

## Chapter 245: The Forum IV

Lavafist stood before the two young individuals, their talent evident in how they carried themselves—brimming with confidence yet teetering on the edge of arrogance. Their names were not worth remembering, as he had seen too many promising talents and only remembered a select few—who truly stood out. But these two were different, distinct from the likes of **Roland**, Marisia, **Valdrus Leonandra**, or the only hero he deemed worthy of the title—Caius Valeheart, the current hero.

Still, the youth before him was undeniably impressive—reaching the second **conjecture** of their Ground Control before reaching two hundred was a rare feat. It made his molten blood simmer with a potent mix of grudging admiration and regret.

*'These little shits,' he thought, grimacing under his breath. 'I should have acted sooner.'*

They weren't part of the **Pure-Steam clan** or any of the more dominant isolationist factions. Still, they belonged to a smaller, reclusive group called Innocent-Glow—an ambitious sect rapidly gaining influence. Their rise stemmed primarily from their ingenious use of artifacts, a craft traditionally dominated by gnomes and dwarves—a concern he had set aside as more pressing matters demanded his attention.

While Innocent-Glow was far from dominance, their recent surge was striking enough that no one—not even Lavafist—could dismiss them outright. They were an unorthodox group of young upstarts, driven by a fanatical goal and wielding knowledge rarely encountered within the Eros Alliance.

At first, Lavafist suspected a key figure within the Leonandra household—a cunning imp renowned for manipulating others' goodwill—had orchestrated Innocent-Glow's meteoric rise. On the surface, it seemed an obvious conclusion, especially given how Alexander's influence extended far beyond artificing and magic. He wielded an uncanny ability to sway opinions, expertly tapping into people's mental states and feeding them exactly what they wanted to hear. With remarkable finesse, he shifted blame for his and his **retainer's reckless wager** onto an unfortunate scapegoat, all while securing unwavering support—politics at its most ruthless.

**Roland** is Alexander's Grandfather and Husband of Scarlet. **Valdrus** is Alexander's Great-Grandfather.

A **conjecture**, a newly introduced definition, describes the considerable jump in power one experiences in Tier 6.

Depending on the race, it is called differently. Example: Beast Kin have Body Modification, and Djinns have Ground Control.

**Pure-Steam** was the clan blamed for inciting the refugees to engage with the Essence Alliance inside Pascal's territory.

**The stunt—Lila's bet** reflects the political complexity of the Eros Alliance. Unlike the Moorgrelians, where every Knightage has its own military, the Eros Alliance centralizes military power under the Council and the Leader.

Clans must leverage portions of their territory and assets to expand their influence and secure military support. Success increases their land holdings, while other clans may bet against them, staking their own resources. This intricate system ensures that power remains widely distributed, preventing any single entity from consolidating control.

Yet, that was clearly not the case. Despite all evidence to the contrary, a gut feeling told Lavafist that Alexander was too honest and simply forced himself to play the game. 'My instinct never lets me down,' he mused, a confident smile playing on his lips as his internal heat flared, mirroring the chaos erupting around him in the cavernous hall.

**John** from the **Steel-Mountain Clan** battled a volcanic golem, their clashing roars echoing against the stone walls. Meanwhile, **Theressa Hearthstove** was locked in a vicious skirmish with the Golden-Ember contingent—frenemies who seemed equally eager to tear each other apart.

While Lavafist disliked any chaos inside his Alliance, he also couldn't deny that it was the perfect opportunity to clear away interlopers who threatened to derail his plans to uplift his own people. He had no desire to become a supreme ruler or culminate any more power—he had reached the fourth Ground Control a hundred years ago and had already lived more than **five centuries**. His remaining years, he resolved, would be devoted to defending his kin and ensuring they adapted to the radical changes sweeping across Moorgrel...and far beyond.

'Weeding out trouble is a small price to pay,' he mused, molten eyes scanning for threats. 'The world is changing, whether we want it or not.'

His gaze shifted to Alexander, who lingered at the periphery. Unease settled in Lavafist's gut. 'This punk is still here,' he worried. Moorgrelians were notorious for their extremes—unyielding loyalty and relentless vengeance. They would die for an ally and pursue an enemy to the world's end. Alexander straddled a precarious line, neither true friend nor sworn foe. If he fell here, the westerner and central Moorgrelians would descend upon his city, demanding retribution and throwing his plans into chaos.

As if summoned by his worst fears, the moment arrived. The young woman—one of Innocent-Glow's prodigies—crackled with electricity, her cruel grin widening as she mockingly saluted, tapping a gloved metallic finger against the underside of her top head.

"See ya!" she hissed. Thunderbolts arced wildly around her, illuminating her sadistic smile with bursts of crackling [Energy]. The floating gears clicked into place, radiating a fierce, electric heat. Steam hissed from her mechanical boots as she lifted effortlessly off the ground. "Good luck—you'll need it."

**John** is the representative of the Earth Djinn Coalition. **Theressa Hearthstove** is the representative of the redlight districts and underworld.

After every conjecture, the lifespan increases by 50%. The average lifespan is ~200 years. After the first conjecture: 300 years. After the second conjecture: 450 years. And so on.

Depending on many factors, it can be far shorter or longer.

Western Knightages have Knights with at least the second Body Modification, and central ones are third to fourth, usually the Count's personal guards.

She wears clothes similar to those of the steampunk subculture.

Lavafist recognized the [Energy] spike immediately. He lunged to stop her, but a voice echoed through his head, forcing him to hesitate—someone had hit him with a telepathic command that cut his reaction short. Then, the young man with the massive hammer rig—her partner—slammed into Lavafist's chest with a blow amplified by enchanted gears and magical circuitry.

"Urgh," Lavafist groaned, momentarily stunned. The hesitation cost him—an explosion ripped through the air as condensed [Energy] discharged on impact, sending him hurtling across the hall. Dust and debris swirled in the chaotic aftermath as the young man's triumphant laugh echoed through the settling gloom.

"Like I said, jus' a sec," he boasted, brushing his thumb and index finger along his mustache. "Artifacts can really overcome any gap, am—urgh?!"

His words choked off as the heat around him surged. Blood spurted from his mouth, evaporating instantly in the searing inferno that coiled around them—his body heating at an alarmingly rapid pace.

Lavafist's booming laughter thundered across the partially emptied hall, molten flesh twisting into a grin. "Bahaha! Boy," he rumbled, "you really want those two to escape their fate? Your call!"

The young man, reeling from the searing heat, met Lavafist's gaze with a mix of disbelief and confusion, struggling to grasp the molten giant's cryptic words. Before he could utter a response, a piercing scream shattered the din—his companion hurled herself prematurely at Alexander, electric bolts slashing through the air like striking serpents.

"Let them stay alive!" Alexander shouted, ignoring the danger he was in—all he saw was the treasure trove of technology right before him. "I will share all of their secrets; Just don't fucking kill them!"

Alexander desperately tried to disable the young woman's enchantments and mysterious technology without destroying them. Mana threads from his mind surged into her mechanical gear, prying at each enchantment to break it down systematically while ignoring any insight he could gain—tiny slivers that moved systematically, burning and breaking traces and modules, hoping not to damage them irreversibly.

Despite his fear of death, Alexander was resolute—he would steal and reconstruct as much as possible, leaving the mystery of its origins for later. The crude yet dangerously effective steampunk-like machinery fascinated him, its secrets calling to him like an unsolved puzzle. If he could dismantle it intact, he

might unlock knowledge beyond anyone's reach. Even if it meant risking his life in this chaotic melee, he refused to let the opportunity slip away.

Alexander's heart pounded in his ears as he zeroed in on her propulsion boots, severing their primary mana connections with precision. Sparks hissed as the boots sputtered, their thrust failing. She plummeted, landing with a startled expression, eyes wide with disbelief. "Who did this? The divine being gifted these miraculous artifacts to me!"

Her fury sharpened as she rose, eyes blazing with indignation. "You were this! You will pay for your blasphemy!" Without hesitation, she activated another device at an astonishing speed. The floating gears whirred into a blur, their intricate enchantments forming an impenetrable barrier against Alexander's attempts to hack them—his mana splintered upon contact, shredded by the sheer density of the [Energy].

'What the—' His thoughts scrambled like his mind had been abruptly severed from reality. His senses tangled in a bizarre fusion of the tangible and the surreal, leaving him unable to distinguish what was real from what was not. The disorientation deepened as he locked eyes with her snarling face, her thunderous gauntlet aimed directly at him. Reddish-blue light pulsed ominously around her arm, the tubes along her gloves crackling with barely contained fury. In a blink, she flickered forward, her enchantment distorting space itself as chaotic bolts of [Energy] shattered the air.

Yet, just before her strike could discharge, Alexander's senses warped. 'Fuck, not again,' he cursed inwardly. Ever since advancing his [Mana Sense] to the intermediate tier, this distortion plagued him when he couldn't fully focus—his perception fracturing into overlapping layers of past, present, and imminent future. 'I'm gonna puke, fuck!'

The physical and mana sensations overwhelmed him like a tidal wave—Alexander perceived the swirling lines of mana from the present. In contrast, past sensations of smell, sight, and sound crashed over him, reverberating through his [Mana Sense]. Worse, [Mana Theory] and [Artificing] worked in tandem, predicting the future by analyzing how particles coalesced around the steampunk girl's enchantments. His refined skills instinctively mapped out the next movement before it even occurred, layering time upon itself in a dizzying cascade of foresight.

Alexander's mind reeled as he struggled to analyze and process the overwhelming influx of information while juggling multiple parallel tasks. A sharp headache stabbed through his skull. 'This is fucking outer circle!' he groaned. Everything unfolded in slow motion before his eyes; his mana

perception, unbound by time, allowed him to witness events in real time with unnerving clarity.

Mana had no lag—at least not since he reached the intermediate tier of [Mana Sense]. Unlike physical sensations, which carried slight delays even in the fastest reflexes, mana flowed instantly. The moment he perceived something through it, the information returned to him in real-time, bypassing any processing delay. Worse still, he could only maintain any semblance of control through his anti-mana collar. Without it, [Mana Manipulation] felt like playing CS with fiberglass while everyone else used a 56K Modem—a nightmare. With three overlapping time frames colliding in his mind, the chaos was nearly impossible to manage.

'Woah... throwing the damn collar away was a mistake!' Alexander's mind strained as the scene played before him. Barry materialized at the Steampunk girl's side with startling speed. His massive fist surged forward, distorting the air with the sheer force of his [Divinity Line], an ability honed to amplify raw physical power. His sheer pressure was an unstoppable force, a testament to the ox kin lineage's mastery over weight manipulation. The impact sent shockwaves through the ground, cracking it open beneath them.

At the same time, Lili surged from the opposite flank, her fur morphing into silvered steel as she coiled tightly around the woman's limbs. She elongated her body, encasing every conceivable point of attack, a living shield sacrificing herself to restrain the foe.

All the sensations surged at a dizzying pace, culminating in a violent explosion of colliding energies. The force sent Alexander stumbling backward as a massive dust cloud erupted, only to settle almost instantly, revealing the aftermath of the struggle.

"Barry...?" Alexander asked, voice tense.

The oxkin guard stood tall, tightening his grip around the thrashing woman's head. She unleashed a furious hail of minor thunderbolts, but Barry's rugged prowess shielded him from the brunt of her desperate attacks. Then came the sickening crack: her skull gave way under his grip, and her body slumped, blood dripping across Barry's broad palms.

He dropped her at his feet, a low grunt escaping him, his eyes showing regret. "Sorry if the... hat broke," he muttered, eyeing the shattered remnants of her metallic headgear, now slick with blood and fragments of bone. He nudged her

limp form with his boot, watching as what remained of her brain sizzled against the floor. "Maybe we can save her..."

Alexander nearly groaned in frustration—he needed her alive. She had secrets that could push his research forward by decades, and worse, her gear was now a mangled mess of broken pieces, twisted and shattered by Barry's devastating blow. The force of his strike had rattled her entire body, reducing the intricate machinery around it to useless debris.

As if mocking him, Lili sauntered over, her muzzle clamped around the charred remains of the arm that had the intricate glove and tubes that produced a devastating [Energy] blow. It was Burned and fused to parts of her own scorched fur, barely recognizable. "Mr. Alexander, maybe you can use this?" she murmured, setting the limb gently at his feet, fully aware of his frustration.

"Fuck!" Alexander clenched his fists, frustration surging through him. Yet, as he took in the extent of Lili's injuries, the anger ebbed, replaced by a deep-seated appreciation for her sacrifice. His breath steadied, "Are you—" but he was cut off abruptly before he could ask if she was alright.

"Ahhhh! You bastard!" The young man's shriek focused on him as what was left of the forum looked at him. "I will kill you!"

Lili sneered, her body swelling with raw power as she flexed, emphasizing her resilience. "Second conjecture," she declared, her eyes narrowing with fierce arrogance despite the burns marring her flesh. "These little toys won't be enough to stop me," she added, her sadistic grin widening.

It seemed like another standoff, but Alexander's breath hitched as he caught sight of the giant engulfed in searing heat energy, smirking at the steampunk djinn. The sheer intensity of his killing intent and the twisted joy radiating from him sent a shiver through Alexander's spine.

Alexander screamed, "No! You will not kill him!"

"Don't worry, boy," Lavafist rumbled, his molten fist cleaving through the distressed and unguarded opponent, severing his legs cleanly at the knees. He loomed over the fallen figure, the sheer pressure of his presence enough to stifle any screams. "What an amateurish mistake," he mused, molten eyes gleaming with cruel satisfaction.

The moment was fleeting as another voice echoed through the grand hall of Oyaras, Leader of the Pure-Steam Clan. "Those machines may be impressive, but can they truly stand against natural strength~?"