

Tutorial 831

Chapter 831 - Truly, a royal gift

The Leviathan dodges the beam by diving underwater, and the surface of the lake instantly grows calm.

My vessel, manifested behind me, grows in size as I expand [Eclipse] to fully encompass the beam of mana I now hold frozen in the air. The vessel, now three times my own height and consisting of only a torso, buries its hands within the beam. Using the mana contained within, it manifests a sword and pulls it free. Five colored this time. A dark blue blade with wisps of purple and light blue, and a gold and white core.

I ignore all the fish attacking me as Mapthaniel takes control of the vessel and swings at the enormous fish, cleanly cutting through each of them.

Mana based attacks aimed my way pulse out and weaken, wildly crashing against me and my vessel in a storm of dust-like particles of mana. Meanwhile, I stare down at my feet, tracking the Leviathan's enormous mana signature.

There are just a few seconds during which I will be able to handle the full output of my heart, even with my vessel taking on most of the strain, so I better make the best out of it.

A pulse of my mana expands over an area several miles wide and then bounces back to me, informing me of the position of each of the boys and all the fish. I share that information with Mapthaniel. Then, the entire frozen beam of mana breaks apart and mixes itself with the mana I've redistributed from my heart. All of it, like a torrential wave, crashes into the lake and pierces into it, expanding and attacking the Leviathan swimming below, gathering more and more mana as it goes.

Another of my arrays is prepared, and so while swinging the sword, my vessel frees one of its arms, reaching into the air and drawing an inscription with a glowing bead of mana at the tip of the finger. Continuously, I expand [Weave] over a wider area, growing it in size as my domain devours what remains of the Leviathan's presence on the surface.

[Weave - lvl 16 > Weave - lvl 17]

[Weave - lvl 17 > Weave - lvl 18]

The Leviathan's mana clashes against my own once again, just as my vessel finishes drawing and pokes a woven array. It activates just once, flashing, expanding, and influencing just a single wavelength of mana. The one the Leviathan was using to teleport.

My vessel remains on the surface as I push myself underwater with a blast of kinetic energy that sends a geyser of water exploding into the air. All the mana I sent ahead and in my possession redistributes, converting back to golden thermal energy.

The powerfully beating heart in my chest generates more as I go, and I instantly evaporate a wide bubble of water around me, clearing space, leaving me floating in the middle.

Another attack shoots at the charging Leviathan, bouncing off its armored head. Even unable to teleport anymore, it flies as if it swims, and dozens more arms appear around it, these ones made of mana. They clash against the golden flames, which I turn into the shape of arms as well.

The surface of the lake explodes again as my vessel dives in, and Mapthaniel hands control back over to me as it moves behind my back. My output instantly increases, and the strain of everything I was handling before lessens to a great extent. The waterless bubble triples in size, as does the number of flaming golden arms. They begin to tear apart their mana based counterparts, burning them, and the heat continues to rise, causing some of the Leviathan's scales to crack under the output of the Champion grade thermal heart.

Blood drips from my finger, elongating and taking on a coat of flickering mana and gold and white light as I combine it with [Empyrean Lance].

Another pre-prepared array triggers, sending out a pulse of [Eclipse] that drains the colors from the air and, for a split second, pushes away the monster's [Mana Domain]. Then, in quick succession, I use [Redistribution] to convert all the flames back to mana and then use that mana to power [Eclipse] once again, turning the whole space around us black and white.

Within this near colorless place, a lance speckled with my blood roars ahead in an explosion of kinetic energy that, because of the sheer amount I injected it with, escapes my control, throwing me to the side and eating a good chunk out of my shoulder.

Neither me nor the Leviathan is able to track the brilliant lance. Just for a moment, there is a light, and then it is gone. A hypersonic boom ripples multiple times in a row, breaking my eardrums and pushing away the water around me and vaporizing it. Then follows the sound of a violent, low frequency thump so deep that it almost feels like a punch.

The maelstrom that is the Leviathan's body comes to a halt as a hole appears through the exact center of its head, where the armored scales are thickest. All of its mana escapes its control as its body begins to twitch, and the human arms start to spasm. The fish opens its mouth in a soundless scream as it twists and coils onto itself.

It stops moving for a second. Then its enormous heart beats again. The head closes its eyes, and something else takes over. Just the impulses and instincts of the body.

Where its control over its mana previously carried a rough beauty and skill, it is now merely crude. The pulsating heart beats louder and stronger, each pulse sending much more mana rushing through it than before, damaging the body and seeping into the area. But that's all, just a huge amount of mana handled poorly. Gone is the beauty.

The seal over my Ignition falls back into place, and its wild thumping against the inside of my chest weakens as I take the mana that remains and move it to the crown over my head, which starts to calm down as well. My vessel disappears as well, leaving just me and a mindless body throwing itself about like a living nuclear plant simply generating mana.

Regalia surrounds me and grows in size to face the airplane sized monster as I grab hold of it. [Eclipse] stops the mana radiation from touching me, and my eyes break it down into tiny particles that I seize and feed to my crown.

We are thrown through the water at high speed, while the Leviathan doesn't even try to bite me, simply smashing its head against me while its hands twitch in jerky spasms in an attempt to tear my armor apart. I form a sword in one of Regalia's hands and cut into its head.

My senses break through the natural barrier, and I find a second, smaller brain. Twisting and throwing the body to the side, I reach it, bury Regalia's hand in it, destroying it as well.

[You have defeated Leviathan Fish - lvl 461]

[Lvl 419 > Lvl 420]

[Lvl 420 > Lvl 421]

[Lvl 421 > Lvl 422]

[Lvl 422 > Lvl 423]

Finally, the body slows down, not moving anymore.

For a while, I stay there, breaking apart and taking in all the mana I can get and feeding it to my crown.

When I'm finished, I convert a burst of mana into kinetic energy to launch myself back toward the surface, hauling the body and head with me. I break through the water to land on the surface of the calm lake, walking across the surface as I pull the remains behind me.

Regalia shrinks before disappearing entirely, to be stored in an array by one of my subminds as I look around. There is still some fighting going on, but it mostly seems to be over, while the boys mostly compete over who can get more of the fish. Though some aren't likely to be usable at all with the amount of damage they've caused.

Out of curiosity, I drop a few more droplets of my blood onto the surface, but this time I get no reaction. It seems there are no more fish available, but looking at how many of them are lying around, I won't complain.

When the last one dies, Morwag, Weslin, Savant, and Brich all move in closer. They show hints of the fight we went through, but none have any serious wounds and are still more than combat ready.

"You should tell your guide not to move out yet," Savant says, still holding the Sword of Aeons in his hand with the white wing behind his back. The orange light from his domain continues to flicker about as I track his gaze to the body of the Leviathan Fish.

That huge body begins to twitch, and Savant charges with both kinetic energy and mana. He stabs the sword to the side, but it is already too late as the side of the Leviathan explodes into gore. Scales fly away, and blood and organs are gouged out as something fast escapes, landing against Morwag, who lifts his arm as it bites into his forearm.

It is a lynthari with two tails and a body and face entirely covered in tattoos. Looking at the color of the skin and the look it's giving us, I immediately identify the lynthari as a lurker.

[Reanimated Corpse - lvl ???]

Morwag flings his arm, and the lynthari flies to the side, moving like an animal and ducking under Weslin's attack.

A lurker that the Leviathan must have eaten. Now that the fish is dead, the lurker's heart beats out, generating mana once again without the enormous mana pool of the Leviathan Fish to suppress it.

As Savant attacks it again, the lurker teleports away and then does it again. Every time he takes a step to move, the air in front of him wavers as if the space itself were changing, and it teleports. In a way that seems almost similar to Ruby's. And the more mana the lurker gathers, the farther and faster it teleports and the stronger it becomes.

But it doesn't run away yet. It teleports through my disruption and avoids Morwag's charge only to crash into the Leviathan's body, piercing through to the other side. When it appears there, the lynthari holds the core, the most valuable part of the fish.

The thought of observing the way the lynthari teleports escapes my mind as all my effort goes into disruption. This time, I succeed, and the teleport cancels halfway. Savant tracks the exit somehow, already waiting there with a sword he swings at the lurker.

The lynthari bites into the blade, and the core it holds glows, sending a pulse of torrential mana that pours out an enormous amount. Savant tries to attack, but the lynthari steps back, almost pulling the sword out of Savant's hand.

I react slowly as I observe with fascination how the lurker takes control over the mana generated by the core and its own body. I observe the wavelengths, finding an easy means of choking it out. It is a fascinating way of handling mana, and yet weak somehow. The kind that dies off easily, in contrast to a greater mana pool. That's probably why it ended in the belly of the Leviathan for who knows how many years.

The lynthari uses teleportation powered by the entirety of the mana he gathered, and I track the way it does that.

"Duncan will take care of the fish," I say to the others as I connect to the remains of the teleport. I send more mana through to keep it open, widen it, and prepare to follow through as I turn to the rest. "I want to see where it wants to run. Are you coming?"

Weslin shakes his head and stops by my side with less excitement than Morwag. Even Savant and Brich lower their natural barriers.

Then I teleport us through, tracking the lynthari. The distance is much longer than I would have expected, with a few stops along the way as the lurker needs to pause to gather more mana. However, I have no such need and power it with my reserves alone, the environment around us shifting and shifting. It weaves through ambient mana and sometimes passes through what feel like invisible rivers of mana and many arrays that couldn't have been set by the locals or attendees.

The ways the lynthari skillfully uses the environment to teleport over such great distances are new and fascinating to me, so I'm learning as much as I can.

At some point, I begin to estimate the direction we head and the lengths of the teleports, and my heartbeat speeds up. Looking at the others, I am not the only one.

When we finally stop, there is the darkness of a cave and a soft male voice that speaks.

"Aahhhhhh, so you have finally returned from your mission. Just how many decades has it been? I thought I had lost you, you, one of my favorite puppets." The voice stops before speaking again. Now, the way it reflects sounds like it speaks in our direction. "And you even brought a guest. A gift. Oh yes. They can come, but they cannot leave. Puppets. Great puppets. Very impressive ones. Shining even more than you did in life. And there's something else there as well. Truly, a royal gift."

My thermal cube manifests and spins, lifting up into the air and generating more and more of a gentle orange golden light. It fills not a cave, but what seems to be the inside of an enormous body, with huge organs hanging all around that I couldn't even hope to recognize. Flesh and bones and a wet, fleshy, unmoving surface we find ourselves standing on.

And the lynthari stands next to the dark figure. It has wide open, unblinking eyes that are entirely red, whites, pupils, all of it. And the entire figure is black. It has the proportions of a shriveled human body, but I can't pick up any more details. It's just entirely black.

[Dhampir Lord - lvl ????]

I can't see the figure's mouth, but I can feel the smile in its voice as the red eyes turn to Brich. "Truly a most welcome surprise. My master's sword, his fragment, his bond, his power manifested."

Before any of us can move, the figure is standing next to Brich. The lumoran can't even react before his body is flung to the side in an explosion of blood, chunks of armor, and failed automatic defenses. And in the place where Brich stood, the Dhampir Lord stands, holding Calvorn, which begins to chuckle as the blade splits out to reveal teeth and a long tongue.

Chapter 832 - Lurker After Lurker

"Hey, you trash, how dare you put your nasty hands on me?" The sword says as it suddenly stops chuckling.

The Dhampir doesn't seem to be affected in the least and smiles gently. "As harsh as always when you don't try to trick people. Have you given up on that already?"

"A fucking traitor like you should just keep your mouth shut. Do you want me to use your brother's voice? Will you cry again when I do? So, how's your life, you bitch? Do you enjoy reviving every few hundred years anytime someone kills you? Has so many revives already left you demented? I can sense that you've been greatly weakened." Calvorn chuckles, a wet tongue flicking as he changes his voice. This time, reminding me of a certain nonchalant Wraith, the being Adrian now possesses within the half formed figure constantly floating behind him. "Are you even still a Champion, Alistair, or just a leech on this body? Just how low have you fallen?" The sword's voice switches back to harsh. "You fucking..."

Calvorn doesn't get to finish as the blade shuts, closing the mouth, and the Dhampir turns around. "Take care of our guests," he says, and simply turns to leave.

Before I can blink, the lynthari uses that teleportation of his to get in front of me. Some sort of spatial skill presses against me in an attempt to block my own teleportation, and the kinetic blast I throw at him disappears, teleported away, to hit Morwag instead, who is thrown to the side.

Out of the darkness, a dozen more lurkers appear, teleported here by the lynthari.

I swap into my kinetic stance as I turn to face the lynthari, who, upon seeing that, teleports away. At the same time, he continues to hold the core, using its mana to strengthen his skills as more and more lurkers begin to appear within this place, with them gradually rising to higher and higher levels.

Morwag and Weslin are already fighting them. I see Weslin's void cancel out a lurker's flight to reach him quickly as he uses the palm of his hand to cut off its head. Morwag face tanks a kick from a huge velnar, using his own horns to stab the lurker and, with a twist, throws him against the ground, as the demon's speed increases and he stomps on the velnar's head.

"I'll take care of the lynthari!" Savant shouts at me as he absorbs multiple attacks and, with a swing of his wing, follows the teleporting guy.

"Got it," I call back to him and watch Brich's body twist and crack and snap back to life as he takes a deep breath. For a moment, he looks around in confusion, but quickly moves, avoids an attack, and begins to fight the multiple lurkers grouping up against him.

My [Empyrean Lance] stabs through a tanky looking velnar, preparing to attack me, with all his defenses failing to put up a fight. The lance just tears through his field, the barrier he places over his skin, his natural barrier, and continues on through his body.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 382]

Another lurker lifts what feels like a mid arcane bow, nocking a glowing mana projectile to the string. I observe it, my eyes decipher the structure, and I pull on a string that destabilizes it, causing it to explode and throw the lurker away. Another of my projectiles follows, piercing through his head.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 397]

A huge mace crashes against my body, but I absorb all of its kinetic energy, and it barely feels like a push. My body doesn't even move.

I move that kinetic energy, narrow it, and feed more into it. The air shakes as the lurker's head explodes like a watermelon.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 275]

Another barrage of mana projectiles crashes against my back, and I don't even bother putting up a barrier against them. I don't even have to turn around as they turn into a cloud of particles that the maelstrom of my Mana Crown quickly absorbs.

In quick succession, I send multiple tricolored orbs through the lines I've woven throughout this place, and they explode one after another.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 249]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 266]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 210]

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I use the structure of my [Weave] to teleport away, even as the lynthari lurker tries to suppress our spatial skills, even as he's fighting with Savant. Rising high into the air, I locate more powerful signatures.

Sensing danger, I push myself to the side, and a projectile I instantly recognize brushes past me, disrupting my mana as it does so. It stabs into the fleshy wall and continues to fly far away, carrying that familiar golden and white core.

My attention quickly snaps to the lurker who shot the Empyrean bolt. I locate him, a mora, as tall as they come, wearing old, tattered robes and lifting a staff as tall as he is. The staff is almost akin to a small tree with branches and a glowing crystal floating between them.

Another Empyrean bolt shoots at me just as I teleport away, and then start moving toward the lurker.

He expects it. The place where I appear is suddenly surrounded by a field that makes me feel like I'm moving through molasses.

My own [Empyrean Lance] shoots ahead to deflect another Empyrean bolt. It misses me, just as my lance misses him. But it buys me enough time to comprehend the field. My [Eclipse] flashes, the hold on me disappears, and this time I move toward him with Wraith Dance while keeping my domain close to my skin, disrupting any attempt to stop me.

When I notice the lurker shooting a few Empyrean bolts toward Morwag, I use my own lance to deflect them. Before I reach the lurker, a sword as long as I am tall manifests in my hands. My body creaks as I momentarily boost it with both kinetic energy and mana, swinging into the mora lurker.

The sword cuts through multiple barriers and fields. All of his disruptions fail as the blade pierces deep into his body.

In reaction, he shifts the staff like a weapon and swings it at me. I let go of the sword and launch dozens of kinetic blasts at him, channeling them quickly one after another. He stops half of them, but the latter ones break through his barriers, riddling his body with holes and causing him to stumble back. Another sword manifests in my hand, and I boost myself up to take off his head.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 401]

Before he can fall, I grab the tall staff. Through my eyes, I observe its function. In a split second, my mana cycles through it to learn how it operates before I lift it and slam the bottom against the ground.

A huge portion of my mana flows in and pouring out from the staff, and a field like a cloud of molasses begins to spread. It is not unlike a kinetic hold, but it is mana based and much more effective, requiring

less effort even if it can't fully halt enemy movement. The advantage is that it slows both mana and kinetic based attacks.

I twist around, activating another function. My mana flows toward the top, into the crystal between the branches, where it bounces around within, strengthening with each rebound and narrowing. Like a laser, a beam of cutting mana shoots out. I spin it around, tracking and cutting through dozens of lurkers.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 346]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 278]

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[Lvl 423 > Lvl 424]

The power contained in the crystal dies off, requiring another dose of mana, but instead, I lift it quickly to fend off an attack from a blue glowing axe that bites into the staff with the swing. I note that it's being held by a vyssari woman, a lurker who turns into red and white lightning, zigzagging around me to attack me from behind.

I let go of the huge, cumbersome staff and switch to kinetic movement as I jump over the next swing of her axe. I boost myself, flying to the side to avoid a primordial lightning projectile and then shift back into the same space. With my palm covered in oscillating mana, I swing at her, but she simply turns into lightning, swiftly avoiding me once again.

I track her movement, and when she reappears, a blast of kinetic energy reverberates through the air, only for her to avoid that as well.

She's about to charge me again when Weslin's void disrupts her primordial energy, and the half demon lands beside her with a slam. As she swings her axe at him, he disrupts whatever energy surrounds it and grabs the blade of the axe with his bare hands before his kick caves in her chest and throws her against the wall.

A dozen of my projectiles pierce through a human lurker about to attack him, and I teleport away just as an explosion lands where I once stood.

More and more lurkers continue to be teleported by the lynthari lurker Savant is still hunting, though I don't see any of them as I focus on gathering more mana and continue charging out of the vicinity to avoid more projectiles.

My domain expands as I choke off another explosion, preparing to drown the battlefield, and I track its source. Two weird domains press against mine, trying to destroy my [Weave], but I just feed it more mana to strengthen the ley lines it's composed of and weave it tighter into this space.

Another of my lances shoots at the lurker, preparing a wide range bombardment, before I duck to the side as Savant flies past me, his wing flickering to stop his momentum. Right after, leaving the air shaking, kinetic energy vibrates through the space in a familiar set of movements.

I feel sick as I lift my eyes to see the lynthari lurker standing there in the distance. And next to him is a tall male demon with long white hair and short black horns. Even dead and reduced to a lurker, his face is handsome, and his eyes retain a hint of the demon's red.

In a fast, twitchy movement, the demon lurker avoids Morwag's attack and, in a burst of speed, hits my guildmate multiple times, dancing away as Morwag returns the attack.

I watch as all the kinetic energy he absorbed slams into the ground, exploding a crater into this space of flesh and oversized organs, which then all freeze in the air. Droplets of blood, pieces of flesh, and even some nearby lurkers are suspended as if frozen in time.

He is about to attack Morwag again when Savant charges at him, swinging his sword, only for the lurker to tilt to the side and avoid the sword.

Savant's movements are much faster and much more powerful. The lurker can't even hope to absorb it all. Yet, when it comes to melee, something like raw power won't work against him. Even if he is a hundred or so levels lower.

The demon lurker uses dozens of bursts of kinetic energy, each feeding on the last as they bounce within his body. Some move him, some are feints against Savant's kinetic senses, and some are meant to deal with the sheer momentum he's generating.

Once again, he avoids Savant's attacks in twitchy, unpredictable movements, and when Morwag moves to attack him, a Needle Point, this one truly as narrow as a needle, pierces through the muscular demon's body in multiple places. These attacks are incredibly small, yet all are directed at the ligaments, causing Morwag to slow down and falter until he almost falls to his knees.

Even then, Morwag refuses to use his primordial binding, and the demon lurker slams a fist into his face before avoiding Savant and jumping away as Savant uses his domain.

"Morwag, with me!" I shout as I slide deeper into [Focus] to force my eyes off the lurker.

Meanwhile, another lurker that I recognize as the one known as Specter reappears from somewhere behind my back, about to stab a dagger through me, but I already knew about him. Before he even materializes fully, a spike made of mana stabs through the entirety of his body, causing him to die and drop the dagger.

A notification dings, and I stand there with clenched teeth as Morwag, annoyed, turns toward me. Seeing my expression, his eyes narrow further, and he leaves the fight, letting Savant, Weslin, and Brich deal with the lurkers here.

When he lands near me, we rush after the Dhampir and Calvorn, with Morwag still holding the glass container containing the rot.

Chapter 833 - The ****pocalypse

We rush through a tube that appears to be a vein, its surface constantly pulsating, stretching, and expanding. More lurkers continue to appear. The nature of the place we've found ourselves in prevents me from being able to send my senses too far out, but I'm sure they aren't just being teleported in by the lynthari lurker. This area just seems to have a huge density of them, and those we encounter tend to be especially strong as well.

It would seem that we've really gotten to the center of the 1st floor by hitchhiking.

Sending my mana bouncing through the vein we're moving through disrupts a few of the lurkers ahead of us, while Morwag grabs one of the more melee oriented lurkers that keeps getting into fistfights with him and squeezes his skull.

A blaze of thermal energy fills the vein from some place ahead of us, entirely careless of the fact that the attack is going to kill some of the lurkers as well. Before these golden flames even reach me, I absorb the heat until they've weakened to the point of a warm breeze pressing against us, then I launch a blaze of my own, rushing ahead in a torrential wave.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 399]

Something flies past me that I recognize as part of a weapon one of the lurkers was using, which Morwag then tore into pieces to throw as projectiles. The fragment flies with enough force to evaporate the head of one of the incoming lurkers.

More attacks rain in from the back, and even without using binding energy, Morwag just lazily tanks it with the sheer power of his body. Snickering, he drops the hammer and pins it to the ground with his boot. Using his one remaining arm, he tears a chunk of metal from the item and flings it toward the source of the attack. The attacks stop right away.

The ambushes continue all the way through, with many more lurkers appearing as we go. Sometimes there are big groups numbering in the dozens. In other cases, it's just a few of them, but their levels are all over 400. I continue to channel mana and my primordial energies while Morwag moves tirelessly, taking the weapons they leave behind, even as the lurkers die and either using them directly or tearing them into projectiles.

Moving on from the vein, we walk across what almost looks like a wide bridge with a never ending pool of darkness below, but closer inspection reveals it to be an enormous bone, and the ceiling is covered in what looks like nerves, constantly pulsing with the electric impulses being passed between them. Within this huge open space, some lurkers have even begun to fly, attacking us from whatever distance they feel is safe, only to be finished by our own ranged attacks.

In the middle of that bridge, a female velnar lurker stands.

[Reanimated Corpse - lvl 441]

She meets Morwag in a direct clash just as the demon charges and punches her. Part of her body explodes but regenerates every bit as quickly as Lily's would as she uses healing mana to repair herself. Her attack meets Morwag's face, causing him to stumble back, and then, with both hands fusing into something resembling a hammer, she smashes down at him. He's sent crashing down with a crack into the bone bridge, which cracks under the force, and the resulting shockwave pushes me back.

Even then, the demon, bleeding from his mouth, pushes himself back to his feet only to grab her hand, stopping her next punch. He gets pushed a bit less this time, and tears begin to appear across his body that he entirely ignores, along with the broken bone poking through his forearm. He pulls the velnar woman closer to bite into her neck and tear out her throat.

But before he even fully pulls back, the wound is restored, and straightening her fingers, she stabs her hand fingers first into his body and jerks it back out. She pulls Morwag's guts out of his body as she does, and blood floods from his mouth, yet he still begins to laugh, causing even more blood to flow.

He pushes himself closer, causing her arm to stab deeper as she begins to search for his heart so she can crush it. His hand shoots ahead, fingers first, in a similar manner, but his strike goes through the bottom of her chin. He breaks a few bones but pushes deeper and pierces through to reach her brain, at which point he starts to wriggle his fingers.

The velnar woman begins to uncontrollably twitch, attacking him more aggressively and bleeding him out while he watches her almost curiously. But she's the one who stops moving first, and drops to her knees, held upright only by his hand until he pulls it out and lets her fall.

Then, he stops and looks at his hand with its broken fingers covered in brain matter. He snorts as if in surprise and lazily kicks her body off the bridge.

An attack crashes into his shoulder, flinging him back, but he observes the trajectory of the other incoming strikes and twists his body just enough to avoid them. While stepping to the side, he shoves his guts back into the huge hole in his stomach, relying on his high natural regeneration to take care of the rest. Like an unstoppable machine, he continues to march ahead, meeting the attack of two demons using kinetic energy to boost their movements.

Meanwhile, I press against the combined effort of some lumoran triplets to set up a domain within which they would be able to turn all mana to their own efforts. It is an interesting attempt, yet still so silly against someone like me.

I break it down into pieces, changing parts of it and adding something of my own in the process, and using the remains of their barriers, I [Weave] my own. In addition to my [Mana Manipulation], I then use that [Weave] to absorb ambient mana and further strengthen my disruption efforts.

There are a few invisible lynthari moving under the bridge on all fours to attack us from the sides. I cancel out their invisibility as well, and my projectiles fly through the air like guided missiles as they track the markers I placed on them.

One of the attackers blocking the last stretch of the bone bridge is a lurker entirely covered in fur with a bear-like face, standing even taller than Morwag. Almost as tall as a velnar, though he is much wider. Each movement of his body carries an incredible strength behind it as I track its momentum with my kinetic senses.

I gather enough mana high in the air, and use part of my [Weave] to strike out with dozens of projectiles while I launch an [Empyrean Lance] that I [Weave] with my blood.

While under the barrage of projectiles, the lurker moves to attack and slams its arms down, breaking the end of the bridge. With a loud crack, it begins to fall, pulling us down into the darkness as I watch the ceiling with its nerves and flickering electricity.

Both Morwag and I jump. I fly to avoid a few ranged attacks while Morwag simply flicks them away. The wounded bear lurker charges to attack the demon, and my [Redistribution] expands, further strengthened by my [Weave], and all movement halts.

Morwag reaches him first, tearing his head off and throwing it to the side. A rain of my own projectiles shoots out, homing in on the marks I've placed on the remaining lurkers, as I land on the walkway next to the demon.

There's a wall in front of us that I simply blast away with all the kinetic energy I've been absorbing, resulting in a shower of flesh and bone that once formed the wall. All of it halts in the air, held there by kinetic energy as we pass through.

Almost ignoring our presence, the Dhampir is there waiting within what seems to be the inside of an organ, maybe a lung, for which this place is just the tiniest part. On a table made of bones lies Calvorn, whom the Dhampir seems to be endlessly fascinated with.

Next to him stand two lurkers. A human with a golden third eye in the middle of his forehead, and a demon without any horns. They weren't pulled off or broken, they're just missing.

[Reanimated Corpse - lvl ????]

[Reanimated Corpse - lvl ????]

The Dhampir turns to us, again with a smile sounding in his voice, though it is impossible to see. "Oh yes, you will make beautiful puppets."

I walk slightly to the left while Morwag goes to the right, and both lurkers begin to move along with us. The human with the third eye, turning to face me, and the demon without horns, doing the same for Morwag.

"You don't seem to be too annoyed by us destroying so many of them," I note, gathering more and more mana, ready to push it further.

"And why would I be? Within a year, all of them will return to me. Back under my control," he says and tilts his head. "And there are so many more, I can hear them all."

"That sounds like a lot," I stop just a few steps away from the human, who watches me with the golden eye in the middle of his forehead, while the other two track Morwag. "So this is all your work?"

For the first time, the Dhampir laughs, it is a broken, high-pitched sound ending in a snort. "I am just a vessel. A puppet master using just a fragment of the power of the Great One." He spreads his arms wide and shouts, "The Great One whose body we are walking through like mere insects! Though some insects are more annoying than others. Kill them so they can join you in service to me. They will be useful in my quest to return the Great One to life."

A slight push and my mana compresses, turning black. The upper part of the vessel, manifesting behind my back, grows two more arms and puts two around me in defense while using the others to attack the human lurker.

[Eclipse], powered by the black mana, expands into the area as I swing my hand and fling dozens of droplets of my own blood ahead of me. Some of them flying towards the Dhampir, others towards the human and demon lurkers. Each carries a hint of that gold and white light as I break apart [Empyrean Lance] to empower them further.

The human lurker avoids some, while the Dhampir ignores them entirely as they simply rain against his body. A mouth appears on his entirely black face, like a half moon made of blood, as he smiles. Two long, fang-like teeth make themselves known.

However, the demon gets most of them, staggering back, and Morwag uses the opportunity to throw the container. Watching it fly through the air, I hold the syringe I got from Doc, ready to stab it into my heart.

Everyone in the room turns their attention to the reinforced glass container. The Dhampir arrogantly watches it sail through the air toward him, his smile widening. "Why don't I show you how useless all of this is against someone like me, my precious?" he says.

He lets the glass case break against his body as all of the measures we built into it unwind. Morwag's arm is still there, sickly gray with black, green, and with a tracery of gray veins and missing pieces of flesh. The arm doesn't even smash against the Dhampir. It just splashes and breaks apart the moment it touches him, as if it barely held its shape. It is just pieces of wet, weak flesh and jellied bones.

It all washes over the Dhampir, and I realize where all of Morwag's binding energy has been going this whole time, as it binds the arm to the Dhampir and then does something else. Something much more exotic.

Morwag chuckles shortly, and I watch him standing there looking at the Dhampir like he can only see a fool.

Taking a deep breath, the Dhampir flicks the gore from his clothes. "Even after all those years, nothing feels better than putting the overconfident in their place. I am a vampire. One of the first sired by my master, you lowly trash! I am one who has fed on the blood of a god! Something like this-"

He doesn't finish the word as he throws up. Not a little bit. He projectile vomits for three seconds straight. A stream of dried blood, chunks of bone, and shriveled flesh, and a foul pus-like liquid.

After finishing, he coughs and stands tall. "This is-"

Once again, he projectile vomits, heaving in between and then projectile vomiting again. His body sways, and he almost falls, resting his arm against the bone table, confused. "Just what-"

Another round of vomiting follows, and even the lurkers in the room with us begin to sway. The human and the demon don't vomit, but they falter as pieces of their bodies begin to break away.

Morwag chuckles again. Standing there tall, the demon then begins to laugh, with the laughter gradually growing in intensity. He laughs louder the more the Dhampir vomits and the more he begins to break apart.

The Dhampir even tries to use a skill but fails to activate it. One of his black arms falls off, and a hole big enough to see through appears in his chest.

The human and demon lurkers make a sound for the first time and groan in pain, breaking apart even faster.

"It can't-" The Dhampir doesn't get to finish his last words as he breaks apart completely and without ceremony.

[You have defeated Dhampir Lord - lvl 549]

[Lvl 423 > Lvl 424]

[Lvl 424 > Lvl 425]

[Lvl 425 > Lvl 426]

[Lvl 426 > Lvl 427]

"Morwag, what have you done?" I ask, turning to my right.

That demon guildmate of mine smiles and lifts one of his fingers, telling me to wait.

And then, it all begins.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 466]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 471]

Two of the lurkers in the room with us break fully and die. But it doesn't stop there.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 333]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 341]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 278]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 401]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 355]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 189]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 174]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 199]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 298]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 363]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 358]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 402]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 233]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 211]

...

[Lvl 427 > Lvl 428]

And it continues.

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 233]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 431]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 211]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 201]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 111]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 15]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 19]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 99]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 134]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 75]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 44]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 211]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 233]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 236]

...

[Lvl 428 > Lvl 429]

The dingpocalypse.

Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, and even more notifications filling my view. Lurkers are dying all over the 1st floor in amounts that feel like... all of them?

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 265]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 291]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 21]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 12]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 66]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 420]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 69]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 67]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 134]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 399]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 351]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 213]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 285]

[You have defeated Reanimated Corpse - lvl 200]

...

[Lvl 429 > Lvl 430]

...

...

...

[Lvl 432 > Lvl 433]

...

...

...

[Lvl 436 > Lvl 437]

...

...

...

It all stops only minutes later as the breaks between notifications rise to over a second long, stretching to seconds, and then a moment of silence stretching on for over a minute before the last one dings.

And I can only stare at my level.

Lvl 440

When I look at Morwag with a question in my eyes, he seems to get what I want to see.

As he turns to me, there's a wildness in his eyes, like he wants to challenge me right here. But Morwag despises people who lack control, along with anyone he considers to be stupid. He pulls that inborn aggression under control, judging that now is not the time, and allows me to see the text over his head.

[??? - lvl 456]

Chapter 834 - Negotiations

Standing there with the syringe in my hand, I feel my fingertips tremble. Even after all this fighting, I don't feel satisfied at all, and the final boss disappointingly just projectile vomited himself to death.

But, isn't there an opponent I could still face?

I squeeze the syringe and continue to stare at the text over Morwag's head. His level falls into the level spread Champions usually have, though he's obviously not quite a Champion yet. He also lacks a chosen or applied Primary class upgrade, he just hasn't had time for that.

Yet, I can't help myself as I ask, "What now, Mormor?"

The demon looks at me like he knows exactly why I'm using that nickname, but he doesn't let me provoke him, as he gives me that demonic smile of his.

He doesn't make it easier at all. "Why would I be so stupid as to challenge you now, before I've even gotten my primary class upgrade? If you want to fight, go on, challenge me. I'll entertain you then."

It is clear he wants me to attack first if I want a fight, to show that I am the one who lacks control between the two of us. Then, even if he loses, he can look down at me somewhere in the back of his mind. Otherwise, he'll gather all he can and challenge me when he is more confident in his ability to win.

It's annoying. I can control myself, and pushing the impulse away is easy for me. I've met too many powerful people I wanted to challenge and didn't, solely to avoid ending up as a pancake against the wall, to not have my urges under control. But I don't want to, I really don't want to do it now. I also don't care too much about what he or anyone else thinks of me in the back of their minds.

Yet, just like Morwag, I also have a few things I can improve upon before the fight. Trait strengthenings, passives, and a few more.

"Tsk," I just let out and turn around, putting the syringe away as a new series of thoughts go through my mind. "So, how many arcane items do you think we'll be able to loot from all these thousands of dead lurkers?"

I only have time to grab Calvorn and start looking around for things to loot before I appear in another place. There's no sense of being moved and no disruption in the flow of mana around me. I am just somewhere else.

This display of teleporting someone like me is something I still consider terrifying, as there is no defense against it, not as I am now.

We appear in Ruby's usual never ending space with a black floor and a myriad of bright stars and nebulae filling the sky. Even her trusty old wooden table is there, and she sits behind it.

Next to that table, a huge black ant stands with Zant beside him, holding onto one of the chitin legs like a child would hold a parent's arm.

I almost squeak like a girl at that adorable sight, but then I notice another person behind them. The Ruler of Envy is here as well for some reason, sitting in a huge white marble throne that seems to have been broken apart and pieced back together with what looks like molten gold. He is smiling shamelessly and even waves to me.

Unlike my usual meetings with them, this time, Morwag, Weslin, Savant, and Brich are here as well.

I confirm that the rest seem safe, though they appear to have been beaten down a bit. This is especially true for Brich, who's currently missing a leg and an arm as he weakly rests against Weslin, who is terribly burned in places, but gesturing to me that he's okay. Taking a few steps, I hand Calvorn back to Brich, who looks at me with a bit of confusion and then at the weapon. He then nods once. Savant looks to be in better condition, but I can barely sense any mana from him, though it's hard to say how much he still has stored in his Sword of Aeons.

"This," I begin, speaking first towards Diligence, "is too much. Are you planning to take all these items from us..."

"Silence," the Ruler of Diligence says, and no more words come out of me. My hand shoots up quickly, and I touch my lips, which are gone, along with my mouth. Instead, I find only smooth skin.

I look at Ruby, whom I'd hoped to rely on, so I could be a bit more annoying, max out my rewards, as I've come to expect Diligence to try to reduce them.

But Ruby just smiles widely. "You can't be too angry at him," she says gently towards Diligence. "This time, it was mostly that demon. And even then, what happened was within the stated rules and allowed probabilities. And he's mine, so don't do that."

As she says this, my mouth returns to normal. But I, being the smart boy I am, decide to stay quiet for now.

The huge ant's compound eyes look like he is staring at everyone at once as he says with a slightly annoyed tone, "I do realize that. Yet, why is it that when something like this happens, he always has his fingers in it?"

"Just a coincidence," Ruby waves it off and turns to the rest of us. "But it is rude, isn't it? You have to excuse him, though. DiliDili isn't good at dealing with people. I am the Ruler of Greed, if you haven't figured that out yet, and this oversized, antagonistic home pest is the Ruler of Diligence. The little bitch sitting on his pathetic throne is Envy."

It is fun to watch the reactions of the others. Though it is a bit surprising, it makes me realize that meeting a being most of the system considers akin to gods isn't the least bit normal.

I can't wait to meet Sophie's disciple, Deva, and tell her about all the mythical beings I've met since last time.

Even after hearing what Ruby said, Envy continues to smirk from his throne. "My heart aches in pain, but I forgive you. I do realize it's hard to ever find yourself in a decent mood when you spend every morning crying about the death of your master and promising to avenge her. Oh, I apologize! Maybe I shouldn't talk about that long dead fossil in front of you! It might bring back sad memories."

Ruby gives him a nice smile. "Wow, you seem to be in a really bad mood. Is your ass still sore after you recorded yourself getting it kicked in by a mere crippled imitation that was holding back the whole time? Oh, I apologize! You were just too fucking braindead to use the main defensive array properly and let said mere imitation take control of it."

"Hohoh," Envy smiles and licks his lips. "Maybe I really struck a nerve, you seem... distressed. And a fun fight that was, wasn't it? I would like to see you fight it yourself. At this point, aren't you multiple times older than she ever was? So why are you still so weak? Aren't disciples meant to surpass their masters? Oh, I apologize! That ancient fossil seemed to have been a terrible master. What would she have taught you other than how to search for homeless bums to try to kill Him? Are you still scared after you challenged Him, got your ass kicked, only for Him, for whatever reason, to leave you alive?"

"Hahaha," Ruby laughs as well, her face seeming even gentler. "I think I know why you're in such a bad mood. You must be nervous because of the other Masters of Envy. Even as a Ruler, your abilities seem fairly pathetic. I think any of them could probably kill you at any moment. There might even be a few Adepts capable of that, judging by the way you handled the array! It must be tough for you. But hey, maybe you'll be kind enough to record your death for all of us to watch forevermore!"

Before either of them can say anything more, it's Diligence who taps the tip of his chitin leg on the floor, letting out a clear ringing noise. "The Ruler of Envy is allowed to be present, as is the Ruler of Kindness and the Ruler of Wrath if they should wish it, but I must ask you to maintain at least some semblance of decorum. The same goes for you, Greed."

Envy is still smiling, while Ruby removes the gentleness from her smile and lazily turns back to us, gesturing for Diligence to take over the conversation.

And the huge ant does just that, " The lurkers of the first floor are each set by us to stop reviving after a thousand years to prevent overpopulation. Such a timeline allows for a gradual exchange, always keeping somewhat similar numbers of lurkers on the floor. But currently, all of them are dead. Also, currently, all of their items are spread all over the first floor," he says.

He looks as if he is challenging me to say something, but I stay quiet, and no one else says anything. Weslin, Savant, and Brich still seem a bit amazed by the sight of the beings in front of them, while Morwag just seems to be thinking about how he would go about fighting them.

Diligence continues, "Such a number of items flooding the market would ruin not only the first floor's economy but eventually the economies of the other floors. This is especially true with so many of them currently lying around for anyone to simply pick up off the ground. The fact that there will be no lurkers at all for an entire year also ruins the normal settings of this floor, all the possibilities for training or item gain. Of course, all of this is still within the purview of what's allowed, and no one can blame you for taking the opportunity, as much as it might be annoying."

These last words sound like he's saying them more to himself as he takes a short pause. "The Rulers currently in charge of this cycle will work on speeding up the lurker reanimation process, even if it means interfering with the body."

"Are you sure?" Ruby asks him. "Messing with it doesn't sound like a good idea."

"I've already made the calculations, this much interference should be fine," Diligence answers her.

At that, I finally cough, turning their attention to me. "I think we have a right to know," I say

"Do you?" Diligence seems about to take a step toward me, but stops only after glancing down at Zant, who stands there with the kind of perfect manners only he can manage. "At least acknowledge it's just to satisfy your curiosity and a desire for information you could abuse," the ant says.

"Aren't you a crafter or something? You should understand curiosity," I shrug.

Weslin, standing by my side, whispers, "Maybe we shouldn't annoy someone who could very easily destroy your entire planet."

In reaction to that, Ruby just snorts. "You would need to do something much worse for him to do that. And hey, why shouldn't they know a little? We can consider it a small addition to their rewards."

"Do whatever you want, but stay within the allotted information limit," Diligence answers.

"Sure, sure," Ruby waves her hand. "What lies at the center of the first floor of Beyond is the body of a god. There are a few more, spread through certain dungeon floors in locations I won't tell you about. These bodies were used long ago as a base to create the First Dungeon, maintain its structure, and other things I won't bore your tiny brains with. You wouldn't understand anyway. We Rulers later went on to use some of the bodies to help with the creation of Beyond, so you can thank us for that. Dead people reanimating on the first floor is just the tiniest side effect caused by the mere presence of that body, even with all the seals we've set in place. That seriously dumb Dhampir was getting dumber and dumber as he kept trying to drink that body's blood, and after all these reanimations. He even tried using the tiniest part of that tiniest of side effects to control the lurkers. His talk about reviving the great one was honestly as sad as it was amusing."

She pauses, letting us take it all in. When she continues with a smile, she is looking at me. "Well, I guess he will continue trying to do that all over again once we reanimate him to return the floor to its previous state. Hey, maybe you can kill him again..."

Ruby doesn't get to finish as Diligence hits the floor with his chitin leg, and she just pauses.

"Anyway," she says, "where was I? Oh yes, the bodies of certain gods whose names I won't tell you because Diligence would get angry. They remain in their old forms because they are useful in that state, even though most of the other gods had their beings shattered into fragments..."

"This information will be deducted from their rewards!" Diligence shouts as he interrupts her again.

"Oh, come on. The sword already knows about all that. His master was experimenting by taking this as inspiration!" Ruby defends herself.

"Yes, my master is very smart and powerful. He did all of that!" Calvorn shouts as well happily for the first time since we came here.

To all of that, Envy chuckles in the background, "I propose killing all of the present attendees to erase the information the Ruler of Greed has just shared with them beyond the allowed information limit."

"Rejected, there are no rules that require that," Diligence immediately reacts, "But yes, their rewards will be reduced by a small amount because of the information the Ruler of Greed has just shared. Do you agree?"

"I'm fine with that," Ruby just says lazily from her chair.

"We are not fine with that, right, boys?" I turn to the others, but they stay quiet, not even protesting. "Boys?"

Diligence takes that silence as an answer and continues to talk while ignoring me, "Let's get to the negotiations."

He taps his leg, and Lily appears by my side. She looks around wildly, clearly confused as the ant continues to speak. "Attendee Lily will be participating in the negotiations as well. And if her Handler, the other healers, and Kindness are not willing to step in, I will discuss with her the dangers she poses to others in Beyond by using her abilities in the manner she has."

Chapter 835 - This is what I have to deal with

"I want a five active skills combination token," I say, then gesture towards the black haired healer, "and for Lily as well."

"No," Diligence answers.

"So you acknowledge there is such a thing?"

"I do not."

“See, Lily? This is what I have to deal with.”

“Nat, is that creepy ant the Ruler of Diligence? Oh, and hello Zant, it’s nice to see you again so soon!”

“I greet you, Lady Lily.”

Diligence then goes on to say, “The rewards you receive will include the rewards for clearing the quest of the 1st floor of Beyond, to simplify things. Is there anything else you would like?”

Lily looks around, observing the area with wide eyes for a few seconds before moving toward the boys to heal each of them.

Meanwhile, I shake my head. “I know this cheap tactic. You’re trying to get me to ask because I might be unaware of the value of what we did, and lower your offer. But we killed that Dhampir guy who was ready to revive a god and probably ruin the entire First Dungeon, killing everyone in the process.”

“There is no way something like that would ever have happened because of him.”

“Morwag is...no, we are heroes, all of us. Just in our small group, and thanks to Lily’s terrifying joy in finding ever creepier ways to kill people, we defeated tens of millions of lurkers. I bet you even reduced our rewards somehow. There should also be millions of items that should be ours.”

“I find the way he talks very annoying,” Diligence says, turning to Ruby.

She just shrugs. “He’s always such a little shit when he’s in a good mood.” She then looks at me. “There weren’t tens of millions of lurkers. Why don’t you have one of your minds comb through the notifications and count them?”

“I tried. Every submind I attempted to assign the task to rejected it.”

Ruby blinks, and I calmly face her.

“Anyway,” she says, “you’ve received all the experience you deserved. If the Skreths you got the rot from still lived, they would’ve gotten a share of the experience as well, which would’ve made the 3rd floor even more fun.”

“I don’t think fun is the correct word in this situation,” Diligence disagrees. “As Greed said, a part of the experience should’ve been allocated to the Skreths, and another part should have even gone to the Dhampir, whose connection to the lurkers you exploited. With them dead, that experience was partially allocated to you, but some of it was reabsorbed by the system. So, you got all you could. As for the items, there is simply no way you would be able to collect all of them. Even now, before we pulled you here, some attendees have been lucky enough to loot some, and a few groups even got to live thanks to the lurkers stalking them suddenly dying.”

“Heroes,” Lily smiles and shoves my side, making Diligence turn to her, but her smile remains, causing him to shake his head.

“Lord Ruler, if I may,” Savant says from the side, “must the rewards we choose be heard by the others?”

The ant turns to him. “They do not.”

“In such a case, I have selected mine. If you open a separate communication channel with me, we can see if it’s possible.”

They do just as Savant asks, and after a short exchange, Diligence answers without even asking Ruby or Envy for their thoughts. “Your request is pushing things, but it is reasonable and still within acceptable limits, so I confirmed it. Now that you-”

“If I may.”

“Yes?”

“I would like to stay until you send everyone back. It’s possible I’ll pick up a useful piece of information or two,” Savant says.

Before he even realizes it, the throne Envy sits on empties. The lumoran stands next to Savant, laughing and putting his arm around his shoulders. "How shrewd. Why don't you try changing your subclass? I have a spot for a disciple or two."

"I apologize, but I have no intention of making any changes," Savant answers. "Also, please, I would prefer if you didn't touch me."

Envy just smiles widely and, in an exaggerated gesture, lifts his hands into the air. Turning around, he takes a long step, bumps into Weslin, who gives him a hard look, and then, with a twist, comes to a stop in front of me and Lily.

He is right in front of my face, staring into my eyes. "You have a look that reminds me of the imitation," he says.

"Do I?" I ask.

Envy nods, his smile widening. "But it's okay in your case, you are still so very weak. There is talent, and you have the correct mindset, something The Absolute would've appreciated more than anything, judging from her records. But..." He pauses. His head tilts as he looks into my eyes and even pokes the veins on the side of my neck. "There is nothing to envy as of yet."

A huge shadow falls on both of us, and Envy slowly turns around to face Diligence, who stands right behind him. A conversation I am not invited into is exchanged between the two of them, one that should probably be minutes long, yet is shared in a mere fraction of a second.

Lifting his arms into the air again, Envy moves toward the throne, kicks it, and then both he and the throne disappear, leaving only Ruby and the ant behind.

Diligence speaks as if nothing happened. "Attendee Savant proposed a reasonable take, and I agree that it would be reasonable to negotiate with everyone separately. And before you say anything, Attendee Gwyn: I won't be using this as an opportunity to scam your naive fellow attendees. Though some of them seem scared, I'll even try to involve their Handlers."

"Can I have Nathaniel negotiate in my place? I don't think my handler cares enough to help," Lily asks.

To that, Diligence agrees and begins talking privately with the others.

At one point, he speaks out loud, sounding almost insulted, that he won't be giving a piece of his body as a reward to Brich, who immediately starts crying. He is literally crying, as if an attempt at emotional manipulation like that could make the Ruler change his mind. Brich just tries everything he can, saying he will switch subclasses and, getting braver, asking to be Diligence's test subject. He asks to be turned into an ant and offers to test items for him.

All of these are rejected, and the conversation goes silent again, with even Calvorn seemingly joining in as Brich likely tries to get some rewards for the sword as well. He's a smart guy. I would do the same.

Once the negotiation ends, Diligence sends him away and turns to Weslin. This conversation is much shorter and, judging by Weslin's face, the half-demon is very happy with the reward, though he is making that face he uses when he's trying and failing to hide his emotions.

Savant then gets kicked out finally, ruining his plan to wait for free information.

Morwag is surely the one to get the highest reward, as he stole the most participation points, and by the looks of it, he's fairly satisfied with the reward as well. Though, given the sweat on his face, I have a suspicion that he's already chosen his Primary Class upgrade at some point during all of this, and the changes are applying to him even now.

What a lunatic, I think as I wipe sweat off my forehead and push away waves of weakness attacking me, and the feeling of blood burning in my veins.

When the most demon demon to ever demon is about to vanish, he just says to the confused Ruler of Diligence, "I still have not forgotten the battle you robbed me of."

The ant then looks down at Zant as if searching for help, but the tiny vyssari just shrugs, so the Ruler turns to me. "Now for the annoying part."

"Ruby, I feel deeply hurt. Can I require higher rewards as compensation?"

"I don't think so," she says.

"What do you want?" Diligence asks.

With the conversation mostly prepared in my mind, I dust off my clothes and take a small step forward.
"What just happened in the middle of the 1st floor... I will do it again."

Ruby chuckles but quickly stops because of something I can't perceive. Her eyes are still shining as she watches from behind the table.

"I will take Lily here, Savi, and in a few months, we will gather more of that Necrotic Rot and trap it in someone's, very likely, left arm. I will even ask the people from Group 4 to throw in some of their own stuff so they can get some easy level-ups. Before you say it won't work without Morwag, let's just say I'll ask Dennis for help. His [Connection] isn't that different, and hell, with the right amount of time, I might be able to straight up bully that Dhampir. So, why don't we skip the annoying part? Double our rewards. You can also send an addition to Savi, since he already left and would've been part of that."

"Diligence," Ruby says, bringing the ant's attention to her, "I don't think he's joking. And there is no rule you could use to stop him. If you decide to go against the rules, in this case, I will push against you." She smiles. "I think rather than messing with the body again, it'll be better to just increase his rewards."

Zant gently pets Diligence's chitin leg, and the huge ant lowers his head to gently tap the tiny guy's head with his antenna.

The huge ant starts talking, "I dislike very much the current situation I find myself in. I also find the growing urge to... strike your face, very fascinating. I am not an expert on human faces and the emotions they try to demonstrate, yet, for some reason, the face he currently has and the look in his eyes annoy me very much."

He pauses and snaps his mandibles a few times before continuing in a firm voice. "Doubling your rewards is impossible, as it would constitute rewarding you for something you haven't done and have only planned. A lot could change. Some of you could die, or next time you could fail, unlike you did in this attempt. Yet, I take the possibility of having to interfere with the body again as a threat, and with Greed backing you, I cannot coerce you to give up the idea. So, given no other reasonable choice, I will

increase the rewards, and I will require Greed to vow that she kills you and anyone trying to help you in the future, should you still try to enact this."

"No problem from my side," Ruby says way too easily. "I vow."

Diligence seems to be satisfied and nods. "As for the rewards, it won't be anything outrageous. You have already received your experience. So, as with the others before, I have to remind you that we negotiate rewards in place of items that you might have been able to acquire and which you were denied."

"Got it. Five active ski..."

"No."

"I want to unlock mid pristine passives and items."

"No. Low pristine is the limit of the tutorial, there's only even a small chance of getting a mid pristine item in Beyond."

"I want you to free Zant and give him to me."

"Wha... No."

"You hesitated. I almost got you. Just give..."

"I said no."

"As part of the twins' rewards for not connecting the rot to the Dhampir in the future, I want you to help them with their problem."

"Problem?" Diligence asks. "Let me check the records." He pauses, and a second later, he shakes his head. "I see how it is. In a way, they were quite lucky. Had it not been for their strong connection,

something like that would not have been possible. But what you are asking is very nearly impossible and will require much. The best way to solve this would be to let them work this out on their own, but that would require the level of an Absolute's personal power. Even then, they would never solve it fully, and they would in many ways forever remain a single being."

Ruby joins the conversation from next to him. "There are a few who could help. Out of them, the more reasonable and available ones are people like the Magi, Kindness, or the Elf."

"No other Rulers?" I ask.

"There are some, but what you have requested would require forcing the system to acknowledge a new addition after it was erased. It's just not that simple. In a way, the system makes things that break its rules more difficult for a Ruler to do, and it comes at a greater cost."

"Isn't Kindness also a Ruler?"

Diligence answers this time, sounding almost amused. "She is a most exceptional case, even among us Rulers. As part of their reward for the future misbehavior they now won't be getting involved in, I will ask Iant to become their handler and offer guidance."

"Your naming sense aside... thank you," I say, realizing once again that there is no simple solution and that it's just something we'll need to deal with later. Well, we will get there. "I also want five million shards for every member of Group 4 and twenty million for the twins."

"Not a chance. Half a million for each group member. And taking into consideration their ability and the fact that they're capable of using their skill in such a way, ten million to the twins, plus reasonable assistance from Iant, who will have access to my knowledge."

"400 thousand shards for Tess, and some sort of cool, useful eyepatch. 500 thousand for everyone else."

"Deal."

"Good."

"Agreed."

"Good," I repeat, making it seem like I'm still holding out while I stare down the huge pest. "Two low pristine passives, The Chronometric Formula of Planetary System Awakening, and twenty million shards for me."

"Just the formula alone has a value hundreds of times higher than anything you could have done in Beyond. I remind you that the reward only encompasses items, and I still consider it generous. I have taken into consideration that many of the strongest lurkers had already surrounded the place or were near your location, so you would have been able to gain quite a few before anyone else arrived. But do not overestimate things, as the value would be split between all of you. One low pristine passive and five million shards."

"Add two trait strengthening tokens of up to 3rd stage and, please, remove the low arcane Passive Skill Combination Token I have in status. It really annoys me seeing it there."

"Only one trait strengthening token, and up to 2nd stage only. And it is not as simple to remove something from your status as you might think. Taking away power granted by the system is anything but simple. However, I can make a workaround and make it possible for you to give up on it and sell it to the system shop."

"I want to sell it for a million shards."

A chitin leg strikes the floor. "One shard. If you persist, I will put in the effort to modify your rewards. Should you be offered an upper arcane passive or anything similar in the future, I will ensure it is replaced by one thousand low rare passive skill combination tokens. I will make them impossible to sell, such that they occupy your status permanently, each of them in their own line."

My eyes widen, and I look at the Ruler as if I might be seeing him for the first time. Then I slowly nod in acknowledgement. I can respect that.

"Deal," I say out loud.

His attention switches to Lily, who continues to smile happily as he asks in a much calmer tone, "A low pristine passive? I'm taking into consideration the fact that you were not present when the items were available to take, so this is mostly to stop you from doing this again in the future and to prevent the possibility of you adding in something even worse."

Lily looks at me. Seeing me shrug, she says, "I will take that, but please make sure Iant is really helpful to the twins."

"I keep my word," the ant says. "With the deal made, I will take my leave."

And as he says it, he is gone as if he were running away, along with Zant, leaving me, Lily, and Ruby behind. I still stare at where he stood, not believing that blatant favoritism and the way he offered a fair and decent reward to Lily, considering her participation, while I had to fight for mine.

"You know, I got flashbanged by the notifications when they came. I panicked and forgot how to turn them off, so I faceplanted into a building," Lily says, prodding me with the playful accusation.

"Poor building," I say, ignoring a playful punch from her that I have to defend against to preserve my dear life, while acting as if it's nothing. "What level are you?" I ask.

"I reached 405. I had hoped to get a few more achievements before my third trait, but I guess even this should count. I think I've already noticed some interesting options."

"Well, at least Diligence forgot about giving you a lesson or something."

"Oh, he didn't. The entire time he was talking, he was berating me. Though he was much nicer than my handler. He isn't as bad as you made him out to be, Nat." She smiles at me.

Lily doesn't get to say more after that before she disappears, leaving me to turn to Ruby, who is looking at me from behind her table.

"I don't like thieves," she says with a smile, "Oh, and congratulations. You're the 18th highest level attendee in the past thousand years. You can go finish your boys' trip, but after you're done, I have a thousand year quest for you, so make some time in your schedule."

Chapter 836 - Let's check out the surface!

POV Savant

A comfortable quiet settles over me once I return to the first floor of Beyond. I do not expect the Ruler of Diligence to break his word, but I still check my bag. As expected, within it lies a metal shard with an oval stone imbued inside it, covered in delicate inscriptions.

I close the bag and decide to use the item on the Sword of Aeons later. My goal remains the same, by the end of the tutorial, I want to restore the Sword of Aeons to at least mid-pristine rarity, and this stone will help with that.

The negotiations we took part in were terrifying, but they bore fruit and provided a wealth of information. I have gained knowledge on gods, fragments, and the identity of Nathaniel's handler, among a number of other things.

Seeing beings as powerful as the Rulers is also a reward in itself. Though they were heavily restricting themselves, getting used to such powerful presences carries its own advantages. After all, freezing mid-combat due to fear is a very real danger.

"Was he always like this?" Weslin asks, appearing at my side.

"Excuse me?"

"Nathaniel, I mean. You knew him before I met him. Did he always talk to the Rulers like they were some sort of back alley merchants?"

I observe him for a moment longer. He still seems a bit shaken, and when I check my own state, I notice similar tension in my own body.

“He might not seem like it, but he can be very calculating. He behaves the way he does because he either thinks he can do so without significant consequences or because he believes they have a preference for it. If you think about it, being a Ruler must mean almost everyone cowering in fear before you. Having someone so straightforward must be refreshing for at least some of them.” I say.

Weslin chuckles. “It’s easier to see than it is to actually behave that way. Well, having a ridiculous amount of mana must also mean he’s more accustomed to the sort of pressure they radiate.”

I nod in agreement. Then, I take a few steps and pick up the Leviathan Fish’s core from the ground, likely left there by the Ruler of Diligence. All of us are now standing outside the god’s corpse and have likely been placed far away from it. I don’t think this was truly meant to stop us, so much as serve as a hint and silent request to leave it alone. I don’t think it would be a bad idea to get on a Ruler’s good side, so I should do my best to prevent the others from returning there.

“Oh, look, Brichant,” Weslin says as Brich approaches, while Morwag sits on the ground to meditate. This time, I take notice of the movements of his binding energy. He’s still heavily drenched in sweat, and heat seems to seep out of his body, which occasionally twists and audibly cracks.

I notice his horns getting thicker and slightly longer, too. The only thing that comes to mind is a Primary Class upgrade, as I figured he already had his third trait before our expedition started. So, does the class upgrade influence the body? Is it his newly allocated stats? Or something else entirely?

Even without this, Morwag is an interesting case. He doesn't have a fifth trait, or even a fourth. According to the information I have, he wasn't even born with a demon heart, so his traits are limited to three, much like a human. It’s a disadvantage for him, and knowing demons, he was likely looked down upon. However, the binding primordial energy he possesses isn’t like anything I’ve seen in anyone else yet.

There is a lot I want to observe regarding him, but it wouldn't be efficient. Not with Weslin here, I can learn much more from someone like him. So, I turn back to him and his conversation with Brich.

“I swear, Isolde will eat me alive... or at least skin me alive! You know, like maybe a hint of Diligence’s presence clinging to my skin for her to detect or something,” Brich says as happily as only he can. “Do you really think he would rename me to Brichant if I became an ant?”

“For sure,” Weslin answers, then calls out toward the demon. “Morwag, do you still want to go to the surface?” His question surprises me, but he seems to have caught onto something I missed.

I listen for whatever answer Morwag might give.

Weslin appears to be correct, as the demon answers while remaining seated with his back to us. “I thought about it, Weslin, and I think I want to compare myself to Nyssa one more time with all that I’ve acquired now. Just a few days remain in my tutorial, and I also want to see how far I can push the thirteenth floor.”

At that moment, Nathaniel appears as well, but noting the demon’s speech, he stays quiet. As always, he brings that unnerving feeling that my own mana is about to betray me to serve him instead. My constant detection, which searches for enemies, breaks around him. Particles of my mana and the ambient mana swirl and stop within his reach, as if happy to obey him. His eyes, glowing with his trait, sweep over us, the area surrounding us, and then toward the location of the god’s body.

Morwag speaks again. “But there’s someone else I want to challenge much more now, and from whom I think I stand to gain much more.” He stands up and, taking a few heavy steps, stops in front of Nathaniel. He is much more muscular, wider, and taller. His eyes are the reddest I’ve ever seen in any demon.

Of course, the guy doesn’t flinch. He just stands there, watching the demon’s suffocating pressure with nothing but calm curiosity. He stays well within striking distance, despite his ridiculously fragile body.

“I’m not saying no, but how about we go to the surface for a day or two. We return to Duncan for the shards, I stop by the Doc, and then we find a good place to fight.” Nathaniel says.

“I agree. To the death,” Morwag declares.

“Honestly, I won’t kill you even if I win. But you won’t mind, right? After all, the winner is correct.”

“That is true,” the demon agrees.

“Well, then, why don’t we leave. It’s time to check out the surface.”

POV Nathaniel

I sadly look toward where the god’s body lies resting far in the distance. I really want to head straight there, but I know it would take longer than currently fits our schedule. Unfortunately, by rough estimation, reaching the body of the god would take over a week. That simply does not fit with Morwag’s deadline, so perhaps next time.

It is truly far away, but at the same time, there are storms, defensive arrays, zones with mana radiation, and many other dangerous areas to consider. My marks are also gone, not specifically erased by Diligence but rather crumbled, as if they could not exist within such a space.

It’s safe to say we only reached that place so easily because we were able to hitchhike on the lynthari lurker’s teleportation, and the experience is still fresh in my mind. I will have to experiment with using the environment to aid my long-range jumps. Something like that should increase range and drastically reduce cost, though it would require a more detailed mapping of the local wavelengths, ambient mana, and what I’ve begun to think of as mana rivers and currents.

We’re fairly close now, but it still takes some time to reach the portal and use it to head to the Entrance Floor. Once there, we enter one of the outposts to find a guide offering information on active teleports to the surface.

I let Weslin and Brich deal with that while I rest with my back against the wall, observing the many attendees appearing there. They’re fresh Beyonders, some of them barely escaping the surface alive. I still remember when I first arrived with my leg missing, and there are many here in a similar state.

One such human stumbles against the wall next to me, clutching a hole in his side. Tattoos appear on his skin, rushing toward the injury and closing the wound while he breathes heavily. His wild eyes then shift to look at me, but his expression freezes.

As I calmly watch him, his aggression vanishes. He opens his mouth to say something, but quickly closes it, gulping and slowly walking away.

In much the same way, I catch the attention of half a dozen more attendees, always making sure to look as impressive and mysterious as possible, and by the 6th one, I'm getting to be quite good at it as I look down at him.

My crown spins over my head, and with my domain skill, I drain some of the color from the area around my face to make my Preeminence Eyes seem even brighter, wearing the mysterious look of a guy staring at a man he's shared a gym with for years and talked to every day, yet can't for the life of him remember his name.

Honestly, we are attracting quite a bit of attention. With Morwag being taller than most thylarin, almost reaching the size of a velnar, he cuts quite a threatening image. I wonder which one of us scares the attendees more.

But once we have the information, we leave the outpost and head on our way through the tunnel system until we find a simple crack in the wall. It's pitch black and far from the usual pathways.

I don't seem to be the only one disappointed by its lack of grandeur as I step in front of it.

"Want to hold hands while we pass through? So we don't get separated," Brich offers, only to be rejected by the silence.

Every one of us switches to whatever combat-ready state we've been preparing, and then I take a step forward with all of them following right after.

The moment the teleportation activates, I know something is wrong. From deep within me, something burns through my very being. Notifications ring in alarm, and all my mana is gone in a blink, as even more of it is pulled straight out of my veins.

The world around me spins as I materialize and fall to my knees, my hands barely stopping my head from hitting the ground.

When I lift my head, I see a shoe right in front of me, playfully tapping the floor. And as I continue to look up, I hear a voice. "Damn, feral one, falling to my feet the moment you see me? How flattering."

I let out a groan, not just because of pain, and several other voices from behind me echo the pained sound in turn. The boys.

“Though I wasn’t expecting you to bring company. But the more the merrier!”

Another voice cuts her off. “Little kitten, why don't you continue with your mana shaping exercises instead of being a bother? And you, little pup, get control of yourself, or you will sink even lower in my esteem. Your handling of the transport is, quite frankly, pathetic.”

I open my mouth to say something, but instead, I vomit, barely missing her legs, but as she asked, I push myself to my feet after wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

What I thought was a mountain acting as a backdrop to Lissandra now moves. A lizard-like head on a long neck twists around. That movement alone disturbs the air and creates a breeze as the head moves behind Lissandra. Just one of the pale golden eyes on said head is many times bigger than Lissandra herself, and I notice pale gray scales with a hint of a purple tint.

The enormous wyvern lets out a long noise that shifts from the sound of cracking rocks to deep vibrations rattling my bones, ending in a longer call reminiscent of a whale. The result is a mix of sounds with an odd sort of rhythm to them, leading me to realize the monster is talking to us.

"I have no idea what it's saying," Myrra whispers to me when I look at her.

Unlike her, Lissandra listens to it. After the wyvern stops talking, Lissandra lifts her hand and waves in a dismissive gesture, causing the wyvern to display its enormous teeth and slightly open its maw before it turns away to rest as it was doing before.

I don't get a chance to observe any further before I realize Lissandra is creating a field around us, which doesn't let my senses through. It seems to be defending us against the pressure from the wyvern and possibly from this place itself. I don't look around any further before I glance towards the boys, who are crawling on the ground and groaning in a similar way to me moments before. Myrra, curious as always, reaches them with a few nimble steps and begins to playfully kick Savant with the tip of her shoe.

"I hope you didn't hurt the vyssari that was with us," I say, not noticing Zant anywhere here.

"I just stopped him when he tried to follow. I don't see a point in antagonizing a Ruler without reason, so I didn't kill his vessel."

For a few long seconds, I stare at her. Then a chuckle escapes me. "Yes, no reason to ant-agonize him," I repeat after her. I chuckle again and almost fall down as Myrra slams into me from behind, rubbing her face against my hair.

Still standing and feeling a bit better, I ignore the lynthari and take a deep breath. "So, what's the plan?"

Instead of answering, Lissandra asks, "Tell me, little pup. How much do you know about the nature of that 'black mana' of yours?" As she says it, Redacthaniel snaps into existence, and the words "black mana" are spoken in my own, but very monotone voice.

Thinking of where she might be going with this, and whether she just wants me to be a supply of black mana again, I reply, "Not that much, but it's not as if I put too much effort into it."

After my answer, she stands there staring at me. There is a hint of disbelief in her expression. "Little pup."

"Yes."

She lifts her hand slowly and points at a spot under one of the trees. "Go and sit over there. You have one hour. Then, I will ask you the same question again. If you are dumb enough to give me another useless answer, I vow by the power I hold: I will leave you on this floor."

The wyvern behind her shifts again, enormous and terrifying, and not just because of its size but because of the power it holds. It speaks again, a deep growling noise coming from deep within its throat that shifts in frequency and sounds like it spreads for dozens of miles.

Lissandra doesn't even turn toward it as she answers. "I do not care. I will find another way."

Myrra slides off me, and I turn around, walking past the very confused bunch of S ranks and Savi to sit on the ground under the tree.

With an hour of free time, I guess I could also finally use one of my low pristine passive tokens.

Chapter 837 - The boys remain undefeated

I catch Weslin looking at me, but being the good boy that I am, I keep quiet and sit in my corner under my tree just as Lady Sandra the Cockroach ordered. The only thing I might be missing are snacks, in the form of crayons, to nibble on. I wonder which color tastes the best.

Of course, Myrra won't leave me alone. She is already there, sitting behind me, and even though I don't have very long hair, she begins attempting to tie mine into a braid, or perhaps a set of them. Whatever it is she's doing.

It feels weirdly relaxing, almost like a sort of head massage as she tugs on my hair and weaves it together. So I just stay quiet and go over my status, checking over the passive that's become my new favorite to replace my subdermal combustion.

Sometimes I find myself wondering how many attendees actually get access to low pristine passives. I could have three of them if I wanted. It wasn't that long ago that I was happy to have just one, but now it feels common and almost like it isn't enough. I want more and greater rewards. There are attendees that would cry bloody tears if they heard my thoughts.

Screw them.

I risked my life too many times to get where I am. I deserve to enjoy the fruits of my labor before some sugar-hungry ants come in to steal a good part of it.

Shaking my head again to shake away the distractions, I then immediately get distracted as I glance at this place that can only be the twelfth floor of Beyond. A singular thought forms in my head.

Then I quickly go and check the exploration rankings.

Exploration Leaders

1. Nathaniel Gwyn (12th Floor)

2. Morwag (12th Floor)

3. Brichant (12th Floor)

I pause there and look towards Brich. Did that guy use his only chance to change his tutorial alias just to change it to this? Wait... I thought you could change your alias, but only to your real name.

WAIT, WAIT... Did... Is that what he asked Diligence to help him with when they were going over his rewards? Did he unlock some new "change-your-alias-to-whatever-silly-name-you-want" token?

What a... out of nowhere, I weirdly find myself thinking better of Brich. I can only find this sort of silly behaviour endearing. What a guy.

Then I continue to go through the rankings.

4. Weslin Kharn (12th Floor)

5. Savant (12th Floor)

6. Christoph (7th Floor)

7. Adrian (6th Floor)

8. Nyssa Volare (6th Floor)

9. Voss (5th Floor)

10. Orion (5th Floor)

...

And the rankings continue on through hundreds and thousands of more names, but I don't care about those.

The boys remain undefeated.

The dhampir threatening to erase all of Beyond was stopped thanks to us, and now we've made it to a deeper floor of Beyond than possibly some of the Rulers.

This is going to cause a lot of commotion in Beyond. Hell, I bet that once we're allowed to leave, we'll be visited by a certain black ant, provided he hasn't already tried to force his way in. But so far, that doesn't seem to be happening, so maybe Lissandra and the wyvern did something? The wyvern, whose revival ceremony the Rulers rushed so it could get back to fighting Liss to stop her from messing with Beyond's main defensive array, is now just lying there.

Many, many questions swirl in my head, and I am sure some of them will be answered if I do what Lissandra told me to do, but there'll be time for that later.

Myrra tugs on my hair harder, causing me to lose my balance and lean back a bit as I narrow my eyes at her.

"Sorry! You're just so delicate and weak!" she says, tapping my head before continuing to mess with my hair.

Meanwhile, I finally look at the four healing passives I've taken a liking to.

Blood-thermal Restoration (Low Pristine) - The user's blood becomes infused with a passive combustion frequency that purges infections and other negative effects. Upon injury, the blood at the site of a wound reacts by triggering a localized heat burst that forges replacement tissue and bone, ensuring the user's physical integrity is never compromised for more than a moment.

This one could be interesting, mainly because I have no idea how it might react with my Empyrean Ichor. I don't think it would change the ichor, I think my trait is probably at a higher tier than this sort of passive, even if that trait hasn't been strengthened much. Mana dense ichor could clash with thermal energy spread through my blood, or the two could somehow work together, which might allow me to try to improve my [Weave] by weaving mana with thermal energy.

Or, perhaps, my ichor would prevent that sort of healing from working. I have no illusions about the fact that I could easily fuck things up this way. The latest example of how much certain changes can cost is the body that Blackie now finds himself controlling: a demon champion with some sort of kinetic reflection trait. While alive, that demon was probably fighting constantly to control it, otherwise, just a simple bump would have killed any other demons around him.

Well... he was a demon, so maybe he didn't control it at all.

The second passive I like is:

Heat Resonance Restoration (Low Pristine) - When the user stands in an area of high heat or channels heat, resonance spreads through their body, triggering healing that scales with temperature. This resonance allows the user to heal from severe injuries so long as there is a thermal source nearby to jumpstart the heart and regenerate the body.

This one mostly seems like a simple upgrade to my current mid arcane passive. I noticed it before, but sometimes the descriptions make passives sound more similar than they are, just allowing you to pick up on certain changes or weaknesses. The main thing to look at while choosing a passive remains the rarity. It is honestly a bit like an item in a shop having a higher price tag. Though in this case, it doesn't just mean some corporation is better at marketing cheap crap to you at a high price.

At least, that is what I'm hoping. I also really like the part about "resonance". I could work with that.

The last sentence of the passive is also interesting, and it's making me wonder if it might be possible for me to be near death and unconscious while some random nearby volcano starts healing me, without requiring me to generate heat from my Ignition Heart.

Well, with my Constitution, maybe just a simple fireplace would be enough. That could be useful. At least if my hard to replace blood doesn't mess with it.

It also seems to reward pyromaniacs, but that's just the usual system nonsense for you.

The third option is:

Kinetic-Thermal Stitch (Low Pristine) - The user's body converts the friction of movement and the impact of incoming attacks into focused thermal combustions. Each hit taken creates a flash of intense heat that "welds" the user's body back together and heals it, making them harder to kill the more they're attacked.

This one is interesting. It likely means the passive would activate only under friction from incoming attacks, so does that mean there would be no more regeneration outside of combat?

As if. I've already thought of multiple ways to cheat it. The passive sounds weak since it only works based on friction and the impact of incoming attacks, but there are no specified types of attacks, meaning mana, heat, primordial energies, and everything else should be included. The fact that it's restricted to being so reactive also likely means the burst of healing is quite powerful.

I could attack myself, hoping it counts toward activating the passive, even if there is a chance it won't. After all, I have to ask, would the system classify my own actions as an attack? I think it might. And, hell, reading the description, even a quick burst of movement could activate it. It is an interesting one.

Lastly, we have this one.

Volcanic Endoskeleton Array (Low Pristine) - The user's internal temperature is raised to volcanic levels by using mana and primordial thermal energy. This extreme heat creates a sterile internal environment where no foreign particles can survive, while simultaneously maintaining the user's regenerative factors in a permanent state of overdrive.

Interesting, but it seems restrictive in a similar way to the kinetic reflection trait Blackie's been taking over, even if I could take that heat and use it. But I already have Ignition Heart for that. I just like it

because of the description talking about a permanent rise in regeneration. Maybe there is a chance of modifying one of my traits to do something similar.

Taking a break, I lean back and ask Myrra after looking into her golden eyes, "Why does Lissandra have a pet wyvern now? Didn't she kill it? How are they friends now?"

The lynthari nods. "She did! And she almost killed it again, but then the wyvern started talking, and they made some sort of deal. I don't know, she never bothers to explain things. She just said that together they somewhat spatially locked the 12th floor away from the other Beyond floors."

"Ehm, isn't that a big deal?"

"Is it? Feral one, I might have lost my ability to recognize common sense after watching what Master Lissandra does. I mean, she does things so easily that I think, 'Oh, maybe all Absolutes can do that!' And then the Ruler of Envy appears, I blink, and the Ruler of Envy is running away with his tail between his legs."

"I feel you," I say, watching as Lissandra takes a few steps, coming to a stop in front of Savant.

The Cockroach simply reaches out her hand and says, "The Sword."

Savant doesn't even try the well tested excuse of: "I don't have it anymore", or "my dog ate it." Instead, he simply pulls the Sword of Aeons out of his arm to hand it to her without a word.

For a few moments, Lissandra's face softens just a tiny bit. "I still remember the day I gifted the original to Tristan."

She moves her hands, taking the sword in a way that seems like she might break it, just snapping it like some old dried up branch, but she stops herself. Lissandra then tilts her hands, making it slide down and fall to the ground with a loud thump. The sword doesn't even bounce, it just lies there as if glued in place.

"Little pup, what should I do with it?" she asks uncharacteristically, still looking at the weapon.

“Savi’s not a bad guy,” I say simply.

Lissandra looks up at the aforementioned guy, and I’m sure she can read him and his abilities like an open book. She then waves her hand, and drifting from one of Savant’s bags, a metal shard with a mana stone in the middle flies out and thumps into her open hands, at which point she crushes it. A tiny bit of her mana flares, and the dust of the crushed metal shard rains down on the sword.

After that, she doesn’t look at it anymore, and Savi seems to be happy, but were I in his place, I would be careful. If the sword ends up being too good, the Rulers will shamelessly confiscate it.

My attention turns back to myself. I sell my passive and then, using the token, I choose Heat Resonance Restoration. Even if applying passives isn't as bad as applying traits, I close my eyes and do my best to ignore the pain that feels like thousands of ants digging through my body. Lily will be angry and likely invent an even better healing mark just to show off how pathetic my passive really is, but that’s a problem for future me to deal with.

Funnily, with my second strengthening of Empyrean Ichor soon to be fully applied, the boost I get to my healing lowers immediately. But it was still necessary, and I should test the passive later and see how well it does at replacing blood.

I allow myself to slide down to lie in the grass, but Myrra grabs me and adjusts me so my head ends up on her legs. I look up, slightly annoyed, and see her fangs peeking out in her smile. She tugs on my hair again and continues on with her very important work.

This time, I forgive her. She seems to be having fun, and I consider her a friend. I guess I'm just glad to see her alive.

Lifting my hand, I grab and push my mana out, forcing it into the shape of an orb between my fingers. As I have many times before, I slide into that deep state of [Focus] and use the skill, as well as my ability to channel and compress all that mana quickly and tightly. As always, there’s that feeling of resistance, that sticking point, and like so many times before, I stop there.

I like mana, and I have since the moment I made it move for the first time. I like it because of what it’s allowed me to do and how it changed my life. There probably haven’t been more than a few hours since

I gained this ability that I haven't been using mana, experimenting with it, or training it. But my ability to use black mana still remains a mystery, at least partially.

Why I can do something so few can is a question I'd thought about a lot in the early days. It's likely a combination of many factors: the fact that I got to attempt it within the healing aura of a Saint that had made me near-immortal, my [Focus], my mindset, my effort, my talent for channeling mana. My connection to Biscuit and by extension his primordial energy surely played a part. Yet, even with the bond to Biscuit gone, my ability remains.

I push a bit further, and a huge amount of mana channels through me and compresses, creating a tiny black orb.

The huge wyvern shifts again, raising its head high and looking down at me. The vertical pupil widens slightly in that pale golden eye as it focuses on the black orb. The one-winged wyvern then lets out a series of loud, deep sounds that stretch into long noises. Most of all, it sounds... sad. Like it's mourning.

And looking at that tiny black orb, I ask quietly, "And a fragment of what god are you?"

Chapter 838 - The deal is made

I still have some time until my time out expires, so I wave away the black orb that even now I can't understand. Though, isn't that a bit of a cocky thing to say? "Even now?" There have to be people who've been experimenting with the mysterious black mana for much longer than the few years I've spent in the system, yet I still say that. In the end, I still find it fascinating. Finally learning where it came from and discovering more about its true nature would be interesting, and I won't lie and say I'm not curious. But at the same time, I don't really care all that much.

Mostly, because none of that information will change what it means to me, even if it is some sort of weird fragment that hasn't materialized like most of them.

I pause and almost chuckle, finding myself suddenly curious about it out of nowhere.

I really am a fickle man. It's a bit like using a smartphone without giving much thought to how it works, and then one day you fall down a rabbit hole of videos, only to, hours later, find out that one of its main components is just a rock that humans have tricked into thinking?

“Feral one?”

“Yes, Myrra?”

“Can I try on your glasses?”

I pause and narrow my eyes, regretting the fact that I don't have a phone with me. Well, I had one, but it broke during the fights. A photo of a literal catgirl wearing round, thin silver-framed glasses would sell for a lot to certain audiences.

Still curious, I take the glasses off and hand them to Myrra, who puts them on and adjusts them a few times so they fit her better. Unsurprisingly, even if they are a bit small, they look good on her... and here we go. I watch the glasses change size until they fit her perfectly.

I'm sorry, Elian, I didn't know your game. Of course, you would add a mode that would make them adapt to a female lynthari if one were to wear them.

“Feral one, these are terrible. They reduce my senses so much! Is this some sort of training tool?” Even if she looks silly, she quickly picks up on the effect, and I nod.

“Something like that,” I say. I don't ask for them back, hoping the distraction will allow me to delve back into my thoughts while I check my status.

Lvl 440

Strength: 375

Dexterity: 356

Constitution: 100

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 2026 + 2026

Even though I'm still suffering from a severe case of mana deficiency, my mana stat is looking a bit better. One day, I might even find a cure.

At the very least, I think the effects my constitution and active skills have been having on my body is beginning to show more and more. It's never been easier for me to channel mana, nor has it ever been this easy to create black mana. I've also already managed to raise a few active skills to level 80. That's good, though of course I plan to go higher.

The upper 80s is the domain of the truly powerful. Then, at level 90, the Absolutes start. That means I should likely expect an even bigger slowdown at level 85.

Bored, I flick my finger and open that part of my status as well.

Active skills (8/10):

Focus - Lvl 80

Perception - Lvl 77

Redistribution - Lvl 80

Eclipse (Pride) - Lvl 71

Empyrean Lance - Lvl 56

Manifestation - Lvl 47

Weave - Lvl 18

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 81

With [Mana Manipulation] reaching level 80 the moment I started pulling on ambient mana on my own, I wonder what even higher levels of it will allow.

Lastly, there's my passive skills. With the Epic Adaptive Defense waiting to be replaced, I just need the system to note my performance and dig into that passive a bit more. Something tells me it won't be easy, but something also tells me it will be crazy good.

Passive skills (5/5):

Mana Wavelength Tyrant (Mid Arcane)

Mana Wave Predation (Unique Arcane)

Cognitive Hyperprocessing Vector (Low Pristine)

Adaptive Defense (Epic)

Heat Resonance Restoration (Low Pristine)

Things are looking pretty good. Of course, minus my crumbling body, but I bet many mana enjoyers like me have the same problem. It should be a fairly normal state, even if it does gradually become increasingly painful and cumbersome, even as it makes handling mana easier, and in the same vein, much more difficult.

Once again, I feel Myrra shove me. "Feral one, I'm bored. Introduce me to your friends."

"Nope, I'm scared. I'll be sitting here under this beautiful tree, enjoying this beautiful shade being cast by that beautiful giant wyvern, until the hour Lady Lissandra gave me passes."

"But why?"

"Because I want to ask her about my friend. I wanted to ask the Rulers, but I was warned their attention could bring a more unwanted sort of attention, and I believe that. So, I'll be asking her instead, and I'll just try my best not to ruin her mood before then."

"You know she doesn't care about that sort of thing. In her own way, she even seems to like you and sees you as her disciple." As she speaks, Myrra's voice grows a bit more serious and quiet, with a hint of gentleness to it.

"It's possible. I don't look into other people's heads, so I can't say for sure. But even if it only means getting a tiny bit of a better chance, why wouldn't I go along with it?" I reply to her.

"I guess," Myrra sighs. She gently places the glasses back on me, where they shrink once again to fit me perfectly. Before letting go, she caresses the side of my head and then stands up energetically. "Hey, you, lumoran guy! Show me that fancy sword on your back!"

For a bit, I watch her head toward Brichant, who's sitting on the ground next to Savant and Weslin. They still seem unsure what to do. When Weslin looks at me with a question, I just shrug. He shrugs back, and our conversation ends that way to our mutual satisfaction.

Meanwhile, Morwag isn't sitting at all. I don't think he's taken his eyes off Lissandra ever since we arrived, and he refuses to look away now as Brichant takes out Calvorn. The sword starts talking to Myrra in a polite voice, calling himself an evil-slaying sword, and asking her to free him from this lumoran lunatic.

Lissandra, of course, feels that gaze Morwag has been giving her, but she doesn't seem to be too bothered. Well, not until Morwag takes a step toward her. Only then, from her perch on a nearby boulder, does she lift her eyes and look at him.

With eyes wide open, the demon starts shaking. His skin becomes pale, and his throat and head move as if he's about to vomit. He stops. I can hear his ragged, deep breathing as he whimpers like a scared little animal. The surface of his eyes grows wet as if with tears, and his hands constantly twitch, closing and opening.

Then, he takes another step toward her and stops, squeezing his eyes shut. His heart thuds loudly, and his legs begin to tremble. Though he is much taller than she, he looks so small now.

Morwag opens his eyes again and takes another step, pulling his leg through the dirt as if he's unable to lift it any higher.

Another barely half-step.

And right after, he falls. As if someone flipped a switch, his body and mind give up, and he falls to the ground like a puppet with its threads cut.

"Not bad," Lissandra says quietly while looking at the demon before turning to me. "Do you need the rest of the hour, or shall we continue, little pup?"

"We can continue," I say, standing up. When I take my first step, I expect a push against me, but I find there is none, and I quickly cross the distance. "So-" I start, but I'm stopped.

"Glasses," Lissandra says.

I don't say it out loud, but I swear I have no idea what I'll do if she also puts them on.

I hand them to her. Holding them in her hand, she turns them around a few times as she observes them and then speaks.

"Biometric Tethering. Mana Signature Indexing. Geospatial Beacon. Acoustic Vibration Capture. Visual Feed Passthrough. Mana Binding Synchronization. Thought Pattern Recognition. Proximity Signature Logging. Environmental Mana Mapping. Biological Feedback Looping, and a dozen or more functions."

The light reflects on the glass of the lenses, and I gulp, as I begin to wonder if Elian might not be an app developer on Earth in his free time? But then, it's not like I didn't expect it, so I'm not even angry.

"All powered by ambient mana and your own," Lissandra completes.

"What a leech!" I shout out loud in anger.

Ignoring me, she takes out her black dagger, and I notice that it's been cracked. Still, she flicks it, and a pulse of mana surrounds the items she is holding. Her voice deepens as she speaks, this time addressing the glasses directly.

"Funnily enough, it wasn't that difficult to track the coordinates back to where all this information was being sent. Maybe it was even done on purpose. You are a brazen man, aren't you? Once I'm done here, I'll make sure to find you. And if you decide to run, you'd better do a thorough job of erasing your tracks."

Lissandra then molds the glasses as if they were made of play dough until they've been shaped into an otherwise indistinct orb. She looks at me. "Toys. Useless tools made for incompetent people. You will either learn to use your trait the proper way, or you don't deserve it and will never be able to reach its full potential."

The orb in her fingers continues to be compressed further and further, shrinking until all that's left is nothing more than a speck of dust that she flings away. "Show me your full status."

I do as I'm told, and she watches it for a while. She opens her mouth but then closes it, and instead of ordering me, she asks, "What is your plan?"

"Currently? To strengthen myEmpyrean Ichor to the third stage. I think it will forcefully evolve my Mana Physique and revert it to the 1st stage, after which I will use the 2nd stage token I got not long ago. Then there's another construct I've been working on that I mean to implement fairly soon."

"So, not slowing down?"

"Not at all. I'll be speeding up."

"Good. Use your 3rd stage strengthening token for your ichor now."

I don't tell her that the 2nd stage isn't even fully applied yet, she must know, so I just use the token. For a moment, I think she might be helping me or planning to aid me through it, but as soon as I confirm the use of the token, I remember who she is. Of course, it'll be all on me.

Some of my minds that were training even now snap back, reallocating resources to help me endure, but I already feel like all my veins are about to burst. The blood flow literally pulls on my mana, and my veins become visible through my skin. Even my eyes feel swollen, as if they were about to pop, to say nothing of the headache.

"Little pup, if you can't focus your concentration, go sit back under your tree," she says.

For a moment, I feel anger swell inside of me, but I push it away. I wait a second so the decision can be made by me rather than my feelings, even if the result is the same.

"I'll stay," I say, even as I fight to keep my balance.

"Good. We should have three days before the Rulers barge in here, though they don't seem to be in any hurry. That'll be more than enough time for what we have planned."

As she says this, the wyvern reacts, twisting its head to look at her and speaking in a loud, rumbling voice.

Lissandra answers back, speaking normally. "A week? Are you lazy or just dumb? Put some effort into your part. Three days is more than enough."

The wyvern opens its maw and lowers itself further. The head touches the top branches of the trees around us, breaking some of them as it moves dangerously close to Lissandra. Lightning crackles in that open maw, while beyond the field Lissandra's created, the earth shakes. Mountains in the distance crumble, and miles long lashes of white lightning flash through the area like whips made of plasma, cutting through everything, moving with the sound of snapping power lines. Even the ceiling shakes, as broken crystals rain down from above.

In an even deeper voice than before, the wyvern speaks, and my entire being shakes. I find myself having trouble even seeing or breathing.

Then, as fast as it came, it's all gone. It's the wyvern who finally breaks eye contact with Lissandra, letting out a few more sounds before turning away.

Unbothered, Lissandra turns back to me. "He can be a bit difficult to work with, but he's useful. And stubborn. He refuses to even speak in a way the system might translate, but he just called all of us system slaves and parasites."

Dusting non-existent dirt off her clothes, Lissandra speaks some more. "To explain the situation and why you are here: I used the mark I placed on you, a disciple communication token, and the dagger you made with your black mana, then waited for you to use a teleport to redirect it here. As expected, it was laughably easy. This floor is currently partially blocked from the other floors and the Beyond. I used the hole I made before they took control of that flawed array they're so proud of, and with the help of the wyvern, disconnected this floor. The next steps will require even more of your black mana."

"What do I get in exchange?" I ask.

"I'm confident we can make a fair trade, with you very likely getting much more out of it than you have to offer. Little pup, not to brag."

"You are bragging."

"-but there was a time when Absolutes came to Eladore with the sole purpose of begging me to teach them."

"They must have been pretty weak Absolutes."

"Indeed, though I still find them to be much better combatants than what I have seen so far of this era."

"You don't need a mana heart? You still seem to be lacking one, and now you have more people here than you expected. You even could have let Diligence's vessel pass and taken his."

She gestures at a smaller boulder nearby, and I move to sit there. For a bit, Lissandra looks toward Myrra, who grabs the unconscious Morwag and pulls him under the tree to flip him over. The catgirl then breaks a small branch, chars it with her fire, and begins to draw on his face.

"I already have a heart in mind," Lissandra says. "One I'm confident will fit me very well." Briefly, a small smile flickers in her eyes. "Once I'm out of the tutorial, I will head to the Labyrinth of Xyphos. I went there once, not long before Eladore fell. Because of the way that place functions, my Avatar is still in there, along with my new heart."

I want to ask her how confident she is in her ability to defeat said Avatar. Though it won't be as strong as prime Lissandra, it's still likely to be very powerful. But the question doesn't come out as I see her confident bearing, the look of someone in absolute control.

She can be a bit cool sometimes, I have to admit.

"Black mana is a fragment of a god, I suspect, though I'm still not fully sure of how it works," I say.

The silver haired woman nods. "I've known it was a fragment for a while." She waves the cracked black dagger. "But it was only after speaking to the wyvern that I learned a bit more. Telling you about it will be part of my payment for you supplying me with it."

"Can you manage thought acceleration or create a mind space for us, so that more time passes inside than out?" I ask her.

"It's almost insulting that you would ask if I can do something so basic."

"Good. I want to train with you in that accelerated space, and I want you to look into my severed connection with my bond. I want to know if you can track it, if he is safe, or if you could help him if he needs it. If nothing else, I want this more than the training or any information."

"That much is reasonable. Very well. I offer further information on your "black mana", I offer my help regarding your bond and what I think happened to him, and lastly, I offer my guidance and training. Within your mental space, I will be able to accelerate time enough to give you a year of training, as that's within the limits of what your mind should be capable of handling. But little pup, even if it is just

accelerated thoughts, it is still one year of my life. If you bore me, if you disappoint me, if I find you lacking, or if you complain, I can and will cut that time short at any moment."

"That sounds fair to me. I accept. In exchange, I will generate as much black mana as I can for you while giving it all my effort."

"The deal is made, then. So, for a start, let me tell you a story. A story about one of the weakest gods, one who was looked down upon by the others. God of the very thing the current system's mana is based upon, and the first to stumble upon something mysterious from another universe. An invader, a parasite, a spark at the heart of our universe that set ablaze the fire that is the System. And the natives of this universe that only united against it once it was already too late."

Chapter 839 - System War

"There are six races native to this universe, though there might be more drifting on the undiscovered edges. Our universe is incredibly vast, and yet we still know that it is finite. Among these six races, the most powerful were the gods. Only a handful of dragons were able to match their Godkings, though most dragons stood on the same level as the average god. Then, there were elves, mora, fae, and humans, just like you and me. Usually, they were much weaker than the others, left to their wit, effort, and willpower to find their place."

"That must have sucked for them."

"Certainly. Yet, it was all those other mighty races that failed to notice the invader and fell, while humans remained."

"And the winner is the one standing at the end."

"Yes. As for the gods, they were of many shapes and forms, born of concepts, energies, and collective thoughts. We simply no longer know how exactly they came to be. Like much of our history, even this was erased from the collective memories of the people by the system. Most remain ignorant, and the few who know dare not speak of it, lest they bring unwanted attention upon themselves."

I glance at the wyvern resting its head on the ground near Lissandra. He's also listening to her tell me the things he must have told her himself. Lissandra continues to talk, but while she repeats the information given to her, her own thoughts bleed into her retelling.

“Every god possessed their own Elysian Framework, though many also called it a Divine Framework. It was something tied to their very being and the universe itself, and it made them near immortal.”

She reaches to her belt and draws the cracked black mana dagger. “But there was one god who was not fully a god. They came to be without an Elysian Framework, they were born with a Divine Heart instead. A heart pumping blood, just as the lesser races did. Unlike other gods, they weren’t quite so powerful, though they possessed authority over an energy that was almost non-existent in our universe.”

Lissandra taps the black dagger, causing it to let out a clear ring. The wyvern in the background lets out a deep, rumbling noise that lifts the dust from the ground.

“That god found their place among humans. From them came descendants that were later known as the Emyreans. Some of them even possessed weaker Divine Hearts just like their god, and they remained a weak clan. But that was about to change.”

It seems like she is offering me a chance to speak, but I stay quiet and listen.

She ignores the loud rumble behind her as she says, “I was told that god made an honest mistake. That they were kind and beloved and had been tricked just like everyone else. But in my opinion, they were a failure, just like the other gods and races of this universe.”

Lissandra’s voice for a moment rumbles louder than the wyvern trying to interrupt her, as she declares, “They have deservedly lost everything.”

At that, the wyvern stops, its huge eye looking at her with powerful intent, a deep sound shaking the air.

Lissandra turns to face it. “I do not care for the source of my power nor that it comes from something unnatural to this universe. But call me a slave to the system one more time, and I will end you.”

An area outside of her protective field explodes. Hundreds of mountains shake and burst outward. Chunks of stone as big as entire cities and islands lift high into the air as far as I can see. A mile, ten, even more as I strengthen my sight.

A shockwave continues to explode outwards, and more and more of them shatter, lifting and floating high up under an immense force I cannot comprehend.

"I am slave to no one, and my life belongs to me alone," she declares to the gigantic wyvern facing her.

She's just a tiny, silver-haired human, many times smaller than the wyvern, many times smaller than its smallest fang. Yet, inside that tiny body, in that tiny brain, is a dangerous level of incredible talent and control.

The wyvern lets out a short rumble, and only then do the debris begin to float down, sending out clouds of dust that cover the entire area as it hits the ground.

Lissandra turns back to me as if nothing happened. "That god, on one of their journeys, came to the very centre of our universe, where they found the invader. At first, they didn't know what it was. Even later, as it began to spread and others took notice, they also failed to think much of it. After all, in something as big as the universe, new powers appear daily, and no one was aware of its true nature."

Her words halt for a few moments, as if a word brought back another memory, until she shakes her head. "The system at its core strengthens what already exists and evolves it. One of its main functions is to spread. It made a contract with that god, and parts of that contract still lie at the core of the system, even if it has been trying to remove them. That might be one of the only reasons it cannot simply take away what it has given. What I am telling you is everything the god shared with the dragons and wyverns after they realized the true nature of what they had found."

Moving even closer, the wyvern carefully touches the tip of its lip to the dagger Lissandra holds, and lets out a quiet noise.

She nods. "In the beginning, the black mana god served as protector and Champion of the system alongside their descendants, the Emyreans. By simplifying and adapting, the system copied the nature of black mana to create a version of its own. It modeled Mana Hearts after the god's own Divine Heart to awaken system mana. Together, the god and the Emyreans protected the system while it was at its weakest and as it began to spread."

"What did the black mana god get out of the deal?" I ask.

“Try using that brain of yours, little pup,” she challenges me, and stops talking to wait for my answer.

I give it a few seconds, looking at the black dagger and sensing the heart beating in my chest before saying, “Were the gods more powerful the more their concept and power was spread throughout the universe?”

Lissandra agrees in satisfaction. “They were, indeed. And though system mana was not exactly the same as black mana, the god grew far more powerful because of it. Perhaps it was part of their precautions, a small seed of distrust they held for the power they found. Maybe they wrote it into the contract so the system couldn’t just copy black mana, ensuring they would always retain control over it. Maybe the system never had enough data to fully monitor or restrict it, whereas the more powerful gods provided plenty of data for the system to work with.”

“And maybe it allows people to control black mana now so it can gather data in a controlled manner,” I note, “rather than placing eradication quests on them.”

“It could be, but at this point, black mana poses no threat to it, nor do the powers of gods, dragons, or primordial energies. The system has observed it all and adapted. Eons after the system first appeared, it began to seem a bit too threatening, and the universe finally took notice. The then Godking of black mana and the Emyreans ceased to be its protectors and became its enemies, but the system simply found new ones. One hundred Rulers came to be, and many humans joined their side. Entire galaxies fought to keep the power that the gods, dragons, and elves of old tried to take from them, while the mora joined the war and fought on both sides, and fae disappeared entirely.”

In surprise, I feel my eyes widen. I glance at the wyvern and then back to Lissandra.

“Of course, it wasn’t easy,” she continues. “The black mana Godking, with the help of other godkings, the Emyreans, the Emperor of Dragons, the Queen of Elves, and the Primordial Orders, led the attack, damaging the very structure of the system. They forced it to change and slowed the system’s spread, but it was already too late. The System War was lost. The name of the black mana Godking was erased from living memory. As for the black mana you now control? It is merely the remains of that god still present within the system, a shadow you can touch if you reach deep enough. It’s something I have tried to seize as well, though I seem incapable of reaching it. It seems to recognize me as a creation of the system.”

A small smile appears on her lips, as if she finds the fact amusing. “But that is all it is. Black mana is all that remains of that pitiful god. The Emyreans are nearly erased, and their power is greatly diminished.

Like all the others, they were and are just a part of the system. Powerful, yes, but not special. The system is gradually making Empyrean Skills more common, just as it did with Primordial Energies and the fragments of gods. You playing with black mana is like a child poking a corpse they found on a battlefield.”

She gestures for me to come closer, and I listen. She pushes me down onto a small stone and walks behind me. Her hand moves over my head, and my hair falls away, cut clean to reveal bare skin. She begins to draw inscriptions, drawing a bit of my blood to create a dense web that spreads into a fine, drawn crown and a series of lines across my scalp.

“Thought acceleration is usually the purview of mind mages, though if one is capable enough, they can somewhat mimic what they do,” Lissandra says.

Before I can think to ask a question, she taps the top of my head.

I feel myself forcefully pulled into my mind, finding myself in that never-ending white space. Suddenly, the pain, the strain of trait strengthening, and the pressure of my constructs are all gone.

My hand moves across my hairless skull. “Was shaving my head truly necessary?”

“Little pup, do not tell me you care so much for your appearance,” she says, changing before my eyes. Her body grows taller, her silver hair dims slightly, and wrinkles crease her face as her clothes transform into a black suit more suited for a man. “But perhaps I am being too harsh. Many of the young care for such things, and it is only later that they cease to matter.”

Lissandra now looks exactly like the version of her I met on the second floor.

After walking for a bit, she comes to a stop in front of me. “There are, and always will be, disadvantages to thought acceleration. Your status will not update, your muscle memory and mind will not be able to fully adapt to your training, and you will not ingrain these new instincts into your physical form. Lastly, you will never be able to sleep properly in this space. A few days isn’t a problem, but gradually your mind will grow tired, weak, and muddled, if it doesn’t outright break. That is why I warn you, after we are finished here, you should avoid such high level thought acceleration for at least several months. I have seen even the most talented people die after abusing this, and I have seen many gain nothing from their training, no matter how hard they tried.”

“That is my problem to manage, is it not?” I answer her. “You simply do what you think is best, and I’ll deal with the rest.”

“Very well. We will start by testing you against my released presence, the version of me you encountered on Eladore,” she says. “We will start with ten percent.”

The moment she finishes speaking, a monstrous amount of mana radiates from her. Though perhaps 'monstrous' is not the right word, it is not about the volume, but the sheer, crushing power of it. I try to resist, but it presses against me until I feel my body explode.

In the next blink, I am standing exactly where I was before. I’m healed, but the memory of the death is fresh in my mind.

“I will continue until you can handle at least fifty percent of it,” she speaks coolly. “Even if it takes months, we will not move on to anything else.”

Once again, I don’t have time to respond. In the presence of her uncontrolled power, my body explodes, and I find myself reappearing in the same spot.

All other thoughts vanish from my mind as I focus on this alone.

Let’s make this a matter of days, not weeks or months.

POV Vice Guild Master of Primordial Knights

The door to my office in the Megacity bangs open, but before I even have time to shout at the demon barging in, I notice who it is.

Taking a few calm steps on her bare feet, Nyssa Volare reaches my table. Wearing white shorts that barely reach her knees and a light blue tank top, she stands there. There are wounds covering her body, but her clothes remain perfect, and her eyes are sharp.

"Vice Guild Master, tell me where MorMor, Nathaniel, and Weslin are."

Every time I speak with her, it is impossible not to understand why everyone keeps referring to her as one of the most talented attendees Beyond has had in millennia. If it weren't for Christoph, she would be even more praised.

But even then, even though there's a hint of fear I still can't help but feel despite knowing her true personality, I can't help but complain. "The new Guild Master took them on an expedition," I say through my teeth.

"Where?"

The words come out of me as if I'd left them suppressed for too long. "They took another S rank and future S rank as well, and the five of them have been making a mess ever since! When I requested the name of the expedition for our files, do you know what the Guild Master told me? 'The Boys.' Would you believe that?!"

"I see, but-"

"Since then, I keep getting messages from the other guilds asking if they did something wrong! The kings are getting worried about so many S ranks in one place, and a few guilds have made defense pacts with each other and have been paying their A ranks extra to stay in Beyond while hiring mercenary guilds for defense! There is a new zone devoid of mana on the 3rd floor, and people say it's a location where Diligence himself manifested. On the second floor in the third city, Morwag destroyed the headquarters of a mid sized guild and got banned from the city for 100 years, and we had to pay an enormous fine! In the first city, there are rumors that Primordial Knights erased a branch of the Healing Guild, but the Champion King ruling it was so scared of our S ranks that he just let them go. All the fish from Lake City are gone! Such blatant overfishing is against the rules, and it's going to take decades for the lake to repopulate. Apparently, some guide named Duncan is now holding all the stock and saying that if anyone touches any of it, our Guild Master will declare guild war on them. Oh, and yes, all the lurkers from the 1st floor disappeared for a few minutes. ALL OF THEM. People were picking up arcane weapons from the ground. There was later a floor-wide message from Diligence, so there are new rumors that he lost control of his emotions again, just as he did with the Ancient Armory. And since then, we've lost sight of them, and they were apparently headed to the surface."

I take a few long breaths, feeling relieved, but that relief begins to fade as I look at Nyssa, who stands there patiently.

"I apologize," I say, standing to bow, and keeping my head in that position.

"It is okay, Vice Guild Master. I'm not Guild Master anymore, and I didn't return to retake the position." Her eyes narrow. "But I have seen the rankings, and I guess I'm still a demon after all."

She doesn't smile, but a cold, predatory focus settles over her face. "I will be testing myself against... The Boys."

Chapter 840 - A fleeting nuisance

Flashback Biscuit

Pantophagic energy eats the Weredeer's attack, eats a hole into the 10th floor, into the structure of the tutorial, and all the way out. But it isn't the only force doing so.

After all, this floor does belong to the Ruler of Lust, and she ensures the hole is wide enough, even putting one of her pets to work. Too excited and too worried that someone will take away this new addition to her menagerie, she leaves the Cerulean Parlor in a hurry, swinging her wings and teleporting to appear on the mark her pet placed.

Now she floats in open space, victoriously golden hair, eyes, and wings wide spread. One of her wyverns that helped with the process is there as well. Adult, yet it's not all that big, barely big enough for the Ruler if she wanted to ride it. Yet, underestimating it would be a grave mistake. The wyvern is pale gold in color with pale red eyes, keeping their target surrounded by a barrier as the Ruler of Lust arrives.

"Good job, my precious," Lust says lovingly, and the wyvern lets out a deep, happy noise, its red eyes constantly observing the area for danger as well as keeping track of the tear in space.

"And you, poor little thing," the Ruler whispers as she touches the barrier and watches the corgi pup within. "That must have hurt, didn't it?"

The corgi is missing one of its front paws, and its side has a hole in it with a patch of fur missing around it. With eyes closed, it keeps twitching and whimpering.

“So brave, but oh so imprudent. But don’t worry,” she whispers, “I will make sure to raise you right, just like my other babies.”

A deep growl warns her, and she quickly follows her wyvern’s gaze, tracking it towards a nearby star. There, even at this distance, a noticeable lash of fire is taking shape. From it, a myriad of small orange sparks are shooting forth, pouring into space, spreading further and refusing to be choked out by the cold space around them.

The feylith’s eyes widen in horror as she snaps an order to her wyvern. Just as they start to teleport, a growl spreads through the soundless space, forcing them both to halt and shattering their attempt at escape.

The victorious gold of her eyes, wings, and hair is replaced by ash gray as her eyes tick towards the sparks heading their way and then to the corgi puppy. Her mouth opens and closes a few times as she struggles to make a decision.

And then she finds it’s been made for her. One of the sparks reaches them and dies off, in its place floats a big gray bear with orange eyes.

The wyvern roars, lunging before Lust can so much as flinch.

With a casual swat, the bear deflects the strike, sending white lightning arcing into the distance. A spark flickers, and the bear is suddenly, unstopably, above the wyvern, slamming a massive paw down upon it with a force that shakes the beast’s entire being and stuns it. It then sinks its teeth into the wing to pin it, shearing through scales thought to be one of the toughest materials in the universe.

The orange eyes watch the Ruler of Lust while a barrage of attacks crash into the bear as the wyvern struggles to get out. White lightning, projectiles, arrays, mental attacks, spatial cuts. Yet nothing damages the bear as it simply continues to bite deeper and shake the wyvern, causing it to roar in pain while the bear watches on calmly.

“We’ll leave! Please!” the Ruler of Lust begs and halts all movement of her mana.

The wyvern stops moving, just hanging there sadly as the bear bites harder and bone cracks, causing it to roar in pain. Even then, no one dares to move.

Only then does the bear let go, and both wyvern and feylith disappear as quickly as possible.

The bear, licking its maw covered in wyvern blood, reaches the puppy sized corgi and shrinks to the size of a normal brown bear. It pokes the place where the corgi is missing a paw with its nose and sniffs a few times. Then it carefully licks the tiny animal.

In the end, it gently bites into the pup’s scruff and lifts it up, and then disappears as the nearby star flares up again.

POV Biscuit’s disciple

It’s on a planet set in one of the long forgotten parts of the universe, those on the edge of one of the biggest battlefields of the System War. It’s a battlefield where many gods died, and the currents of many energies continue to color the galaxies like polar lights where mana still doesn’t function quite as it should.

On one of these planets, a young pitch black wolf with golden eyes stands, overlooking the far stretching plains of one of the oldest planets in the universe. Waiting for his prey, he has his head lifted, parsing the scents the wind carries until he feels something unexpected, but familiar.

The wolf moves quickly, lowering into an incredibly fast sprint, with slight flashes of primordial energy devouring the space ahead of him to make his leaps that much longer.

Tracking the scent, he barges into the quiet, dark forest where many of the trees are older than planets, and halts when he notices a single orange spark. The wolf doesn’t hesitate and follows it over the next few minutes. And there, on the moss beneath a large oak like tree, he finds a tiny corgi pup, and the orange spark disappears.

“Master!” The wolf shouts and jumps closer, poking the tiny animal with his nose repeatedly, but quickly calming as he realizes the corgi has just been rendered unconscious.

After looking around, the wolf sits down and looks around once again, golden eyes narrowing as his primordial energy reaches towards the puppy.

He sighs. “Oh, master, I told you to be careful about how much you use.”

The wolf shrinks a little and pulls one of the enormous leaves from the tree to lay it out on the ground. Then, very carefully, he pushes his master onto the leaf with his nose, the corgi barely taking up half of the leaf.

“The Elders will be angry, and the Great Elder probably already noticed a change in our primordial energy, but it doesn't matter!” The black wolf begins to shrink further and further. It continues until he is of a size comparable to the corgi pup: a tiny wolf pup with fuzzy fur and a round belly.

“You are very young, master! But powerful. I always thought you could carry our will, be someone to use our energy with a strength none of us could match, and take revenge in our stead!”

The wolf pup grabs the stem of the leaf and begins to pull it, along with the corgi puppy on top.

He still talks, though his voice is muffled because of the stem in his mouth. “Ebwen if your primordial energy is gone now, you are still my master! But don't worry, we will help you get it back!”

POV Tess Hansen

Maybe I should declare for myself that the desert is pleasantly cool with a constant breeze. Would something like that even work with this mysterious skill of mine?

I stop to take a break, making sure to keep my mana signature hidden and my body tucked behind one of the nearby rocks. I'm confident that I've drunk more water already in my time on the 11th floor than I did in all my previous time in the tutorial combined, even if I drank not long ago, I take out my bottle and take a small sip, stopping myself from drinking more.

Peeking from behind the boulder, I look in the direction I've been heading in. My sight strengthens and expands, and my eyes zoom in several times over until I see that structure once again. It is 50 or so miles away. Ambient mana bounces off the structure and the walls, offering shielding that prevents me from seeing the mana signatures within.

I sweep the area again and then dash forward, turning myself into a burst of crackling lightning as I keep myself low, jumping from stone to stone. My speed gradually increases to the point where it's almost as fast as teleportation would've been.

When I stop, I'm still a dozen miles away, but I don't need to go any closer. I already see everyone outside as if they stood in front of me. As long as I'm just using my senses, they can't sense any of my probing, and I take full advantage of it.

What I'm looking at, we think, is part of the Aurate Consortium, also called The Corporation, outside of the tutorial.

Even here, during the time the record of this floor was made, they're one of the most powerful organizations around, and I'm waiting to see their Adjudicator to confirm my suspicions. We're on the day side of this tidally locked planet, so no matter how long I wait, no cool, refreshing night is coming to contest this heat, nor to hide my signature. Yet all I can do for now is wait and hide.

I calm my breathing too, slowing my heartbeat to just a few beats per minute, and my mana barely moves in the meantime. Even my body is perfectly still as the sand gathers around me. I don't blink or use my [Psychokinesis] as sand gets into my unblinking eye, while the other remains hidden behind an eyepatch. The entire time, I hold my breath.

And the Adjudicator finally comes. Out of the sky, a bright white plate-shaped flying object descends, stopping near the base. At the base of the object, a hole opens up, allowing multiple figures to drop down to the sand below. Almost all of them are wearing suits with tubes coming out of them, and some even have containers on their backs.

But one of them isn't wearing a suit. Instead, the Adjudicator is just as they were described to me by one of the talnium extraction teams I met.

The Adjudicator has a womanly figure, and unlike everyone else's pale colors, she wears a black jumpsuit that covers her entire body, even her head, even her eyes are hidden behind a darkly tinted glass visor. But that jumpsuit is now damaged from some fight she must have gotten herself into.

My heartbeat slows even further until it stops fully, and I forcefully keep myself from shaking. A small lizard runs across my skin as I stand there, while they make their way into the building that then leads to tunnels underground. Even then, I stay there for another ten minutes, not daring to move.

Only then do I allow my heart to beat once more, slowly and gradually. The process takes a few minutes before I finally return to normal. It's not as easy to use as Tacita's or Lyraen's fields, but I'm confident it's something that'll give me a better chance of hiding from someone with good senses like Nathaniel.

Once everything's back to normal, I explode into movement and turn myself back into lightning, moving back much faster than before and taking a roundabout way to ensure I'm not tracked.

But my run slows down as, in the hazy burning air of the desert, I spot the figure wearing the black jumpsuit standing on top of one of the dunes. I find my eyes being pulled to her face, confirming that she's looking straight at me.

The mask of the jumpsuit is half burned and torn, revealing fair skin, golden hair, and violet eyes. Even partially obscured, the face is unbelievably beautiful.

As quickly as I can, I lift my hand with the Ring of Preserved Status on it, and a thousand red and white lightning projectiles form behind my back. The crown over my head dissolves, and the sunny day grows darker as storm clouds block out the light.

Yet still I hold fast, keeping my hand in the air and ready to swing it down. I giggle when I feel my quickly beating heart and smile, moving a strand of hair from my face as we stand, facing each other. It's so scary.

The Adjudicator moves first, and half of my projectiles shoot ahead as she begins to weave in between them, breaking some and taking direct hits from others. They splash against her, merely damaging her jumpsuit while leaving her skin untouched.

If I had to compare her movements to anyone, it would be Lily. She's faster, but she doesn't move like Tacita. Her movements are just like our healer's, powered by an incredibly powerful body, straining and tearing muscles only to heal them so quickly that the wounds never show.

I shoot the other half of the projectiles and turn around to burst into a dash that turns to lightning as I head forward in a straight line, continuing to pick up speed. The storm clouds twist like a whirlpool, and from them, lightning crackles in a blink, reaching me and hitting the space over my head as my crown reforms.

Before I can even react, she's behind me, stabbing her hand into the lightning and forcing me to materialize as she pulls back.

My fist, covered with lightning, crashes into her face, but she doesn't even bother avoiding it. She takes the hit expressionlessly, and her hand moves, slamming an open palm against my chest as I drop reinforcement on the rest of my body and focus it all on the area as she strikes me again.

My heart stops beating, and my lightning cracks within me, restarting it as I take a deep breath and activate one of Lily's healing marks. Lightning surrounds me as I duck under one of her attacks, concentrating on moving faster and slamming my hand against her chest with as much force as I can manage, and breaking my hand.

The Adjudicator just shrugs it off and follows me as I attempt to flee. She grabs my leg to slam me against the ground and stomps on my chest as I defend again with all I have. Under that confusing attack, my heart stops beating again, and my lightning kickstarts it once more, this time slower.

I use another healing mark from Lily. With mana oscillating across my hand, I cut off the leg she's latched onto, turning into a streak of lightning, white and red, trailed by the further red of my blood.

From the ring, I pull another attack: a small cube that expands quickly, locking her in a cage made of lightning. My crown disappears again, pulling the clouds from the sky just as she pushes through, with all of it failing to damage or stun her in the least, just barely slowing her as she does.

I stop, and my rapid heartbeat calms down as I watch her. There is just a tiny bit of mana in her body, I can tell, as my eyes finally pierce through. She has no heart, and there's a small box in the middle of her

chest instead, a mana battery to power just the tiniest bit of the skill she's using. Something that's currently receiving communication from the base.

And that's all. She's barely using that mana, the rest is the simple result of the raw power contained within that body. The strength of those muscles and the insane regeneration.

This time, I fly high into the air, and two more healing marks restore my leg as I look down at her. And of course, she jumps up. She then leaps off the air itself towards me. Not with mana, but by stepping against the air itself so fast and powerfully that it solidifies beneath her.

As she heads higher and higher, I reach my hand towards the sky, towards the clouds, and then beyond them. Much further beyond them. Towards a javelin made of endurium, hanging in orbit of this planet. I have declared it to be mine, and so it is an extension of myself.

My lightning crackles and appears around it as I swing my hand down with all the power I can gather. And then I continue to add more. I pull on it with all my force, filling it with more lightning as it travels.

My floating golden hair swims around my head, blocking a portion of my view for a moment, and just as she is about to reach me, the sky screams. The dark clouds are pierced and disappear as a straight line is drawn down from the heavens, attempting to catch up to the javelin. It slams against her. At least, I think it does. Even I can't track it with my eyes, but the next moment, just before she is about to attack me, she is gone.

The entire sand dune under me explodes outward and then further. All of the sand rises up into the air as a wave, taking more and more dunes with it as a hole is dug into the base of the black rock underneath.

And looking down on it, I see movement.

So I pull another javelin, drawing a straight red and white line that slams into the same spot with the loud crackling of lightning, shredding the silence and sending a burst of sonic waves tearing outward.

Then a third, all of them slamming into a spot the size of a coin, but the movement still doesn't stop.

I watch her broken arm simply reform, and the hole in her chest close. I don't even see the process. One moment there is damage, and the next she is healed.

I allow my [Psychokinesis] to feed on my mana, and all that sand and red rock rise into the air to plug the hole in hopes of slowing her down, as I rush away.

Giving it a thought, I decide it's not enough, I can't leave a chance that she'll be able to track me to the others. I will deal with the consequences of using the token this way later.

Sset (Hell, group 4) -I'm going to Beyond.

I send the message in the Community before I use my token, appearing in the headquarters of the Silent Veil. Me leaving should clear the tracks and ensure that the natives forget they were ever tracking someone.

Looking around my clean and spartan room, I check the mirror, clean myself up, and change clothes before heading out. The headquarters isn't big, as this guild never has too many members, and everyone is A rank at least. But it is cozy, with a lot of red color and dark brown wood.

I'm early, but there are already a few members preparing for the expedition to the 5th floor in a few days, and I greet a few of them with a smile, even as I still feel my hand shaking and heart beating wildly, but I force myself to keep my expression calm.

I wonder how many of them know that the Adjudicator is one of Kindness's clones, likely grown from the very flesh The Corporation has access to. And I wonder how much goodwill and shards I can get for sharing this information.

Small Talk Only - Live Podcast

19 million concurrent viewers

"Rafael, so here we are again. Is this our fourth time speaking? It's been almost a month since the last time anyone saw you, and we were getting worried. I'm betting that today is the day when Septa will

finally let me pet her. So, how have you been enjoying your role as Christoph's Herald? You know that's what they're calling you?" Faye Hard asks, smiling at him while sitting very comfortably in her own chair.

Meanwhile, Channeler, also Rafael by his real name and now the man known as the Herald, sits in a similarly comfortable manner, though he is wearing a black shirt that's been left unbuttoned to show his collarbone, and his sleeves are rolled up. His golden hair is a bit longer than before, and he continues to smile in that nonchalant, confident manner.

"'Herald' has a nice ring to it, even if it's a bit dramatic. And as for Septa, I'm afraid she's a bit of a snob when it comes to new friends." He says while he looks at the spider currently standing on the table in the background of the cozy recording set.

As if listening up until now, one of the spider's legs, which reaches up to a human's knee, moves and flicks a vase off the table.

Faye doesn't even seem surprised and smiles charmingly. It doesn't even seem like she is aware of the viewers from the way she's acting, though she knows those numbers very well. After all, every word from the man sitting across from her represents another man, a man that some groups have even started to worship and whom many leaders, under pressure or fear, have begged for help.

Still, she doesn't rush the point she wants to talk about and tries to keep the conversation light. She controls herself by keeping a calming smile on her face, but at times her fear becomes noticeable, at least to the man sitting across from her.

At one point, they play a game where she reads the comments left under videos of individual tutorial attendees. At this point, there are many such videos, and some of the attendees have become quite famous, mostly the ones still in the tutorial, even if those who already returned as superhumans still scare and fascinate many.

"And now to the last set of comments on the young man with two differently colored eyes," Faye catches up, seeming a bit embarrassed, and her smile becomes a bit more honest as she says, "The first one reads 'i can fix him' and is followed by another comment that has a dog licking its lips emoting and text saying: 'I can make him worse.'"

"Faye, seriously, I refuse to answer this one," he says for the first time, and both of them laugh.

As that laugh slowly dies off, Faye takes a deep breath and says in a quieter voice, "I have to say, what Christoph has done surprised all of us, Rafael."

"Let's be honest, Faye. You don't have to be careful with me. That's why I'm here."

"It is scary, you know."

"I get that. I really do," Rafael nods, his smile turning gentle and reassuring.

"He killed a lot of people that day, Rafael. And-"

"May I?"

"Please."

Channeler sits a bit more upright, and his smile weakens. "I think a little bit of fear is reasonable. People should be afraid because what is happening to Earth is scary. We are currently caught up in a Pairing with not just one planet, but two. Just yesterday, I shared information with our Vice President that the gravitational pull of Earth will continue to get stronger. The moon will soon be pulled closer, and in the following months, it will continue until it breaks apart."

"And why did you speak with the Vice President and not the President, Rafael?"

"Because the President was part of the problem Christoph had to deal with. Along with several other leaders who weren't up for what's coming." He leans closer, holding her gaze with a calm intensity.

The number of viewers jumps up as people continue to join and watch, some out of fear, others out of curiosity.

In the past month, a lot has changed.

"Faye," Rafael continues in a smooth, confident voice, "Christoph is capable of things you haven't even seen yet. He's going to handle the moon so it doesn't just rain down on our cities. He's the one who's actually going to keep us safe as the Pairing progresses. I know it's a violent change, and that's hard to swallow, but..."

He stops and smiles while shaking his head. "Words do not matter. Neither of us is a politician promising one thing while doing another. We will let our actions speak for themselves. But Faye, I'm sure you are aware, what did the people that died have in common?"

"They were widely acknowledged as corrupt."

"Exactly. And look at the streets. Was anyone else targeted? Were any homes destroyed? Did we hit a single person who was just trying to live their own life?"

Faye shakes her head, and Rafael continues, "The world is better off without those people. They were parasites, leaders who hoarded resources while everyone else struggled, warmongers, people who didn't even see the rest of us as human, and-"

The conversation continues on a bit longer. Rafael answers a long string of questions, including many from an audience that refuses to hold back. Many ask what gives him the right to decide, some ask how confident they are that the people who died were truly bad, and others ask how anyone can be sure some of these people weren't killed simply because they stood in the way.

Rafael answers all of it, calmly and confidently in his own words, with an attitude that keeps him from seeming defeated, or like he's trying to justify his actions. He is there just to inform.

Once it's all over, he leaves the set and is driven to the airport, where he boards a private jet.

Just as the doors of the plane close, he freezes, seeing a well-kept man who seems to be in his early 40s sitting there with Septa already beside him. They stare at each other, and Channeler then sits down across from him as the plane begins its preparations for launch.

"I have to thank you, I personally wouldn't have been so patient," Christoph smiles, and Rafael answers.

"I hate it."

"You will get used to it," the man sitting opposite him says, looking out the window. "Most of these people will remain simple humans, and die in fifty or sixty, maybe even seventy years. Even if some of them get brave enough to level up a few times or if healers spread new medicines throughout the land, most of them will live just over a century or two."

The plane shakes, and the lights on the launchpad peek through, reflecting inside the cabin.

"It won't take long before everyone on the planet is replaced with people who were born after the Earth's awakening and grew up under our leadership. All this complaining, all these people talking about democracy, religion, countries... To us, it will be remembered as... a fleeting nuisance."

POV Warden of the Parallax Eyes, Kyralon

I take my eyes off what's currently happening on Earth and allow them to deactivate, cutting the power to my tower and the field around it that is strengthening my sight. As the hum continues to weaken without an active power source, I turn to watch Greed, who is sitting nearby, drinking one of the best alchemical wines I've been saving for a special occasion.

Greedy as she is, she almost never uses her own when something free is available for her to take.

"What happened?" I ask her, curious about her visit.

Ruby looks at me before taking another long sip and looks at the glass in her hand. "Pride just cleared the 14th floor of Beyond." She watches the liquid slosh. "And I have learned that the First Dungeon has 20 floors, so at least that's nice."

"But that isn't all?" I ask.

“It is not,” she shakes her head, throws away her glass, and takes long sips straight out of the bottle. “All of the Rulers just got a quest to kill the Ruler of Pride. The rewards are one of his active skills at its current level, awarded even if you already have 10 skills, and an upgrade token.”