

Tutorial 851

Chapter 851 - The Boys No More

Nyssa uses the distraction to walk behind one of the velnar who's stopped to stare in the direction of the ruckus. Her figure disappears entirely behind his body, and by the time the velnar takes a step back, she isn't there anymore.

My eyes widen, and I turn around just in time to reinforce my body and put my hand on Nyssa's forearm. She pushes against me, and I slide over the ground, only to stop with my back against the wall. Then the tip of her dagger stabs into my belly, and I fail to fully stop her.

I swing my dagger as well, but she hits my wrist with her other hand, causing me to drop it.

She keeps pushing her dagger with just one hand, as I grip her forearm and wrist with both of my hands, trying to stop her. But she continues to overpower me, pressing the dagger deeper and deeper.

No one pays us any attention, and most of the people either choose to run away from or to Morwag. I think it says a lot about Beyonders. Although I can't really sense Morwag's presence anymore.

I don't even try getting Nyssa to change her mind. She's just as crazy as all demons. But finally, I finish drawing an inscription on her forearm with my own blood, all under the pretense of holding it in place. And finally, Nyssa notices it as well.

She swiftly lets go of her dagger, and I let go of her hand, instantly teleporting away.

I reappear in the exact same spot I appeared when I first came here and leaned against the wall. That's when I had found the time to draw the inscription I just used as an anchor.

The inscription I drew on Nyssa should disrupt her mana to slow her down and hopefully detonate her arm in the process, though I wouldn't be surprised if it only made her stronger instead.

Using Wraith Dance, I move swiftly through the crowds, activating it a few times to reach different parts of the city. Only there do I decide to slow down to walk past the fountain that sprays geysers of water in

delicate shapes toward the sky. The sound of the water is weirdly calming, and a slight breeze pushes a few small droplets onto me, and they feel like they are cooling me down.

My body is currently hot and weak. I also put my hand against my wounded chest, though that does very little to stop the bleeding, instead, I just end up with a bloodied hand.

As the fountain changes its rhythm, the geysers fall down, preparing to shoot up again in a different pattern. And then there she is. Nyssa is standing on the other side of the fountain, with her arm, obviously, not missing, and her eyes locked onto me.

I groan, not only in pain, just as the fountain shoots up again and blocks my view of her.

I move, and at some point in the middle of my Wraith Dance, she smashes into me, canceling it out. Both of us stumble, crashing into what seems to be some sort of C rank Selari recruiting newbies.

“Hey, what the fuck are you-”

He doesn't get to finish as I throw Nyssa off balance and slam her back against the guy, sending him flying into a nearby shop.

Nyssa furrows her brows, and her open palm hits my chest, making my wound bleed more and hurt much, much worse, and I cough up some blood. Still, as I open my mouth, an orb of mana shoots out from it.

But she's still very fast, mostly avoiding it and leaving her with just a scratch on her cheek.

Both of us form our daggers again. I use Wraith Dance, and she hijacks it again, but with much more oomph this time. Our landing sends both of us off balance and against the chairs on a terrace, which opens up to a view of a smaller park and people eating nearby.

I'm about to charge her again, but some tiny person chooses that moment to tug on the leg of my pants. When I look down, I find Zant standing there, as adorable as ever.

He tugs on my pants again, his intent obvious, though I keep hold of my dagger and look up toward Nyssa, who continues to hold hers as well.

“Lady Nyssa, he’s lost already. Is that not enough?” Zant says.

“I haven't lost shit,” I say, but Zant ignores me.

“I believe you can find a better place to continue your duel, but for now, please tone it down. After all, this place is one of the many Entrance Floors where fresh Beyonders can get their bearings, and there are no Champions directly overseeing it.”

People around us start to watch with interest. Some put up defenses and just keep eating, maybe making bets. There are a few who seem to recognize Nyssa’s name or description, or perhaps just our power, and they quickly clear out of the area.

Looking at Nyssa standing there, I give it an 80% chance that she will attack me anyway.

That's why I'm surprised when she dissolves her dagger and dusts off her clothes. “I will step back this time because you asked. And because I don't want the Ruler of Diligence to get angry at me again.”

Only when she says that do I cancel out my dagger as well so as to avoid provoking her further, and I sit down on one of the nearby chairs in the corner with a nicer view toward the greenery of the park.

Without asking, I take some pillows from the nearby seating and stack them up to make a place for Zant to sit next to me.

And for some reason, Nyssa takes a few steps over to sit with us as well.

In silence, all of us wait for a minute until a waitress comes out with a big smile, though I sense her heartbeat beating in an extremely erratic manner. She has the bottom half of a spider, and as it turns out, a spider’s head as well.

"Welcome to the Green Lizard Inn, what might I offer you?" she asks, her voice not showing even a hint of her fear.

I'm almost impressed until Zant, next to me says, "I would like a beer-"

I don't let him finish and cover his mouth. "Forget about that," I say. "For the cute little guy here, some freshly pressed fruit juice, chilled and with a lot of sugar." I pause, thinking if Zant will like sugar the same as ants. Probably, yes.

Then I continue, "And some juice for me too, also cold. And something sweet, multiple desserts. Some towels and water as well, so I can clean my hands."

The waitress writes it down and looks at Nyssa, who just says, "Same as him."

After an energetic nod and another flashy smile, the waitress leaves, and the awkward silence ensues again.

I shake my head to keep myself from dozing off, and focus on keeping my healing passive activated. Then, I also start dealing with my constructs, because, of course, they're getting terribly scrambled as my Mana Physique begins its evolution into a Mana Vessel. Plus, there's the Ichor's strengthening, my wound, and some other things barely worth mentioning, like total mental exhaustion.

I don't even realize when, but Nyssa stands by me and taps my chest a few times, not caring about the blood she's getting on her hand, though she makes sure none gets on her clothes. It hurts, but after that, all the wounds she caused start to heal normally.

"Isn't that twisting the way weapons are meant to function?" I ask her.

And as she sits back, she simply explains, "If you truly control your weapon, you should be able to decide when you cause harm with it and when you do not."

And it's back to silence. That sentence from her makes me realize that she is just as delusional as anyone else in the tutorial. Everyone has their own point of view, and their skills react to it. Or maybe they just

get the skills that fit with their worldview. I, for example, would have a difficult time coming to the conviction that a weapon hurts only when I want it to. I mean, once you're hurt, you are hurt.

"Sir Gwyn," the quiet voice by my side brings my attention to him.

"Yes, Zant?"

"I asked Sir Morwag to leave and go back to the surface, but before he left, he told me to tell you that if you two meet again, he will fight you to the death."

"I see."

"I think he was serious."

"I think so too."

They bring us what we ordered, and I watch Nyssa take a sip of what looks to be strawberry juice. After washing her hands, she takes a fork and sets herself to devouring multiple plates of cake and other fancy sweets mirroring the ones in front of me. She even gets some on her nose and cheek.

Meanwhile, I wash my hands and dry them before moving the glass of juice closer to Zant. That glass is much smaller than mine, as if the people here are used to serving vyssari. There is also a similarly small bottle with more of the drink.

Zant takes a few long gulps and stops for a moment because of the cold drink before taking a few more.

"You know, I spoke with your sister once," Nyssa says out of nowhere, pausing her eating as she looks up at me.

"I know. During the reception in the Megacity, right?"

“Yes,” the albino demon nods, looking down at a cake and stabbing her fork into it. “I’ve never met anyone like her. Not before and not after.”

“Vic is just like that,” I confirm.

“Yes. Back then, she told me that I was allowed to fight you, to hurt you. But also that if I ever killed you, she would find me, kill everyone I held dear, make my life a joyless void, and only then would she kill me.”

“That sounds like her,” I confirm again.

Nyssa takes her fork and stabs the cake a few times before smiling. She cuts off a piece of the stabbed cake and continues to eat it.

And even while dealing with all the trouble with my body, I wonder if Victoria ever judged Nyssa to be a threat, and if that's why she warned her. I wonder if she's done the same with anyone else. Maybe Lyraen? The guy could be dangerous if he surprised me. And of course, my natural enemy, Tacita with her “gun”. Though, as of late, I think I’m proving myself to be my own worst enemy. Be it good or bad.

Carefully, I reach to the side and tap Zant’s tiny shoulders before ruffling his hair. His head is so small that I have a feeling I could probably hold its entirety in my palm. I could also probably squeeze it, shake him, or just hold him and swing him around. I could pull on his cheeks and hold his tiny, tiny hands. The little guy is supposed to be Champion level, apparently, but I care nothing for that.

I miss my ESC, I miss Biscuit. I think he’s safe, and it hasn't even been that long since he... left. But often I find myself looking for our bond, only to find it entirely gone.

There is that promise I got from that cockroach that she would try to check on him, and I trust her promise more than I would for any of the people I currently know. At least when it comes to having the actual power to do so.

After finishing her cake, Nyssa stands up. Without even offering to split the bill, she then walks away, saying something about having to go get her clothes and return to the 6th floor.

It slightly, a tiny bit, annoys me that she doesn't press to continue our duel to decide the winner. Almost as if she were already convinced of the result. But I also don't challenge her either, so that probably just confirms it for her.

Honestly, I don't care that much about it. Not even a bit. There's just too much I'm already dealing with.

"Is Diligence really that angry?" I ask Zant when we are left alone.

"He is not so simple to bring to anger. He just dislikes when people break the rules and behave irrationally," Zant pauses. "I think that might be why he has a hard time understanding demons."

"Well, being as old as he is, he probably understands, he just dislikes the way they behave most of the time. Though, it is nice to hear he is not angry at me. After all, I did nothing wrong. I'm just a victim of my environment and the people surrounding me, correct?"

"Perhaps, Sir Gwyn."

"Little rascal," I ruffle his hair again as I say so. "Well, what now. Morwag said he's going to try his best to kill me, and when he declares something like that, he isn't joking. I think he's been pushed a bit too much as of late and decided to let loose. I could probably return, but there is a chance I'd have to kill him, and I'm not sure I'm in a state where I could fully control the fight."

"It would be sad if Sir Morwag died."

"Right? I already said my goodbyes to Weslin, and he and Morwag will be leaving the tutorial soon. I will, unfortunately, have plenty of opportunities to see Savant, and no one cares about that kleptomaniac Brich," I sigh. "Well, once again, it is a girl who broke apart the boys' group."

"Perhaps."

I ruffle his hair again and begin to think he might be doing it on purpose. But none of his body language or expressions lean toward that. As always, he looks like he swallowed a metal rod and just finished a lesson on behaving like a little gentleman.

"I have to go." He says.

"Understood. I will see you later, Zant."

"Likewise, Sir Gwyn."

Chapter 852 - I've got your back

I watch as Zant jumps off the stacked pillows and also leaves without offering to split the bill. And this sort of exact behavior is the reason why I will always try to get the best possible stuff during negotiations with that huge household pest.

When the waitress comes, I pay for everything with my hard earned shards. Then I start talking out loud to seemingly myself, not caring about the looks I get from the attendees around me.

"Ruby, if you're listening, I would like to invite myself to your fancy I-don't-know-what-it's-called space."

I almost don't finish the sentence before I appear there, sitting on a wooden chair opposite of her beyond her trusty old table.

"Do Rulers always have so much free time?" I ask.

"Perhaps."

"I won't ruffle your hair, you are nowhere as cute as Zant."

"Tsk. What do you want?"

"You've trained under Lissandra, haven't you? I want to ask why I feel so weird. My body is close to fully healed, if you exclude the evolutions and such, but I've dealt with worse, and I'll deal with them too. But my mind. It is like I have to concentrate just to keep being me. If I stop, I feel myself losing all the emotions, and... I don't know, it's all weird."

"Well, do you know how long you spent in her thought acceleration?"

"Probably a bit over a year, right?"

Ruby chuckles and taps on the table where I put my hand. She touches the back of it, examining me. "By my estimations, five hundred ninety-nine days."

"Oh..."

"Nathaniel."

"Yes, Ruby?"

"I know you a little bit, so I'm confident I'm on the right track, but are you annoyed about not having lasted one more day?"

"Perhaps."

She flings my hand away, resting back in her chair. "Simply said, you're mentally exhausted and tired. Don't try to find anything else in that. You possess a concentration type skill, so you have a great predisposition to maintaining a powerful mind. That's why you never experienced it before. But this time, you've pushed yourself a bit too much, and of course, that imitation allowed it. You know she wouldn't mind pushing you to the point of breaking, right?"

"I mean... yeah. I agreed to it, and it was my decision. Why would I blame her for that?"

"... Of course you would think like that. So, my recommendation is for you to take it easy for a few days at least. I mean, you can fight, train a bit, and it will probably help you to absorb what you have experienced, but just keep it at... thirty to fifty percent effort for about a week. And actually, I have just the right kind of quest for that. It's ten days long, and the start of it will give you the time you need for all of that."

"That sounds interesting, tell me more, and I'll decide."

"It's the thousand year quest I mentioned before."

"Meaning a quest that no attendee has successfully completed in a thousand years. That does indeed sound relaxing, just as the doctor ordered."

"It can be a bit less, 970 years or so, but a thousand years does sound better. And yes, relaxing, so are you interested? I think you will enjoy it."

"I'm getting more and more suspicious of you."

She smiles at that, but a moment later that smile weakens, and she says, this time with a more serious tone of voice, "I think it will be good for you, and you'll want to go anyway. Of course, it is dangerous, and if you let yourself get careless, you will die. Actually, it is very dangerous. You won't be able to trust the people there that much, and some will actively try to kill you, take advantage of you, scam you, and so on and so forth. Others will hope to watch you burn and die."

"But?"

"But as I said, I think it'll actually be good for you. And one more piece of info that might make you more interested: the last person who completed this exact quest almost 1000 years ago was Adrian."

I don't say anything, but Ruby smiles once again. "I see that's made you a bit more interested. To explain it in the way you like best: ten days. You and another attendee, a fresh S rank. The objective is to win the Game organized by the Halcyon Trust Corporation, which includes people from within the galaxy where the quest takes place. Mostly talents on the brink of becoming a Champion, Champion and Absolute candidates or disciples of Champions and Absolutes, and others. Even though the Halcyon Trust is nowhere close to the Aurate Consortium, they are quite rich, so the rewards should be decent enough."

“So what you’re saying is that in order to get an extra week or so of rest, I should go jump into a deadly game against a bunch of soon-to-be Champions and other assholes who, as you said, might try to kill me, scam me, and take advantage of me?”

“It’ll make more sense once you are there. I’m hiding something so I can see your surprised expression later. If you don’t agree, they’ll just call in some other S-ranks. At this point, taking talents from the Beyond is kind of a tradition of the games, and you got lucky with the timing.”

“Sure. Well, I agree then.”

“Is it because I told you Adrian won it?”

“Just send me there.”

“Good luck then! I might even come to watch!”

Then, as always, I feel a pull on myself and try to observe. Even now, I am unable to do anything about the way her forced teleportation entirely ignores all my defenses and natural barriers. Sometimes she uses a portal in the shape of a door, and sometimes she just moves me, and I don’t think it even matters. She’s doing this all on a whim. I suspect there’s always some sort of stable portal, like the door, that sometimes she just teleports me through it without me seeing it, making it feel like she just teleported me. Or something like that.

But musing over all that she told me, I think I already know who the attendee, the fresh S-rank joining me, will be.

Ruby is indeed a very shrewd woman. And that’s only confirmed as I appear in a luxurious room with a huge glass window open to the desert beyond, with a beautiful green oasis tucked between the dunes. Beyond that oasis, I see a number of huge towers that seem to be made of metal and glass, and the air is full of floating islands, airships, and spaceships.

The person I find waiting for me is my sister, Victoria. Judging by the micro-changes of her expression, which I know better than my own face, she was already informed about my state. My suspicion grows

more as she greets me through all this with a smile and a long hug, then gestures for me to sit and join her near a small table.

“I’ve heard about your state, Natty, so you’re going to be taking things easy for a week and letting me take care of most things. I want to hear no objections.”

And the only answer I can come up with is, “Yes, Vic.”

POV Tess Hansen

One of the Champions on the fifth floor is dead, and Lyraen killed it. I don't think any of us had a chance to do it without him, not even with all of us combined. Even though most of us served as distractions just to gain an extra few seconds so Lyraen would have time to attack, two people died in the front ranks, and more, like Lily and Jean, got hurt pretty badly.

But the plan was too good, and everything went accordingly. Though it got a bit expensive because of the single-use items the Silent Veil brought.

My attacks and lightning still aren't comparable to what Lyraen did, and even if I do realize there is a difference between the two of us, I don't like it. But my likes and dislikes don't matter right now as I move from person to person, answering any questions that might come up, blaming me, us, the people from Earth.

As if what happened after the Champion died was my fault.

As if it were me who told Tacita when we were planning the attack, so she could steal the key right out from under us.

POV Dennis Dalton

(Wow! I've never seen a mind like yours! It seems kind of similar to mine, but so different at the same time!)

(Huh? Who is talking to me?)

(Hi! I'm Spark! Marble wants to join the conversation. Can I let him in?)

(What? Why? Look, Spark, you shouldn't just barge into people's minds, it is rude. And scary. I think you could probably kill me if you wanted.)

(I could! But I just talk and make friends. I wouldn't hurt you for no reason, nor will I invade your privacy. If you think so, I'm sorry!)

(I think it is okay, I've heard a bit about you. And about Marble.)

(That's good! He is a bit grumpy, but he's still a decent guy. I'll let him in. Marble, say hello to...)

(Dennis and Aaron.)

(To Dennis and Aaron!)

(I apologize for Spark and his behavior, so please ignore him for now. I would like to know the skill you used to do whatever you've done to your mind. In exchange for that, I offer three possible rewards.)

(Eh, go on?)

(The first one is the number of people who...)

POV Kim Min-Jae

The Adjudicator crashes into Maya, who surrounds herself in her tricolored [Armament] while forming a dagger. Seeing that she's preparing to go all out, I do so as well, twisting the gravitational energy around her and attempting to squeeze the Adjudicator. My mana drains quickly, and my eye throbs painfully, but their body is ridiculously powerful.

Maya gets thrown away, and the Adjudicator turns to rush at me, but with moving a [Boost], Maya barely reaches her and sends them both rolling. Finally, my attack pierces through, and one of the Adjudicator's arms explodes, only to regrow before the pieces of flesh and blood can even fall to the sand. As Maya switches to gauntlets, they fight, and the hot air of this floor evaporates the blood before it makes contact.

Swiftly, I switch to slowing our opponent down instead, giving Maya an opportunity to compound more of her attacks, which start stacking as each subsequent one does more and more damage.

Meanwhile, I lift tons of sand and spin it around both of them, increasing the speed further and further and sending streams of it at the Adjudicator every time she starts to press Maya too hard. The sand moves with such force and speed that it throws her off balance and even causes her to take a slight bit of damage, almost like sandpaper.

But I know we have no chance. Izzy, Noodle, Sophie, and Blackie are still in the cave, far away from here, and everyone else is off in Beyond. I already severed our connection, using the method Sophie developed to make it impossible for anyone to track us. With the Adjudicator here, the Corporation controlling her should have more people around. And both Maya and I are of the same mind: we can't allow that.

I have no illusions that we would be able to defeat what seems like a distant clone of one of the Rulers. Sophie could escape to Beyond, but Izzy? I owe her too much to be that kind of person.

"This way!" Maya shouts, and her voice sounds cold from the level of [Focus] she's operating under.

She's already running in one direction, and the Adjudicator follows behind her. They exchange a few attacks, and I pull down one of the huge rocks I always try to keep floating high in the air, with a mix of inscriptions, special crystals, and my energy. It mostly consists of metal, with a core made of something akin to tungsten that I've specially implanted within.

I do a quick calculation and pull as hard as I can, allowing it to pick up a lot of speed. Then, when it's almost there, I make it so it's pulled directly towards the Adjudicator.

Maya, hearing the sound of it, boosts herself further, and the rock slams against our opponent, hitting her directly and squashing her to a pulp, while sending a huge shockwave outwards that blows away tons of sand.

In the next second, another shockwave ripples through it, and the Adjudicator is out, her body fully restored.

I increase my flight speed even further, seeing the cave Maya is heading towards, making a last ditch attempt to ensure that gravity doesn't act on the woman in the torn, black, one piece suit. I pass by her as her legs fail to find purchase and she levitates a little, but I know it's just a question of time before she's free.

"I can fly us," I quickly tell Maya as I reach her.

"It won't work, they already placed marks on us," she answers, grabbing my hand and pulling me as we head into the cave. The sword in her hand grows in size as she swings it to destroy the ceiling, burying us inside.

"What-" I don't get to finish as we reach what looks like a long shaft, the bottom of which I can't even sense, but I recognize that feeling instantly.

It is one of the many entrances to the Labyrinth of Xyphos. And then it all makes sense.

"Are you crazy?" I manage to get out. A wave of fear washes over me as I remember all the information we gathered about it.

"There is no way any of us can defeat that thing outside. Not even if the entire group goes against her. Maybe Nathaniel, if he were here. But the best we can do is run." Maya's face is calm, and I know she made a decision with that cold logic of concentration skill users, but still...

"I already sent a message in the Community chat, so the others will know. We will get separated, so try looking for an exit, after which we will find each other through the Community, or find a good place to spend the rest of the tutorial. In the worst case scenario, try to see if you can get a quest and enter the Beyond," she says.

For a moment after she says it, her eyes turn to look towards where the Adjudicator is, already bulldozing through the fallen rock. It might just be me, but Maya seems angry.

"If only we were a bit stronger, right? Good luck to both of us." Maya smiles at me and then rushes forward. Grabbing my hand, she leaps into the shaft, pulling me with her. I let myself fall just as the rocks behind us explode and the Adjudicator lunges.

The fall isn't even that long, and just a few seconds later, I find myself at the bottom. Alone.

Just like the Labyrinth during the tournament, this one also has a ceiling made of smooth red rock imbued with white crystals that emit light. The walls are made of a pure, stunningly smooth gray stone, as is the floor.

The place where I find myself seems to be half a mile wide and multiple miles long, with multiple entrances to tunnels in the distance. The light here is calm, like the last light of the day, and grass covers the floor alongside multiple small lakes and many trees. It looks as unearthly as it is pretty.

Something moves at the edge of my vision, and I turn around, gathering mana to fight it. My heartbeat can be felt somewhere in my throat, and sweat gathers on my forehead.

That something is blurry, as if I'm looking at it through wild water, and it emits a gentle light itself.

I try to read the text floating over it.

[F∞e - lvl ██████]

An instant later, my body plummets, slamming into the ground. My head spins so fiercely that I can't make out a thing. Trembling, I lift a hand and press it to my eyes, trying to force the dizziness away.

Then a voice speaks to me, "All good, Kim?"

"I don't know," I answer.

When I look up, he's standing there, his brown hair messy as always, grinning down at me.

"Kim, my bud, I swear if it weren't for me, this tutorial would've eaten you alive. Well, assuming that burrito-ass corgi didn't do it first. You guys might find him cute, but I'm telling you, he looks at us like we're just snacks he's saving for later. Honestly? I think Nathaniel is worrying for nothing. That corgi is probably eating the Rulers right now and solving all our problems for us."

"Sure," I chuckle and take his offered hand as he pulls me up to stand. "Come on, let's look for a way to get back to Maya."

I pause, my eyes drawn to the empty air ahead.

"A bit longer and I'll have to hold out a few fingers and ask you to count them for me," he says, stepping up to my side.

"I just thought I saw something," I say with a shake of my head. "Sorry, Kevin. I shouldn't be letting myself get distracted. Not here."

"It's okay, buddy. I've got your back."

Chapter 853 - Who do you take me for?

POV Nathaniel

"It seems they are giving us time to greet each other before they barge in," Victoria says, looking out the window.

She is the same as always. Black hair, emotionless face, and brown eyes, though one of them is a lighter shade of brown. And as always, she wears no armor and carries no items. She just wears simple clothes.

That causes me to look down at my white shirt from Earth and blue sweatpants. Looking at her, I notice how clean her clothes are and do my best to dust mine off, though there's not much I can do about the blood.

Even without turning to me, she says, "It is too late for that, Natty."

"I would probably have gotten changed if I'd known I would be meeting you."

"And that is the mistake. You should always try to be presentable. But I know very well no such thought ever entered your mind."

"No thoughts. Head empty," I nod.

When Victoria turns away from the window, she has that small, almost imperceptible smile as she reaches out and ruffles my short, buzzcut hair.

"Indeed, not a single thought has ever graced this head," she feels my short stubble of hair before tapping my head with her open palm a few times and letting go. "But do not worry, I can do the thinking for both of us."

"Sounds like a deal," I smile at her. "Has everything gone well for you as of late?"

"Reasonably well, though likely not as well as it has for the famous Mana Tyrant himself."

"Vic..."

"I have heard he manipulates mana with such beauty that mana itself stops and takes note, eager to listen to his commands."

"Tell me right now who said that bullshit."

“Someone from your guild. They also said your rare smiles melt hearts quicker than your thermal energy. Though, Natty, I do not know how this haircut will affect that reputation.”

“My hair was taken from me against my will.”

“Just like your last few brain cells, and that is why I have to keep an eye on you so you do not push yourself too far.”

“I’m being schemed against, Vic, and they’re using you, my only weakness. But I still mean it, it’s nice to see you.”

“Such a charmer.” She moves and sits down. Instead of choosing a nearby chair, I sit on the small couch next to her, and we look out of the window. “How much do you know about this quest?” she asks.

“You know me. Not much.”

“Indeed. So, for your information, this quest comes up every fifty years or so and is organized by the Halcyon Trust Company. They always try to have one to three people from the tutorial, usually S-ranks. I’ve heard they’ve been asking for Nyssa Volare ever since she became an S-rank and did everything they could to reserve her, but she rejected them. Then they tried Lyraen, and he almost came, until a certain thief from Earth stole the key he was working so hard to get, and now he’s focused on hunting her down.”

“It is quite insulting to learn we’re the third option.”

“Insulting or not, looking at it from their perspective, there is a clear logic behind it. Given the nature of this game, it is obvious they prefer the concept of having the Gwyn siblings over either of us individually. It is highly likely that they will try to pit us against each other at some point, simply for the drama it would bring.”

“Well, it would suck for them if one of us were to forfeit then.”

“Yes,” Victoria nods. “There are usually three events, though they change them fairly often. The first one will be something to filter people out, an event where they throw all the participants into an arena for one to three days. After that, some interviews and shows, another event, more appearances, and then the final event.”

“Vic, I’m starting to like this less and less.”

“Does it seem boring to you?”

“A bit, but I’m more annoyed at the thought of having to do the interviews and stuff.”

“Good. That means you will have ample time to rest. But do not forget to not trust anyone. The producers will try their best to create an interesting show, meaning they do not care for this to be fair.”

We talk for a while longer until a selari man barges in, dressed in a dark blue suit and a broad smile on his face, “Miss Gwyn and Mister Gwyn, it is a pleasure to meet you!”

His skin and hair are both pink, and he has white freckles, while his eyes are green and blue. Just a typical selari in the looks department. He continues to smile, waving in a few more people behind him. Among them is a big, grapefruit-sized black orb inlaid with what seems to be four blue lenses. It zaps around, seemingly pointing its lenses at us and zooming in. Another, smaller orb, about the size of a ping-pong ball, follows it, covered in what seems like fuzzy hair. A microphone perhaps?

“I am Melek, the face of the Games, proudly sponsored by the Halcyon Trust Corporation! Please, do your best to ignore the recording devices. We’re just capturing a bit of juicy material for your grand introduction, and perhaps a future highlight reel once you make it deeper into the games! Your Handlers already handed over some footage, which we will absolutely be finding a home for.”

Finally, he wraps up his barrage of speed-talking. With his hands at his sides, he looks at us and smiles. “Gwyn Siblings! Now that truly has a nice ring to it! The organizers are going to love it. Of course, there are plenty of other fascinating characters out there, and this poor host only has one mortal body to get around to them all. But don’t you worry, you will be beautifully cared for by your team, which is only going to grow the further you advance into the game!”

Swiftly, he approaches Victoria and, with a slight bow and his left hand behind his back, offers the palm of his right to her. Of course, my sister seems to know what to do and puts her hand on top of his, with her fingers touching his palm. Melek then slides his hand back and swings it to his side in a surprisingly annoying and elegant-looking gesture.

When he stands up, he looks at me.

I look at him.

Then he just waves at me, his smile growing even wider. “It has been ages since anyone still attending their tutorial won the Games, so I wish you both the absolute best of luck!” he chirps, acting as if nothing awkward had just happened. Then he rushes out, his entourage trailing behind him as the video and audio drones buzz in a tight circle around us one last time before leaving.

I am usually a very friendly and forgiving guy, but I don’t like that man.

We are left with a selari woman called Selene, and two more people who seem to have been assigned to help her. We are swiftly led to a different room with such speed and haste that one would think the games were going to start in the next two minutes.

In the hallway, we meet a few more groups like that with potential game attendees, and I, like Victoria, give longer looks to these people. And just like them, we do a bit of our own “friendly” probing.

I seem to have better senses in that way than Victoria, mainly thanks to my Preeminence Eyes and some of my more specialized training. I mean, my senses need to be decent; after all, at this point, a gray lizard headbutting my body would probably destroy it if I couldn’t detect it.

Plus, my hatred for stealth combatants runs deep. At this rate, I wouldn't be surprised if it evolved into a fourth trait or showed up in my DNA.

Of course, I keep everything to a strict 30% to 50% limit of my capabilities, just as Victoria ordered. My sister must know what she’s doing, so I'd better listen to her.

I also catch myself in a better mood just thanks to having her here with me, with a constant current of shared memories swimming to the surface. Even if they aren't very good ones, they feel precious because she was there with me. I think Tess is right when she says that suffering together, and going through shared trauma, connects people.

It becomes easier for me to keep my mind together, and I don't find myself having to push all that hard to feel like myself again, though I find that any sort of stimulus helps, even if it is just the bustle of the people moving around us.

We are separated into two rooms, where I take a shower after making sure there aren't any cameras. After all, I don't really know this galaxy's customs, so there's every chance they'd be willing to put that in the pre-show or something. Just some announcer shouting and ranking the participants by... I shake my head and step out from the now non-functioning shower I took apart to learn how it functions.

Once back in the room, my Earth clothes are gone. Stolen, possibly to become a relic to be sold or kept in a vault forever, unique items made by a planet many light-years away. When Victoria and I win the Game, those clothes will probably make someone very rich.

There are replacements which I put on, and they fit so perfectly that I feel goosebumps rise on the back of my neck. I check them for some sort of hidden inscriptions, marks, and other potential trickery, but they're as normal as they come.

Once I enter the small waiting room where Victoria sits, I understand a bit more about why they picked these outfits. Both of us are wearing the same black, high neck shirts with long sleeves and dark brown pants. They don't feel like a simple cotton fabric, and have a sort of design that must be trendy here, and the materials feel nice. However, my shirt is thicker, like a sweater, while Victoria's shows off her figure more.

"We'll have to find the pervert that-" I do not get to finish as Selene barges in, followed by her two assistants.

She looks us over, nods in satisfaction, and gestures at Victoria. "Please take a seat over there, my dear."

My sister complies and sits down. Then Selene presses a button and five or so shelves shoot up from the surrounding walls. The two women assisting Selene immediately rush over to them, picking up an array of mysterious items, and start to work on Victoria's hair and face.

"You have a striking expression, beautifully framed by the structure of your face. To emphasize your presence, we'll be keeping the makeup minimal and simply enhancing your natural features. Just a touch to deepen the color of your lips, and some shading around the eyes to make that gaze even more piercing. Combined with a clean, combat-ready hairstyle, it will be perfect. Iset, let's go with that style the Cordonian warrior princesses have been favoring lately."

"Yes, Lady Selene," the woman answers.

Meanwhile, I sit on a chair and watch curiously while Victoria takes it all so patiently. When they're finally done, she doesn't actually look all that different. It's still my sister, though I have to agree that the way her hair is styled does look pretty cool.

"Is everything to your satisfaction, my dear?" Selene asks Victoria.

"Does it matter whether it is or is not? But I thank you for the effort you put in." Victoria stands up with an elegant but powerful movement, reminding the women exactly who they're dealing with.

However, Selene seems to regain her balance quickly. She smiles, gesturing at the other two, who rush over to me. The selari woman looks at me with her arms crossed over her chest while the other two wait.

"There's really not much we can do with your hair unless you let us grow it out a bit. Fortunately, we have an exceptional hair serum crafted by the Healing Order of Absolute Zerathusa..."

"I don't mind. You can grow it a bit, maybe to finger-length or something like that."

"That would be fantastic, honey! Much like your sister, you have a striking face that will look absolutely gorgeous on the promotional materials. Now, could you share your Constitution level with me? This serum comes in quite a few variants, and your Constitution dictates exactly how it interacts with your body."

"Yep, not telling."

Selene narrows her eyes, but quickly sighs and claps her hands together. "Well, of course, you are from some backward, rural planet and you're still stuck in your tutorial. It's only natural that you would behave a bit... Well, never mind!" Her smile widens as she condescendingly looks me over. "Considering you were actually chosen to come here, your level must be close to 390, taking into account that you have over a year left in the tutorial. Oh yes, I did my homework and saw the promotional materials."

She is smiling like she caught me, that sort of kind smile people use when they've been dealing with a child or someone being stubborn when they clearly have the upper hand. "You have been introduced as a combat mage specializing in mid- to close-range combat. An amplifier with a relatively high mana stat, meaning your Constitution should be about... 600! Iset, give me the level nine serum!"

"Yes, Lady Selene!" Iset quickly hands Selene a bottle. The selari woman takes it, puts on gloves, steps closer victoriously, and starts carefully applying it to my hair by massaging it in.

It tingles and feels nicely warm. It is comfortable, so I don't even complain.

Once Selene steps away, I watch her face as she says, "Now we wait and-"

Her words stop as my hair begins to grow rapidly. Instead of finger-length, it cascades down my shoulders, down my back, and over the chair. It touches the floor and then grows a bit further still.

There is so much of it that I can barely see her face through the luscious locks draping over my eyes, but I just sit there calmly, looking back at her.

Silly woman. Who do you take me for? My Constitution is barely 100.

Chapter 854 - Spectators

There are a few things that I will take with me to my grave. Some will never even grace my thoughts ever again.

Almost dying to hair serum is one of them.

I sit here, very, very carefully circulating thermal energy through my body to heal up. What the serum did was use some of my resources to speed up hair growth. It made me hungry, tired, thirsty, and lightheaded.

I'm fairly confident there should've been some sort of warning label for that level nine hair tonic made by the Healing Order of Absolute Zerathusa, and Selene should totally have told me about it. But it's also very, very likely that silly woman just didn't expect my constitution to be this low, and I totally don't plan to complain now. I also don't plan to kill her for the attempt on my life, it would be too awkward to explain.

"I-Iset! I said level nine!" After staring at me with her mouth wide open, Selene turns to shout at her colleague.

"Lady Selene, but I did use level nine, look!" Iset cries, rushing to the selari to show her the bottle.

I, meanwhile, remain seated in my chair, surrounded by my luscious locks of hair. Blowing a bit, I make a small part in my hair to widen a gap so I can watch them.

Selene is once again glancing at me after reading the bottle. "T-there's no way. The bottle must have been mislabeled!" she shouts and moves in front of me, bowing very deeply. "Mister Gwyn, I apologize very deeply for putting you at risk in this way. I should have warned you about the risks of the serum. Please, direct your anger at me. Iset was only following my orders."

She doesn't even try to make excuses and instantly takes it all on herself. I notice her shaking a bit, and her heart beats wildly. Selene doesn't see it, but behind her, Victoria is standing up, locking her fingers together and holding them straight, like some sort of blade, as she takes a step towards them.

Before the situation can degrade any further, I just say, "I will ignore it this time."

For a moment, I glance at Vic, who catches my gaze and then nods, sliding back to her chair to sit in that super proper, formal, serious way she likes to do, which can't be comfortable.

Selene, Iset, and, for some reason their third colleague begin to thank me like I just saved the lives of their entire families. The whole thing gives the impression that they feel like they owe me, and I quite like it. Of course, it can be an act from their side, and it is possible that they're spies or hired assassins, but who the hell knows? I just know I'll make every attempt to use that to my advantage somehow.

They get to work on my hair. As I request, they first cut it so it extends slightly below my shoulders, then style it well. I stand up and look at myself in a mirror. Unlike Savant's, my hair is not as dark, and it is slightly wavy, but looking at myself, I have to say that not only are my mana reserves higher, but my looks are better as well.

Still not tired of winning, I sit down, and they continue cutting it down until it hangs down by a finger's length. They style it a bit in a formal way that weirdly seems to fit with the clothes I am wearing.

Once they're done, I raise up thermal energy and entirely burn all the scissors, towels, and hair left behind. It melts the floor quite a bit, but I already disconnected this room from the central alarm system, so no alarm rings. The defenses here are honestly... not very good. So I suspect that, as fresh participants of the Games, they didn't assign us the premium rooms.

At one point, someone knocks on the door, and Selene goes to answer, meeting with a human woman who hurriedly whispers something through the door, causing Selene to widen her eyes. Once the human woman leaves, Selene comes back to us, clearly thrown off by the situation and thinking of something.

Neither me nor Vic even bother to ask, choosing to wait patiently until she shakes her head and says, while looking at us, "I apologize, my friend just told me a rumor that the Ruler of Envy will be spectating the games, so I'm just feeling a bit thrown off."

In reaction to that, Iset squeaks in surprise, causing her to get a harsh look from her colleague and quickly calm her expression to stand back up in a proper pose. Though her heart beats wildly in excitement.

While the two women seem like they just heard there will be a big celebrity or leader of a state coming, Selene is much more nervous and shows even a bit of what feels like fear.

"Is a Ruler appearing as a spectator that rare, Selene?" Victoria asks her.

That gets her a nervous, unbelieving chuckle. "Very rare, Miss Victoria. He is a Ruler. One of only fourteen. He isn't even from our galaxy, nor are we counted among the central galaxies." She gestures wildly as if she has a difficult time explaining, so she just ends with an emphasized, "He is a Ruler."

"But he's also a new one, and possibly the weakest. I bet some powerful Absolute like the Magi or a proper replica of the last Elf could probably fuck him up."

"Language, Nathaniel."

"Sorry, Vic."

Selene looks at me in a way that makes me suspect she wants to call me a backwater-galaxy bum or some other such thing, but she patiently says, "Even if he wasn't crowned all that long ago, he is still one of the most powerful people in the universe. If he willed it, he would have no problem destroying this world and many others in our galaxy. Just releasing his presence fully would probably kill everyone on this planet, minus those at the brink of becoming Champions, Champions, and Absolutes. You can't even look at the true body of a Ruler, looking for too long will burn your eyes, not to mention their presence. There aren't even many planets in the universe where a Ruler can fight without destroying them instantly. Possibly not even ours. And this planet has been strengthened through a number of pairings. A planet like yours that just awakened would be annihilated."

"I see," I nod. "What about Beyond?"

She seems confused but answers, "I think the deeper floors should be quite durable."

"You seem to know quite a bit, Selene," my sister says.

"I try to, Miss Victoria, sweetie. There are many things I've learned from attending the academy, and further under the tutelage of my master. Then I took many courses to even qualify for the position of support staff in the Games," she answers proudly.

"Are any other interesting people going to be joining the spectators?" I ask her before she can go into further bragging about herself, as I'm sure she would.

This time her eyes gleam like those of a fangirl. “Yes! There will be Felix Maro!”

“Selene, I’m just a bum from a barely awakened planet.”

“Honey, everyone knows Felix Maro, he’s a very powerful Absolute! Two thousand years ago, he started his tutorial in Beyond.”

That piques my interest, and I sit up straight. “Tell me more.”

“There are many stories of his tutorial, the most powerful S rank ever known, completing many 1000-year quests. He was even later taken in as a disciple of The Ruler of Temperance. There is a rumor that the Ruler of Temperance is raising him as a potential successor!”

“Selene, I have a question.”

“Yes, Mister Gwyn.”

“Who is the Ruler of Temperance? Then, in a simple way and shortly, name floor by floor all of the Rulers.”

“I apologize, but this sort of information-”

“Nathaniel, do not be too greedy,” my sister interrupts her.

“Vic, this is very simple information that everyone should know, and I’d think it’d be fairly widespread. There are so many tutorial attendees, and each floor gives you an opportunity to meet a Ruler if-”

“You can meet a Ruler on each of the floors!?” Selene looks like a hungry dog as she moves closer, ready for gossip or information to sell.

“Ehm...” I just say, looking for help from my sister, who steps in, making Selene change the subject.

Meanwhile, I muse that maybe some information that Ruby gave me isn't that freely available. Am I getting a bit too spoiled? Did I spoil information for Selene, a sort of endgame info she would've had more fun getting to and discovering on her own? Or maybe she means to sell it later?

In the end, I come to the conclusion that the education here is the worst, and people of this galaxy lack curiosity.

But in the end, I get a description of the Ruler of Temperance from Selene. Though people almost never get to see a Ruler in their lives, there are rumors and legends of their appearances. Temperance, for example, is seen as a very gentle lumoran man who is fond of using war armor.

There is only one being that fits that description from the floors I have visited so far.

It also makes me wonder. Did Champion Feroy succeed at the end of the seventh floor, or is the Ruler of Temperance a special grade mimic that managed to take him over?

Selene continues to be polite, explains some stuff, and mostly talks about etiquette and our schedule. After a while, a drowsiness starts washing over me, so I listen with half an ear, occasionally asking questions about the Rulers.

I find it very interesting to see how someone born this long after their planet's tutorial and after multiple pairings sees a Ruler. Maybe for the first time, I truly see someone admiring them in a way reminiscent of gods, even if she never saw any and only ever heard about them. A ton of information since her birth, things she learned in the academy, from her tutors, and the rumors and past legends. Tidbits of information on the appearance of beings on the scale of a Ruler, and the destruction they might bring.

There are also a few wild stories about subclass Absolutes forming temporary alliances to take down a Ruler, so they can later fight each other to claim the vacant seat. Even then, the chance of that ever happening is very rare, and it usually ends with the Ruler wiping out the party instead.

Absolutes like Lissandra, The Last Elf, the Magi, and some like the Slayer, Void Caller, or the Pale Titan, are exceedingly rare, often seemingly disinterested in holding the position of a Ruler. Hell, many people

consider even a wyvern to be as rare a sight as a Ruler, and dragons are even rarer, not to mention the very few gods still alive and hidden away somewhere.

Over the past few years, I've come to see most of these things as normal and had a chance to meet some, even if they were just copies. It's easy to forget that the First Generation that enters the tutorial is just barely under 40 thousand people, and not all of them even survive, and not all of them have the opportunities I've had. And then, thousands of years could pass on Earth without people, even awakened ones, having any chance of seeing the things I have.

When Selene talks about the Ruler of Envy, she doesn't talk about the dickhead I saw in the record getting curbstomped by the imitation of the Ancient Monster, even the Rulers are scared of. Selene just sees someone who, despite the efforts of many thousands of powerful Masters of Envy, was able to push through and claim the spot of the new Ruler of Envy when Ruler Tyven died.

And the longer she talks about it, the stronger Envy begins to seem. But it doesn't make me respect or even admire him. It just makes me realize that maybe I should be a bit more thankful to Sandra the Cockroach.

We're all led to a smaller room where other participants mingle. There are a few hundred of them, though Selene tells us there are a few more rooms like that, and more "prominent" participants have more luxurious places, probably because they're too pure to interact with us, commoners.

Left alone, me and Vic make our way through the room, dealing with the many waves of scans all over again while doing our own in turn. Probing people and making sure to remember the ones that seem like they might be dangerous, though I have to say there aren't many of them.

The thing that best catches my attention is the walls placed throughout the room. They seem to be made of glass, and on each one, in extremely high resolution, a sort of hype reel plays. There are even snippets with me on them. Me against Savant during the first tournament. Me against Ruby's avatar during another tournament. The fight with the Leviathan Fish, and then even the boys standing off against Nyssa, with the video being cut there as a cliffhanger to make the viewers wonder how it ended.

As Vic taps my shoulder and leaves to talk to a few people, I also watch some of hers. Both of us against Lissandra, even if Lissandra's face is blurred. Victoria in what seems like a nest of ants, getting torn apart, as her duplicates continue fighting. Her on the snowy lumoran planet surrounded by multiple Greater Mimics. Her in the rainforest of the ninth floor, facing off against clans of demons throwing

themselves against her, with the forest set ablaze as monsters rush in in waves, and Victoria standing there unbothered as she mows them all down.

When the videos show someone else, I stop looking and glance towards her, feeling a smile climbing onto my lips. Vic seems to sense my gaze as she turns to me with a question, and I just shake my head. She then turns back to speak with some weird looking bear like man, and I find a quiet corner to slip into after grabbing some snacks.

The entire time, I continue to scan the area and keep an eye on Vic, unbothered by the hundreds of flickering presences in the room.

Chapter 855 - Bless you

From my corner, I continue to deal with my changes in a much more comfortable way. I find it fun to defend against other people's scans and sneakily apply some of my own in turn. Even though I am heavily limiting myself so I don't strain my mind, I can still do quite a bit.

Some of these people are way too easy to probe without them ever noticing, and most of their scans are just as easy to deflect or trick. I find it fun using Sneaky Mode in combination with my Mana Cycling and Empyrean Ichor, drawing on my mana leakage to partially hide my signature. To most people, I must seem like a person with average mana reserves.

There are also a few demons observing the way my hearts beat. Not feeling like fighting right now, I make myself seem as average to them as possible. Some of these demons are already picking fights and causing a ruckus.

This place is huge, with many pillars splitting the areas into zones. There are also multiple other floors with coiling, spring-like stairs heading up and down, as well as plenty of terraces. I don't think a construction like this would be possible on Earth with its current materials. Though who the hell knows. Maybe the current ones are already getting soaked in mana and being enhanced as Earth awakens.

During this sort of sparring against the other participants, and while I am thinking of silly things, I find my eyes being pulled to the screens again. It is because they are beginning to show hype reels, but this time they are of previous winners. I ignored most of them, only watching out of slight curiosity, but that changes when a young man is introduced as Adrian.

Adrian is handsome and even younger than me. He has red hair and pale blue eyes as the "camera" pulls in on his smile. Then it switches, showing him standing in the middle of an arena that seems to have been constructed on the surface of a moon with the planet visible off in the distance. Against him stands a mora, twice Adrian's height, with red skin and that same wildness I saw in the trio of crafters and the Endo knight.

The mora licks his lips, and mana starts to spread across his body, changing color, taking on a dark gray hue and solidifying into a sleek armor. It makes the mora seem even wilder, but without looking bulky or restricting his movement.

Adrian takes a step back, getting into a battle stance, and mana starts surrounding his body, the same as with the mora, turning into the same sort of armor. Just before it entirely covers his face, Adrian is shown wearing a challenging, confident smile.

The earth under them explodes as they charge each other, and Adrian makes a joke out of his opponent. Not a single attack touches him as he dances around him, always dodging by a hair's breadth. It is not because it's efficient, he just seems confident and daring like that, making fun of his opponent in the process.

This view morphs into another scene, showing Adrian walking across a sky that cracks around him like a broken mirror as it shatters into pieces.

Another shot shows him surrounded by dozens of people, possibly other participants. Many of them are smiling around him, listening to him almost lovingly, but the next flash shows him standing covered in blood with their corpses all around him. His face twists into a devilish, handsome smile.

This set of videos stops, and a few of the other winners are presented. A woman with a spider body, a demon even bulkier than Morwag, and many more. None of them seems weak, and I find it especially interesting since this doesn't seem like the sort of game that's filled with the absolute best there can be. Even Selene said that this isn't one of the central galaxies, nor is the Halcyon Trust Corporation one of the biggest corporations. In a way, isn't it just some backwater sort of game, similar to how Selene called Earth a backwater planet?

It begins to seem like the laughter from the other groups is starting to reach my corner, so I stand up and head towards the closest balcony to avoid them. A group nearby seems to be having an excited conversation, so I strengthen my hearing and listen in on them.

"-said. Yes, the Ruler of Envy will be spectating. Do you think he's looking for disciples?"

There is some murmuring I can't quite place, then another voice speaks.

"-fight him. I heard one of the Ruler of Diligence's vessels will be spectating as well. And Felix Maro too, people say his disciple is from this galaxy, so he came to watch with her."

"Shh, look, that's the attendee. Hey! Tutorial attendee, yes you! Get your ass over here!" A human woman smiles and waves at me before I can sneak onto the balcony.

There are a few choices laid out in front of me.

I can oblige, get in close, and then grab her and throw her off the balcony.

I can entirely ignore her and the group and just go my own way.

Or, I can go over to them and socialize.

This time, the last option wins. Out of a twisted sense of curiosity, I move closer, putting a friendly look on my face.

"The fuck are you frowning at me for, you asshole? Did I spit into your drink or something? Looking for a beating?" she chuckles, but unlike her words, she moves closer, pushing some other guy away and shaking my hand with a friendly smile. "I'm Xixi, and these fuckers are... I don't know, how the hell should I remember all their names? You're one of the siblings, right? Gwyn."

"Yup."

"Daamn, I hope that long answer didn't hurt you. Are you in one of those silent cults, are not allowed to talk, or what?" She laughs out loud.

Xixi has short green hair and yellowish eyes. She is just a bit shorter than me, and her sundress-like clothing shows off her muscular body.

"He must be overwhelmed. Maybe he hasn't seen this many people in a while. What floor are you on, Gwyn?" a feylith man asks, his hair and eyes turning a pastel yellow color.

"14th," I nod seriously.

That causes him to laugh out loud, and Xixi slaps my shoulder, forcing me to quickly strengthen my body. Though in the end, the slap is surprisingly gentle.

"There are some on my world speculating as to whether the 14th floor truly does exist," a lumoran woman from the group says. "They theorize Pride agreed in the end to the Ruler of Greed's plan, and joined in the recreation of the tutorial, but his floor is open to very few ever."

"Well, I never heard of any jerk ever talking about it. So, how is the 14th floor, Mister Gwyn?" Xixi asks me with a cheeky smile.

"It stinks of the wyverns Pride keeps there as his pets, and doesn't clean up after. Listen, I get you want to play, but the way you've been trying to put that marker on me is quite painful to watch," I say as I turn to the feylith man.

Quickly, his hair and eyes turn black before switching to pale red with hints of yellow as he shamelessly smiles. "It seems that you noticed."

Before I can answer that even my minion would've noticed, another woman speaks, "He entirely blocked my scans," she says.

"And he redirected mine to Xixi, and I almost didn't notice," a velnar man adds in a deep voice.

Before anyone else can say something, they look somewhere behind me, just as the presence I sensed approaching comes to a stop behind my back.

I can feel his heartbeat, recognizing a kinetic demon heart from a mile away. Still, I don't bother turning around.

Maybe if I ignore him, he will leave.

"Hey, you human," he says, and his hand touches my shoulder.

And in that moment, I allow my kinetic energy to rise up. My mana floods my kinetic mana heart, converting it all into kinetic energy that I send reverberating through my body. My heart beats powerfully, keeping all the force perfectly within my body.

The demon doesn't say anything, and his kinetic energy rises up as well, but it's all blown away by my own. It's wilder, there's a lot more of it, and it moves much faster, flowing in huge amounts through my body. Remembering Nyssa, the beating of my heart slows down, producing a single beat where once there were two, and then even less.

I feel the hand touching my shoulder begin to shake, and slowly, the demon lets go of me. I don't even turn to look at him as he leaves.

Once again, I refocus my attention back to the group of game participants.

Xixi is looking at me with wide eyes, bursting into a laugh and playfully slapping my shoulder while pulling me closer. "Tell me, has anything fun happened in the Beyond as of late? I really miss that place."

"Not really?" I say, pulling myself away from her a little bit. "Just Diligence creating a mess."

"As in, The Ruler of Diligence?"

"Yup, the house pest. There was that Ancient Armory on the 4th floor. The guy destroyed it entirely, so the attendees won't have a chance to exploit it. He also, for some mysterious reason, created a zone devoid of mana on the 3rd floor, killed all the fish in Lake City, and all of the lurkers on the 1st floor, before respawning them and taking all of the items from the attendees."

"You're bullshitting me."

I look at the group around me, who seem to be listening with curiosity, though there are various expressions and emotions on their faces. In the end, I just shrug and don't say anything more about it.

Sorry, Zant, but you should have split the bill with me. Now your Colony leader is going to suffer.

After a few more questions, they seem to get bored of me, and I sneak away when they start talking to a different game participant, apparently some kind of Absolute candidate who's rumored to be the most powerful of his planet.

With so many people here, I don't care about the individuals, so I rejoin Vic.

The rest of the time, we spend on our own, mostly with her telling me about her floors in that typical analytical way of hers that makes it all seem so devoid of emotion.

And then, hours later, she talks with that same lack of emotion right to the face of the Games, Melek. The selari man has an even fancier suit now, and his two drones zip around.

Currently, me and Vic are sitting on a sofa, facing him as he sits behind a simple table that has some mysterious items arranged across it. Probably decorations. We are in the center of a raised podium, surrounded by concentric rings of viewers who laugh, clap, or gasp depending on what the prompts are telling them to do.

All of this is being recorded to be used in promotional materials later.

"So would you say you were always the more responsible sibling?" Melek asks Victoria.

It's the latest in a barrage of what must have been at least ten questions, and the drone zaps closer, zooming in on her face as it waits for an answer.

"I would say so. Even if I do not think that's too impressive, given how my brother is," Victoria says.

Melek laughs out loud at that, not realizing that she wasn't trying to be funny. Still, I almost have to admire how genuine everything he does seems.

"And is that your plan for these Games as well?" he asks, and then lowers his voice, whispering quickly to the microphone drone, "sponsored by the Halcyon Trust Corporation."

The crowd bursts into loud laughter. On the other side of the podium, an older selari man sitting behind a strange instrument moves metallic sticks in his hands, striking a series of floating orbs. The snappy jingle he creates is instantly echoed by the rest of the selari band. The crowd loves it, laughing and shouting in excitement.

When the music fades, Melek is still looking at my sister, waiting for her answer.

"Yes, this is what I plan to do," she answers.

Melek doesn't even seem to be disappointed by the short answer, but his attention switches to me. "Mister Gwyn, I have to be transparent with you. We did some research preparing for you tonight, and I have to say that out of all the participants, you are one of my personal favorites."

He keeps smiling, but the crowd falls silent as his voice drops to a lower, more intimate tone. "My team and I were lucky enough to get our hands on a few of the recent tutorial records."

Melek flashes the crowd a conspiratorial look, inviting an excited murmur from the audience, then focuses back on me. "There isn't much of it, but why don't we watch one together?"

There is no question directed at me to see if I agree, and a drone floats closer as something akin to a hologram forms around us, starting to play a scene I remember very well.

Lily lies on the ground, breathing heavily. The wound on her chest is covered in the red flesh of the monster trying to devour her. Gray mana keeps moving to destroy it, but Lily seems to have trouble focusing. I watch as my projection's eyes meet Lily's.

She nods, and my projection gathers kinetic energy to attack her multiple times over, destroying the chunks of red flesh while hurting Lily in turn. Then, the black-haired healer damages her own body further, profusely bleeding from open wounds. She almost stops breathing until I slap her across the face, forcing her dwindling attention back to me.

And for the first time, as I watch the record, I see the expression I was making back then.

When the projection ends and Melek turns to me, I smile back at him, seeing how taken aback he is by that for a moment, that he even forgets what he wanted to say.

Keeping the smile on my face, I ask him, "Can you tell me who gave you that record?"

"I apologize, but I can't do that," Melek laughs, answering rapidly, while spreading his arms in a defensive yet friendly gesture. "But we have learned the woman in the projection is one of your group members." He winks at me, though it seems more directed at the crowd, which whispers as if they've just heard something scandalous.

His eyes become firmer as he locks them with mine, and I notice an imperceptible smirk on his lips as he says, still in that friendly tone, "It was interesting to see that side of you, Mister Gwyn."

"I guess. But I think I know who you got the record from, so I want to say one thing."

Without even trying, I feel my smile turn gentle as I look right into the camera drone.

"I knew you were a precious little mistake, but isn't this a bit too much? Were you broken when you got your bottom kicked by her? Bless your useless little heart. Why don't you share that record? Or maybe you already did? Is this some sort of fetish? A golly-gee degenerate, voyeuristic freak who gets off on watching yourself get beaten? Is that it? Seriously, what the sweet goodness goes on in that hollow, desperate, glorious skull of yours? Do you wake up every blessed morning wondering how to be an even bigger goddamn disappointment, or does failing this gosh-darn hard just come naturally to you? You're a sad, lovely parasite—"

"I apologize, Mister Gwyn. As you can hear, our audio drone is automatically censoring what it's detected to be excessive cursing."

"Is that it?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Bless you, too, Melek. Suck a lollipop."

Chapter 856 - Start of the Game

I don't like this galaxy's customs.

Apparently, the simple act of releasing a bit of mana and mimicking the way Lissandra attacked me with her presence counts as "Unwarranted escalation of lethal force."

Also, sending in a near Champion from the security unit was too much. My intention was just to scare the asshole "face" of the Games.

Judging by the fact that he has some records from my tutorial, I highly suspect they were handed to him either directly or indirectly by the new Envy.

If it were only me on the records, I wouldn't mind, but using the one with Lily... Showing all of these people her [Disintegration], and that she's a healer able to endure the parasitic red flesh of the imprisoned Champion from the Astral Prison floor, annoys me.

It was meant not only to annoy me, but also as an attack on Lily as well. Many people have warned me that there would be those wanting to get a healer like Lily at all costs. Many of them even said that Lily by herself would be more valuable to these people than the entirety of Earth.

This... this doesn't feel good at all.

Feeling my sister's hand on my shoulder, I smooth out that spike of anger while the two of us sit alone in the small room without any windows or doors, under a single glowing orb near the ceiling.

"I understand the severity of what they are doing, Natty, but just for now, endure," she says calmly, the entire situation not seeming to disturb her at all.

"Yes, I will," I answer her.

"Good," Victoria says. "I will make a note of this as well. Once we have the power and the opportunity, we will collect what is owed."

"I hate being so patient, Vic."

"I know that very well. You are quite the risk-taker."

"One day, Vic, one day it'll all snap into place, and not a single being in the universe will dare to threaten me."

"That's quite a childish dream."

"Being a 'proper' adult is overrated," I tap her hand resting on my shoulder thankfully, and she lets go.

We sit here in comfortable silence for a while longer until one of the walls lights up.

On the screen, Melek stands, smiling charmingly at the camera while standing on what seems to be the surface of the sea. The water's surface creates a perfect mirror of the beautiful blue sky as a few lonely clouds make their way across. He looks like he's waiting for some sort of inaudible cheering to stop, smiling longer and longer, and even performing a few small dance moves. His pink hair and skin contrast strongly with his white tuxedo suit as he lifts his hand into the air.

"This message is for the participants' ears only. In the name of the Halcyon Trust Corporation, I welcome you to the Games. Years, decades of agonizing training, blood, and sweat have all built up to this very moment, where you'll finally get to test your limits against your peers!"

Melek begins to walk on the surface of the water, without it rippling at all. "I know many people look down on the first event. Some viewers don't even tune in until the last event, but I have always thought the first one was the most fun."

The camera drone zooms in on his face. "I find it so incredibly fun to watch the powerful massacre the weak. A single attack from the most talented among you as it completely erases half a dozen of you. I like to laugh at people who aren't even capable of perceiving certain individuals because of their speed... that sheer, brutal difference in power and skill is what I live for! Because, as we all well know, we aren't born equal."

His walk stops, and in the room where I am with Vic, a pillar shoots up from the floor, revealing two bracelets on top of it. The bracelets are made of black metal, and there is a single, pale blue crystal orb set into each one.

"This," Melek says on the screen, "is the Crescent Lifeline, beautifully crafted by our premier sponsor, the Crescent Smithies! This is the premier, unreleased model that will be available for purchase through your local suppliers immediately following this event! The bracelet will connect to your vital signature, allowing us to monitor you for the purpose of making this show that much more enjoyable for the viewers. Simply putting it on constitutes your consent to the terms of use. It will monitor your mana pool as a percentage, rather than tracking exact values. It will monitor your body's overall condition, your exact location, your velocity, and it even uses a charming little algorithm to estimate your emotional state. But don't worry, all of this data is strictly for the broadcast and will NOT be shared with our business partners. Trust me, we learned that lesson the hard way last time!"

He chuckles. "If you refuse to put on the bracelets, it will be considered a forfeiture of the games, and you will be sent back after paying the agreed-upon fine. And I also want to assure you that because the device monitors your vitals so closely, it can instantly teleport you out of danger and straight to the Healing Guild of Absolute Zarathusa if things get a bit too intense. This instantaneous transport is made possible by a proprietary array from an Absolute who wishes to remain anonymous, though I have to say, it cost a ridiculous sum of money. But I want to warn you. Do not rely on it too much."

Vic takes a bracelet and hands it to me. After I take it, she takes the other one and puts it on her left wrist. I look at my pale left hand and at the fragment imbued into the back of it. Of course, my tendency of being disarmed surfaces in my mind, so I put the bracelet on my right hand instead.

Meanwhile, Melek continues to blabber. He talks about how there are five thousand participants, and how the games need to filter them down to one thousand. He explains that all of us will be moved to an

arena prepared by another company he promotes, one which specializes in construction and similar projects.

Apparently, there will be one thousand crystals hidden throughout the place, which we'll have to find and place upon the bracelet to be allowed into the next event. He calls it a treasure hunt.

There will also be viewers watching, and by donating whatever currency they use, they can vote for certain interventions. Things like making a change to part of the arena, summoning a powerful monster, and other interesting obstacles to make the event more dramatic. There are a few more details, but those are the main points.

In his final speech, Melek points out some of the interesting people we might find ourselves facing. Candidates, disciples, talents. He even mentions two charming tutorial attendees who'll be participating, challenging people to try to test themselves against Beyond's S ranks.

When the countdown starts, I stand up, stretching a bit and mirroring the movements of my sister, who does the same. Even as I try to act nonchalant, I feel my heartbeat speed up slightly. But it isn't because of fear, it's just my excitement.

Maybe this will be fun.

As Melek requested, both Vic and I lower our natural barriers so the bracelet can connect properly, and neither of us tries to defend ourselves against it as we are teleported away when the countdown stops.

We aren't even split up, and both of us find ourselves in a metal box surrounded by a dozen other participants. It is dark in here, and I sense us moving upwards.

No one attacks yet, though the people around us are immediately getting ready, raising their mana and reinforcing their bodies. Multiple signatures fill the metal box, heavy with the pressure of everyone's presence, which causes the air to shake.

Then the box speeds up, making me realize we're in an elevator.

We pass over a wall, and light shines in through the glass side of the elevator, revealing us to be moving along the exterior wall of a very slim and incredibly tall skyscraper. Looking out, I see dozens, hundreds more similar skyscrapers, all of them rising through the clouds that entirely block whatever is below.

Multiple skyscrapers in the distance are already beginning to tilt, cut apart, exploding, with many people escaping the elevators or fighting.

I look around our elevator, where most of the people's eyes are stretched wide open, looking at Victoria, who stands right in the middle of it. She isn't even turning to look around at the people holding their weapons, she is just standing there calmly, with her presence leaking a deadly feeling.

The elevator stops and the doors open, leading to a pearl white hallway with golden lights.

Victoria moves first, taking a step and stopping right in front of the exit, and turning around. Some of that golden light frames her figure, as does the pearl white of the hallways, but it is her eyes that pull you in and make you freeze.

No one dares to move, and the doors close with a hiss.

With a jump, the elevator begins to move upward again. The human man near me stays frozen, sweat running down his temple. The lynthari on the other side twists her tail, making her look erratic and nervous. I sense multiple heartbeats speeding up. Gradually, the elevator picks up speed.

Victoria flattens her right hand, locking her fingers together into a lethal, flesh and bone blade.

Then the light disappears as the elevator enters a dark vertical tunnel, and a blinking red light starts up at the ceiling.

At that exact moment, as if on cue, everyone bursts into movement.

Victoria shoots ahead, using her hand to cut off the arm of the feylith closest to her. As the said feylith gathers mana to use a fire skill, Victoria, without hesitation, stabs her fingers toward his heart, not

caring that the healers might not be able to fix it. Yet, the feylith disappears as the crystal on his bracelet cracks when Victoria stabs her fingers into his chest.

I twist to duck under a lynthari charging at me and hit him with my shoulder, causing him to crash through a few people and into the metal wall of the elevator, which creaks and bends. Before he can attack me again, a vyssari behind him buries her fingers into the lynthari's leg and releases a burst of primordial lightning.

Victoria ducks an attack aimed her way, a swing with a short axe made of mana carried by a selari man. Another selari man attacks her from behind, moving at incredible speed. Yet, my sister faces both of them. A swing of her hand cuts off the hand holding the axe, and she matches the speed of the selari attacking her from behind, stabbing her hand through his neck and grabbing his spine.

The second selari disappears, and the one with the axe regrows his hand to attack her again, but he gets stabbed from the back by a blonde haired human woman. Victoria then cuts through his belly, causing his insides to fall out.

As the red light stops blinking, we get over the wall, and light shines back inside as the elevator speeds up even further. Many more skyscrapers outside are entirely destroyed, toppling over, with an abundance of participants flying about. I refocus and dodge as a figure flies by me and slams against the glass of the elevator, which cracks and gets splashed with blood.

The entire time, I'm using my eyes to read the flow of mana, disrupting the activation of mana-based skills. Any domains, explosions, and anything that would destroy this place too quickly. Even while restricting myself, I find myself quickly jumping from person to person to do this.

My detection picks up on something, and I see a green arrow shooting toward our elevator, an arrow bigger than the elevator itself.

Releasing oscillating mana through my feet, I blow out the bottom of the elevator, causing the cabin to continue its ascent as we all fall down.

Victoria finds her bearings quickly, holding the vyssari woman by her leg even as the woman tries to kill her with lightning. My sister swings and slams her against another participant before stabbing her hand through both of them.

Also noticing the green arrow, she jumps toward the ceiling of the elevator before it disappears, using it as a launchpad toward me, twisting along the way to avoid a projectile from one of the participants and destroying another one with a swing of her hand. In the next moment, the elevator gets entirely obliterated, and the arrow continues through the skyscraper.

Before the guy can shoot more projectiles at Vic, my own mana projectile stabs through his back and pierces his barrier, which I finally disrupt, and his body disappears.

With my sister by my side, we continue to fall toward the clouds. I disrupt attacks shooting our way and observe the fights in the distance. A powerful pulse of mana catches my attention, and I notice multiple thin skyscrapers being torn, cut in two, and floating into the air to gather around one figure floating in the sky. The skyscrapers are set horizontally as someone uses a skill to launch the entire buildings as projectiles, while another attendee uses walls of fire to meet those projectiles and melt them.

Another barrage of green projectiles rains toward us, and, grabbing my sister's hand, I boost us toward a skyscraper, breaking through the glass and entering a pearl white hallway.

Both of us immediately turn to start running through it, heading toward the other side. One of my lances shoots through the wall ahead of us, stabbing into one of the participants. Vic moves in front of me, tanking a lightning strike heading our way. Then, picking up speed, she reaches the attacker in a blur and tears the vyssari in half before breaking through another window.

I follow her, jumping out just as another barrage of projectiles entirely destroys the skyscraper.

Chapter 857 - The viewers have voted

I throw multiple orbs behind us, and each one explodes as projectiles enter the field surrounding them, destroying the projectiles in the process.

Vic continues to fall while occasionally pushing off the side of the skyscraper to speed up her descent as we head towards the clouds. I send my senses out towards and through them to make sure they're not dangerous. Sensing a few signatures below them, I nod at Vic.

In response, she speeds up. Each step she takes across the side of the metal and glass skyscraper sends ripples through it like a stone cast into a lake without seeming to break anything.

Spinning in the air, I dodge a few more projectiles, and then we pierce the clouds. It takes a few seconds of low visibility while we're surrounded by the clouds, and then we are on the other side. The area below is entirely different. As far as I can see, there are a myriad of floating platforms. Some of them are just small enough for one person to stand on, while others are as big as entire buildings.

The air here has a yellow haze to it that many would compare to a Mexico filter, and the skyscrapers continue down where there are more clouds, but these ones have lightning cracking through them.

All of this was made by people, by a company, just for these games. Just how cool is that?

I move to the side, dodging more projectiles. Waving my hand, I use my eyes to take control over one of them and send it shooting off into the distance, where it causes a huge explosion. Vic is already jumping across the platforms and heading towards the next attacker, who strikes at her and then begins to panic as nothing manages to slow her down. The vyssari tries to teleport away, but sweeping over him with my gaze, I break the structure of his skill.

My sister crashes into him, grabbing him by both of his hands before tearing him in half. In the middle of that movement, the vyssari disappears thanks to his bracelet, and she stands there calmly looking around.

Boosting myself, I reach the platform and land beside her, tapping on her shoulder and pointing up.

As I do, a man with a bear head pierces the clouds, and around him are floating multiple skyscrapers in an impressive display of [Telekinesis].

Seeing the platforms, the bear man swings his hand, shooting those skyscrapers at Xixi, whom I see in the distance, surrounded by a green suit of armor that makes her as big as a building. That armor grows further in size, as does her mana output, as she breaks through the skyscrapers to head out and attack the bear man while he pulls many of the surrounding platforms towards himself to use them as projectiles.

Placing my hand on my sister, I teleport both of us and then watch as the place where we stood gets blasted away by a dark blue flame. I shoot a lance at the attacker before teleporting us again. Along the

way, someone tries to disrupt my teleport, but I push through, so that instead of disrupting it, they find the exit point.

Just where we appear, three lynthari women who seem like they might be triplets are waiting and attack us.

Victoria pushes me away, and through the place where I just stood passes a sword that one of the lynthari holds. Behind that sword, a purple line remains, and she moves to attack me again.

I block her sword with the back of my hand after modifying my defensive layer against the frequency of her attack. A pulse of my kinetic energy hits her, but she tanks it without taking any wounds and switches to another fast attack as I reinforce my body and match her speed.

She rushes at me as I jump back onto another platform, each of her movements trailed by a purple glow, matching the swing of her sword. She gets annoyed when I jump back again instead of meeting her, shouting something at me, but I just jump again and then come to a stop. A field expands from her, a domain to stop my teleportation, and she gathers mana to boost her movement to charge me.

But before she can, she finally senses another presence whose mana signature I'd been hiding and turns around, her eyes widening as she sees Victoria right behind her with the other two lynthari nowhere to be found.

The skin on Victoria's body tears as she increases her speed and slams the attacking sword away. Meanwhile, I take over the field and use its anti-teleportation effects against the lynthari, and after two exchanges, Victoria punches the lynthari woman's face, breaking something.

Victoria follows it by grabbing the lynthari's hair and slamming her head against her knee, causing the bracelet to shine and the woman to disappear. Then, swinging her hand, she gets rid of the blood clinging to it.

More participants begin appearing in the area. Much like me, they must have noticed that there is a ceiling at the top, so the only way forward is to go down.

Out of nowhere, a ping of sound spreads through the whole of the battlefield.

"The viewers have voted, and we have listened, even if it might be early for something of this scale. But no one can say we don't deliver," Melek's excited voice spreads out everywhere, audible even through the explosions.

"A Champion Grade monster, a Griffin, will be summoned in three seconds and will stay for a duration of one minute! This monster selection comes courtesy of our top spectator!" he shouts.

In the sky, a huge circle appears, glowing red and pulsating, its color becoming darker as it starts letting out more and more light. It almost looks divine in a way, though most of it has no real function other than visuals.

"Three!" Melek starts his count.

I let mana shoot out from me and place multiple teleportation markers. Vic grabs my hand and opens it, placing a finger there.

"Could you stop doing that?"

She entirely ignores me. "Do not forget, Natty. Thirty percent. I will take care of the rest."

"Two!" Melek's voice shakes the place, and most of the attacks pause, as most of the participants don't start new fights and instead stare up towards the circle.

"It was up to fifty percent," I complain.

"And I said up to thirty. Okay?"

"Okay," I sigh.

"One!" Melek's voice thunders, and in a flash the circle disappears.

In its place floats a griffin no bigger than a horse, its lion's body suspended in the air by wings. It has the head of an eagle and powerful front legs ending in massive claws.

No one attacks, as everyone seems to be aware of the presence that's appeared here. Everyone can feel it. Everyone can see the predatory way its eyes sweep the area.

Its wings spread wide open and shake as if ridding itself of some lingering stiffness, and then the monster shrieks.

For a moment, everyone's skills flicker out and are canceled. Then the monster isn't there, and instead is a mile away on one of the platforms. Its head lowers, and with its beak, it pulls at something, making me realize it's the head from the body of a velnar participant.

The Griffin opens its beak, swallowing the head before pulling off the leg of the guy and swallowing it as well, careful not to soil its fur or feathers.

A dozen attacks rain down on the monster, who just shrieks again in annoyance, disrupting most of them and then finding another target. It disappears, flying and moving with a speed no one has a way of tracking. When it appears again, it holds another velnar in its front legs, with one of its claws stabbed into his heart.

And then I realize that the man was dead before the bracelet could activate. It is possible that it has something to do with the speed, but it is also possible that the creators of the Game simply allowed it.

"50 seconds remain!" Melek announces happily, not bothering to explain anything.

The Griffin hears him, twisting its head as if trying to track that voice, but failing in the end. So instead, in a few seconds, it tears the rest of the body apart and looks around for more prey.

Out of the thousands of people on this platform, the Griffin charges yet another velnar man, which makes me suspect that it's targeting the biggest prey with the most meat on it.

The velnar this time isn't such an easy target. When the Griffin appears again, its claws are scraping against the velnar's chest, but they haven't pierced through, as the entirety of the man's mana seems to form a defensive layer around him and reinforcement.

That guy screams in pure terror mixed with desperate defiance. He slams against the Griffin, but his arms just pass through the empty air, as the monster isn't there anymore.

Instead, the monster is a mile away, holding a different velnar whose heart it has pierced, and bites off his head. It entirely ignores the velnar it just surprised, as well as a barrage of attacks that weakly make impact against its fur and feathers, causing no damage. Only when a bigger projectile explodes forth and bursts into flames does the monster shriek, disrupting the attack before it reaches it. And the shriek even seems to affect the Primordial Lightning one of the participants has been launching its way, along with the flames of some sort of Fragment.

During this time, none of the participants bother to fight each other. There are some rushing down to pass through the clouds into the lower level in hopes the monster won't follow. But I'm more interested in the participants who remain here and are clearly getting ready to attack the monster. There are hundreds of them.

And I also continue to try to keep my body as stable as possible. All out of fear that I will be teleported out if the bracelet judges me "near dead." I still remember what happened during the last tournament, and I don't want a repeat.

Even so, I'm enjoying the current situation. With each charge the Griffin makes, I learn to observe it a bit more. Amazingly, mana has nothing to do with it, all of it's just the sheer power and dexterity of that body. The monster barely has any mana at all. Every time someone dies, I observe the movements of its body. I sense the kinetic energy its muscles produce.

With all these observations, the Griffin still terrifies me. It's not only fear for myself, but for my sister next to me. And as the monster moves from participant to participant, some bracelets activate in time, and their wearers survive. It becomes very obvious that the organizers are playing favorites. But everyone already knew this would be a fucked-up Game.

A dozen or more velnar die, and only when ten seconds remain does everyone move as if it were planned out.

The man with the bear head uses his [Telekinesis] and halts the Griffin for the shortest moment. In the next, Xixi rains thousands of green, arrow-like projectiles down on it. A vyssari woman nearby launches a white lightning projectile, and a long-haired human man throws a spear made of green crystal that's twice as long as he is tall.

One of the remaining velnar teleports through that barrage, steps onto the Griffin's side, and with pure rage in his eyes, grabs and pulls on a wing, tearing it off entirely.

Finally, the Griffin breaks free of the telekinetic hold and shrieks, causing all the attacks to disappear and the mana around it to disperse. It waves its remaining wing and disappears, appearing in front of the bear-headed man with telekinesis, though the monster moves slower this time.

The bear man slaps his hands together, causing the air to visibly ripple, and the Griffin stops again. It is about to shriek when Xixi crashes against it, and, surrounded by her green armor, holds the monster's beak closed.

As the bear man starts bleeding from his eye, another participant closes in. A handsome selari man jumps over from one of the nearby platforms, carrying a sword and shield to attack. But his target isn't the Griffin. With a smile, he coats his weapon in oscillating mana and stabs at the bear man, who roars at him and moves to defend himself.

In the next moment, the Griffin overpowers Xixi and bites off her arm just as the velnar, which tore its wing, teleports there again and punches in a second attack, but the monster charges again.

The entire time, I'm watching this with the [Empyrean Lance] floating by my side, weaving layers of kinetic energy around it. Just as the Griffin reappears, I release the projectile after predicting where it would appear.

My lance shoots ahead with a thunderous crack and reaches the monster in a blink, targeted at its head.

And then I watch as the Griffin flings its head back, but not from getting hit. Instead, it holds the [Empyrean Lance] in its beak, and its eyes find me way too quickly, locking onto me. It bites down on the lance, crushing it, seemingly not caring about the explosion right in its face, instead, all of it gets pulled inside its beak as the monster swallows it.

It then shakes, and with visible speed, its wing grows back.

"Five seconds remaining!" Melek's voice calls excitedly.

The Griffin lifts its beak upward and screeches, disrupting everyone's primordial energies, fragments, and all the mana in the area. That screech is long and drawn out, and as it hangs in the air, the monster grows in size, adding two more, smaller wings growing from its back.

"Looks like someone didn't know the rule of not using anything Empyrean-related or hyper condensed mana against the Griffin!" Melek laughs out loud and then calls out even louder, "The Ruler of Envy has been generous and has donated a large sum, and by large, I mean extremely large, for us to twist the rules a little bit."

The Griffin continues to stare at me, ignoring its favorite snack, the velnars in the area.

"The Griffin's summoning duration has been extended by one minute!" Melek shouts, and the Griffin disappears.

Chapter 858 - Why would that crazy asshole do that!?

Victoria throws me her bracelet and, grabbing it, I teleport away just as she slams into the Griffin and stabs her fingers into its neck.

The Griffin bites at her with a speed she can't dodge, and its front leg guts her body horizontally, separating her legs from her torso. Even then, despite losing one arm, her upper half continues to attack it.

I reappear at another spot. Victoria grows from the finger I'm holding and leaves another with me while saying, "Keep the bracelet for now."

I nod and watch as the legs the Griffin cut off grow into an entire duplicate. That duplicate tears off all five of its fingers, throwing them around, and a new Victoria grows from each of them. All of them attack the monster and hang onto it, even as it charges me, and I teleport with the finger again. Victoria, staying behind, charges the monster and joins the duplicates already fighting it.

One of the duplicates clashes against the Griffin, overclocking her body and exploding after a single punch, but the Griffin's head flings back, and two more duplicates follow in the exact same way. More and more duplicates reappear from pieces of flesh, attacking and immediately exploding as they push their bodies far beyond their limits.

By now, the Griffin is missing one eye, one wing, and one of its legs is heavily damaged, with multiple bleeding holes covering its body. Still, the monster shrieks in anger and charges, breaking through the skyscraper and shaking the Victorias off its back.

Even that doesn't stop my sister. Her duplicates charge, jumping off the platforms and the skyscraper in a way that ripples the surfaces as if they were made of water without breaking anything. They rush at the Griffin like they're the ones hunting it, while even more duplicates keep popping up.

Meanwhile, I boost myself down along with the platform I'm standing on, dodging the selari man with the sword and shield who passes through, slashing his blade. He lifts his shield just as I shoot my projectiles at him, blocking it with a clear ring of metal. More of my projectiles move past his sides to turn around and hit his back, but he channels mana through his shield, and all my projectiles get pulled toward it, slamming against the metal.

Then that selari man rushes away as the bear man with telekinesis follows, shouting at him and launching projectiles at the man.

A velnar man teleports over to the Griffin to fight it directly, but he doesn't join forces with Vic. Instead, he swings his arms, destroying one of her duplicates and charging the monster. My sister doesn't seem to mind and ignores him, the two of them pursuing the Griffin, who continues fending them off as well as a hundred or so more attacks.

Some participants use the distraction of the Griffin to fight among themselves, while others launch sneak attacks against the ones fighting the Griffin. Some even attack both the Griffin and the people facing it.

Explosions are all over the place as all of it ramps up, and of course, I take note of the way the Griffin looks at me.

It doesn't try to hunt for velnar anymore, it fights off the participants attacking it and constantly tries to get to me, while Victoria proceeds to stand in its way every time. No matter how the monster moves, there's always a bit of Victoria's flesh clinging to it, and her duplicates grow to continue the attack.

Meanwhile, I have my [Weave] already set in place. A few of the participants are caught up in observing it, trying to hijack, disrupt, destroy, or use it against me, but I keep up the effort necessary to keep it mine. And so I use it to teleport all over the place, observing the Griffin and teleporting. Sometimes leaping multiple times a second, and others just once or twice every five seconds.

A single failure could easily mean my death, and I have no illusions that my bracelet would work properly with Envy around. It would probably also be good content to have one of the siblings die to create drama around, preferably Vic's survival, who's so far been showing off a lot more out of the two of us.

She's currently demonstrating just how ridiculous she is with her ability to constantly duplicate herself without losing her mind, all while facing a Champion grade monster.

I teleport again and then duck under the green projectiles someone's been shooting at me. A platform thrown by telekinesis flies over me and crashes against the selari man with the sword and shield, and instead of defending myself against the explosion, I teleport again. Accelerating my mind just that little bit as I do, I observe the twitches of the Griffin's muscles, trying to predict its movements and teleport again. Not even for a second do I try to actively track the monster. If I did rely on just that, I'd die.

Reappearing again, I see a barrage of attacks raining down on Vic, and two humans in armor attacking her, trying to wound her with some sort of poisonous weapon, likely hoping it'll affect the duplicates as well.

Everyone here is doing their utmost fucking best to fuck over everyone else, while the Griffin hunts me like I'm the best snack it's ever seen. The longer it stretches, the more maniacal its eyes seem.

I'm not even surprised. My ichor is full of hyper condensed mana, my ability to create an [Empyrean Lance], and my body itself in the form of my mana vessel trait. For a monster that seems to regenerate by consuming mana, I must seem like a goddamn treat. I've been warned many times that people might want to kidnap me for my eyes, or even my other traits, or my mana-conductive body. But who knew the first real threat I'd face would be a chicken with the body of a lion.

But I've had enough, especially as I sense more projectiles being aimed at me and more people attacking Vic instead of fighting off the monster.

Keeping it down to thirty percent of my capacity, I cut the palm of my left hand and let my blood drip out, gathering it into a ball.

As if smelling it, the Griffin shrieks, pushing everyone away and charging at me with incredible speed, but I'm already gone.

Reappearing high in the air, I start forming [Empyrean Lance] and break it apart before it fully forms, taking all that mana under my control. I let it surround the orb, and they begin to bounce off each other, strengthening one another.

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 58 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 59]

Checking the bracelet Victoria gave me one last time, I teleport away. While reappearing on one of the smaller platforms, my mood improves.

The Griffin stands where I stood before and stares with starry eyes at the orb made of my blood, pale blue mana, and the golden and white streaks of mana around the core. Then, without hesitation, it gobbles it down, eating it in a way that makes it look like it's about to choke.

The shriek it lets out this time damages my eardrums, and most of the mana constructs in the air disrupt fully, though my [Weave] fails to completely break apart. Especially not the part I modified to endure the shriek.

[Weave - lvl 24 > Weave - lvl 25]

[Weave - lvl 25 > Weave - lvl 26]

My last few checks confirm that everything is ready and functioning, and I feel a deep satisfaction as they do, especially since not once did I go over my promised limit. This entire situation, all these people, honestly piss me off.

I form another lance and shoot it at the Griffin, who catches it in its beak and breaks it before devouring it.

And then another.

And another.

And a few more.

At this point, most of the fighting stops. A few people are shouting at me, throwing themselves forward and attacking me with everything they have just to stop me, but it's too late.

The Griffin grows to twice the size it was at the start, and its shadow looms threateningly as six pairs of wings violently snap open with a deafening crack.

POV Participant in the Game sponsored by Halcyon Trust Corporation

Every Griffin has a stomach that converts the mana and items it eats into a healing factor, and into temporary enhancements for itself. Everyone knows that.

So why, why would that crazy asshole do that!?

The Griffin is now gleaming with power, fully healed. That Champion grade monster, which should be one of the simpler ones to deal with if you come prepared, is now somewhere around the middle grade of Champion monsters.

And that ridiculous bastard calmly stands there on his goddamn platform as if a single miscalculation wouldn't mean his death. He isn't even smirking like you'd expect of a crazy person as he sweeps his gaze around the arena, while the Griffin seems to be waiting for him to feed it another empyrean projectile like the ones he's been using.

But instead, that man finally finds what he was looking for and speaks into the silence, pointing his finger at a human man. "You. You attacked me like three times, and my sister twice with that nasty poison."

The man's confusion turns to horror as a pale blue mass of mana with a flickering white and golden core forms on his back, and the Griffin snaps toward him. Before he can even move, the monster is there, holding his torn-off head and biting into said mana.

And that crazy, crazy man nods in satisfaction while raising his voice. "Now, you fuckers. Why don't you attack me again? Maybe try to be a good sneaky little shit and try to use a mental attack to force my mana to go out of control, or try to connect to my sister's duplicate to search for her mind to break it."

He turns and points at a feylith floating nearby. On that man, the same empyrean mana flickers, and in the next moment, the Griffin is there, holding his dead body.

It then sits there waiting, as if for more food, looking back at the man.

Like everyone with at least some experience, I realize he must be using that ridiculous array that still remains in the sky to send empyrean mana to the people he must have already marked.

In quick succession, he points at five more people, and each of them dies while he watches on coldly. Though there are a few shrewd ones that are fast enough, and they move to kill themselves and activate the bracelet to teleport themselves out before the Griffin gets to them.

At this point, not even the most powerful participants have a chance against the monster, and barely anyone dares to move. Every time that man points at someone, it's because that person used some especially nasty way to attack him or his sister. I know for sure some of the others attacked him much more, but he doesn't point at them, as if there were some sort of twisted logic in his selection.

But even the Griffin's time limit starts coming to an end, and that man stops pointing at people.

That causes the monster to look at him, as if he were the last remaining source of food it could get.

Melek starts counting down the last few seconds when that human man arrogantly lifts his hand to point. But this time, he doesn't point at anyone else. No, he points at his own left arm, which starts glowing in the brightest golden and white colors. In the next moment, he disappears, leaving the arm floating there just as the Griffin reaches it.

The monster bites it and swallows, not caring about the impending explosion, but this time the explosion is different. There's a ridiculous amount of mana packed into that arm. Mana, and some sort of primordial energy, or is it multiple energies?

All of it explodes inside the Griffin's beak, causing the monster to scream in pain. Even then, it seems to endure it all. But this time, there's no mana left for it to absorb, all of it was almost perfectly used up in the explosion.

As the wounded monster begins to look around, its beak cracked and one of its eyes burnt, it stops and retches. From the inside, fingers connected together stab through the skin near the beak, and the arm twists upward and stabs into the monster's remaining eye.

The Griffin swings its talons, separating the arm from whatever is inside, but the arm hanging from its eye regrows a new body. She grabs the beak with her free arm to pull herself up while constantly stabbing at the eye with the other, trying to dig toward the brain.

I almost pity the monster with how that crazy, determined woman is still going at it, but it finally disappears, dismissed.

Still in that silence and stiffness filling the air, Melek starts shouting excitedly, saying he hopes we enjoyed the result of the spectators' vote.

The woman who had been attacking the Griffin then jumps up, returning to that human man, who hands her a bracelet before the two of them jump down, heading for the lower layer.

Chapter 859 - I miscalculated

I have a hard time deciding if I like Griffins or not.

On one side, they seem almost like these cute, murderous machines ready to kill a person for even a bit of mana, and I can respect that. They are cruel, but looking at it another way, aren't cats the same?

Probably even worse. I've seen cats do terrible things to other living beings, like squirrels and rats, just for the love of the game, not because of a need for food. The Griffin at least went for the kill before it started eating.

On the other side, Griffins also seem to like mana, and that creates a possibility of them being mana thieves. And we don't like that.

I stop swiftly and hold my hand out in front of my sister, who stops on the platform next to me. We watch as one of the participants approaches the clouds, which have lightning going through them, and the moment he comes close, a lash of lightning hits him, damaging him enough that he's teleported outside.

Victoria moves first, and I follow her as she breaks a window leading into a skyscraper and then shifts to a slow, calm walk through the hallways.

This event requires us to get one of 1000 mana stones. That means it will likely continue until all of them are taken. According to what I have learned, that means up to three days, even if it could be much shorter. After all, it might be possible for one person to gather up hundreds of the mana stones and, in so doing, block the way forward for many participants.

While I mull that over, both of us stop and listen to the sound of cracking glass as someone steps over it, and walking out from behind the corner is a man entirely cloaked in shadows and holding a glowing, red-bladed dagger. And over his head floats a similar shadowy crown.

He glances our way and, confirming that we don't seem inclined to attack, walks away, finding a staircase heading down.

Me and Vic follow along behind him as the skyscraper seems not to be affected by the lightning storm outside. I think it is a way to force participants into smaller, narrower places, allowing for a higher variety of battlefields.

The man covered in shadows must know we're walking behind him, but even now, he doesn't seem to mind and heads down, and the lower we go, the fewer lights there are.

No one here needs it, but at some point, I create a thermal cube to light the way. I just feel more comfortable having a bit of cozy light nearby. The cube floats and slowly spins over my shoulder, throwing a gentle golden light over the walls while also creating shadows of the railings and our own bodies.

My perception is raised as I observe the man. I wait for an attack or anything, really. Yet, he doesn't bother. Instead, he just continues down.

"Any idea who he is?" I ask my sister, not caring if he hears us.

"Absolute Candidate Euris, said to have been declared by a wyvern," Victoria says.

"Damn, a wyvern? I thought all those guys hated the system? How can they even declare people?"

"I do not think there are a lot of details available about that, Nathaniel."

"I see. Do you think he'll tell me if I ask him nicely?"

"He doesn't seem the type," she says, her eyes watching the man the same way I do, ready for any sign of attack.

Yet even now, it doesn't come.

A few participants find their way into this skyscraper as well and begin their rush down the stairs. When they notice us, they begin attacking immediately. Throwing explosive projectiles down after us, using their presences for intimidation, or straight up charging into melee.

For the most part, a few lances are enough, and Victoria takes care of the melee-range ones. Interestingly, this place has very durable walls. Not one of them takes any damage, not from my projectiles, nor from explosions, nor from Victoria slamming some poor participant into them.

It's not like they're indestructible, but they require some amount of effort to break. My lance can pierce through when I try, but any more would require more than 30 percent of my abilities.

Maybe I should hire these guys to build my future moon base.

When the stairs finally end, we enter a long hallway framed on both sides by big windows through which I can see the storm clouds which are now above us. The hallway itself is at ground level, which radiates heat, like a lot of it. Like "the floor is lava" level of heat. That part of the ground is red, and there's an array of narrow, twisting blue pathways that don't radiate heat, tracing routes over it.

The sky is still filled with that nasty lightning, and there are big clouds of green mist moving about like a living being. Throughout the space are tall, round towers, like the sort some fantasy wizard would have.

There are also lakes, a few mountain peaks capped with snow, and mysterious pits whose bottoms I can't reach even with my senses, nor can my eyes pierce the darkness within.

And of course, participants are battling all over. I can sense a few really nasty arrays and domains that I suspect somebody must have set before the other participants came down. I think these people went through the second layer as quickly as possible to make their preparations here. Some of the arrays are impressive, and they're not all that different from mine, to the point that I don't think I could remove them easily.

Euris, whom we'd been following, is already gone, disappearing who knows where, when Melek's voice carries through this layer.

"With great pleasure, I want to announce yet another special spectator! The guest isn't here just yet, but I am far too excited not to share the news right away! He contacted us directly, and after a brief discussion, we agreed to arrange his transport here!"

His voice cuts off as if he wants us to muse it over, though I suspect this pause is mostly meant for the viewers and spectators to theorise with each other.

Then Melek shouts again in a gleeful voice, "For now, I will keep their identity to myself so you guys will have something to think over! Please don't hate me too much for that!"

Me and Vic look at each other, but neither of us says anything. I highly suspect the invisible cameras are currently zooming in on participants' faces to fish for a reaction, but they won't be getting any from me.

I shield the two of us, and we begin to run through the blue path, heading towards one of the towers nearby, or well, at least one that hasn't exploded yet.

Even an hour later, we have no mana stones, nor have we seen any sign of one. Once in a while, Melek announces some famous participant finding his mana stone and using it to "pass" through this event.

There are no ridiculous audience votes like summoning another Griffin, but there are a few fun ones. For example, increasing gravity fivefold for five minutes. Another one is to plunge this whole place into total darkness, but that one is quickly canceled as it seems a number of people in the audience threw up because of the night vision cameras.

Some of them are straight up ridiculous.

Like having to do a short dance every time you kill someone to avoid being kicked out. That one lasts surprisingly for half an hour, and the audience doesn't seem to get bored of it. And the participants continue to fight, not seeming to mind the new "rule".

There are probably many more, but the area of effect is usually much smaller, often targeting certain participants. Mostly the more famous ones. Some of them get harassed by the audience, while others get powerful single-use items and such.

Many of these participants are clearly taking advantage of that, putting their best side forward. Others are trying to promote some company or other when they think the camera is on them.

And the longer this goes on, the deeper the contempt forming inside of me grows for all of this.

This is a joke.

It takes the act of competing against each other, the test of skill, mind, and body that I enjoy so much, and twists it. It feels like they aren't even taking the effort people have put in to get here seriously, treating them like simple puppets thrown into an arena for a laugh.

With Vic, I search through the area, sometimes getting into smaller, quick fights, but never seeking them out. There are a few times when I think the camera focuses on us. After all, we're both likely to be the newest additions to the system out of everyone here. Bums from a newly awakened rural planet. Still attendees of the tutorial, even if talented enough to become S-rank.

I don't think any of it matters to the organizers or the audience. We're just siblings. A Chekhov's gun waiting for one of us to die or lose so they can see the reaction of the other, or so they can pit us against each other.

But meanwhile, there are many more famous names people are interested in.

So we don't do anything outrageous, and after a few more boring hours that only serve to make me more frustrated, both of us have our mana stones.

Unlike many of the others, we don't remain behind to find more of them, but crush them right away to appear back inside that small room where we were before the event started.

With our appearance here announced, Selene and her two colleagues rush in, congratulating the two of us while dragging us through the hallway, where we meet more participants who've advanced in similar fashion.

"So far, the audience seems to like you! You did brilliantly on the second layer, which shocked quite a few people. But they got a bit bored by your performance on the third, honey," Selene says. "It wasn't bad, but it lacked any sort of extravagant flair, if you know what I mean!"

"I am well aware of that, Selene," Victoria replies calmly.

The five of us step onto a platform that functions like a high-speed horizontal elevator, hurtling us through the desert toward a cluster of towering buildings in the distance.

"I'm glad you are!" Selene continues. "To be honest, if you do well, it benefits me too! We have a bit of downtime now, probably a day or so, which gives me enough time to commission some proper clothes for the two of you and book another interview with Melek. Just keep in mind that since you passed, the organizers will be paying a premium for any dirt on you, and the amount of money they'll be able to spend will only skyrocket if you clear the second game. They love digging up nasty little secrets to provoke a reaction or rile up the audience. Though I'm still not sure what narrative they're looking to build around you."

She taps her chin thoughtfully as the platform accelerates, narrowly missing another platform a few times.

"Of course, they love the sibling dynamic," Selene muses. "But I don't know if they'll try to cast you as villains or heroes. Perhaps one of each? Nathaniel, sweetie, after your stunt with the Griffin, they could easily paint you as an arrogant, villainous type. Or maybe a rebel against the system? Who knows. Melek is entirely unpredictable, and he's the one calling the shots. That ridiculous man is the only one capable of keeping track of it all in that creepy head of his."

The platform finally grinds to a halt in front of a towering metallic skyscraper surrounded by lush, vibrant gardens that feel entirely unnatural here in the bone dry desert. We're led along a cobbled pathway running through the oasis. It's clearly just one of many such compounds, which makes sense. Organizations with the resources to construct entire layers for the first game wouldn't struggle to build a few buildings like these.

Once inside, Selene takes my measurements and departs, leaving me with barely enough time to settle into my quarters or take a shower before a sharp knock sounds at the door.

A sudden burst of suspicion makes me want to fire a lance straight through the door, a blood and empyrean mana lance powered by up to thirty percent of my total capacity and reinforced by up to thirty percent of my kinetic energy capabilities.

Suppressing the urge, I take a few steps forward and pull the door open.

I give it a fifty-fifty chance of being Envy or Adrian. And the opening door reveals the latter.

I almost slam it shut the moment I see his infuriatingly honest smile. To make it worse, he looks even younger than before. Where he previously resembled a well-maintained man in his mid-forties, he now looks as though he is barely pushing his late thirties.

"I can leave if you prefer," Adrian says smoothly.

Instead of answering, I step aside, and he walks into the room, looking around curiously.

"They didn't invite you to the game, so you decided to show up and cause trouble anyway?" I ask, shutting the door behind him.

"Oh no, I was invited. I simply turned it down. While it looked entertaining, it felt a bit too shameless to pit myself against these people."

"As if you wouldn't join the moment there was something to gain."

"Possibly," he agrees.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Your handler is likely too preoccupied preparing for whatever is brewing on the twelfth floor of Beyond, so she doesn't know. But this Game is about to become very interesting too."

"Envy?"

"Envy, and a few others," he confirms.

"So the two of you are best friends now, sharing secrets?"

"I wouldn't put it quite like that," Adrian replies, his grin widening as he clearly savors my frustration at being left out of the loop.

So I lock eyes with him and ask. "Have you seen Beyond's Individual Rankings lately?"

For a fraction of a second, and only thanks to my thought acceleration, I see his smile falter just that tiny little bit.

POV Ruby

Maybe choosing the Game as a place to let Nathaniel "rest" was a mistake. I know him at least a little after all this time, and I can see it on his face. That growing, dark frustration, waiting for the moment he decides to snap and release it all.

I expected him to get annoyed, but I probably miscalculated, and he seems to look down on these people even more than I thought he would. At least his sister is there to rein him in a little.

In a way, he seems similar to Master Lissandra. She would also have utterly despised the Game.

But even if there is something I've missed, there isn't much I can do to help him, and I'm beginning to worry that we may have been tricked. Both me and Diligence.

Maybe the Beyond's main defensive array was purposefully handed over to the imitation so she could get into what she is doing now. Maybe there are people who are now relying on me and Diligence to be distracted by her to put their own plans into motion.

There isn't much I can do about that now, other than send in a few of my available Masters of Greed and notify a few Rulers who might be willing to help.

For now, I have to focus on keeping the tutorial stable and not allowing Diligence's near panicked emotions to affect me.

The Imitation of Master Lissandra is advancing something she's been sneakily doing for a while, and she's been ramping it up now that she has that ridiculous dagger.

There's no stopping her now, but we still have to do our best to keep the tutorial from breaking.

Chapter 860 - Grand Prize

POV Kim Min-Jae

"Kevin, are you sure you know where we're going?" I ask, barely managing to catch up to him, breathless. It's already been what feels like days as we go through the labyrinth, avoiding traps, disassembling them, fighting monsters, or hiding from them.

"I guess," he shrugs with a smile. "You don't have to worry about that. I'm sure I can smell Maya nearby. Just a few days, a week tops, and we'll get to her!"

"There's no way you can smell Maya."

Kevin smiles brightly and sniffs a few times, then points in one direction. "Ha! Then how do you explain this!?"

I look that way, and there is nothing there, just one of many hallways. Possibly with yet another Avatar of a long-dead person that visited the labyrinth before there was any form of civilization on Earth.

"If you don't want to tell me, I'll understand... I trust you, you know."

"I know," he smiles. "And Kim, I also know the Envy subclass doesn't fit you." He begins to walk, and I follow him, using my primordial energy to look for enemies and [Telekinesis] to hide the tremors of our steps.

"It does fit me," I shake my head. "I... it just does."

"Kim, my naive little bud, you damn Korean weirdo with all your weird-ass siblings and fucked-up parents, may they shit themselves in public. Oh, and your sense of fashion is just a single level better than Nathaniel's, so basically trash."

“Ehm. Okay?”

“Ehm. Okay,” he repeats mockingly. “I said it doesn’t fit you, and so it doesn’t. And you should listen to me, because I seem to have a sense for it.” He taps on his temple and then on his nose.

“Sure.”

“And don’t be so meek. Disagree. Fight me or something. Insult me as you did back in the good old times. You remember that one time when we fought, and you bit me on the shin? I don’t think I was ever as proud of you as I was on that day.”

“Kevin...”

“Yup?”

“I think you’re dead.”

“Am I?”

“I think Lily killed you.”

“Did she now?”

“I’m not sure... Everything feels weird. This place. You. The light I saw when I came here. And...”

He lifts his finger to stop me from asking, but continues to smile. “You have to watch your words. It’s always listening, adapting, recording.” He waves his finger. “And we have to hurry. There’s a human woman who, even long after her death, continues to cause trouble, and this place... well, I smell that very interesting things will happen. Whether good or terrible is yet to be decided.”

Kevin's walk begins to pick up speed as he pushes between trees. Droplets of water continue to fall from the leaves like dew, but none of it hits us as his [Reflection] constantly activates, deflecting them all.

My mind feels like it's been torn. I want to clear it out, to find out what exactly is going on, but at the same time I... I don't want this to stop.

As I gulp, I feel as if I've got something stuck in my throat, and the words become blurry for a while. I'm so useless. I'm the worst. I'm weak.

I don't even notice when he stops and find myself crashing into his back, almost falling as he takes a deep breath and turns around to face me.

"You, my friend," he says, "need someone to kick you around a little bit. To steel your mind and to make you stop thinking of useless things. Do what you really want to do, not what you think you should! You're still acting as if you have to wait for the approval of your parents and trying to fit in. I'd hoped Daron would whip you into shape. Nathaniel could work, but he's been useless, he barely understands himself. Tess would rather let you suffer a bit longer so you can be stronger, and Izzy would only coddle you. Maybe Maya? She has the potential to become a great muscle mommy just the way I like it, but she's way too lazy, and she's not ambitious enough, even if that might change here."

While shaking his head, he makes a sad face that is clearly there to make fun of me, as I can see the corner of his mouth constantly lifting upwards.

"I don't need your help," I say.

"Maybe, but you want it."

"I..."

"Ha, not the answer you expected, right? Reflected straight back at you, you too-tall twerp! Let's hurry then, through the mysterious Labyrinth of Xyphos!" His voice turns to a whisper as he looks around, as if checking to see if someone is listening before saying, "By the way, this is the real one, not some tutorial copy."

He begins to rush under the trees, this time even reflecting the branches, and I don't even have time to think as I hurry to follow him.

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POV Nathaniel

Melek smiles after yet another round of applause from the audience, and his band plays yet another cheerful jingle. Vic and I wait for them to calm down after the last barrage of comments from the spectators, which he read out loud for the sake of getting a fun reaction out of us.

The place we find ourselves in this time is much bigger than it was before, but there are still the same circular tribunes, and we sit in the middle on a raised platform. I would estimate there are a few thousand people here, arrayed in a blend of many races.

"I personally still can't get over that unnamed noble house inviting you to visit their holiday moon, Mister Gwyn. I have to tell you," he whispers, "that their daughters are well known for... well, "enjoying the company" of people with interesting traits like yours. But onto another question. How are you still alive?"

I tilt my head in confusion, and Melek smiles while the audience laughs.

"We've been keeping track of your stats during the first game and even went over some of the records, slowing them down to see if anyone had poisoned you or otherwise damaged you! There was nothing of the sort, yet your vitals were constantly on the border of forcing you out."

"Hell yeah!" someone from the audience shouts.

Melek smiles patiently. "I appreciate the comment, but our guards will still have to escort you out. You'll also be fined in accordance with the contract you signed to take part in this live audience. But still... thank you."

His eyes look anything but appreciative to me. Even as he smiles, I can see a coldness in his eyes as he tracks the man who shouted, being escorted out.

The audience claps as the prompt signs signal they should, and Melek turns back to me. "We even checked your Crescent Lifeline. But as expected of our premier sponsor, Crescent Smithies, whose products are all now available at your local distributor, it was totally undamaged."

"How would I know that?"

Melek chuckles. "I guess. How would you know, Mister Gwyn?" his charming-ass smile doesn't disappear at all despite my lackluster answer, "but why don't we watch some of the records my team has been able to acquire? I bet the audience will find them interesting!"

Both Vic and I wait, and as the recording starts playing, we watch it along with everyone else, even as some people in the audience gasp or make weird, sad noises.

"Nathaniel, can you describe what we are looking at?"

"Something that should constitute a breach of my privacy."

"It is great to see you and your sister keep such a brave face," Melek says before raising his voice toward the audience. "Unfortunately, we were unable to get any records from Earth, as you know, the system only begins to record once a planet begins its awakening and the non-attack phase and tutorial start. So, what you're seeing is the recording of the fourth floor, right when Mister Gwyn and his group lost one of their party members, something of a father figure to the younger members!"

Breathing becomes a bit more difficult as I watch Hadwin's face during that fight when the First One appeared.

There are many things I want to do right now, but I will give them no pleasure in seeing it. I don't even turn away. Instead, I watch the record in its entirety while Melek goes so far as to pause and zoom in on different people's faces during certain parts.

He has that fake, sad smile that might seem charming to an outside observer as he repeatedly plays it in slow motion, zooming in on Hadwin's face for long moments at a time.

When the record stops playing and he dismisses it, Melek turns to me. "I'm so sorry, Mister Gwyn. It must have been terrible. Even those of us who didn't go through the tutorial have heard of its dangers and therefore hold our own First Generations in great esteem."

"Thank you, I appreciate it," I respond, giving a small smile. "I hope I will be able to repay your kindness someday."

Victoria and I wait in the dressing room while Selene and her team rush around, fitting us with new outfits for the next game.

There's also a new member on our team, a vyssari man standing on a chair so he can keep his eyes at the same level as ours while he talks to us. He's already been talking to us for hours and showing us records of the previous Games while sharing some of the rumors and expectations as to what the next game will be.

"If you thought the first game was unfair, the second one is much worse," the vyssari, Rake, says. "913 people have passed this time, which is a historically quite large number, so they'll try to thin the crowd down. People who did well with the audiences or donations will be given plenty of opportunities, while they'll be trying to quickly dispose of the less interesting ones. Melek likes to start working more seriously on his storylines during the second game, so be ready for that. If you two weren't so fucking weird, I'd be telling you to try and act a little, but I bet you wouldn't listen."

"I apologize for the inconvenience. I realize that Nathaniel and I are not exactly the ideal people for this," Victoria says.

"Concentration skill users tend to be like that, but sometimes the audience actually likes it. I have no fucking idea where Melek is going with his angle of giving Nathaniel such a sad backstory and painting you as the powerful older sister, but nothing good ever comes out of that man's head."

"Shh, you three, watch! That asshole is talking again!" Selene shouts out of nowhere, moving aside so we can see the screen.

There Melek stands, this time wearing a black suit that sharply contrasts with his pink hair and skin tone. On the sleeves of the suit are faint white dots, seemingly mimicking his white freckles, and his tie is the exact green and blue color of his eyes.

The selari smiles charmingly, walking through the hallways where his steps echo loud and clear. "As before, this message is dedicated to our exquisite participants. The fearless men and women who dare to seek glory within the Game!"

His steps halt in front of a small metallic pillar draped in a black cloth, hiding whatever is resting on top. "This," Melek says, "is our grand prize. The most magnificent reward ever offered in the history of the Game, graciously bestowed by a sponsor who insists on remaining so delightfully anonymous. I have to tell you, if I had something like this, I wouldn't give it up. But the message we received stated it must be offered as a reward, so here it is."

He smiles charmingly. "I mean, we could probably keep it, couldn't we? Slide it into an auction, pocket the fortune, and use a mere fraction of it to put up a prize that would still beat everything we've done before. But this universe is full of mysterious people, powerful people, scary people, and the rules are simple: you just don't fuck with them. And we highly suspect our anonymous donor is one such individual."

With one smooth, clean movement, Melek pulls away the cloth to reveal a small crystal, causing a memory of my Fragment of the Nameless Tree to flash behind my eyes. Resting on the pillar is a small crystal of a velvet indigo color that seems to absorb the light. It doesn't even look like a crystal, its surface has a weird, impossible softness to it.

"This is the Fragment of Starless Sky," Melek announces with a reverence that doesn't even seem feigned this time. "It is a pure fragment, and not a recreation from the tutorial. One of the most powerful and well-known fragments in existence! A fragment of the Elysian Frame from a dead god! As many historians will tell you, there aren't many fragments of this god left, meaning each one carries terrifying might."

The video zooms in on his face, and then cuts to a close-up of the fragment resting on the pillar.

"And this is what you are fighting for."