques are ancient and..." he hesitates, "let's say, rather crude and dangerous to their wielders, Lissandra Hawthorne was the sort of person none but a few could ever hope to match."

I just look at him, "Honestly? I think she would kick your ass." There are a few more things I want to say, but saying them might end with me being thrown off the ship.

"That much is obvious. I have no illusions of my ability to face her in direct combat. Am I correct that you came here to earn Everwood?" Elia asks.

"Yes," I confirm.

"Excellent. You having just attained level 400 is a welcome surprise. We can adjust the objective of your quest accordingly. As I see it, you have yet to select your third trait. You will disclose your options to me,

then make your selection so that I may observe the process as it applies. In exchange, you will receive Everwood," he says, laying it all out as if it's a foregone conclusion.

"No. I won't be disclosing to you my trait offers and my selections," I say. My words make him pause and turn back toward me.

"So you are not entirely dull. But it matters little, in that case, you may leave. I am not interested in..." he begins, but he is interrupted.

"Master Elian, I apologize for interrupting, but if I may, Nathaniel might not be aware of the fact that you always give a vow to keep that knowledge to yourself, just as you did with so many other people."

"He wouldn't be that stupid."

"I am that stupid," I say.

Both the Master and his disciple turn to look at me. Elian exhales as if he is looking at something pathetic. "Such a waste of time." He glances at his disciple. "You won't need him in the lab? I should understand that much?"

"We might need him, perhaps for a day or two, Master. I can take on some of the tasks you wanted him for so you can observe his trait etching."

"Very well. Continue your work, Noll, and you follow me." Even before finishing the sentence, Elian begins to walk away, taking my compliance for granted.

Yup, there is no way I'm going to get along with this guy. He's probably much older than his replica in the tutorial was, so I had a small hope he might have changed. But this guy is exactly the same.

For a moment, a memory flashes in my mind, Elian hovering in the air, my black mana trapped by his ability, and then three cubes forming behind his back, each one capable of erasing the entirety of the Academy floor.

I begin to follow him through the hallway a bit more enthusiastically, even starting to enjoy the design of this place. Silver metal, glass windows with thin metallic frames, black-tinted panes, the sun burning way too close, and plenty of greenery. There are more trees as we pass, vines artistically climbing the walls, flowers, and more. It is a twisted mix of sci-fi with a medieval feel and a lot of plant life. Honestly, it isn't bad at all.

Maybe I should give this guy a chance, I wonder. I could try to get some nice stuff out of him.

Magi Elian and I enter another circular room after ascending a twisted stairwell with railings ornamented by vines of green leaves and violet flowers. We find ourselves in what looks like an observation room, a cupola made entirely of glass with seats lining the edges. The seats are crafted from wood and covered in fur. And laid out in the middle of the floor is something akin to a fireplace. Multiple logs of white wood are piled there, and over them burns what I recognize as a Fragment of Eternal Flame, a shifting fire of blue, green, and purple.

"You have my word that I shall keep your trait offers, and your chosen trait, to myself alone. Should my mind ever be corrupted or breached, that knowledge shall be destroyed, as is the case with many of the other secrets I hold through similar vows. As with the others, the destruction of that knowledge shall be prioritized over my own survival. Should we ever engage in combat, whether initiated by my side or yours, that knowledge shall be erased as well."

I listen closely, and there it is, that unmistakable undertone of a system given vow. It still feels weird to rely on this kind of stuff, but if Rulers and even Absolutes do it, it should be good enough for me.

"That is acceptable. What do I get in exchange?"

Elian looks at me with what I consider graceful, noble annoyance at my mere presence and the question. He takes his glasses out of his pocket and puts them back on, causing his Mana Wavelength Iris to dim. It makes me wonder... just how many strengthenings has that trait gone through? The base is three, but there's just no way. Even I have four and might get more through some new sort of System fuckery. So, five? Sounds like too few. Six? Eight? Ten? Is it even still a Mana Wavelength Iris? Maybe his trait evolved and just kept the same "look," similar to my Preeminence Eyes.

"What do you get in exchange?" he repeats in a measured tone. "Well then, first, let us make certain things clear, so I may avoid tedious conversations regarding what I already know."

Elian gazes at me. "Through my own ability, and not by information from anyone else, I can tell you these things. You possess a Mana Physique. You obviously possess an evolved version of a Mana Wavelength Iris. While it is not one whose name I would know, I can deduce its abilities quite accurately. You are level 402, and you are an Amplificator with a base Mana stat over 1700, which, in my personal opinion, I consider to be an extremely foolish thing to do."

His eyes become even more piercing. "I can tell you possess an Empyrean skill. Your low constitution is a sight to behold as well. I personally am aware of people under level 50 with a higher one. According to my estimation, based on what you have done to your body and all other factors, you have no more than five or ten years to solve these issues. What I can offer you in exchange is Everwood and a consultation on how to solve that problem, using my very extensive knowledge."

"I have my own plan already, so there is no need for that. Check up on me in five to ten years, I think you will be impressed. But anyway, I want Everwood and a lesson or two on my eyes. I think I could get more out of them."

"At least you realize how pathetic your use of your eyes has been. Very well, your offer is acceptable. Now, tell me the traits you have been offered."

His voice almost makes me want to throw him out of the spaceship and watch him drift into the sun, but I graciously decide to be a better person today and name the four traits I've been offered to him.

Predatory Mana Parasite -A parasite capable of ravenously siphoning ambient mana particles through your pores to fuel its existence. Further, the parasite consumes a constant portion of your mana pool, but it can't digest it all at once. To store the volume it can't digest, it packs your remaining mana into a hyper condensed state you can use. The parasite protects itself by reinforcing its host, channeling condensed mana through the body to greatly increase physical stats and durability. Any attempt by an enemy to drain or disrupt your mana triggers an instinctive, violent retaliation as the parasite lashes out against anything threatening its food source.

Mana-Absorbent Gastric Lining -The lining of the stomach is modified to break down mana-saturated matter, such as mana stones, materials, or even items. It allows you to transform gained energy into a significant temporary stat boost, restore your body using mana, expand your mana pool, or condense your mana. The more powerful the digested object, the stronger the effect; some may allow for permanent boosts.

Empyrean Ichor - An ancient blood that carries a unique Empyrean frequency that predates modern system governance. It remains fundamentally dissonant with the established laws of the current mana system. The blood possesses the ability to absorb the user's mana and hyper-compress it into a liquid state as it circulates through the body. In addition to that, just the circulation of the blood through the body generates a field within that rejects any foreign mana.

Immutable Halo Frame - No matter how much damage the user takes, the Frame remains perfectly intact. Invisible to most, but perceptible to a few, the indestructible golden halo provides absolute stability against spatial warping. The Frame acts as a foundation, allowing other abilities or effects to be connected to it, and any such connections gain the Frame's stability and coherence.

Chapter 793 - Four traits

After listening to their descriptions, Elian leans back and seems to muse about something. I think he is hiding it, but he appears to be very interested in my trait options.

"The wording on all of your traits suggests that each one carries a significant degree of power on its own. That does make sense when I look at your body. It shows how hard you push yourself for your strength, and the System does tend to reward people like that, even if it might not be for too long."

"I hear that a lot."

"I'm not surprised. I want you to select Predatory Mana Parasite... no, wait... Mana-Absorbent Gastric Lining. It's honestly hard to decide. I've met someone with an Immutable Halo Frame before, though she's been dead for a long time, so I can speak about it. I know what it does and what it allows for. As for Empyrean Ichor, I've heard of it, but not firsthand, and I've never met anyone who had it. Still, I think I can figure out what it does. The Predatory Mana Parasite, though, interests me a great deal. Traits like that are very rare, and the last time I met someone with it, I didn't have the chance to properly observe them. But the Mana-Absorbent Gastric Lining is something I've never heard of at all. It's very curious. I'd offer you a mid-pristine item for..."

In the middle of that sentence, he furrows his brows. The air dims around us slightly, and the Fragment of Eternal Fire blazes in a way that seems like it is about to die off from the pressure the Magi's radiating. I, meanwhile, can't feel anything.

A mere moment later, everything returns to normal, and Elian says, "I have little patience for eavesdropping. I permitted an exception, as you are his handler, yet I will not suffer interference. Should I decide to trade such an item, it will be on my terms alone. I am fully aware of the System limitations governing such dealings."

There is no answer or reaction to his words, and Elia snorts and looks back at me. "Do you accept my offer?"

"Nope."

"How tiresome."

"That sucks," I say. "Why don't we talk them over? You might still make me change my mind, but I would rather you didn't lie or hide things from me."

"What do you take me for, Mister Gwyn? We made a deal, and I agreed to share my knowledge with you. I regard the passing of that knowledge as a matter of great importance and always strive to do so with the utmost accuracy."

"Well, you used to be a professor, didn't you?"

"I did indeed, a long time ago. Did you meet my replica when you were on that floor?"

"I was your assistant. We were the best of friends. It's kind of weird to think that you got to teach the future Ruler of Envy."

"I highly doubt that. As for young Tyven, he was always talented, ruthless, and driven by an insatiable hunger for knowledge. It carried him to the heights he reached, yet those very gaps in his character also led to his downfall. But enough of that."

"Fine. So, Mana Parasite. I don't like it. I don't want some asshole to live rent-free inside of my body and steal mana from me as well."

"That is a terrible assessment. Parasites, after multiple strengthenings and possibly after going through evolution, can become exceedingly powerful. The wording of your offer suggests it would absorb ambient mana. That could allow you to make use of that mana once it enters your body."

"Are you telling me I would have to fight that thing for mana?"

"That is why it is called a parasite. It simply takes, and any advantage you gain from it is an unexpected side effect. And, to an extent, yes. Some even use their parasites for training. Hyper-condensed mana could prove highly useful, particularly for you as an Amplificator. With a few strengthenings, the condensed mana would likely exceed what your normal mana pool could hold."

I shake my head. "I can do that on my own."

"It would be shameful if you weren't able to do at least some of those things," Elian says, and I expect him to snort, but of course he doesn't. He just says it with that confident, noble air around him.

"And the increase in physical stats?" I ask quickly, before I say something rude.

"At early levels of enhancement, just a simple active reinforcement by using your mana. With further strengthening, you could expect permanent changes to your body, such as more durable bones and possibly a permanent increase in physical stats. In rare cases or with the correct evolutions, the parasite could expand your mana pool."

"To increase its source of food?" I ask.

"Obviously."

"Is this just a normal Fragment of Eternal Fire? And what is that wood?" I ask, changing the subject, and ask what I was curious about since we came here.

The Magi lifts his eyebrow and glances at the flame floating over the white wood in the middle of this cupola. "It is, in fact, ten flames of the Eternal Fire, each on the stronger side, combined into a single one. The wood is mostly just there as decoration."

"Is it expensive?"

"Very much so, though if you were to attempt to steal it, Mister Gwyn, you would burn to ashes."

"I wouldn't do that. And the part in the trait description about violent retaliation against anything threatening its food source?" I ask changing the subject back to the traits.

"Weak at first, but with the right evolutions and sufficient strengthenings, it could kill an average Champion and absorb all of their mana in the process."

It causes me to pause in surprise. "It's that powerful?"

"Mister Gwyn, I must say, your reading comprehension is abysmal. Allow me to test you: explain your second offer and what you expect from it."

"Sure, Magi Elian. By the way, isn't 'Magi' plural? Shouldn't you be the Mage or Magus? Well, whatever, you do your own thing. With Mana Stomach..."

"I will stop you here. It is common sense to use the correct names and terms when discussing matters. Such simplifications are unwise and can foster habits that may harm you later. And please, drop that tone with me. It's not what I'm accustomed to, and I find it highly unpleasant. I afford you a certain measure of respect, and I expect the same in return."

"You just called my reading comprehension trash."

"I have called it abysmal. I do not consider such an accurate description of your actions a breach of decorum."

Giving myself some time to think, I lean against the glass wall and look up through the glass cupola with the thin metal frame in between the glass panels. With my hand, I touch the fur pelt I've been sitting on and think about the guy in front of me. I wonder if I have ever met anyone truly normal, someone actually kind. So far, everyone's been twisted in their own way. Liss, Ruby, Kindness, Envy, New Envy, Lycan, Hornless Heartmaxxer, and all the others.

Actually, aren't Diligence and Pride the most normal ones so far? As much as I dislike that thieving Armory destroyer, the ant has acted reasonably so far with understandable objectives in mind. And from what I know about Pride, the guy's just been chilling while every other asshole keeps trying to challenge and kill him for some reason.

I look back at the Magi. And then there's this guy. At the uppermost level of power for an Absolute. Someone I've heard mentioned alongside Absolutes like the Last Elf and Warden Kyralon.

Indeed, so far, I remain the most normal person I know.

Looking out of the window, I begin to talk. "Mana Absorbent Gastric Lining... I don't like it very much. I could probably make thousands of mana orbs with highly compressed mana and eat them during fights to get some kind of stat boosts and healing. I can craft items, so I could eat some of those as well. There is one unhealthily patient and cowardly individual whose expression I would love to see if I were to eat his fancy sword. It might be worth picking this trait just for that. In the long run, this trait could be really good for getting myself plenty of stats. If I become a Champion and an Absolute later on, I could just start gathering loads of even more powerful items."

I stop there and think to myself. With the right amount of strengthening, I could possibly eat a black mana orb, even if I had to make it weaker than usual. It's possible that the trait wouldn't be able to digest it, given the way black mana seems to fuck with the System, but if I could, the gains would likely be quite insane. I imagine just eating an orb or two before and during a fight. I am sure I could experiment a lot with different frequencies and densities to dial in the effects I want. It could even allow me to free up one of my passive slots and get rid of thermal healing, healing by eating orbs instead.

At this point, I am fairly certain that I got this trait offered thanks to Biscuit and possibly thanks to my black mana. So it must be good.

"You are more or less correct," Elian agrees. "However, while consuming mana is not exceedingly rare, the ability to consume items and materials is, particularly for a human. There are many unknowns and possibilities, and that is what piques my curiosity. As I said before, should you select this trait, I offer you a mid pristine item. I will bear the backlash from your Handler and, to a certain extent, the backlash from the System and Beyond."

"You can do that?"

"To an extent, I am capable of it, though not to the same level as the Rulers. The peak of the Absolutes often dabble in such matters. For example, the Last Elf is well known for it and may even exert influence beyond some of the Rulers themselves. Now, tell me about the Empyrean Ichor. I want to hear your thought process again."

"Like a teacher testing a student."

"Indeed."

"Well, anyway... Empyrean Ichor. Is it correct that things with 'Empyrean' in the name usually come from a time when the System was beginning to spread?" I ask him.

"From our observations, yes. The System underwent many changes as it adapted and addressed some of its loopholes, or the ways certain individuals have been known to exploit it. The system is deeply ingrained with a sense of fairness, so it strives to do so automatically. The Empyreans were a race long since extinct. At their peak, they were regarded as someone to be avoided, particularly their Thaumarch, who could easily match any of the Rulers."

"Let me guess: he also died after challenging Pride."

"How curious. Where did you gain that knowledge?"

"Just a hunch."

"I usually look down on those, but at least this one was accurate. Yes, the Empyrean Thaumarch initiated it and died in a duel against Pride. Before that, he and his people were known for a certain mutation that had not been seen in the universe since. And before you ask, no, it was not their blood. The System is likely just using 'Empyrean' as the most fitting term. While the System strives for fairness, it also seeks to evolve and strengthen in a manner consistent with one's performance or achievements, even if that means bending some of its other rules."

"So, if you were to think of the most important rule of the System, would it be: To evolve or to strengthen what's already present?"

“Perhaps to awaken and evolve whatever strength has the highest chance to grow within you. Many think in such a way. I am inclined to as well, but without hard proof, I leave room for other theories. As for the Empyreans, their mutation, which many historians would claim was linked to one of the more powerful gods of the Pantheon, partially resisted the System. This allowed their awakened mana to differ from that of others. It’s been said that the System itself created a system-wide quest with an objective to eradicate all Empyreans and every trace of their bloodline. Since then, the System occasionally borrows the name for skills, traits, passives, or items. The Warden of the Parallax Eyes, Kyralon, theorizes that the System isn’t doing so intentionally, but that as it reabsorbed what remained of the Empyreans, their mutation slightly damaged a small part of the System, allowing more Empyrean phenomena to appear.”

I can't help but think that this may be some of the coolest shit I have ever heard.

Out loud, I just say, "Sure then, Empyrean Ichor sounds interesting. Now on to the Immutable Halo Frame, I have a question. Do you know a skill I have..."

"To gain such a trait offer, and with what I’ve observed, it’s quite possible you possess a skill like [Materialization], [Conjuration], [Ideation], or [Incarnation]. There are many others, though they are rare, and I won't spend much time on them. So you can talk mostly freely. So that you may keep the name of your skill to yourself, let’s say you have [Incarnation].”

I find it curious he didn't mention [Manifestation], but I find no reason to tell him that.

"Okay, so from the Immutable Halo Frame, I would mainly expect my [Incarnation] to become much, much stronger. Any of my incarnations would instantly become more powerful and stable. By using my reading comprehension and thinking of the wording of the trait offer, I really think that boost would be the best part. Not to mention the arrays, anchors, teleportation marks, and other crazy things I could do."

He nods. "Accurate. I also find that part about the trait most appealing. The wording indicates absolute stability against spatial warping, and then it mentions that your abilities can be connected to it, sharing in the Frame’s stability, meaning that the skills' stability likely won't be as absolute as the protections against spatial warping, but it’d likely be very impressive nonetheless. Well, now that we have that out of the way, why don't you tell me what you've chosen?"

Chapter 794 - New trait

“It is simple. I’ll be picking the blood,” I say.

Elian doesn't show any reaction, but he gestures for me to continue.

"I think that out of all the traits, it works the best with the ones I already have, so they should sync well. The blood will flow through the entirety of my body, there are veins in my eyes and my brain, too. So, let's say it isn't the absolute best of my offers, but it is the second best. And given the high chance that it'll make my other traits stronger, it is well worth the trade."

For a moment, he seems disappointed. I guess he really wanted me to pick the parasite so I'd find myself having to constantly fight for my own mana with an intruder in my body, or the stomach, so I could cosplay as Biscuit. Though I really did want to eat the Sword of Aeons.

"That is correct," Elian says almost unwillingly, fighting between his impulse to be a teacher and his weirdo scientist side. "With Empyrean Ichor, your blood will become something many would pay a high price to obtain. It will likely be more conductive than most mana-conductive paints. Though I would have preferred if you had chosen Mana-Absorbent Gastric Lining, Empyrean Ichor is also interesting. One of my disciples is even attempting to make something akin to a potion that would replenish mana reserves upon consumption. It is an interesting concept."

"O-okay."

Elian isn't bothered at all. "As the description mentioned, a constant flow of such mana-rich blood will create a field within you that'll strengthen your natural barrier. Furthermore, the very same blood will fill your Physique and flow through your eyes. It would be silly not to expect it to influence them in some way. Additional possible strengthenings, forced evolutions, and further options. I wonder, did you plan this out with such synchronization in mind?"

"Not really. The eyes and physique are mostly just what I got, though I did a lot to make them as powerful as possible. Before level 400, I did my best to gain as many achievements as possible to get the best possible trait selections. The System always says that it assigns rewards according to previous performance, so I tried to influence that a bit and then hoped for the best. I learned a bit from the trait grandpa, I forgot his name. He was from the Academy floor. Without the knowledge I gained from him, I would've likely picked the Halo."

"You likely mean Hywel the Tyrant."

“Yes, that guy.”

“In such a case, it makes sense. Very well, you can proceed with your selection. I will stay here with you to observe the process and offer assistance in case the pain gets to be too much, considering your low Constitution and how powerful this trait may turn out to be.”

I nod and read the notifications again. I hesitate a bit. Once I select the blood, the others will be gone, and I just can't stop thinking about how powerful each of them could have been. That is my nature. I already have plans regarding how best to abuse each of them to the utmost: black mana orbs to eat, the Halo used with [Manifestation], [Ley Lines], and [Eclipse], or a shift in my combat style that would force the parasite to work for its rent while I constantly lured my opponents into triggering its lashes.

I can probably mimic some of these to an extent, but likely not in a way comparable to a fully strengthened and evolved trait. I just want them all. My greed for them and the arrogant thought that I should still be able to do some of it on my own fight with each other constantly.

Before confirming the option, I look at Elian, who observes me as I do. I question how much I can trust the guy. Then, I select the Empyrean Ichor and close my eyes.

The following 24 hours become a blurry mess as I sit there hunched over, elbows on my knees, and palms pressed against my eyes. My entire body feels as if someone is pulling a red-hot string of razor wire through every inch of me. It feels as if my blood has been set aflame, fire spreading through my veins as the pain rapidly increases.

It's almost easy to endure. After the hell that was my body upgrade during the tournament, this feels familiar.

So, with my eyes closed, I observe the changes happening to my body. Someone like Lily could probably see much more, but I can still learn a thing or two here. I also begin to work on making changes to my Mana and Thermal Cycling.

I start thinking about how this might affect Lily's healing mana, Sophie's Thought Acceleration, or the telepathic link the twins create. I'm sure all those things are going to become more difficult, but at the current strength of my new trait, it shouldn't be too much trouble. Though in the future, it surely will be.

For now, I'm sure I can find a way to allow Lily's mana or the twins' link through. It will weaken the effect of the trait and require active effort, but I expected as much.

By the second day, the pain has grown dull, but it still carries that burning sensation. I feel as if my brain and eyes are swelling until they might explode, and my hearts are beating violently against my ribs.

Once in a while, I cough up clots of blood, as if my body were trying to get rid of what remains to clear the way for the new supply. Gradually, the coughed-up blood contains bits of the new blood, which I notice right away. It is mostly because of how it looks to my eyes. Empyrean Ichor is so saturated in mana that it even surprises me.

And I'm not the only one.

I sense movement from Magi Elian. As I lift my head from my palms and look at him, he is staring at the bits of blood with eyes glowing in interest, holding his glasses in his hand.

For a faint moment, something akin to a smile twists his lips before he slowly puts his glasses back on and returns to his usual expression.

The third day, though the pain remains and the trait continues putting the finishing touches on its application, I feel like I'm up to about 90% of my normal capabilities, so it shouldn't hinder me that much.

With interest, I watch a drop of my new blood fall from the tip of my finger. It is still a deep red, though in the right light and to the right eyes, there are visible, tiny white and golden particles glowing inside of it. In a strange sort of way, it's kind of pretty.

Just from the sight of it, I can tell just how saturated it is with mana. It's incomparable to the way before, even when it was saturated by the effects of my Physique. It's reached the point now where I have to wonder if it could be put into a vial and used as a mana source overfilled mana stones.

Then, there are notifications I didn't expect, which I leave hovering in front of me.

Due to the latest enhancements to your body, additional adjustments have been applied to your status to reflect your current state more accurately.

Preeminence Eyes 2/4 > Preeminence Eyes 2/5

Mana Physique 2/4 > Mana Physique 2/5

Insanity. I had hoped for this, but didn't dare expect it.

Pure, fucking insanity.

Then there is also the Emphyrean Ichor itself with five possible strengthenings.

And, for some goddamn reason, this as well.

[Emphyrean Lance - lvl 40 > Emphyrean Lance - lvl 41]

[Emphyrean Lance - lvl 41 > Emphyrean Lance - lvl 42]

[Emphyrean Lance - lvl 42 > Emphyrean Lance - lvl 43]

...

[Emphyrean Lance - lvl 48 > Emphyrean Lance - lvl 49]

At this point, I don't know what to think. I just decide to roll with it all.

I look at Elian. "Would you say I fulfilled my part of the deal?"

The Magi takes a moment to look up from the droplets of my blood, finally meeting my gaze. He nods. "More than that. I thought I knew what to expect, yet I have proven myself to be a fool. It seems even after all these years, there is much I can still learn about arrogant confidence, even when it's rightfully held for the most part."

"I can't even tell if you're putting yourself down or bragging."

He ignores me. A simple cube of mana forms over his hand as he speaks. "As for your promised lesson, I have thought on it. Doing something like this properly would take months, which we do not currently have. Instead, I will create a learning tool for you."

As he talks, the cube begins to shift and stretch. I feel a wave of lightheadedness until Elian creates a barrier that blocks some of my Preeminence Eye senses.

"You must be feeling it, your new trait made your eyes more potent even without an evolution. It wasn't that long ago that you strengthened them, either, so for the moment, something like this is too much for you. Here, I've made changes to the surrounding wavelengths so as not to overwhelm you."

The cube shrinks and stretches, turning into a pair of round glasses not dissimilar from his own. They have a thin, silver metal frame and glass lenses.

When he hands them to me, I take them. No matter how deeply I observe them, I can't tell that they weren't simply made of glass and metal without breaking them. The System doesn't even treat them as an item, so it is likely just his skill, pure mana shaped through either illusion or a surface treatment imitating different materials.

I feel no change, even as I put them on.

"They will help you filter out some of the information and resist the backlash. If you send a bit of your mana into them, it will trigger a training method I have created. As for the Everwood, I will make sure your handler receives it as per our deal. So, I must ask as well: have I fulfilled my part of our deal?"

Something about his tone puts me on edge. My attention shifts to him fully, and I stop paying attention to the glasses.

"Yes, you have," I say slowly.

"Very well then. I like to be upfront, so I want to inform you that I have decided to further study your Empyrean Ichor. Your trait has proved far too fascinating, with impressive potential and many possibilities. I underestimated what it would become within your Mana Physique, much less with such a low-Constitution, highly mana-saturated body."

"And if I say no?" I ask, thinking of the way Kyralon once told me someone called the Magi had tried to kidnap him for his Parallax Eyes.

Elian stands up and fixes his suit. "I do not think you have a choice in this matter. While your Beyond quest is only for a week, I believe I can destroy the connection you have to Beyond and the Tutorial. Of course, the System will notice and continuously attempt to restore it, but I can block those attempts, even if only for a week or two. In any other case, I would probably offer to let you study under me after your Tutorial or any other more peaceful way. But judging by the state of your body, there is a high chance you won't survive, or that you'll die throwing yourself into danger. I won't lose a subject that-"

He stops talking as the entire place shakes violently.

For the first time, Elian moves hurriedly. He removes his glasses and lifts his hand, and a golden spherical barrier surrounds what feels like the entire base we are on.

In the next moment, stones from the asteroid belt I saw before begin to smash against that barrier soundlessly. Many of them are several times larger than the base and move at incredible speeds, yet the base endures without its surface so much as wobbling as the enormous stones break apart.

Elian's focus fully turns away from me, his movements losing their arrogant, noble grace in exchange for raw, predatory efficiency. He swings out with a flat palm, carving a miles-wide horizontal rift into the cold void of space. The tear opens with a scream audible even though the vacuum, a jagged white scar of pure force that bleeds a light so intense it makes the nearby star look dim in comparison.

For a heartbeat, the sun itself seems to pale. Then, the rift collapses into a single brilliant white orb that continues to scream as it hovers over her palm.

In the sudden shadow of the dimmed star, a single figure remains. She hangs suspended in the void, a mere speck of dust compared to the celestial object behind her, yet she exerts a presence that feels as if she's physically overwhelming it. The massive flares of the star seem to recoil and bow in her presence, making the gargantuan star look like nothing more than a flickering candle behind her back.

"Elian, how dare you try to take what's mine." Her voice reverberates as if she is speaking from everywhere and nowhere at once. It is quiet, but audible. And threatening.

"Lady Greed, please exclude yourself from this situation," the Magi answers in a similar fashion.

Chapter 795 - Your guys' fault

"As if I would."

"There's no need to be so emotional, Lady Greed. I'm surprised to see you react this way. I wouldn't have expected you to come here in your true form over such a minor inconvenience."

"You always were a bit dim, Elian."

"How rude."

The white orb hovering over her hand explodes. A rain of that same light pours down against the base, only to be stopped by that golden barrier. But this time, its surface ripples and wobbles.

Then, a section of the star's surface stops moving. Flares halt entirely and then begin to move like living beings, throwing themselves into the portal that appears between them. We're still pretty far away, too, so for me to see it at all, the scale must be beyond comprehension.

Beside Ruby, space itself splits open. A narrow rift tears through the void, and fire pours out of it in never ending waves. Orange and red flames spiral around her, growing higher, wilder. Her red hair lifts with the rising heat, spreading out to either side, striking against the endless black around her.

An attack I cannot see hits the barrier, and cracks appear. A portion of the golden barrier starts to melt, beginning to drip down like liquid.

"You think I won't attack you seriously, Elia? Either fight me or fuck off." Ruby's voice bounces inside the chamber during all that.

I attempt to move but feel my movements halted, along with the flow of my mana. All the while, Elia doesn't even turn my way, "Is he one of your silly weapon projects?" the Magi asks, maintaining his nonchalant behavior.

"Something like that," Ruby says. She flicks her hand as if brushing away a fly, yet the casual motion knocks aside an attack I cannot even see, let alone follow.

In the next instant, a tiny hole appears in the star, as if something has punched straight through it. It's a hole large enough for me to see even from this distance. It closes as quickly as it appeared, but the shock remains.

There is no way I saw that correctly, right?

"You seem to have leveled up your skill," Ruby snickers. "I would maybe consider it more impressive if you hadn't used your base to power that attack just now."

"It's something I've been wanting to test for a while now, and your presence just offered a great opportunity. Even so, I have to acknowledge I'm a bit disappointed by the results. Nonetheless, I'll be working on some improvements." Elia takes a small step closer toward the glass of the dome. "I find it very curious that you would go this far. In the past, you haven't reacted this way. What is your goal with this..."

He doesn't get to finish as the base shakes and a light blinds me entirely for a moment.

When the light clears, Ruby is nowhere to be seen, and the view is reduced to little more than a wall of churning flames, and I realize we, the entire base, have been teleported closer to the star. The star we're currently falling into. The base groans, a deep metallic scream that vibrates through the floor and my bones.

Elian doesn't even flinch. He's already moving his hands, weaving those white inscriptions of his into the air. He moves swiftly, recreating a golden barrier through which a dense web of white inscriptions begins to spread. The barrier forms in great hexagonal segments, and the parts that connect them glow with a deep golden light.

"To throw a tantrum of this scale requires a lack of efficiency I find highly exhausting." Elian sighs while looking at the star, not me.

He presses his palm against the glass. The inscriptions flare, and the entire base jerks. It shudders again, harder this time. A hairline crack appears on the cupola glass.

I can still feel my mana locked down, but the sheer kinetic energy of the base moving toward the star is overwhelming. We're accelerating, and the golden barrier is starting to char at multiple places.

Then, for the first time in a while, I find that I can move.

Ruby is still gone, but her voice sounds from everywhere at once. "This time I'll let it pass, Elian, and I won't destroy your precious toy. But there is a price you will have to pay for breaking the rules."

"You've never cared for them before, Lady Greed," the Magi snorts. Under his will, the base gradually slows down until it stops moving. The fight I cannot hope to observe continues even now.

"But that is incorrect. I've always liked the rules, especially when I can use them to my advantage." Ruby laughs, and next to me, a portal appears.

There's something about the whole thing that makes me think Ruby has a reason for all of this, so I grab two fur pelts from the bench and step toward the center where the Fragment of The Eternal Fire burns. For a fleeting moment, I think I should try to take it. To endure it for a second and enter the portal where that crazy redheaded woman can take care of it.

But I just know I would die. This flame is made of ten of them combined, and none of them is the tutorial's recreation. All of them are pure fragments, like mine.

So instead, I grab one of the white wood logs.

For the first time, Elian turns around. He looks my way, annoyed, but he is too busy defending his base. Before he can say anything, I shoot an [Empyrean lance] at him. He lets it happen, and the lance doesn't so much as send a ripple across his skin, it breaks against his face, dissolving into mana particles that rain down around him.

The Magi looks at me with utter shock, but as quickly as it appeared, it disappears. "You have attacked me in hopes it would trigger the conflict clause of my vow and erase my knowledge of your trait."

I don't even wait for him to finish. I step through the portal, but his voice chases me from the other side. "Did you seriously think I would even consider something of that level an attack!?" His voice rises for a short moment. "Mister Gwyn, you have so much to learn. If you survive your tutorial, come and find me. I will share the Coordinates of a place you will be able to find me with your tiresome Handler."

The portal closes. Instead of the never ending space filled with stars and nebulae that Ruby likes so much, I find myself in a space no bigger than a closet. It is still lit by lights that look like stars, and everything else is black with no visible borders, but I know they're there by the way they restrict my movements.

I am currently being squeezed in here with Ruby, and the two of us are pressed against each other. Her face is so close I can pick up the fine details of her yellow eyes and her trait, as well as the faint hints of her freckles on her cheeks.

"This is new. Did you have to move out because of the rent?" I say. I try to move, but instead, I only find myself pressing against her, as her forehead hits my nose.

"So fucking funny," she grumbles. "Elian did that while we were on our way out. It's all that asshole is good for, being a goddamn nuisance." She exhales, and I feel her warm breath brushing my cheek. Her shoulder nudges mine, and a strand of hair slips across my face. Suddenly, the space between us feels even smaller.

"Well," I mutter, "at least he's consistent."

"I wonder," she says after a second and looks up, directly into my eyes. "You're so annoying that I don't know why I don't just burn you down to a concept."

I blink, caught off guard. "That... sounds extreme. Just a tiny bit."

Instead of a reaction, something pushes me, and I find myself falling, crashing against the floor in a familiar space. Next to me lie the two fur pelts and the white wood log. I quickly check their descriptions, disappointed to find they are considered materials only.

"Why are they only at pristine rarity?" I ask Ruby, who's already sitting back behind her wooden table, acting as if nothing happened.

"Most attendees would cry with joy to even get their hands on something of pristine rarity during their tutorial." She is leaning back in her chair. "But let's not waste time. Go into the system shop and buy an item called a Tutorial Stay Token. I just unlocked it for you, so it should appear there."

Her voice is serious, so I access my shop to do so, but the price surprises me. "It costs half a million shards."

"Yes. You used a two-week Beyond Stay Token to get here, and nine days of it still remain. That'll be too long. Buy it, return to the tenth floor as soon as possible, and try to complete that floor quest immediately. Don't ask for more, this is truly the limit of what I can say. You owe me, again."

I look into her eyes for a few moments before I buy the token.

"What is this all about?" I ask.

From behind her table, she sighs. "As always, it's all your guys' fault. I thought there would be more time so you could do your Beyond quest, but your tenth floor is already a huge mess, and it's going to get much worse. Thankfully, Elian was his typical self, so I was able to improvise and use it as an excuse to get you out."

“That’s not all, right? I know you better than that,” I say as I stand up and continue to look at her until a small smile appears on her lips.

“It is in my nature to be greedy. I sent you to Elian because I expected him to do what he did. Now, I will use his actions to threaten him with Diligence and the resulting consequences of his actions. In exchange for my silence, I finally have the opportunity to pry a certain item from his collection that I’ve been wanting for a long time. Are you disappointed?”

“As if,” I snort. I gesture at the pelts and logs. “Guard these for me for a while.”

“I will.”

“Oh, and by the way, Ruby?”

“Yes?”

“F-ant-astic job today.”

“Screw off.”

I return to the tenth floor a few moments later. The area I find myself in is empty, and nothing seems amiss other than the communication arrays in the sky, spreading as far as I can see. They also seem to have a detection component to them, though it appears to be aimed at something oddly specific.

I fix the glasses on my nose and quickly move back toward the city. As I get to it, I can see it’s gotten even busier than it was before, but in a way that suggests people are fleeing. Flying ships and airships move constantly, heading in directions away from here. There are no defenses or restrictions against people entering, but the array is supercharged, constantly prepared to deflect an attack.

As I move through the streets, the crowding becomes more noticeable. Large numbers of people are packing their belongings into carriers and arguing with officials. There are flying orbs that seem to be something like security drones that hover low over the streets, sweeping all over the place.

Still, there are plenty of people who don't seem to care, an amount that seems to account for just over half.

Not wasting time, I hurry toward the tower where we've been staying. I reach our floor, where Maya lets me in. She looks surprised, but she lets me in without question.

I don't even have to ask her anything before she hurriedly explains, "One of the Champions died the other day, not that far away from here, and the Absolute is going to be returning to this planet. By the way, what the hell is up with those glasses?"

Before I can answer, Maya shakes her head as if it doesn't matter, her voice jumping a bit when she says, "Everyone says it was a goddamn Weredeer that killed the Champion."

Chapter 796 - Sir Elydor

I stare at Maya for a while longer before I push past her and walk into the common room and sink into an armchair with a sigh.

My thoughts race in my head as I absorb the information I just received. While I'm hoping for the situation to turn out a certain way, I keep coming to the same conclusion. This will likely get worse than it already has.

"Where are the others?" I ask Maya, who joins me nearby.

"Min-Jae is working at the docks. He-"

"Maya, sorry to interrupt you, but one of the eleven most powerful people in this world died, and Min-Jae decided to go and get his first j*b?"

"J*b? What did you even say? Did... did you just bleep yourself? Did you mean 'job'?"

"Please, we don't say the J-Word out loud."

“Whatever, I think the boys have been having a bigger influence on you than you think. But yeah, something like that. J*b. The docks here are always searching for people with specializations that can help with work, and one of their scouts noticed Min-Jae’s gravitational energy. Apparently, it’s rare enough that they made him a really good offer, and a few of the wealthier natives were almost bowing to him. Not like rich rich people, but important ones, so he went with it and is currently using that to gather information in the meantime.”

“If you say it like that, it makes a little bit of sense,” I say as I stop by the couch with Lily and poke her cheek, “and this lazy ass?”

“She hasn’t moved since we got here, so we’ve been rotating who stays with her. By the way, what’s with the glasses? Surprisingly enough, they fit you. I mean, I know how rotten your personality is, but if I didn’t know you, I would say you have that confident, smart, talented, arrogant young rich professor vibe. Well, if you actually wore proper clothes.”

I turn to her and give her a look, and don’t bother to answer.

She quickly nods, “Yes, that look right there, but, anyway. Tess and the twins are spying on the auction house where we suspect the egg is being held. Apparently, they’ll sell some great item from time to time and then keep it in their safe until it moves to the customer. Izzy, Sophie, Noodle, and Biscuit have been doing... Well, whatever it is they do. I think they were going by the thought that they could probably put Biscuit into the auction and try to sell him as a rare beast, and hopefully, he would get closer to the egg. Don’t look at me like that, Nat. It was Izzy’s idea, but surprisingly, she and Sophie confirmed it could work after ‘talking’ to some people, if you know what I mean.”

“Maya, this floor is a mess.”

“Tell me about it.”

“No, I mean a true mess. We probably only have a few days before things start to get catastrophic, like the end of the world bad. Don’t ask me how, I myself have no idea, but they will. If I picked things up right, the Champion’s death is just the start. So we’d better hurry and get the egg and then keep it somewhere for these three days.”

"If even you're saying that, I think I might need to start worrying. Tess and the twins should be back soon, so you should talk to them about it."

"You're only saying that to pass the responsibility and decision making off on her," I blame her.

And with that, Maya stands up and does an elegant curtsie, the kind one might see in a ballroom, and smiles brightly.

As Maya said, Tess and the twins return around thirty minutes later. Their faces grow more relaxed once they enter the common room, and they throw themselves into the seats around us. Tess is currently still wearing an eyepatch over her eye. But this one looks more elegant. A nice one made of black leather. There are no straps at all, just an eyepatch, so I suspect that she's constantly keeping it pressed against her eye with her [Psychokinesis].

And I wonder why it fits her so much and makes her look so cool.

"What's with that arrogant, annoying rich young professor look..." Dennis doesn't get to finish.

"I already asked," Maya says.

The two of them jump into conversation while Tess sits in an armchair opposite me and says seriously, "Bambi's curse is back and stronger than ever before."

I nod just as seriously, "The Dusk Deer Biscuit dragged here and left behind reanimated because of blood or mana radiation from the fingers, and then ate them?"

"That's what we think too," Tess nods, "But to have killed a Champion already, that Lycan's blood must have been something else."

I shrug, "Apparently, one of the most powerful werewolves in the system. Did you guys get one and a half million shards each?"

"That was you?" Aaron jumps in, sitting nearby.

"I brought the hand to Beyond and traded it there. I still think I got scammed, and I probably could have gotten more, but now I'm also glad I didn't leave it behind."

The mood turns slightly solemn as they think of that, and I give it a thought as well. Most of all, I wonder how the situation would've looked like if I really had left it here.

"Well, it was obvious the curse would return," I say, still remembering the deer I skinned and how, according to some truly unreliable sources, I did such a terrible job with it that the spirit of that deer cursed me, so that now we have a deer problem. "I already told Maya, but we need to clear this floor fast. Getting our hands on the egg today would be perfect, possibly tomorrow, or if we are lucky, we can get away with taking it in another day or two. But I really think we don't want to stay here for too long."

After that, I explain all the information I've gained recently, and the twins add me to the link so I can talk to the others as well. Since it's foreign mana, my new trait resists it, forcing them to expend far more mana to establish a link, and requires an active effort from me just to keep the connection alive.

In the end, the effort I need to expend is greater than I anticipated. Even as I make further modifications, I wonder just how much more difficult this is going to be in the future, after a few strengthenings.

I also share a bit of info about my new blood so the others can help figure out if we can make use of it somehow. Then, while they're busy sharing ideas with the others, I listen to Tess.

"I think the egg is still being held in the auction house. It is widely regarded as the safest storage anywhere. I don't have it confirmed, so I could be wrong. It could as well have been moved once the Champion died. Hell, the Champion it was intended for could be the one that died."

"Any auctions coming up soon?" I ask.

"Not for a week at least. So the only way in is by using some connection to someone very powerful to get a tour of the auction house's stores, or possibly get into one of the parties they have there, where

they often make a show of the items to be auctioned. However, I don't know if there will be any in this situation. And even if they do, they likely won't be showing the egg as it's already been sold."

"We have two pristine items from the last floor. We could act like we want to auction them off and store them before that."

Tess nods, "I thought the same and started looking into that."

"Izzy wanted to sell Biscuit, I heard."

That causes Tess to smile a little bit, "Silly, isn't it? As much as she has grown and as much as she can understand people, she is still just a kid, so some of her ideas can be like that. But honestly, just between us, I don't think it's that bad of an idea," her voice turns to a whisper as she says so.

"I suspect Biscuit would treat it as a game and enjoy the experience. Even if he had to stay there for three days, the quest would be completed, and he would get the portal to the next floor."

"The question is how good of an actor does he make," she says. "We can sell one of the low pristine items to have money to throw around at our problems. A lot of money means quicker solutions. Then we can sell even more upper arcane items we have or materials. It won't be that much of a problem. Lastly, we can either try to sell Biscuit or the remaining low pristine item. You said you want to hurry, so we'll do so. Some low pristine item doesn't matter in exchange if it makes us safer."

"Not at all. Then we could throw around some of my blood as well. Say things like we've found some kind of fancy new monsters with plenty more to trade. I have a feeling it would be expensive. And if Lily wakes up, she could show off her healing a little bit and see what it causes."

Tess furrows her brow at that, "Even if it is a new trait, wouldn't people be able to tell that it's human blood, not a monster's?"

"And wouldn't that work even better?" I lean back in my armchair and put my feet up, shoeless and near Lily's face, as I wiggle my toes next to her nose, "If they find out the blood is mine, they might try to kidnap me and hide me somewhere near the egg. Or we kidnap them in exchange and gather information that way."

As I finish talking, I ignore the disgusted looks I get from Tess and Maya and continue to move my toes near Lily's face, "And you, wake up already."

POV Sophie Martinez

It has been almost a day since Nathaniel returned to the 10th floor.

And it has been one day since, according to witnesses present in the room, Lily woke up after Nathaniel, for some reason, stuck his toes under her nose. To this hour, I regret not being there when it happened. As Dennis described it, Lily opened her eyes and took a deep breath as if surfacing from a long stay underwater. Coincidentally, his socks were in front of her face right around that time.

Dennis says she threw him across the entirety of the room and slammed him against the enchanted glass, which is as thick as my forearm, and yet still managed to crack it.

Nat, likely to protect his dignity, has said it was nothing to worry about, but Maya says it's possible that he almost died with his hummingbird constitution.

After realizing what had happened, Lily begged him for forgiveness and kept healing him nonstop while saying sorry. Or at least until Nat asked her why the heck she has two hearts now. Apparently, our crazy little healer was inspired by Nat's Ignition Heart, with the exception that hers transforms bits of her mana into more of that gray mana she has, compresses it, and increases her immediate output of [Disintegration].

Apparently, she'd been working on it, even while she was unconscious.

Since then, things have gone full throttle. The twins joined Min-Jae to support him with his plan to get into the auction house by making himself important and gaining connections with the extremely rich Hadon Trans-Orbital Dockyards. Tess and Maya are currently serving as bodyguards and advisors for Lily, and they went with the "healers are always so goddamn important, so let's abuse it again" plan.

Meanwhile, I ended up with Izzy, Nathaniel, Noodle, and Biscuit.

All three of us are dressed in expensive clothes. Me and Izzy are in matching yellow dresses, along with a few of the upper-arcane items we have in the form of beautiful jewelry. Nathaniel is wearing a well fitted light gray suit with a pale yellow tie and those silver round glasses he's taken to wearing.

Izzy carries Biscuit in her arms, and the corgi is the smallest I have ever seen him. A tiny puppy, but without those budding deer antlers. It took us like ten minutes to get Nat to stop cuddling him.

Though the air around Nat is very different now. His posture is straight, and every movement radiates confidence and arrogance, even more so than his usual relaxed state. Even his expression carries some of that, instead of being entirely empty as we walk through one of the publicly accessible hallways of the auction house.

Our contact waits for us at the end of it and bows deeply. "I greet the beautiful ladies and sir..."

"You may call me Elydor," Nathaniel says, barely paying him any attention.

Like me, even this guy must know the name is fake, but he doesn't seem to mind. That's just what you get when you throw enough money at the problem.

Another man moves closer, bowing to the first man and then to us. But before he can say anything, Nat throws some of this planet's currency we got for the upper arcane items and one of our low-pristine ones at the man. Coins with holes punched through the center through which a chain has been threaded.

I begin to sweat as I realize the value of them as I recognise the coins, wondering if Nat has no idea, doesn't care, or if it is all part of his act.

That chain with the coins hits the man straight in his face before Nat says with confident, noble arrogance, "You. Exclude yourself from this situation."

Chapter 797 - Empathy

POV Sophie Martinez

Both of the men are feylith. While our contact shows no reaction and his hair stays brown as well as his eyes, the man hit by the money chain turns his hair and eyes to pale red before they shift to white.

I noticed, but there's no sense to the color of their hair. For one person, anger could be white, while for someone else, it might be black. It is just that each individual has their own colors and their own range.

Our contact quickly gestures at the new man, who bows and grabs the chain from the ground. I calculate the worth of two upper arcane items on them.

"I apologize for my colleague, Sir Elydor."

"Let's not waste my precious time on such annoying things," Nathaniel steps ahead as if he owns the place, and our contact is forced to follow behind him. "As my servant has informed you, I'm willing to auction off one of the two beasts I bought for my daughter."

"But I want them both!" Izzy sobs quietly. Through our link, she quickly shares information on the emotions of the people. I meanwhile don't make any attempts to directly manipulate the feylith man with us, but nudge him, just a tiny bit, gently so none of his potential means of detection spark up.

"How tiresome. Well, if you want them both, maybe you shouldn't shame me in front of my... business partners." Nathaniel fixes his glasses and looks at our contact. "I'm not cruel enough to take both the snake and whatever beast the second one is, but it is a lesson she needs to learn. Do you not agree?"

"O-of course, I-"

Nathaniel doesn't even let the feylith finish and sighs. "Spoiled, that's what she is. But at least she has some talent for combat. Would you agree that being so close to level 300 at her age is somewhat impressive?"

"Yes, Sir Elydor, I find it very im..."

"Yes, yes. So, which beast do you think would be more interesting for your auction house?"

To that, the feylith pauses our walk and looks at Izzy. It forces Nathaniel to stop, after which he shows his impatience by tapping the tip of a foot on the marble floor. Biscuit is currently dozing off and pretending to sleep. His tiny tail wags a little bit to show how much fun he's having. Meanwhile, Noodle is coiled around Izzy's arm and curiously observing the area with his six green eyes.

"Honestly, Sir Elydor. This isn't how we usually go about things. There are procedures and protocols our auction house must follow."

"I find it remarkably foolish that you believe me incapable of noting all the ways in which these protocols are quickly forgotten when there is money to be made." Nathaniel sounds as if he is making fun of him. "Well, my dear friend. I plan to leave as soon as possible with that Weredeer still around. If I sell one of the pets, it will mean less trouble when travelling."

"But I want them both!"

"Isabella, I have to say I'm disappointed in your lack of decorum. But what would I expect, considering the amount of time you've been spending with your mother. I always told her she was spoiling you." Nathaniel looks at me.

It catches me off guard, but as planned, I stay quiet and give him a very angry look before looking away.

The silence is awkward, and the feylith man steps from foot to foot and laughs a bit nervously, though Nathaniel doesn't seem to mind it at all.

"Feisty, isn't she? At least I have a few more wives that are nicer to me."

At this point, I can't help but send through the link, (The fuck?)

Izzy sends a message as well, (Soph, be careful with your nudging. He seems to have a bit of training.)

I quickly answer, (I know, I'm modifying my strategy.)

Nathaniel doesn't show the slightest reaction and turns to the feylith. "You have my permission to look at the beast. I've already seen how you can't take your eyes off him."

"Was I that obvious?" The feylith laughs awkwardly and steps towards Izzy before saying, "May I, little Lady?"

"NO!" Izzy shouts and hides Biscuit in her arms. "My friends will make fun of me if you sell one of them! They'll call us poor again, and I will never be able to marry!"

(Nat, I want to make him begin to think we are in financial trouble. Try to brag a bit more about how rich you are,) She shares.

I start to think that maybe my sister and Nat are enjoying this too much, as I see him work the act.

"Isabella, we aren't poor," Nathaniel says with mild disbelief, like she just announced something deeply inconvenient rather than emotionally dramatic. "We are, in fact, offensively wealthy," he continues, brushing imaginary dust from his sleeve. "Which makes this display rather confusing."

The feylith laughs again, thin and unsure, as if he has been accidentally invited into a family argument and doesn't yet know which side is safer.

(Push a bit, Sophie.) I receive.

"Yes, Sir Elydor, no one of proper standing would ever assume-"

Nathaniel glances at him with his cold, differently colored eyes, his trait constantly shifting behind the glasses. The man immediately stops talking and shifts his attention back to a safer target.

He steps closer, eyes tracing the line of Noodle's body. "The serpent's mana structure is unusual," he murmurs almost involuntarily. "I think I also sense a fragment within it. How curious and exotic. It would attract collectors who value uniqueness."

Nathaniel does not look at him and instead begins to observe a statue nearby. "And the other one?"

At that, the feylith lowers his head and looks at the nearly sleeping pretend corgi. He observes him very deeply and even puts on an item in the shape of a monocle. Then he reaches out, takes Biscuit from Izzy's arms, and holds him up in the air by his scruff.

(Stop.)

It takes me a moment to realize that it's Biscuit saying it. Then another that it is meant for Nat, and not me.

When I look at him, he stands there with his eyes wide open. They are terrifying. Gray and brown, and the golden light trying to push from behind his black pupils.

That gaze isn't even the worst part. I know that if he willed it, the entirety of his mana would move in an instant to fill this hallway, like a walking nuclear reactor just waiting to explode. I also see how close he was to doing it, too. This lunatic wouldn't care at all, he would turn this feylith man into a smear of blood on the wall.

Meanwhile, Biscuit doesn't react much. He just opens his eyes and blinks slowly while the feylith man holds him and talks, unaware of Nathaniel's expression. "How surprisingly cute, this little beast. I have to say, I've never actually seen this specific one. The serpent is rare, yes, but something about this one... its musculature suggests extraordinary compression strength," he murmurs. "If it were displayed in a controlled demonstration, the bids would be... enthusiastic."

"Did you buy it already?" Nathaniel asks in a cold voice.

The feylith doesn't seem to be aware of the danger as he continues to curiously observe and probe the corgi. "Sir Elydor, of course, I didn't buy anything yet. It is not that simple." He even laughs.

"Why are you touching something that is mine, then?" That lunatic's voice becomes even colder. He takes a step that feels too loud, as if it were bouncing off every wall in the hallway.

"He is not an item, father! He is a living being." Izzy takes Biscuit from the man's arms and takes a step back.

Only then does Nathaniel's expression begin to shift back to normal as the feylith says calmly to her, "Everything is an item, young lady. The difference lies in who controls the exchange."

The feylith laughs softly, trying to ease the atmosphere, though his hair flickers faintly toward pale gold.

(Greed, layered with apprehension. He's also looking down at you and seems very smug about it. Brag about how rich you are to confirm his feelings. As Nathaniel says something and the man begins to answer, you can push a bit more, Soph,) Izzy sends in the link.

As the feylith turns back to him, Nathaniel finally smiles. "I must say, your comprehension of the purpose of this visit is abysmal," he says calmly. "I am not here because I need coin. I am here because I dislike crowds."

In reaction to that, the feylith opens his mouth, and I push. I touch his mind, feel the movements of his thoughts, and then push and pull in all the right places. It is almost all instinctual, something I can feel and modify in accordance with his reactions, changing things even before my conscious mind perceives them.

For a faint moment, he furrows his brow, but it soon smoothes out, and he smiles.

(Arrogance. He is looking down at you. Annoyance at the way you've been treating him. Great interest in Biscuit,) Izzy shares right away.

"I'm afraid I need to go now, Sir Elydor, but why don't we meet again tomorrow at the same time? Somewhere more private within our Auction House?"

(Good, this will let him feel like he punished you, and the moved meeting makes him feel he is more in control. Tell him you don't have time, Nat.)

"Do not take me for some-"

And for the first time, the feylith interrupts Nat. "I said, I have time tomorrow."

As Nat opens and closes his mouth, his words dying before he can spit them out, he clenches his teeth and gives a stiff nod.

I notice a patch of the man's hair shift to a dark red hue, and then he smiles.

POV Nathaniel

As we leave the auction house, I keep my posture upright and offer Sophie my arm. She hangs onto it as we walk through the street, maintaining the image just in case they're watching us. To further sell the lie, we've even rented a house located a few levels above where Group 4 currently lives. Someone might call it a waste of money, but we have to be sure.

Only once we are back inside the tower and safely within Group 4's rooms do we drop the act. Sophie pulls away from me, and Biscuit floats into my arms, as I begin to pet him. I don't have a crown floating over my head, but I am storing mana inside my body. Ruler of Diligence, be my witness, that the auction house will burn to the ground before this floor ends.

"You almost fucking attacked him right there!" Sophie shouts at me.

"I think it would have added to my act of an arrogant noble hiding his identity if I had," I defend myself.

"I don't think so, Nat," the traitor Izzy says, supporting her sister.

"Want to see something, Izzy?" I ask as I undo my tie, throw it over an armchair, and shrug off my suit jacket. "Feel my emotions now and tell me if I'm lying when I say I would react the same if anyone from our group was treated that way in Biscuit's place."

Sophie doesn't even let her sister answer. "I just want to know if you realize what almost happened and to be sure that you won't splat the guy if he decides to be a dick tomorrow."

"I probably won't do that. Right, Biscuit?" I swing him gently while holding him in my hands, and he woofs a few times.

We make our preparations, and I let Sophie and Izzy talk it out. With part of my mind, I listen to Izzy explaining what the man felt, which hair and eye colors match which emotions, and theorizing over the best way to make him do what we want. We conclude that tomorrow we will return with just Izzy, me, Biscuit, and Noodle.

A part of me finds it scary how easily Izzy talks about the man's emotions, where to push to get him to do exactly what she wants, all the while making him think it was all his own idea. Unlike what Sophie does, our little empath's ability leaves no trace. Damn, she even mentions that she can sense when the man suspects something and knows exactly how to make him drop it, making him feel confident and in control instead. She proved as much earlier today.

It all makes me remember Adrian. He's an empath as well, but unlike Izzy, he's much more ruthless and never minds using it to his advantage. The memories I saw from Lioren tell me that Adrian started with [Empathy] the same way Izzy did. Considering you usually start with skills you have a talent for, skills that come from within, I find the comparison interesting.

Two people. One of them gained [Empathy] because she had a talent for feeling people's emotions and wanted to help them. And another with the very same talent, but he used it to exploit people for his own ends.

The skill might not look like much, but combined with the fact that it's among the most difficult to detect. It can be truly terrifying.

That night, I watch the city from the tower and notice a great deal of movement down there. Encrypted messages are being passed along, people are moving through the darkness. Someone important and very powerful seems to pass by for a moment before heading west, back toward where we entered this floor.

I don't think we have much time. My mood hardens, and I confirm with myself that I will be ready tomorrow, so I don't hesitate. If necessary, I will kill everyone in that auction house. With my black mana and Biscuit's help, I can erase all traces, and Noodle can just eat the egg to transport it out without being detected. It's something he's already proved himself capable of pulling off.

Likely sensing these emotions, our empath steps onto the balcony and looks toward the night city with me. She doesn't say a word, only briefly squeezing my hand before going back inside.

And as I gaze down on all these lights alone, I continue to think that it used to be easier to kill people. Even now, I don't differentiate that much between tutorial natives, attendees, or the locals in Beyond. Yet I find that the more powerful I become and the more options I have, the less I like taking such an easy route.

I still know I can do it. I wouldn't hesitate to burn this entire, fake, tutorial, city to the ground, and I won't feel sad if anything like that happened. Still, something in there is changing.

And so I wonder. Maybe, just like that feylith today, I too have been manipulated into what I am by that green-eyed girl.

Or maybe it's just me.

Chapter 798 - Beneath the Inverse Pyramid

As we enter the auction house that I am sure has a fancy name, though it will never be more than a simple auction house to me, we are led through the hallway by one of the servants. As before, I notice that there are arrays splitting the building into different zones, and each of the people working here has some sort of implant in their body that gives them access to their assigned zones and no more.

I suspect it also makes records for higher ups to check who was in what zones and when, and likely a few more fancy functions. Our contact seems to be one of the higher ups here, likely thanks to the amount of money Tess threw at one of the shadier information guilds to set up this meeting.

Currently, only Izzy, Noodle, Biscuit, and I are here. This is after Izzy asked her sister to stay behind because the man is likely to feel more confident if there are fewer of us. Or as Izzy phrased it: "Without a pretty young woman making him nervous."

Of course, that mind manipulating sister of hers agreed after such thorough flattery, so here we are. I maintain my image and greet the feylith man as the servant leaves. With a few words, I still act apologetic for my wife not being here.

(He feels relief, but also seems a bit sad. I think he really does think Soph was pretty.) Izzy chuckles through the connection. Meanwhile, Noodle watches curiously as before, and Biscuit has his fun acting like he is asleep. He even tries to make a snoring noise, but his swinging tail gives him away. Again.

Biscuit...

"Why don't we head into some of the parts of the auction house that aren't normally accessible to normal people?" the feylith smiles and leads us through the hallways that are elegantly but richly decorated. There is golden metal, wooden carved walls, a lot of what looks like expensive stone, and all those things.

Once in a while, he stops near certain items in display cases and gives us a short presentation of what they are. None of them is all that important or useful, and mostly have historical value, and that value only seems to increase the deeper we go.

Yes, this auction house is in the shape of an inverted pyramid, a big one that looks like it should collapse under its weight. But instead of going up, we're headed in the opposite direction.

There is a central node that has plenty of hallways and stairways up where I thought the more valuable items would be, in rooms full of sunlight and a gradually improving view the higher you go. Instead, we find a single hidden hallway, and the door unlocks after a signal from the feylith man, and we head underground. Once there, I begin to suspect another pyramid exists, but this one is right side up and much smaller than the one on the surface.

Passing through the central node of the underground pyramid, the colors begin to change. Stone turns black, the wood on the walls is darker, and golden inlays have been replaced with silver. The ceiling is entirely made out of what looks like gently glowing sheets of some unknown material. That light is easy on the eye while properly lighting everything there, but it nonetheless creates a very different sort of atmosphere.

Izzy begins to shout in excitement as she continues to put up her act, and the feylith gives her another lesson while leading us deeper and deeper. There are no elevators, so we are using the stairs. Once in a while, we meet other people. There are selari, human, and lumoran men and women wearing noble clothes, and feylith people working here who mostly wear the same sleek black suit.

And that's how we end up in a cozy looking lounge with a glass case in the center with a wooden dagger floating and slowly spinning inside.

So far, all's going according to plan. The man is cockier than before, taking advantage of what he thinks is Sir Elydor, the noble with financial trouble, and Izzy and I feed into it with well timed reactions.

We almost get to the point of straight up selling Biscuit.

Almost.

All communications cut off out of nowhere, and I hear a loud rumble somewhere outside. The case in the center rattles slightly, and the lights at the ceiling flicker for a moment before switching color from a cozy mix of orange and white to blue. My Ley Lines and telepathic links are gone as well, leaving us stuck in here with this guy. Even my link to Izzy is removed, likely due to a mechanism they use to "clear" things like that.

"Bowen, any idea what is happening?" a feylith woman shouts as she rushes past the underground lounge we are in. Her hair and eyes are both bright pink.

"Just follow the procedure! The Champion-Class Interference Protocol was triggered!" our contact shouts to her even as she rushes by. A few more feylith pass the hallways in the same hurried manner.

Meanwhile, Bowen begins to show a bit more emotion. The edges of his hair turn green, which Izzy picked up as his color for fear. The rest of it shows a level of tension that reveals itself as a very pale shade of brown. Darker brown is arrogance and more and more. I do realize there are advantages to be gained by learning them all, but when she was telling me about them, I wasn't listening. After all, I would have had her with me. The problem is that we can't communicate without this guy hearing.

"I apologize, Sir Elydor and Little Lady Isabella. While situations like this do not happen very often, we have procedures that I must follow. In your case, you will need to stay with me in this room for the time being. If anything worse happens, we will head deeper underground, where we have safer rooms, as I have no way of letting you back out on the surface since we're currently under lockdown. But I can confirm that our safe rooms are better than anything else in the city."

"Very well then," I lean back in my chair and cross one leg over the other. I don't even bother asking him if he has any more information. I can clearly see that all communication has been cut off, and their defensive arrays are operating at full capacity to isolate specific segments as mana spreads through the walls to power them.

The ground shakes once more, this time even more violently. I don't take my eyes off the guy, who seems to have forgotten about me.

His hair and eyes gain more green as he mutters, "For it to be shaking that much even here, what could be happening..."

I don't need to be Izzy to tell he is scared and very nervous. I find that a striking difference between him and me, or my fake daughter. Both of us are used to such dangers, while this man clearly isn't.

He stands up and begins to pace as Izzy moves closer to me and clutches my clothes. "Are we going to die down here?" Her voice sounds shaky as she stares at me with big green eyes. I notice Bowen glancing at us before forcing himself to look away.

I notice another earthquake coming through my kinetic senses, and time it just enough to speak a second before it hits. "I'm sure it won't happen again. We'll be fine."

Then the whole place shakes once again, not as violently as before, but as the man is distracted, I seep a bit of my mana into the area. I don't touch the arrays or try to influence the room, but I make the lights flicker out for a few moments, turning the place pitch black.

Izzy screams as if in fear and hugs me while whispering, "Continue to make him more scared."

"I know," I whisper back.

The lights turn on again, and Izzy begins to sob. As the feylith looks at me, searching for relief in seeing someone calm. I return his gaze steadily, and that makes him relax a bit, but as he moves to look away, I make sure he notices my hand shaking.

Izzy must sense something from him because, taking the opportunity, she sobs louder. "It is so dark here. It will all fall down on us, I know it. I want mom!"

"Little Lady Isabella, I'm more than sure it will be..."

He doesn't get to finish. I block one of the detection marks for a moment and channel my kinetic energy into the air, making it vibrate. It's the kind of tremor you feel deep in your chest, the kind that sets your nerves on edge because you cannot tell where it's coming from or what it is.

(Biscuit, see if you can slip downstairs and find the egg.) I send to the corgi. (On three. Two...)

At the end of my count, another earthquake comes, and this one begins to make me wonder, just what could be happening outside? Which leads to the thought that we'd better hurry up here.

This time, even Bowen screams and almost falls. Biscuit squeaks and runs like a rocket toward the stairway, heading downstairs. The lights flicker out again and die entirely, and this time it wasn't even me.

When they turn back on, the lights are weaker and cast a dim red glow, probably drawing from whatever alternate power source the place has switched to. In the distance, loud clangs and alarms ring out as metal doors, each as tall as half my height, begin to drop and seal off sections of the space. They are likely trying to seal off the place before another tremor destroys another power source and makes it impossible.

"You ask him," Izzy whispers.

"I wonder," I say, getting Bowen's attention. "Should we move to a safer place before we miss the opportunity?"

The feylith doesn't even respond. He takes off running, and I'm sure he would've left us behind if he thought he could.

I grab Izzy and follow after him. Soon, a few more feylith with the same idea rush past us. The doors ahead open only because of the implants the people working here have, and the attack arrays do not activate.

People shout, “Quickly, we only have a few seconds!” and “Go down the stairs!” Their panic noticeable even through the alarms.

These stairs aren’t very long, but they are circular and beautiful like everything else here, though not many people will likely ever see them. In the dim red light, they’ve taken on an eerie quality, and the darkness down there feels even more so. The metal clangs continue to sound as more doors fall into place and close until the final one seals the stairway as we reach the lower floor, plunging us into pitch darkness. No lights glow down here.

“It should be here...” one of the feylith women rummages around. With my senses, I watch her move toward one of the pillars and press the back of her hand against it. Nothing happens, and she curses, eventually finding some manual mechanism and opening a hidden door.

From there, she draws out a few items that look a bit like glass orbs. She shakes them, and they begin to radiate a calming orange light, drawing sighs of relief from the others. I notice a few more such orbs inside, as well as some food, water, and things I can’t identify right away.

There are more people coming from the other side, mostly feylith, but some customers are mixed in as well, as the light of the orbs shine on us.

I’m not surprised no one is using any skills, there is currently a constant, powerful field disrupting mana.

If I’m correct, this entire underground pyramid is surrounded by walls made of materials designed to interfere with it. I don’t think it’s natural, and it’s likely that it was created by someone with a powerful skill.

The resulting walls were then covered in a thin layer of another metal that blocked the effect, and just before the lights flickered out, that layer of metal melted and slid down to let that disrupting effect pass through.

I find it all very fascinating.

"You should pretend to panic a bit," Izzy pulls on my arm and then hugs it. Tears are on her face, and she cries loud enough for others to hear before pressing against me and whispering, "We need to silence the feylith with that white brooch on his suit. He isn't panicking at all, and the others are investing a lot of hope and respect in him. I don't think we will be able to exploit this situation at all with him still here."

"I see," I nod, and caress Izzy's hair. With her feeling the emotions of everyone here, I know how difficult these things are on her.

Then I send a message through the connection that still remains even within this field, after a clear from before.

(Biscuit. Not a friend. Quietly.)

The corgi is already snooping around, but hearing my words and receiving my image of the man, I sense him moving back quickly.

"There is no need for alarm," the man with the white brooch says, his smile practiced and cool. "This remains one of the most secure installations in Hadon. As you are all aware, this sector was encased a century ago within a static mana-nullification shell created by Champion Lorik. I'm going to personally interface with the hardwired communication conduit to see if I can gather any information. Please, remain comfortable for the time being. Bowen, see to their needs."

"I'm on it!" Bowen shouts. The green from his hair lessens slightly, and he shows a bit more confidence.

I meanwhile watch the feylith with the white brooch take a step through the hall and toward one of the walls. As he touches it, a part of it slides down, revealing something like a cable heading up with a small panel connected to it. He takes out a brooch and presses it to the panel, which lights up.

He then halts, a frown creasing his forehead while his eyes search the area.

Even as he holds the lighting orb, the shadows around him become darker, and for a moment it almost seems like they're moving.

All the lights flicker out, and a few people shout in surprise.

Barely a second later, the lights are back on, and a single orb falls to the ground where the man with the white brooch stood. He himself is nowhere to be seen.

"Boss?" Bowen whispers as he stares in that direction, but there's no answer.

The other people start noticing the disappearance as well, rushing over to where he was or straining to get as far away from the space as they can.

Within the chaos, Izzy's voice carries, "He escaped alone! He left us here!"

That adds even further to the terror. I notice that Noodle leaves her arm and heads toward where I sense Biscuit is once again. Then, the brooch connected to the panel of the cable lets out a cracking noise.

"C-an... you... h-ar me?" The voice is a jagged mess of digital artifacts, repeating the phrase in a loop. It remains oblivious to the frantic shouting of the people surrounding the control panel.

"I- re-peat... I re-peat..." A burst of static cuts off the part of the sentence. "...pion Oolik and... Champion Ewqui-...both... dead. Re-anim- Dusk Weredeer... killed... both."

Chapter 799 - Vault number 2

It seems we need to hurry even more than I'd expected.

"Izzy, who is the most important person here?" I ask, fully dropping my act and speaking the question aloud. A few people turn toward me, but Izzy seems to understand.

"Bowen," she says.

I nod and take a step. I've been testing it, but for the time being it's somewhat difficult to materialize and control mana outside of my body. Some things, like detection or others that don't require much in the way of mana, are possible, but others are nearly impossible. I still think I could do it if I tried, but there is a quicker way.

Right under the eyes of the people down here, I cut my hand deeply on the decorative brooch I'm wearing, and my blood floods out in strong pulses. My blood full of hyper condensed mana.

Under my will, it shoots forth, elongating into the shape of a nail and piercing the head of one of the feyliths I consider the most dangerous out of the group.

They shout, with nobles pushing to escape behind them and even some feyliths scrambling to do so. Two of them, though, step ahead, moving quickly with clearly powerful bodies.

My kinetic energy takes me to the side and then back in a confusing set of movements. My blood shoots at the man's head as he dodges, just before I bury the dagger I'm holding in my left hand in his chest. That dagger is made of wood grown from my fragment. It continues to grow quickly and pierces through the man's chest from the inside as I let go of the handle and kick him away.

Another man reaches my side, but Izzy's flames blaze just for a moment before they can be disrupted and melt off half of his face. Even then, the feylith targets me with determination. His fist crashes against my chest, but I absorb all that kinetic energy within my body.

More blood drips from my cut hand, and a nail stabs through his chest where his heart beats. Strengthening my body with kinetic energy, I throw him against the wall, causing his bones to audibly crack.

Another blast of Izzy's fragment blazes, setting the man entirely on fire and quickly reducing him to a simple skeleton with bits of flesh falling to the ground.

Ignoring the twitching body of the man from whose chest cavity a small tree begins to grow, I boost my body to follow the people who ran away and swiftly kill all of them while ignoring all they have to say. Even as I reach Bowen, my mind is using my fragment as a node as I begin to set up a way to teleport to one of the marks I left outside, hopefully even through the defensive walls and arrays they've set down here.

“Where is the egg? Your auction house would have gotten it not long ago.” I ask as I come to a stop in front of Bowen, who, with entirely green hair and eyes, tries to push away from me. Behind his back, there’s something like prison bars set over rows and rows of smaller rooms, each with its own doors.

“What?! I... I don’t know! What are you doing? Do you even know...”

“Izzy?”

“He’s lying.”

With my body strengthened with kinetic energy, I grab and twist his arm to break it fully. “The egg,” I repeat.

He shouts in pain, grasping the bars, but only a part of me watches that. The other communicates with Biscuit, another forms the dripping blood from my hand into the shape of a dagger, I make as sharp as possible, and the last uses the Nameless Tree to continue to set up a way to teleport us out.

“V-vault number 2,” the feylith finally gets out with a groan.

“Izzy?”

“He’s not lying.”

I nod and grab him by the back of the neck, pulling him with me as we make our way past the vaults and walk through the hallway lit only by a glowing orb, which Izzy now holds. At the end of it, we find Biscuit and Noodle. Both of them have been stopped by what seems like a block of metal, into which they were able to make deep carvings, but still failed to break through.

“Is it behind there?” I ask Bowen.

“Y... yes! Please... my arm.”

“Open the door,” I order him.

In reaction to that, he almost sobs. “I can’t... no one can.”

“It’s true,” Izzy confirms.

I look at him. I had hoped he would be able to, or that someone down here would. I don't think the implants the employees have can open it alone. Each implant is tied to their living signatures and doesn't seem to work when extracted. At least that’s what I’ve come to suspect after observing them, and it’s also what makes the most sense. Maybe the man with the white brooch would’ve been able to. Or maybe he truly could not. But it’s too late for that now.

I swing the dagger in my hand, separating his head from his body, and take a step toward the metal plate.

My blood is filled with so much mana that I can partially affect the way it moves. Right now, I force it out of my body, it flows out of the cut in my hand, flowing down the dagger I’ve already made and extending the blade. I make it long, thin, and as sharp as possible. There are two skills that are good for that, which I can still use to an extent, even within the field being generated down here.

[Manifestation - lvl 40 > Manifestation - lvl 41]

[Manifestation - lvl 41 > Manifestation - lvl 42]

[Ley Line - lvl 74 > Ley Line - lvl 75]

After all of that, I feel lightheaded. Since my body upgrade and my new trait, I’ve been noticing that my healing passive isn't as effective as it used to be. I’m beginning to think that even if I bought a more powerful one, it wouldn't change much. It’s just that, right now, my blood is nearly impossible for a normal healer to restore, and my body is likely taking on a similar quality. Lily can still do it, but she’s far from what I’d consider to be a normal healer.

But it doesn't matter now. It's a problem for the future, and one I expected.

I reach back and stab the long, slim sword into the metal plate. It goes through like the wall is made of sand. All the defensive arrays fail to disrupt it, and the same goes for the field. Moving the sword down, I put my weight into it and begin to cut a circular hole large enough for us to pass through. Even though it seems like it should be easy, it isn't. It takes the effort of my body, strengthened by mana and kinetic energy, to pull it off.

Sweat begins to bead on my forehead just as I finish and pull the sword back. Lightheadedness catches me again.

I don't even have to ask. Biscuit expands in size and rams himself against the shape, pressing his head against it and making it slide in. It likely weighs multiple tons, but the corgi just continues, jumping, pushing, and using his paws, not caring for the damage it causes.

Eventually, with a long ringing noise, the metal cutout falls free and slams into the ground on the other side with a heavy thud. It doesn't even bounce, it just slams against the floor and stays there as if it were welded in place.

We climb inside, finding the field even more powerful here. We find ourselves in a circular room with five doors, each marked with numbers and each with what looks to be prison bars over them. Every one of these doors is very different.

One is pitch black and made of wood. Another is made of glass with some unknown liquid inside. Then there's a set of red doors that have been polished to an extremely smooth surface. The fourth is made from a myriad arrangement of small scales. The door to vault number two is wooden, with inscriptions inlaid into it with metal wire.

My sword cuts through the bars and then through the door while Biscuit's primordial energy surrounds me as he turns into a puppy and jumps up on my shoulder. Hanging there by his front paws, he devours every defensive attack thrown my way while I work. A constant barrage of them continues to shoot towards me, and at some point, they cause the lighting orb Izzy holds to crack, leaving us in pitch-black darkness.

Just as I finish cutting through, another earthquake shakes the entire structure. In the distance, I hear a wall cracking, and part of the field suppressing mana, set in place by the Champion, weakens for a moment.

The door I've been cutting through falls with a sound that suggests it's much heavier than it should be, revealing a small room with multiple showcases. In the center, there is one containing an egg about as big as my head. It is almost unassuming, though it is covered in what looks to be scales.

I cut the showcase, grab the egg, and throw it to Noodle, who expands in size and eats it. Even after holding it just for a moment, my hands feel numb, but I do the same with multiple other cases, grabbing all the items I can and throwing them to the white snake.

Biscuit pulls several large chests from the room, and the snake eats them too. Only once everything from this vault is gone do we head out.

I almost move toward another vault when the next earthquake shakes us, and the field cracks further. I notice scans washing over us and sense the signatures of people high above heading down. A number of them are exceeding me in strength.

"We are leaving," I say.

Noodle shrinks in size and climbs into Izzy's sleeve, though he does so much slower than usual. Biscuit follows, and I pick him up.

I force mana from inside my body. Now, even through the cracked field, I manage to pull out enough to compress it until it turns pitch black. I pull it into three pieces. The first one I leave in the room with the five vaults. As we climb through the hole, I leave one just outside. Then the last one I throw into the hallway, where most of the bodies are.

All of the orbs begin to devour any bits of mana that remain in the air, just as we reach the Nameless Tree, which has grown to a size where it is pressing against the ceiling. At its roots, the torn pieces of the body of the feylith still remain.

Before I teleport us out, Izzy lets a flame orb drop from her hands, and it crashes onto the ground. Pouring through the space like a liquid, it begins to spread through the flooring, burning anything it reaches that isn't able to resist and continuously growing stronger with the weakening of the field.

All of us teleport along with the fragment, which I pull with us at the last moment. We appear next to Tess, who's been wearing one of my marks this whole time.

We are still on the streets of Hadon, though they look very different now. Many of the buildings have crumbled to the ground, the streets are cracked, and people carrying all they can are moving to run away. There's also quite a bit of looting going on as well. The earthquakes continue to strike from outside the city, and the sky, as far as I can see, is blood red with a sickening amount of mana radiation I can feel coming from the west.

Tess doesn't even seem surprised by our appearance at her side. "I thought you would use the mark you placed on me. Is everyone okay?"

"Yes," I confirm, still taking in the area. Maybe I didn't even need to bother clearing our tracks back there.

"The egg is with you, I guess. If you check the status, the three day counter has already started." Even as she talks, she doesn't stop, and we follow behind her. "We'll be taking one of the airships. They told Min-Jae they're going to be leaving immediately and offered him a spot, so he is there already and sharing info with us. We'll be using Lily to get the rest of us onto the deck."

"Sounds like a plan," I agree.

Tess doesn't seem too happy. "Likely the best option we have at the moment. We need to get as far away from here as possible. Let's hurry then. I already let the others know you're safe, but we will need the twins or Soph to add you into the link."

Chapter 800 - Everyone aboard

I avoid a group of people rushing past and even push one of them aside when they get too close. He looks at me angrily, reaching for his weapon, but Tess's lightning scorches his shoulder before he even realizes what's happened, and he runs away, cursing all the while.

Tess holds Izzy's hand and pulls on it to hasten our movement. We aren't all that far from the auction house, as Tess likely moved close in case we might need help. And now that I look back, the inverted pyramid has fallen to the ground, resting on one side.

"I don't know if you heard, but two of the local Champions got together to kill the Weredeer, likely in hopes of pleasing The Princess. Now that makes three out of her eleven Champions dead."

We stop for a moment, letting another group pass. This one, made up of a number of people carrying big wooden boxes and two dozen bodyguards with weapons drawn. Once they pass by, we move again, and Tess talks. "We don't know where the Weredeer is at the moment, but it killed the Champions somewhere in the west. The fight either happened close enough to ruin the city with collateral damage alone, or it happened far away, and it was just that destructive."

"The second one," I mutter.

"I think the same. Are you okay? You look really pale."

"I'm fine, Tess."

"Okay."

Hurrying, we reach the docks and push through more people. At a few points, we even fight some of the smaller groups that have been eyeing us for some reason, and at another point, I make a hole in one of the defensive arrays to reach the place where the others have gathered. We barely greet each other, and Sophie hugs her sister as we are forced to hurry over to Min-Jae, who motions us over.

On the docks to the side, he's standing next to a feylith man wearing a uniform with an array of badges. That man has his hair tied back in a ponytail, and his wings are slightly bigger than the small feylith wings I'm used to.

"That's them?" he asks Min-Jae the moment we appear. "Which one is the healer?"

Instead of answering, Lily steps forward, and the man, without hesitation, lifts his arm and makes a deep, long cut into it.

"Heal," he orders.

Before he can fully finish the word, the wound is closed. Lily doesn't even touch him.

The feylith then nods just once, decisively and without hesitation. "We're taking everyone aboard."

The flying ship we find ourselves on is entirely made up of a dark brown sort of wood with three masts, each of the same size. The sails are a very pale shade of red bordering on transparent, and they constantly move and shift, though there aren't any winds strong enough to do so. The ship itself is wider than ships usually are and big. Like very big, probably half the size of a modern cruise vessel.

We are let in as promised and as they send us below deck to be dealt with later Min-Jae talks, "I'm surprised, he said he would take only two people to guard Lily, but must have changed his mind after you healed him," he looks around and points in one direction, "Go this way and use this key when you find the door labelled The Gilded Chamber. I have to go and get to work!" After that, he leaves, hurrying to make his way back on deck.

Once we enter the room, Blackie, very careful not to bump into anything, moves to stand in the corner. He's currently wearing a black cloak with a hoodie under it and some sort of mask over the entirety of his face with no holes. When the ship begins to lift, I notice him gently swaying from side to side as he matches the swaying of the ship.

"How long can Noodle keep that egg and the items in his stomach?" I ask while still observing Sophie's bond in the body of the deceased Demon Champion.

"Just for an hour or two longer. They're already causing trouble for him, especially the egg," Izzy says, and pets Noodle, who is spread over the apartment room we got. The snake has now expanded to the point where his body is as thick as a tree trunk, and I find myself thinking that it probably helps him with whatever he's doing.

I still find that part of his ability to shrink and expand while temporarily storing items in his stomach very interesting, and I've been observing it for a while. Unfortunately, I haven't made any progress on figuring out how it works, but I'm sure it is something that I'll be able to imitate in the future.

Otherwise, The Gilded Chamber is a massive apartment furnished with furniture accented by wood and gold. This sort of decoration looks truly old school, even more so than the usual medieval style. I almost expect some sort of noble cat lady to walk out of the room with piles and piles of plates in showcases, never to be used for dining.

Taking it in, I notice that Tess has the low pristine ring from the end of the 9th floor on her finger. If memory serves me correctly, it allows her to indefinitely store an attack or something like that. For someone like her with powerful, piercing attacks that are held back only by her reserves, it makes sense. If I were her, I would charge and store the most powerful attack I can muster in it, multiple times, if I could. And that's probably what she's done now.

Being asked, I stop dilly dallying and move to help Sophie, who's busy setting up a shielded chamber in one of the smaller bathrooms. The sink and bathtub are already gone, having been moved to one of the side rooms, and Noodle is spitting out some materials. A few sheets of metal she fixes to the walls and connects, along with some of the showcases we took from Vault 2.

The ship begins to lift and fly towards the sky at high speed, which, to my surprise, proves to be nearly as fast as me flying at full throttle. Keeping my guard up and senses reaching as far as I can, I place marks on everyone in here, ready to just teleport us away if needed.

In the meantime, I help Sophie. Instead of using mana paint, I let bits of my blood drop from the tip of my finger and use it to draw on the floor and walls while the Mindblender is repairing the showcase I cut to get the egg out.

Pieces of the fake wyvern Dennis and Aaron stole from that Lycan maniac have already been thrown in the corner, and I make a mental note to myself to make sure this place isn't leaking signatures once we are done.

Noodle, meanwhile, waits nearby, with an expression that looks like he's ready to vomit up all the items he's been holding. I find myself a few seconds of time to give his head a scratch. As always, Izzy's bond's body is warm, and the scales are nice to touch. So I sacrifice a few more seconds to pet him until Sophie shouts for me to help her.

"You really took everything you could. I can't even say you stole anything not glued to the floor, some of these things have clearly been pulled up with pieces of said floor still attached," Sophie mutters with her arms crossed, looking at the piles of items laid out in the shielded room we made.

I don't answer as I secretly agree with her. I took a number of showcases, even though they were empty. One of them holds the egg again with the top I cut off glued back on top. That egg is white with a slight hint of pale blue when you look at it under the right light.

It doesn't even look all that impressive now. It's just an egg. If not for the three day system countdown for the time we have to hold it, I could easily believe we were tricked, and that it was just the egg of something like a gray lizard.

I want to see a gray lizard one day.

Otherwise, there are a few chests we still haven't managed to unlock, an entire set of armor, a shield, a small flower in a glass case filled with some sort of gel, a necklace made of what looks to be human teeth, an orb made of water held in a small glass vial, and some materials, a few of which have a rarity of pristine.

I really want to return to the auction house and check the other vaults. But it's too late for that. I can only hope the black orbs erased our signature enough that no one can track us, or at least that they make it difficult enough that we can be gone before it becomes a problem. Overall, it's not a bad haul, though I would've asked for more since our floor is so screwed up already and has been cut so short.

For some reason Blackie stands near us as well, looking into the room curiously until Sophie sends him away, which he carefully does. I can see how much it stresses her out every time he moves. I have heard about some of the accidents he's already had. Just bumping into one of the buildings caused it to explode, even though the cloak should help to absorb some of that kinetic impact, given that it's already been enchanted for that. Here on the ship, I think most of us feel a bit nervous because of what could happen.

Everyone takes an item that seems like it should be safe for examination, and we lock our shielded bathroom and head into the center of the apartment to the ugly living room, where we wait until Min-Jae joins us as well. The boy, the young man, whatever he is now, seems tired and just slides down into the couch next to Aaron, who taps his back a few times.

With a tired voice, Min-Jae says, "We'll be orbiting the planet soon. We had to leave fairly quickly, so our mana tanks are only half full, and we lack some defensive personnel capable of using the arrays and devices this ship has. At least we have enough fuel to stay here for a few weeks. If you want, you can go to the deck, it's shielded, so you can breathe there, and the temperature is controlled. The view really is something else."

"So what the hell is happening down there?" Dennis asks.

"Reanimated Dusk Weredeer killed one Champion, so two of them thought it would be a good idea to take the deer down to please the feylith Princess, who happens to be their Absolute and Lust subclass. By the way, I think all of the Champions are men, and she controls them."

"Harem..." Dennis whispers.

Maya throws a pillow at him. "Why do you say it with such a creepy tone?"

"Don't throw stuff at me!" he shouts back at her and throws the pillow back. "I bet you admire her and would..."

Their conversation fades into the background as Min-Jae continues, "She was supposed to return in two months or so. There are rumors that she's on a mission for The Corporation in an effort to get something from them. But now she's apparently returning even though she will need to deal with, and I quote the captain here: the prohibitive exit penalties triggered by her breach of terms."

"Great, there's bureaucratic contract bullshit even here in my magical world," Aaron sighs, and Min-Jae nods in agreement.

The Korean boy then continues, "We plan to stay in orbit until she returns and deals with the Weredeer and hope it either doesn't notice us here or decides it's too busy destroying cities." He pauses. "This is all our fault, isn't it?"

He doesn't even get an answer as the ship begins to shake, and we stop gaining height. All the conversations stop.

Then the ship begins to plunge towards the ground at a much higher speed than before, and that speed only increases over the next thirty seconds. Blackie loses his balance, and his shoulder strikes one of the inner walls, causing it to explode entirely, even as I absorb some of the kinetic impact. Items flying through the room hit him, sending more explosions like that, and I find myself busy absorbing kinetic energy from the reflections of his trait.

Everyone gathers closer, and Tess halts all the items bouncing in the room mid-air. The airship shifts and begins to descend at an even sharper angle.

Something streaks toward the spot where we were barely a minute ago, a place now miles, and miles behind us. A mana projectile the size of a building, traveling at supersonic speed, tears through that space and continues into the void of outer space. It leaves behind a nauseating mana signature, and even at a distance, its mere presence causes the ship's defensive arrays to flicker.

No other projectiles or attacks come for us, but I notice multiple more just like that in the distance. Some of them hit other airships far away, entirely annihilating them.

Our speed slows down only once we are about to crash into what seems like the middle of the sea with no land in sight. In the sudden deceleration, the ship slows down, and an entire side of the vessel explodes as Blackie is thrown against it, and I am unable to contain all of the kinetic energy. Harshly, we crash into the sea, with the barrier flickering just for a moment as some field dampens the impact.

Tess doesn't wait for anyone. Turning herself into lightning, she zigzags through the room and out the hole in the side of the ship to stand at the ship, using her sight to search for any sign of incoming projectiles. Izzy and Maya move to join her while Sophie and I head over to check on our shielded bathroom.

The moment the door opens, I can only let out a very long and deep sigh.

The showcase with the egg is on the floor and broken, though that should've been impossible from a fall like that. The egg itself is out, having rolled across the floor and into one of the corners.

The very same corner where we piled the remains of the fake wyvern. Those very remains are now gone and nowhere to be seen.

Instead, the white egg with the pale blue tint now shows a few small cracks on its surface.

And a notification pops up.

The Floor quest has been reclassified as impossible to complete in its current state due to parameters independent of the floor's internal architecture.

The Rulers in charge of this cycle of the tutorial have been notified, along with the Ruler responsible for the floor's setting.