

Tutorial 861

Chapter 861 - Esteemed spectators

“Is that fragment really that rare?” I ask the vyssari guy. I already feel his name slipping from my memory, so that’s what I’ll be calling him.

The vyssari guy continues to stand on the chair, looking at where the screen was while chewing on an aromatic wooden stick that sticks out from his mouth like a cigarette.

“I’ll ask for more information about it and send it to you, but I think there are only between three and four dozen of that Fragment that we know of, no more have been appearing on freshly awakened planets,” he says.

“Why?”

“What do you mean why?” He turns to me and bites into the stick. I can almost imagine him as an aged, too-tired-for-this-shit cowboy.

“What do you mean why, why?” I mimic him. “I obviously mean why there are thousands, tens of thousands of other fragments, while Starless Sky only has a few dozen.”

“I don’t know,” the vyssari shrugs.

And for a moment, I think he pisses me off more than Melek ever did.

I get the assholes. I can understand someone messing with me, being gleeful, and wanting to make me hurt. In a way, I even think it’s a pretty good strategy, one I would probably use if I hated someone enough or was a scared little shit and needed such tactics.

But the vyssari guy, showing not an ounce of curiosity, physically insults me. He’s the sort of person I will never understand.

“What Nathaniel wanted to ask was what could be the cause of certain gods being shattered into so few fragments. Is it because they were powerful or because they were weak? Or maybe the way they were shattered had an influence?” Victoria asks in my stead, catching my mood.

And the vyssari guy spits out the stick onto the ground and slowly puts another one in his mouth, which he begins to chew. “I understand what he meant. But as I said, I don’t know.”

“It is not useful, but thank you for being honest instead of-”

“No, Vic,” I interrupt her, “being honest is fine, but this psychopath didn’t even have an opinion on any of that. Not once in his life has he devoted any of his mental capacity to give it a thought or be curious about it.” I turn to my right. “Selene, we want a new vyssari advisor guy. This person is terrible.”

“Maybe after the second event, sweetie?” Selene smiles kindly. “And now, what color for your shirt do you prefer? Bright pink or pale yellow?”

“If you try to dress me in those colors, I will burn the clothes you put me in and walk into the event naked.”

One of the other two selari women chuckles and quickly covers her mouth as Selene turns to her.

Turning back to me, Selene says, “That’s an interesting strategy to get the audience on your side, but don’t you think-”

She shuts up as someone knocks on the door. Three quick knocks, followed by one slow, and two additional quick.

Taking it as some sort of signal, Selene rushes over and exits the room, where I can hear a barrage of quiet whispers as they exchange a conversation.

When she comes back to the room, she sighs, “The Ruler of Greed’s vessels, Ignis and Yvaine, have joined the Game as spectators. The Ruler of Diligence’s vessel, Bant, is joining the already present Oant. And the Ruler of Patience is rumored to be coming as well.”

Selene's eyes are unfocused as she has a difficult time comprehending it all, and she just stares blankly at a random space in the air in front of her.

"And don't forget that Lord Wrath might come too!" someone calls from behind the closed doors, causing everyone to turn there in surprise. "Can I come in?" the voice asks with a tone that sounds like they're having fun.

"Low pristine item as an entrance fee," I call out before anyone else can answer, and I hear a laugh from behind the door.

"I offer information instead. Master told me you might appreciate it!"

Picking up on the hint, I look at Victoria, who just gestures that it is my decision, so I call, "Come in then."

The door opens, and a feylith woman walks in, smiling brightly. She's wearing a set of black, suit-like clothes, not dissimilar to the ones Ruby once wore on the 2nd floor. Both her hair and eyes are a gentle yellow, and there are holes in the back of her clothes to allow her small wings to pass through.

"I'm Yvaine!" she says, her hair and eye color not changing at all. I even notice that her left eye is exactly the same as Ruby's. And she seems to notice me noticing. "This is a mark from my master and my connection to her as her vessel," she smiles as she explains.

I shrug, looking at Selene, who is in the corner, sitting on the couch with the two other selari women by her side, while the vyssari guy has stepped down from his chair and is also standing nearby. When Yvaine looks at him, he bows quickly, with his chewing stick nowhere to be seen.

"Are there any problems with the Game?" I ask.

And the feylith ignores her, instead coming closer to me, tilting her head to look at me with the eye Ruby marked. She is smiling brightly, moving that eye up and down my body while smiling.

“I have to say that I’m not sure what she sees in you,” Yvaine says, and I notice the field she put around us and Victoria, cutting everyone else off so they can’t hear. “I mean, it’s not like you aren’t interesting, but I’ve met my fair share of suicidal talents who grew strong fairly quickly, and barely lived long enough to become a threat to the truly powerful. Even if you two are a little bit similar, I find attendee Nyssa Volare to have more potential.”

“I’m happy for you,” I answer.

She laughs happily and pokes my cheek. “Maybe she likes your personality. I myself quite like how well you endure my presence. Tell me, is it not scaring you? I’m releasing quite a bit of it in your direction.”

“It is impressive, possibly good enough to scare children or Easy Difficulty attendees.”

“Is it now?” she asks, and her presence rises up even further, not affecting the area but creating that suffocating feeling very close to me.

But even with all that I’m dealing with, how can it compare to hers?

“You’re an Absolute?” I ask.

“An Absolute with the highest compatibility with Master Ruby out of all her vessels. Through my body, she can channel more of her power than anyone else!”

“So not the strongest, but the best leech, which makes you, in the case that Ruby shares her powers with you, the strongest of her vessels?”

She nods. “I like how you simplified it, but you will never be popular with girls if you expose everything they’re hinting at. And you,” Yvaine turns to my sister, “I was told you are in charge at the moment, and the more reasonable of the two. Master doesn’t know too much about this situation, but something is about to go down here, so Ignis and I are here to keep an eye out just in case.”

“I expect this isn’t just to keep an eye on my brother and I, but something much more serious. You mentioned Lord Wrath might be coming. Did you mean the Ruler of Wrath?”

"There is no one else in this universe I would ever call Lord Wrath other than that velnar. If he actually shows up here, you know, everything is beyond saving. You only deploy him when you've already accepted total destruction. I mean, Master Ruby can get angry, sure, but Lord Wrath? Once he's riled up, he doesn't stop fighting until there is nothing left to destroy."

"So when do they send the Ruler of Wrath in?" I ask curiously.

Yvaine thinks for a bit. "I think the last three times he went out were when there was a situation connected to one of the Last Elf's Prime Replicas, one of the remaining gods, and another Lycan that challenged him. Oh, maybe that one fight against the Hornless Demon, but that was a while ago."

"Not when the Ruler of Pride messes something up?"

Ruby's vessel bursts into laughter. "When Pride moves, there is nothing you can do but wait and pray you survive the consequences."

As she speaks, I notice an interesting fact. Just like everyone else I've spoken with, she calls him Pride. Not the Ruler of Pride, Lord Pride, or anything. Just Pride.

"Back to what I mentioned previously. I assume the situation must be serious since they dared to use the imitation of Lissandra Hawthorne as a diversion. There's probably not much you two can do once it gets to that scale, so just do your best to survive. Moreover, I shouldn't even be here, but I got curious! So see you later, Victoria, Nathaniel!"

Standing up with a smile, Yvaine begins to walk away, not even bothering to open the door, but passing through it as if it wasn't even there.

The second game is about to start, almost a day later, once all of the preparations are finally done. The mainly occurs because of the interviews and other responsibilities toward the show organizers, things like making posters and signing further contracts giving us a split from merchandise sales and similar stuff.

I almost want to let Vic deal with it, but she simply doesn't care. As much as I love my sister, she is almost completely missing an inner loot goblin. Overall, she finds it difficult to care about certain things.

Sure, she logically knows there is an advantage to getting a better deal and acquiring more resources, but at the same time, she considers it a minor detail. Hell, maybe she just thinks of it as a distraction.

As for me, I don't want to deal with it either, so I reject all of the deals for now, deciding to wait longer. It's the sort of game where you wait and see which side blinks first, or which side twists the wheel to keep the cars from crashing into each other.

For now, both me and Vic are wearing similar clothes we got from Selene, though mine consist of a pale gray shirt and black pants, while she wears gray pants and a black shirt. The design is tailored in such a way that it pulls more attention toward my pale left arm and shows off my scars a bit more. I think they also avoided ironing mine on purpose, meanwhile, Victoria's clothes have been left in a perfect state.

On the screen, Melek once again blabbers his usual stuff, walking through a number of luxurious tribunes that open up to a view of a huge area with many screens. Plenty of rich-looking people sit there in comfy chairs that I bet are worth more than some epic items. Maybe even a few arcane items, too? Who knows.

"And here we have our new, esteemed spectators! The vessels to the legendary Ruler of Greed herself! Yes, that Ruler of Greed! The one who battled an ancient dragon to a complete standstill! She, who faced one of the mightiest remaining gods, the Timeless Void, and walked away victorious! Just having her vessels present is a massive honor, and who knows, she might even be watching through their very eyes! A warm welcome to Mister Ignis and Miss Yvaine, who've requested to be introduced simply as her disciples and vessels!"

The camera pans out toward the two figures, the female feylith and a mora man towering over her. He is tall and slim, with red skin and gray tattoos. Ignis also gives a smile, though his feels much less friendly than Yvaine's.

"I would also like to introduce Mister Bant, vessel of the great Ruler of Diligence! The master of Domus and its universe-famous World Smithy! Mister Bant will be joining Mister Oant to spectate the game!" Once again, the camera spins and zooms in on two of Diligence's vessels, a human woman and a thylarin man who wave at the screen.

As if stealing the camera for himself, the view gets entirely filled with Melek's brightly smiling face before he pulls back, chuckling. "And as we have many times before, a thank you to the Ruler of Envy for already spectating. We are glad to have you here, our esteemed Lord!"

Envy appears on the camera, sitting higher than the others, with a few servants nearby. That asshole of a lumoran waves lazily and smiles, letting a servant put some sort of fruit into his mouth before he bites into it.

Melek cuts in quickly the moment the view returns to him. "There might be another distinguished guest joining us later, but I'd hate to spread false rumors, so I will share the news only once they've arrived! But! I worry I may have taken up too much of your time already. Once again, a massive thank you to all our new spectators. I'm absolutely certain I haven't forgotten anyone important!"

For the briefest moment, the camera sweeps across the audience, passing over Adrian sitting there in a VIP lounge not that far off from the others Melek just introduced, but that's it. It passes right by, and Melek doesn't even bother to mention him.

The selari face of the Game is smiling in a way that tells me this omission is obviously on purpose.

"Now then, it is time for the second game: Glass House!"

Chapter 862 - Glass House

As the name implies, the second game is set in what could generously be called a Glass House. It's basically just a huge cube-like maze with walls made entirely of transparent glass, through which you can perfectly see the positions of the other participants. There are many hallways and many floors as well, with everyone set at the same distance from the black-walled room at the center of the cube.

Even now, Vic and I aren't split up, and around us are eight more participants meant to be our teammates, randomly selected. Of course, Melek uses some fancier words, something about our bloodline or the like.

There are just a few things I care about. First, you have to control your powers, physical stats, and the like. If you use too much, you will damage the Glass House. When you damage the house, the others from your bloodline can vote to have you exiled, meaning you'll have to find other exiled people to form a new bloodline. Once exiled, you remain next to your former teammates, but you will not be able

to attack your former bloodline for a full minute, though they'll be able to attack you without any consequences.

At least three bloodline members will be needed to pass certain doors. Some require five, and later you'll need ten as you get closer to the center. In addition, there will be hunters. According to Melek, who somehow doesn't seem like the most trustworthy person, ten percent of the participants were "randomly" chosen to fill said role. They started alone and can not form or join any bloodlines to progress. Instead, they need to eliminate a number of participants equal to the requirement of each door to pass through it.

Furthermore, their progress will reset after each door. So even if they have 100 eliminations and then open a three-person door, they won't have 97 remaining, but will be reset to zero.

I really wanted to be a hunter, and I expected they would make me or Vic one, but surprisingly, we've found ourselves standing here with a few other weirdos. There are a few more rules that I know somewhere in the back of my mind, but I care only for these few main ones.

After all, it still comes down to personal strength. I also find the idea of an entirely transparent cube interesting, as I can see everyone, their positions, and the shapes of the hallways we're all walking in, which may currently be quite narrow but widen out in places, and I can already see a few spaces that are quite big.

Some attendees are already using skills to make themselves invisible or fill the hallways with smoke and such. Meanwhile, some of the others don't seem to care at all and start heading toward the closest opponent.

I move closer to my sister and, in a whisper, ask, "What happens if you attack someone from your bloodline?"

"Eliminating someone from your bloodline triggers an automatic exile and a one-minute period in which you won't be able to deal damage to them," she answers.

"We should exile that Griffin fucker," someone from our bloodline says out of nowhere, and multiple heads turn toward me.

"Phrasing, please," I say.

"Or what?" That man, a velnar, says as he pushes his way through the others. "When they announced you, I expected more, but so far you've just been a tricky, little, cowardly ass," he growls at me.

"Oh my, let me get you a handkerchief to sob into. How old are you? 50, 100? Not even a Champion yet, and who even declared you a candidate? Someone's blind grandma? Was there a system error? Or maybe it was your mommy, who couldn't help but be proud of her special boy?"

"For one who's been offered the great opportunity of the tutorial, and squandered it, you sure do talk big." He already towers over me as I look up at him.

Not breaking eye contact, I reach behind my back and reinforce my body. Then, I knock on the glass wall, causing it to crack. Right then, a popup window appears in front of everyone, Vic included. Unlike system windows, it's visible to everyone, not just the owner.

"Go on, exile me. I'll stand right here for that minute, and the second it ends, you are out of this game."

The velnar narrows his eyes, but his gaze slides toward Vic.

It is obvious what he's thinking.

"Oh yes bitch, my sister will be helping me," I tell him.

"Have you no pride?" he growls at me aggressively.

"Vic, this guy isn't trying to exile me or fight me. He clearly has no pride himself, so why is he lecturing me about it?" I ask my sister, who has been waiting here patiently the entire time, seemingly not even getting ready to fight.

Instead, she seems to be observing the bloodlines and hunters close to us. I am doing the same, and as I do, I begin to find it more and more entertaining, meeting the gaze of someone passing nearby and trying to guess if they will head somewhere else or choose a path that will lead to a clash with us.

"If a fight starts, we can always find someone more capable who's already been exiled and join forces to unlock the doors," she says.

"So how about we calm down and just roll with it for a while?" An extravagantly dressed vyssari man from our bloodline says, nimbly jumping up from the ground to land sitting on the velnar's shoulder.

And to my surprise, the velnar doesn't throw him off or complain. Instead, he stands there frozen in what seems like fear.

The vyssari man taps the velnar's head. "Good boy," he says with a smile, then jumps down, stopping in front of Vic and me. "I'm Prince Kip! Tell me, humans, have you met a vyssari by the name of Lyraen during your tutorial?"

"Yes, we did," Victoria says.

Kip turns to her excitedly. "How is he? I only saw a few records my master shared with me, and she said some of the Handlers have been claiming that it's been quite a long time since they'd seen a wyvern bloodline as pure as his."

"He's a womanizer," I say instead of Vic.

That causes Kip to switch his gaze to me. "A womanizer?"

"There are rumors that he has something like sixty wives waiting for him outside of the tutorial," I say, observing the guy. He is short like all vyssari, but weirdly, even though his legs are scaly like the rest of his race, they're slimmer than most I've met, even ending in what looks more like talons than human-like feet.

There are even some scales on his shoulders, which are revealed by round holes cut into his ornamented shirt. Overall, he's dressed all in black with golden embroidery.

"That is interesting indeed," he smiles, "but you know I meant his powers and not something like that."

I face him and recognize that, from his point of view, he's giving me a second chance to answer his question, even if I dodged it the first time. He doesn't threaten me or seem insulted, despite the fact that I provoked him.

This forms a better opinion of him in my mind, so I answer, "He's not as strong as Nyssa, but he's still quite powerful. White lightning, long range, really good at hiding. That sort of thing." I think for a bit. "Maybe the fifth strongest of the current attendees?"

Prince Kip nods seriously, but playfully. "Let me guess, you and your sister are second and third?"

"Obviously."

"And who might be fourth?"

"There is one really fast girl who scares me. I think I could win if I fought like an absolute coward, but if she catches me with my guard down, I might actually lose."

"It is nice to see a man brave enough to be so honest!" Kip keeps nodding in satisfaction. "How about your sister and you stay in a bloodline with me?"

"Vic?" I ask her.

"I don't mind," she says.

"We don't mind," I confirm.

"Very good!" Prince Kip claps his hands together, turns back to the rest of our bloodline watching us, and scratches his chin. "What about them though?"

A few of them are raising their defenses, having drawn their weapons. The rude velnar from earlier is already running away too, though he isn't all that fast.

After the filtering, the average quality of the people here is much better than during the first game, but I'm continuing to have a hard time telling if any of them are truly powerful. I mean, I know Beyonders are the best of the attendees, S ranks are the best of the Beyonders, and the people here are mostly Absolute or Champion candidates.

But even though I can sense their presence and it tells me they are strong, it doesn't feel all that threatening.

"I apologize for my rudeness, and this might get a little dirty, but I hope you'll understand!" Prince Kip says, and his brown eyes light up.

A concentrated burst of white lightning flickers around his eyes, intensifying until it starts to burn his eyeballs. But before they're entirely gone, his eyes flash like pointers and shoot from each one a finger-thick, uninterrupted, laser-like stream that doesn't even resemble lightning anymore.

That stream cuts one of the participants in half, and the guy disappears as his bracelet activates.

Meanwhile, Prince Kip stands there, smiling politely even though his eyes are gone, totally burned out. Then they start healing at a rapid speed, and a moment later, the vyssari blinks a few times to reveal they've gone back to normal.

Both Vic and I move against the group, each of us using the opportunity to eliminate one of the participants before we can be kicked out of the bloodline and rendered unable to attack them anymore. I shoot the fleeing, panicked Velnar with my lance while Vic gets close and personal.

For the following minute, the three of us defend ourselves. I continue to throw in random attacks to test how well the invulnerability works, and truly, I do nothing to them at all. The way this thing is set up

likely means someone at the level of an Absolute holds control over it, defending against the attacks and maintaining the rules. Or, at least, they've created some array for the purpose.

But even over the course of the whole minute, they don't manage to kill any of us, and after it ends, it takes just a few seconds for the three of us to get rid of the remaining four.

Of course, there are huge explosions, flames filling the hallway, and attacks powerful enough to destroy a city or two, but it is nothing we wouldn't be able to handle with a little bit of elbow grease. In the end, even as I hold the wound on my side and watch my burns heal while feeling my sister's judgmental gaze on the back of my neck, though I don't feel too bad about it all.

The Glass House around us is entirely undamaged, making me believe the organizers can switch the durability on and off at will. A part of me wonders what kind of stories they're trying to play out for the audience. Big betrayals, hunters and hunted, bloodlines unsure if they can trust each other. Short zoom-ins on a smirk here or some suspicious gesture there as a participant's colleagues move, all to keep the audience on the edge of their seats. All while every participant can see everyone through the glass.

I watch as Prince Kip stands there, his eyes regenerating until he can look over at me. He must have noticed my curiosity. "You spoke to me honestly, so as a man, I shall do the same! My lightning is far too powerful for my eyes and body, but I've developed a workaround through localized super regeneration."

"Is that an official term?"

"Probably not, but it sounds impressive, doesn't it?" The vyssari smiles brightly at me, and I think I begin to like him a bit more in that moment.

"I declare you my temporary companions and promise I shall warn you in the event that I decide to kill either one of you!" Prince Kip says proudly, looking at us with expectation.

"Well, why not? I promise to warn you as well," I say.

"In order to be more efficient, I'll offer the same promise, which will apply so long as you hold to yours," my sister says.

"Great! Now, let's head toward our next target!" Prince Kip says, pointing a finger in the direction of the man rumored to have been declared an Absolute candidate by a wyvern. Euris, a human man entirely covered in shadow and wielding a glowing red dagger with a shadowy crown over his head, as he passes through the glass hallways alone.

"Let's hunt the hunter!" Prince Kip adds excitedly, and his eyes glow with white light.

Chapter 863 - Intruders

We fight our way through a bloodline group, and this time it's much more enjoyable since we don't have to wait out their minute of invulnerability.

And now the second fight is about to happen, this time not in hallways but in an oversized cubic room as the Glass House shifts and opens. Before the fight can even start, glass walls appear in front of us and Melek starts hyping the whole thing up. He introduces the combatants and mentions some of the more impressive things they've done, which makes me think it has more to do with Prince Kip than me and Vic.

From what I've seen, I think this vyssari with his Superman-like laser eyes, so powerful they burn his eyeballs out, might be one of the strongest participants. So far, I think the favorites are him, that shadowy guy Euris, Xixi, the bear man with [Telekinesis], and a female thylarin array specialist with six arms.

Every time any of them seems to be entering a slightly more difficult fight, Melek chooses that moment to start annoying everyone, and the Glass House starts shifting impossibly.

"This is your last opportunity to donate! The countdown will be starting in just a few moments. Maybe the fate of your favorite lies on your shoulders!" Melek shouts.

The whole thing makes me start taking note of our opponents. There are six of them, but it is difficult to say whether or not they're dangerous, as sight is the only sense able to pierce the walls, giving me no way of feeling out their presence. Not even my eyes are helping here.

So for now, I stand here and wonder what Melek would do if we just turned around and left after all this hype.

[Selective Adaptation - lvl 17 > Selective Adaptation - lvl 18]

Meanwhile, my new skill is continuing to level up nicely. It's already gained almost ten levels in the last few days. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to fuck my body up a bit more to get an easy level up for the trouble. The question remains as to whether that'll even be possible.

Strangely, I think Victoria knows what she's doing by telling me to limit my effort to thirty percent. I have a faint memory of someone else saying something similar, but their opinion doesn't matter as much as my sister's.

In the past few days, I've been starting to feel almost rested, and it's growing easier to keep my mind together. My ongoing trait strengthening and evolution have also been simpler to deal with, and my constant work on my constructs continues, but since this time, I'm not strengthening them, only fixing them, it's much simpler.

I know it'll only be a bit longer before I can stretch my metaphorical wings and give these changes some proper oomph.

[Weave - lvl 28 > Weave - lvl 29]

Yes, just a bit longer.

"The countdown starts!" Melek shouts and begins, "Ten!"

He counts down as if there are others counting down alongside him, an audience that we can't hear. With each number, his voice grows louder and louder. At about three, Vic grabs my hand and presses something into it. I don't even have to look down to know what it is.

The wall drops down, and Prince Kip squints his eyes as two white lasers shoot out of them, sweeping around the arena.

Even though our opponents were building their defenses the whole time, the lasers cut through them as if they were nothing.

I see one participant get cut in half, while another loses his leg, and a third takes a cut to the neck before Prince Kip's eyes are entirely burned out. He closes them as he waits to heal. Even then, he doesn't stop and nimbly jumps into melee, using other senses to locate his opponents while he flies around in the same unnerving fashion kinetic energy affords me. He changes direction with a thump to clash against one of the guys he wounded.

My sister is also already gone, and I watch her body explode into a pile of blood and flesh which immediately drops to the glass floor, staining the wall with gore in the process, but as it sails through the air she regrows from one of the fingers. Her overclocked duplicate punches against the restored barrier and explodes, though the impact does manage to crack it.

Three more Victorias appear, each charging the same spot. In quick succession, all three of them, one after another, hit that spot and explode into piles of flesh and blood, until the fourth breaks through and stabs her clenched-together fingers through the chest of a female human mage with a staff.

I boost myself down to the bottom of the huge cubic space we've found ourselves in and twist to dodge two projectiles. I let my eyes see through the last one, and it breaks into particles of mana that twist through the air around me. I gather them over the palm of my hand and form them into a dagger.

The air behind me shifts, and an invisible seventh opponent moves to attack me. Using my kinetic senses alone, I locate him, and at the last possible moment, I reinforce my body and move. I use a short, sudden burst of high speed and lash out with the dagger, cutting into his body.

Another rain of projectiles shoots towards me before I can finish him. These projectiles twist through the air and track me, gathering more and more speed while constantly adapting and changing as they do.

The invisible opponent disappears too, picking up on the way I sensed them and countering it. There isn't even a heat signature for me to follow, so while dodging the projectiles and disrupting the man's efforts to cast some sort of large-scale attack, I close one of my Preeminence eyes.

For a moment, my sub-minds combine, and I look through the wavelengths surrounding me, sliding into that cold state I had when I was surrounded by hundreds of dolls, not knowing which one would launch the next attack against me.

And then there it is. Something I almost can't explain, but my hand moves ahead, and I grab the invisible guy by the neck and disrupt the field, revealing a human man. His dagger moves to stab my heart, but I concentrate my defensive layer there, and it bounces off. Then a pulse of my mana disrupts the projectiles I'd already seen through.

I quickly release the human assassin as he swings to cut off my arm, and I fly back. He is about to slide back into invisibility when he notices an inscription I drew with my blood on the back of his neck while holding him, unable to cause him more damage with my physical stats alone.

But before he can do anything, the inscription sizzles, fueled by the hyper-condensed mana in my blood, and explodes.

The blast is much bigger than I'd expected.

The shockwave and the pulse fill the cube, bouncing off the walls and almost throwing me aside, even as I raise a barrier around myself. Said barrier also stops multiple projectiles, but opening both of my eyes, I lock my gaze on the selari man who's been launching them at me the entire time. Next to him, one of his projectiles halts, then turns around and stabs into him.

Before he can do more, Prince Kip's laser cuts him in half.

I see a vyssari thrown by Vic fly through the air, missing an arm and clutching his belly to keep his guts from falling out. I shoot my lance at him, but it freezes just when it's about to hit him.

"Ozrantisixelevkeks's one-time life-saving gift, purchased by one of our generous audience members, has been used!" Melek shouts.

So I shoot another projectile, but the vyssari avoids it, and his body regenerates quickly just as Victoria crashes into him. And even as he shows off his incredible strength and pierces a hole through her body with a single punch, she grabs his shoulders and almost tears him in two before his bracelet activates.

Only one opponent remains, a feylith man who has spent the entire battle focusing his mental attacks on Prince Kip. But the prince resists them all, pinning the man in place with both hands clamped on

either side of his head. Trapped in his grip, the feylith can only continue to unleash a series of desperate, frantic mental attacks on the vyssari.

And then Prince Kip's eyes glow as his twin lasers shoot forth, melting away the feylith's eyes and face, before his bracelet activates as well.

No one likes mind mages.

"And just like that, we have our victors!" Melek bellows. "Congratulations to everyone who placed their bets on Prince Kip and the Royal Bloodline! But the real question is... how will they handle their next opponent?"

A specific hallway lights up, drawing our eyes and forcing our attention toward a shadowy figure walking through it. Just a few more steps and one final turn, and he will be upon us. Having seen a few of his fights, I know our next match will be much harder.

Euris takes his final steps, keeping his eyes locked on us, as Prince Kip's eyes begin to glow.

Then the wall shuts, cutting off the man's path towards us.

"No, no, we can't have all the best fights happening just yet!" Melek laughs. "But don't be disappointed. Follow me, and see what..."

Another hallway lights up somewhere in the distance as Melek leads the spectators along, but I don't take my eyes off the man in shadow, intently staring our way. The glow of his red dagger intensifies, and with incredible speed, he stabs it into the wall, causing even Melek in the distance to shut up.

A crack spreads through the wall separating us, the one that had remained completely undamaged throughout the fights, but in the end, it holds, and Euris begins to walk away.

As he takes a few steps, two white lasers strike the exact spot where he made the crack, widening it, and Euris halts. But even then, the wall endures, and the shadow shrouded man heads off to hunt another opponent.

Thirty percent. Thirty percent. Thirty percent.

Maybe thirty-one?

No, no, thirty percent.

Thirty percent.

Thirty percent.

Thirty percent.

I keep repeating this mantra as I watch it all go down, and then both me and Prince Kip follow Victoria. A few minutes later, we pass through the first door into the inner space of the cube, heading toward the black room at the center.

Our Bloodline's bond was unbreakable. Me, the vyssari with laser eyes, my sister, and later on, some random guys we picked up along the way just to get the door open for us. We had spared them, we brought them in, clothed them, and fed them.

And how did they repay us?

Obviously, by secretly working with another group and sneakily attempting to take out Prince Kip. After all, he's the strongest one here. The other two are just tutorial attendees.

Everyone knows the advantages that the tutorial and Beyond offer. Just how much they can supercharge and speed up your growth. Everyone knows that only the best your planet has to offer are selected. There isn't a single participant who hasn't met a person from the First Generation, if not someone who went through Hell difficulty or Beyond. These people are often still Champions, and it's likely their Absolute is one of them too. Many decades after the tutorial, they've settled in, taking positions as powerful family heads, leaders, warriors, and such.

But me and Vic don't even have 4 years under our belt. Out of everyone here, we spent the shortest time in the system. No one expects much. So what if Melek introduces me as the guildmaster of the Primordial Knights, which even people outside the tutorial have come to know as one of the recurring top guilds of Beyond. So what if Victoria was declared an Absolute candidate by an imitation of The Ancient Monster, Eladore's Shadow.

I don't think you can get to where any of us are if you aren't a bit cocky and confident in yourself. Of course, we're being looked down upon to the point that even Melek mentions my disappointing performance a few times.

But Vic continues to prove herself especially scary. Throughout all these fights, and ever since the start of the Games. Now, she's saving Prince Kip from a concerted effort to kill him. She creates duplicate after duplicate until even Melek excitedly shouts about how it's been a long time since he's seen such an impressive mind.

And even the biggest assholes have to acknowledge that she's truly something else as she stands there surrounded by piles of flesh and blood, most of which are her own. The crowd goes wild, a deafening sound that Melek finally allows us participants to hear. Many millions, maybe billions of people on thousands of planets watching the Game, and the cheers of live spectators present on this planet as they chant Victoria's name.

For me, it might seem like they've only had a few days to build up to the Game, but on the outside, weeks and months have passed. Most of the participants had already attended their own interviews and had entire episodes dedicated to them, giving a glimpse into the lives of the crowd's favorites. Sad stories were told, goals revealed, and charming personalities were carefully brought to light by Melek for the galaxy to see.

Me and Vic are intruders in all of this. We're new, there's almost no info available regarding us. We're barely a novelty.

Not much is being expected from us, and the last tutorial victor was Adrian, and he won almost a thousand years ago. A talented Absolute that hasn't been seen anywhere in recent years, so they couldn't even interview him. Lost in history between so many powerful contenders appearing each year.

For the audience, it's too difficult to like either of us, after all, we just appeared out of nowhere and either personally or indirectly caused the elimination and some deaths of some of the more popular, underdog participants.

Yet, they can't help but roar for my sister, who stands there nonchalant as death itself. An unkillable goddess with a mind forged of iron.

But I know they would cheer the same if someone unexpected took us all out.

People are fickle just like that.

Chapter 864 - A Competition in the end

POV Maya Jones

It's been days since I found myself in this labyrinth.

One of my early thoughts was to worry for Kim and the others on the surface. I hoped they weren't dumb enough to follow and try to help, and I hoped they hadn't been found by the Adjudicator and the Corporations controlling things there.

But just as my sense of the passage of time disappeared without the change from day to night, so did my worries as I went deeper into [Focus] just to keep the fear at bay.

Every near-death experience, every powerful opponent I avoided by either sheer luck or their lack of care, and every trap that almost killed me. It just keeps snowballing and snowballing until my optimistic behavior from those first few hours here feels hollow now.

I still don't like [Focus].

I know there's a reason I've got it, and I know how powerful the skill can be from the way Nathaniel uses it. But I've never embraced it fully. But now I find myself with no other choice. Maybe it's cowardice, a way for my mind to escape and protect itself. That's what I always thought would happen, no matter what Nathaniel said.

But now, as I try to use it the way he drilled into me and then let my instincts take over, it feels... right? Correct? It's begun to feel natural.

It is my starting skill that I have a talent for. Out of myriad skills, this one appeared in my status. And now I don't feel as much like a machine as I'd worried. I don't feel like I'm losing myself.

The world turns black and white, and my emotions dim out, only coming to the surface when I will them to. And the way I'm using the skill, my determination to survive is still there. It's boosted, compounded. I claw, I bite, I swing my weapons in all the ways martial arts taught me to, in the way I admired so much. All this training, the paths I drew with my blade are now ingrained into my body itself, and as I fight, all of it smoothly pulls itself to the surface.

There's no hesitation as I cut, no fear slowing my reactions. Being left here on my own, I don't have the luxury to slack off. My low ambition won't help here.

And all the stress from having to make a choice is gone, as I'm forced to fight and grow.

POV Kim Min-Jae

"Kim, my bud, of course talnium is special. There's only a few places in the universe where you can find it, and all of them are kind of weird. The Labyrinth of Xyphos is, obviously, the most fucked up out of all of them," Kevin says, and the Avatar of a thylarin with four arms drops down in front of him from somewhere above.

He feels so terrifyingly strong as he swings out with his blue skinned arms, and sparks of gold and white mana glitter around him, as the area around us drains of color. The thylarin then slams his arms together, and the black and white space expands even further, and all those sparks shoot forth with a scary might.

Kevin watches this all unbothered and lifts his right hand in front of him with his palm open. The air around him ripples like there is an invisible wall just as the sparks reach it.

All of them slam against that wall and then bounce back with even higher speed.

The thylarin has no time to do anything about it, and dozens of projectiles drill through his body. He still tries to fight back, but flames start to combust across Kevin's open palm, and he closes it into a fist.

An explosion of flames the size of a building erupts around the thylarin. There's no shockwave, smoke, or dust. The flames clear out quickly, and there is nothing left at the place.

Kevin snorts in satisfaction, "A weak-ass Champion. Kim, make sure to never end up like him."

"I will try."

"I can hear the honesty in your voice, so I have no choice but to believe you! Now, as I said, talnium is a byproduct of these special places with extremely high space compression or dilation. Like the bits of charred grass you find around a campfire, no matter how many stones you layer around it. For example, the Labyrinth of Xyphos. The planet itself might seem normal on the surface, but on the inside, the space is much, much bigger."

"How much bigger?" I ask.

He turns to me and smiles in a way that both seems a bit too much like him, and yet not enough. "Some say big enough to fit a galaxy or two."

"What, that's..."

"Impossible? Yup! As I said, the Labyrinth of Xyphos is a fucked up place, and even the system wasn't able to copy it properly, so what you see during the floors is a cheap ass copy. There's also the chance that The Tutorial was actually inspired by the Labyrinth of Xyphos, but even that's a far, far cry from the original. Before you ask, even I have no idea, as smart as I am. I am smart, Kim, right?"

"Sometimes."

"That's the answer I expected. The usual punishment would be to endure Biscuit's ankle biting for an hour while he's in his puppy form, but we don't have that option, so I'll let it pass! So, other than being impressively big, it can, well, some say it mirrors the true creation, others say it records and stores the

events within. Places, items, Avatars of people, and such stuff. Of course, all of it lacks the spark of the original, but that's only to be expected."

"You mentioned it before, but how would she replace the tutorial Xyphos with the real one? She shouldn't be able to reach beyond, right?"

"That is true! But whoever made the tutorial was quite lazy. Or maybe just unskilled back then, and a temporary solution became permanent. Since the system can't copy the real Xyphos, it maintains a connection to the real Xyphos where an array has been placed around it to observe and send back data or something. Don't ask for more, though, I have no idea how that was simpler than just creating a lesser version and copy-pasting it everywhere."

"Maybe the Labyrinth as a data source is in some way structurally impossible to duplicate or scale down to a simpler asset, so the best the system can do is to create a rendering and pipeline a real-time data stream with... something like a much compressed resolution?"

"You are such a nerd. But yeah, she found that connection, and by working with that cute wyvern, they're about to abuse it. But anyway! Now, let's go forth onto a far more important adventure! Girls! Maya awaits! We have to save her before that lunatic woman begins her plan."

POV Nathaniel

Xixi is trying to escape, and yet glass walls rise up in front of her every time she's about to succeed. The green-haired woman's perception is great, and she dodges long-range attacks as if she knows where they'll be. Like Prince Kip's laser eyes and yes, even my lance. And then she also has high enough physical stats to outrun Vic.

As a hunter, Xixi doesn't have anyone to help her, so she's left out on her own, and because of the glass walls, it's been pretty easy to follow her.

But as we reach a dead end, she stands in a hallway surrounded by her green armor.

"Motherfucker, stop disrupting everything I do!" she shouts with her eyes angrily locked onto me, ignoring Vic and Prince Kip.

"Maybe put more effort into not letting me do it."

"I've met goddamned Champions who fucked with my mana less than you, you ridiculous bastard!"

"Forty percent," I say.

"Stop saying that, I have no idea what it means!"

She doesn't, but I do. Victoria started allowing me to use up to 40% not long ago, and I'm still in a good mood because of it.

And if what Xixi says is true, Champions must have been quite bad at handling mana. And even now, as she talks, I'm using my eyes to reach out towards her and pull apart the structure of any skill she tries to activate. Armor, projectiles, attacks. Anything external.

Forty percent is still too little for me to try to pierce her defenses and natural barriers to reach under her skin. Still, even with all of that, she's still pretty dangerous. Her reinforcement is impressive, the armor she keeps close to her skin is powerful enough to face down Victoria, though she does her best to avoid Prince Kip's laser eyes.

"Is this it? Has our hunter found her end in our game? Among our male audience, the participant Xixi ranks quite high, so maybe one of our donors will shell out for an expensive option to send her some aid!" Melek babbles on in the background, along with the murmur of the crowd, as if they were sitting all around us.

Just as Prince Kip regenerates his eyes and shoots at Xixi, an item appears in front of her. A round, shiny shield she grabs with widened eyes and holds in the path of the lasers.

The surface of the shield begins to glow as if it's going to melt, and droplets of metal start dripping on the floor, but it endures the attack, along with the lance that I shoot at it.

Victoria reaches her in the meantime and throws two fingers out in front of her. From each, a duplicate grows, boosts its body beyond limits, launches ahead, and smashes into the shield, after which the duplicate's body explodes under the pressure. It's almost like she's using them as some sort of one off attack.

The second duplicate flings the shield to the side and opens up Xixi as Victoria reaches her.

My disruption causes Xixi's skill to break apart again just as Vic slams her against the wall. A duplicate appears on the other side, and they both pull, tearing flesh on their forearms as they pull apart the green armor Xixi's created from her mana.

I use the opportunity and shoot the lance, stabbing it through the woman, who disappears in the next moment.

The audience goes into a rampage. Shouting in anger or amusement, and Melek starts joking about lost bets and the like, but as I usually do, I filter it out.

I look through the Glass House towards the black room in the middle, which isn't even that far away, and this time I don't even see any opponents between us and it.

The door Xixi tried to reach opens, but both me and Vic stand unmoving, as both of us notice Prince Kip's eyes glowing.

"It was nice while it lasted, but this is a competition in the end, isn't it?" he says with a smile.

"It is," my sister nods and turns to him.

"I've also noticed that you've been at the front the entire time, Miss Victoria, while your brother kept behind me most of the time."

"I wouldn't attack you out of nowhere, but you know... just in case," I answer instead of my sister. As he said, I'm currently behind him. With the way his most powerful ability works, he would face Vic and blast her, which is the sort of thing she can deal with, meanwhile, I stand ready to attack him from behind.

"Refreshingly so, I believe you," the vyssari says with a smile. "Let's break this alliance apart then. Do you agree?"

"I agree," I say.

"I agree," my sister says.

The next moment, Prince Kip's eyes shoot lasers ahead, cutting my sister in half. I'm gathering my mana and launching my attacks at him already while observing his movement.

But he doesn't behave the way he did before.

His body doesn't even move, and it is the body I watch for signs of turning around. Instead, his head twists on his neck, breaking and spinning 180 degrees as bones bulge under his skin.

There's a wide grin on his face as his laser sweeps against the side wall, and when he is fully turned to me, it tracks me.

All my attacks are left to explode or get cancelled out, as all my effort goes into boosting myself to the side, where I slam against the wall with a crunch and then boost myself across the floor to avoid the sweep of the laser.

The glow in his eyes intensifies, and the narrow stream grows wider, breaking apart until multiple streams of lightning are shooting out of his eyes and bouncing off the walls and through the hallways.

I keep dodging, I raise defenses against them, all to no avail, and a few of them pierce through my body, damaging me and burning my flesh, slowing my healing.

Prince Kip avoids my lance even as it grazes his side, and his neck snaps back into place as he heals himself and his eyes begin to regenerate. Without sight, he still manages to nimbly avoid my sister until I reach out to him with [Redistribution]. He is fast, but his physical stats aren't as impressive.

I begin to absorb his kinetic movement, halting him in place, and in his efforts to counter it, he quickly makes his natural barrier expand in an attempt to press against it.

But like any problem, this also can be solved by throwing more mana at it. Forty percent is still more than enough to let mana flood my body as I quickly channel it in huge amounts, overpowering him just for a moment, long enough for Vic to grab him by his shoulders and start pulling him apart. I pin him for just a very short moment, but on this level, even that short moment is more than enough.

In the final second, one of his eyes regenerates faster than the other one, and he blasts away her head in a burst of white lightning, but what remains of Victoria's body continues to pull him apart until his bracelet activates and the vyssari disappears.

I let go of the finger I've held on until now, and my sister regrows from that as I hand her the bracelet as well, and both of us start walking through the hallway towards the black room.

Chapter 865 - Before the third game

Entering the black room teleports us into a different, normal-looking room. There's already some of the other participants waiting, and yet no one's fighting. Which is immediately explained by someone from Melek's team who rushes in to congratulate us for making it through the second game and tells us to wait until everyone is here.

A few recording drones zap around, and I swat one away like it is a fly. Then I head over to one of the corners of the huge room with Vic, and I create a pair of manablock chairs for the two of us to sit in.

I feel blood flowing from my wounds and pooling up across my body, from the wounds Prince Kip caused and a few others from a fight with another group. But only the ones caused by white lightning that are taking so long to heal. Lily's improved healing marks do much better than they used to now, and using a few of them even partially weakens the effect, but as of now, it still can't quite push through.

"You were careless, Natty," Vic says, using my nickname, which she only ever does when it's just the two of us.

Currently, we're not being listened to, nor are we being recorded, as I confirm. Her senses are quite good. As expected of my sister.

"I didn't expect him to be a healer, Vic. I know the world's unfair, but to have both a wyvern bloodline that gives him that weird lightning and for him to be a healer? It's just too much. If it were just the powerful regeneration, I would've been more okay with it."

"That is just an excuse, Natty."

I sigh. "Yes, I was careless." But now that I think of it, I say, "Do you think Lily could shoot a [Disintegration] beam out of her eyes as well? Or me? I bet I could make it so I could shoot thermal energy, I could use my eyes as reflectors. It would be difficult with the trait I already have, but maybe? Or how about a third eye? Or maybe I could just shoot it out of my mouth."

"Do whatever makes you happy." She pauses and looks at me. "Are you happy?"

"I am, Vic. I'm here with you, so how could I not be?"

"It stays at 40 percent for a while longer, no matter what you say."

"Tsk."

She smiles just that tiniest, little, imperceptible bit. "What I meant was, are you happy with your group? You told me what happened to your bond and to your friends, the twins, so I wondered if you wouldn't be happier not having to deal with it all."

"Even with all that happened, I wouldn't just leave them behind."

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Good, but remember. Even if everyone is gone, if everything breaks, I will be here."

"I know, Vic. I trust you."

"Truly trust me?"

"What a dumb question."

With that, her smile becomes more noticeable, and she leans closer and squeezes my hand. "Then continue to trust me no matter what happens."

There are many questions that form in my mind when she says that, but looking into her eyes, I push them all away and nod.

Melek only appears once everyone is here, not as an illusion or projection, but in person. He walks onto a stage that rises up from the floor, smiling charmingly. Each of his steps is full of energy.

"Congratulations to everyone who's completed the game! For you, it might seem a mere moment, a few short clashes, but it was a great show for our audience! And that's just the live streams. Once we get to editing, the finished product will be that much better. Oh, all of the emotions we'll be able to get out of it!"

Barely any of the remaining participants have any reaction, and there's only around 50 or so of us left now. Though I can't really tell if it's a high or low number.

Melek doesn't let it bother him at all. "But I've decided to change things. To spice them up a little and speed things up ahead of schedule. I hope you don't mind... well, what am I saying, of course you don't mind."

He stops walking and straightens up with his mana rising up around him dangerously. "Let's say there were some changes and outside pressure that has forced even someone like your favorite face of the Game to adapt. Oh yes, even someone like me." He shakes his head, but then, as if it were nothing, pulls all his mana back within himself.

"You have one day. Rest, meet with your team, choose a nice outfit, as it might be the one some less fortunate among you die in. In your place, I wouldn't rely on the Crescent Lifeline bracelet too much during the last game. Those fucks were one of the first ones to run away," Melek chuckles.

Coughing once and fixing his suit, he says, "Before the last event starts, you will be present at a dinner with all our precious spectators that have stayed, the most generous donors, and such who wanted to see you in person. Behave, be nice to them. Allow them to see up close the people they've spent months watching before the Game and during it, and then... may the best one win as they wade through the blood of their opponents to claim the reward."

Selene is alone when we return to our room. Her colleagues are nowhere to be seen, and neither is the vyssari advice guy. There's also no sign of the promised new members of our team, which we were told would grow the deeper we go into the game.

It is just a panicked Selene, barely hiding her fear.

We learn she has stayed only under threats, and as soon as she's done with us, she will be gone. Like many of the rich or powerful, she will be escaping this planet. Its Absolute is already gone, and so are all of the Champions and most of the organizers, leaving behind a skeleton crew to keep this Game running.

The rumors are spreading already, and soon panic will ensue as the rest of the population learns about the escapes. Just like Selene, they won't know why or for what reason, but they will try to escape, and apparently, not long after, a mass evacuation will ensue through the creation of portals to nearby moons and planets.

With Selene gone, it's just me and Vic. We didn't keep the selari woman for too long, and with tears in her eyes, she thanked us while leaving quickly, with over 20 hours remaining before the last event.

I found a few recording devices in our room and on our clothes. There are also a few tracking marks, as well as the marks Selene applied to our heads while working on our haircuts.

There's no way she made them, as they are way, way too impressive. They were drawn over her fingerprints, which she pressed against our skulls when she was working on our hair. Some of them

serve as trackers, while the others are much more sinister, though I see through all of them, and I'll remove them in a few hours once I think Selene is off the planet.

We're being spied on, and so was she, so she couldn't warn us. It is possible she wouldn't have warned us at all, but I can't judge her too harshly. There's a high chance she'll still be killed to get rid of evidence, but there's nothing I can do about it.

I wonder when I'll be strong enough to prevent these things from happening around me. When I can just notice it and immediately find the perpetrator without caring for the consequences. A Champion? An Absolute? Someone like Lissandra?

For sure not, as I am now even with all these new changes.

The rest of the time I spend talking to Vic. Just the two of us in a single room. Though this one's much more luxurious than the last, with a nicer view of the desert, an oasis, and buildings in the distance. We talk about useless stuff, though it's mostly her listening and me talking.

As we do, I watch the sky and count the number of ships I see rising up to leave the planet. Later, mass teleportations happen all over the planet, releasing such a humongous amount of mana that I can sense them even from here.

"What do you think?" my sister asks when there are just a few hours left for us to wait, and someone knocks on our door.

"I feel rested," I answer.

She doesn't even try to check if it's true in my expression. When it comes to these things, we don't lie to each other, and there is absolute trust.

"Good, one hundred percent it is," she says, and standing up, I nod.

Both of us are dressed all in black, simple and beautiful clothes that manage to seem formal and casual all at the same time. This time, a crown made of mana floats over my head, and my rolled-up sleeves

reveal the dense inscriptions I've drawn over my forearms with my blood, causing them to stand out strikingly against my pale left arm.

We exit the room, and before its doors close, I glance in one last time, looking through the huge window to the desert outside and the many lines in the sky drawn by escaping ships. Then I open my status.

Name: Nathaniel Gwyn

Title: Absolute Candidate

Difficulty: Hell

Rank: S, Radiant Gold

Guild: Primordial Knights

Floor: 11 - Xyphos

Time left until forced return: 1y 231d 12h 30m 30s

Traits (3/3): Preeminence Eyes 2/5, Mana Vessel 1/3, Empyrean Ichor 3/5

Lvl 441

Strength: 375

Dexterity: 356

Constitution: 100

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 2529 + 2529

Primary Class: Mana Weaver (Unique Arcane)

Sub-class: [Adept of Pride]

Active skills (9/10):

Focus - Lvl 83

Perception - Lvl 79

Redistribution - Lvl 81

Eclipse (Pride) - Lvl 74

Empyrean Lance - Lvl 59

Manifestation - Lvl 52

Weave - Lvl 32

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 84

Selective Adaptation - Lvl 19

Constructs:

Physical Fortification Matrix

Mana Flow Control

Mana Sovereignty Field

Kinetic Mana Heart

Sealed Ignition Heart (Partially Sealed, 1/3)

Combat Cognition Frame

High-Density Thought Network

Thermal Flux Controller

Passive skills (5/5):

Mana Wavelength Tyrant (Mid Arcane)

Mana Wave Predation (Unique Arcane)

Cognitive Hyperprocessing Vector (Low Pristine)

Adaptive Defense (Epic)

Heat Resonance Restoration (Low Pristine)

Tokens:

Send a single item to your disciple (up to epic rarity)

Beyond visitor token - 1 year (unlocked after tutorial)

Beyond 14 day stay token (x 24)

Two active skills combination token

Low Pristine Passive skill

Trait strengthening token (up to 2nd stage)

Shards: 10,881,116

Other than the skill levels, there's been one huge change to my body.

After evolving my Mana Physique to Mana Vessel, my mana stat grew as if the trait had either forced my body to change or clashed with the hyper-condensed mana of my ichor. Now the best stat is 500 points higher, and further doubled by my attribute upgrade.

Before the last game, we find ourselves, as Melek said, surrounded by spectators and other participants, all weaving together. Everyone talks to everyone, be it participants with other participants or spectators speaking with participants. Though there aren't that many of them here either, each one that does remain is either very powerful, has an escape plan, or is straight up crazy.

My sister weaves into the crowd, talking to Yvaine, who then introduces her to Ignis, who seems even more impressive than when I saw him on screen. The combination of a tall, wild mora taken with the fact that he's also an Absolute and a vessel of the Ruler of Greed just seems more threatening in contrast to the friendly feylith Yvaine.

Meanwhile, I rest on the railing of a balcony that opens to a huge crescent looking out over the open desert. There is a place where a building and a hallway once stood miles off in the distance, but now that building is entirely gone, and only a small portion remains. A patch of floor on which a pillar stands, and at the top of which rests the Fragment of Starless Sky.

Just like that.

Adrian seems more relaxed than most as he joins my side, casually sipping on some sort of drink, and also looks toward the fragment.

I am sure he is mirroring my feelings and observing them, but who knows what he actually gets out of it all that leads him to say, "Have you ever heard of Project Sundial?"

"A little," I nod.

"Let's say I was always a fan." His eyes harden as he pours the drink over the balcony and watches it fall toward the sand while smiling. "But that's between us, for once the tutorial is over. For now, do your best. Do you want to hear behind-the-scenes information?"

"You already know the answer."

"Obviously." He smiles and once again looks at the fragment. "The Fragment of Starless Sky appeared here ten days ago with a simple message stating that it was to be used as a reward in the Game, and that only the victor would be able to decide what to do with it. Other than that, the message only said that it could not be moved or taken by anyone else."

"How interesting."

"Isn't it? There were Absolutes invited by this planet's Absolute that came to look at it, maybe even to take it for themselves. Yet no one did. Everyone of them who saw it refused to even touch it and left this planet as quickly as possible."

Adrian takes a step back from the railing and walks away without saying anything else. I watch as he joins Envy, who greets him warmly, and, noticing my gaze, the lumoran waves at me.

Taking my eyes off him and Adrian, I turn back to the fragment in the distance.

Chapter 866 - Fragment of Starless Sky

There are way too many people here for me to even think about spending the mental effort to take note of them all. Plus, Adrian's words still weigh heavily on my mind. He said it all so simply, yet that's something I'm sure he's entirely capable of doing.

Project Sundial... the only reason I know anything about it is curiosity, if I remember correctly, it was a doomsday plan some crazy guy concocted back in the Cold War? A plan to bury hydrogen bombs underground, and in the event it seemed like America was going to lose, the idea was to set them off and theoretically destroy all life on Earth? One last, spiteful declaration that if we don't survive, then you won't be alive much longer to enjoy your victory either.

So I watch Adrian as he chatters away over there, so easygoing. He must know my emotions. He must know what little effect such a warning has on me, yet he said it anyway. Just to make fun of me, or to annoy me. He doesn't even bother trying to pretend in front of me anymore, much less play the part of Earth's savior.

Does it feel like a relief for him to be able to show this side to someone? Or does he not care for words, continuing to believe that his actions will show his true intentions all on their own, a sentiment I strongly agree with? Is this just his way of making fun of the younger generation, mixed in with a hint of truth?

And could I fight and defeat him right now if I actually went for it?

Taking a deep breath, I quickly calm myself down and bring my mana back under control.

"Mind if I have a word with you?" a soft voice sounds by my side. I turn toward it to face Felix Maro. One of the disciples of the Ruler of Temperance, and someone who started his own journey in Beyond two thousand years ago. He is a lumoran, with half of his body tinted pitch black as his race usually is, while the other half is covered in pale blue crystals. Though his look more like vitiligo rather than actual crystals growing out of him, resembling some sort of skin condition.

"I don't mind," I say.

He smiles gently and gestures for me to follow as he begins to walk. With incredible ease, he forms a barrier around us, the kind meant to prevent anyone from listening in on our conversation.

"I have spoken with my master, and if needed, he will manifest through me," he says simply, as if it were trivial. "The Ruler of Temperance will protect the planet, and my master, if necessary, will forcefully end your Beyond quest to send you back."

"You won't stop being mysterious and just straight up tell me everything?"

"I apologize," he says, and his expression actually looks like he means it. "We aren't supposed to interfere too much with the participants. Everyone here will wait until one of you gains the Fragment of Starless Sky and makes a decision as to what to do with it."

"There's only one person I can think of that would scare you guys so much that you wouldn't break some informal rule of his," I say.

Felix Maro smiles slightly. "Just be careful and keep an eye on your sister. I think she's made a deal with a rather dangerous person."

The disciple of the Ruler of Temperance then gives me a slight bow and walks away to rejoin Yvaine in conversation before heading off to speak with the other participants.

Meanwhile, I move around the room. I give myself a few moments to observe Euris, the bear man, and the thylarin array specialist, noticing that they're also talking with their own people.

Envy, Yvaine, and Felix Maro seem to represent the three main factions, each with a different goal that ultimately rests heavily on whoever wins and gets their hands on a fragment.

I am sure Vic has a plan too, and watching her, I find it strange that I don't know what it is. I know she can't tell me right now, not without someone spying, and I don't need her to tell me anyway, I trust her completely. Yet, it is a reminder that she's also been going through the tutorial, meeting people, and

planning things out on her own. There are a few things I think she's likely to be focusing on, so I spend some time thinking about them as well.

I grab a few snacks and spend an hour having a conversation with a friendly vyssari who introduces himself as Prince Kip's uncle. He laughs and tells me he has been donating to us, explaining that there were apparently efforts by others to place negative effects on me and Vic, but there was also an option to bid higher to ensure those effects weren't applied.

We then somehow get into an argument over which mana attribute is truly the best. He strongly defends Potency, while I fight for my beloved Amplification.

Soon, it even comes down to an exchange of insults as we each put down the other's opinions, but none of it feels ill-spirited. He seems to be having a lot of fun with our conversation, too.

After a few drinks, I get him to show me a photo of Prince Kip from when he was a baby vyssari, and indeed, every young vyssari reminds me of how Zant looks. It's as if whatever Ruler created the vyssari race by imbuing them with wyvern blood, intending to create mighty warriors, instead made a genetically superior race when it comes to the cuteness of their young.

During this entire thing, Melek continues to do his job, though he does so more and more half-heartedly. He's still smiling and charming, but he continues to drink and grows much less patient as time goes on, not seeming to care if he's insulting people or being cruel, as if his real personality were rising to the surface.

And when the time for the last game finally comes, he climbs onto the platform and bows deeply toward us all.

"Thank you all for participating in this shitshow sponsored by... well, fuck them too," he smiles brightly and takes a deep breath. "It is indeed an amazing feeling to have something I gave so much of my life to turn into this sort of mess... this is trash."

He looks at his palms and closes his hands into fists before opening them again. "I hope our precious spectators don't mind my lapse in professionalism, and if you do..." Melek looks over at Envy, Felix Maro, and even the vessels in attendance, and smirks, "Well, fuck you too, in particular."

As he slaps his palms together, the lights flare up behind him, creating beams that reach the sky as dawn draws closer and closer. There are small particles of sand floating in the air, glittering beautifully, causing them to look like stars glinting in the night sky.

“Why don't we start then?” Melek says, pointing toward the pillar miles away in the distance. “I had a beautiful game planned, but why bother? Let's make it simpler, more brutal, more enjoyable to watch, shall we? The objective is simple: go. Rush the fragment. Kill everyone in your way to get to it, or give up and run away.”

The selari Melek starts unbuttoning his shirt. Then, taking off his jacket, he throws it away, pulling the shirt down as well to reveal a muscular and heavily scarred body.

“I went over the rules, and there's a clause that allows me to make such changes, and I don't believe that person is going to mind either. After all, the fragment must be earned. And hey, if I get to screw over the plans of some of you assholes, why not? Go against that person's direct order and try to take the fragment before the Game ends. But I bet you won't.”

Like heat over a flame, mana starts rising up around the face of the game. It coils around him, washes over him, and pulses in waves. The sheer size of it continues to grow as he ramps it up, letting his mana heart go wild.

It is a disgusting amount of mana from a man who, as I have learned, refused to become a Champion because of how much he enjoyed stomping his lessers into the dirt, without being overwhelmingly more powerful than them.

He's already been the face of the game for two hundred years, and he himself won the Game before that.

“This is the most live viewers The Games have ever had, by more than double. There are even some individuals running a pirate stream outside, so why don't we give them something fun to watch? You'll have to kill me to get to your prize. You will be starting in ten seconds.”

With that said, Melek jumps high into the air, and by releasing a huge amount of mana like a booster, he pushes himself toward the pillar in the distance at high speed, remaining floating in the air near it.

The countdown starts, a count that everyone's keeping in their head.

Most of the spectators at this point have cleared the scene, leaving just a few people waiting behind. Some of the remaining ones lift themselves high into the air, and the tension increases. The sides that seemed somewhat neutral now eye each other, looking as if they might start fighting at any moment.

The bear man, Euris, and the thylarin array woman get ready, as do the remaining two dozen participants who haven't already fled.

And then there's me and Vic.

Though I'm breathing calmly, I feel my heart begin to race, and my focus sharpens. There's that tingle at the tips of my fingers and a feeling like cold water starts enveloping me, the kind that almost forces your body to shake, not out of fear, but out of a desire to take action.

The countdown continues, and at the last second, someone shoves a table nearby. In the silence, the glass shattering on the floor sounds like a gunshot.

The entire podium explodes under the bear man's telekinesis, and two of the participants who are unable to press back against his skill get compressed into a ball of flesh and bone. The bear man swings his arm, further annihilating the podium and throwing the others aside.

Before he can do more, Euris emerges from a shadow nearby and takes a calm step toward the bear, who notices him and releases everything against the man cloaked in shadow. All of it fails to do much of anything, almost as if his attack were simply sliding off his opponent, and in response he launches even more attacks in quick succession.

Disruption, projectiles, attempts at teleportation, but all fail to do anything, and the bear man slides into a form of body strengthening that shatters the area around him with the excess power. Yet even then, he fails to keep up with Euris, who stabs his dagger through the bottom of the bear's chin and through the top of his head, killing him on the spot.

In the next moment, Victoria crashes into him, and he swings his red dagger to defend himself.

Meanwhile, with a boost that shatters what remains of the podium, I launch myself into the air at high speed, targeting Melek.

I spin in the air to avoid the projectiles tracking me and disrupt them with a single powerful pulse. I see that the thylarin woman building an array, but I focus on it with my eyes, taking it over and weaving my own around it as I continue to expand it. She attempts a few times to take back control, but I track her location, ignore the multiple illusory versions of herself that she's placed, and find her real body.

Through her remaining connection to the array, I send one of my orbs, and the area around her explodes into a huge ball full of thermal energy that burns a few of the other participants nearby.

[You have defeated Ephemeral Contraptionist - lvl 446]

I don't even bother forming a lance, instead, I use my usual super-dense mana javelins, each of them heavier than myself and boosted by kinetic energy. I don't hold back at all as they shoot out at supersonic speed, one after another, cracking and breaking barriers to catch up to the speedier participants.

A few explosions crash against the barrier I've raised. Someone gathers power for a large-scale attack, but I just throw more mana at it, making my barrier so that it cuts off all sound to the outside while the attacks merely ripple across its surface.

Floating there in the air, I use my eyes to track each and every one of them, bombarding them with similar attacks of my own, just with vastly more mana.

The longer I fight, the more I let myself go wild, channeling it into my skills and turning the desert around us into a landscape filled with craters. Primordial lightning barely ripples across my barrier. Nearly all mana based attacks get disrupted or turned against their owners, and my projectiles don't stop raining down as I refuse to let anyone approach the fragment.

At one point, the remaining participants join forces against me. There are five of them, all Absolute candidates. They launch their attacks at the exact same spot and try synchronized disruption attempts, but it's all for nothing.

I already targeted the participants with primordial energies first. Now, all who remain are forced to use mana-based attacks, powerful as they may be.

I let them feel my frustration from having to hold back and endure this shitty game. I don't move a single inch from the spot, removing them one after another, taking over their attacks, breaking their barriers, and rendering all their mana completely useless in my presence.

And when they are gone, I float there, hanging in the air, pulling all the stray particles of mana in the area toward me and feeding them into my spinning mana crown.

With a boost of kinetic energy, I launch myself like a rocket toward Melek, who's still floating in the air. My barrier is gone now, as I pull it all close over my skin to create a constantly shifting defensive layer.

The face of The Games smiles, spreading the arms of his scarred body wide as his mana radiates outward with incredible pressure. In quick succession, three attacks slam against me, each of them powerful enough to erase a city, and each one lights up the dawning desert.

But I don't even try to disrupt them, I just let them hit me. I also block his projectiles and fight against the pressure, attempting to disrupt my own mana. Just like him, I let my mana rush out as I face my fellow Amplificator, someone like me with his own bottomless well of mana, allowing him to launch bombardments of his own.

My mana is like a torrential wave, while his is like a firestorm. They become visible as they meet in the air.

But where he is reaching his maximum output, I continue to dish out more. Where he begins to have trouble channeling it all, I'm only getting started, and my mana sweeps his away, suffocating his pressure as I reach him.

Instead of continuing to fight me this way, he coats his body in defensive barriers and uses a powerful form of reinforcement.

I match him by reinforcing my body and weaving mana together with kinetic energy. I duck under his attack, then, despite the sheer amount of information my mind is currently being forced to handle, I use my eyes to read the frequency of his barrier, and my own resonates to match it perfectly.

My fist hits his face, and he staggers back. Boosting myself ahead, I catch a punch he throws my way, punch his face again, and then, with a burst of speed, I do it a third time.

Melek staggers back, releasing his mana in a wave of pressure that blows away tons of sand and cuts into my barrier, but I step through it. I strengthen my body further, punching him multiple times over. He sways and plants his feet, letting out a battle cry as he charges at me.

After letting one of his hits land against my barrier, uselessly rippling against it, I punch back at him again. His jawbone tears away from his face with the force of the punch as he staggers and falls to the ground, trying to keep himself conscious. Even now, he is chuckling and pressing himself to stand up. Not for a moment does his mana stop moving, still trying to attack me as it rages around us.

Looking down at my bloodied fists, I say, "I'm sorry, I thought you would be stronger."

A glow of mana appears on the tip of his finger as if he means to write something, but then he just stops, holding his finger there. Instead, he turns to the camera drone in the distance and bows.

Then he explodes, releasing all the mana he's been gathering for who knows how long in a fraction of a second. It is an explosion destined to spread for miles and miles across the area.

I grab it all, usurping the flood of mana and pressing it into a compact space. It vibrates and fights to be released, but I keep pressing and pulling it toward me. I move my hands together with my palms facing each other, and between them, I hold all of that mana in the stable form of a tricolored orb.

Then I break it apart, pulling it into the whirlpool that is the crown over my head, and boost myself toward the pillar where the Fragment of Starless Sky rests. There is no one else left to fight me for it. Even the remaining spectators move closer, some on the ground, others floating nearby.

Stopping there, I don't reach out to touch it, choosing to wait instead.

“Take it. Give the fragment to me, Nathaniel,” Yvaine says, and just from her speech, I know it’s Ruby talking through her.

She moves closer, but even she refuses to grab the fragment.

The sound of soft steps echoes on the sand as Victoria makes her way toward me, holding the glowing red dagger Euris once owned. She taps my shoulder and gives it a soft squeeze that means more to me than a minute-long hug from anyone else.

“Nathaniel!” Ruby calls to me.

I look her in the eyes, and whatever is in mine instantly silences her.

Victoria then places her hand on the fragment and takes it, but she doesn't take it for herself.

My sister stabs her hand into the middle of her chest and pulls out a small, tiny orb that gives off no energy signature at all. All of the figures remaining here move closer, but they wait for the victor's decision as Victoria squeezes the orb and throws it to the ground.

In the next moment, a tear appears in space, and two figures step out from it.

A replica of the Last Elf smiles brightly as he looks over everyone present and moves his red hair out of his face. The other figure is entirely covered in a cloak.

"As per our deal," Victoria says.

"As per our deal," the elf confirms, nonchalantly taking the fragment from her.

His body then moves as quickly as a striking snake as he stabs his hand through the chest of the cloaked figure, burying the fragment within its torso.

The figure's cloak falls away, revealing an old man, and all my attention is pulled to the blood flowing from his chest. Then I notice the dozens of Fragments of Starless Sky embedded all throughout his body alongside dense inscriptions, and blood flowing from fresh wounds around the fragments. And that blood is Empyrean Ichor, incomparably purer than mine.

At that moment, the Last Elf declares, "By the power of the Empyrean bloodline bound within this system-defying vessel, with every shattered fragment finally unified in one frame, and through the culmination of millennia of labor, I awaken he who once stood among the mightiest."

The dawning sky turns a shade darker, as if the stars are being drained of their radiance.

"Awaken, Godking. Awaken Starless Sky."

Chapter 867 - It could have been much worse

"Have it your way," Ruby says, and she swings the hand of the body she's possessing, causing a great rift to tear itself open in space. From inside it, a pair of hands pierces through, grabbing the edges of the rift and spreading it wide so the herald of destruction can pass through.

The Ruler of Wrath looks around. A huge, muscular velnar wearing white clothes, reminiscent of a Greek toga that reveals a large portion of his upper chest and arms. Everyone in the space seems to freeze, and even the Elf stops for a moment.

Meanwhile, Ruby's presence disappears, and Yvaine shakes her head, clearly strained from her master using her to create a portal to teleport a person as powerful as Wrath, though it seems like Ruby has other things to do now.

Seeing the man covered in the fragments, and feeling the incredible, unnerving power radiating off him, the Ruler of Wrath growls. His body increases in size, enveloping itself in black fur as he turns into his Lycan form.

Then, from the silver diadem he was wearing, a layer of that same silver metal of that same silver color flows as if it were molten. It burns him, releasing steam and heat, and the Lycan grows larger as the armor covers his body.

It's made of a beautiful, pure silver-colored metal comprising the best work of art I've ever seen, and yet it remains completely functional.

"So they gave him Materia. Envy, call upon our friend, we need to distract Wrath," the elf says, raising a barrier around us.

And even under the barrage of attacks beginning to rain down on him, Envy finds the time. Smiling, he takes down one of the crowns hanging over his head and breaks it, funneling all of its mana into a portal opening in front of him.

A demon steps out much like Wrath stepped out of the rift. He has no horns, in fact, they seem to have been sawed off, and inside of his chest, five powerful Demon hearts beat.

With a swing of his hand, a massive release of kinetic energy blasts the Ruler of Envy away, and then the Hornless Demon, without hesitation, charges the Lycan. Their first clash almost breaks the Last Elf's barrier as they move like unpredictable lightning streaking through the sky, and their attacks push away the clouds and light up the dawn.

An attack thunders through the area around us, entirely destroying everything in its path, only to be blocked by the newly reinforced barrier raised by the Last Elf. It is perfectly spherical and covered in what seems like incredibly dense rivers of meandering lines that almost seem to pass through each other, twisting and covering the entire surface.

Another attack clashes against it, but then Yvaine moves back as Envy attacks her. Immediately, Bant and Oant move to help her, and the three of them face down the Ruler of Envy in a clash so fast that it takes them dozens of miles away in mere moments, covering the horizon in attacks reaching high toward the sky.

Ignis frowns, and four wings made of fire manifest behind his back. Then he pulls a sword made of rusted red metal from his forearm. The heat around that sword is much higher than the heat around his wings, and droplets of molten metal begin to drip off it as he prepares to attack the barrier. But at the last moment, he turns to deflect a beam made of pure mana, as it crashes into him and sends him crashing to the broken ground.

Adrian floats there in the air, his red figure covering the sky behind him, wielding a staff and sword.

Flames blast from Ignis like a river crashing towards the sky, and Adrian takes it all on directly.

Out of nowhere, Yvaine appears in front of the barrier and slams her palm against it in the exact same moment that the elf notices her and slams his palm against the same spot from the inside.

Reality itself around the barrier seems to crack, as rifts start appearing all over the place, and Yvaine attacks the barrier again and again, failing to break it each time. Before she can do more, Envy reaches her position and, moving with much greater speed, kicks her away, sending her flying with a loud sonic boom. He launches himself away to follow her, and behind him, Bant follows, with Oant nowhere to be seen.

A huge explosion brings my attention to the other side, and I watch a chunk of the planet we're standing on explode, sending hundreds of fragments of debris and rocks rising so high that they fly directly into outer space.

Another clash in that direction reduces half the debris to dust, with just the shockwaves washing over the barrier, blowing all the sand away under hurricane force winds, obscuring any view of the battlefield and erasing anything still standing nearby.

Four kinetic hearts beat in unison as the Hornless Demon faces the Lycan, but he's clearly getting pushed back and is unable to do anything against the materia armor the Lycan is wearing. Meanwhile, the Ruler of Wrath grows stronger, as each of his attacks actively destroys the planet we are standing on.

Yvaine's voice spreads through the area, calling upon the Ruler of Wrath, and he glances our way. And in response, the Last Elf presses both of his hands against the barrier just as the Lycan, in his werewolf-like, pitch-black furred form, reaches us. His golden eyes glow as he slams against the barrier, and everything beyond the barrier is instantly gone. A shockwave with the force of a hurricane blows everything away, and a clear ring vibrates through the air as the shockwave blows away all the clouds as well.

Then the Lycan punches again, and cracks finally start to appear in the barrier. The sheer force of the attack melts the area under the friction caused by his absolute strength, and the tectonic plates beneath us begin to move.

Another strike sees a lot of its force redirected upward, displacing enough atmospheric pressure to instantly create a localized supercell storm. Heavy rain and lightning begin to fall in a violent downpour as the Lycan reaches out to punch again, but the Hornless Demon reaches us just in time and slams against him, pushing the Lycan's face straight into the ground.

The demon is already heavily wounded, missing chunks of his chest, neck, and arm, yet he's still smiling. For a while, he continues to use all his strength to press the Ruler of Wrath into the ground until the Lycan roars, his form growing even further, and the materia armor shifting to contain that massive form, once again burning him and steaming as it does so.

With a smile, the Hornless Demon disappears, and the Lycan follows right behind him, completely ignoring the barrier behind them.

The rain wets the craters around us as the elf slides to the ground, seemingly sapped of strength after defending against that brief attack from the Ruler.

I step toward Victoria, both of us reduced to mere spectators. There's not the slightest thing we can do to change the outcome, only watch and take it in. Feeling something being pressed into my hand, I look down, only to see the glowing red dagger.

"I have no need for it," she says.

"Thanks," I reply.

And then, from the stormy sky, descending from the dark supercell storm, a figure begins to float down. A high-pitched noise fills the air as a halo woven from the purest form of light starts to float over his head, expanding in size until it is a mile wide. Beneath that light floats Felix Maro.

No, that's not him, not this time, it's his master, finally.

The Ruler of Temperance, Feroy, lifts his hand, and a bright light gentle enough not to burn the eyes fills the area, pushing away the darkness and illuminating the scene with the full light of day as he lands before the barrier.

First, he looks at me and Victoria, then at the elf, and lastly at the older man with his pure Empyrean Ichor and fragments of the Starless Sky imbued throughout his body.

“What a mess you’ve made,” he tells the Elf, and then, with a single tap on the barrier, he easily shatters it into a burst of particles reminiscent of glowing stars.

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Before he can take the next step, something falls onto the ground in front of him, and I track his eyes only to recognize Yvaine’s head.

“I got rid of the pests so they can't interrupt us anymore,” Envy says, landing nearby with a smile. Dusting off his damaged clothes and ignoring his wounds, he glances into the distance where Adrian is still barely holding off Ignis.

Temperance simply lifts his arms, and a brilliant light explodes from them. It moves too quickly even for someone like the Ruler of Envy to avoid, erasing everything in its path when it eventually explodes. The next moment, Envy reappears further away. Having barely escaped with almost the entire left half of his body missing, he collapses to the ground, chuckling.

“It is too late. It has been for a while,” the replica of the Last Elf says.

“I know,” Temperance nods, his eyes fixed on the man holding all the fragments. “We underestimated your ability to keep Patience and me from helping any sooner.”

Without saying anything else, he swings his arm and, in a flash, entirely erases the body of the replica of the Last Elf in a pillar of light.

Turning to me and Vic, he says, “The two of you should already be gone.” Under his gaze, I feel as if someone has strongly pulled on a rope tied to my waist, and I feel myself falling until I land on the ground somewhere else entirely.

The last thing I see is all the fragments of the Starless Sky melting and covering the man in what seems like liquid darkness with a velvety texture and a hint of indigo color. His shape changes entirely, becoming longer, bigger, and less reminiscent of a human.

In a blink, all the light disappears from the sky as far as I can see, even suffocating the light that Feroy brought. Instead, it is replaced by a velvety indigo veil void of stars, and the planet begins to freeze.

The next thing I see is Ruby in front of Victoria. The Ruler stands in such a way that I immediately push myself back to my feet and walk closer, causing Ruby to shift her eyes and look at me.

"Why?" she pushes through her teeth as she asks my sister.

"Starless Sky will protect Earth from any outside forces for the next hundred years, be it invaders, Rulers, Gods, or Corporations, leaving us to deal only with internal strife. That will give Nathaniel and me a safe base to grow stronger until we're ready to handle those threats ourselves or create a more permanent solution," Victoria says simply.

"You did it for that? If you only knew who you'd just helped to bring back, you'd realize just how lucky you are that I haven't destroyed you where you stand," Ruby says. She then does not even wait for Vic to answer and waves her hand, sending my sister away.

Standing there, she takes a deep breath and closes her eyes in a way that makes it clear she is already dealing with something else. It is likely the distraction that did not allow her and Diligence to come here in the first place. When she looks at me, I return her gaze without looking away.

"Do you not trust me, Nathaniel?" she asks me.

"Ruby, you allowed Adrian to return to Earth," I remind her.

That silences her for a moment, so I smile weakly. "Tell me, would you protect Earth the same way Victoria just made a deal to ensure? Or would you have allowed things to get worse just to force me to grow stronger, to become a better weapon?"

Even then, she stays quiet, and I nod slightly. "I don't blame you, truly I don't. Such is your greed. But don't expect me, or us, to adapt to your needs and goals. I care very little for them."

"And what will you do if your sister makes a mistake? What if it only makes things worse?" she asks.

"I will support her even then."

"There is something deeply twisted about your attachment to her. That sick, blind devotion where you would surrender your entire free will just for her."

"Victoria sacrificed herself for me. She became who she is now just so I could live as myself. It's a debt I'll never be able to repay, and it's the exact reason I will never again be as weak and helpless as I was back then."

"...Do whatever you want."

"I will. And Ruby, don't you ever threaten my sister again."

POV The Warden of Parallax Eyes, Kyralon

The warden sits on his tower, taking notes for his records with his eyes hazed over as he watches through the galaxies. Next to him, an unmoving projection of the Ruler of Greed sits, shut down because she doesn't currently have the mental capacity to talk with everything she's dealing with. Kyralon knows this, so he patiently waits and observes.

He watches as Lissandra Hawthorne steps onto the surface of Xyphos, and with a single step that collapses space in front of her, she reaches one of its many entrances.

Before entering, however, she looks up.

Her eyes perfectly align with the gaze of the Warden of Parallax Eyes, and she gives a smile. "Honestly, I find your gaze annoying, curious one, but I do feel a sense of familiarity from you. Your technique and the way you use your mana. I'm curious to know if you weren't a disciple of my original self."

She takes another step, and right before entering the Labyrinth, she says, "Though I have to say that I find your use of my techniques highly lacking."

And then she is gone, and in that moment, the planet begins to be enveloped by the white domain of one winged wyvern, and thousands of tutorial attendees begin to appear all across the surface.

The velnar stops his scribing for a moment and examines his own technique, even giving a little chuckle before continuing to write.

Finally, the Ruler of Greed's projection begins to move, and she lets out something between a long groan and a sigh. "This almost killed me and Diligence, Kyralon. I am beginning to tire of all this crap."

"I can imagine," he says, before asking with genuine curiosity, "I think I got most of it, but can you tell me the details? I wasn't able to fully comprehend everything."

She looks at him with a gaze that threatens to turn into anger, but in the end, she just shakes her head. "One of the Godkings, Starless Sky, is back. I knew the elf always wanted to awaken one of the gods the elves once worshipped, and even I thought about trying something similar and throwing one of the stronger ones up against Pride, but the elf got to it before me. Now the system has adapted to it, so that's that."

"Yvaine... I'm sorry for what happened to her," Kyralon says.

Ruby nods solemnly. "She knew the risks, and I told her to leave, but she always was stubborn. But... yes. I will mourn her later, just as Diligence will mourn his vessel. And I've already found the place Envy's holed himself up in, so you can be sure I will avenge my disciple. But the exact moment Victoria Gwyn handed the fragment to the elf, it was already too late to stop the awakening. They all should have escaped and let Wrath cover their exit." She rubs her eyes and sits there quietly.

The velnar nods and does not ask any more for a moment, giving her time to mourn.

He had already witnessed Starless Sky's awakening, the reincarnator's battle to hold off Ignis, and Envy's bloody retreat. He saw the Hornless Demon vanish from sight and watched the Rulers of Temperance, Patience, and Wrath clash with the godking, only for the deity to break away wholly unscathed.

"Victoria Gwyn bears the stigma of Starless Sky now," Kyralon says.

"She does."

"Nathaniel Gwyn used the opportunity to gather blood samples of that extremely pure Emphyrean Ichor from the descendant the Last Elf found."

"He did. As angry as I am with him, I almost admire that greed. Little fucker."

"And her imitation?"

"Simply put, she and the wyvern used the dagger to link themselves to the real Labyrinth of Xyphos. They hooked it up to the tutorial, starting with Group 4's instance, before it bled out into the rest of the tutorial. The 11th floor has been replaced by the real planet that hosts the Labyrinth of Xyphos, which is still in the same place it always was, but it's been spatially cut off from the real world, sitting right on the brink between the tutorial and reality. The imitation took inspiration from Beyond, and the wyvern created its own version of the Main Defensive Array of Beyond and has already spread the domain throughout the planet. And of course, it's already begun calling for more wyverns."

"Oh."

"Yes, oh. All the people and all the Corporations that were on the planet at the time getting talnium to sell to Domus and other worlds or Corporations are now trapped in the tutorial as well."

"OH."

"And all the goddamn tutorial attendees currently on the 11th floor got moved to the real Labyrinth of Xyphos."

"And her replica?"

"Well, she went into the Labyrinth of Xyphos, obviously. She wants to meet the avatar our master left there before the fall of Eladore and take her heart. You know that Xyphos only ever creates one avatar, a single replication of something. But this time it hasn't acknowledged the imitation as the same being as our master. So you know what? It created an avatar of her as well, the moment she entered. Now there are three of them in there."

"And this is what you and Diligence were able to limit things to?"

"Trust me, Kyralon. It could have been much worse."

Chapter 868 - Quite a mess

POV Kim Min-Jae

Kevin stops out of nowhere, and I pull up by his side. As I have so many times before, I get ready to fight, raising my mana and using [Telekinesis] to push my body to move faster.

But soon enough, I recognize the presence appearing ahead, and Maya walks out from around the corner.

With a happy shout that escapes my throat, I begin to rush toward her, but the cheer freezes in my mouth as I see her eyes. They are so cold and lacking any emotion.

Maya is covered in wounds and blood, as well as broken pieces of her tricolored [Armament]. She's holding a short sword with a really wide blade and no tip, pointing it directly at me. It takes a few seconds for her eyes to register who I am.

"Kim?" she asks carefully.

"Yes, are you okay?" I ask, moving closer as she drops her weapon.

“Yes, I... Kevin?” she asks, furrowing her brows. “But you’re...”

“This is just easier for your feeble mind!” Kevin smiles, putting his hands on his hips as he looks at Maya. “Damn, maybe we should have waited for you to save us instead of hurrying to find you,” he chuckles.

Maya shakes her head, but she does not raise her weapon. She seems different from before, even as she exits her [Focus], if only a little bit. It’s difficult to describe. Maybe sharper?

“And just in time!” Kevin continues to smile, watching as a woman with silver hair steps out from one of the tunnels.

Nathaniel’s master, Lissandra Hawthorne. And her appearance here only makes my confusion worse and worse.

She tilts her head and, for a good five seconds, just stares at Kevin, who continues to smile back at her.

“So, that’s how it is,” she says in the end, and then gives a small, polite bow toward him.

“It seems so. You’ve made quite a mess, you know,” he tells her.

“Nothing that can’t be dealt with later.”

“I guess,” Kevin sighs, then adds, “I can make Kim and Maya forget, but you’re too powerful for me.” His tone grows more serious. “It cannot learn about me.”

“I understand,” Lissandra says. “I will erase my memories of you.” She begins to walk away, but before leaving, she adds, “Next time, do a better job at hiding.”

Then she is gone entirely, moving at such a speed that I cannot even track where she went.

“Have you ever seen a human as arrogant as her? And so confident?” Kevin watches the spot where she left and shakes his head. “I would really love to see Nat get to her level. I bet they would get along soooo well then.”

With a few steps, he comes to a halt in front of Maya. “While I don’t want to do this, this is important, Maya. Will you allow me to erase your memory of meeting me here?”

“You aren’t Kevin...”

“It is... complicated. Even words have their own power, and the more I say, the higher the chance it will learn, adapt, and evolve. I know you have no reason to trust me, but...”

“Even that woman agreed, and I don’t think I can stop you anyway, so just get on with it.”

Kevin smiles. “Maybe we’ll meet again one day. Thank you,” he says, gently tapping her forehead. The touch causes Maya to faint, and he carefully catches her, lowering her to the ground before turning to me in a quick movement.

“But you, I have to kill! You know too much, and you chew too loudly. A monster rather than a human!” he smirks, making a finger gun and pointing it right at my head. “And I hate you quite a bit, after all.”

Even with the heavy emotions swirling inside me, I chuckle.

Still pointing his fingers at me, he says, “I think I can break our rules a little bit, Kim. So I want to tell you that even at the very end, Kevin never blamed Lily, so stop forcing yourself to hate her in secret on his behalf. It doesn’t fit you.”

He takes a step forward. “And Nathaniel is not a better person than you. He’s not some miraculous, all-powerful, shining hero you need to admire. His burden is nothing to be envied, either. Kim, it is perfectly fine to be yourself.”

“Then what exactly should I do?” I ask him.

Kevin just smirks. “No idea.” He takes a final step, and the tip of his finger gun touches my forehead. “You’re a smart boy, so think for yourself. That itself is part of the process.”

“I guess I have to... figure it out on my own...” My final words trail off into a whisper.

“Do not start sobbing on me now that I’m leaving.”

“Who gives a crap? I am going to forget it all anyway.”

“That is the spirit,” Kevin chuckles. “Though your memories will disappear, some of the feelings will remain, so I want to tell you something.”

Immediately, I know what to expect, and right on cue, it comes. Kevin was always a huge fan of lame humor.

“You’re getting too tall. You need to lean down when you walk or something.”

“I’ll try, short king.”

“Tsk.” He continues to smile. It feels like he is the one who does not want this moment to end, stretching it out, but in the final second...

I shake my head, suddenly finding myself on the surface rather than inside the Labyrinth of Xyphos. I let my senses expand, searching for the Adjudicator. Maya is here as well, rising from the ground just like me as we look around.

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

Weren’t we escaping into the Labyrinth? Why are we now at a different place?

It seems that they've continued to track us or left someone to keep an eye on the area, so before I can think about whatever just happened, an Adjudicator lands nearby as if they'd been dropped from somewhere high in the sky, and Maya takes a step forward to face her.

Then another Adjudicator falls down. And a third. And a fourth.

Six of them appear all around us, beginning to charge.

I watch them all rush at us as I close my right eye, concentrating everything through my left. But then, as if someone suddenly switches off the lights, everything around us turns pitch black. I begin to plummet, and a second later, I crash into the sand, finding myself stranded on the desert planet once again, but the Adjudicators are all gone.

What just happened?

POV Nathaniel

From my position high in the air, I can tell this planet is different from before. If the few bits of information Ruby threw my way are to be believed, we're on the real planet that holds the Labyrinth of Xyphos.

One question still remains: is the planet itself called Xyphos, is that why it's the Labyrinth of Xyphos? Or does the planet have some other name, or does it have no name at all? Maybe Xyphos was just some random guy, and the Labyrinth got named after him.

But, as Ruby said, the planet has been entirely covered in a rather terrifying domain that I faintly recognize as belonging to the one winged wyvern. The planet itself feels bigger and hotter, though it's hard to say for sure right now.

I just know that when I opened the Community tab to check on everyone from Earth currently chatting on the 11th floor, hundreds of messages popped up at once.

Tacita (Hell, Luce) - 丶 (`д´*)ノ

Uggard (Hell, Astrum) - I have no fucking idea what you mean by that, just type normally!

Iut (Hell, Casual Violence) - What happened? Why are there people from other tutorials around me?

Thelax (Hell, Astrum) - I was about to complete the floor quest, what is this crap?

Cutie (Hell, Unsupervised) - Wow, there are so many humans here now. Shouldn't the floor be for our planet alone?

Randomlamename (Hard, Mostly Dead) - Stop attacking us, you idiots! Something clearly went wrong. Wait for the system message or something!

Six (Hell, Over-Budget) - I want to hurry to the next floor. I'll make a custom high arcane item in exchange for the required talnium. You can find me on the hot side.

Savant (Hell, Alone) - Gwyn, what have you done?

I read the last one, deciding it must be meant for some other Gwyn somewhere in the tutorial.

Parsec (Hell, Company of Distinguished Individuals) - Quickly, search for people from Easy difficulty in the area and save them! They're going to melt in these temperatures!

Lizzard (Hell, One) - Oh fuck, I didn't think of that!

I quickly close the Community tab, rise high into the air, and send my scans sweeping through the area. Fixing on a group of ten people, I boost myself in their direction to potentially help, but I find it's not necessary.

The group is being protected by a blue barrier projecting from a single orb in the center of their circle, so I open the Community tab again.

Fluffy (Easy, Land) - We're fine! The moment we appeared here, a barrier surrounded us. Is this really an instance of Hell difficulty's tutorial? Why are we all here?

Justagirl (Easy, Land) - We can't leave the barrier. Is it really that hot out there? It looks hot. Please don't break the barrier.

HeavySoup (Easy, Land) - There's some sort of creepy human floating over us. Sir, please do not attack us.

Lord Pathaka (Easy, Land) - He is holding a glowing red dagger. I am getting worried.

I look down at the group and then at the dagger I hold in my hand. I remember being truly proud of my sister, momentarily awakening her inner loot goblin. And I'm even more so after checking its description and seeing it's mid pristine grading.

I fly away from the group and expand my senses further as I search for Group 4. A few times, my senses clash against the perception of other people doing the exact same thing, but at this stage, we just ignore each other and pass on by.

There are also ships moving through the sky, and on the ground, I spot several structures that were never present in the tutorial version of this place. I'm sure there'll be more of them soon. At least, that's what Ruby said, mentioning that she and Diligence are working on it and have called upon some of the other Rulers.

But for now, I'm curious to learn about the other tutorials, and Victoria should be somewhere around here as well.

Further increasing my speed, I zip across the sky, observing hundreds, thousands, and likely far more tutorial attendees scattered all over the surface. Plenty of them are enclosed in barriers, likely those from Easy and Normal difficulty. Though I wouldn't be surprised if that included most of Hard difficulty, possibly even all of it. That cockroach really made a massive mess of things.

I halt when a javelin passes by not far from me and continues to fly off into the distance. Quickly, I calculate the trajectory it came from and boost myself in that direction, ramping up my speed significantly.

I cross a massive area, covering dozens of miles, until I find a tower made of white rock jutting out of the desert. It's a solitary building in a vast wasteland, though it seems to be abandoned and crumbling in places.

At the top of it, Tess stands, waving at me with a smile.

"You could have hit me," I tell her as I land at her side.

"I sent a message in the Community, but I guess you stopped reading it."

"There are too many messages. I'm waiting for people to calm down."

"That won't be happening anytime soon," she says, gesturing to the landscape around us. "Any idea what's happening? I just returned to the floor, and everyone had left our base. Before you ask, yes, everyone seems okay. I saw them in the Community."

A notification that appears in front of me stops me from answering, and I read what it says.

There has been an unexpected occurrence, and the 11th-floor quest has been put on hold. I would like to ask everyone to stop moving, as it will be much simpler to note people's locations that way.

Soon, everyone will be given an item to locate the other members of their group.

This notification should appear to all attendees, corporate members—whether in orbit or on planet—and everyone else present

I want to give a strong warning that hurting tutorial participants or interfering with their tutorial in any other way is heavily prohibited.

Lastly, this part of the message is for the one who's set their domain over the planet. I appreciate you not hurting anyone present, though I know it to be a calculated move, and it would have brought more attention to you if you had.

I will be visiting you soon for a conversation, and I don't mean combat.

- The Ruler of Diligence

I look up at Tess. "Saw it?"

"Yes. So, once again, Diligence is behind it all."

I blink and look at her for the moment it takes me to realize that she's joking. But as I think about it more, I come to the conclusion that Diligence probably hasn't thought this through, or how the others might see this situation.

Chapter 869 - Corporate owned death desert

While waiting for the notification that will hopefully give us our updated floor quest and the compass leading us to our other group members, we sit on top of the tower.

I still don't know how I should feel. Am I happy with what just happened, or am I annoyed about only being able to watch? Maybe both? I also realize that just watching such high-level fights has forced my mind into overdrive, to the point that I was barely able to function other than keeping my body standing.

And as has happened many times before, I'm sure there were parts of the fight I wasn't able to process. I glimpsed it, but that's all.

At all times, they used their presences to pressure each other: attacks on natural domains, quick activations of something I like to call simple domains, and their mutual pressures within it. There was the invisible kinetic armor the Hornless Demon used, and the Last Elf's barrier as it endured those incredible attacks. There's just so much for me to think over.

Tess shoves my shoulder, bringing my attention back to her.

“Dennis and Aaron got ten million shards. Your work?” she asks.

“You could say that. I’ll be asking for 1 percent so they don’t think I’m a pushover. The rest they’d better spend wisely.”

“I don’t know, Nat, you could probably ask for more than one percent.”

“I was never good at negotiating and the like.”

“How interesting,” she continues to smile and turns away to look over the desert. “You’ve gotten thinner, you know that? Lost some weight. I can see it in your face somewhat, and the others will probably start to notice as well in the next few weeks.”

Curiously, I touch my face and look at my hands, but I don’t see it. Maybe it’s a case where you don’t see your own weight loss because you see yourself daily in the mirror, whereas someone else meeting you after weeks or months notices it right away.

The only reason I can think of, and the one that feels the most logical, is the current state of my body and the stat imbalance beginning to show outwardly. Well, not like it matters that much. If my plan goes well, it won’t be a problem for longer than a couple of years.

But to Tess, I answer with a simple shrug, which she accepts.

We stay quiet for a while, and I begin to replay the way Adrian fought in my mind. I don’t think he was as powerful as Ignis, but his [Mirror] and his use of empathy seemingly allowed him both to stay alive and to hold off a vessel of one of the Rulers.

But that creates a bit of a problem for me, he’s already stronger than I expected, and he’ll only have more time to grow before my tutorial ends.

Maybe things will change before then, and we won't clash right after the tutorial as I expect, perhaps we'll get a few more years of enduring each other on Earth. Though I suspect it would be too naive of me to expect him to let me grow any stronger.

There's still a chance some arrogant part of him will continue to believe he can handle me and that he'll simply grow stronger faster than I will. The problem will be what he does once he believes I'm at risk of overtaking him.

Knowing his personality, he'll immediately turn into a spiteful little shit. I think Adrian is someone who can be reasonable, even try to act nice and generous when he thinks he's fully in control. But once someone steps up against him, or if things don't go his way, he'll turn unpredictable and dangerous. As Ruby said, he's broken, and everything he does is driven by pure inertia without him even realizing. His Project Sundial is just more proof of this, meaning that even if I kill him, things may still go to shit.

I could probably do some trickery with my subminds and hide some of my emotions to trick him into giving me more time, but he already knows that I'm capable of that, so he'll already be careful about it.

More and more, it's starting to seem like our clash is inevitable, and I think I feel relief about it. Because I really do want to kill the guy.

I despise the fact that some weird ass, thousand year old creep is roleplaying as an Earthling. I don't care that he's spent more years on Earth than me and Vic combined. I also don't care that he could be useful in protecting it, Vic already took care of a big part of that. And I hate the fact that he betrayed and killed Lioren, as silly as that may be of me.

With Project Chestplate currently being worked on by Crimson Forge, the way I'm growing the Fragment of the Nameless... I mean the Mana Tree, and a few other preparations, I think I'll have a chance, but it's going to be costly. Still, even then, it should offer a new opportunity. A beautiful fuck you to the system and to a few others in particular.

Deciding that everything's been going pretty well so far, I allow my legs to swing a little as I watch the extremely hot desert and a few ships belonging to some Corporation or other as they fly on in the distance.

A few times, I open the Community, but like before, I'm still being bombarded with thousands of messages. It has slowed down, though, which makes me wonder if the Community has been limited to a few messages per second.

I close the screen with a heavy sigh, staring out at the nearest floating hunk of corporate metal.

"Assholes," I mutter, pointing at one of the ships.

Tess looks over, an eyebrow raised, but catches up maybe too quickly. "Are we starting an alphabet game? On top of a tower in the middle of a corporate-owned death desert? Sure."

She just keeps her eyes on the desert below, her legs mimicking my rhythmic swinging. Tess doesn't even blink. "Bastards. The whole board of directors."

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

"Canyon," I supply, pointing toward the deep, jagged crack cutting through the red dunes a few miles out.

"Dust storm," Tess counters smoothly, nodding toward a swirling orange cloud in the far east.

"Erosion," I say, rubbing my temples as I look at the bizarre rock pillars dotting the wasteland. "Those pillars look like they're barely holding up."

"Flats. The salt plains stretching out past the dunes," she says, squinting against the light. "Glint. From whatever metal scrap heap is burying itself in the sand over there."

"Hey, no double-lettering," I grumble. "Heat. It is too hot here."

"It is," Tess says, giving up on the game and, by all possible rules, leaving me victorious. "But I'm too curious. Do you mind telling me how your expedition with 'the boys' led to all this?"

I give myself a moment to organize my thoughts, and as I go over all that happened, it quickly resolves into a ridiculous mess. But ever excited to see Tess's reaction, I get started explaining everything to her.

Then, a few minutes later, I stop and stick out my chest proudly.

"Devil worshipers in the rookie city on the second floor?" she mutters.

"Yup."

"Leviathan Fish?"

"Yup."

"A Dhampir left broken after who knows how many deaths and resurrections, and drinking the blood of a dead god whose body serves as some sort of keystone they used to build the first floor of beyond?"

"Yup."

"According to your words, the cool as fuck fight that almost ended in a draw, against Nyssa Volare?"

"Yup. Yup."

"Lissandra hijacking your teleport to the surface and pulling you to the twelfth floor, and placing you in a mental training space, after which you're still annoyed you didn't endure a day longer?"

"I could have done it."

"Sure you could. And then the Games, the Elf making an appearance, the resurrection of a long dead godking, and Lissandra, according to your words, finds herself unable to leave and go to Xyphos, so she drags the whole damn place to her instead. And now the wyvern is likely keeping us, the Corporations, and everyone else on Xyphos hostage while calling in even more wyverns."

"I wouldn't be surprised if a dragon showed up. I want to see a dragon one day, Tess."

"I'm not saying I'm not interested. There's something majestic to the way we perceive "fictional" dragons on Earth, and seeing one in the flesh..."

"See?"

Tess shakes her head and thinks it over, muttering, "But now your sister's gone and done it. She must have been in contact with a replica of the Last Elf for a while, and he either persuaded her to join the Game or got really lucky with her choice to attend."

"Her handler is probably sweating bullets right now," I nod.

"One of the Rulers?"

"Nah, she got the Ruler of Greed at first, but quickly asked to change handlers, and now she's working with some powerful Absolute."

"Not too unexpected from her. And am I correct to assume that protection from the Starless Sky doesn't apply to pairings?"

"I would say not, as it was more or less caused by an... Earthling. Don't ask, I can't tell you any more."

"I won't," she nods, and then chuckles shortly. "Still, it's a bit annoying to see Victoria, Christoph, and even you doing things that'll influence Earth, while I'm just watching from the sidelines."

"Right?" I nod. "But hey, you and the rest of the group are still going to have to get stronger."

"How much stronger?"

I give it some thought and then look back at her. "Much stronger, I would say. I mean, other than Vic, Tacita, Savi, and Jean, there shouldn't be anyone on Earth even close to your level."

"Hmm, that should be more than possible. By the way, do you see her?"

"Yup, I'm surprised you can see her too. Your [Farsight] is weird. Shouldn't it just allow you to see into the distance?"

"It evolved. It's called [Telesthesia] now."

"I have no idea what that means."

"Me neither. We'll have to ask Kim when we get to him."

"Yup." I nod, and alongside Tess, I watch as Tacita makes her way over to us, shielded by her field, not caring at all about the Ruler of Diligence begging for us to stay in one spot.

She moves with that signature, effortless ease, making her look like she was simply born to run. Every leap is mesmerizing to watch, like a seamless blend of a lethal apex predator, the instincts of human biology pushed to its absolute peak, and an almost childlike joy radiating from her entire being as she blurs across the desert. There's no wasted effort or heavy breathing, just the terrifyingly smooth rhythm of her movements that blurs the line between lethal and pure joy.

I can safely say there's a beauty to the way she runs.

Without so much as slowing down, Tacita runs right up the side of the tower and reaches the top, and her field disappears. There, she stops with a smile and waves. She begins to draw something in the air when she suddenly freezes and looks to my side.

Using everything I have, I weave kinetic energy and mana based reinforcement, and at the cost of damaging my own body, I grab the glowing red dagger.

Only a split second later, Tacita passes right through where it was. She then circles around and stops in front of me again with a furrowed brow, clearly unhappy, and keeps glancing at the dagger.

"You already stole a key from Lyraen and Tess. You won't be getting the dagger." I say.

Tacita looks confused, glancing over at Tess, who mutters, "I passed the information to her through Lily so she could steal the key."

That causes me to look at the blonde next to me, who doesn't seem sorry even for a moment and just gives me a lazy smile.

"It's better if someone from Earth gets it instead of him," Tess says simply.

A soft squeak brings my attention back, and I watch as Tacita steps closer. She is clearly torn, a silent battle playing out across her face, but between two of her fingers, she gently pinches the scruff of a golden baby ferret.

The tiny creature looks like it just woke up, blindly squinting into the harsh desert light and letting out a yawn during which I see its tiny, cute pink tongue flick.

As if she absolutely cannot endure watching it, Tacita stretches out her hand, offering up the tiny baby ferret like a hostage for negotiation. Then, with her other hand, she points a demanding finger directly at the glowing red dagger.

Chapter 870 - Mid Pristine

"You want to trade your baby ferret for a dagger? You think I'm dumb? If I accept, the ferret will just escape and return to you in a few days." I stare at Tacita, who, at the last sentence, breaks eye contact and looks to the side.

With a sigh, I look at the ferret as it yawns once again and simply hangs there in Tacita's hands. As the assassin girl moves closer, as if trying to push me into making the deal, the ferret flops around like a wet noodle.

"I think that's what she actually wanted," Tess agrees with me.

"Talk to her, make it a better deal for me," I tell her.

"I can't. She's only really friends with Lily, if I get too close or push her too much, she will stab me."

Not surprised by that answer at all, I don't press the issue, and looking at Tacita, I shake my head in refusal.

So, instead, she moves closer and sits on the ground near us, placing the ferret on the floor, where it looks around curiously before jumping around in that cute way ferrets do.

Tacita, meanwhile, takes a piece of beautiful, plush red square cloth from her bag and puts it on the ground in front of her. Then, like some sort of magpie, she starts hunting for items in her backpack and draws even more from the many, many hidden pockets all over her outfit.

She lays five daggers on the impromptu sales mat. Three of them, each made of different metal and shape, and two of them are made of crystal. She puts out a brooch, multiple mana stones, some of them serving as data storage, and she takes off a really thin bracelet, one ring, and one earring, each of which I identify as goddamn low pristine items.

She ends up showing off a lot of stuff. It isn't a massive volume, but there are plenty of small, valuable items, and most of them are pretty shiny and nice.

In the end, she also points at the key on her forearm that allows for passage to the 6th floor of Beyond, the same one as I have on my right forearm.

Looking all of this over, I glance at the dagger in my hand and reread the description. I even let Tess check it, watching how her eyes widen.

Veto (Mid Pristine) - Extremely sharp and near unbreakable, designed specifically to neutralize high-level threats, the blade emits a constant, soft red luminescence. When Veto punctures an enemy, it targets their active skills and locks down the last used skill. The target is prevented from casting or activating that specific skill until the effect wears off.

The ability is ridiculous, honestly. Sure, I can do similar stuff with disruption, but there are skills even I can't disrupt if they're activated within a natural barrier.

Taking into consideration the fact that it's mid pristine, which should be the highest possible rarity to get while inside of the tutorial, and even then only in Beyond, during a Beyond quest, or with an extreme amount of luck, it's easy to see how valuable it is.

Hell, if I wanted, I could sell it now for 7 million shards. Crafted items sell for 50 percent of their shop value, while items gained on the floors only sell for 10 to 20 percent. This means the dagger's probably worth 35 million shards or something, just as ridiculous if I wanted to buy it from the shop.

Well, if mid pristine stuff were available in the system shop.

And I strongly suspect one thing, even though I haven't tested it yet. I think Veto can be stacked multiple times. It would likely allow one to lock down multiple active skills.

Getting a grasp of system bullshitery and how these things work, I think the first skill is blocked for the longest. Likely minutes, or more likely seconds if your opponent were exceptionally powerful, and each blocked skill beyond that probably decreases the duration. But hell, even blocking a particularly important skill for 5 seconds could easily mean a very quick death in that level of fight.

Lastly, it's mid pristine... I really still think that low pristine items are meant for people at the brink of being Champions or fresh Champions. Proper Champions get mid pristine, and more powerful ones upper pristine items. So, though the description might not sound like it, the rarity alone makes it scary. The system likes to do things like that. A simple description that might even be copy-pasted over a few different rarities, while the rarity represents a drastic difference in strength.

In the hands of someone as fast as Tacita, this dagger would be... terrifying, truly terrifying.

Watching her intently, I hold the dagger and outstretch my hand toward Tacita to let her read the description. I watch her eyes move from left to right multiple times, and similar to Tess, they widen.

The baby ferret meanwhile jumps over to us, climbs on my leg, and climbs up to my neck, where it presses against the skin over my collarbone. For a moment, I feel its tiny cold tongue and then warm breath.

Still looking at Tacita, I reach out with one of my hands and pet the ferret. Tess doesn't even try to help, instead, she sits there and watches it all curiously. Though I suspect she already knows how this might end.

Weighing the dagger in my hand, I think things over once again.

Of course, I want to keep it. It's just that amazing, and even if I didn't actively switch my fighting style to match it, there are things I could probably learn from its effects. I already planned on stabbing myself to see how this particular skill lock works and if I could learn to defend myself against it, and I don't think I'd give it out to anyone until I had a chance to experiment with it properly.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

Still, I hate relying on items. I don't want to change the way I fight, and I want to do these sorts of disruptions and skill lockings with my abilities only.

So, give it to Dennis? That could work, his preferred weapon is a combination of a dagger and a short sword. Or maybe I could hand it off to Tess and tie the dagger to some kind of shaft and turn it into a javelin. The problem remains: the sort of danger it would bring to anyone holding it. I could easily imagine a Champion killing either one of them just to get their hands on it. It's just too valuable to go unnoticed. Even the crystal currently embedded in Dennis's forehead is low pristine and presents a risk all its own.

Meanwhile, Tacita? I can imagine that lunatic getting away, even from a Champion if she wanted. I can also imagine her going unnoticed, and I can easily imagine her stabbing someone ten times before they even had a chance to notice, and blocking all of their active skills.

But I just keep coming back to the thought of just how great a match she and Veto are.

"Okay. Let's do it like this," I say, and pull the dagger back while scooping up the ferret and keeping my fingers moving so it can continue to attack them playfully.

Tacita fixes her sitting position and listens carefully, her eyes peeking from behind her messy brown hair.

"I want to experiment with the dagger, so I'll keep it until the end of this floor. A week or two should be plenty of time, and if the floor continues for a month or so, I'll keep it for a month."

I pause, and she sits there, the most motionless I have ever seen her.

"After that, I will lend this dagger to you. Not give. Lend." I emphasize that word. "If I ask, you will return it to me at any time and without complaints."

When I look at her questioningly, she nods seriously.

So I continue, "I do not want your items in exchange. You will owe me, you'll owe me a lot. But you know me, I won't be too unreasonable when I come to collect. I also want you to promise that you will never use it against me or anyone belonging to me. Not even if you have a falling out with that person, or if they hurt you. You will never lift that dagger against anyone I consider to be with me."

Tacita seems to get it, but I don't think it's enough, so my words become flatter and colder as I look into her eyes. "I really mean it. If you ever lift this dagger against someone like that, I will kill you."

I do not threaten her further, and we look at each other in silence until she simply smiles and nods.

Tacita then points at the dagger, likely wanting to look at it for now, so I hand it to her. She takes it as carefully as a mother with her baby and turns and twists it, watching how the light reflects through the glow of the dagger's blade. She swings with it, testing its weight, and at one point even sets it next to the other daggers and compares them.

Meanwhile, I grab the ferret with the fingers of both hands and lift it up in front of my eyes. The tiny creature has incredibly soft fur, and its body is surprisingly warm, and I can even feel taut muscle under its skin.

I shake it, but the ferret does not seem to mind, flopping around.

"Biscuit would be so happy to see you. I know you likely have nothing to do with that evil spawn of Satan ferret that saved Izzy, but you'll probably end up looking similar. I wouldn't be surprised if you were the same species," I say, talking to it softly and watching as the ferret nibbles on my finger, surprisingly controlling itself well enough that it doesn't even draw blood.

"I wonder," I say. "You for sure aren't native to the floor, as the tutorial wouldn't have allowed you to move over. So maybe you were some sort of floor reward? An egg Tacita bought from the system shop?" I continue to swing with it, and slowly it begins to yawn, its eyes closing even as the tiny creature fights hard to keep them open.

As always, these sorts of thoughts make me wonder about what sorts of interesting adventures everyone else must have been having. Like Victoria's meeting with the Last Elf, Tacita, and Savant, both clearing the floors on their own, and everyone else besides. In the end, I am not the only one having twisted floors like this.

When a shadow falls over me, I look up to see Tacita carefully placing the dagger nearby. She stretches out her hands and gently picks up the sleeping baby ferret while still being very careful not to touch me, then she tucks it inside her jacket.

The three of us wait, and I occasionally open the community to see how the conversation is trending. People there have mostly been theorizing about what the floor quest is going to be, with most seeming to think that we'll probably end up being instantly moved to the next floor with reduced rewards. Most of all, the Easy difficulty guys seem to be excited, they've been talking to people from Hell. Now that they've found out that they're safe inside their barriers, they don't seem overly stressed.

Though I wonder what they'd think of the wyvern's domain covering the planet. And I wonder what they would have thought then, knowing that the wyvern is at least as powerful as most of the Rulers, even a few of the weaker ones combined. Didn't someone say it was as strong as the average dragon?

These people would probably be more scared after reading the message from Diligence stating that he means to speak with said Wyvern, especially since it could very well turn into a fight.

So far, I think the ant is just stalling, waiting for the other Rulers to come help in case they're needed, but that brings its own risks too. Liss gets time to find whatever she's searching for in the Labyrinth of Xyphos, and the one winged wyvern will strengthen its domain's hold over Xyphos.

Yet, in the end, things still don't seem as bad as I thought they might be as I read the notifications that appear.

Floor Quest:

Either on your own or with the cooperation of the Corporations present, lead Easy and Normal difficulty participants to safe zones of your own creation. Protect them and gather water for them.

Easy and Normal difficulty participants are too weak for this setting and have been thrown into this through no fault of their own, the same as most of you present.

Even if they're not as powerful as attendees from Hell difficulty, the lower difficulty participants are important members of your First Generation. While this was not intended to happen, use the opportunity to share some of your knowledge and experience with them over the following weeks, as the situation changes.

It is currently impossible to move you to the next floor due to the domain enveloping the planet.

A subsystem will run in the background, and if your preparations to move lower difficulty participants to a safe space are considered inadequate, they won't be able to leave the safety of their barriers.

As the Corporations present are stuck here as well, they are allowed to contact and trade with the attendees. A strong warning is in place for attendees to be careful with any such trades.

- Temporary Floor Quest given by the Ruler of Diligence.