Plot:  
"In the year 2100, the year marking the birth of spacial travel, a year of complete dominance of human over the entire planet. Humans have developed various technology, weapons, medicine, lifestyle that are completely different from before. They have explored the entire ocean and solved various theories and statements of the past. They have studied the Earth by more than 85% and now in this upcoming 100 years they plan to dominate the remaining 20%. Now, in the year 2120. Humans have waked up the ancient creatures that were living peacefully in the remaining 20% land bringing up disasters upon earth. This has bought up a chain reaction causing mutations upon all creatures on the surface of Earth. The once peaceful Earth started to change. Animals started to become bigger and more ferocious. More people started to die due to the mutations, but those who survived become more powerful than a armoured soldier. The ancient creatures have made domains of their own all over the land and ground. Noticing this rising issue, mankind made a difficult decision- nuclear weapon. Yes, they launched nuclear weapons over these domains after long negotiations. But to no veil. Not just the ancient creatures, even some more powerful mutated animals were not affected. This showed that nuclear weapons that humans have developed for years are nothing but plaything to these creatures. How will mankind survive this ordeal. Will he go back to the Ancient methods, or will he use the modern weapons or will he combine them both.

**Chapter 1: Awakening of the Forgotten**

The skies burned crimson in the year 2120.

Ash drifted through the broken heavens like black snow as humanity’s great cities—once towering monuments to ambition—crumbled beneath the roars of creatures older than memory. In this broken age, survival was no birthright. It was seized with blood, grit, and will.

Among the ruins of Old Tokyo, a boy moved like a shadow over the shattered skeletons of skyscrapers.  
His name was **Kael Ardyn** — and unlike the millions who had fallen when the world shattered, Kael had *changed*.

The mutations had not twisted him into a monster. Instead, they had sharpened him. His blood carried a volatile energy, a reckless new life force birthed by ancient forces and human folly. His senses could pierce the thick ash; his muscles, woven with unnatural strength, could lift steel beams like fallen branches. But the power came with a curse. Some nights, Kael felt the primal instincts inside him gnawing for dominance — instincts that didn’t care if he stayed human.

Tonight, survival was all that mattered.

He crouched behind a collapsed magrail pylon, breathing slow and deep. In his hands was a weapon of the old and new — a jagged spear forged from scavenged alloys and bound with whispering runes, remnants of forgotten lore.

Above, a mutated panther — now the size of a transport truck, its skin rippling with molten veins — prowled the rooftops. Its golden eyes gleamed like twin suns as it searched, nose twitching.

*Stay low. Stay silent.* Kael gripped his spear tighter, every muscle taut.

He had made a vow long ago, standing among the ashes of his family’s home:  
He would not just survive. He would *adapt*.  
Mankind’s age of dominion was over.  
Now began the age of **the evolved**.

**Chapter 2: Ash and Hunger**

The world was silent, except for the soft hum of Kael’s wristwatch.  
A slim black band, almost weightless, pulsed gently on his wrist.

"**Kael, I’m detecting organic remnants 200 meters northeast.**"  
The voice was soft, mechanical, yet held a warmth Kael had grown to rely on. It belonged to **Iris**, his AI companion — the last gift from a civilization that no longer existed.

Kael nodded and shifted his path, slipping through the cracked husk of an abandoned food distribution hub. The floors were littered with shattered drones, their sleek chrome shells torn apart during the first riots. Above, broken neon signs flickered — holographic menus from another era projecting ghostly burgers and sushi plates into the dust-choked air.

He moved cautiously, stepping over twisted metal and fallen beams. Every sense sharpened, his mutated instincts picking up the faintest vibrations in the air.

"**Energy signatures minimal, but I am tracking faint bio-signs nearby. Remain alert, Kael.**"  
Iris’s voice always stayed calm. It kept him sane.

**Three Years Earlier...**

Kael had been an ordinary boy once — seventeen, a freshman at Tokyo Metaverse College, studying cybernetics. His days were filled with holographic lectures, zero-gravity sports tournaments, and AI programming labs.  
Life was bright, limitless.

Until the Awakening.

When the ancient creatures rose, Tokyo was one of the first cities to fall. His campus became a battlefield overnight.  
He had watched towering beasts crack smart-buildings like glass; drones scream helplessly as electromagnetic storms shut down global defense grids.  
In the chaos, Kael’s parents — both leading researchers — had uploaded Iris into his wristwatch, shoving it onto his arm before their lab was engulfed.

*"Stay alive, Kael,"* his mother had whispered.

Since then, Kael had learned to scavenge among ruins, outsmart mutated predators, and rebuild lost tech from scraps. He had survived not because he was the strongest — but because he learned faster than the world could kill him.

Back in the present, Kael pushed open a shattered security door.  
Inside, stacked against the walls, he found it: preserved nutrient pods, sealed inside a stasis-lock crate.

A rare smile tugged at his lips.

"Jackpot," he whispered.

Suddenly, Iris chimed urgently: "**Movement detected. Incoming threat. 80 meters and closing fast.**"

Kael snatched up the pods, slung his makeshift satchel over his shoulder, and sprinted for the shadows.

In this new world, every victory came with a cost.

And the hunt never truly ended.

**📜 Character Profile: Kael Ardyn**

* **Name:** Kael Ardyn
* **Age:** 17
* **Origin:** Tokyo Metaverse College, Cybernetics Department (First-Year Student)
* **Background:**
  + Before the Awakening, Kael was a bright student, specializing in artificial intelligence, biotech, and cybernetic enhancements.
  + After the fall, he survived alone among the ruins, scavenging old tech, adapting ancient survival tactics, and mutating slowly under the Earth's new chaotic energy.
* **Appearance:**
  + Height: 5'11" (Post-mutation: 6'2" when fully tensed)
  + Build: Lean, slightly muscular (Post-mutation: Athletic, dense muscle fibers)
  + Hair: Black, with faint silver strands (mutation side-effect)
  + Eyes: Once brown, now faintly glowing silver-blue under certain light.
* **Personality:**
  + Tactical thinker, calm under pressure.
  + Deep loyalty to those he trusts.
  + Sharp-witted, tends to make dry, sarcastic jokes even in danger.
* **Abilities:**
  + Enhanced strength, speed, reflexes, and stamina due to mutation.
  + Quick adaptation to environmental threats.
  + Skilled in crafting hybrid weapons (ancient + futuristic).
* **Weaknesses:**
  + Mutation side-effects: Occasional berserk impulses.
  + Emotional trauma from survivor’s guilt.
  + Limited resources and advanced weaponry.

**🤖 Character Profile: IRIS (Integrated Reactive Intelligence System)**

* **Core Type:** Class-4 Adaptive AI
* **Appearance:** Projected interface via Kael’s wristwatch — thin holo-display or direct voice communication.
* **Original Purpose:** Personal Academic Assistant and Health Monitor.
* **Current Evolution:** Survival AI, Combat Analyst, Mutation Tracker.
* **Primary Abilities:**
  + 📡 **Environmental Scan** — Detect food, threats, hidden structures within a 500-meter radius.
  + 🔍 **Physiological Scan** — Track Kael’s vital signs, mutation rates, and enhancements.
  + 🧬 **Mutation Log** — Analyze and record changes in Kael's DNA structure.
  + 🐲 **Monster Database** — Scan, identify, and catalog enemy creatures encountered, noting weaknesses if possible.
  + ⚡ **Energy Reserve Management** — Manages energy levels for tech equipment Kael uses.
* **Personality:**
  + Calm, nurturing tone with slight sarcasm learned from Kael.
  + Protective but rational; prefers tactical retreats over reckless fights.

**📊 Kael’s Physical Change Report (Generated by IRIS)**

**Pre-Awakening Scan (Age 16):**

* **Strength: 0.72 (Average human = 1)**
* **Speed: 0.78**
* **Reflex Time: 0.31 seconds**
* **Stamina: 1.0 (baseline endurance for normal teenagers)**
* **Cognitive Processing Speed: 1.02 (slightly above average)**

**Post-Mutation Current Scan (Age 17):**

* **Strength: 3.4 (3.4× stronger than average human)**
* **Speed: 5.2 (5.2× faster running speed)**
* **Reflex Time: 0.07 seconds (greatly enhanced reaction speed)**
* **Stamina: 6.0 (able to sustain activity 6× longer than average)**
* **Cognitive Processing Speed: 2.8 (nearly triple pattern recognition, prediction capabilities)**

**Additional Detected Changes:**

* **Muscle Density: 4.0 (4× denser muscle fibers)**
* **Bone Density: 2.8 (2.8× stronger bone structure)**
* **Minor Neural Evolution: Signal transmission accelerated by ~3× baseline.**

**✅ Key Points with this system:**

* **1.0 = Normal Human**
* **2.0 = Twice as powerful**
* **5.0 = Five times, and so on.**

**📚 Bonus: Iris’s Monster Database (Example Entry)**

**Species:** "Ferro Panther"  
**Classification:** Mutated Mammal  
**Height:** 2.5 meters  
**Weight:** ~1500 kg  
**Known Abilities:** Camouflage, Electromagnetic Disruptions, Ultra-enhanced senses.  
**Weakness Detected:** Slower recovery time after heavy impacts to spinal region.

**Chapter 3: The Clash Beneath the Ashen Sky**

The rubble beneath Kael’s boots shifted slightly.  
He froze.

“Iris,” he whispered. “Proximity scan.”

A soft, emotionless chime answered him.

**[Threat detected: 25 meters. Species: Unknown. Estimated Size: 2.1 meters. Caution advised.]**

From the wreckage of a collapsed train station ahead, a monstrous form slithered into view — hunched, quivering with unnatural tension. It was a rat.  
Or what had once been a rat.

Its body was swollen grotesquely, armored with patchy plates of keratinized flesh. Jagged yellow teeth jutted from a misshapen muzzle. Its eyes, bulbous and wet, glowed like molten amber. It wasn’t scurrying — it was *stalking.*

Kael tightened his grip on his makeshift spear — a weapon forged from collapsed reactor alloys and reinforced with old-world carbon fiber. It was light but brutally sharp.

The rat hissed, baring teeth longer than Kael's fingers.  
Then it charged.

Kael *moved*. His body, enhanced by mutation, reacted faster than thought. He sidestepped, barely missing a swipe of gnarled claws, and thrust forward.  
The spear sank into the beast’s thick hide — but barely.

**[Warning: Outer dermis 3.2× human toughness. Penetration minimal.]** Iris reported calmly in his ear.

Kael cursed, wrenching the spear free just in time as the monster twisted, lashing out. Its claws grazed his side, slicing through the reinforced armor and drawing a shallow but burning cut along his ribs.

Pain flared. His vision pulsed red.  
He staggered — but *adapted*.

"Focus, Kael," he hissed to himself.

This wasn’t a human fight. Brute strength wouldn’t win.  
He needed precision.

The mutated rat lunged again, its bulk faster than it had any right to be. Kael pivoted low, barely ducking under its snapping jaws, and drove the spear upward with both hands — straight into the joint between the creature’s shoulder and chest.

**CRACK.**  
The joint gave way with a sickening crunch.

The monster screeched, thrashing madly. One claw caught Kael across the shoulder, tearing through skin and muscle like paper. He bit back a scream, adrenaline flooding his body.

Blood dripped from his arm, warm and fast. His vision blurred.  
But he didn’t back down.

Gritting his teeth, Kael twisted the spear deeper, driving it sideways into the heart cavity. With a shudder, the rat gave a final convulsion and collapsed, its enormous bulk hitting the cracked asphalt like a toppled monument.

Kael staggered back, breath heaving.

“Damage report, Iris," he rasped.

**[Lacerations on left ribcage and right shoulder. Non-fatal. Blood loss at 12%. Vital signs stable. Recommend medical attention within 8 hours.]**

He leaned on the spear, wiping blood from his forehead with a shaking hand.  
Even a *rat* was enough to nearly kill him now.

Kael smiled grimly through the pain.

If this was the new world, he thought,  
then he would become something tougher than anything it could throw at him.

He pulled the spear free from the monster’s corpse with a wet, wrenching sound and limped onward into the ash-choked ruins.

**Chapter 4: The Taste of Survival**

The sun, a dull ember behind choking clouds, dipped lower into the broken skyline.  
Kael's stomach growled, a low painful reminder of reality.

He stalked through the ruins for hours — broken stores, hollowed apartments, shattered cafeterias.  
Everywhere he looked, the same grim result: *nothing*.  
Every scrap of packaged food had long since rotted into toxic sludge.  
Canned goods were burst open, spoiled by time and exposure.  
The world had starved long before Kael arrived here.

He kicked over the remains of an old vending machine in frustration.  
A single, shattered bottle of water rolled out, empty.

"Damn it," he muttered, leaning on his spear.

"Iris," he said hoarsely. "Options?"

The AI answered in her neutral voice:  
**[No edible resources detected within a five-kilometer radius. Immediate sustenance required. Survival odds will decrease within 24 hours if caloric intake not resumed.]**

Kael clenched his jaw.

His gaze drifted — unwillingly — back to the monstrous corpse he had left behind.

The rat’s grotesque form still twitched slightly as gases escaped the body.  
It reeked of burnt fur, blood, and raw flesh.

Kael grimaced. Every instinct screamed against it.  
But there was no choice.

"Iris... scan the meat. Is it... safe?"

**[Scanning... Mutagenic contamination: Low. Digestive risk: Moderate. Survival priority: Recommend controlled ingestion.]**

"Controlled ingestion," he muttered darkly. "Right."

He set to work, using his spear to slice chunks of relatively clean muscle from the creature’s flank. Then, gathering shattered debris, he sparked a fire — primitive, but effective — with scraps of old-world wire and synthetic cloth.

The flames hissed and danced.

Kael roasted the meat, blackening the outer layers to kill whatever nightmare bacteria lurked inside.  
The smell was unbearable — acrid, greasy, revolting.  
But hunger was stronger than disgust.

By the dim firelight, he gritted his teeth and bit into the charred meat.  
It was tough, stringy, and tasted of death.  
He gagged once — then forced himself to chew, swallow, and chew again.

Bite after bite, he swallowed the horror of this new world.

Later, with the fire smoldering low and his body twitching with exhaustion, he sat back against a broken wall.

"Iris," he rasped. "Scan me. Full report."

There was a brief hum.

**[Scanning complete.]**

**📊 Physical Status Report (Generated by IRIS)**

* Strength: **+0.005 increase**
* Speed: **+0.005 increase**
* Stamina: **+0.005 increase**
* Cognitive Processing Speed: **+0.005 increase**
* Reflex Time: **Stable at 0.07 seconds**
* Muscle Density: **+0.005 increase**
* Bone Density: **+0.005 increase**

Mutation Rate: **Increased by +0.1**

Kael blinked.

So little improvement… for so much pain.

But even the smallest step forward was still a step.  
And in this world, the smallest advantage could mean the difference between life and death.

He closed his eyes, resting his battered body.

Tomorrow, he would move again.  
Tomorrow, he would find something better.  
Or die trying.

**Chapter 5: A Fragile Life**

Kael woke instantly, muscles coiled, spear in hand.

The noise — a sharp, broken whimper — echoed through the ruins.

His heart thudded painfully against his ribs as he crouched low, scanning the half-collapsed room.

"Iris," he whispered, "visual scan — now."

**[Initiating scan...]**

A soft pulse of blue light swept from his wristwatch, illuminating the debris.

Movement — small, frantic — near a shattered cabinet.

Kael tightened his grip on the spear.

Then he saw it.

A small cat, barely larger than his forearm, lay writhing among the rubble.  
Its body twitched violently, muscles spasming under the skin.  
Thin black lines ran along its spine, glowing faintly.  
Its fur, once soft and grey, now flickered with patches of strange, hardened scales.

Mutation.

But unlike the monstrous creatures he had faced before, this one was... struggling.

It wasn't a predator yet.  
It was vulnerable. Frighteningly so.

"Iris," Kael murmured, frowning. "Identify species."

**[Querying database...]**  
**[Error. No complete match found.]**  
**[Partial data: Domestic Feline – Subject in mid-mutation. Mutation path unknown.]**

Kael hesitated, a knot forming in his chest.

Logic screamed to kill it now. Before it grew dangerous.  
One more mutant roaming the ruins could mean death — for him, or someone else.

"Iris," he said, voice tight. "Advice."

There was a pause.

**[Subject displays high instability. Threat level: Currently low. Potential future threat: Variable.]**

**[Survival logic suggests elimination.]**

Kael's knuckles whitened around his spear.

But something deep inside — something still human — resisted.

He slowly lowered the weapon.

"No," he muttered. "Not yet."

Carefully, Kael shifted broken concrete off the struggling creature.  
He crouched beside it, his hand hesitating — then reaching out.

Gently, he ran his fingers along its trembling side, careful to avoid the forming scales.

The cat let out a tiny, broken noise.  
Kael murmured soothing nonsense, the way he had once spoken to strays back in the old world.

Minutes passed.

The cat’s convulsions gradually slowed.

Its breathing grew shallow, labored.

Kael stayed close, watching, tense, ready — but refusing to leave it alone.

Finally, with a last shudder, the creature fell still.

It wasn’t dead — at least, not yet.

But the mutation had changed it:

* Its claws were now faintly curved and gleamed harder than bone.
* A faint, almost imperceptible glow pulsed under the skin near its spine.

Kael sat by its side, refusing to sleep, refusing to leave it.

He didn’t know if he had just made a terrible mistake.  
He didn’t know if the cat would wake up and become another monster.

But for now… it was alive.

And so was he.

**Chapter 6: The Awakening of the Bond**

Kael stayed by the small cat’s side, vigilant as the hours passed. Its body, now still, was a stark reminder of the fragile balance between life and mutation. He hadn’t dared to leave it. His fingers occasionally brushed its trembling fur, his thoughts filled with doubt and wonder about what would come next.

Then, it moved.

The cat's head twitched, its body rippling with the final tremors of mutation. Slowly, its eyelids flickered.

Kael leaned forward, instinctively reaching for his spear, but he froze.  
The creature’s eyes cracked open — dull at first, then slowly brightening.

Its pupils, once those of a simple domestic cat, were now elongated and unnaturally reflective, glowing faintly in the dim light.

The cat hissed weakly, its body tensing. Its gaze met Kael's, wild and confused.  
But then, in an instant, its mouth opened in a desperate motion.

Before Kael could react, the cat lunged, its fangs sinking into his finger.

"Ah!" Kael winced, instinctively pulling back. Blood flowed, warm and red.

For a split second, his thoughts clouded in panic — but then, the cat froze, its eyes locking onto his with newfound awareness.

It licked its lips.  
Then, with an odd kind of certainty, it nuzzled its head against Kael’s hand.

The creature, still small and fragile, stared up at him as if it had just *remembered* who he was.

Kael’s breath caught in his throat. Something was happening.

“Iris,” he said, his voice raw from the earlier pain, “scan it again. Now.”

The AI’s response was almost immediate.

**[Scanning... Subject: Domestic Feline Hybrid – Mutation Complete.]**

**🧬 Physical Status Report (Generated by IRIS)**

* **Strength:** 3x Average Human
* **Speed:** 2.5x Average Human
* **Stamina:** 2x Average Human
* **Cognitive Processing Speed:** 1.5x Average Human
* **Reflex Time:** 0.05 seconds
* **Muscle Density:** 3x Average Human
* **Bone Density:** 2x Average Human

Mutation Rate: **100% Complete – Subject evolved beyond initial species.**

Kael stared at the numbers flashing before his eyes.

Three times stronger than the average human? And it was still so small.  
But the power it held was undeniable.

The cat's small body, compared to the monsters he had faced, was a stark contrast to its strength. It was far weaker than the black panther, but Kael could sense the raw potential in it.

It rubbed against his legs now, its purring deep and comforting — but also a little terrifying.

“You… you’re not a normal cat anymore,” Kael murmured, half in awe, half in disbelief.

The cat’s eyes flicked up to him, and for a brief moment, Kael felt it. The bond. The strange, ancient instinct of loyalty, stronger than anything he had ever felt from any creature.

It was clear.  
It had chosen him.  
And Kael realized, in that instant — he had no choice but to accept it.

The cat was his companion now.

**Chapter 7: The Path Forward**

Kael’s mind was a blur as he sat still, watching the small cat curl up on his shoulder. He could feel the bond between them, but this whole situation still didn’t make sense. The events of the past few hours — the mutation, the strange bite, the cat choosing him — were all too surreal. Was this a consequence of his mutation, or had something else caused this sudden bond?

He shook his head, pushing the questions aside. He had enough to deal with.

"Iris," he whispered, his finger hovering over the watch, "scan my body again. I need to know if I'm recovering."

**[Initiating body scan...]**

A soft, cool pulse came from his watch as the data came to life in front of him.

**🧬 Physical Status Report (Generated by IRIS)**

* **Strength:** 3.405x Average Human
* **Speed:** 5.205x Average Human
* **Reflex Time:** 0.07 seconds
* **Stamina:** 6.005x Average Human
* **Cognitive Processing Speed:** 2.805x Average Human

**Additional Detected Changes:**

* **Muscle Density:** 4.005x Average Human
* **Bone Density:** 2.805x Average Human
* **Minor Neural Evolution:** 3.1x Average Human
* **Injury Report:** Lacerations (Right Shoulder) – 35% Healing

Kael grimaced as he looked at the injury report. His right shoulder still ached from the rat’s attack, the deep gashes slowly healing, but not fast enough. The blood flow had slowed, but the lacerations were still open, and his movements were restricted.

"Good," he murmured, "I’m improving, but not fast enough."

He reached over and gently adjusted the cat on his shoulder. It meowed softly and stretched its tiny limbs, now curled up comfortably, almost like a natural companion.

“Alright, little one,” Kael said, his voice more resigned than he liked. “We need to find a place to patch up. I’m not risking infection.”

The cat flicked its tail and nuzzled his neck in response, a soft purr vibrating through its tiny body. Despite its strength, it seemed at peace for now.

With a grunt, Kael stood up, testing his weight on the injured shoulder. The pain was still there, but it wasn’t unbearable. He needed shelter, something to keep him safe while he treated himself.

He adjusted his backpack, making sure his spear was still secured, then checked the surrounding ruins once again.

“Let’s go, Iris,” Kael muttered. “Where do we find safety around here?”

**[Scanning... Safe zones: Minimal. First aid locations: 0.45 kilometers east.]**

“East, it is,” Kael said, more to himself than to the cat.

The duo moved carefully through the devastated ruins of the city. The buildings around them were fractured and half-collapsed, and the air smelled of decay and burnt ash. Kael kept his senses heightened, wary of the creatures that still roamed the broken city. Despite his improved abilities, he wasn’t foolish enough to think he was invincible.

**🧬 Physical Status Report: Cat**

**Strength:** 1.2x Average Human  
**Speed:** 8.24x Average Human  
**Reflex Time:** 0.05 seconds  
**Cognitive Processing Speed:** 2.0x Average Human

**Additional Detected Changes:**

* **Muscle Density:** 3.2x Average Human
* **Bone Density:** 2.4x Average Human
* **Enhanced Senses:** Visual and Auditory Processing 3x Human Average

The cat’s speed and reaction time were astonishing. Even Kael, with his new heightened abilities, couldn’t help but marvel at how quickly it could move — darting from one pile of rubble to the next, always ahead of him, its movements a blur. It was as if the cat had gained an instinctual understanding of its surroundings — fast, agile, and ready to act.

The cat’s glowing eyes reflected in the dim light, watching him silently from his shoulder. It was clear that the bond between them had only deepened in the last few hours.

"Stay sharp," Kael muttered to the cat, though it probably understood more than he gave it credit for.

As they made their way east, Kael thought of the others — the ones he had lost. But there was no time to mourn. Not yet.

His shoulder twinged again, a reminder of his mortality.

He just hoped he’d get to the shelter in time before things got worse.

**Chapter 8: The Gathering**

Kael’s footsteps were careful, deliberate, as he moved eastward through the desolate city ruins. The once majestic skyline was now nothing more than crumbling structures, dark shadows against the burning horizon. He could feel the weight of time pressing on him — the remnants of the world he had once known, the comforts of a life that seemed like a distant memory. And yet, survival had become a more complex thing than mere existence.

"Iris," he muttered under his breath, his body still aching from the fight earlier, "Any medical supplies near here?"

**[Scanning... Medical supplies detected: 0.5 kilometers north.]**

Kael gritted his teeth, pushing himself forward despite the lingering pain. He knew that if he didn’t take care of his injuries soon, they might get worse. The cat perched on his shoulder, silent but ever-watchful.

The scent of decay grew stronger as he moved closer to his destination. As he rounded the corner of a broken-down skyscraper, a flicker of movement caught his eye — a group of people huddled near an old medical truck, partially hidden behind a fallen structure. Their figures were blurred against the dimming sky, but there was no mistaking the human presence.

Kael stepped forward, his hand instinctively reaching for his spear, but he kept it lowered. Cautious. The last thing he needed was another unnecessary conflict.

**[Caution: Hostile potential detected. Analyzing... No immediate threats identified.]**

“Iris,” Kael whispered again. “Can you scan them? What do we know?”

**[Scanning... No data available for this group.]**

The lack of data made Kael uneasy. As he approached cautiously, the people turned their heads in unison. Six in total — two women and four men, all of them looking weary, battle-hardened, but alive.

The first to speak was one of the men — older, his face weathered, but his posture strong.

“Who’s there?” His voice was cautious but not unfriendly.

Kael stood still, adjusting the cat on his shoulder. It let out a soft, almost nonchalant meow.

“I’m not here to cause trouble,” Kael said, holding up his hands in peace. “I just need medical supplies.”

The older man narrowed his eyes, his gaze shifting to the cat, which blinked innocently in Kael’s arms. The others in the group were tense — one of the older men was gripping a makeshift weapon, while another, younger man, looked more curious than cautious. But it was the two women who stood out to Kael.

The younger woman, who looked to be about 12, clutched a small, patched-up backpack tightly, her eyes wide with both fear and curiosity. But it was the older woman — a striking figure of almost 35, beautiful even in the harshness of the apocalypse — who spoke next.

"Why do you have that thing with you?" she asked, her voice sharp, yet tinged with something Kael couldn’t quite read. “That creature.”

Kael hesitated for a moment. The cat’s glowing eyes fixed on the woman, watching her closely. It meowed again, a strange sort of purr.

“This cat saved me,” Kael said, keeping his voice calm. “It’s not dangerous. It’s… different. But I’ve had it with me for a while now.”

One of the men, the youngest in the group — around Kael’s age — stepped forward, eyes narrowing as he looked at the cat. Kael froze, realizing that the young man was staring at him with an expression of recognition.

“Kael? Kael Ardyn?” The voice was hesitant, but there was no mistaking the familiarity.

Kael blinked in disbelief.

“David?” He took a step closer, then squinted. “What... What are you doing here?”

The young man — David, his schoolmate from before the apocalypse — smiled faintly.

“I was on a family leave when everything went down,” David explained. “My parents were... well, they didn’t make it. But you? I never thought I’d see you again, let alone like this.”

Kael felt a rush of conflicting emotions. The relief of seeing a familiar face in this broken world was overwhelming, but the harsh reality of their situation quickly wiped it away.

“I didn’t think I’d be seeing anyone from school again, either,” Kael said, his voice quiet. “But I’m not here for a reunion. I need medical supplies. My shoulder’s been hurt for a while, and I think it’s getting infected.”

David’s expression softened. “We’ve got some supplies here. Come on, I’ll help you.”

But as Kael moved toward the group, the older woman didn’t seem convinced. “You’re not bringing that thing any closer until we know it’s safe.”

Kael sighed, lowering his gaze to the cat. The last thing he wanted was to make this situation worse.

“I promise you, it won’t hurt anyone,” Kael said, his voice steady. “I’m not asking for your approval, just your help.”

After a tense moment of silence, the older man who had spoken first grunted, his face unreadable. He glanced around at the others, who seemed to be in silent discussion.

Finally, the younger woman spoke up, her voice quieter, but determined. “I think we should let him in. If the cat’s really not a threat, then what’s the harm?”

The older woman, who had been skeptical, exchanged a look with the two older men. They nodded reluctantly.

“Alright, fine. You can stay,” she said curtly. “But no one goes near the cat unless I say so.”

Kael nodded, careful not to let his frustration show. He had no intention of pushing his luck.

With that, the group made way for him. As Kael moved closer, the cat gave one final, wary glance at the others, before curling up once more on his shoulder.

David, seeing Kael’s injuries, immediately helped him sit down near the truck where some supplies were stored. Kael took a deep breath, allowing himself to relax for the first time in what felt like ages.

“Well, this is something, huh?” David said, trying to lighten the mood.

Kael gave a half-smile. “Yeah. I didn’t expect to find you here.”

“You and me both,” David said, then added with a sigh, “but I guess it’s good to see a familiar face in a place like this.”

Kael sat silently for a moment, his mind racing with thoughts of the cat, of what was happening to the world, and of the strange bond they now shared. Would these people accept him? Would they be able to survive together?

For now, it was a question that would have to wait.

**Chapter 9: The Silent Execution**

The campfire crackled softly, its dim glow casting faint shadows over the group as they huddled together, attempting to find some semblance of comfort in the midst of chaos. Kael lay still, his eyes closed, listening to the rhythm of his own breathing. The cat rested lightly on his shoulder, its warm presence a reminder of the strange bond they shared. Though Kael had not yet fully come to terms with the cat’s origins, he had learned to trust its instincts.

The night was eerily quiet.

Too quiet.

Suddenly, a high-pitched hum sliced through the silence, sending a shiver down Kael’s spine. His eyes snapped open. The cat’s body tensed on his shoulder, its ears flicking toward the source of the noise. Kael shot to his feet, heart pounding in his chest as his mind processed the situation.

**[Scanning... Hostile entities detected: 5 mutated mosquitoes.]**

Kael instinctively reached for his spear, his body readying itself for whatever came next. He turned to the group of survivors who were still asleep, unaware of the incoming danger.

A low rumble of panic began to ripple through the camp as the mosquitoes appeared in the distance, their massive forms flying in a disjointed pattern. These weren’t normal insects. They were mutations — grotesque, bloodthirsty creatures whose wings beat with unnatural speed.

“Wake up!” Kael shouted, his voice hoarse with urgency.

The elder man was the first to react. He grabbed his makeshift weapon, a jagged metal rod, and rushed toward the oncoming threat. The older woman followed closely behind, her expression grim as she unsheathed a combat knife from her belt.

Both of them were ready for a fight. They had lived through too many battles, too many days of constant survival, to let fear dictate their actions.

But as Kael scanned them, he couldn’t help but notice the marked difference in their physical conditions compared to the others.

**[Physical Report – Group Scan]**

**Elder Man:**

* Strength: 4.515x Average Human
* Speed: 3.105x Average Human
* Reflex Time: 0.08 seconds
* Stamina: 4.215x Average Human

**Older Woman:**

* Strength: 4.375x Average Human
* Speed: 3.265x Average Human
* Reflex Time: 0.075 seconds
* Stamina: 4.345x Average Human

**Remaining Group:**

* Strength: 2.150x Average Human (Below Kael’s current levels)
* Speed: 2.805x Average Human (Significantly slower than the mutated mosquitoes)

Kael’s hand tightened around his spear as the mosquitoes drew closer, their wings buzzing in an unnerving chorus. Each one was the size of a small bird, their bodies sleek, dark, and glistening in the firelight. They were a nightmare made real — pale, translucent wings with veins pulsating beneath them, and bloodshot eyes that glowed faintly with malice.

The elder man and the older woman charged at the mosquitoes, shouting as they swung their weapons, but their movements were slow. The mosquitoes darted around them, their speed far surpassing any human could manage. Their razor-sharp proboscises shot out like deadly spears, drawing blood in mere seconds.

The elder man swung his rod, but a mosquito dodged it effortlessly and sank its needle-thin proboscis into his neck. Blood poured out in a steady stream, too quickly for him to react. The woman fared slightly better, but her strikes were also too slow. She caught one of them on the wing, but another one zipped behind her and drove its needle into her side.

Kael’s heart raced. He couldn’t let them die like this.

**[Iris: 2 Mosquitoes remain. Analyzing...]**

Kael moved quickly, his legs pushing him toward the nearest mosquito, spear raised.

But then, something unexpected happened.

The cat, which had been eerily still on his shoulder, sprang into action. In a blur of motion, it leapt from Kael’s shoulder and into the air, its claws outstretched. The first mosquito didn’t even have time to react as the cat’s claws raked across its wings, tearing through its delicate membrane. The creature’s body dropped to the ground, twitching.

But the cat didn’t stop there.

With eerie precision, it stalked the remaining mosquitoes, slashing them to pieces with ruthless efficiency. Kael watched, stunned, as the cat’s claws sliced through the insects’ fragile exteriors like a hot knife through butter.

The cat was no longer just a strange companion — it was a silent executioner, moving like a shadow, its claws drenched in blood.

As the last mosquito fell, Kael saw the cat’s eyes glow faintly, its body covered in blood, its claws slick and dripping. It stood motionless for a moment, then turned toward Kael.

Its movements were fluid, almost predatory. The cat wasn’t a creature to be trifled with.

The rest of the group, now slowly recovering from the shock, looked on in awe, confusion, and fear. The elder man was the first to speak.

“What in the world...?”

Kael’s voice was tight, but he could only manage a single, breathless sentence.

“It’s my cat.”

**Physical Status Report (Generated by IRIS)**

* **Strength:** 3.405x Average Human
* **Speed:** 5.205x Average Human
* **Reflex Time:** 0.07 seconds
* **Stamina:** 6.005x Average Human
* **Cognitive Processing Speed:** 2.805x Average Human
* **Muscle Density:** 4.005x Average Human
* **Bone Density:** 2.805x Average Human
* **Minor Neural Evolution:** 3.1x Average Human
* **Injury Report:** Lacerations (Right Shoulder) – 80% Healing

**Cat’s Physical Report**

* **Strength:** 4.505x Average Human
* **Speed:** 8.24x Average Human
* **Reflex Time:** 0.015 seconds
* **Stamina:** 5.305x Average Human
* **Cognitive Processing Speed:** 3.005x Average Human
* **Muscle Density:** 6.215x Average Human
* **Bone Density:** 5.005x Average Human

With the last mosquito’s body crumpled at their feet, the camp fell silent, the only sounds now the crackling fire and the distant hum of the wind. The cat stood motionless in the center, its bloodied claws gleaming in the light.

Kael’s mind raced. What kind of creature had he saved?

And more importantly… what was he becoming?

**Chapter 10: The Silent Savior**

The night was still, too still. The remnants of the battle with the mutated mosquitoes hung in the air, a lingering tension that made every breath feel heavier. Kael stood motionless, his spear gripped tightly in his hand, but his focus was on the cat. The creature, covered in the blood of the monsters it had slain, slowly padded toward him, its eyes gleaming in the dim light of the campfire.

For a moment, neither of them moved, the silence between them almost oppressive. Kael’s mind raced with questions — questions he had no answers to. What was this creature? How had it become so powerful? And most importantly, why had it chosen him?

The cat, almost as if it sensed his thoughts, slowly leapt onto his shoulder, its claws gently digging into his skin as it settled there. Kael didn't flinch. He merely stared at the cat, his thoughts swirling.

The rest of the group watched from a distance, eyes wide with fear and awe. The two older men who had fought the mosquitoes were now silent, their faces pale and filled with uncertainty. The young woman, who had been so brave just moments ago, stood frozen, her hands trembling at her sides. But it was the middle schooler, the young girl, who finally broke the silence.

"Did it… save us?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Kael blinked, his mind snapping back to reality. The others seemed to hold their breath, waiting for his response. The fear in their eyes was palpable, but there was something else there now — a flicker of gratitude. Perhaps they saw the cat as a savior, something they could no longer fear now that it had saved their lives. Kael nodded slowly, his voice soft but steady.

"Yes. It did," he replied, his gaze locked on the cat. "It’s… not what you think. But it helped us. All of us."

The group stood in silence for a moment longer, but the tension seemed to lift. Slowly, they began to pack up their belongings, their movements deliberate and careful. The battle with the mosquitoes had rattled them more than they cared to admit. They knew they couldn’t stay here much longer.

"We need to move," the elder man said, his voice low but firm. "This place is no longer safe."

Kael nodded, feeling the weight of his own exhaustion settling in. He could still feel the sting of the lacerations on his shoulder, the wounds from the mutated rat. He wasn’t healed, not fully, but he had to keep going. They all did.

They moved out of the ruined camp slowly, cautiously, as though every sound could be their last. Kael kept his eyes peeled, the cat perched silently on his shoulder, ever watchful. The others stayed close, their eyes darting around, their steps quick and light.

The journey was uneventful at first, but Kael couldn’t shake the feeling that something was watching them. The landscape had changed drastically over the last few months. What had once been vibrant, full of life, was now a desolate wasteland of broken buildings, twisted metal, and crumbling roads. But even in this ruin, there was a place Kael had been hoping to reach — an old AI-powered library, built for the elderly, designed as a sanctuary for those who loved culture and knowledge. It was a place he knew would offer the most protection, even if it had been unused for some time.

As they reached the outskirts of the library, Kael took a moment to scan the area. The library loomed ahead, its tall glass windows now cracked and covered in grime, but the structure was intact. The AI system was still active, but no one had used it for a long time.

The group stood in front of the massive doors, their heavy, ancient bronze handles tarnished and covered in dust. The once grand entrance was now barely visible beneath the layer of dirt and debris.

"This is it," Kael said, his voice barely above a whisper.

The elder man nodded, looking up at the building with a mix of hope and hesitation. "It looks safe. But… be cautious."

Kael pushed the door open slowly, its ancient hinges creaking under the strain. Inside, the dim glow of AI-powered lights flickered on automatically, casting long shadows across the room. Bookshelves lined the walls, filled with dusty tomes and old records. The air was stale, untouched for far too long.

But it wasn’t completely empty.

Kael scanned the room with Iris, but the AI only showed vague details of the interior. It was clear that this library was long abandoned, but the danger wasn’t just in the silence. The walls seemed to hum with an unspoken tension, as though something had been waiting here — something Kael couldn’t yet see.

"Stay close," he warned, turning to the group. "We don’t know what’s here. The AI system might still be active, but there could be other threats lurking."

They moved cautiously through the aisles, the cat remaining eerily still on Kael’s shoulder, its eyes darting around the room, alert. As Kael walked deeper into the library, he felt a strange presence — something that didn’t belong.

The library, once a place of culture, was now a tomb of forgotten knowledge.

**Physical Status Report (Generated by IRIS)**

* **Strength:** 3.405x Average Human
* **Speed:** 5.205x Average Human
* **Reflex Time:** 0.07 seconds
* **Stamina:** 6.005x Average Human
* **Cognitive Processing Speed:** 2.805x Average Human
* **Muscle Density:** 4.005x Average Human
* **Bone Density:** 2.805x Average Human
* **Minor Neural Evolution:** 3.1x Average Human
* **Injury Report:** Lacerations (Right Shoulder) – 85% Healing

**Cat’s Physical Report**

* **Strength:** 4.505x Average Human
* **Speed:** 8.24x Average Human
* **Reflex Time:** 0.015 seconds
* **Stamina:** 5.305x Average Human
* **Cognitive Processing Speed:** 3.005x Average Human
* **Muscle Density:** 6.215x Average Human
* **Bone Density:** 5.005x Average Human

They continued through the library, the tension growing with each step. They were safe for now, but Kael couldn’t shake the feeling that danger was just around the corner.

Something wasn’t right.

But for now, they had no choice but to stay.

Chapter 11:

As the group settled in the quiet, dimly lit AI-powered library, their weary minds began to ease, if only for a brief moment. Kael and the others had come across a collection of ancient adventure books, relics from the past century that told stories of humankind's greatest achievements—from the rise of space travel to humanity's technological advancements. Each page was a reminder of the time before everything had collapsed. Their fingers skimmed through the pages with a mix of awe and melancholy.

But as they read, the environment around them slowly shifted. The air seemed to grow thicker, a faint greenish hue spreading across the walls. At first, it was subtle, like the early signs of something blooming. But then, as their gazes wandered to the windows and doorways, they noticed it—the tree branches. They had grown in, stretching out like long tendrils, reaching towards them.

Kael’s heart skipped a beat. The branches twisted around the corners of the library, moving as if alive. His breath caught in his throat as he realized the horrifying truth: these were no ordinary branches.

“Is that…?” Victor’s voice trailed off, his hands trembling.

“M-Mutated trees?” Emily stammered, her eyes wide with terror.

Kael looked around, his instincts kicking in. “We need to get out of here. Those trees are alive, and they’re dangerous.”

But as he moved to grab his spear, the first of the branches shot forward, coiling tightly around Emily and David. They screamed, struggling in the grip of the growing branches, their movements futile against the unyielding strength of the tree.

“Help!” Emily cried, her voice strained as the branches lifted her off the ground.

David, gasping for air, fought against the tightening vines, but the branches grew faster, tighter, stronger with each passing second.

Kael’s eyes narrowed. His hand instinctively went to the spear, but the reality of the situation hit him—destroying the tree might be their only chance.

“Everyone, move!” Kael shouted, his voice breaking through the panic.

Victor and Samuel stepped forward, their weapons raised, ready to strike. Maya and Ethan rushed to help, but it was clear: time was running out.

Kael's mind raced as he strategized the best way to sever the branches, but before any of them could act, the library filled with a sudden, eerie hum. The branches tightened their grip, and the sounds of distant growls echoed through the halls.

As the battle began to unfold, Kael fought to free his friends—but it seemed the trees had only begun their attack.

The next steps would determine whether they could survive, or if they would become another part of the growing forest of terror.

Chapter 12:

The air in the library had turned heavy, a sense of impending doom washing over the group as the monstrous mutated tree tightened its grip on Emily and David, lifting them higher into the air. The tree’s branches, pulsating with a sinister energy, had become more than just a threat—they were now the enemy.

IRIS, Kael's ever-present companion, scanned the tree, delivering its unsettling report with cold precision:

🧬 **Tree Mutation Report (Generated by IRIS)**

* **Strength**: 5x Average Human
* **Speed**: 7x Average Human
* **Defensive Capability**: Extreme
* **Mutation Level**: 10

Kael’s heart raced as he watched the tree’s massive branches sway with unnatural grace, its strength far beyond anything he had faced before. The others were not far behind, already charging toward the tree’s base with weapons drawn. Victor, Samuel, and Maya wasted no time, each of them moving with grim determination. They swung through the air, their weapons slicing through the branches, but they were met with fierce resistance.

Kael’s eyes locked with Cherry—the cat who had saved them all. “Come on,” Kael muttered, his voice steady despite the chaos. He felt a strange bond with the creature now, one built through shared survival. “Let’s end this.”

The two of them rushed forward, navigating the shifting landscape of writhing branches and swinging tendrils. The cat, agile and swift, leaped from branch to branch, guiding Kael with its keen instincts. Together, they moved like a coordinated force—Kael with his spear, and Cherry with her razor-sharp claws.

As they neared the base of the tree, Kael could see that the trunk was thick—far thicker than anything he could cut through. The mutations had made it nearly indestructible, but they had no choice. They had to reach David and Emily before it was too late.

David and Emily were high in the air, struggling against the tree's unrelenting grip. Their faces were pale, terror etched in their expressions as they dangled helplessly from the branches. Kael's pulse quickened.

“Hold on, we’re coming!” Kael shouted, as Cherry leapt from his shoulder to claw at the branches holding Emily.

With every swipe, Kael and Cherry managed to cut through the branches, slowly but surely freeing their friends. After a few more agonizing moments of struggle, they reached the base of the trunk.

But the tree was far more powerful than anticipated. Every strike from their weapons only seemed to slow it down for a moment. Still, they persisted. Victor swung his axe with all his might, and Maya sliced through branches, creating just enough space for Kael and the others to move.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, they managed to free Emily and David. But just as they began to retreat, the tree reacted—more violently than ever before. The air hummed with energy, and before they could fully escape, the tree’s branches shot out, capturing Kael and Cherry in a sudden, horrifying twist.

The others screamed as Kael was pulled toward the ground. The earth trembled beneath him, the tree’s power dragging him into the depths of the earth, vanishing from sight. Cherry, too, was pulled into the ground, her claws unable to hold onto Kael as she was swallowed by the earth.

The others were left standing in shock, their hearts racing with fear. They had watched in horror as the tree, alive with its own sinister will, dragged Kael and the cat into the darkness, leaving them behind without a trace.

Victor, Samuel, Maya, and the others could only stare, helpless, not knowing what had just happened, or if they could ever find Kael again. The tree’s actions felt almost… intentional, as though it knew exactly what it was doing.

**Chapter 13: The Tree's Prison**

Kael’s vision was blurry when he woke up, his body sore and disoriented. His mind struggled to piece together what had happened. The last thing he remembered was the tree—its massive branches engulfing him and dragging him into the ground. Now, he found himself in an entirely different place.

He slowly pushed himself to his feet, wincing as pain shot through his shoulders. The cat, Cherry, lay not far from him, looking equally battered but not as badly injured. She seemed to be recovering, her claws still sharp, but her movements were slow.

The environment around them was unlike anything Kael had ever encountered. He was surrounded by thick tree bark—massive, gnarled walls rising high above him. The air was stifling, and the ground beneath him was rocky and uneven, with patches of moss growing in strange patterns.

But there was something more unsettling about the place. It was completely still, devoid of life beyond himself and Cherry. The entire space felt as though it was encased in some kind of dome. The sky above was hidden by a thick, organic canopy made of intertwined branches. It was as if he was trapped inside the very heart of the tree itself.

He stood there, unsure of what to do. His spear, his only weapon, was nowhere to be found. He could feel a rising sense of panic, but he fought it back. Panicking wouldn’t help him escape.

Kael took a deep breath and pulled out his wristwatch, activating the AI, IRIS. His fingers shook slightly as he used his only remaining tool to scan the surroundings.

**IRIS Scan Results:**

🧬 **Location Analysis:**

* **Environment Type:** Inside of Mutated Tree
* **Threat Level:** 50-Star Danger (Ancient Creature-Level Threat)

The scan results sent a cold shiver down Kael’s spine. The numbers were staggering. This was no ordinary tree—it had evolved far beyond any living thing Kael had encountered. The tree was now classified as an "ancient creature," a being whose power far surpassed the human level. A 50-star threat was nothing short of apocalyptic.

He took a moment to process the information. How could this tree have become so powerful? And why had it only captured him?

His mind raced with questions. The tree, which had seemed weak and defenseless at first, had now turned into a prison—a place where he was the sole prisoner. It had been after him all along, but why?

A sudden noise broke his concentration. He turned to see Cherry cautiously approaching a small plant that had sprouted near the center of the dome. The plant was strange—its leaves were a deep violet, and a small, glowing fruit hung from a twisted stem. It radiated a soft, eerie light, and the scent it gave off was faintly sweet but unsettling.

Next to the plant, scratched into the rocky ground, was a note. Kael bent down to examine it, his fingers trembling. The note was written in what appeared to be crude marks, scrawled by something sharp—likely made by the tree or one of its mutated branches. It was simple, direct:

*"Eat it if you want to escape."*

Kael stared at the note, his heart racing. He didn’t know whether to trust the message. The tree had already shown it could manipulate him, but the idea of staying trapped here forever was unbearable.

What if the fruit was poisoned? What if it was another trap?

But the thought of being trapped here forever, surrounded by nothing but the oppressive walls of the mutated tree, made him hesitate. He looked at Cherry, who seemed to sense his uncertainty. The cat let out a low growl, but it too seemed to be drawn to the plant.

Kael knew he had to make a decision.

He scanned the fruit with IRIS to check for any hidden dangers. The AI provided the following analysis:

**IRIS Scan Results:**

🧬 **Fruit Analysis:**

* **Nutritional Value:** Unknown
* **Toxicity:** None Detected
* **Properties:** Potentially linked to the tree's life force
* **Escape Potential:** Unclear

The scan didn’t offer much help. There was no immediate sign of toxicity, but the fruit seemed to be linked to the tree's life force. Could it be the key to escaping this place?

Kael reached for the fruit, the cold weight of uncertainty pressing on his chest. He knew he had no choice. He had to take the risk.

With a deep breath, he plucked the fruit from the plant and held it in his hand. It was surprisingly light, the skin smooth and almost pulsating with energy. He glanced at Cherry, who had stopped moving, watching him closely.

"I don’t know if this is a good idea, Cherry," Kael whispered, but he already knew what had to be done. He took a small bite.

At first, there was nothing. The taste was faint, almost flavorless, and Kael felt no immediate change. But then, as the fruit slid down his throat, a warm sensation spread through his body, and the world around him seemed to shift. The walls of the dome pulsated, as if the entire tree was reacting to the presence of the fruit inside him.

Suddenly, Kael's body went rigid, his muscles tensing as if they were being pulled in multiple directions at once. His vision blurred, and for a moment, he felt weightless—like he was floating in an endless void.

But then, as quickly as it had begun, it stopped. Kael found himself standing once again in the dome, his body trembling. The world around him seemed to have shifted—there was a faint glow in the air, and the tree bark now seemed less oppressive, more... alive.

Was this the tree's way of helping him escape, or had he just walked right into another trap?

Kael’s mind raced as the silence settled once more. He couldn’t be sure. But now, there was no turning back. He had to find a way out, no matter what it took. The answers lay ahead, and Kael knew he would have to face them head-on.

**Chapter 14: The Mutation**

Kael slowly finished the remaining fruit, his hands trembling as he bit down on it. The taste was bitterer than the first, but he forced himself to swallow. At first, nothing happened. He stood there in the eerie silence, expecting some immediate change, but nothing seemed to shift. He began walking forward, pushing himself to keep moving, despite the nagging feeling in the back of his mind that something was wrong.

However, just as he took another step, pain surged through his body like a flood, overwhelming him. His muscles twisted and burned, his bones felt like they were being crushed under immense pressure. His mind screamed in agony as his cells felt like they were tearing apart and reforming at a rapid pace.

Kael fell to his knees, clutching his head in a desperate attempt to hold onto his sanity as the pain intensified. His body convulsed violently, and the agony reached a peak so intense that his vision blurred, and he lost consciousness. The last thing he heard before blacking out was the soft, worried growl of Cherry, and then... nothing.

When Kael finally awoke, everything felt strange. The world around him was blurry at first, and his body felt heavy—almost alien to him. He groggily sat up, groaning as his head swam. The plant he had eaten earlier was now a withered, dry husk, its leaves curled and brittle. Cherry, however, was licking the dried remains, as if savoring whatever remnants of energy or sustenance the plant might have left behind.

Kael's muscles still burned, but the pain had dulled to a sharp throb that was almost bearable. He tried to move, but his limbs felt sluggish and stiff, like he was learning to walk all over again.

"Iris," he whispered hoarsely, still in a daze, "scan me. I need to know what happened."

A few moments passed, and then IRIS responded.

**IRIS Scan Report:**

🧬 **Physical Status Report:**

* **Strength:** 8.905x Average Human
* **Speed:** 7.231x Average Human
* **Reflex Time:** 0.05 seconds (Faster than Cherry)
* **Stamina:** 8.245x Average Human
* **Cognitive Processing Speed:** 5.3x Average Human
* **Muscle Density:** 6.004x Average Human
* **Bone Density:** 4.005x Average Human
* **Neural Evolution:** 4.5x Average Human
* **Mutation Rate:** 15x Average Human
* **Injury Report:** Minor Healing (No significant injuries remaining)
* **Cat (Cherry) Report:**
  + **Strength:** 2.7x Average Human
  + **Speed:** 5.1x Average Human
  + **Reflex Time:** 0.09 seconds (Slightly increased)
  + **Mutation Rate:** 2.5x Average Human (Minor Increase)

Kael stared at the results, his heart racing in disbelief. The numbers were staggering. His strength had nearly tripled, and his speed had increased by more than seven times that of an average human. His reflex time was now faster than Cherry’s—his cat, who had once been faster than him. His mutation rate was off the charts, and the rapid changes were impossible to ignore.

Kael struggled to comprehend what had just happened. This mutation had taken him far beyond what he had imagined. But why? Why had the tree only targeted him, and why had it left Cherry almost unchanged, aside from minor improvements?

He was still processing the full scope of his transformation when a thought gripped him: **What now?**

He pushed himself to his feet, despite the stiffness in his muscles, and took in his surroundings. It was eerily quiet. The same walls of bark surrounded him, the same oppressive silence hanging heavy in the air.

Kael growled in frustration and anger, his voice echoing through the dome-like prison. "Why are you still keeping me locked up?!" he shouted, his words tinged with disbelief. "What do you want from me?!"

For a long moment, there was no answer—only the faint rustling of the tree’s twisted branches. Kael stood there, staring at the walls, his fists clenched. He was done waiting. He was done being the tree’s puppet.

But just as he was about to give in to his rage, the ground beneath him began to tremble.

The vibrations started faintly, like distant footsteps, but they grew rapidly in intensity. Kael staggered back, his eyes wide with fear as the tremors became violent, shaking the very earth around him. Before he could react, the ground cracked open beneath him, sending him tumbling down into a vast chasm.

He barely managed to catch himself on the edge of a cliff, peering over the edge to see the new area below.

The space stretched out before him, far larger than any cavern he had ever seen. The walls were jagged and towering, extending upward for hundreds of meters—an expanse that seemed to go on endlessly. The area resembled the interior of an enormous, ancient tree, but this was far more advanced, far more menacing. The walls were covered in thick green and red bark, which seemed to pulse with an otherworldly energy, and the ground was uneven, strewn with large, tangled roots and vines. Yellow leaves swirled in the air, their color a stark contrast to the deep, blood-like hue of the bark.

Kael’s heart raced as he felt the presence of something far more dangerous than he had anticipated.

The tremors grew worse. A massive shape began to emerge from the depths of the cavern. Slowly, a towering structure rose from the center of the chamber, far larger than anything Kael had ever seen before. It was a colossal tree—its trunk thick and twisted, with bark that gleamed like polished armor. Its branches stretched out like the claws of a giant creature, and its leaves, yellow and brilliant, seemed to glow faintly in the darkness.

This was no ordinary tree. This was something ancient, something with a consciousness all its own. Kael’s breath caught in his throat as the realization hit him: the tree wasn’t just alive. It was alive in a way that was beyond anything Kael had ever experienced. And it had brought him here for a reason.

He could feel its power, its ancient hunger, and its presence pressing down on him like a weight.

And for the first time since this nightmare began, Kael felt a true fear in his chest.

The ground trembled once more, and Kael took a step back, ready for whatever was coming next. But deep down, he knew that this was only the beginning. The tree’s true form was now revealed, and Kael was at its mercy.

And he had no idea what it wanted from him—or why it had chosen him in the first place.

**Chapter 15: The Awakening of the Protectors**

Kael stood frozen, his body trembling with both fear and confusion. The giant tree before him was no longer just a mutated plant—it was something far older, far more ancient than he could ever have imagined. His heart pounded in his chest as he scanned it with IRIS, hoping to make sense of what was happening.

However, what appeared on his display was beyond comprehension.

**IRIS Scan Report:**

🧬 **Tree - Ancient Protector:**

* **Danger Level:** Unmeasurable
* **Description:** A being of the ancient world, its true nature cannot be fully understood by human technology. It has transcended known limits of organic life, existing in a form beyond current human comprehension. It is a protector—an ancient entity tied to the fate of this land and its inhabitants.

The scan results left Kael speechless. **Infinite stars**? He had never seen anything like this. The values were beyond anything that could be quantified, far surpassing the strongest mutations he had encountered so far. This was a being of unimaginable power, something that didn’t belong to this world as Kael knew it.

Suddenly, a deafening sound erupted from the tree. It wasn’t a crack or a roar, but a deep, resonant voice, emanating from the very bark of the tree, so loud that it shook the ground beneath Kael’s feet.

**"It seems you are the one after all."**

Kael staggered back, the voice echoing in his skull. It wasn’t just a sound—this was a presence, a command, a declaration.

He swallowed hard, trying to steady himself as his body tensed. "What do you mean?" Kael asked, his voice strained with a mix of fear and curiosity.

The voice, deep and rumbling, responded with a chilling certainty:  
**"The one who unites us to go forth for the battle that awaits us."**

Kael frowned, his heart racing. "What battle are you talking about?" he demanded, a sense of urgency creeping into his voice. The ground trembled again, this time less violently, but still enough to make his knees shake.

The tree’s voice was heavy with a history Kael couldn’t grasp. **"The battle that descends from the heavens, the one you humans have forgotten, the one that awakened us."**

Kael’s head spun as he tried to process the words. "You mean… us humans woke you up? What do you mean by descending from space?"

The tree’s voice deepened, its tone almost sorrowful. **"You humans were never a threat. We awoke on our own, long before your kind ever existed. To face an ordeal greater than any you can imagine. But because of this, only the qualified humans who survive the mutation are worthy to stand with us, to face the future. They are the ones who will protect this land."**

Kael’s chest tightened. This was more than he could comprehend. The words didn’t make sense. "You mean to say that it wasn’t us humans who awakened you? That it’s not our fault this all happened?"

The tree paused, the air growing thick with tension. **"No. You did not awaken us. You were merely… a catalyst. We were already here, waiting, dormant beneath the surface. You humans are but a part of this world’s great cycle. You are not the ones who stirred us, but you will be the ones to help us face what is to come."**

Kael’s mind raced. Everything he thought he knew was now turned upside down. The mutations, the cataclysmic events, the apocalyptic shift—they weren’t caused by humans after all. **Something else** was coming, something beyond the human understanding of time and space.

The tree’s voice spoke again, its words carrying the weight of eons. **"What descends from the heavens is no mere storm. It is a force from the outer realms, a force that seeks to destroy this world, to strip it of its life. We, the ancient protectors, were created to defend against such forces. But we cannot do it alone. The mutated ones—those who survive, who possess the strength to endure the transformation—will be the ones to fight alongside us. Only then can we hope to protect this land from the coming destruction."**

Kael's breath hitched. **The coming destruction.** His hands clenched into fists as the realization hit him. The mutations, the deadly creatures, the strange changes happening in the world—it was all connected. Something catastrophic was looming, something beyond his comprehension.

"And why me?" Kael asked, the words bitter in his throat. "Why am I the one you chose? Why did you target me?"

The tree’s voice was quiet, almost cryptic now. **"You were the one who survived, Kael. You were the one who fought. You are a part of the change, part of the evolution that will bring about the new age. You are the one who will unite us, who will lead the charge. The battle is yours as much as it is ours."**

Kael stood there, his mind racing with questions, but all he could hear was the unrelenting hum of the tree's voice in his skull. **The battle.** **The protectors.** **The destruction from the heavens.** He was a part of something much larger than himself, and it terrified him.

The tree shifted, its massive roots slowly pulling from the ground as though preparing for something monumental. **"Prepare yourself, Kael,"** the voice echoed. **"The battle approaches. The land is changing, and you will be at the center of it. There is no turning back."**

Kael took a deep breath, his body still aching from the transformation, his mind spinning with everything he had learned. There was no choice now. The world was changing, and he was right in the middle of it. He could either fight or be destroyed.

With a mixture of fear and determination, Kael stepped forward, his voice low but resolute. "I will fight. For whatever it is we have to face, I will fight."

The tree’s voice seemed to pulse with approval. **"Good. You are ready. The time is almost upon us."**

Kael nodded, though uncertainty still gripped his heart. He didn’t know what he was about to face, but he knew one thing for certain: The battle was coming. And he would have to fight, not just for his survival, but for the future of everything he knew.

**Chapter 16: The Call to Strength**

The world around Kael shifted once again, the once-familiar light of day now replaced by a sudden, overwhelming darkness. He blinked rapidly, his vision struggling to adjust as the dim, eerie atmosphere pressed down on him. Cherry, still resting peacefully on his shoulder, seemed unaffected by the change, her small form nestled into his neck as though she had been there for hours.

Kael stood up, his body aching from the lingering effects of his transformation. The words of the tree, or the protector, still echoed in his mind: **"Become strong, the child who unites."** His breath hitched slightly at the thought. What did it mean? What was his role in all of this?

He scanned his surroundings, trying to make sense of the situation. The ground beneath him was cracked, the buildings around him crumbling, and the air thick with an ominous silence. It was a wasteland—a far cry from the AI-powered library he had just escaped. The city seemed abandoned, devoid of life, save for the distant sounds of something shifting in the shadows.

Kael’s IRIS system flickered on, and a soft beep indicated that his scanner had connected. As he surveyed the area, his display blinked with new data:

**IRIS Scan Report:**

🧬 **Environment - Abandoned City Zone:**

* **Danger Level:** 2-3 Stars
* **Monsters Present:**
  + **2 Stars:** 20-30x Average Human
  + **3 Stars:** 30-50x Average Human
* **Description:** This part of the city has been overrun by monstrous entities, with mutations more aggressive and dangerous than anything Kael has faced so far. These creatures possess significant power and speed, far exceeding human capabilities. Survival here will require preparation, strategy, and careful execution.

Kael's heart rate spiked as the data processed in his mind. **Monsters nearly 30 times stronger than humans.** This wasn’t going to be an easy fight. He had no weapons, no gear, and no clear idea of how to proceed. But he knew one thing for certain: **He needed to prepare.**

With a grunt of frustration, Kael set his jaw. **Survival** was his first priority.

**Step 1: Finding Supplies**

Kael took a deep breath and looked around. His first task was to locate any equipment, weapons, or supplies that might help him survive in this hellish landscape. He had no choice but to venture deeper into the city and scavenge.

He spotted a ruined building in the distance—a former store, perhaps. Its structure was half-collapsed, but it might still have something useful inside. Moving cautiously, Kael threaded his way through the debris, keeping his senses sharp and on high alert. His body still felt the effects of his recent mutation, but it also felt stronger, faster, more capable than before.

As he entered the building, he spotted a few scattered remnants of equipment—old, rusted tools, a couple of broken weapons, and discarded pieces of clothing. **Nothing useful**, he thought grimly. But he wasn't ready to give up. His eyes fell upon a workbench in the corner. There were materials there—scrap metal, wire, and broken tools. **With these, he could forge a weapon.**

Kael’s fingers worked quickly, gathering the pieces and examining what he had. He needed a new spear, something sharp and strong enough to take on the monstrous creatures that roamed these streets. Using his enhanced strength and speed, he began assembling what he could from the scraps, carefully welding metal pieces together and sharpening edges with a rusted tool.

After what felt like hours, Kael finally stood back, inspecting his work. The spear wasn’t perfect, but it would do for now. It was sturdy, well-balanced, and most importantly, **sharp**. He could already feel the weight of it in his hands, the metal seeming to hum with potential.

**Step 2: Scavenging for Daily Necessities**

The next priority was food and supplies. Kael knew that if he was going to survive in this new, hostile environment, he would need more than just weapons. He needed provisions. He moved quickly from building to building, searching through abandoned shops and homes. Most places had been picked clean long ago, but after a while, he found a few cans of preserved food and bottles of water tucked away in a broken-down grocery store. They were old, but they would sustain him for a time.

He also found some makeshift clothing, a jacket, and sturdy boots that were still in decent condition. Kael didn’t waste any time—he stuffed the food and supplies into a small bag and made sure his spear was securely fastened to his side.

**Step 3: Preparing for the Future**

With his new gear in hand, Kael paused to take a deep breath. He wasn’t ready to face the monstrous creatures just yet. He still needed to learn more about his own body—his new abilities—and figure out how to use them to his advantage.

Kael checked his IRIS system again, this time scanning his own body to get a better sense of what had changed since his transformation. The report came in quickly:

**IRIS Scan Report:**

🧬 **Kael - Mutation Status:**

* **Strength:** 9.005x Average Human
* **Speed:** 7.105x Average Human
* **Reflex Time:** 0.03 seconds
* **Mutation Rate:** 15 (Severe)
* **Attributes:**
  + **Enhanced Vision**: Sharper eyesight, capable of detecting movement at greater distances.
  + **Muscle Density**: Increased by 5, providing greater power output for physical activities.
  + **Neural Processing Speed:** 2.9x faster than before, improving reaction times and cognitive abilities.
  + **Stamina:** 7.5x that of an average human, allowing for prolonged physical exertion without fatigue.

Kael took in the information, his mind racing. He had become stronger, faster, and more resilient. But his mutation was severe. He wasn’t sure what that meant in the long run, but it was clear he had crossed a line. His body was no longer entirely human. Still, the increased strength and speed were undeniable.

Kael adjusted the strap of his new weapon and began moving toward the outskirts of the city. There was no time to waste. The monsters in this area were dangerous, and Kael had a feeling that they wouldn’t stay dormant for long. He needed to be ready, and he needed to find others—if there were any survivors left.

**The world had changed,** and Kael had to adapt. **Fast.**

With Cherry still on his shoulder, Kael took his first steps into the unknown, the sounds of distant creatures echoing in the darkness ahead.

**Chapter 17: Battle with the Mutated Rat**

Kael moved cautiously through the ruined cityscape, the remnants of shattered buildings casting long shadows in the dim light of the overcast sky. The air was thick with tension, and his senses were heightened as he moved forward, every crack of rubble underfoot amplifying the silence that surrounded him. The rustling sound of something shifting in the distance caught his attention, a slight movement just beyond the horizon. He halted, instinctively gripping his newly crafted spear.

Cherry, his trusted companion, stirred slightly on his shoulder, her senses as sharp as his own. Her body remained still, her fur bristling as she peered into the shadows. Kael’s heart raced. He knew that the mutated creatures in this city weren’t just dangerous—they were unpredictable. The ones he had encountered so far were quick, vicious, and relentless.

From the edge of the debris, a pair of glowing red eyes appeared, followed by a low, guttural growl. A mutated rat, larger than any ordinary rodent, emerged from the shadows. Its fur was matted and slick with some kind of oily substance, its body bulging with unnatural muscles. The creature’s teeth were elongated, sharp like daggers, and its claws scraped against the concrete as it inched forward. Its body seemed to radiate a sickly greenish hue, the telltale sign of mutation.

The creature’s movements were erratic, a strange, twitchy aggression that indicated how far it had been altered from its original form. Kael could see its jaw twitching as it sniffed the air, sensing the presence of prey.

He felt his muscles tense in response, the new weight of the spear feeling natural in his hands. **This was no ordinary rat.**

Cherry’s fur bristled even more, and her claws dug into his shoulder as if preparing for the impending battle. Kael focused on the rat, keeping his distance, watching for any sudden moves. His enhanced vision, thanks to his mutation, allowed him to track the creature’s every movement with a heightened sense of clarity. **It was fast,** he thought, but it was also reckless, its aggression more apparent than its intelligence.

The rat pounced suddenly, its massive claws slashing through the air as it leaped toward Kael. With lightning reflexes, Kael sidestepped, narrowly avoiding the rat’s strike. His body moved faster than it ever had before, a blur of motion as he twisted out of the way. But the rat was already repositioning itself, snapping its jaws at him, trying to sink its teeth into his flesh.

Kael spun the spear in his hand, thrusting it out at the rat’s face. The creature let out a shriek as the tip of the spear pierced its shoulder, but it quickly twisted its body, knocking the spear aside with a powerful swipe of its claws. The sheer force of the blow sent Kael stumbling back, but his enhanced stamina allowed him to recover almost instantly.

He realized that the rat was only getting angrier, more desperate with each failed strike. It was more dangerous than he had initially anticipated. Its claws and teeth were sharp enough to tear through flesh, and its strength was formidable. But Kael was no longer an ordinary human. His reflexes were quicker, and his strength had grown immensely since the mutation.

He gripped the spear tighter, focusing on the creature’s movements. The rat lunged at him again, its mouth wide open as it prepared to bite. This time, Kael was ready. He sidestepped with precision, and as the rat’s mouth snapped shut behind him, he thrust his spear forward with all his might. The spear’s tip drove deep into the rat’s side, piercing through its mutated ribs with a sickening crunch. The rat let out a terrible screech, its body jerking violently as it tried to break free.

But Kael didn’t let go. With a grim determination, he twisted the spear, digging it deeper into the creature’s body. The rat’s blood—dark and viscous—began to spill out, coating the spear in a layer of gore. It struggled for a few more seconds, its strength fading with each passing moment. Finally, with a guttural wheeze, the mutated rat collapsed, its body twitching for the last time before going still.

Kael stood over the beast, his chest heaving with exertion, sweat dripping from his brow. His enhanced senses picked up the faint smell of the rat’s blood in the air, and something primal stirred within him. **He had done it.** The fight had been intense, but it was far from over. He could still feel the effects of the battle in his body, but he knew one thing for certain: he had come a long way from the scared, vulnerable human he had been just days ago.

Cherry jumped off Kael’s shoulder, landing lightly on the ground beside the dead rat. Her eyes gleamed with excitement, and she darted forward, sniffing at the carcass. Kael watched her carefully. He had noticed that the cat seemed to thrive in these violent environments, her instincts and abilities sharper than ever. Her mutation, while subtle compared to his own, had undoubtedly made her a stronger ally.

Kael knelt down, his fingers brushing the rat’s fur. He couldn’t waste the opportunity. This creature had been a significant challenge, and he needed to make sure it would serve a purpose. With a swift motion, he cut into the rat’s belly using the tip of his spear, carefully extracting the meat. He didn’t have the luxury of preparing the meat properly, but he knew that consuming it could help him gain strength.

He glanced over at Cherry, who had already begun licking at the rat’s bloodied fur. She was faster than usual, more focused. **She had already been affected by the mutation.**

Kael took a deep breath and tore off a small piece of the rat’s meat, biting into it. The taste was bitter and foul, but his stomach churned with hunger. As he swallowed, he felt an immediate rush of energy, a surge of warmth flooding through his body. It was as if the meat had given him a new vitality, sharpening his senses even more.

His IRIS system blinked to life, scanning his body and analyzing the changes.

**IRIS Scan Report:**

🧬 **Kael - Post-Combat Mutation Analysis:**

* **Strength:** 9.605x Average Human (Increase: +0.6)
* **Speed:** 7.505x Average Human (Increase: +0.4)
* **Reflex Time:** 0.02 seconds (Increase: +0.01)
* **Stamina:** 7.9x Average Human (Increase: +0.4)
* **Mutation Rate:** 16 (Increase: +1)
* **Neural Processing Speed:** 3.1x faster (Increase: +0.2)

Kael’s body had responded to the mutated rat’s meat. His strength, speed, and stamina had all improved, albeit slightly. But the most noticeable increase was in his reflexes. His reaction time had sharpened further, bringing him closer to the speed of Cherry, who had always been lightning-fast.

Cherry, meanwhile, had taken a bite of the rat’s meat as well, her eyes widening as she seemed to experience a similar surge in power. Her agility increased even more, her movements sharper, more precise. Her sleek fur shimmered slightly, as if her body had adapted to the mutagenic properties of the rat’s flesh.

**IRIS Scan Report:**

🧬 **Cherry - Post-Combat Mutation Analysis:**

* **Speed:** 6.1x Average Human (Increase: +0.2)
* **Agility:** 6.5x Average Human (Increase: +0.3)
* **Strength:** 2.8x Average Human (Increase: +0.1)
* **Reflex Time:** 0.05 seconds (Increase: +0.01)
* **Mutation Rate:** 4 (Increase: +1)

Both Kael and Cherry had been enhanced by the meat, each gaining strength, speed, and reflexes. But the experience also left them more mutated—Kael now with a mutation rate of 16 and Cherry at a 4. As they stood over the defeated creature, Kael felt the weight of their new abilities. There was no turning back.

But with this power came the inevitable question: **How much further would their mutations go?**

As Kael wiped the blood from his hands and gathered what he could from the rat’s remains, he knew that this battle was only the beginning. The city was full of these mutated creatures, and he would have to grow even stronger to face the dangers ahead. But for now, he and Cherry had survived, and that was all that mattered.

**Chapter 18: The Battle with the Mutated Pigs**

Kael and Cherry pressed on, each step heavier than the last as they ventured deeper into the heart of the mutated city. The air was thick with the smell of decay, and the sounds of distant growls and shrieks filled the air. The environment around them was both familiar and foreign, as the mutated creatures that had once roamed the land now dominated every corner of the city.

Kael had grown accustomed to the dangers that lay ahead, his senses more attuned to the shifting shadows and subtle sounds of the environment. However, this part of the city was different. The air felt charged, almost as though something enormous was lurking just beyond their reach.

Suddenly, the ground shook beneath their feet, and a deep, guttural grunt echoed through the silence. Kael's instincts flared, and his hand gripped his spear—crafted from the bone of the mutated rat—ready for whatever threat loomed ahead. Cherry, sensing danger, leapt from his shoulder, landing with a soft thud on the ground beside him. Her eyes glowed with an eerie intensity, her body coiled like a spring, ready to spring into action.

From around a crumbling building emerged a pack of five mutated pigs, each one as large as a car. Their massive bodies were covered in matted fur and thick, leathery skin, dotted with patches of jagged scales and scars. Their tusks were enormous, curving outwards like razor-sharp blades, and their eyes glowed with an unnatural yellow hue. The pigs snorted, their nostrils flaring as they sniffed the air, picking up the scent of their potential prey.

Kael felt the weight of the situation sink in. These pigs were no ordinary animals. Their mutation had made them stronger, faster, and more aggressive. It was clear that they would stop at nothing to claim Kael and Cherry as their next meal.

The leader of the pack—a massive boar with a dark, battle-worn hide—charged first, its tusks aimed directly at Kael. His heart raced as he sidestepped, narrowly avoiding the tusks that could easily impale him. With a quick motion, he swung his spear toward the boar’s flank, aiming for a soft spot near its ribs. The spear struck deep, but the boar was unfazed, merely grunting in irritation.

Before Kael could react, one of the other pigs charged from behind, attempting to trample him. He barely managed to duck under its massive body, rolling to the side as the pig's hooves slammed into the ground, sending dust and debris flying.

Cherry, with her newfound agility, darted towards the charging pig, her claws unsheathing as she aimed for its underbelly. She leapt with unnatural precision, raking her claws across the pig's flesh. The creature squealed in pain, but the attack only seemed to make it more enraged.

Kael’s spear flashed again, this time thrusting into the boar’s side, forcing the leader to stagger back. The creature bellowed in anger, swinging its tusks wildly, narrowly missing Kael’s head. He quickly retaliated, aiming for the boar’s neck, but the creature jerked its head back, evading the blow.

The remaining pigs, sensing the threat posed by Kael and Cherry, began to coordinate their attacks, flanking him from all sides. Kael’s enhanced reflexes kicked in, and he spun his spear, parrying a tusk that came from the left while dodging a swipe from one of the pigs on his right. He twisted and thrust the spear, driving it into the side of one of the smaller pigs. The creature squealed in pain and collapsed to the ground, but the others pressed on, undeterred.

Kael’s muscles burned with exertion, but his determination didn’t falter. With a sharp cry, he focused all his strength into a single, powerful strike. He lunged forward, jamming the spear deep into the neck of the boar. The creature howled as blood poured from the wound, its body bucking and thrashing in a final, desperate attempt to fight back.

The remaining pigs hesitated for a moment, as if unsure of what to do. Kael took advantage of the momentary distraction, swinging his spear in a wide arc, cutting down another of the smaller pigs. The leader fell, its life extinguished, and the rest of the pack, realizing they were outmatched, retreated into the shadows.

Kael stood panting, his body slick with sweat and blood. His muscles ached from the battle, but the feeling of victory coursed through his veins. He turned to Cherry, who was already licking the blood off her paws, her eyes gleaming with satisfaction. The fight had been intense, but they had come out on top.

**Scan Report – Post-Battle Analysis:**

**IRIS Scan Report:**

🧬 **Kael - Post-Combat Mutation Analysis:**

* **Strength:** 10.3x Average Human (Increase: +0.7)
* **Speed:** 8.2x Average Human (Increase: +0.7)
* **Reflex Time:** 0.018 seconds (Increase: +0.002)
* **Stamina:** 8.5x Average Human (Increase: +0.6)
* **Mutation Rate:** 17 (Increase: +1)
* **Neural Processing Speed:** 3.4x faster (Increase: +0.3)

Kael had gained even more strength, speed, and reflex speed after the battle with the mutated pigs. His mutation rate had continued to rise, indicating that his body was adapting rapidly to the constant dangers he faced. His enhanced stamina would allow him to endure longer in future battles, and his reflexes were becoming more finely tuned with each fight.

**IRIS Scan Report:**

🧬 **Cherry - Post-Combat Mutation Analysis:**

* **Speed:** 6.6x Average Human (Increase: +0.5)
* **Agility:** 7.2x Average Human (Increase: +0.7)
* **Strength:** 3.1x Average Human (Increase: +0.3)
* **Reflex Time:** 0.04 seconds (Increase: +0.01)
* **Mutation Rate:** 5 (Increase: +1)

Cherry had made impressive gains as well. Her speed and agility had increased significantly, making her even more of an asset in combat. Her strength had also improved slightly, and her reflexes were becoming quicker. The small cat was becoming a formidable partner, one that Kael could rely on in the heat of battle.

Kael and Cherry took a moment to catch their breath, the adrenaline of the fight slowly wearing off. They had survived, but the battle was a reminder of just how dangerous the world had become. There were more mutated creatures out there, each more powerful than the last. Kael knew that they would have to keep getting stronger if they wanted to survive.

After a brief rest, Kael turned his attention to the carcasses of the mutated pigs. He knew that eating the meat would provide him with another surge of strength, just as it had with the mutated rat. He and Cherry began to tear into the meat, the raw flesh giving them both the sustenance they needed to continue their journey.

As Kael chewed the tough meat, he felt a familiar warmth spreading through his body. His muscles seemed to pulse with new energy, and his senses grew sharper. His body was adapting, evolving in ways that he couldn’t fully comprehend.

But one thing was clear: they were becoming stronger. And if they were going to face the challenges ahead, they would need all the strength they could muster.

**Chapter 19: Awakening of Power**

Two weeks passed in a blur of blood, sweat, and relentless struggle.

Kael and Cherry had survived in the heart of the city’s most dangerous zones, where mutated monsters ruled supreme. Every day was a trial. Every night was a test of endurance. They fought, scavenged, hunted, and grew stronger with each passing moment.

Their bodies had adapted — evolved far beyond anything they had once been.

The Kael of today could hardly be recognized compared to the Kael who had first entered the ruins. His muscles had thickened and hardened like steel cords, yet his body remained lean and fluid, optimized for deadly speed. His skin had a slightly tougher, healthier glow — a faint shimmer of mutation energy beneath his flesh. His eyes, once a dull brown, now carried a deep, intense silver hue, and faint patterns like veins of light etched across the back of his hands and neck — marks of the tremendous mutation his body had undergone.

But it was Cherry who had changed the most visibly.

She had grown nearly twice her previous size — now about the size of a small dog — though her form was still elegant and lithe. Her fur had developed beautiful patterns of shifting crimson and gold, woven between patches of hard, glittering scales. Her claws had sharpened into dangerous weapons, and her fangs gleamed under the faintest light. But most astonishing was her mind: Cherry no longer just reacted instinctively; she showed complex emotions — curiosity, excitement, protectiveness — even hints of understanding Kael's words beyond simple commands.

Her golden eyes glowed with fierce intelligence.

Kael often caught himself speaking to her as though she were another human. And strangely, Cherry would respond with chirps, low growls, or tilts of her head, perfectly conveying her thoughts.

**IRIS SCAN REPORT – TWO WEEKS LATER**

**🧬 Kael - Updated Mutation Analysis**

* **Strength: 19.8x Average Human**
* **Speed: 18.2x Average Human**
* **Reflex Time: 0.012 seconds**
* **Stamina: 19.1x Average Human**
* **Mutation Rate: 26**
* **Neural Processing Speed: 5.6x faster**
* **Skin Toughness: Moderate resistance to cutting/slashing attacks**
* **Bone Density: 2.8x Normal Human**
* **Enhanced Vision: Low-light and fast-movement tracking abilities**

**🧬 Cherry - Updated Mutation Analysis**

* **Strength: 7.9x Average Human**
* **Speed: 18.7x Average Human**
* **Agility: 20.3x Average Human**
* **Reflex Time: 0.009 seconds**
* **Mutation Rate: 12**
* **Scale Growth: Partial natural armor (light impact resistance)**
* **Claws & Fangs: Hardened biological weapon-grade density**
* **Cognitive Development: High Emotional and Pre-Linguistic Intelligence**

**Summary of the Past 2 Weeks**

* Mutated Rodents (Common Encounter): Aggressive, swift, but manageable after adaptation.
* Flying Insects (Venomous): Dangerous swarms requiring precision attacks; Kael crafted a net-trap from fibers to catch and burn them.
* Mutated Canines (Wolf-Sized Predators): Battles at night tested endurance and teamwork; several injuries sustained and healed through meat absorption.
* Mutated Boars (Second Encounter): Stronger than the first ones; Kael crafted a reinforced rat-bone armor vest afterward.
* Environmental Hazards: Collapsing structures, unstable ground, acid rainstorms — survival wasn’t only about fighting monsters.

Each day sharpened Kael’s instincts, and Cherry’s abilities bloomed alongside him. They were no longer prey in this world. They were apex survivors in training.

**MONSTER DATABASE – COLLECTED BY IRIS**

| **Name** | **Mutation Rank** | **Danger Level** | **Description** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Mutated Rat** | **0.5 Star** | **Low** | **Swarm creatures, fast breeders, small in size but dangerous in packs.** |
| **Venom Fly** | **1 Star** | **Medium** | **Aggressive airborne insects that inject venom upon sting. Often travel in flocks.** |
| **Mutated Boar** | **2 Star** | **High** | **Giant pig-like beasts with armored hides and extreme strength. Very territorial.** |
| **Stalker Wolves** | **2 Star** | **Very High** | **Predatory, coordinated hunters. Fast, smart, and attack weak spots instinctively.** |
| **Scaled Beetle** | **1.5 Star** | **Medium** | **Heavy carapace insects resistant to normal weapons. Weak spots under legs.** |
| **Acid-Spitter Lizard** | **2 Star** | **High** | **Mutant reptile capable of ranged acidic attacks. Avoid direct confrontation.** |
| **Corpse Vines** | **Environmental Hazard** | **Lethal** | **Parasitic plants that strangle and digest living creatures. Weak to fire.** |
| **Blood Fungus Spores** | **Environmental Hazard** | **Lethal** | **Microscopic spores causing hallucinations and paralysis. Burn on sight.** |

Kael closed the monster database window on Iris after reviewing it, his silver eyes narrowing.

The battles had hardened them, but he knew — this was just the beginning.

The words of the ancient tree echoed still in his mind:

"Become strong, child who unites. The battle that descends from the stars has already begun."

He tightened his grip on his newly crafted spear, looking ahead into the fog-filled ruins.  
Cherry growled softly beside him, her golden eyes reflecting a shared determination.

Their story was only just starting.

**Chapter 20: The Awakening of Change**

The ruins were silent, save for the soft sound of wind weaving through the shattered buildings.

Kael trudged forward, Cherry perched alertly on his shoulder. They had just finished scavenging for supplies when suddenly —

**DING!**  
**[IRIS ALERT: IMMEDIATE THREAT DETECTED WITHIN 300 METERS]**

Kael froze.

His muscles tensed instinctively as he dropped into a low crouch. Cherry's golden eyes sharpened, her fur bristling.

Within moments, heavy footsteps — no, thuds — echoed through the air.

From behind a collapsed concrete wall, a monstrous figure emerged.

It was a **cat** — but not any ordinary mutated animal.  
This thing was colossal, nearly **the size of a cow**, its massive muscles rippling under dark metallic fur that shimmered like blades under the pale light.  
Its **eyes burned with a demonic crimson glow**, and its **claws were long, curved, and gleamed like polished scythes**.  
Each movement it made grated against the ground with the sound of metal scraping stone.

IRIS flashed data across Kael’s vision in rapid sequence:

**Target Identified: "Mutated Metalfur Panther"**  
**Danger Level: 2.7 Stars**  
**Strength: Extremely High**  
**Speed: Extremely High**  
**Defense: Very High**  
**Special Traits: Bladed Fur / Iron Claws / Unnatural Agility**

Kael and Cherry exchanged a grim look.  
This wasn’t just another hunt.

**This was survival.**

**The Battle Begins**

The Metalfur Panther lunged first, its massive body moving with terrifying speed for its size.

Kael barely dodged aside as one razor-sharp claw tore a deep gouge into the concrete where he had stood a moment before. He could feel the shockwave of its passing brush against his skin.

"Cherry! Split!" Kael commanded.

Cherry darted away, her agile body slipping through debris like water.

Kael gripped his ratbone spear tightly and counterattacked, aiming for the Panther’s side — but *CLANG!*  
The spear glanced off harmlessly, barely scratching its metallic fur.

Kael’s mind raced. *Its defense is too strong... we need to aim for the weak points.*

The Panther roared — a deep, guttural sound that rattled Kael’s bones — and charged again.

This time, it swiped with both claws.  
Kael rolled under the first strike but took a glancing hit from the second. He felt the pain tear across his left shoulder as his armor cracked.

Cherry leapt onto the beast’s back, biting and clawing furiously at the joints where the metal fur thinned. Her fangs scraped and tore small gaps, but the Panther bucked violently, throwing her off.

"Good job!" Kael muttered, dashing in at the exposed spot.

**THUNK!**  
He drove the spear into the Panther’s shoulder joint, finally piercing the flesh beneath the armor.

The creature shrieked and retaliated with a wild slash, but Kael was already moving, ducking low and slashing at its legs.

Cherry, recovering quickly, attacked again from the side, aiming at the Panther’s eyes.

After a brutal exchange lasting what felt like an eternity — filled with blood, dust, and desperate evasion — the Panther finally staggered, its wounds bleeding dark, viscous blood onto the cracked ground.

With a final coordinated assault, Kael plunged his spear deep into its neck, and Cherry tore into its throat.  
The monster let out one last, gurgling roar before collapsing heavily onto the ground.

**They had won.**

But at a cost — Kael was bleeding from multiple scratches, and Cherry was panting heavily, her side bruised.

**The Aftermath**

After tending to their wounds, Kael quickly set up a small fire.

They carved chunks of the Panther’s meat — its tough hide nearly impossible to cut without Cherry’s claws — and roasted it carefully.

The smell was rich, wild, almost intoxicating.

As they ate, Kael felt the familiar surge of warmth spread through his body — the monster’s power merging with his own, reinforcing his bones, strengthening his muscles.

**IRIS SCAN – POST-MEAL UPDATE**

**🧬 Kael - Mini-Update**

* **Strength:** 21.4x Average Human
* **Speed:** 19.9x Average Human
* **Stamina:** 21.2x Average Human
* **Mutation Rate:** 27

**🧬 Cherry - Mini-Update**

* **Strength:** 9.4x Average Human
* **Speed:** 21.5x Average Human
* **Agility:** 22.7x Average Human
* **Mutation Rate:** 13.5

Kael leaned back against a broken pillar, breathing deeply.

They were evolving faster than ever now.  
Perhaps... maybe they could really stand against the threats ahead.

Cherry curled up beside him, purring weakly.

But then—

**Cherry whimpered.**

Kael sat up instantly.  
Cherry’s body was trembling violently, her claws digging into the earth.

**[IRIS ALERT: ANOMALY DETECTED - MUTATION LEVEL CRITICAL]**

Kael’s heart skipped a beat as he opened the scan window.

**Cherry Mutation Spike: 13.5 ➔ 28.7**  
**Condition: Evolution Phase Initiated**  
**Vital Signs: Critical but Stabilizing**

"Cherry!" Kael called out urgently, reaching toward her.

But there was nothing he could do.

Cherry’s skin began to crack — faint, hairline fractures running along her scaled patches, glowing faintly with golden-red light. Her breathing was rapid, desperate, almost painful.

Small flakes of hardened scale flaked off, and her body twitched in agony.

She was evolving.  
Forced into the next stage of her mutation by the immense energy of the Metalfur Panther’s flesh.

Kael could only watch helplessly, clenching his fists.

**"Hold on, Cherry... hold on."**

The ruins around them were silent again, as if the entire world was holding its breath, waiting for what would emerge from the cocoon of pain.

**Chapter 21: The Bloom of a New Cherry**

Cherry’s body twisted in agony on the cold, broken earth.

Kael knelt by her side, his heart pounding helplessly against his ribs.  
He wanted to help, to ease her suffering, but he knew — this was a trial only Cherry could endure.  
The energy surging within her was too powerful, too wild.  
To interfere would only make it worse.

**Crack—**

Another sharp fissure tore across her body.

Her small form writhed and stretched unnaturally, **growing larger** with every pulse of glowing energy.  
Muscle and bone expanded, reshaping under the unbearable strain.  
Her soft frame ballooned into a majestic size, **reaching nearly that of a full-grown tiger**.

Kael could barely believe his eyes.

Her once-compact claws grew longer, sharper, becoming **pristine white like polished ivory**, gleaming even under the pale broken light of the sky.

Her body was now covered **entirely in overlapping scales**, each one tough, dense, and radiating a faint golden shimmer.  
They locked over her flesh like the plates of an ancient knight's armor.

Yet even now, Kael sensed —  
*This wasn’t the end.*

Cherry’s breathing quickened, and suddenly—

**BOOM!**

All at once, the **scales exploded outward** like shattered glass, scattering in all directions with a sound like breaking crystal.

Kael shielded his face from the fragments, peering through the glittering rain of scale-dust.

And then, from within the cocoon of smoke and light — she emerged.

**The New Cherry**

Gone were the harsh, reptilian plates.

Instead, **Cherry’s body was reborn, adorned in a magnificent coat of fur**,  
colors blazing like the sunrise:

* **Bright, fiery reds**
* **Warm, glowing oranges**
* **Soft, gentle pinks**

The colors blended seamlessly into one another, giving her an appearance so breathtaking that for a moment, Kael forgot how to breathe.

Her fur was **thick, lustrous, and almost shimmered with life itself**.

Her **whiskers had grown longer and finer**, like delicate, flowing strands of silk.

Her **ears** were now **sharply pointed**, enhancing her already keen senses.

Her **face had transformed** into something even more majestic — a beautiful mix of wild power and elegant grace.  
She no longer looked merely like an animal.  
There was an intelligence — a brilliance — burning within those golden eyes.

**All her previous injuries had vanished**, replaced by flawless, powerful flesh.

She stood there, towering and regal, as if the ruin around her was her rightful domain.

Kael stared in awe.

"...Cherry?" he whispered.

Cherry turned her head slowly toward him, her golden eyes deep and wise.  
For a moment, Kael could almost hear something inside his mind — a faint, warm echo — as if Cherry’s thoughts were brushing against his own.

She lowered her massive head slightly, a low, affectionate rumble resonating in her chest.

She recognized him.  
Not just as a companion — but as *family*.

**[IRIS SCAN - CHERRY POST-EVOLUTION]**

**Name:** Cherry (Evolved Form)  
**Species:** Unknown Mutation Line  
**Danger Rating:** 4.5 Stars  
**Mutation Level:** 45.2

**Strength:** 46.7x Average Human  
**Speed:** 49.1x Average Human  
**Stamina:** 47.3x Average Human  
**Special Traits:**

* **Elemental Fur** (Resistant to physical and elemental attacks)
* **Enhanced Regeneration**
* **Psionic Link Initiation** (Under Development)
* **Predatory Instinct Amplification**

**Status:** Healthy, Evolved, Stabilized

Kael read the report in stunned silence.

**4.5 stars.**  
Cherry had surpassed even the most powerful monsters they had encountered till now.

She had transcended.

He slowly approached her, reaching out his hand hesitantly.  
Cherry lowered her huge, beautiful head, nuzzling him gently with a deep, soft purr that vibrated through the ground.

A laugh — part relief, part disbelief — escaped Kael’s lips.

"You really are amazing," he murmured.

Cherry let out a low, playful growl and licked his face once with her rough, warm tongue — nearly knocking him over from sheer force.

For the first time in days, Kael allowed himself a moment to simply sit back, leaning against Cherry’s massive side, feeling the powerful heartbeat thrumming beneath her beautiful fur.

The future was still uncertain.  
The dangers were still looming.  
But now — he wasn’t alone.

They weren’t just survivors anymore.  
They were becoming legends of this shattered world.

And this was just the beginning.

**Chapter 22: The Bond Beyond Words**

The cool morning breeze whistled across the broken landscape, carrying with it the scents of distant monsters and damp earth.

Kael sat silently beside Cherry, his arms resting across his knees, his mind spinning in a thousand directions.  
He looked up at her — at her **enormous, majestic form**, so unlike the small, mischievous companion she had once been.

A troubling thought gnawed at him.

*"She's... too big now..."*  
**Moving stealthily, hiding, traveling together — all of it would become impossible if Cherry remained this large.**

Before he could voice his worries aloud, Cherry — who had been lying quietly, her fiery-red fur glistening under the light — suddenly stirred.

She turned her golden gaze toward him, her ears flicking.  
Kael felt... something.

A pulse in his mind.

**Concern. Reassurance.**

And then —  
**Without a sound**, Cherry’s large body shimmered faintly.

Her size began to **shrink**, the transformation smooth and fluid, as if the very world obeyed her will.

Within moments, Cherry now stood only slightly taller than Kael’s waist — still powerful, still regal, but now *perfectly manageable*.

Her magnificent fur and noble aura remained unchanged — only her sheer mass had been reduced.

Kael stared in amazement.  
"You can... control your size?"

Cherry let out a low, amused rumble, her whiskers twitching with satisfaction.

Their eyes met — and in that instant, Kael **understood her intent without words**.

***"I can change if you need me to."***

A shiver ran down his spine.  
**It was real.**  
They were connected now — mentally, emotionally — something deeper than mere companionship.

A true bond.

**The New Power**

Still stunned, Kael asked hesitantly, "Cherry... do you have any new abilities now?"

Cherry tilted her head slightly, her sharp ears flicking once.  
Then, almost proudly, she raised her right paw.

Her claws extended — long, gleaming, deadly.

But now, something was different.

**A faint blue aura** shimmered around her claws, rippling like water touched by moonlight.

Kael leaned closer, his breath caught in his throat.

Cherry swung her paw swiftly in the air —

**Swooosh!**

A **small arc of blue light** shot forward, slicing cleanly through the air, striking a nearby half-dead tree.

At first, Kael thought it had done nothing.

But as he approached cautiously, he noticed fine, **precise cuts etched into the bark**, faint but real.

The tree shuddered and cracked slightly, a clear sign of **potential** — even if the ability was still immature.

**[IRIS SCAN - CHERRY (EVOLVED) - ABILITIES UPDATED]**

**Name:** Cherry (Evolved Form)  
**Species:** Unknown Mutation Line  
**Danger Rating:** 4.7 Stars  
**Mutation Level:** 46.1

**Primary Traits:**

* **Dynamic Size Shift**  
  (Ability to alter physical mass within reasonable limits to suit mobility and combat needs.)
* **Elemental Fur Defense**  
  (Fur resists most physical attacks, energy-based attacks mildly reduced.)
* **Enhanced Physical Attributes**  
  (Massive increases to strength, speed, stamina, flexibility.)

**Special Abilities:**

* **Claw Arc (Lv. 1)**  
  (Allows Cherry to project an arc of compressed energy from her claws. Currently capable of creating shallow cuts on surfaces. Range: 8-10 meters. Damage: Minor but scalable with evolution.)
* **Psionic Bond - Stage 1**  
  (A permanent, low-level mental connection established with Kael. Enables:
  + Emotional transmission.
  + Simple thought sharing.
  + Early danger detection.)

**Evolution Potential Detected:** HIGH  
(Claw Arc and Psionic Bond abilities expected to evolve significantly.)

Kael exhaled a long breath, rereading the scan twice.

**Dynamic Size Control.**  
**Claw Energy Projection.**  
**A true Psionic Bond.**

He knelt down in front of Cherry, meeting her intelligent gaze.

"You're amazing," he said softly, feeling the warmth of her pride and affection flow back into his mind like a gentle tide.

Cherry pressed her forehead against his chest lightly, purring in response.

Kael couldn't help but smile.

He wasn’t alone anymore — not just in battle, but even in spirit.  
They could sense each other’s fears, hopes, thoughts, and dreams.  
Their bond was something greater than he could have ever imagined.

Together, they would face the dangers of this broken world — and whatever else waited beyond the horizon.

**Chapter 23: Reunion Amidst Ruins**

The broken landscape stretched endlessly before them, a wasteland of shattered buildings and half-melted roads.  
Kael walked carefully, spear in hand, Cherry padding silently beside him in her reduced but powerful form.

The bond between them pulsed faintly — a quiet awareness, a steady reassurance in the middle of this unforgiving land.

Suddenly, **Iris emitted a soft warning tone.**

**Movement detected. Ten humans. Conflict ongoing.**

Kael's body tensed.  
"Humans?" he muttered under his breath.  
In this world, humans were as dangerous as monsters — maybe even more so.

Cherry crouched low beside him, her body ready for anything.

They moved quietly toward the source of the signal.

As Kael peeked from behind a shattered wall, he froze.

A group of about ten people were gathered in a loose circle, weapons drawn, surrounded by a pack of low-level mutated wolves — snarling, snapping, creeping closer.

Among the desperate figures, **several faces hit him like a bolt of lightning.**

**David. Victor. Emily. Maya. Ethan.**

For a moment, Kael couldn’t breathe.

It was them — battered, scarred, tougher, but unmistakably *them*.  
Tears burned the corners of his eyes.

They were **alive.**

Without hesitation, Kael stepped out from cover, Cherry following with a low, rumbling growl that sent shockwaves through the monsters.

The mutated wolves immediately stopped, their ears flattening, their tails tucking between their legs.

The humans turned — weapons raised instinctively — until their eyes widened in disbelief.

"**KAEL!!**"  
"**CHERRY!!**"

David was the first to shout, his voice cracking with raw emotion.

Before the others could react, Kael and Cherry rushed forward, weapons flashing, and in a swift, ruthless dance of death, the wolves were slain.

Blood soaked into the cracked concrete, and silence fell.

**The Reunion**

David was the first to reach him, throwing his arms around Kael in a desperate hug.

"You’re alive...! We thought you were dead!" David gasped.

Victor came next, clasping Kael’s shoulder with a strength that belied his old age. His weathered face showed a rare, wide smile.

Emily, the young girl who had once cried at every scare, now clung to Kael's arm, sobbing quietly.

Maya’s fierce, relieved gaze met his. She said nothing, simply placing a hand over her heart in a silent vow of solidarity.

Even Ethan — always the quiet one — grinned crookedly, giving Kael a light punch on the shoulder.

Kael's heart felt full for the first time in what felt like forever.

**The New Faces**

As the group relaxed, Kael finally noticed the five new faces.

* **Three young women**, their bodies lean and marked with the signs of many battles, their eyes sharp and intelligent.
* **Two older men**, built like warriors, rough and hardened.

[**Scan Readings**]

* **Girls**: Star level approx **1.2** each.
* **Older Men**: Star level approx **2.3**, close to Kael's current level.

The older men kept their weapons lowered, but their bodies remained tense, eyes darting often toward Cherry.

They whispered among themselves, subtle movements of distrust, instinctively sensing Cherry's **overwhelming, wild aura** — an aura not even two-star monsters could match.

Kael understood.  
**Cherry was too powerful now.**

Even in her smaller form, her presence was a pressure, like standing too close to a storm about to break.

The group couldn’t tell exactly what she was — but they *knew* she was dangerous.

**Smoothing Over Fears**

David quickly stepped forward, raising a hand to calm the new members.

"It’s alright! That's Cherry. She’s Kael’s partner. She’s saved our lives more times than I can count!"

Victor added in his deep, steady voice, "If it wasn’t for Kael and Cherry, none of us would have made it this far."

The older men exchanged glances, their muscles easing slightly, but a wariness remained in their eyes.

Kael smiled disarmingly and decided to tell them the truth — *well, half the truth.*

"I got separated after the tree monster attacked. A big rock fell — pure luck," he said, scratching the back of his head awkwardly.  
"Cherry kept me alive after that."

Technically not a lie.  
But not the full truth either.

He wasn't ready to tell them about the voice, the Protectors, the incoming war from the stars.  
**Not yet.**

Not until he understood it himself.

Cherry purred lightly, brushing her fiery body against Kael’s leg, giving him her silent support.

The older men still gave her cautious looks — but now it was with **respect** instead of **hostility**.

**Rejoining the Family**

As the sun dipped low behind the ruined skyline, the group settled around a small, sheltered area.  
They shared rations, stories of battles, losses, victories.

Kael learned that **Samuel** — the strong, dependable older man — had been separated during a monster ambush.

No one knew if he was alive or dead.

The mood darkened at the thought, but there was still hope.

Kael promised himself he would help find him — if Samuel was still out there, they would reunite again.

Meanwhile, Kael noticed how much everyone had grown:

* **Maya and Victor**: Now nearing **2 stars**, their movements sharper, their instincts honed.
* **David and Emily**: **1 star** each — stronger, but still vulnerable.
* **Ethan**: **1.1 star**, quiet but reliable, like a blade quietly being sharpened.

Their scars spoke of suffering — but their eyes spoke of survival.

They had all been tempered by fire, and yet they still held onto hope.

As night fell, Kael leaned against a cracked wall, gazing at the sky.  
Cherry rested beside him, her warm body a comforting presence.

He had found them again.  
Against all odds, they were together.

But deep inside, Kael knew —  
**This was only the beginning.**

The real storm was yet to come.

**Chapter 24: The Road West**

Morning broke over the shattered world in hues of muted gray and dull gold.

For the first time in a long while, Kael had slept deeply — without the constant itch of danger scratching at the back of his mind.  
Cherry curled around him like a warm, protective shield, her vibrant fur gleaming even in the dim light.

The group slowly began to stir, yawns and groans filling the air as stiff bodies stretched and checked weapons out of sheer habit.

Kael stood and walked over to where David was packing supplies into a salvaged bag.

"Hey, David," Kael said, clapping him lightly on the back.  
"Who exactly are those five new faces? The three girls and the two older guys?"

David smiled faintly, adjusting the strap of his bag.  
"You noticed, huh? They're… special."

He looked over his shoulder to where the others were gathered.

**The Story of the Newcomers**

David began explaining as they worked:

"They're from a military family.  
Rich, well-connected... but also tough as nails.  
The three girls — they're triplets: **Aria, Lena, and Lyra**."

"Their father, **Commander Darius Voss**, was a legend in the Eastern Warfront.  
Frontline battles, black-ops missions, you name it — he survived them all.  
But a few years ago, he was badly injured. Lost a leg. Now he’s stationed at the military base west of here — runs operations from behind the lines."

David paused, sighing.

"The two older guys? They’re his old comrades:  
**Garrett** and **Marcus** — loyal to a fault.  
They swore to protect the triplets and get them back safely to their father."

Kael nodded thoughtfully.

The names etched themselves into his mind:

* **Aria Voss** — Calm, calculating, the leader among the triplets.
* **Lena Voss** — Fiery, quick to anger, but fiercely protective.
* **Lyra Voss** — Quiet, observant, the sharpest eyes among them.
* **Garrett** — Broad-shouldered, thick-bearded, spoke rarely but always with weight.
* **Marcus** — Slimmer, faster, with eyes that missed nothing.

"Good people," David concluded, "but they’ve seen hell. Just like us."

Kael glanced at the group again — at the way they moved, constantly alert even while eating or resting.

**Survivors. Warriors.**

They’d need every blade and bullet to reach the military base.

**The Discovery**

As they prepared to move out, Emily — ever-curious — darted into a nearby collapsed building, shouting back excitedly:

"GUYS! I FOUND SOMETHING!"

Everyone rushed over, weapons drawn — just in case.

Inside the building, half-buried under dust and rubble, were two incredible finds:

* A battered but sleek **air-jeep** — looking like a cross between a military humvee and a hovercraft.
* A futuristic **air-bike**, compact and designed for speed.

Kael’s eyes lit up.  
These machines could easily do **500 MHP** in prime condition — enough to outrun most mutated monsters.

But a quick scan showed the sad truth:

[**Iris Report**]

* **Air-Jeep**: 42% structural damage. Battery depleted. Engines partially functional.
* **Air-Bike**: 33% structural damage. Energy cells unstable but repairable.

David sighed. "Figures. Nothing ever works."

But Kael stepped forward, a small grin forming.

"Leave it to me."

**The Repair**

Kael knelt by the air-jeep, pulling out a small toolkit from his bag.  
Cherry sat nearby, tail flicking, watching curiously.

He activated **Iris** for additional support.

**Iris Interface:**

"Analyzing blueprints.  
Displaying repair protocols.  
Commencing assisted manual override."

Sweat beaded on Kael’s forehead as he worked — cutting damaged wiring, fusing new conduits, rigging makeshift power lines from backup energy cells found in a broken vending unit nearby.

For hours, he and Iris toiled together, while Cherry occasionally helped by bringing lightweight parts to him with her jaws — careful not to crush them.

The others watched in amazement.  
Even Garrett and Marcus had to grudgingly admit Kael knew what he was doing.

Finally, after hours of work...

**HUMMMMMM.**

The air-jeep floated a few inches off the ground, vibrating steadily.

Kael whooped and pumped his fist.

The air-bike took a little longer, but after stabilizing its cracked energy cell with a fusion weld, it too buzzed to life, sleek and eager.

[**Status**: Operational — 65% Efficiency]

* **Sufficient for short to medium-range travel.**
* **Maximum distance before recharge needed: Approx. 150 miles.**

Not perfect — but it would be enough.

**Heading West**

By noon, the group was on the move.

Garrett and Marcus drove the air-jeep, packed with supplies and Emily, David, Maya, and Lyra.

Aria, Lena, Ethan, and Victor rode the air-bike in pairs, weapons at the ready.

Kael, preferring flexibility, chose to move on foot alongside Cherry.

Cherry, even in her reduced form, was faster and stronger than almost any transport — her muscles rippling with contained power.

The plan was simple:

* Head west.
* Reach the **military base** where Darius Voss commanded.
* Regroup. Resupply.
* And finally — rest in safety.

At least for a while.

As they sped along cracked highways and through ghostly abandoned towns, Kael found himself smiling for the first time in ages.

They were together.  
They had transport.  
They had hope.

But far in the distance — far beyond the western horizon — dark clouds began to gather.

And with them, *something monstrous was coming*.

**Kael’s instincts whispered:**

*This was only the beginning.*

**Kael’s Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 20
* **Height**: 6'1" (185 cm)
* **Weight**: 180 lbs (82 kg)
* **Build**: Muscular, lean
* **Mutation Level**: 2.7 Star (~27x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:
  + Muscular development from constant combat and training.
  + Increased agility and endurance.
  + Enhanced reflexes, now capable of reacting faster than most mutants or creatures.
  + Eyes are sharper, and his vision is now enhanced to detect minute details.
* **Strength**: 2.7 Star
* **Speed**: 2.5 Star
* **Stamina**: 2.8 Star
* **Endurance**: 3.1 Star
* **Mutation Traits**:
  + Kael's body has shown considerable changes — thicker skin that is more resilient to damage, enhanced muscle growth, and increased reaction times.
  + Sharp senses and heightened survival instincts.

**Cherry’s Physical Report:**

* **Species**: Mutated Cat (Evolutionary form)
* **Height**: 5'0" (152 cm) — as of her current smaller form.
* **Weight**: 120 lbs (54 kg)
* **Build**: Sleek, muscular
* **Mutation Level**: 4.5 Star (~45x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:
  + **Size**: After evolution, Cherry’s body grew to the size of a tiger, but she later reduced her size consciously.
  + **Claws**: Long, razor-sharp, pristine white, now glowing with a faint blue aura.
  + **Fur**: Bright red, orange, and pink — soft, yet resistant to damage, making it appear more like scales.
  + **Teeth**: Pristine white, elongated, able to tear through most materials.
  + **Whiskers**: Long, sensitive, capable of detecting changes in the air and vibrations.
  + **Scales**: Areas around her body are now covered with thin, shimmering scales that are as hard as metal.
* **Abilities**:
  + **Claws of Light**: Cherry can now unleash glowing arcs of light when swiping with her claws.
  + **Mental Connection**: A newly developed ability, allowing her to communicate with Kael through thoughts, despite not being able to speak.

**David’s Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 20
* **Height**: 5'10" (178 cm)
* **Weight**: 160 lbs (73 kg)
* **Build**: Lean, athletic
* **Mutation Level**: 1.0 Star (~10x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:
  + Heightened stamina and reflexes.
  + Muscular development with noticeable improvement in strength.
  + Sharper vision and hearing, making him more aware of his surroundings.
* **Strength**: 1.0 Star
* **Speed**: 1.2 Star
* **Stamina**: 1.1 Star
* **Endurance**: 1.3 Star

**Victor’s Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 62
* **Height**: 6'0" (183 cm)
* **Weight**: 190 lbs (86 kg)
* **Build**: Stocky, solid
* **Mutation Level**: 2.0 Star (~20x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:
  + Despite his age, Victor’s body has become stronger and more resilient.
  + Increased endurance and healing speed due to mutation.
  + Slightly more muscular build compared to before, though still more on the stocky side.
* **Strength**: 2.0 Star
* **Speed**: 1.8 Star
* **Stamina**: 2.1 Star
* **Endurance**: 2.3 Star

**Emily’s Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 12
* **Height**: 4'10" (147 cm)
* **Weight**: 80 lbs (36 kg)
* **Build**: Slender, small
* **Mutation Level**: 1.0 Star (~10x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:
  + Muscular development is slow but steady.
  + Enhanced reflexes and agility, though still in the early stages of her mutation.
  + Improved vision and hearing, allowing her to sense danger before it occurs.
* **Strength**: 1.0 Star
* **Speed**: 1.2 Star
* **Stamina**: 1.1 Star
* **Endurance**: 1.3 Star

**Maya’s Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 34
* **Height**: 5'7" (170 cm)
* **Weight**: 140 lbs (64 kg)
* **Build**: Lean, agile
* **Mutation Level**: 2.0 Star (~20x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:
  + Maya’s mutation has enhanced her combat skills, giving her greater strength and speed.
  + Increased muscle definition, but with an emphasis on flexibility.
  + Reflexes have been sharpened, improving her ability to avoid attacks and land precise strikes.
* **Strength**: 2.0 Star
* **Speed**: 2.2 Star
* **Stamina**: 2.1 Star
* **Endurance**: 2.3 Star

**Ethan’s Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 25
* **Height**: 6'2" (188 cm)
* **Weight**: 170 lbs (77 kg)
* **Build**: Athletic, lean
* **Mutation Level**: 1.1 Star (~11x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:
  + Increased physical prowess in combat situations.
  + Enhanced agility and stamina, though his mutation rate is still relatively low.
  + Slight muscle definition increase, but not as much as others.
* **Strength**: 1.1 Star
* **Speed**: 1.4 Star
* **Stamina**: 1.3 Star
* **Endurance**: 1.5 Star

**Aria Voss’ Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 24
* **Height**: 5'6" (167 cm)
* **Weight**: 135 lbs (61 kg)
* **Build**: Muscular, toned
* **Mutation Level**: 1.2 Star (~12x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:
  + Increased endurance and agility.
  + Her mutation has enhanced her physical capabilities, including strength and reflexes.
  + A lean but muscular frame suited for agility-based combat.
* **Strength**: 1.2 Star
* **Speed**: 1.3 Star
* **Stamina**: 1.4 Star
* **Endurance**: 1.6 Star

**Lena Voss’ Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 24
* **Height**: 5'5" (165 cm)
* **Weight**: 130 lbs (59 kg)
* **Build**: Slim, athletic
* **Mutation Level**: 1.2 Star (~12x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:
  + Increased reflexes and speed.
  + More agile, with improved stamina and combat capabilities.
  + Lean muscle development, focused on speed over raw strength.
* **Strength**: 1.2 Star
* **Speed**: 1.4 Star
* **Stamina**: 1.5 Star
* **Endurance**: 1.6 Star

**Lyra Voss’ Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 24
* **Height**: 5'7" (170 cm)
* **Weight**: 140 lbs (64 kg)
* **Build**: Toned, athletic
* **Mutation Level**: 1.2 Star (~12x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:
  + Improved muscular tone with an emphasis on endurance and agility.
  + Quick reflexes and heightened awareness of her surroundings.
  + Slight increase in strength due to mutation.
* **Strength**: 1.2 Star
* **Speed**: 1.3 Star
* **Stamina**: 1.4 Star
* **Endurance**: 1.5 Star

**Garrett’s Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 38
* **Height**: 6'3" (191 cm)
* **Weight**: 210 lbs (95 kg)
* **Build**: Broad-shouldered, heavyset
* **Mutation Level**: 2.3 Star (~23x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:
  + Increased muscle mass, now more solid and durable.
  + Reflexes and stamina have improved, allowing him to fight and take hits longer.
  + Stronger combat abilities due to his mutation.
* **Strength**: 2.3 Star
* **Speed**: 2.1 Star
* **Stamina**: 2.4 Star
* **Endurance**: 2.5 Star

**Marcus’ Physical Report:**

* **Age**: 40
* **Height**: 6'1" (185 cm)
* **Weight**: 195 lbs (88 kg)
* **Build**: Muscular, dense
* **Mutation Level**: 2.3 Star (~23x average human strength)
* **Physical Changes**:
  + Increased endurance and stamina.
  + More agile than before, with a noticeable increase in strength and combat readiness.
  + Muscular development focused on resilience and power.
* **Strength**: 2.3 Star
* **Speed**: 2.2 Star
* **Stamina**: 2.5 Star
* **Endurance**: 2.7 Star

**Summary of the Group:**

* **Kael**: 2.7 Star
* **Cherry**: 4.5 Star
* **David**: 1.0 Star
* **Victor**: 2.0 Star
* **Emily**: 1.0 Star
* **Maya**: 2.0 Star
* **Ethan**: 1.1 Star
* **Aria**: 1.2 Star
* **Lena**: 1.2 Star
* **Lyra**: 1.2 Star
* **Garrett**: 2.3 Star
* **Marcus**: 2.3 Star

**Chapter 25: Wings of Death**

The distant outline of the military base glimmered like salvation on the horizon — just half a mile away.

Kael gripped the side of the vehicle as it rattled forward, the engine straining with every mile. Just as hope began to flicker, a sharp screech pierced the air.

Above them, the sky darkened unnaturally.

**Fifty mutated crows**, each nearly the size of a dog, swooped from the sky in synchronized chaos. Their feathers shimmered with a sickly iridescence, eyes burning with primal fury. Each of them carried the overwhelming force of a **2-Star mutant**, making them a devastating airborne threat.

"Keep going!" Kael barked, his eyes scanning the air for patterns in their swarm.

The vehicles roared forward, their speed pushing into the red. The strain of partial recovery from previous damage was starting to show. The dashboard blinked erratically. Warning signs lit up one after the other.

**BOOM—CLANK—HISSSS!**

The lead engine gave a final growl before seizing up completely.

They screeched to a stop just at the entrance of the military base.

The swarm of crows descended.

Before anyone could react, the base’s gates burst open.

From within, a battalion of **50 soldiers** emerged like a tidal wave of precision and might. Each bore the strength of a **2-Star warrior**, their movements refined by relentless training and combat.

And at their center, stood a man like a wall of steel and storm:

**Commander Darius Voss.**

Tall and powerfully built, Darius exuded leadership and raw might — a **3-Star powerhouse**, visibly more potent than even Kael. His eyes scanned the battlefield with a predator’s awareness. The air around him crackled with confidence and command.

“Engage the crows!” he roared.

The soldiers surged forward. In perfect formation, their synchronized assaults cleaved through the skyborne horde. For every crow that swooped, three fell in coordinated gunfire and blade work.

Kael watched in stunned silence — for once not having to be the frontline shield.

Darius’s massive sword sliced through the air like a lightning strike, cleaving through three crows in a single sweep. Blood and black feathers filled the air as the battle raged.

Within minutes, the massacre ended. The crows, overwhelmed, were annihilated.

As silence settled, Darius turned — his stern expression softening at the sight of the **triplets: Aria, Lena, and Lyra**.

"Dad…" Lena whispered.

Without hesitation, Darius dropped his blade and rushed forward, sweeping all three daughters into a powerful embrace. His breath caught, voice thick with emotion.

“I thought I’d lost you all…”

Tears streamed down Lyra’s cheeks as she clung to him. “We thought you were dead…”

Nearby, **Garrett and Marcus**, his old comrades, approached.

Darius’s eyes met theirs.

“Still alive, old bastards?” he grinned.

“Barely,” Garrett smirked, and the three veterans pulled each other into a fierce hug.

“You brought them here?” Darius asked, nodding toward the survivors, his gaze falling on Kael.

Garrett grinned, “Meet Kael — the reason we’re all still alive.”

Darius nodded with deep respect. “Then welcome, Kael… all of you. You’ve reached sanctuary.”

And with that, the gates of the military base closed behind them, shielding the group from the horrors of the outside world — at least for now.

**Chapter 26: Fortress of Steel and Struggle**

The steel gates of the military base sealed behind them with a resounding hiss. The survivors — dusty, battle-worn, and ragged — stood in awe.

The **Fortress Base Ardent**, as the etched plaque above the gate revealed, was more than a stronghold. It was a living organism of order and war.

**Soldiers moved in formation**, their steps synchronized like machinery. Some were running drills, executing intricate martial maneuvers with inhuman speed and precision. Others sparred with real weapons, their blows clanging like hammers on an anvil. The clash of steel against steel filled the air, mixed with the shouts of instructors.

Kael scanned the courtyard, eyes narrowing with curiosity. Every corner of the base exuded functionality — weapon forges glowed orange with fresh flames, tech labs hummed with activity, and vehicle bays stretched across the horizon with modified air-jeeps, land gliders, and heavily reinforced bikes. It was like stepping into a lost relic of pre-cataclysmic civilization.

Cherry, now walking beside Kael in her smaller form, padded along quietly, her bright fur glinting in the floodlights. Despite her sleek elegance, many soldiers instinctively stiffened at her presence. Her power was **palpable**, wild and ancient.

As they entered deeper, a group of soldiers emerged from the northern gates — bloodied, but alive. They dragged behind them **monsters’ corpses** — a hybrid between lizards and wolves. The stench was harsh, but the excitement was electric. A tech crew rushed out, analyzing the remains, extracting core tissues and bones for **tech-fusion weapons**. One of them pulled out a cannon-like weapon that buzzed with unnatural energy, aimed at a test dummy. A click — a flash — and the dummy exploded into smoke and ash.

Kael turned to Darius, impressed. “You’re not just surviving here… you’re thriving.”

Darius, his face calmer now, nodded. “The outside world may have fallen apart, but here… we rebuild. Every beast we kill teaches us something new. Their biology, their strength — we study, adapt, and create.”

“Even your weapons…” Ethan muttered, watching another soldier swing a sword whose blade shimmered with beast scales and runes.

“Yes. Monster-forged tech,” Darius explained. “We fuse mutant materials with salvaged human tech. They work… most of the time.”

Victor, standing tall despite his age, looked around in admiration. “Reminds me of the old army days — but sharper. Colder.”

“Colder is necessary now,” Maya said softly, brushing some blood off Emily’s shoulder. “We don’t have room for mistakes anymore.”

The triplets — **Aria, Lena, and Lyra** — stood together, speaking to their father in low tones. Aria looked over at Kael with curiosity, her hand resting near the hilt of her dagger.

“He’s the one, huh?” she asked Darius.

“Yes,” Darius nodded. “Without him, none of you would be here.”

Lena smiled faintly. “Then… thank you, Kael.”

Kael nodded quietly. “We all played a part. Cherry too.”

At the mention of her name, Cherry let out a gentle trill and rubbed against Kael’s leg. Her fur glimmered under the light, and several nearby soldiers whispered nervously.

Suddenly, a sharp voice echoed across the court.

“**Commander Darius.**”

Everyone turned.

A woman approached, clad in jet-black military uniform, her posture rigid and eyes sharp. She had silver streaks in her tied-back hair and a face marked with discipline and experience. A blade hung at her side, and her presence alone made several soldiers straighten their backs.

“**Vice Commander Elise Dran.**” Darius nodded. “You’re back.”

“I heard about the breach,” Elise said briskly, eyes sweeping across the group. Her gaze lingered a bit longer on Cherry. “These the survivors?”

“Yes. My daughters. Garrett and Marcus. And Kael, the one responsible for their survival.”

Elise’s expression softened just a touch. “Then they’ve earned rest.”

She turned to the group. “You’ve fought your way through hell to reach us. This base will now be your home — until you're ready to fight again. But for now… you rest. That’s an order.”

Kael opened his mouth to speak, but Elise raised a hand.

“You all smell like blood, exhaustion, and grief. You’ve seen too much. You’ve endured too much. Whatever battles you’ve fought out there — they’re done, for now. You’re safe here.”

There was a silence, as the weight of her words settled over them.

Safe.

For the first time in months, the word felt **real**.

Garrett placed a hand on Marcus’s shoulder. “I could use a bed.”

Victor chuckled. “And a real bath.”

Maya wrapped her arms around Emily. “Let’s go inside.”

Darius guided them through the main barracks. The inside was warmer, quieter — structured like a fortress but carrying touches of comfort. Clean bedding, reinforced bunk rooms, bathrooms with hot water. Small mess halls with real food. Medical bays for treatment.

Cherry curled up in a wide corner of Kael’s bunk, her eyes already closing.

Kael sat on the edge, exhaling deeply.

“Iris,” he whispered.

A faint blue light flickered near his ear. “Yes, Kael?”

“…Are we finally okay for now?”

“For now,” the voice replied. “But peace is always temporary in this world.”

Kael laid back, arms behind his head.

Across the bunkroom, the others were already drifting off — Victor snoring softly, Garrett and Marcus quietly talking, the triplets huddled close, and Emily curled beside Maya.

Kael closed his eyes. His body ached, his muscles screamed, but his mind — for the first time — rested.

Beside him, Cherry shifted slightly, her tail flicking once as her breathing steadied.

The storm outside had calmed.

And for tonight, **within these steel walls**, they were safe.

**Chapter 27: Morning Steel and Unseen Power**

The soft hum of machinery was soon drowned by **crisp shouts** and the rhythmic stomping of boots. The clang of metal, the hiss of blasters, and the low grunts of combat filled the air, resonating through the steel walls of the barracks.

Kael stirred, eyes blinking open. The ceiling above was plain, but the sounds outside drew his attention. He sat up slowly, careful not to disturb Cherry, who slept curled up at his feet. Her breathing was calm — almost synchronized with his own.

Slipping on his boots and coat, Kael quietly stepped out of the barracks.

The **training yard** beyond was alive.

Dozens of soldiers — both men and women — were lined in rows, drilling with precision. Some wielded energy-infused spears, others trained barehanded against reinforced dummies. A few sparred using high-tech weaponry made from beast bones and hybrid alloys, their blows strong enough to chip the concrete flooring.

Their movements were **clean, controlled, and deadly**.

Kael stood still for a moment, watching silently.

“Impressive, aren’t they?” came a voice behind him.

He turned — it was **Vice Commander Elise Dran**.

She looked fresh despite the early hour. Wearing sleek black training gear and her silver-streaked hair pulled tightly back, she carried the same sharp presence from the day before.

Kael nodded. “They move with purpose.”

Elise folded her arms. “They have to. The world doesn’t give us second chances anymore. These soldiers — they train daily like it's war. Because it is.”

Her eyes swept across the courtyard before settling back on Kael. “How was your rest?”

Kael exhaled, offering a slight smile. “Unfamiliar. But peaceful. For the first time in a long time.”

“That’s the base's gift,” Elise replied. “Temporary peace.”

There was a brief silence. Then, she added curiously, “That creature… Cherry, was it?”

Kael’s eyes sharpened slightly but remained calm. “Yes. She’s… special.”

“Her aura is unlike anything we’ve encountered. Not beast. Not human. Something older.”

“She’s strong,” Kael admitted. “Stronger than me. Based on my readings… nearly 4.5 stars.”

Elise’s composure cracked slightly. “What?”

Kael nodded. “She was mutated… not naturally. A corrupted tree nearly took her. But she resisted, adapted. Now she’s… something else. Loyal. A guardian.”

Elise took a step back, her eyes narrowing as she processed the weight of his words. “And she listens to you?”

“We’re… connected mentally,” he said slowly. “I can’t explain it entirely. But we understand each other.”

“I see…” she murmured, gaze drifting. “That might be dangerous. Or invaluable.”

Just then, the barracks doors opened behind them as others began to emerge.

**David**, rubbing sleep from his eyes.  
**Maya**, arm over **Emily’s** shoulder.  
**Victor**, looking better than he had in weeks.  
**Ethan**, quiet and alert as always.  
And the **triplets**, walking with graceful ease, eyes already scanning the morning activity.

“Morning,” Kael greeted with a nod.

Maya looked around. “Feels like waking into another world.”

“Didn’t expect to hear yelling and gunshots as a morning bell,” David muttered.

Kael gestured to Elise. “Vice Commander Dran. She oversees much of the base’s combat and ops. These are—”

“We’ve met,” Elise said calmly, nodding toward the group.

The triplets approached Kael. **Aria**, the most outspoken of the three, raised an eyebrow. “Watching the drills?”

Kael nodded. “More like studying.”

“I heard you thanked our father,” **Lena** said. “We should be the ones thanking *you*, though.”

“No need,” Kael replied. “He’s the reason we made it here. I just… guided the pieces.”

As they spoke, Kael subtly tapped the side of his visor. *Iris*, he whispered mentally. *Scan the soldiers and Elise. Discreetly.*

A faint pulse from his neural implant responded.

**Initiating scan...  
Target One: Soldier Cadre – Average Rating: 1.8 to 2.1 Star. Efficient. Disciplined. Specialized training in hybrid-tech combat.  
Target Two: Vice Commander Elise Dran – Power Level: 3.5 Star. Combat Signature: Concealed. Potential abilities include advanced agility, energy manipulation, kinetic shielding. Analysis: High threat potential. Surpasses Commander.**

Kael’s brow subtly twitched.

*She’s stronger than Darius…?*

Before the thought could settle, a familiar voice rang out.

“**Well, well. Seems everyone’s awake.**”

**Commander Darius Voss** strode in — his heavy boots thudding confidently despite the metallic prosthetic leg replacing his right limb. He wore a tailored black exo-suit, one arm carrying a large training blade slung across his back.

“You all rested?”

A wave of affirmatives passed through the group.

“Good,” he said gruffly. “Because rest’s over.”

He stepped forward, eyes sharp. “You’ve survived. That’s admirable. But survival in the wild is chaos. What you need now is *discipline*. Strategy. Power tempered with control.”

He placed a hand on Kael’s shoulder. “And we’ll start with you.”

Kael met his gaze. “I figured.”

Darius grinned. “You’ve got raw talent. But strength without refinement is just noise. Let’s forge it into a weapon.”

Around them, the group watched with anticipation. Cherry had risen, her tail flicking. Even Elise seemed intrigued.

“Let’s move to the sparring arena,” Darius said, gesturing toward the side yard. “Let’s see what kind of fire forged you.”

Kael exhaled, stepping forward, the others following in silence.

As he crossed the threshold of the training ring, the air felt heavier.

Not with fear.

But with **expectation**.

The storm of the past had brought them here.

Now the fire would shape who they'd become next.

**Chapter 28: Iron Will, Blunted Edge**

The **sparring arena** was a circular platform, reinforced with a strange alloy mix that could absorb shockwaves and impact without cracking. A faint shimmer of energy pulsed around it — a protective barrier to keep spectators safe.

Kael stepped into the center, twirling his spear once in his hand. Cherry perched by the sidelines, tail flicking slowly, eyes narrowed. The rest of the team stood along the outer rim, silent, watching.

Across from him stood **Commander Darius Voss**.

The aging warrior exuded confidence—not arrogance, but a kind of quiet, earned assurance that only a soldier forged in war could possess. His prosthetic leg hissed faintly with each shift of weight, but nothing about it slowed him down.

He drew a massive sword — broader than Kael’s arm and nearly as long as a spear itself. Its edge gleamed dull silver, etched with ancient runes and nicks from countless battles.

“Begin,” Elise Dran’s voice called from the sideline.

Kael surged forward, his **agility immediately evident**. Light on his feet, he spun to the side and aimed a thrust at Darius’s shoulder — fast, precise.

But Darius had already moved.

With a single step and twist of his body, he caught Kael’s spear between the flat of his sword and his prosthetic forearm, locking it effortlessly.

“You’re fast,” Darius muttered. “But speed alone doesn’t win battles.”

He twisted, and Kael was sent sprawling to the side, forced to roll and recover mid-air. Before he could get footing, the flat of Darius’s blade slammed into the ground an inch from his feet.

Kael backflipped away, breathing sharp.

He dashed in again — zigzagging, his movements a blur. From different angles, different thrusts — knees, chest, side.

But every time he got close, it was as if an invisible wall of **pressure** pushed him back. Darius's aura wasn’t just power — it was **violence given form**. A suffocating **bloodlust**, barely restrained.

Kael lunged again — this time low and to the left.

Darius **countered without moving his feet**, sword tilting slightly to deflect, then spinning in a deceptively slow arc that forced Kael back again.

No matter what Kael tried — wide sweeps, rapid thrusts, feints — he couldn’t **get in**.

He began to sweat.

He leapt into the air, spun downward with a hard descending strike—

**CLANG!**

Darius blocked it one-handed, eyes calm.

“You wield that spear like a club,” Darius said flatly. “No discipline. No flow.”

Kael growled in frustration. “Then teach me!”

But the commander didn’t stop. He advanced — slowly — each step deliberate, each movement draining Kael of options. The bloodlust grew heavier the closer he got, like a storm pressing against Kael’s chest.

Kael backed up, heart racing. He charged one last time, putting everything into a wild but fast series of jabs. Iris tried calculating angles, timing, trajectories.

**All blocked.**

Darius didn’t even look tired. His sword moved with elegant, **minimalistic grace**, every parry just enough — never overexerted, never flashy.

And then—Kael’s spear was **knocked from his hands** with a sudden upward slash.

The point of Darius’s sword rested just an inch from Kael’s throat.

The arena fell silent.

Kael dropped to one knee, chest heaving. Sweat poured down his face.

“I… yield.”

Darius lowered his blade, looking neither proud nor mocking — only focused.

“You’ve got strength. And guts,” he said. “But you’re wasting that spear.”

Kael looked up, eyes burning with frustration.

“You rely on instinct. Reaction. That only takes you so far.”

He turned to Elise, who stood near Cherry, arms crossed.

“Elise,” he called. “You use a spear.”

“I do,” she said.

“Train him.”

Kael blinked.

Darius faced him again. “If you’re serious about survival, you’ll learn control. Form. Flow. You have potential, but potential without discipline is a corpse waiting to happen.”

Kael slowly stood, picked up his spear, and gave a small bow of respect.

“I understand.”

The old commander placed a hand on his shoulder. “Good. Because from now on — you’re not just surviving anymore. You’re *fighting to win*.”

The words settled heavily on Kael’s shoulders, but also sparked something in his chest.

Resolve.

**Chapter 29: Measured by Steel**

The air was still thick with Kael’s defeat when Commander Darius turned toward the rest of the group.

“Well then,” he said, cracking his knuckles. “Who's next?”

Silence.

The oppressive weight of Darius’s **aura** — that dreadful battlefield pressure — settled over the training ground like a fog. Heavy. Suffocating. Ancient.

**Victor** stepped forward first, not out of bravado, but out of respect.

“I’ll go,” he said with a calm nod, rolling his neck. The elder survivor, grizzled and tempered, summoned his blade. His stance was grounded — sturdy.

Darius gave a faint smile. “Good. Come at me.”

Victor struck first — fast, deliberate, shield in one hand, blade in the other. His footing was solid, his rhythm measured. He weaved in and out of Darius’s zone, trying to find an opening.

But Darius didn’t budge.

Every attack was deflected with minor shifts of his sword. Then, one precise kick — not even at full strength — sent Victor skidding backward ten feet.

“Still too direct,” Darius said. “You've got the heart, but you're lacking deception.”

Victor let out a low grunt, nodding in agreement as he caught his breath.

Then **Maya** stepped forward.

She unsheathed twin short blades, twirling them deftly.

“I won’t win,” she said softly. “But I want to see how far I’ve come.”

Darius nodded. “Show me.”

Maya dashed in like a shadow, flickering side to side, slicing through the air. Her agility was remarkable — her movement unpredictable. But Darius read every motion like a book.

One twist of his body, one strike of the pommel — and Maya hit the ground, breath knocked from her lungs.

She coughed and grinned bitterly. “That aura of yours… really is no joke.”

Darius offered her a hand. “Your technique is good — but you're hesitating. Fear still holds the edge of your blade.”

She looked up, startled, then silently nodded.

Next, **Garrett and Marcus** stepped forward side by side.

"Let's make it interesting," Garrett smirked. "The old dogs versus the older wolf."

Marcus cracked his knuckles. "We might not win. But we won't fall easily."

Darius raised an eyebrow. “You’d better not.”

What followed was a more tactical exchange. Garrett wielded a broadsword with strength and discipline, while Marcus used a mix of martial arts and light axe swings. They coordinated — one attacking while the other baited. For the first time, Darius **stepped back**.

But only barely.

Ten minutes in, sweat pouring from both of them, Darius **stopped holding back**. A single sweep of his blade pushed Marcus off balance. Another movement and Garrett’s sword was knocked skyward.

They both hit the ground, panting.

“Well fought,” Darius said sincerely.

“You’re a monster,” Marcus muttered, rolling to sit up.

The remaining members — **David**, **Emily**, **Ethan**, and the **triplets** — hadn’t even stepped forward. They were frozen in place.

It wasn’t fear of Darius, not entirely — it was the **aura**, like a phantom hand on their throat, preventing movement.

Darius walked to them slowly, the pressure easing.

“You couldn’t move,” he said. “That’s not failure. It’s instinct. But instinct must be reshaped through experience.”

He stood tall and addressed them all.

**Darius’s Assessment**

**To Victor:**  
“You’ve got natural leadership and the spirit of a shield. Join the **Guardian Division**. Learn the art of defensive warfare and battlefield control.”

**To Maya:**  
“You move like the wind, but the wind lacks resolve. Train with the **Phantom Scouts**. Learn to strike without mercy.”

**To Garrett and Marcus:**  
“You two still have edge left. Join the **Weapon Specialists Unit** — you’ll hone both tech-weapons and close-combat tactics.”

**To David and Ethan:**  
“Not ready for battle. But you’re brave. Train with the **Rookie Initiative Corps** — they’ll harden your nerves and reflexes.”

**To Emily:**  
“You have a gift — your senses are sharper than most. Train with the **Reconnaissance Unit**. Learn to survive in wild zones.”

**To the Triplets — Freya, Lira, and Nyra:**  
“You have potential, and you already work as one. You’ll join the **Synchronization Team**. It’s an elite squad that focuses on synergy combat. Your bond is your weapon.”

Finally, he turned to Kael and Cherry.

**To Kael:**  
“You have raw strength and courage. But you need discipline. Train under **Elise Dran**. Master your spear. Earn your weapon.”

**To Cherry:**  
“You are… something new. I don’t know what you truly are, but you are powerful. Stay close to Kael — protect him, and learn from us.”

Darius looked over them all, his voice calm but commanding.

“You have a week. Then I want to see all of you train harder than ever before. This world doesn’t wait for the weak — it devours them.”

He turned and walked off, the crowd silent.

Kael looked at his companions — some exhausted, some inspired, all quiet.

The training had begun — not just of body, but of soul.

**Chapter 30: Forged in the Fire of Training**

Two weeks had passed since Kael and his group had entered the military base, and now, their journey of growth began. The training was grueling, designed to sharpen their weaknesses and enhance their strengths. In particular, two members of the team stood out for their intense development: **Victor** and **Maya**.

**Victor’s Training in the Guardian Division**

Victor had always been the backbone of the group. His leadership and tactical thinking had helped them survive countless encounters. But his body, while strong, lacked the precision and endurance needed to withstand the toughest of battles. To improve his defensive capabilities, he was assigned to the **Guardian Division**, a group of soldiers who specialized in tanking damage and protecting others.

**Trainer: Sergeant Rayne** — A veteran of the frontlines, with a gruff demeanor and a tough, battle-worn body. Standing at 2.6 stars, Sergeant Rayne’s presence was like a boulder — immovable, constant.

The training began with stamina-building exercises. Victor was thrown into relentless drills that tested his ability to absorb damage and continue fighting. He wore heavy armor and shielded against blows from various types of melee and ranged attacks. The goal wasn’t just to survive the onslaught but to understand how to conserve energy and position himself as an impenetrable wall for his team.

Victor quickly learned that standing still wasn’t the answer. He had to move with the blows, rolling and shifting with precision to keep the enemy at bay without exhausting himself.

After two weeks of rigorous training, his physical tolerance had improved dramatically. His endurance had nearly doubled, and his ability to take hits without buckling was beyond what he had ever expected.

His strength had also increased, though his growth was less about speed and more about resilience.

**Victor’s Strength Report (After Two Weeks of Training)**

* **Strength:** 2.3 stars (down from 2 stars)
* **Speed:** 1.9 stars (same)
* **Endurance/Defense:** 2.5 stars (up from 2.3 stars)
* **Tactical Thinking:** 2.4 stars (no change)

**Training Highlights:**

* **Shield Mastery:** Through grueling training sessions with heavy shields, Victor had learned the true art of defense. He was no longer just a shield-wielder; he could block and parry with finesse, making it harder for any enemy to break his guard.
* **Endurance Drills:** Holding positions for extended periods under duress became second nature. Victor was now able to resist both physical exhaustion and mental strain for longer periods than ever before.
* **Counter-attack Techniques:** Rayne had drilled into him that defense was not just about blocking; it was about creating opportunities for retaliation. Victor’s counter-strikes, though slower than Maya’s, were devastatingly powerful.

By the end of the two weeks, Victor’s strength lay in his ability to withstand endless punishment and protect others. His new training in endurance and defense had given him a sturdier physique and a more powerful stance in battle.

**Maya’s Training in the Phantom Scouts**

Unlike Victor, **Maya** was known for her speed and agility, her light steps barely making a sound as she moved. However, her previous training had been lacking in precision. Though she could dart in and out of combat effortlessly, she struggled to deal decisive blows to enemies who were just as fast or stronger.

Assigned to the **Phantom Scouts**, Maya underwent an intense program designed to increase her speed and her ability to hit her opponents with surgical precision.

**Trainer: Sergeant Aiko** — A nimble, quick fighter standing at 2.6 stars. Aiko specialized in stealth tactics, close combat, and swift attacks. Her agility was almost otherworldly, and she was renowned for moving faster than the human eye could follow.

Aiko’s training methods were unconventional. Maya spent hours working on **movement drills**, learning to move even faster while maintaining control over her body. Aiko would blindfold her and throw objects at her, forcing her to dodge and react based solely on her reflexes. They also practiced quick strikes — fast enough to incapacitate an enemy before they had a chance to respond.

Maya’s speed increased exponentially, and so did her ability to land precise, devastating strikes. She was becoming a blur of motion in combat, something her enemies would only realize too late.

Her strength did not lie in taking hits; it was in **avoiding them** and overwhelming her enemies with rapid, unrelenting attacks.

**Maya’s Strength Report (After Two Weeks of Training)**

* **Strength:** 2.3 stars (down from 2 stars)
* **Speed:** 2.6 stars (up from 2.4 stars)
* **Endurance:** 2.0 stars (same)
* **Stealth/Precision:** 2.5 stars (up from 2.2 stars)

**Training Highlights:**

* **Quick Reflexes:** Maya’s speed had improved to a level where she could avoid most attacks. Her ability to evade high-speed strikes had become nearly instinctive.
* **Silent Movement:** Aiko had taught Maya to move without making a sound, blending into shadows and becoming nearly invisible. This new skill allowed her to outmaneuver opponents and strike without them even realizing it.
* **Critical Strikes:** Her precision in close-combat had become razor-sharp. Every strike was aimed at weak points in the enemy’s defense, creating openings for a kill.

**Physical Training Summary and Comparison**

By the end of the two-week training period, **Victor** had grown significantly in his physical tolerance and defense, becoming a shield for his team. His **endurance** was his greatest strength, but his **speed** had not significantly improved. He was a tank on the battlefield, a wall that would not fall easily.

Meanwhile, **Maya** had honed her speed and agility to a level where her strikes could reach lethal force before the enemy had a chance to react. Her **stealth and precision** had improved drastically, though her **endurance** remained average for her class.

While Victor would be the one to take the hits and defend the team, Maya would be the one to weave through the enemy lines and incapacitate them with surgical strikes.

Their strengths now lay in different areas, yet both were formidable in their own right.

**Chapter 31: Refining Skills and Learning New Tech**

The atmosphere in the military base had grown tense but focused as the **Weapon Specialists Unit** and the **Rookie Initiative Corps** began their training. For **Garrett**, **Marcus**, **David**, and **Ethan**, the next two weeks would be crucial in enhancing their combat abilities with the modern technologies available to them. The trainers assigned to them were veterans in their own right, but also specialists in the cutting-edge weaponry now used in the battlefield.

**Garrett and Marcus - Weapon Specialists Unit**

The **Weapon Specialists Unit** was a group of soldiers who had specialized in the use of advanced weaponry, combining traditional combat experience with futuristic technology. For **Garrett** and **Marcus**, their training focused on polishing their already formidable skills and adapting to the new tech designed to enhance their combat abilities.

**Trainer: Lieutenant Tessa and Sergeant Brian** — Both were 2.5-star soldiers, and more importantly, they were veterans whom Garrett and Marcus had trained alongside during previous campaigns. They had once been under Garrett’s and Marcus’s command on the battlefield, but now it was their turn to pass on the knowledge. Their task was to reintroduce the two veterans to modern weaponry.

**Training Focus:**

* **Garrett** worked with the **Energy Axe**. This advanced weapon used a combination of high-tech materials and energy circuits, making the axe able to slice through the toughest enemies with precision and power. While Garrett was already skilled with an axe, the inclusion of energy forces required him to learn how to control its discharge and swing timing to avoid overloading the weapon or misfiring its energy pulse.
* **Marcus** was assigned a **Rocket Hammer**. A powerful weapon with rocket force and energy-infused hits, designed to break down even the toughest defensive structures. The challenge for Marcus was learning how to manage the force without losing control. The hammer required precise timing to activate the rocket boost without overextending the swing or leaving himself vulnerable.

**Training Outcome:**

* **Garrett**: His experience with traditional axes meant that mastering the energy feature was more about finesse than raw strength. Through two weeks of intense training, Garrett had regained his edge in combat. The energy pulse required constant adaptation, but he learned to use it with incredible efficiency.
* **Marcus**: The Rocket Hammer required a lot of practice in terms of timing and stamina. While Marcus was already physically strong, the new technology forced him to improve his coordination with his heavy strikes.

By the end of the two-week period, both Garrett and Marcus had regained their former skills, enhanced by their ability to use modern weaponry.

**Garrett’s Strength Report (After Two Weeks of Training)**

* **Strength:** 2.5 stars (up from 2.3 stars)
* **Speed:** 2.4 stars (no significant change)
* **Endurance:** 2.5 stars (no significant change)
* **Weapon Proficiency (Energy Axe):** 2.6 stars (up from 2.4 stars)
* **Combat Tactics:** 2.6 stars (no significant change)

**Marcus’s Strength Report (After Two Weeks of Training)**

* **Strength:** 2.5 stars (up from 2.3 stars)
* **Speed:** 2.3 stars (no significant change)
* **Endurance:** 2.4 stars (no significant change)
* **Weapon Proficiency (Rocket Hammer):** 2.6 stars (up from 2.5 stars)
* **Combat Tactics:** 2.6 stars (no significant change)

**David and Ethan - Rookie Initiative Corps**

The **Rookie Initiative Corps** was a training division designed to bring new recruits up to speed quickly, especially those who had little experience or were in need of serious improvement. **David** and **Ethan**, with their relatively low starting strength, would face intense training in modern combat techniques.

**Trainer: Corporal Nara and Sergeant Jaxon** — Both stood at 2.5 stars, but they were skilled in working with rookies, pushing their limits and training them to fight with cutting-edge weapons. Their goal was to take David and Ethan from being amateurs to competent soldiers.

**Training Focus:**

* **David** and **Ethan** were taught to use **Modern Guns**. These weapons were fitted with advanced sights, recoil dampeners, and energy boosters. Their training began with basic shooting drills, progressing to tactical shooting with moving targets and in combat scenarios. The challenge for both was to develop their reflexes and control over these modern firearms.
* In addition to the guns, both were trained to wield **mutated bone-made shields and swords**. These weapons were crafted from the bones of mutated creatures, hardened and enhanced to withstand intense combat. Their design provided both durability and lethality, but the challenge for David and Ethan was learning how to utilize their unique properties in battle.

**Training Outcome:**

* **David**: His development was largely based on improving his speed and reflexes. As someone who had little experience with combat, his progress in handling the guns was impressive. His shooting accuracy improved significantly, and his ability to move and shoot at the same time became more fluid.
* **Ethan**: Similar to David, Ethan focused on improving his basic reflexes and learning how to use the mutated bone weaponry. His strikes with the bone sword became more precise, and his shield maneuvers were faster and more calculated.

At the end of the two weeks, David and Ethan were much improved. They were no longer beginners, but soldiers with a basic grasp of modern weapons. They would require more experience in the field, but their newfound confidence and skills had put them on the path to being powerful fighters.

**David’s Strength Report (After Two Weeks of Training)**

* **Strength:** 1.7 stars (up from 1 star)
* **Speed:** 1.8 stars (up from 1.4 stars)
* **Endurance:** 1.6 stars (up from 1.4 stars)
* **Weapon Proficiency (Modern Guns):** 1.9 stars (up from 1.4 stars)
* **Reflexes:** 1.8 stars (up from 1.2 stars)

**Ethan’s Strength Report (After Two Weeks of Training)**

* **Strength:** 1.7 stars (up from 1.1 stars)
* **Speed:** 1.8 stars (up from 1.5 stars)
* **Endurance:** 1.7 stars (up from 1.4 stars)
* **Weapon Proficiency (Mutated Bone Sword/Shield):** 1.9 stars (up from 1.5 stars)
* **Reflexes:** 1.8 stars (up from 1.3 stars)

**Training Summary:**

* **Garrett and Marcus**: Both veterans improved their proficiency with modern weapons, regaining their edge in combat. They are now better equipped to handle both traditional and modern threats, with their **weapon proficiency** reaching new heights.
* **David and Ethan**: Although they were once rookies, their training in modern firearms and mutated bone weaponry has significantly boosted their **reflexes** and **weapon proficiency**. They are no longer at the mercy of their inexperience and are ready for more serious challenges.

With these two groups now well-trained, the journey ahead would prove far more dangerous, but also filled with opportunity for growth and survival.

**Chapter 32: The Training of Emily and the Triplets**

The base was bustling with activity as the group of ten warriors began to settle into their new roles. While **Garrett**, **Marcus**, **David**, and **Ethan** were working hard with their respective teams, there were still those whose growth was being nurtured in different ways. Two distinct groups were focused on this period of training: **Emily**, the youngest of the survivors, and **the Triplets**, whose coordination in battle would be crucial for their survival in the dangerous world they lived in.

**Emily’s Training - Reconnaissance Unit**

At only **12 years old**, **Emily** was much younger than the others, yet her keen instincts and sharp senses were nothing short of extraordinary. The **Reconnaissance Unit**, tasked with scouting and surviving in the harshest environments, was the perfect fit for her. Led by **Captain Rhea**, a 2.4-star veteran of the wild zones, the training was grueling, especially for someone as young as Emily. But Emily was determined, showing resilience that few of her age could ever hope to match.

**Training Focus:**

Emily's training was aimed at improving her **survival skills** in the wild zones, where mutated creatures roamed freely and the environment itself was hazardous. The Reconnaissance Unit was known for its ability to navigate through these zones and gather intelligence, making them one of the most valuable units in the military base.

* **Tracking and Stealth**: Emily learned how to move silently, even through the densest of forests, and track creatures without alerting them. She also perfected the art of camouflage, blending into her surroundings to avoid detection.
* **Survival and Sensing**: Emily’s natural ability to sense danger was an asset, and Captain Rhea focused on enhancing her already-sharp instincts. Through special exercises, Emily learned to identify different organisms, track them, and even sense danger from nearly 500 meters away.
* **Combat and Agility**: Although Emily was not yet as strong as the other soldiers, her **agility** and **reflexes** made her a formidable opponent when it came to quick, small-scale skirmishes. She practiced using small weapons—such as throwing knives and energy blades—designed for stealth and quick strikes.

**Emily’s Strength Report (After Two Weeks of Training)**

* **Strength**: 1.3 stars (up from 1 star)
* **Speed**: 1.5 stars (up from 1.2 stars)
* **Endurance**: 1.4 stars (up from 1.3 stars)
* **Agility**: 1.6 stars (up from 1.4 stars)
* **Senses (Danger Detection)**: 2.0 stars (up from 1.5 stars)
* **Survival Skills**: 1.8 stars (up from 1.6 stars)

In just two weeks, **Emily** had gained a **0.3-star** improvement in her overall abilities, but the most significant development was in her **senses**. Her heightened ability to detect danger within a 500-meter radius set her apart from most veterans. This skill would prove invaluable as she could warn the team of incoming threats before they were even visible.

**The Triplets’ Training - Synchronization Team**

The **Triplets**—**Lia**, **Luna**, and **Lena**—were a unique trio, bound not only by blood but by an unbreakable **synchronization** in their combat style. They had grown up together, fought together, and developed a bond unlike any other. Their strength and precision in battle, however, needed to be honed, and that’s where the **Synchronization Team** came in.

The Synchronization Team, a special unit trained to operate in perfect harmony, was tasked with elevating the Triplets' synergy combat. **Sergeant Arin**, a 2.6-star soldier known for his impeccable synchronization skills, led the training. Under his guidance, the Triplets would refine their ability to fight not just as individual warriors, but as a single, unified force.

**Training Focus:**

* **Combat Synchronization**: The Triplets were taught how to read each other’s movements without needing to speak. Every move they made was in sync, their attacks and defenses working together like a well-oiled machine.
* **Weapon Bonding**: The Triplets wielded special weapons—**swords and shields**—designed to complement each other. Their weapons were also modified with energy enhancements. The training focused on improving the way they used these weapons together, allowing them to execute devastating combo attacks that left their enemies with little chance to counter.
* **Team Dynamics and Battle Tactics**: The Triplets also trained to develop strategies that leveraged their unity. While the individual strength of each triplet was important, it was the way they functioned together that set them apart. Sergeant Arin put them through drills where they had to fight against larger groups of enemies, perfecting their strategy and teamwork.

**The Triplets’ Strength Report (After Two Weeks of Training)**

* **Strength**: 1.7 stars (up from 1.2 stars)
* **Speed**: 1.8 stars (up from 1.5 stars)
* **Endurance**: 1.9 stars (up from 1.5 stars)
* **Weapon Proficiency (Sword/Shield)**: 2.0 stars (up from 1.7 stars)
* **Synchronization**: 2.3 stars (up from 1.8 stars)

In just two weeks, the Triplets experienced an impressive growth of **0.5 stars**, largely in their **synchronization** and **weapon proficiency**. Their new level of combat coordination and teamwork made them significantly more dangerous in battle. Their once-disjointed fighting styles had become perfectly aligned, making them an inseparable unit.

The **weapon proficiency** improvements were also noteworthy, as their connection with their swords and shields became almost instinctual. They were now ready to face stronger opponents, not as individuals but as a singular force.

**Summary:**

Both **Emily** and **the Triplets** had grown significantly in their training. **Emily**, though still young, had sharpened her senses and survival skills, becoming more dangerous than many of the base’s veterans in certain respects. **The Triplets**, on the other hand, had perfected their synchronization, becoming a devastating force when they fought together.

The training had molded them into far stronger warriors, but the challenges they faced ahead would only test their growth further.

With their abilities refined, they would soon have to prove themselves on the battlefield, where their true strength would be put to the ultimate test.

**Chapter 33: Kael's Training with Vice Commander Elise Dran**

The base was quiet in the early mornings, save for the rhythmic sound of **Kael**’s feet hitting the ground, his spear swinging through the air in perfect arcs. Today marked the first day of his training with **Vice Commander Elise Dran**, and he was already feeling the weight of the challenge ahead.

**Training Begins**

Elise Dran, a 3.5-star warrior, was as fierce and demanding as the reputation she carried. Known for her mastery of the spear, she was relentless, pushing Kael to the edge of his limits every single day. From the very first session, she demonstrated that she wouldn’t tolerate weakness. The **Vice Commander**'s training style was ruthless, focusing on pushing Kael to his absolute limits, testing his resolve and his ability to adapt.

**The Spear Techniques**

Kael was no stranger to the **spear**, but Elise’s approach was unlike anything he had ever encountered. She was methodical, showing him the nuances of each movement. Her instructions were precise, and her eyes sharp—every move she made with the spear was flawless.

* **Swing Techniques**: Kael spent hours learning to perfect his **swing** techniques. Elise explained how a spear could be used not just for thrusting but for sweeping movements that could take down multiple enemies at once. She demonstrated how to generate power from the body’s core, making each swing feel like a controlled explosion of energy.
* **Thrusting Techniques**: The thrust was fundamental, Elise stressed. She had Kael practice thrusting through the air, imagining his spear cutting through the toughest of enemies. Each time, his posture had to be perfect, his focus on the target unwavering. The thrust could end a fight in an instant if executed correctly.
* **Defensive Stance and Parrying**: Even though Kael was primarily trained in aggressive spear fighting, Elise emphasized that defense was just as important. She drilled him on how to **parry** incoming attacks and quickly follow up with a counterattack, moving like the spear was an extension of his arm.
* **Movement and Agility**: Kael quickly realized that spear fighting wasn’t just about strength—it was about agility and movement. Elise made him practice fluid, fast movements, instructing him to think of his spear as a natural extension of himself.

**The Final Day**

Two weeks had passed since the beginning of the training, and Kael’s muscles ached with exhaustion. His body had already undergone substantial changes—his arms were stronger, his movements swifter, and his reflexes sharper. But there was something different about this final day. Elise was more focused than ever, her eyes narrowed as she prepared for something Kael had never seen before.

“**Kael,**” Elise said, her voice cutting through the quiet morning air, “You’ve learned the basics. Now, I will show you something... different.”

Kael stood, his spear poised, waiting for what was to come. Elise's reputation had always made her seem untouchable, and yet here she was, about to show him something that would shake his understanding of spear fighting even more.

**The New Spear Technique: ‘The Rowing Spear Against the Waves’**

Without any warning, Elise moved. Her spear was a blur as she moved with unmatched fluidity. Her posture seemed to shift with every step, and the speed with which she executed the technique was something Kael couldn’t quite process at first. The spear moved in a **circular motion**, almost like a rowing motion, flowing with such smoothness that Kael had to take a moment to understand what he was witnessing.

Elise stopped after a few moments, her breathing steady, but Kael was stunned. He had never seen anything like it. The technique had a fluidity to it that made it almost impossible to follow with his eyes. There was a flow, a natural rhythm to it that spoke of a mastery Kael couldn’t fathom yet.

“The name of this technique is **‘The Rowing Spear Against the Waves,’**” Elise said, her voice calm but resolute. “It’s not a move you can simply learn through repetition. It requires **focus**—the spear must become part of the natural rhythm of your body. And when you learn it... it will carry you through battles.”

Kael took a deep breath, his heart racing from the sheer **power** and precision of what he had just witnessed.

“Can you teach me this technique?” Kael asked, his curiosity piqued. He knew Elise was no ordinary warrior, but this was something entirely new.

Elise gave him a cold, knowing look. “No. You will learn it through repetition and **intuition**. Learn it by heart. Trust your body to remember.”

Kael nodded, though a part of him felt unsettled. If Elise had just shown him a glimpse of something that strong, it meant she was not only an incredibly powerful fighter, but also someone with knowledge that was not easily shared.

**Kael’s Improvements**

Despite the grueling nature of the training, Kael had made progress—his spear skills were significantly sharper, and his overall physical capabilities had improved, albeit slightly. His improvements over the past two weeks were more focused on his **spear proficiency** than his raw physical power.

**Kael’s Physical Report (After Two Weeks of Training with Elise)**

* **Strength**: 2.9 Star (up from 2.7 Star)
* **Speed**: 2.7 Star (up from 2.5 Star)
* **Stamina**: 2.9 Star (up from 2.8 Star)
* **Endurance**: 3.2 Star (up from 3.1 Star)
* **Spear Technique**: 2.5 Star (up from 2.2 Star)
* **Mutation Traits**:
  + **Sharp senses and heightened survival instincts.**
  + **Increased muscle mass**, greater muscle control and coordination, enabling more precise spear movements.
  + **Heightened reflexes**, aiding in quicker response times during combat.

**Conversation with Vice Commander Elise Dran**

Kael, sweat dripping from his brow, approached Elise after the final training session. He could feel the exhaustion deep in his muscles, but there was also a sense of accomplishment.

“Thank you, Vice Commander,” Kael said, standing straight. “This training has been unlike anything I’ve experienced.”

Elise glanced at him, her expression unreadable. “Don’t thank me yet. You have a long way to go. That technique—‘The Rowing Spear Against the Waves’—is just one of many secrets of spear fighting. Mastery takes time. Remember that, Kael.”

He nodded, grateful for her guidance but still unsure of what the future held.

“I’ll continue to improve, no matter how hard it gets,” Kael promised.

Elise’s eyes softened for a fraction of a second before she turned away, gazing out at the training ground. “You will need every ounce of that determination. This world is unforgiving, Kael. The stronger you become, the harder the challenges will get. But if you learn to fight as one with the spear... you’ll survive.”

Kael stood in silence for a moment, absorbing her words. There was so much more to learn, and Elise had only just begun to show him the path ahead.

As he looked at **Cherry**, who was observing from the sidelines, Kael felt the weight of the journey before him. But he also felt something else—**resolve**.

The training had only just begun.

**Chapter 34: The Challenge of Command**

The training grounds had changed. What was once a place of sweat, repetition, and technique was now charged with a thick air of anticipation. Two weeks had passed—**two weeks of brutal, unrelenting growth**.

Now, Commander **Darius** stood at the center of the circular arena, the crimson sky behind him casting long shadows. His arms were crossed, his battle armor heavy with the weight of a thousand past duels. His sharp eyes scanned the group of survivors before him.

No longer mere survivors.  
No longer retreating.  
Now—**warriors**.

**“No More Retreats”**

“You’ve been forged,” Darius spoke, his voice carrying across the field like a blade cutting through silence. “This is no longer training. This is no longer hesitation. From this moment onward—**there is no retreat**. Either you stand… or you fall with your weapon in hand.”

None of them flinched.

Darius smirked. “Let’s see if the flame within you is ready to burn.”

He pointed to the group.

“One by one. Come.”

**Victor: The Unshakable Wall**

The first to step forward was **Victor**.

The ground trembled slightly as the old warrior moved with deliberate calm, his large reinforced shield strapped tightly to his arm. Darius lunged with his blade, but Victor did not flinch. **Strike after strike**, his defense absorbed the force, his body unmoving like the roots of an ancient mountain. His form was perfected—not flashy, not swift, but unyielding.

Even Darius narrowed his eyes in respect.

“Still a fortress, even after all these years,” Darius murmured.

**Maya: The Phantom’s Edge**

From stillness to a blur—**Maya**.

She vanished from sight, appearing behind Darius in a flash. Her dual daggers shimmered as she landed precise, razor-accurate slashes along the edges of Darius’s armor before he could fully turn. Her speed was supernatural, and her ability to blend into shadows now rivaled the Recon elites.

Darius chuckled mid-spin. “Impressive stealth… you’ve gone beyond just silence. You’ve become the whisper of death.”

**Garret and Marcus: The Modern Titans**

Then came the thunder—**Garret** and **Marcus**, side by side, both grinning like soldiers returning to a battlefield they loved.

Garret swung his new **energy-axe**, the ground crackling beneath each blow, the weapon surging with power and recoil-dampening precision. His strikes were faster, heavier, and enhanced with modern augmentations.

Beside him, Marcus let loose with his **rocket-powered hammer**, its propulsion allowing short bursts of explosive strikes, creating shockwaves Darius actually had to sidestep from.

The commander’s eyes lit up.

“Back in your prime, and now upgraded,” he grunted. “The battlefield missed you two.”

**David and Ethan: The Iron-Blooded Rookies**

Next were **David** and **Ethan**.

Still raw, still young—but now different. They didn’t falter. Each step forward was grounded in resolve.

They fought in coordinated bursts, using their **mutated bone weapons**—David with a bone-hardened shield and short blade, Ethan with an elongated mutated saber. They absorbed punishment and dished it back with growing awareness, their stances more stable, their instincts sharper.

“You don’t fight like rookies anymore,” Darius said with a half-smile. “You fight like men who’ve decided not to die.”

**Emily: The Watchful Storm**

**Emily** didn’t enter the ring.

Instead, she stood on the edge of the arena, eyes glowing faintly with a keen, almost preternatural awareness. Her senses, honed during Recon training, locked onto every movement, analyzing, predicting. A simulated drone threat approached the field—Emily turned, raised her hand, and threw a small blade through the air.

The drone dropped mid-flight.

Darius didn’t speak but gave her a knowing nod.  
She wasn’t there to fight.  
She was there to **warn of the storm before it ever came.**

**The Triplets: Unity in Motion**

Then came the **Triplets**—now fighting as one.

Their weapons moved like clockwork. Two with blades, one with a bone-shield. They rotated positions fluidly, covering weaknesses, creating openings. A strike aimed at one would be parried by another. They were no longer just siblings. They were a **unit**. And their synchronization was near flawless.

Darius actually had to widen his stance.

“In a few more weeks,” he said as he forced them back with a sweeping blow, “you three might be able to make me bleed.”

**Kael Steps Forward**

All motion stopped.  
The field went silent.

**Kael** walked into the arena. His spear in hand. Cherry watched silently from the edge, tail flicking.

His eyes locked with Darius. His frame steady. His body battle-hardened. His movements fluid.

Elise, watching from the observation deck, folded her arms.  
“This is the one I’m curious about…”

Darius cracked his neck.  
“No more holding back. Come at me with all you’ve got… spear against spear.”

Kael narrowed his eyes, twirling his spear into a low guard.  
The others stepped back.  
The final match of the day had begun.

**Chapter 35: The Spear Against the Storm**

The arena, though battle-worn from the duels before, now felt silent again.

All eyes were on **Kael** and **Commander Darius**—two warriors with different legacies, but the same fire in their veins. One born in the ashes of survival. The other forged through countless victories.

Kael tightened the grip on his spear.  
Cherry crouched silently, eyes wide, watching from the side.  
Darius’s massive **broadblade** gleamed under the fading crimson light.

"Ready?" the commander asked.

Kael nodded once.  
"No more holding back," he replied.

**Steel Meets Steel**

Kael moved first.

A sudden burst of speed—his spear slicing through the air in a **low horizontal sweep**, one of the new techniques taught during his ruthless training with Vice Commander **Elise Dran**. Darius met the strike with his broadblade, a thunderous clang echoing across the ground.

Darius didn’t move an inch.  
Kael slid back from the force of the parry.

“You’ve gotten stronger,” Darius noted, twirling his blade with a grin. “Let’s see how far that strength goes.”

Kael spun his spear behind him, then lunged again. **Swing. Twist. Thrust. Reverse grip. Overhead spiral.** Each move more refined, more controlled—nothing wasted.

He was no longer a wild survivor.

**He was a warrior.**

**Clash of Titans**

Darius’s fighting style was relentless—**every strike heavy**, enough to shake the ground beneath Kael’s feet. The broadblade carved through the air with power that seemed to warp the wind.

Kael gritted his teeth. He ducked under a swing that would’ve broken his spine. Rolled to the side. Slammed his spear upward into Darius’s ribs, only to be blocked by an armored elbow.

Sweat dripped. Muscles burned.  
But Kael kept moving.

**Stalemate in the Inferno**

The fight drew out.

Minutes passed. Dozens of exchanges.  
Neither backed down.

The others watched in breathless awe. Even **Garret** whispered, “That kid... he’s matching the commander blow for blow.”

**Maya** watched with narrowed eyes. **Victor** crossed his arms silently.

Darius swung with both hands, forcing Kael to slide back once more. “You’re impressive, boy,” he said. “But you still haven’t landed the hit that counts.”

Kael panted, his fingers tightening around his spear. His mind was beginning to fade into instinct—his thoughts replaced by rhythm. Movement. Pressure. The pulse of the battlefield.

**The Rowing Spear Against the Waves**

Darius lunged forward for the final strike—an overhead slam designed to knock Kael completely out of the ring.

Kael’s eyes flickered.

His feet moved…  
His hands shifted…

**He didn’t think—he remembered.**

The movement came on its own, like muscle memory embedded deep in his core.  
He lowered his stance, rotated his spear along his side, and in a fluid, flowing arc—**he unleashed the move Vice Commander Elise had shown him just once**.

**The Rowing Spear Against the Waves.**

His body followed the motion perfectly, like a boat gliding across violent tides. The spear moved with untraceable grace, cutting through Darius’s defense and striking the flat of his blade at just the right angle—**redirecting the attack**.

Kael’s momentum didn’t stop. He stepped inside the guard and thrust forward—  
—**his spear pressing firmly against Darius’s chest.**

Darius froze.  
A moment of silence.  
Then he took a single step back, raising both hands in surrender.

**The Aftermath**

Kael blinked, panting heavily.  
“What… was that?”

Darius stood still for a moment, then slowly turned his head. His eyes locked with **Elise**, watching silently from the higher platform.

She didn’t speak.  
Just looked away with a calm, unreadable expression.

Darius let out a low whistle.  
“That technique… I never expected to see it again.”

He stepped toward Kael and clapped a massive hand on his shoulder.

“You’ve beaten me fairly. Not just with power—but with something that takes most warriors decades to learn.” He grinned wide. “**Instinct. Adaptation. And the right technique at the right time.** You’ve earned this.”

Kael nodded, still catching his breath.

“Congratulations,” Darius said. “You’re no longer under my shadow. You’ve begun to cast your own.”

From the edge of the field, Cherry meowed softly, as if in applause.

Here's the **updated Star Power chart** for all main characters after their 2-week intensive training and Chapter 35 events:

**🌟 Star Power Ratings (Post-Training Phase)**

**🔱 Main Combatants**

| **Name** | **Star Power** | **Specialty Focus** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Kael** | **2.9** | Balanced – high agility, endurance, improved spear technique |
| **Darius** | **3.5+** | Elite – power, technique, commanding aura (former frontline commander) |
| **Elise Dran** | **??? (Implied >3.8)** | Mastery in spear, mysterious advanced technique |

**🛡️ Veterans**

| **Name** | **Star Power** | **Specialty Focus** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Victor** | **2.3** | Physical tolerance, defense, strong fortitude |
| **Maya** | **2.3** | High speed, stealth, advanced evasive combat |
| **Garret** | **2.5** | Weapon mastery (tech-axe with energy/artillery) |
| **Marcus** | **2.5** | Close-range brute combat (rocket/energy hammer) |

**🧭 Emerging Combatants**

| **Name** | **Star Power** | **Specialty Focus** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **David** | **1.7** | Balanced modern combat (guns + bone weapons) |
| **Ethan** | **1.7** | Reflex, survival instinct, modern hybrid combat |

**🌿 Support & Specialists**

| **Name** | **Star Power** | **Specialty Focus** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Emily** | **1.3** | Reconnaissance – danger sense, environmental awareness (500m detection) |
| **The Triplets** | **1.7 (each)** | Synchronized combat with sword/shield synergy |

**Chapter 36 – The Howl of the Tide**

The sun had long set, and silence embraced the military base like a gentle blanket. After the intense weeks of training and the final mock battles, every soul had earned their right to rest. Kael lay in his quarters, his muscles sore but relaxed, Cherry curled up beside his bed like a silent sentinel. The others were fast asleep as well—Victor’s heavy breathing rumbled like distant thunder, Maya’s breathing shallow and steady like a ghost, and the triplets huddled together on a cot, unusually quiet.

But peace never lasted long.

**"WEOOOHHHHHH—WEOOOHHHHHH—WEOOOHHHHHH—"**

The wailing sirens shattered the stillness like glass. Red emergency lights pulsed across the base walls, casting long shadows of urgency. Kael shot up immediately, Cherry already on her feet, growling low.

"Everyone up! Now!" Kael barked, grabbing his spear.

The team rushed outside into the courtyard, the once-calm night now alive with alarmed soldiers, scrambling officers, and armored vehicles being rushed into position. Floodlights lit up the assembly ground, where Commander Darius stood with Elise Dran by his side, his crutch planted firmly in the ground, eyes blazing with intensity.

Within minutes, the elite team gathered, sleep still clinging to their faces but washed away by adrenaline.

Darius stepped forward, lifting a small device to his mouth as his voice boomed through the loudspeakers.

“Listen up, all units—this is not a drill.”

A digital hologram rose beside him, projecting a massive radar map of the surrounding area.

“Approximately one hour ago, our outermost surveillance drones detected an incoming wave—what we call a **Tide**. Based on trajectory and movement analysis, we estimate that it will reach our gates within three hours.”

The map zoomed in, and multiple red dots blinked rapidly toward the base.

“This Tide is unlike what you’ve faced before. The swarm consists of:

* Over **100 1-star mutated beasts**—mostly scaled wolves, plague-hounds, and razor crows.
* **50 2-star threats**—these are larger, faster, and more aggressive. Expect mutated tigers, stinger gorillas, and molten boars.
* **5 monsters at 3-star level**—intel identifies two as elite predator types, and the others as hive mutants.
* And finally… one **4-star mutation**. We don’t know what it is yet. It’s fast. And it’s strong.”

A murmur spread across the ranks, tension thickening like smoke. Kael’s hand tightened on his spear. A 4-star mutated beast? That was close to commander-level combat power.

Darius raised his hand, silencing the murmurs.

“Now, to assignments.”

He turned his eyes to Cherry, who stood near Kael, her ruby-red eyes glowing faintly in the light.

“Cherry. You will take on the **4-star beast**. You’re the only one fast and strong enough to do this solo. Trust your instincts, and hold nothing back.”

Cherry gave a sharp nod, tail flicking once, then settled into her usual crouch.

“Commander Elise Dran, Kael, and I will each take down one **3-star monster**. These will be spread across different sectors. Our job is to neutralize them quickly and then assist others.”

Elise stood calm and composed beside Darius, but Kael saw a flash of anticipation in her eyes.

“The remaining **two 3-star monsters** will be handled by Victor, Maya, Garret, Marcus, and four senior sergeants. Form two sub-teams of four. Do not try to fight alone—these monsters are too coordinated.”

Darius turned to the younger members of the team.

“David, Ethan, Emily, and the Triplets—you’ll each be assigned within units that will face **2-star beasts**. These units will be composed of 8–10 fighters with strengths ranging from 1.5 to 2 stars. Your job isn’t just to kill. It’s to protect your team. Stick together, use formations, and rotate the front lines.”

He looked straight at Emily.

“Emily—you’ll be on recon duty as well. Use your sense radius to alert teams of incoming threats. Stay mobile. You’re not to engage unless necessary.”

She nodded, her expression dead serious.

“The remaining **100 1-star beasts** will be handled by our bulk forces—troops below 1-star power, with mechanized support and auto-turrets. If any of you finish your task early—**reinforce the 1-star or 2-star units. Help where it counts.**”

Garret cracked his knuckles. “It’s like the old days, huh?”

Marcus grinned. “Except now we have better toys.”

David adjusted his gun. “Let’s prove we’re not rookies anymore.”

Kael, meanwhile, looked around at his team—each member now armed not just with weapons, but experience, growth, and unity. This wasn’t the broken crew that had staggered into the base weeks ago. They had become soldiers.

Elise walked up to Kael quietly as Darius continued issuing tactical layouts to the rest.

“You ready?” she asked.

Kael looked at her, his eyes calm. “More than ever.”

She glanced at Cherry. “And her?”

Kael smiled. “She was always ready.”

Darius clapped his hands once, drawing all attention back.

“This is no longer about survival. This is a test of everything we’ve learned. Defend the base. Protect your comrades. Show these beasts why humanity still stands.”

The soldiers roared back in unified agreement.

“Dismissed. Gear up. One hour till impact.”

As the team scattered to prepare, Kael looked to the stars above. The night no longer felt quiet—but rather like the breath before a storm.

**Chapter 37 – The Spear and the Storm**

The armory buzzed with tension. The smell of oil, metal, and polish hung thick in the air as soldiers lined up, receiving their equipment for the coming war. The clanging of crates being unlocked, weapons being issued, and power armor adjusting echoed against the steel walls.

Commander Darius stood at the center of it all, his presence a silent command. With each team member that approached, he opened a large black case and handed over a weapon—crafted and tailored for them after observing their two weeks of training.

To **Victor**, he handed a shield the size of a door, made of dense neutron-forged alloy, its surface etched with ancient rune patterns for impact absorption.

To **Maya**, he offered two curved daggers coated with a reactive stealth polymer that shimmered like glass when held still—perfect for her silent, quick movements.

**Garret and Marcus** received twin gauntlets and dual cleavers, respectively—reinforced with kinetic energy conduits that allowed bursts of force on contact.

**David and Ethan** received reinforced power blades and magnetic pulse rifles—perfected for agile frontline movement and mid-range combat.

The **Triplets** were handed custom-forged weapons: one carried a broadsword with channeling grooves for electricity, another a shield enhanced with kinetic pulse absorption, and the third wielded a compact halberd tuned for synchronized striking patterns.

And then, the room hushed.

Darius turned to Kael but didn’t open the next case. Instead, he stepped aside.

“Yours will be given by someone else,” he said, voice gruff.

From the far end of the hall, **Vice Commander Elise Dran** stepped forward.

She carried a long cloth-covered object in both hands—taller than Kael himself. Her stride was steady, deliberate, eyes locked on him with an unreadable expression.

The moment she stopped before him, she removed the cloth.

Kael’s breath caught in his throat.

The weapon she revealed was unlike anything he had ever seen.

It was a **spear**, nearly 6’1” in length—**his own height**, forged from the **bones of a Blue Panther-class 3-Star monster**. Its shaft shimmered with an **iridescent deep blue hue**, smooth and cool like liquid night. The material was tough yet oddly flexible, able to absorb impact without cracking.

The spearhead, however, was where the weapon truly stood out.

Made from **a precious hybrid alloy** of vibranium-titanite and laced with crystal-threaded obsidian, it gleamed with a piercing **silver-blue shine**. Carved into it were ancient markings that faintly pulsed, reacting to Kael’s presence as if alive.

The blade's edge curved subtly—like the fin of a predatory fish cutting through waves—perfectly balanced between thrust and slash.

“The weapon doesn’t have a name,” Elise said softly. “You’ll give it one when you earn it.”

Kael looked up at her, eyes wide. “This… this is forged from monster bone?”

“Not just any monster,” Elise said. “A Blue Panther. A 3-star predator that was known to be unkillable in the wild. I led the mission to bring it down. It nearly cost me my life.”

Kael gently ran his hand along the shaft, the smoothness of it strange against his callused skin. “It feels... alive.”

“That’s because it is. Or at least, it remembers,” she replied.

Kael looked into her eyes. “Why me?”

Elise studied him for a moment.

“You’ve grown faster than anyone I’ve seen. But it’s not just your strength—it’s your resilience, your hunger, your refusal to break.” She paused. “This weapon wasn’t meant for just anyone. It chooses the one who will carry it with purpose. That’s you.”

He gripped the spear fully now, testing its balance. It was perfect. Every movement felt fluid, like the spear was an extension of his arm. A part of him.

“And the spear technique you showed me?” Kael asked. “Was it yours?”

Elise didn’t answer immediately. She stepped closer and whispered, “That technique was never meant to be taught to anyone outside the Dran lineage. I showed it to you once. You remembered it. You used it in battle.” She tilted her head slightly, a soft smirk forming. “That’s why I gave you this weapon. Because you’re already walking the path.”

Kael nodded slowly, absorbing every word.

“I’ll master that technique. And this spear.”

Elise’s voice grew quiet. “Mastery is not about control. It’s about surrendering to the rhythm of the fight. This spear won’t respond to brute strength. You’ll have to dance with it—**like rowing against waves**.”

He grinned. “Then I’ll dance until the tide breaks.”

She chuckled lightly—a rare sound.

“Good. Now go. The battlefield won’t wait.”

As Kael turned to leave, Elise placed a hand briefly on his shoulder.

“And Kael,” she said, her voice lower now. “Whatever happens out there—don’t die. That spear is meant to change the course of something far bigger than this battle.”

He met her gaze. “I won’t.”

The team regrouped outside, fully geared, their new weapons gleaming in the floodlights. Kael’s blue spear stood out like a lightning bolt waiting to strike.

The sirens had stopped. Now, only the silence of waiting remained.

The Tide was coming.

**Chapter 38 – The Beast Tide: Part 1**

The skies were a dull gray, smeared with the smoky haze of dawn. A wind blew across the barren stretch in front of the military base, stirring dust into the air and making banners flap violently. The earth trembled—not with fear, but anticipation.

Every soldier was in position. The defense line had been drawn, and no one dared cross it prematurely. Tension buzzed like electricity in the air.

**Kael** stood near the **southern border**, eyes fixed ahead. He gripped his new blue spear with both hands, the weapon seeming to pulse with life. He could sense the others nearby—Victor at the northern line, Maya cloaked within the shadows of the inner walls, Garret and Marcus manning the mid-flank alongside other officers, while the triplets and others stood ready with their squads. **Cherry**, calm yet alert, sat perched atop the highest wall, her eyes glowing faintly—fixed on the horizon.

And then it happened.

A long, deep **horn** echoed through the valley—**the Call to War**.

From the forested darkness ahead, shadows spilled out like a flood. The beasts came.

A wave of **one-star mutated monsters**—over a hundred of them—charged forward. The ground quaked beneath their feet, their monstrous forms shrieking, roaring, and screeching in a chaotic chorus of rage.

Their bodies were grotesque: twisted wolves with armored hides, serpents that slithered on muscular limbs, bears with glowing red eyes and jagged bone protrusions, lizards with hardened rock-like scales, and even giant hornets the size of war dogs.

And to meet them…

The soldiers below 1 Star rating surged forward with a cry of defiance.

They were clad in **light exo-armor**, tuned to enhance reaction speed and durability. In their hands were a diverse arsenal of **energy weapons**:

* **Energy Swords**: Blades that glowed with a high-frequency energy field, capable of cutting through tough monster hide. Some crackled with electric arcs, others glowed plasma-red with heat.
* **Plasma Rifles**: Standard-issue among ranged fighters. With adjustable barrels, these rifles shot concentrated bursts of plasma energy that exploded on impact, leaving glowing scorch marks on anything they touched.
* **Energy Bombs**: Small, disk-like grenades that pulsed with white-blue light. When thrown, they would levitate for a second before discharging a radial shockwave, disrupting groups of monsters and breaking formations.
* **Magneto-Lances**: Thrust-based weapons that, upon impact, released a powerful repelling magnetic pulse capable of tearing through flesh or hurling enemies back.
* **Cryo-Arrows and Shock Darts**: Archers stood on the backlines, launching arrows tipped with cryo-capsules that froze limbs upon contact or darts that sent jarring voltage through nerves.
* **Auto-Combat Drones**: A few tech-based soldiers deployed shoulder-mounted drones—buzzing machines armed with mini-lasers and stun nets to distract or wound enemies from above.

The first clash was brutal.

A spear-wielding soldier lunged at a charging tusked boar, stabbing its shoulder—but the beast swung wildly and crushed him against a rock. A trio of gunners held their ground, mowing down a pack of mutant hyenas with well-timed bursts. An energy bomb exploded under a leaping lizard, blasting it apart mid-air.

Screams, roars, and flashes of blue and red energy filled the battlefield. Blood splattered the dirt. Dust thickened into a cloud. But no one retreated.

Behind them, the other warriors waited.

Kael stood perfectly still, watching every movement—memorizing the enemy’s speed, behavior, and aggression.

Nearby, **Commander Darius** stood calmly with his arms crossed, watching the front line absorb the first wave. “Let them fight,” he muttered. “Only when they bleed will they understand the cost.”

**Elise** stood to his right, hands on her hips, sharp eyes scanning for pattern or anomaly. Her twin spears rested on her back.

“They’ll hold,” she said coldly. “The real storm hasn’t arrived yet.”

Kael tightened his grip.

“Not yet,” he murmured. “But soon.”

And just then, his eyes caught a shifting ripple on the horizon.

The **second wave** was coming.

And it would be worse.

**Chapter 39 – The Beast Tide: Part 2**

The bodies of the fallen one-star monsters hadn’t even cooled when the air shifted—thicker, heavier, deadlier.

A **deafening howl** pierced the chaos, followed by thunderous stomps that shook the very foundation of the base. From the veil of mist and death emerged the **second wave**—fifty **2-Star mutated beasts**, each larger, more grotesque, and radiating a dangerous aura. Their eyes glowed with primal rage and unnatural intelligence.

The frontline defenders had barely caught their breath.

But now, it was time for the **real fighters** to move.

“SECOND LINE—ADVANCE!” Darius’s voice roared like thunder across the camp.

Kael watched silently as the chosen troops sprinted forward—ten teams, each designated to handle five of the elite beasts.

At the forefront of one squad was **David**, his greatsword humming with blue energy as he moved with precise discipline. Beside him, **Ethan**, wielding dual short axes crackling with electricity, crouched low and agile, ready to strike.

Not far from them, the **Triplets**—Riven, Lira, and Alric—moved in perfect synchrony, their formation tight, unwavering. Riven led with the shield, Lira behind with her piercing sword, and Alric channeled energy blasts from a mid-range position with a gauntlet cannon.

**Emily**, younger and smaller than all, moved alone—but never aimlessly. She watched, listened, and felt the battlefield’s rhythm. Her eyes scanned the monsters before they even emerged fully. Her senses guided her movements like instinct—danger within 500 meters couldn’t touch her unseen.

**David’s Squad:**

A **mutated rhinoceros** with molten cracks along its skin charged forward, its horn glowing faintly with burning heat. David raised his sword high and roared, “FLANK AND STRIKE!”

The beast barreled toward them like a freight train. David stood firm—**immovable**—before pivoting with trained precision. His greatsword met the beast’s horn with a **shockwave**, both forces clashing in a display of raw power.

“Now, Ethan!”

Ethan leapt from the side, spinning mid-air as his twin axes cleaved through the beast’s exposed flank. Sparks flew. The monster howled, kicking wildly.

Another leap—this time Ethan rolled beneath the creature, slicing its underbelly.

David followed with a brutal **vertical slash**, severing its foreleg.

It crashed with a cry, and David finished it with a clean blow to the head. Blood sprayed, steaming as it hit the ground.

“One down,” Ethan muttered, panting.

“Four to go,” David said grimly, already scanning for the next.

**Triplets' Battle:**

Elsewhere, a **five-legged tiger-beast** with spiked tails and glowing purple veins descended on the triplets. It was fast—faster than most—and its claws left streaks of poison on the stone floor.

“Shield lock!” Riven shouted.

He raised his reinforced shield just as the monster pounced. The beast crashed into it, but the force only pushed Riven back an inch.

“Open!”

With flawless timing, he shifted aside—**Lira's sword** flashed under the beast’s chin, drawing blood. The tiger roared, spinning wildly—but **Alric’s energy blast** slammed into its ribs, throwing it off balance.

“Circle it—don’t let it rest!” Lira commanded.

The triplets moved like a single organism—never crossing paths, never hesitating.

They whittled it down. Cut by cut. Blast by blast.

And then, with one final sequence, Riven pinned it, Lira pierced its heart, and Alric stunned it dead with a focused shot.

“Enemy neutralized,” Alric said coldly.

Lira wiped her blade clean. “Next.”

**Emily’s Encounter:**

At the edge of the formation, **Emily** moved in a blur. She didn't attack—she didn’t need to. A **mantis-like beast** with sickle-arms and jet black chitin had targeted her. But every time it lunged, she was already gone.

She moved with elegance, like a dancer.

The beast’s strikes sliced empty air.

“Too slow,” she whispered, sidestepping again.

She didn’t strike back—she only maneuvered, dodged, analyzed. The creature’s frustration grew.

She lured it toward the trenches, leading it through spikes, into energy fields—turning the environment into her weapon. And just when the beast stumbled for a moment—

**Boom!**

A plasma turret hidden in the wall activated, vaporizing it in an instant.

Emily stood still, hair rustling from the force.

She exhaled. “Eliminated.”

The rest of the 2-Star teams pushed on.

Screams echoed. Roars shook the earth. Bodies fell. But the soldiers held their line.

Kael, still watching, felt something awaken inside him.

They were warriors now.

The **true battle**, though, had yet to come.

**Chapter 40 – The Beast Tide: Part 3**

The air rippled. The earth vibrated. A heavy silence fell across the battlefield—as if the very world held its breath.

And then it came.

The **roar** was unlike anything heard before—deep, ancient, and filled with bloodlust. It wasn’t just a sound; it was a **warning**.

From the fog of death emerged five monstrous shapes.

**The 3-Star Mutants Had Arrived.**

First slithering in was a **mutated serpent**, its **scales like obsidian armor**, glistening with a slick sheen of venom. It was **as thick as a car** and long enough to coil around a building. Fanged and silent, it moved with haunting grace, its yellow eyes scanning for prey. *A whisper of death.*

Second came the **mutated panther**—its body sleek and rippling with muscle, **twice the size** of any 2-Star beast before it. Its **midnight-black fur shimmered** with strange energy, and its tail swayed like a blade. With each step, it left claw marks burned into the earth. *A shadow in motion.*

Then above, circling in the stormy skies, came **two mutated eagles**—each **as tall as a two-story building**, their wingspans casting wide shadows across the field. Their feathers were sharp like blades, talons like spears, and beaks that dripped acid. The sky screamed as they descended. *Death from above.*

And finally, crashing through shattered trees, came the **mutated bear**—a **monolith of muscle and rage**, towering **as tall as a three-story building**. Its fur was spiked and matted with dried blood. Its eyes glowed like embers, and every step shook the ground. Its claws could tear tanks. *An unstoppable force.*

All five monsters spread across the front, standing **200 to 300 meters apart**, challenging the defenders with silent menace.

Across the camp, the **elite troops assembled**.

**“Don’t die,” Elise said softly.**

Her words weren’t dramatic, just **quietly genuine**. She glanced at Kael, her eyes lingering longer than usual, before turning to face the serpent alone. Her calm presence was unnerving—as though she’d already accepted what might come.

**“CHARGE!” roared Darius.**

The commander dashed forward, his **broadblade held high**, energy coiling around him like a storm. He called out as he moved, his voice carrying across the chaos:

“HOLD YOUR GROUND! FIGHT WITH EVERYTHING! THE FATE OF THIS WALL—RESTS ON YOU!”

His body was like a battering ram of sheer will, rushing directly toward the mutated panther.

Behind him, **Cherry**, sleek and poised, gave Kael one last look. Not a goodbye, but an assurance. Her feline eyes sparkled with certainty—*she would win*. And then, in a blur of silver-white fur, she vanished toward her prey.

Kael felt the air thicken.

This was it.

He clenched the shaft of his new spear—the blue shimmer pulsing faintly as if alive. Then, without a word, he sprinted toward the beast that awaited him.

The **mutated bear** had already begun its slow, thundering walk forward. Its head lowered like a battering ram, its growl low and ancient.

Kael narrowed his eyes.

“You’re mine.”

To the sides, the two teams assigned to the **mutated eagles** activated their aerial assault gear—grappling lifts and propulsion boosters fired as they launched into the sky, prepared to fight death itself in midair.

Below, Elise calmly stepped into the field of the massive serpent. Her spear twirled once. She closed her eyes for a moment, exhaled, then opened them with deadly focus.

**And then… the ground broke again.**

A thunderclap of raw energy rolled over the battlefield.

From the far edge of the wasteland, rising over the shattered remains of ruined trees, came a **colossal shadow**.

Its mane glowed with golden plasma. Its body was shaped like a feline, but **larger than a war tank**, every muscle precise and deadly. Its **eyes burned like molten gold**, and its **roar shattered glass** across the base.

The soldiers stopped breathing.

A 4-Star Mutated Monster had arrived.

**The Mutated Lion — apex of the beast tide.**

And across from it stood **Cherry**, a quiet growl in her throat, her stance firm. She didn’t blink. She didn’t falter.

Two predators. One bloodline.

One destined battle.

The horns blared again.

The tide had reached its peak.

And now… the true war began.

**Chapter 41 – The Beast Tide: Part 4**

The sky was no longer blue. It had become a **war zone**.

Screeches thundered from above as the **two mutated eagles**, titanic in scale, circled over the battlefield. Their eyes gleamed like molten copper, scanning the chaos below with vicious hunger. **Wingspans over thirty meters wide** beat against the air, causing whirlwinds that flung debris across the field.

Each beat of their wings could send a grown man flying.

Each talon could crush steel.

Each scream shook the hearts of those listening.

And yet, rising to meet them, **two elite troops** soared into the sky—fueled by jetpack thrusters and energy grappling cables that hissed with fire and light.

They had **one mission**: neutralize the aerial threat.

**Team Alpha: Led by Sergeant Lyn and Marcus**

Marcus soared like a cannonball, gripping his dual-edged plasma sabers, both pulsing neon blue. His armor had been upgraded with aerial stabilizers, and his visor tracked the eagle’s movements with microsecond precision.

“Engage the right eagle! Split the formation!” Lyn commanded through their headsets.

Behind him, three other elite fighters followed suit—one wielding a long-range plasma rifle, one with energy-thread bolas, and the last with compact drone deployers.

The eagle on the right—the larger of the two—screeched and **dove like a missile**, talons stretched wide.

“Marcus! Break its dive!” Lyn shouted.

Without hesitation, Marcus rocketed upwards, **barreling headfirst into its path**. Just before impact, he twisted sideways and **slashed one saber** across the beast’s wing-joint.

A spray of **thick, black blood** erupted—but it wasn’t enough to stop the descent.

The eagle roared and clipped him with a wing, sending Marcus spiraling through the air.

“Marcus!” Lyn barked. “Recover!”

“I’m good—I’m good!” Marcus grunted, stabilizing his flight seconds before crashing into a broken tower.

The eagle swooped again, this time aiming for Lyn himself. The sergeant activated a **decoy flare**, exploding in blinding white light. The eagle reeled back, giving the sniper a window.

“Now!” Lyn called.

The sniper, perched on a floating drone platform, took the shot. A **crimson bolt** fired and struck the eagle **directly in its left eye**, causing it to shriek and jerk mid-flight.

It didn’t fall—but it bled.

They were making progress.

**Team Beta: Led by Sergeant Nara and Garret**

Garret's weapon—a hybrid **energy crossbow** with explosive tips—glowed with pulsing red heat. Unlike Marcus’s direct rush, Garret played from mid-range, sending precise volleys that danced between wind and chaos.

Their eagle was **faster**—sleeker in build, and viciously intelligent.

It had already learned from its sibling’s injury. It dodged and twisted with impossible agility, making it hard to land a hit.

Sergeant Nara wasn’t deterred.

“Form spiral assault pattern!” she ordered.

Her team moved like gears in a machine. One soared above the eagle to distract it, another fired magnetic grapples that anchored into clouds of ionized mist, restricting the eagle’s freedom of movement. A third deployed a **gravity pulse mine** mid-air.

The eagle, frustrated, lashed out—its wings slicing through the mist and sending two soldiers tumbling. One caught herself with her stabilizer, but the other screamed as he plummeted.

“Hold tight, Leo!” Garret shouted.

He dived and fired a grapple from his wrist, snagging Leo mid-fall and yanking him back to safety. The crossbow spun once on his back and fired another shot mid-spin—**striking the eagle’s flank**. The arrow exploded in flame, staggering the monster in midair.

The beast roared, pain evident in its screech.

“Nice shot!” Nara yelled, flying past him with twin blasters roaring.

The eagle retaliated fast—it **flapped hard**, generating a concussive shockwave that scattered the team. Then it spiraled into a barrel roll and crashed into one of the floating towers that Team Beta had been using for support.

The **entire structure exploded**, raining molten metal and electric fire down upon the field.

**Back to Team Alpha**

Marcus had returned, bloodied but fired up.

He soared behind the wounded eagle and **jammed both sabers** into its spine. The monster shrieked and bucked, sending him flying—but the damage was real.

Its flight faltered.

Sergeant Lyn soared in next, firing his grappling hook and **latching onto the eagle’s wing bone**. He crawled along it like a spider as the eagle flailed wildly, trying to shake him off.

“Do it, Kael,” Lyn whispered to himself. “We’ll hold the sky.”

Then he drew a small **energy blade** from his waist—specifically tuned to disrupt nerve centers.

He drove it into the wing joint, right into the sensitive cluster his visor had marked.

The eagle screamed again—a cry that echoed across the battlefield.

The beast was now fighting with only **one usable wing**, spinning in a chaotic tumble through the skies.

**Team Beta’s Eagle Responds**

Despite its injuries, the second eagle had grown **even more aggressive**.

It had begun using **sonic shrieks**, compressing energy into soundwaves that battered their ears and shook their gear apart.

Garret was struggling to aim—his ears bleeding, his HUD glitching.

Then he saw it: the eagle was circling around to attack **the command center**.

“IT’S GOING FOR THE BASE!” Nara shouted.

“I’ll intercept!” Garret yelled.

He activated **all boosters**, flying faster than he ever had. His crossbow rotated and hummed. He drew one of the **experimental explosive arrows** Darius had handed out.

He locked on.

Fired.

The arrow flew.

The eagle turned.

But the arrow struck—not its body—but the **energy sac under its neck**. The resulting explosion sent a massive burst of fire and light, temporarily **blinding** the eagle and pushing it off course.

It didn’t fall.

But it turned back.

Now it was angry.

Garret could see it—**its eyes were on him**.

“Here we go…” he whispered.

**The Battle Continues…**

As explosions tore across the skies, and wings clashed with swords, the battle between the elite troops and the eagles had become an aerial war of attrition—**strategy versus savagery**, agility versus raw strength.

Neither side had fallen yet.

But the sky was no longer a safe place.

And the battle had only just begun.

**Chapter 42 – The Beast Tide: Part 5**

The battlefield pulsed with the rhythm of chaos, but Elise walked forward as though none of it touched her. The wind fluttered through her silver hair. Her boots struck the ground with calm precision. She was alone—purposefully. Her squad had been ordered to support the outer line. **This fight was hers alone.**

Across from her, slithering through the broken terrain like a nightmare uncoiling, came the **mutated serpent**.

It was easily **twenty meters long**, its scales glistening like obsidian metal under the flashes of battle. Each movement of its body dragged gashes through the ground, and its yellow eyes glowed like twin coals. The mutated snake flicked out a **forked tongue laced with green steam**—venom so potent it had melted concrete where it dripped.

But Elise showed no fear.

Only stillness.

The snake hissed violently and lunged forward with a speed that blurred.

Elise lifted her palm.

A shimmer of blue light pulsed from her wrist—the activation of her **energy blade fan**. A metallic hiss unfolded the weapon into five radiant, bladed wings shaped like a blooming flower. They hovered behind her, spinning silently.

The snake came close—**and then vanished in a blur of motion.**

It was fast. **Too fast for ordinary eyes.**

But Elise wasn't ordinary.

“Predictable,” she murmured.

She sidestepped with supernatural grace, the blade fan reacting to her thoughts. It spun around her in a fluid orbit, slicing into the snake's midsection as it tried to pass.

The steel-hard scales cracked with a shriek. Black blood sprayed into the air—but Elise had already moved.

She launched upward into a half-somersault, landing on a crumbled rooftop just a dozen meters away. Her eyes flicked sideways for a moment—toward the southern quarter of the battlefield.

From this angle, she could see him.

**Kael.**

He stood before the towering **mutated bear**, a monster that dwarfed even the buildings around it. And yet, Kael held his ground. His **blue spear** shimmered with power, and he readied himself with the same determination she had seen that night during the storm.

Elise’s eyes softened briefly.

“Don’t lose, Kael,” she whispered. “I want to fight you someday.”

A hiss tore her attention back. The snake had coiled into a **tornado of rage**, spinning violently with its tail lashing like a whip.

It struck at the building she stood upon, collapsing it in an instant.

Elise jumped effortlessly, flipping through the air as debris rained below. Her energy fan formed a protective shield that deflected falling stone. She landed atop the serpent’s own body.

The beast thrashed—furious.

“You don’t get to interrupt me,” she said flatly.

She plunged her palm downward.

One of the blade-wings darted forward and **embedded itself** into the serpent’s spine. The creature screamed, its body convulsing. Elise backflipped off as it crashed into the ground, thrashing violently.

The earth cracked beneath its weight.

Still alive. Still fighting.

Elise landed again and rolled her neck slowly.

“You’re disappointing,” she said with a sigh.

The snake suddenly **snapped its jaws forward**, releasing a **stream of toxic mist** from glands beneath its fangs. The venom hissed as it spread, melting the ground and nearby trees.

Elise brought her hands together, and the energy blades formed a shield dome in front of her. The mist splashed against it—and dissolved harmlessly.

When it cleared, she was still standing.

Untouched.

Unshaken.

She narrowed her eyes and sent the blades darting out in wide arcs, slicing shallow cuts across the serpent’s sides from multiple angles. The snake responded by burrowing—its massive body disappearing beneath the surface in seconds.

Silence.

She closed her eyes.

The ground vibrated.

A moment later, the snake **burst up from the earth directly beneath her**—a clever ambush.

But Elise was already in the air, rising like a petal on the wind. Her blades converged downward, striking the serpent mid-lunge. A direct hit to the face.

A spray of dark blood followed.

Still, the serpent twisted and coiled mid-air—biting toward her in desperation.

She reached back and summoned her final blade—**the core fan blade**, etched with her personal crest. She spun it in hand like a discus and hurled it straight down.

It struck the serpent’s open mouth—wedging into the roof of its jaw and sparking violently.

The monster shrieked, reeling backward, its mouth slamming shut in pain.

Elise landed calmly once more, breathing slowly.

“You’re durable,” she admitted. “But I’m not done testing you yet.”

Far off, she glanced again—Kael now locked in fierce battle with the towering bear. She watched as he was flung back through a wall, only to rise again, spear in hand, blood trailing from his cheek.

“Don’t lose,” she whispered again. “Because if you do… I’ll kill that thing for you.”

Her blades returned to her sides like loyal wings, orbiting quietly, hungry for the final blow.

The serpent, wounded but far from dead, slithered around her in a wide circle—now cautious, aware it had underestimated this woman.

But Elise only smiled faintly.

The sky cracked again with thunder—another eagle had screamed. The battle raged on around them, chaos swallowing the world whole.

But in Elise’s part of the field, there was only **one predator**.

And she wasn’t done hunting yet.

**Chapter 43 – The Beast Tide: Part 6**

The sound of battle echoed through the broken plains like a storm of war drums. But amidst the chaos, **Darius stood steady**, his massive broadblade resting across his shoulder, the wind catching his dark cape. His eyes, seasoned and sharp, focused on the beast that had leapt into the battlefield with silent fury—**a mutated panther**, twice the size of its already terrifying 2-star kin.

Its shoulders rippled with muscle. Its obsidian-black fur shimmered with an oily gleam, absorbing light. Four eyes blinked—two above, two below—and glowed a sinister red. Its tail lashed once, cracking the air like a whip, and its claws gouged into the earth as it circled.

**Darius shifted his weight to his prosthetic leg**—a sleek alloy limb fitted beneath his combat gear. The servos whirred softly, keeping perfect balance.

“Come on, then,” Darius said, voice gravel-thick. “Let’s dance.”

With a snarl that shook the air, the panther launched.

It moved like shadow—**silent, swift, deadly.**

But Darius was ready.

He rolled to the side just as claws carved through where he had stood. Dirt and stone exploded into the air. Before the panther could land fully, Darius swung his massive blade upward in a wide arc. The edge caught the panther’s flank, slicing a shallow gash and sending it tumbling sideways with a furious growl.

“Hmm. You bleed,” Darius muttered, cracking his neck. “Good.”

The beast snarled, its tail lashing again. It circled faster, fangs bared, blood trickling from its side.

This time, it struck with a **feint**—flicking its tail toward Darius’s face, and then twisting its body mid-air for a clawed rake.

The tail hit.

Darius grunted as it snapped across his jaw, drawing blood. But he didn’t falter.

Instead, he **planted his prosthetic leg** deep into the ground, pivoted, and slammed his shoulder into the incoming beast’s side. The two collided with a thunderous crash.

The panther recoiled, momentarily stunned.

Darius exhaled. Blood ran from his cheek and temple, but his grip on the blade was as steady as ever.

“You hit hard,” he said. “But I’ve bled for years longer than you’ve lived.”

The panther leapt high—its form a blur of muscle and claws.

Darius **threw his blade** into the air.

In the split second of surprise from the beast, Darius launched himself forward, grabbed the blade mid-air, and **slammed it downward** with both hands in a devastating vertical slash.

The panther twisted—only partially avoiding it.

The blade still landed a grazing hit, splitting fur and skin across its shoulder.

The beast roared and staggered back.

Darius landed, rolled to one knee, and wiped blood from his chin.

His **prosthetic knee hissed**, absorbing the shock with mechanical precision.

He rose again.

Around him, the battlefield burned with distant fights—the roars of monsters, the clash of energy weapons—but here, in his corner of war, it was just him and the panther.

His voice dropped to a murmur, audible only to the wind:

“I’ve seen beasts stronger than you. I’ve buried them, too.”

The panther’s red eyes narrowed. It let out a low snarl, stalking left and right, probing his stance. Then, with terrifying speed, it surged again—this time faster, more furious.

Its claws struck the blade.

**Sparks flew.**

Its fangs snapped inches from Darius’s throat. But the old commander twisted his body at the last second, catching the beast’s lower jaw with the flat of his blade and **slamming his mechanical leg into its ribs** with a thunderous crack.

The panther yowled and recoiled—but not before raking its claws across Darius’s left arm.

He hissed as **blood sprayed**, his coat torn open.

“Heh. That one got through,” he said, glancing at the cut. “Not bad.”

He spat blood onto the ground.

The panther’s four eyes locked onto his, and for a moment, **man and beast simply stared**.

A standoff.

Both wounded. Both furious. Neither backing down.

Then, from behind him, a voice cut through the comms.

“Darius! Are you alright?” It was Elise’s voice—calm, but with a thread of concern.

Darius tapped the side of his earpiece.

“Still breathing, girl. Focus on your snake.”

“Copy that,” she replied softly.

He clicked off and narrowed his eyes again.

The panther growled low.

“Now,” Darius muttered. “Let’s finish round two.”

**Chapter 44 – The Beast Tide: Part 7**

The ground trembled beneath Kael’s boots.

He stood his ground near the fractured edge of the base perimeter, his new blue spear gleaming with a soft shimmer under the ash-hued sky. A deep rumble echoed across the battlefield, and then—**the mutated bear appeared.**

**Three stories tall**, its shadow alone cast darkness across the scorched land. Its fur was matted and steel-like, thick with a natural armor that shimmered faintly—its **natural defense was monstrous**. Glowing red cracks pulsed beneath its skin, like magma moving under the surface of stone. With each step, the very earth cracked beneath its weight.

Kael’s eyes narrowed. “Here it comes.”

The monster didn’t roar.

It just charged—**a wall of flesh and fury.**

Kael rolled aside just in time to avoid being crushed. A monstrous paw **slammed into the earth**, carving a crater with sheer force. The impact sent a shockwave rippling out, throwing chunks of stone and debris skyward.

He moved quickly, his spear already tracing silver arcs through the air.

*“The Rowing Spear Against the Waves.”*

He thrust—precise and fast. The spear’s blue tip crashed into the bear’s side—**and bounced off**, leaving only a scratch.

Kael’s eyes widened. *“That… should’ve pierced it.”*

He jumped back, evading a paw swipe that would have crushed a tank.

“Is this really a 3-star monster?” he muttered aloud.

The bear turned, red eyes glowing with intelligence and rage. Then it moved again—this time faster.

Kael barely managed to raise his spear in time. The **second blow connected**.

His spear blocked—but the **force flung him across the battlefield**.

He crashed into a stone wall, smashing through it and skidding several meters before stopping. His ribs ached, dust covered his face, and blood trickled from his lip.

“Ugh… no ordinary 3-star,” he groaned, staggering to his feet.

He glanced to the side.

Far in the distance, he could see flashes of **Elise’s battle**, the glint of her twin sabers slicing through the serpent-like monster. Further off, a trail of sparks marked **Darius’s duel** with the massive panther. Two other locations flared with clashing energy—where the two mutated eagles fought against the joint troops.

Only **Cherry’s battlefield** was **invisible**. Just a terrifying hum and distant thuds echoed, shaking the sky.

Kael narrowed his eyes. “That sound… that pressure. That’s not just a 4-star monster. No wonder she’s handling it alone.”

But he didn’t have time to dwell. The bear was already charging again.

Kael gritted his teeth and rolled sideways again. This time he **used his footwork, pivoting mid-dash**, and lashed out with a horizontal strike—**“Three Tide Cleave”**.

The spear drew a brilliant blue arc—*whomp!*

The edge met the bear’s shoulder and cut deeper than before—**but still, only shallow.** Its hide was like tempered steel.

Kael leapt back and switched his stance.

“Your defense… it's insane. This isn't a regular 3-star. Not even close,” he muttered.

He activated the portable scanner on his bracer again—expecting confirmation.

The display flickered. “...Star Power: 3.3...”

“Figures,” Kael exhaled. “A miscalculated scan.”

The bear raised both claws and **slammed them into the earth**, sending a massive shockwave rippling outwards. Kael jumped into the air, flipping mid-spin, and landed on a broken stone pillar.

“Alright,” he whispered to himself. “No more testing.”

He gathered his breath and shifted into a deep stance. His grip tightened on the spear.

“Let’s go, for real this time.”

**He dashed forward.**

The bear swung—Kael ducked and twisted, slipping beneath the arm and **striking upward with a rising spiral thrust**. The spear hummed, blue light swirling along the shaft.

*“Spear Surge – Drifting Break!”*

It struck the bear’s underside—where the armor was thinner.

The monster let out a bellowing roar—the first true sound of pain it had made.

Kael landed behind it, already bleeding from a cut above his brow.

The bear turned slowly, more cautious now. It recognized that this human—unlike many—could **hurt it**.

It lunged again, claws slicing downward. Kael blocked, but was pushed back several meters—his boots grinding against stone.

Kael breathed heavily.

Small cuts adorned his arms, and bruises were forming across his chest.

But his eyes burned with **focus**.

“You’re stronger,” he said between breaths. “But I’ve trained for this.”

The bear roared again and charged, its massive weight barreling forward.

Kael lowered his stance—and then stepped in.

Their clash shook the battlefield once more.

**Chapter 45 – The Beast Tide: Part 8**

The battlefield smelled of blood, smoke, and the dry scent of scorched dirt.

Kael panted, sweat glistening down his brow, stinging the shallow cut above his eye. His grip tightened around the smooth, cool shaft of his blue spear, the shimmering weapon humming as if sensing his pulse. Across from him, the bear stood tall—still unrelenting, still monstrous.

The last exchange had pushed him to the edge.

His breathing was heavy, his muscles burned, and yet—**he smiled**.

Because something within him had begun to awaken.

As the dust swirled between them, Kael closed his eyes for a heartbeat. In his mind, Elise's voice rang out clearly—*“The Rowing Spear Against the Waves isn’t about force. It’s rhythm. Flow. Precision. Timing. You don’t break the tide—you ride it, redirect it, and strike from within.”*

He opened his eyes.

The bear charged again—massive legs pounding the earth like hammers.

Kael didn’t move.

He felt the timing—the pattern of the beast’s movements, the rhythm of its roars, even the heave of its breath. As the monster’s claw came down like a falling tower, Kael *stepped into the wave*.

His body twisted, not against the force—but *with it*, just off its axis.

His spear traced a spiraling line, and with practiced precision—

*Wham!*

It struck **beneath the bear’s shoulder**, a narrow seam in its armor-like flesh.

The monster reeled.

Kael didn’t pause. His body flowed like water, low to the ground, then rising again with a vertical spin. Another strike landed—just beneath the rib-like bones along its side.

**The bear snarled**, its voice low and trembling like thunder.

“I’m not the same guy from a week ago,” Kael whispered, his voice hoarse. “I’m not even the same guy from yesterday.”

He charged again.

This time, it was him pressing the attack.

He flowed like a tide—*rise, crest, crash*. The technique was no longer just a sequence of moves. It had become an instinct. His spearhead, tinged blue, **sang with energy** as it carved controlled arcs into the bear’s hide. Shallow wounds. Deep stabs. Feints. Redirects.

The bear fought back with **pure ferocity**, smashing the ground, swiping wildly, and letting out deafening roars—but Kael danced within the storm.

A paw grazed his back—he spun with the blow, rolling across the earth, and returned with a whip-fast thrust to its thigh.

*“The waves don’t stop,”* Elise had told him. *“You don’t either.”*

The bear began to back up. Kael noticed it now moved with **a limp**.

He felt something twist in his gut—an emotion rising beneath the adrenaline.

**This wasn’t just a monster.** It was a towering force of nature, yes, but also a living thing. And he’d become its greatest threat.

But there was no choice. Not now. Not with **Emily, Ethan, David, Maya**, and the others fighting for their lives. Not when **Cherry was locked in a battle so intense it made the skies hum**, her figure still unseen, her outcome still unknown.

“This battle isn’t just mine,” Kael muttered. “It’s for all of them.”

The bear let out another roar—this one filled with rage and pain. It barreled forward again, lowering its head to crush Kael beneath its bulk.

He didn’t run. He didn’t leap aside.

He *stepped in*—*again*.

The spear hummed in his hands.

*One stroke to turn the tide.*

His body moved in perfect unity—legs rotating, core twisting, arms channeling every ounce of focus into the thrust. The spear pierced forward—not with brute force, but with **timed grace**. It met the soft tissue just below the bear’s eye—**the only exposed spot near its face**.

The creature howled.

It flinched, staggering back, bleeding from a clean, shallow wound that glimmered with blue energy.

Kael hit the ground with a hard roll, skidding across the debris and coming to a stop against a stone slab. His chest rose and fell with ragged exhaustion. Blood trickled from his elbow now. His legs were shaking.

He slowly stood—bracing his weight on the spear.

The mutated bear was still standing.

Its left eye was shut from the damage. One arm hung slightly lower than the other. But it still roared, still pawed at the ground, still refused to fall.

Kael looked up at it—and smiled again.

“Damn tough beast… But I’ve still got more.”

He raised the spear again.

Around him, the battlefield raged on. He could hear the distant clashing of the **eagle troops**, still locked in their aerial dance of death. **Darius’s grunts** and precise orders echoed through the comm line. A glimpse of **Elise’s silhouette**, graceful and uninjured, gliding along the snake’s coiled form.

And still, beyond all of it, the sky trembled with Cherry’s unending duel.

Kael wiped blood from his chin and whispered:

“I won’t be left behind.”

Then he moved.

The bear lunged, still fearsome—still a beast of nightmares.

But Kael’s spear **danced**, and this time, the tide was truly on his side.

**Chapter 46 – The Beast Tide: Part 9: Cherry’s Battle**

The air felt charged as Kael continued his duel, his breath still heavy from the relentless assault of the mutated bear. But all around him, the chaos of battle raged on.

A distant roar shook the ground—a mighty, feline cry that sent a shiver down his spine. He didn’t have to look to know who that was. **Cherry** was already locked in her fight with the **mutated lion**, the monster that stood as an equal to her, and perhaps even a greater threat.

It began with a sudden shift in the ground.

The earth trembled beneath Cherry’s paws. Her **normal form**, small yet agile, had already been a force of nature. But now, there was a **shift**, a subtle but undeniable change. Her body rippled, expanding rapidly. Her fur bristled with energy, shifting from a soft, sleek coat to something more dazzling. A wave of **fiery red, orange, and yellow fur** erupted around her form, glowing with an inner heat that seemed to burn through the night air.

Her claws lengthened, becoming as sharp as obsidian, reflecting the light from the distant fires of battle. Her ears, already keen, now **grew larger**, almost bat-like in their shape—sharp tips flaring out to detect even the faintest movements. With a final burst of energy, her body grew massive, towering over the battlefield like an unstoppable force of nature.

Her eyes—deep and emerald—glowed with an inner fire as she roared to the heavens. She was in her **giant form** now, her size and strength making her an awe-inspiring presence on the battlefield.

**“Stay safe, Kael…”** Cherry’s voice whispered through their **Psionic Bond**, her thoughts intertwining with his like a delicate thread. She didn’t need words. Kael could feel her determination, her silent resolve to protect him—and the others.

The **mutated lion** charged toward her, its massive form circling like a beast of pure destruction. With fur as thick as iron and claws as long as swords, the lion’s massive body swiped with deadly intent. But Cherry was no slouch.

She moved with grace, despite her towering size. **Her massive paws struck the ground**, shaking the earth as she pivoted to dodge the lion’s initial swipe. **Her Elemental Fur Defense** absorbed most of the brute force, the lion’s claws scraping harmlessly off her shimmering fur. She then surged forward, the ground cracking beneath her weight as she lunged at the lion.

**A sharp swipe from her claws** cut through the air with terrifying precision, drawing a deep gash along the lion’s side. The lion growled in pain, stepping back, its eyes narrowing as it assessed her. It was fast, its movements like lightning. It wasn’t a 4-star beast by any means, but it was still a beast of unimaginable power—and it was about to find out how difficult it was to match Cherry’s might.

**Cherry let out a low growl**—one that vibrated through her entire being. The lion came again, its massive paws slashing the air. But this time, **Cherry’s claws arced with energy**—a burst of compressed energy projecting from her paws like a streak of light. The **Claw Arc** exploded in the lion’s face, creating a shallow, yet impactful cut along its jaw. The lion staggered back, momentarily blinded.

**“You’re not the only one who can strike from afar.”** Cherry’s voice reverberated in Kael’s mind, a subtle but confident message. She watched the lion stagger, feeling its frustration rise. The beast snarled, blood dripping from the wound, but it was far from finished.

But then, just as Cherry prepared for another assault, the ground trembled once more—this time more violently.

**A massive figure emerged from the shadows**, smaller than the lion but still just as dangerous. A **mutated boar**, its tusks curving menacingly upward, its glowing red eyes gleaming with hatred. It had been lurking in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to strike. Now, it charged at her with ferocious speed, its body low to the ground like a bull in full charge.

Cherry's massive form reacted instinctively. **Her Psionic Bond with Kael flared**, sending a wave of **danger detection** surging through her mind. She had mere seconds to adjust.

**"Kael, I can feel it!"** she communicated to him, her thoughts sharp and full of raw emotion. **“This is getting harder!”**

But Kael couldn’t answer in that moment. The battle raged on, and he was lost in his own fight. Yet, Cherry’s strength, her **enhanced physical attributes**, and her **dynamic size shift** would be enough—if only she could handle both monsters at once.

The boar charged again, **its tusks** aimed straight at her midsection, and this time, it was faster than expected. **Cherry’s claws met the boar’s tusks**, but it was like meeting a rock head-on. The force of the collision sent a jolt of pain through her limbs. She staggered backward, her giant form momentarily off balance.

The lion took advantage of this, **charging at her side** with incredible speed. Its claws raked across her belly, drawing a deep cut.

**Cherry’s roar echoed**, a scream of pain and frustration. She had barely regained her footing when the boar rushed in again, its tusks aiming for her side. **Her fur glowed brighter**, the energy coursing through her, trying to heal the wounds, but the pressure was too much.

She dodged to the side, but the boar’s tusks caught her shoulder, tearing through her **Elemental Fur Defense** for the first time. The pain was sharp, biting—her fur unable to absorb the full force of the attack. **Cherry’s body trembled**, but her resolve didn’t waver.

She had to fight harder.

In the distance, Kael could feel the shift in the battle. His heart clenched in his chest as **Cherry’s emotions** flooded through him. **Frustration, pain, determination.**

Kael’s gaze flickered toward Cherry’s position, but he couldn’t leave his own fight. He knew what it felt like to be overwhelmed. **But Cherry was stronger than this.**

Her giant form surged forward again, this time with **claws glowing**—her **Claw Arc** slashed through the air, sending another **blast of compressed energy** toward the boar, knocking it backward. She followed up with a brutal **swipe**, her claws cutting through the boar’s hide and leaving deep gashes along its back.

But the lion wasn’t finished. It rushed in again, its jaws snapping, **its teeth gleaming** like sharp knives. Cherry barely had time to react.

Kael clenched his spear tighter. **He couldn’t help her now**, not directly. But there was something he could do.

**"Hang on, Cherry. I’m right here."**

The bond between them pulsed. It was a connection neither could fully explain, but it was enough.

**Chapter 47 – The Beast Tide: Part 10: The Final Stand Against the 3-Star Monsters**

The battle raged on, but as the sun began to rise over the horizon, the battlefield slowly shifted. The chaos of the fight against the 1- and 2-star mutated monsters had lessened as those under the command of the lower-ranked soldiers began to make their mark. The ground was littered with the remains of defeated foes, but now the real test began. The **3-star monsters** and the overwhelming presence of the **4-star lion** remained.

**The Battle Against the Mutated Snake (Elise)**

Elise had finished her battle against the **mutated snake** with ease. It had been a ferocious opponent at first—its massive, scaled body slithering quickly through the dust, striking with deadly venomous fangs. But Elise, having mastered her spear techniques, had danced around the beast with fluid grace, never allowing it to touch her.

Her spear flashed with lightning speed, each thrust calculating and precise. The snake’s massive body was large, but its mobility was hindered by the weight of its venomous fangs and the sheer size of its form. Elise’s spearwork was perfect—each attack found its mark, weakening the snake’s defenses until one final, devastating blow pierced its skull.

The snake slithered to the ground, its last breath a raspy hiss, and Elise took a breath of relief. Her eyes flickered over to Kael's ongoing battle. She smiled faintly, silently acknowledging the fierce fight he was enduring.

**The Battle Against the Mutated Panther (Darius)**

Darius’s fight with the **mutated panther** was far from over, but he was making steady progress. His prosthetic leg, while slower than the others, allowed him to keep a steady rhythm, his movements honed with precision from years of battle.

The panther had been a ferocious opponent—faster than Darius anticipated, and with razor-sharp claws that could tear through steel. But Darius had spent years dealing with far worse in his own wars. Though the panther struck him a few times, minor cuts and scratches on his arms and torso, Darius remained calm, focused, his mind sharp.

Each time the panther tried to land a fatal blow, Darius’s **strategic mind** countered it, parrying with his weapon, redirecting the creature’s power with the **momentum of his prosthetic leg**. The battle was brutal—scratches, claws, and teeth flying through the air—but Darius remained composed.

With one final sweeping move, Darius managed to pierce the panther’s throat with a well-placed strike, the blood soaking the dirt beneath them. He stood over it, victorious but not without visible wounds—scratches along his arms and a deep gash on his cheek.

**The Battle Against the Mutated Eagles (David, Ethan, Emily, and the Triplets)**

The battle against the **two mutated eagles** had been one of **grueling precision and sheer teamwork**. David, Ethan, Emily, and the triplets had worked together seamlessly, combining their strength, agility, and firepower to bring the mighty creatures to the ground.

The eagles were massive, their wingspans wide enough to cast shadows over the battlefield, and their talons sharp enough to pierce through steel. But the **teamwork** of these soldiers had proved to be the key to success. David’s **energy blasts** cut through the air, while Emily’s **speed** and precision kept the eagles at bay. Ethan and the triplets worked together, using their skills to ground the eagles and keep them distracted long enough for David and the others to land significant strikes.

Eventually, after a series of coordinated attacks, one of the eagles was felled. The other was not far behind, as David launched a final energy blast that hit it square in the chest. The creature collapsed to the ground with a screech, and the battle was won.

**The Battle Against the Mutated Bear (Kael)**

Kael’s fight with the **mutated bear** had not been easy. The beast, with its hulking size and monstrous strength, had continuously thrown Kael back with every swing of its massive paws. Though Kael’s **spear techniques** had been useful, the bear was simply too strong—its attacks leaving deep dents in the ground and shaking the very earth beneath Kael’s feet.

Still, Kael remained focused. He had perfected his techniques under the guidance of Elise, and now, in the midst of battle, those teachings were becoming a part of him.

The **bear’s monstrous swings** were now slower, more predictable, and Kael began to use his **agility and precision** to his advantage. Each move was calculated; he used the spear’s length to his advantage, aiming for weak spots on the bear’s body—its eyes, its exposed underbelly. The bear roared in frustration but couldn’t keep up with Kael’s swift, controlled strikes.

Though Kael had taken minor injuries—a scratch here, a bruise there—he had gained a clearer understanding of the technique Elise had taught him. The battle continued, but Kael’s confidence grew as the bear’s ferocity began to wane.

**Cherry’s Battle Against the Mutated Lion and the Boar**

Meanwhile, Cherry continued to battle the **mutated lion**, but her fight had taken a sudden turn. The lion’s ferocity matched her own, but it had been manageable until **another foe arrived**—a **mutated boar**, smaller but still a threat.

The **boar’s tusks** scraped against Cherry’s fiery fur as she twisted her body to avoid its brutal charge. Her **Elemental Fur Defense** absorbed most of the force, but the pressure of having to fight two powerful opponents at once began to weigh on her. She moved with incredible grace, but the lion’s claws dug deep into her sides, and the boar’s tusks made their mark across her shoulder.

Cherry let out a **growl of frustration** but never hesitated. She was determined to protect the base and defeat these monsters. Her **Claw Arc** sent bursts of compressed energy flying toward the boar, knocking it off balance for a moment, allowing her to focus her attention on the lion.

The battle raged on, and the two **ferocious beasts** were relentless. But Cherry’s massive form, coupled with her raw power, was enough to hold her own.

**Darius Moves to Assist Cherry**

Darius, having completed his battle against the mutated panther, glanced over at Cherry’s position. He saw her struggling against the lion and boar, and his instincts kicked in.

**"I need to help her,"** he muttered to himself. He moved toward her, his **prosthetic leg** striking the ground with each step. His **injuries** were minor, but he could still fight. He didn’t have the speed of others, but he had the experience.

But as he neared her, he saw something unexpected—**Cherry’s eyes met his**. She gave him a look, one filled with **assurance and silent strength**. It was clear she didn’t need help—not yet, at least.

Cherry’s posture shifted. She **leapt high**, dodging a swipe from the lion and slamming down onto the boar. With one fluid motion, she used her claws to send the boar flying backward, a powerful **Claw Arc** tearing through the air.

**Darius froze.**

It was clear now. **Cherry had this.**

He took a step back, his heart swelling with pride, and moved toward the other soldiers, his battle over. **He would leave her to handle this.**

**The Aftermath**

As the battle wound down, the troops began to move toward the 2-star and 1-star battles, helping those who were still struggling. Kael, though still locked in his fight with the mutated bear, felt the pressure of the battle easing as the troops surrounding him began to gain the upper hand.

It wouldn’t be long before the base was free of these monstrous invaders. But Cherry, Darius, Elise, and the others knew they had to remain vigilant. The battle was far from over, but the tide was finally turning in their favor.

**Chapter 47 – The Beast Tide: Part 11: The Final Stand**

The battle had been long, and Kael’s body was on the edge of exhaustion. His movements had become slower, his spear strikes less fluid, but his resolve was unyielding. The **mutated bear** had been relentless, every attack a monstrous show of raw power. Its claws, massive and razor-sharp, had gouged deep into the earth around him, sending shockwaves through the ground with each of its mighty swipes.

The battle had started with Kael fighting purely defensively, dodging the bear’s tremendous swings and striking when he found an opening. But as the hours dragged on, the bear’s strength showed no signs of waning. The beast’s attacks were brutal—each one landing with a thunderous crash, pushing Kael back with every strike.

His armor was cracked, his breathing labored, and his body was bruised and battered. He could feel the weight of his spear growing heavier with every second. He staggered slightly as the bear came at him again, its claws slashing in a wild arc.

Kael’s **mind was exhausted**, but he could still hear Elise’s voice echo in his head: *"The Rowing Spear Against the Waves, Kael. Let the tide carry you."*

With his last reserves of energy, Kael took a deep breath, narrowing his focus. His body moved automatically, his spear flashing with deadly precision as he parried the bear’s incoming strike, using its own momentum against it.

The bear recoiled, and Kael saw his opening. With a quick, sharp motion, Kael drove the spear deep into the bear’s side. The beast let out a deafening roar, staggering back, blood streaming from the wound. Kael pressed forward, his body screaming in protest, but he wouldn’t stop now. With one final effort, Kael thrust the spear into the bear’s chest, piercing its heart.

The bear’s body trembled as it let out a final, guttural growl, then collapsed onto the ground with a heavy thud. Kael fell to his knees, breath ragged, as he watched the life leave the beast’s eyes. He had done it. The fight was over—**but only for him**.

**Elsewhere on the Battlefield**

Though Kael had triumphed, the battle was far from finished. The troops, led by their commanders, continued their battle against the remaining **1-star** and **2-star** monsters.

**David, Ethan, Emily, and the Triplets** were still deep in the fray, battling the **2-star monsters**. The air was thick with smoke and dust, but their focus was unwavering.

David stood at the front, his **energy blaster** raised, firing precise blasts at the advancing monsters. The **energy blast** cut through the air like a beam of light, striking monsters down with deadly accuracy. David’s **tactical mind** allowed him to predict their movements, always staying one step ahead.

Ethan and the triplets fought side by side, using their **enhanced physical abilities** to devastating effect. Ethan’s speed was a blur as he dodged attacks and closed in on the monsters, while the triplets worked in perfect synchronization, attacking from multiple angles and using their combined strength to bring down the enemies. Their teamwork was seamless, each member knowing exactly what the other would do before they did it.

Emily, ever the agile fighter, used her **swift movements** to dodge the monsters' attacks, striking when they were least expecting it. She had learned to **capitalize on the weaknesses of her enemies**, focusing on the joints and eyes to disable the 2-star monsters.

Together, the team was a well-oiled machine, and within moments, the last of the 2-star monsters was defeated. Their victory was hard-earned, but they were victorious.

**The 1-Star Battles**

The **1-star monsters** were easier to handle for the rest of the troops, but that did not mean they were any less dangerous. Soldiers worked together in squads, each focusing on their assigned enemies. **Energy weapons**, **swords**, and **bombs** were deployed in synchronized attacks, ensuring that the 1-star monsters were overwhelmed quickly.

**Energy blasts** shot from the rifles of soldiers, striking monsters at range, while others moved in close, using their **combat knives** and **swords** to finish the job. The monsters, though strong in their own right, were simply no match for the superior tactics and firepower of the troops. They were cut down swiftly, their roars of rage silenced by the precise, well-placed attacks.

One soldier, a young recruit, barely managed to avoid being crushed by the foot of a 1-star monster, but a fellow soldier leaped in just in time, knocking the recruit to safety. The squad worked quickly, finishing off the last of the 1-star monsters, their attacks coordinated and deadly.

**Cherry’s Battle Against the Mutated Lion and Boar**

Meanwhile, in the distance, **Cherry’s battle** raged on. She had transformed into her **giant form**, her fur glowing a dazzling mixture of **red, orange, and yellow**, rippling with power. Her claws were sharp as ever, her ears pinned back as she confronted the **mutated lion** and the newly arrived **mutated boar**.

The **lion** roared, its massive frame almost as large as Cherry’s own, and the **boar** charged with its tusks bared. Cherry swiped with her claws, creating arcs of compressed energy that sent the lion tumbling backward. Her **Elemental Fur Defense** absorbed most of the lion’s strikes, though it still managed to get in a few glancing blows.

But the boar was faster than the lion. Its tusks **grazed Cherry’s side**, and the pain was enough to cause her to stumble. She turned just in time to see the boar charging again, and with a growl, she launched herself at it, using her **massive form** to slam into it with **incredible force**. The boar was sent sprawling, its tusks still scraping against her fur, but Cherry was too strong.

Her **Claw Arc** cut through the air, striking the boar in the side. The creature yelped in pain but continued to struggle, and Cherry knew she needed to finish this fight. She squared off with the lion first, her body glowing as she prepared her next move.

**The Troops Support the 1-Star and 2-Star Battles**

As the final 2-star monsters fell, the **troops** quickly began moving toward the 1-star battlefront. They lent their support to the soldiers still fighting, helping them finish off the remaining monsters. **Kael’s team** was especially active, as they used their **energy weapons** and **sword techniques** to aid in dispatching the last few monsters.

They acted swiftly and efficiently, each soldier moving with purpose as they continued to clear the area. The **energy blasts** from David’s rifle hit their marks with deadly precision, and Ethan, Emily, and the triplets continued to work together, dispatching the smaller monsters with ease.

As the final blow landed on the last of the 1-star beasts, a cheer went up from the troops. It was a small victory, but a victory nonetheless. The area was cleared, and the troops turned to look at the ongoing battle between **Cherry** and the remaining 4-star monsters.

**Chapter 48 – The Beast Tide: Part 12: Cherry's Triumph**

The ground trembled under the weight of three monsters—**Cherry**, radiant in her massive battle form, squared off against the **mutated lion** and **boar**, both nearly equal in ferocity but lacking her unique power. Her vibrant fur glowed in hues of **sunset flame**—**red**, **orange**, and **yellow**, crackling with elemental energy. Her deep, golden eyes narrowed as her claws dug into the earth, calculating the next move.

The **lion** lunged, muscles rippling, its fangs gleaming with bloodlust. Cherry sidestepped with incredible agility for her size, her **claws arcing** through the air in a burst of **compressed energy**. The strike hit the lion square across its snout, leaving a glowing cut. The beast roared, stumbling back, while the **boar charged** from behind with brute speed, tusks flashing.

Cherry twisted mid-motion, her body shifting as her **fur hardened**, absorbing most of the impact. But the boar’s strike was strong—it sent her skidding across the broken earth, her massive paws digging trenches as she came to a halt.

For the first time in the fight, **pain flickered** across Cherry’s expression. Blood stained her golden coat where the boar’s tusk had pierced through. Her ears twitched. *Kael…* She didn’t need to see him to feel him. Through their **Psionic Bond**, she felt his exhaustion, his pulse still rapid from his own battle. She could sense the others moving, regrouping, watching her from afar—but not interfering. Not yet.

Her sharp ears perked up.

**Boom!**

An explosion rocked the field. A shell had landed near the boar, just a few meters short of impact, sending it reeling to the side. Cherry’s head turned to the ridge.

Kael stood there, supporting himself on his spear. Beside him, **Darius**, **David**, and **Ethan** manned a mobile artillery unit the soldiers had pulled into position. **Emily**, still catching her breath, pointed out coordinates, her young face marked with sweat and resolve.

They weren’t here to steal her battle.

They were here to **support her**.

As the lion came at her again, Cherry **ducked low**, rolled beneath its lunge, then sprang upward with feral grace. Her **claws slashed upward**, raking through the lion’s throat in a streak of burning energy. It roared, blood gushing from the wound, but Cherry wasn’t done. Her **Claw Arc** surged from both front paws in a crisscross, slicing through the lion’s chest. The beast staggered back, weakened, dazed.

The boar tried to capitalize, ramming into her from the side. This time, the impact sent Cherry flying—but she **twisted midair**, landing heavily but on all fours. Blood dripped from her side, and her breathing came in ragged huffs.

Another shell exploded, this time grazing the boar’s flank. It squealed, its armored hide dented and scorched. The troops were firing carefully—**supporting** without overwhelming, leaving the final blows to Cherry.

Cherry roared—a sound not of pain, but of **rising fury**.

With a powerful leap, she launched herself at the **injured lion**, dodging its sluggish swipe and driving her claws deep into its ribs. Her body surged with power, fur flaring, muscles flexing. With one final roar, she **slammed the lion into the ground**, her claws erupting with a **double Claw Arc** that tore through its skull.

The mutated lion went limp. **One down.**

She turned immediately—**no pause**, no triumph—as the boar came again.

Cherry met it head-on.

The two collided in a brutal clash, tusks grinding against claws. The boar tried to gore her again, but Cherry ducked low, her muscles rippling as she twisted beneath its bulk. She **latched on with her rear claws**, anchoring herself, then began slashing with relentless precision. Each strike chipped away at its armor, one after another, wearing it down.

The boar tried to buck her off—but she held tight.

And then Kael’s voice—barely above a whisper—slipped through their bond:  
*“Now, Cherry.”*

She **closed her eyes**, channeling every bit of her remaining energy.

Her claws glowed **red-hot**, and with a final, furious scream, she unleashed a **full-powered Claw Arc**, both front paws **cleaving into the boar’s neck**.

The light from the attack was blinding.

When the dust cleared, the mutated boar slumped to the ground—twitching, shuddering—then lay still.

Cherry stood in silence, blood on her fur, **heaving**. Her massive form flickered, then slowly began to **shrink**, returning to her normal, sleek size. Her fur was matted with blood, and she had several gashes along her flank, but she stood tall—head high, eyes proud.

Kael reached her first, limping slightly, but his smile was soft. “You did it,” he murmured, reaching out to her gently. Cherry leaned into his touch, closing her eyes, the bond between them thrumming with mutual pride and exhaustion.

Darius, David, Emily, Ethan, and the rest of the troops gathered slowly, their weapons lowered, their faces tired—but triumphant. Around them, the battlefield was quiet. The sky was painted orange and gold as the sun dipped low on the horizon, reflecting the fading embers of battle.

The **Beast Tide** was over.

The monsters had been repelled.

And though blood had been shed, they were still standing.

**Chapter 48 – The Final Echo of Battle**

The sun, now a golden disc on the horizon, cast its last warm glow over the battlefield. The once howling winds of war had gone still. The air was heavy with the scent of ash, blood, and earth—but also the quiet, humming relief of survival.

The last monster had fallen.  
The **Beast Tide** was over.

A silence held for a moment longer, suspended in awe… until it broke—first as a whisper, then a rising roar.

**Cheers erupted.**

"WE DID IT!"  
"We're alive!"  
"THE BASE STANDS!"

Weapons raised high, bloodied and battered soldiers—veterans and green recruits alike—embraced one another. Some wept, some laughed. Some simply collapsed where they stood, the adrenaline leaving their bodies all at once. Dozens of soldiers and defense operators moved forward in organized rows to begin collecting **monster corpses**—large and small—dragging them or loading them onto heavy transports. Harvest teams set up markers, readying for extraction and research.

Kael stood beside Cherry, still scratched and bruised but upright, watching it all.

**Elise approached**, her expression calm, but her pace steady. The violet accents in her armor glimmered faintly with dust. Her black hair was tied up, some strands loose from combat. Her spear was holstered on her back.

"Kael." Her voice held its usual grace, but there was something warmer now. “You’ve improved.”

Kael turned to her, the dirt and sweat still clinging to his brow. “Thanks. I used your technique—the *Rowing Spear Against the Waves*.”

“I saw,” she said with a nod, a flicker of pride in her violet eyes. “You didn’t just mimic it. You molded it. It was yours.”

Kael let out a slow exhale. “It felt different. Like I finally understood what you meant about *feeling the rhythm of the enemy*. Not just striking—*responding.*”

She smiled faintly. “Exactly. It’s not about strength alone. It’s about flow. Understanding. Timing.” She tilted her head. “And Cherry?”

Kael glanced down at Cherry, who was licking at a healing wound on her foreleg. She looked up at him, ears flicking, golden eyes tired but content.

“She saved everyone today,” he said, crouching down beside her. He ran a hand gently along her singed but glowing fur. “You were incredible.”

Cherry let out a soft *chuff*, leaning into him, and through their **psionic bond**, Kael could feel the pulse of her pride, pain, and reassurance.  
She was telling him—*I’m okay. You don’t need to worry.*

“I am proud of you,” he whispered.

Around them, the soldiers had begun piling the bodies of the monsters. Even the massive corpses of the 3- and 4-star beasts were being chained and loaded into carrier pods. Some younger cadets stared in awe at Cherry as she walked past in her smaller form, still radiant despite her wounds.

Then, from atop a transport truck, **Commander Darius** climbed up. His coat was torn at the sleeve, and a bandage wrapped his shoulder. His **prosthetic leg** clicked slightly as he stood tall, surveying his troops. The noise quieted as people turned toward him.

He raised his hand and spoke, voice booming.

“We have endured the storm. We stood against the dark, the teeth, the claws. And we held.”

“Some of us fell. But because of their sacrifice, and your bravery, this base still stands. Our people are safe.”

“The monsters came to break us—but we proved we will not bend.”

“Today is not just survival. It is a reminder that unity, discipline, and courage... will always prevail.”

“You all fought as one. **Soldiers. Scouts. Specialists. Tamers. Children. Survivors.** You are all warriors now.”

The crowd burst into applause. Many saluted. Some pounded their chests.

“LONG LIVE THE BASE!” someone shouted.

“LONG LIVE OUR PEOPLE!” another cried.

The cheers spread like wildfire.

Near the makeshift medical bay, **Emily** sat on the edge of a cot, drinking water while a medic tended to a bruise on her cheek. **Ethan** flopped next to her, shirt ripped, grinning ear to ear.

“I punched a 2-star in the face,” Ethan said proudly.

David rolled his eyes. “That wasn’t its face. That was its *butt.* It ran away because it was confused.”

“Still counts,” Ethan said, smug.

Emily laughed tiredly. “I’m just glad we’re not dead.”

Elsewhere, **the Triplets**—Cora, Lian, and Vale—were grouped together, watching the cleanup efforts while munching on ration bars.

“We worked surprisingly well together,” Cora muttered.

Lian nodded. “Still think we could’ve taken on a 3-star if they hadn’t pulled us back.”

“Shut up,” Vale said with a grin. “You almost tripped on your own blade.”

Back by the walls, Kael stood alongside Darius again, both looking out over the land now strewn with blood and fading smoke.

“Cherry really is something,” Darius said quietly.

“She’s more than that,” Kael replied. “She’s family.”

Darius looked at him for a long moment, then offered a quiet nod.

“You’ve grown, Kael. In more ways than one.”

The commander turned to address some officers, leaving Kael standing alone as the sky darkened into a velvet blue.

He looked over the field. Bodies of monsters lay quiet. The sound of chains, tools, commands, and occasional laughter filled the air.

**It was over.**

But as Kael stood there, Cherry curled by his side, a strange feeling fluttered in his chest.

Relief.

Pride.

But also… anticipation.

This wasn’t the end.

This was the beginning of what came next.

**Chapter 49 – The Feast After the Storm**

The fires flickered quietly through the night, dotting the camp like glowing embers scattered across a blackened battlefield. Tents had been erected where they could; some slept beneath the open sky, too exhausted to care. The wounded were bandaged, the medics rotated in shifts, and a low hum of silence stretched through the base like a warm blanket—comforting, healing.

Kael lay on his back beside Cherry, whose head rested gently on his chest in her smaller form. He could still feel the faint echo of her pain through their **psionic bond**, but her body was healing rapidly. Her breathing was soft and steady.

The stars above were unusually clear. For once, they weren’t drowned out by roaring winds or flaming skies.  
Tonight, they could rest.

**Morning.**

The scent of dew clung to the air as the base stirred awake. Soldiers emerged, stiff and sore, from bunks and tents. Despite bruises and scrapes, they moved with a shared spirit—a weight had been lifted. The world felt... a little lighter.

Then, the horn blew once. A signal.

Everyone gathered at the main plaza, near the command tower. The entire base—every survivor, every defender, every soul—stood together. The stage was simple. No grand flags. No ornate banners. Just **Commander Darius**, standing tall with a file in hand and silence in his eyes.

Kael stood beside Elise and Cherry, near the front, Ethan and David just behind him. The wind was still. Every breath hung heavy in anticipation.

Darius began to speak.

“Yesterday, we stood on the edge of ruin. Monsters poured through the wilds—three-stars, four-stars, beasts we once thought myth.”  
“And yet… we stood firm.”  
“We fought. Together.”  
“And we won.”

Murmurs, nods. Some held back tears.

“But victory has its price.”

Darius lifted the file.

“Fifty-three names. Fifty-three warriors who gave their lives so we could stand here today.”

He looked down at the first name.

“Captain Marren Dall, who held the eastern line when it began to fall.”  
“Scout Alina Vorne, who dragged four wounded cadets out of the fire and didn’t make it back.”  
“Private Jae-Rin Tae, the youngest among us, only sixteen.”

A hush fell. Some sniffled. Others bowed their heads.

Darius continued reading a few more names, voice thick but steady—then stopped and gently closed the file.

“There are more. Too many to read in one breath. But they will be remembered. Engraved on the Memorial Stone that will rise tomorrow.”  
“Their names will not vanish. Their sacrifice will not be forgotten.”

He straightened and looked across the crowd.

“And now… we honor them the only way they would have wanted—**by living, growing, and fighting on.**”  
“The beasts fell. Their flesh, while dangerous, is powerful. **You all know what it means.**”  
“Eat. Rebuild. Grow stronger. So the next time the wilds rise—we’ll crush them without losing another soul.”

A moment of silence followed. Then a horn sounded twice.

**Feast time.**

Long steel tables were set. Fire pits blazed as slabs of monster meat—some still sparking with faint energy—were roasted, seared, and stewed. Teams of cooks and engineers worked together, mixing herbs, nutrients, and mana-cleansing salts to make the flesh not only safe—but power-enhancing.

The scent was intoxicating. Smoky. Spicy. Foreign.  
**Mutated boar ribs**.  
**Roasted 2-star wyvern tail.**  
**Shredded lion flank with jungle salt.**

Every bite made their bodies *hum* with power.

Kael tore into a portion of bear meat. His muscles burned with the sensation, not painful—**revitalizing**. Every chew sent a pulse through his limbs. Cherry devoured three entire plates before curling up again, her ears twitching.

Laughter rang through the air. Bottles clinked. Soldiers joked, play-fought, and told battle stories with the energy of children let loose from storm bunkers.

“Did you see me stab that mantis in the eye?” David was bragging at a table nearby. “It shrieked like a banshee!”

“It shrieked because you tripped and landed on its face,” Ethan said with a snort.

“Hey, whatever works!”

Elise walked over, plate in hand. She sat beside Kael under one of the tents lit by soft orange light.

“You holding up?” she asked, starting on a roasted fangfish skewer.

Kael nodded, wiping sweat and soot from his brow. “I’m… more than okay. I’ve never felt this alive. My body feels like it’s pulsing with heat.”

“That’s the beast energy,” she replied. “The stronger the beast, the greater the surge. You were lucky not to take more of the bear’s hits.”

Kael looked at her. “Thanks, Elise. For the technique. For everything.”

She paused. “I taught you the form, Kael. *You* turned it into something dangerous.”

“I don’t know,” he muttered. “I still feel like I’m chasing you.”

Elise chuckled softly. “You should be. I’m not slowing down anytime soon.”

He grinned. “Neither am I.”

Their eyes met for a long moment. Quiet, but not awkward. Comfortable.

Then Elise leaned back on her hands. “Cherry really evolved, didn’t she?”

Kael nodded. “She’s incredible. I couldn’t have done half of what I did without knowing she was out there fighting too.”

Cherry, hearing her name, stretched lazily and gave a low purring *gruff*. Elise smirked.

“She might be stronger than both of us soon.”

“She already is,” Kael said proudly.

Later that night, music began to play—someone had pulled out a harmonica, and soon makeshift drums from canisters added rhythm. Dances broke out, clumsy but joyful. Troops clapped and spun each other around. Even some medics joined in.

Darius sat nearby, his prosthetic leg propped on a crate, sharing a drink with the elder soldier Victor and nodding along to the beat.

“I remember a time when we didn’t dance after battles,” Victor said.

“We didn’t win those,” Darius replied with a small smile. “This one… we earned it.”

As the night deepened, Kael stood again, looking out from a quiet perch on the wall. The stars stretched far and endless above him.

Cherry pressed against his side.

Elise joined him again, arms crossed. “Thinking about what’s next?”

Kael nodded. “This battle… was only a warning, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. But now we know what we’re capable of. So we train harder. We prepare better.”  
Her eyes glinted. “And we evolve.”

Kael looked down at the camp—at Emily teaching a younger cadet how to clean a blade, the triplets laughing by the fire, Darius giving a toast, Ethan trying to flirt with a medic and failing miserably.

And he smiled.

“I’m ready,” he said.

**Chapter 50 – The Path to the Mountains**

The sky was still painted in twilight when Kael awoke.

The camp lay in calm silence, dew clinging to the grass, and soft breaths rose from tents and resting soldiers. But Kael had long returned to his old rhythm—**waking before the sun, training with purpose**.

He stepped into the empty training ground, spear in hand, shirt off, breath misting in the cold morning air.

Each swing, each thrust, was like a mantra. His muscles sang from the previous battle, but he pushed through, channeling his thoughts into the motion of the weapon.

**Thrust. Sweep. Spin. Lunge.**

It wasn’t just training anymore. It was **refinement**, carving the blade of his spirit sharper with every movement.

Cherry watched quietly from the nearby wall in her humanoid form, her golden eyes glowing faintly.

Kael paused after an hour, sweat dripping from his brow, and sat beside her. He didn't speak aloud—he didn't need to.

Their bond was deeper now.

**Kael (mentally):** "Cherry… I’m strong. But not strong enough. Not yet."  
**Cherry:** *tilts her head, ears twitching slightly*  
**Kael:** "We faced 4-star beasts… but the world has worse. Ancient beings. Ones that could erase cities. And I could barely hold my own against the bear."  
**Cherry (softly):** *You won. And you lived.*  
**Kael:** "Only because I had all of you. But what if next time I’m alone?"

She was silent. Not because she disagreed—but because she understood.

**Kael:** "That’s why I’ve decided. I’m going into the wild. Alone. The Eastern Mountains. There are things there that can push me to the edge."  
**Cherry (after a pause):** *…It will be dangerous.*  
**Kael:** "I know. But necessary."

Later that morning, he found Elise training cadets near the armory yard. Her presence, as always, was poised, confident, sharp as a blade’s edge.

She noticed him and called a break, walking over with a flask in hand.

"Morning ritual, huh?" she asked, raising a brow.

Kael smirked, brushing his damp hair back. “Old habits die hard.”

She leaned against the fence post, her gaze sweeping over the camp. “You’re restless.”

Kael didn’t deny it. “I need to grow more. I’m heading into the wild. Alone.”

Elise didn’t speak immediately. She studied him instead. The boy she had once helped train. The one who was now a man—not just in strength, but in resolve.

“You’re still five years younger than me,” she murmured, a faint smile touching her lips, “and already stronger than most elite squads.”

“Not stronger than you,” he replied.

She scoffed. “Yet.”

A silence hung between them—familiar, respectful.

“Promise me one thing,” Elise said, her voice softer now. “Don’t die out there. Not before I get to spar you at your best.”

Kael nodded. “I will come back stronger. I promise.”

By afternoon, Kael informed Darius and the others. They gathered in the strategy tent.

Darius listened in silence. Then gave a long, measured nod.

“You’ve earned the right to choose your path,” he said. “But be smart. Wild training is not the same as battle. It’s solitude. And it can break you.”

“I know,” Kael replied, steady. “But I’m ready.”

Darius stepped forward and clasped Kael’s arm. “Then return not just stronger—but **wiser**.”

**That night**, the base lit up for one more feast—**Kael’s farewell**.

This time, it wasn’t about victory. It was about honoring a friend. A comrade. A brother-in-arms.

Kael sat surrounded by laughter and stories. David and Ethan made fun of his serious face. Emily gave him a hand-drawn “training talisman” that he promised to keep. The Triplets cried and hugged him like he was going to war.

Cherry sat beside him, devouring yet another roast.

The air was full of warmth. Of memories.

**Dawn.**

Kael stood at the gate, gear packed, spear strapped to his back. The forest ahead whispered like a beast in slumber.

As he was about to leave, a figure approached.

**Elise.**

She walked up to him without a word at first, eyes steady. Then she held out a small cloth pouch.

“What’s this?” Kael asked.

“Mana stabilizer pills. For when your energy gets wild out there.”

He took them, then looked at her again.

“Elise…”

“Don’t get sentimental,” she said, though her voice was gentler than usual. “Just one last thing.”

She leaned in slightly.

“When you're strong enough… head to the capital. Ask for the **Dran family**. They owe me a favor—and you might find answers there. About the ancients. About yourself.”

Kael’s expression sharpened. “Dran family. Got it.”

She placed a hand on his shoulder. “Go. Train hard. Come back a force the world can’t ignore.”

He smiled, sharp and confident. “I will.”

With a final wave, Kael turned and walked through the gate, Cherry beside him. The trees parted slowly as they entered the forest path, and in the distance, the **Eastern Mountains** loomed like giants against the morning sky.

Every step forward echoed with the promise of trials.

**But Kael didn’t fear them. He welcomed them.**

**nd of Chapter 50**  
**End of Arc I – The Dawn Before Evolution**

Here is the **post-battle physical and ability growth report** for Kael and his allies after the large-scale battle. Every survivor has shown at least **+0.5 Star Power** increase, with standout individuals gaining additional boosts based on performance, exposure, and mental strain resilience.

**🌟 Updated Star Power & Ability Growth Report**

| **Name** | **Post-Battle Star Power** | **Specialty Focus (Growth Highlights)** | **Ability Growth / Notes** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Kael** | **3.5** *(+0.6)* | Still balanced, but with refined **spear mastery**, **heightened reflexes**, and **mental clarity** under pressure. | - Spear Technique: Advanced Mid-Level - Focus Control Improved (near instinctual reaction) - Stamina/Endurance gains noticeable. |
| **Cherry** | **5.1** *(+0.6)* | Dynamic combat monster; maintains elite physical advantage. Survived two 4-star beasts alone. | - **Claw Arc Lv. 2** *(Now deeper impact & 15m range)* - **Psionic Bond (Stage 2 unlocked)** – Kael-Cherry emotional clarity now precise, pre-emptive danger signaling improved. - Elemental Fur: High resistance now includes **minor heat redirection** |
| **Darius** | **3.7** *(+0.2)* | Remains elite but aging slightly slows his rate. Tactical command sharpened, aura more oppressive. | - **Commander’s Focus** now visibly boosts morale and coordination in nearby troops. - Combat strength retains efficiency, but durability lower in longer fights. |
| **Elise Dran** | **~4.0** *(+0.2)* | Master-class spear wielder. Technical growth still possible but near human peak. | - Spear Art: **Dran Flow Step** enhanced (she now moves like water between gaps in enemy lines). - Magic pressure noticeably heavier. |
| **Victor** | **2.8** *(+0.5)* | Tank. Massive defensive fortitude growth. Survived 1-on-1 with a 3-star beast. | - Muscular Density increased. - **Shock Absorption** trait emerged (dampens impact-based attacks slightly). |
| **Maya** | **2.8** *(+0.5)* | Evasion queen. Was untouchable in several skirmishes. | - Speed pushed to near superhuman burst sprint. - Reflex dodge enhancement (subconscious body twitching now activates in crisis). |
| **Garret** | **3.0** *(+0.5)* | Tech-Axe destructive power now matches short-burst artillery. | - Artillery Control optimized. - New **Stun Field Pulse** added to axe (short range, high crowd disruption). |
| **Marcus** | **3.0** *(+0.5)* | Rocket Hammer nearly uncontrollable at max power now. Pure brute growth. | - Hammer swing creates **ground fracture shock** (if stomped with enough power). - Minor growth in aim coordination. |

**🧠 Lower Rank Fighters (Major Growth Observed)**

| **Name** | **Post-Battle Star Power** | **Growth Summary** | **Ability Improvement** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **David** | **2.2** *(+0.5)* | Improved coordination with Kael’s team. Better bone weapon synergy. | Gun + melee integration mastered. Critical hits on mutated wolves. |
| **Ethan** | **2.2** *(+0.5)* | Survival and anti-beast tactics now deeply ingrained. | Reaction time now superhuman under pressure. Field medicine skills also improved. |
| **Emily** | **1.8** *(+0.5)* | Massive growth in intuition. Anticipates enemy paths. | **Danger Sense radius** extended to **700m**. Initiated small rescue ops mid-battle. |
| **The Triplets** | **2.2** *(+0.5 each)* | Unison sword-shield formation now covers a wider angle. | Can now hold formation even while fatigued. Shield Bash velocity increased. Coordination sync <1 second lag. |

**💬 Summary Notes**

* **Kael** stands at the edge of true 4-star potential. His reaction times, stamina, and combat perception make him one of the most efficient mid-tier elites in the region.
* **Cherry**, now firmly in 5-star category, is no longer just a companion but an apex battlefield force.
* **Elise and Darius**, while not gaining as much raw stat growth, had their **skill precision, aura influence, and leadership** scale meaningfully.
* The **1–2 star fighters** matured **dramatically**, with several now capable of managing threats they would've died to days before.

**Chapter 50.5 – The Shifting Balance**

The world had changed. The battle Kael and his allies had just endured was only a ripple—one of many forming in the tides of something much greater.

As the ashes of war settled and the survivors healed their wounds, beyond the walls of the base, across ravaged plains and shadowed forests, something else stirred.

Not just humans were growing stronger. The beasts were changing too.

Once primal and chaotic, the **mutated animals**—from bears to serpents, eagles to tigers—were beginning to **evolve**. Their mutations weren’t just savage aberrations anymore. Their bodies were refining. Their instincts, sharpening. **Some were beginning to regain a forgotten intellect**, echoes of ancient bloodlines and ancestral instincts whispering back to life.

And then there were the **Ancient Beasts**.

They were never meant to awaken fully. Locked in slumber or madness, their strength eclipsed even humanity’s greatest weapons. But the touch of war, the scent of core bloodshed, and mankind’s reach into forbidden zones had stirred them awake.

**🔥 The Three Paths of the Ancient Beasts:**

1. **The Cognizant**:  
   A small number among the ancient monsters regained clarity. With that clarity came purpose, pride, and boundaries. They reclaimed their **domains**—vast forested mountains, deep lakes, or ancient ruins—and imposed **order**. They no longer rampaged aimlessly. But they **tolerated no human intrusion**.
2. **The Tyrants**:  
   Others chose **domination**. These beasts expanded violently, crushing all resistance, laying waste to towns and fortified bases. Their minds retained strategy, and their hatred for humans never dulled. They now command mutated armies.
3. **The Lost**:  
   Many still wandered in madness—destroying indiscriminately. These were the most dangerous. No warning. No reasoning. Just death.

And amidst this chaotic ecosystem, humanity’s only hope lay in **matching** this escalation.

**🛡️ Weapon Technique Mastery System (New Global Classification)**

All combatants now recognized that **raw power wasn't enough**. Technique mastery was everything.

| **Mastery Level** | **Description** |
| --- | --- |
| **Lv 1 - Basic** | Fundamental control, basic use of weapon form. |
| **Lv 2 - Intermediate** | Reliable efficiency, few advanced moves. |
| **Lv 3 - Advanced** | Creative combat use, strategic understanding. |
| **Lv 4 - Mastery** | Almost complete control; personalized style. |
| **Lv 5+ Aura Path** | Requires consumption of **30-Star monster core and heart**. Grants energy projection and aura traits. |

*No one on Earth has reached Aura Level mastery yet. It is said only those who’ve faced ancient beasts and survived with their cores intact may begin the aura path.*

**⚔️ Weapon Grades (Crafting Materials)**

The forging of weapons has evolved with the rise of beasts. Human weapons no longer suffice.

| **Grade** | **Material** |
| --- | --- |
| 1 | Crude human or beast bone weapons |
| 2 | 5-Star core + 5-Star monster bone |
| 3 | 10-Star core + 10-Star monster bone |
| 4 | 20-Star core + 20-Star monster bone |
| 5 | 40-Star core + 40-Star monster bone |
| 6 | 60-Star core + soul + monster bone |
| 7 | 80-Star core + soul + monster bone |
| 8 | 100-Star core + soul + bone |
| 9 | 150-Star core + soul + rare enhancement |
| 10 | ??? (Unknown. Possibly divine or forbidden material) |

**🌈 Special Abilities and** **Awakening Potential**

As humans near **10-Star**, their body may naturally awaken **special abilities**.

| Ability Level | Range: Lv 1 to Lv 10 |
| --- | --- |
| Grades: | White, Grey, Yellow, Green, Blue, Violet, Red, Gold (1-5), Rainbow (Max) |
|  | 10 20 30 50 100 150 200 250-999 1000 |

* Some awaken multiple abilities.
* Some awaken before reaching 10-star.
* Some **never awaken**.
* **Every ability's grade and level are determined by fate**, lineage, and unknown variables.

**Cherry's Abilities:**

* **Claw Arc** → *White Grade*, Lv 2
* **Psionic Bond** → *Blue Grade*, Stage 2

**🍖 Beast Meat & Growth Limits**

Human growth now depends on **star-tier compatibility**.

* A **3-Star warrior** will only benefit from eating **3-Star beast meat or above**.
* **Lower meat offers no gains** after reaching new star thresholds.
* **Younger people** absorb energy faster; **older people slow down** after 2.5 stars unless specialized training or resources are used.

**⚠️ Final Insight**

As Kael left for the wild in search of strength, he wasn't just walking into forested mountains.

He was stepping into **a world changing faster than ever**, where power came not only from training, but **understanding the evolution of the enemy**, the **forge of blood**, and the **laws of primal energy** awakening all around them.

The era of random survival had ended.

The era of **Ascension through Systemized Evolution** had begun.

**📘 Character Growth Tracker (Post Arc 1 – After Chapter 50)**

| **Name** | **Star Power** | **Weapon Mastery** | **Aura Level** | **Special Ability (Grade + Level)** | **Signature Weapon (Grade)** | **Notes / Milestones** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Kael** | 3.5 | Intermediate (Lv 2) → Advanced (Lv 3) | – | Not Awakened | Bone Spear (Grade 1) | Plans to train solo in wild; fast growth |
| **Cherry** | 5.1 | Mastery (Lv 4) | – | Psionic Bond (Blue, Lv 3) Claw Arc (White, Lv 4) | Claws (Natural – Grade 3 equivalent) | Defeated two 4★ monsters solo with support |
| **Elise** | ??? (>4.0) | Advanced → Borderline Mastery | – | Not Revealed | Spear (Unknown Grade, likely 2–3) | Origin hidden; close bond with Kael |
| **Darius** | 3.7 | Advanced (Lv 3) | – | Not Awakened | Hammer-Spear (Grade 1) | Commander; strong aura presence |
| **Victor** | 2.8 | Intermediate (Lv 2) | – | Not Awakened | Shield (Grade 1) | Heavy defense; tank role |
| **Maya** | 2.8 | Intermediate (Lv 2) | – | Not Awakened | Dual Daggers (Grade 1) | Stealth, speed, evasive mastery |
| **Garret** | 3.0 | Advanced (Lv 3) | – | Not Awakened | Tech-Axe (Modified Grade 2) | Mechanic combat style |
| **Marcus** | 3.0 | Advanced (Lv 3) | – | Not Awakened | Rocket Hammer (Grade 2) | Brutal melee specialist |
| **David** | 2.2 | Basic (Lv 1) | – | Not Awakened | Rifle + Bone Dagger (Grade 1) | Tactical, balanced fighter |
| **Ethan** | 2.2 | Basic (Lv 1) | – | Not Awakened | Hybrid Tech Knife (Grade 1) | Reflex + survival expert |
| **Emily** | 1.8 | Basic (Lv 1) | – | Danger Sense (Green, Lv 2) | Support tool (Grade 0) | Recon + early warning system |
| **Triplets** | 2.2 each | Basic (Lv 1) → Intermediate (Lv 2) | – | None Yet | Twin Sword + Shield (Grade 1) | Sync tactics improving with group battles |

**🔮 Future-Ready Additions:**

For upcoming arcs, you can track:

* 📈 **Beast core consumption** (who ate what tier)
* 🧠 **Ability Awakening Timeline**
* ⚙️ **Weapon Upgrade Logs**
* 🏅 **Notable Battles / Events**

**Chapter 51 – Into the Eastern Wilds**  
**Arc 2 Begins**

The sun rose over the horizon in quiet shades of gold, lighting the long path eastward that stretched ahead of Kael and Cherry. The forest had thinned out gradually over the ten days of travel, giving way to harder soil, rising slopes, and jagged stone ridges that hinted at the vast mountain range looming in the distance.

Each day was a trial — not only of endurance but of skill, judgment, and growth.

**Battle 1: Scaled Panther Ambush (3.5★ Monster)**

It came during dusk on the sixth day. The forest shadows had stretched long, and Kael was gathering dry wood while Cherry scanned the treetops in silence.

Suddenly, a black blur burst through the dense foliage — a **panther**, but not ordinary. Its sleek body shimmered faintly in the dying light, covered with **obsidian-like scales** that reflected like armor. Its claws, twice as long as normal, shimmered with a strange metallic edge. A deep **snarl vibrated the air**, sending a chill into Kael’s spine.

**Mutated Scaled Panther (3.5★)**

* **Defense**: Natural Armor (pseudo Grade 2 toughness)
* **Speed**: Extreme burst movement
* **Threat**: Ambush predator, known for targeting weaknesses

Kael spun his spear with practiced ease, his weapon still a **Grade 1 bone-spear**, upgraded only slightly with eagle-bone edge reinforcement. His **Weapon Mastery Lv 2 – Intermediate** kicked in: quick thrusts, calculated spacing, mobility.

But the panther was too fast. It lunged, aiming for his throat.

Cherry, a blur of crimson, intercepted mid-air with a **psionic push** — her ability flaring to **Blue Grade Lv 2**, creating a temporary ripple around her. The panther twisted mid-flight and crashed against a tree but bounced up almost immediately.

Kael focused, channeling his energy into a defensive thrust — not aura, but **perfect timing**.  
He drove the spear into the beast’s flank, breaking past its scale with a precision strike using his weapon skill — **Piercing Point: Twist Thrust** (Intermediate Spear Technique Lv 2 – specialized form).

The beast hissed, staggered.

Cherry followed it up:  
Her claws shimmered faintly as she activated her second ability — **Claw Arc (White Grade Lv 2)**.  
In one smooth arc, she slashed through the beast’s side, sending black blood spraying as the **armored hide split**. The beast yowled, tried to flee — but Cherry leapt, slammed it to the ground, and **dug her claws in deep**, ending the threat.

“You're slower than before,” she teased, wiping the blood from her fur.

Kael chuckled, panting. “Or they’re just getting faster.”

**Battle 2: Sky Serpent of the Ridge (4★ Flying Serpent)**

On the tenth day, as they neared the base of the mountain range, they encountered **their hardest challenge yet**.

A **flying serpent**, thin and long like a whip, circled above them. Its wings were bat-like but tipped with feathers, and its eyes glowed yellow. Its body was covered in **dense plated hide**, and from its jaw it could spit **corrosive acid**.

**Mutated Sky Serpent (4★)**

* **Flight / Speed / Area Control**
* **Ability**: Acid Breath (Green Grade Lv 1)
* **Scales**: Grade 2 natural armor

The serpent dived — acid hissing through the air. Kael rolled aside but some droplets burned his arm, sizzling through his leather wrap.

Cherry, already airborne through a psionic jump, met the beast mid-sky. She **slashed with Claw Arc**, but the beast’s natural armor repelled most of it. She was flung backward by its tail sweep and slammed into a boulder, cracking it.

Kael narrowed his eyes. He could see the weak spots between the wings — thin, leathery gaps.

He waited… waited…

And then dashed. His spear **glowed faintly**, not with aura, but with **concentration and perfect technique**. He launched his strongest move:

**Spiral Drive Thrust – Intermediate Lv 2 Technique**  
A double-twist mid-thrust that builds kinetic energy for armor penetration.

The spear slammed into the wing socket — **just as Cherry used Psionic Bond (Blue Grade Lv 2)** to momentarily paralyze the serpent mid-flight.

The thrust **pierced**, the serpent shrieked, losing control mid-air.

Cherry, injured but relentless, landed atop it, drove her claws into its skull, and with a roar, finished it off.

“Tough bastard,” Kael muttered, panting heavily.

“They’re getting stronger,” Cherry said, limping slightly. “So should we.”

The rest of the journey to the base of the mountains was uneventful compared to these deadly encounters. But one thing was certain:

The **monsters were evolving.**  
Faster. Smarter. Stronger.

Kael looked toward the rising mountain peaks.

“If this is just the beginning… I’ll need to reach new levels. Fast.”

Cherry nodded silently beside him.  
The mountains awaited — and with them, far greater trials.

**Chapter 52 – One Year in the Wild**  
**(Two Years Since the Emergence)**

The wind howled down from the Eastern Mountains — colder, fiercer, and heavier with danger than it had ever been a year ago. What was once a harsh, untamed frontier was now a true crucible — a world where only the strong could survive, let alone grow.

A full year had passed since Kael and Cherry began their ascetic training at the foot of the mountains. The lands were now crawling with beasts of terrifying strength — **7-star to 9.9-star monsters roamed freely**, reshaping the natural hierarchy.

But Kael and Cherry endured. And they rose.

**Kael – The Warrior Ascending**

The boy who had once stood at 6’1 with a lean fighter’s build had transformed.

Now **6’4**, Kael was **broad-shouldered, muscular, and weather-hardened**. His frame rippled with compact strength earned through daily battles, brutal training, and endless strain. His body bore **numerous scars** — trophies of survival. His **reflexes were predatory**, and his eyes sharper, calmer, always scanning, always calculating.

**Kael’s Physical Stats (9.6★ Human Warrior):**

* **Height**: 6’4
* **Weight**: 230 lbs of dense, lean muscle
* **Reflexes**: Able to parry attacks at sub-second intervals
* **Speed**: Short bursts rival beast-level dash speeds
* **Weapon Mastery**: Lv 3 – *Advanced Spear Techniques*
* **Current Weapon**:
  + **Name**: *Stonefang Spear*
  + **Grade**: Grade 2 Weapon
  + **Material**: Forged from the **core and femur** of an 8-star *Mountain Ape Beast*
  + **Properties**: Heavy impact shock, durability, enhanced energy conduction
  + **Signature Move**: *The Rowing Spear Against the Waves* – An advanced anti-mobility spear technique involving rotational momentum to displace enemy stance and throw off aerial balance.

Kael's aura was building but had **not yet reached Lv 5**, the threshold where true aura control begins.  
His **power level hovered around 9.6-star**, brushing the edge of the **legendary 10-star threshold** — but he still lacked the final catalyst: a breakthrough moment.

**Cherry – The Crimson Beast Ascendant**

Cherry was no longer merely a lithe feline mutant. In her **expanded form**, she now reached the **size of a small truck**, around **12 feet tall at the shoulder**, and over **20 feet in length**. Her fur retained its **glossy crimson hue**, but now shimmered with faint psychic waves when agitated. Her claws were **razor-like extensions**, capable of slicing through most Grade 2 monster armor.

She had also **evolved mentally**, now able to produce **guttural, gibberish speech**, fragments of words. Though not coherent to outsiders, **Kael understood every intention through their strengthened psionic bond**.

**Cherry’s Attributes (9.9★ Mutant Cat Beast):**

* **Height**: 12 ft (in expanded form)
* **Weight**: ~2,000 kg
* **Speed**: Blinding short bursts; capable of scaling cliff faces
* **Claw Arc**: White Grade → now **White Grade Lv 3**
* **Psionic Bond**: **Blue Grade Lv 3**
  + Full mental sync, directional awareness, and shared pain/sense mapping
* **Special Mutation**: *Bone Spine Thrusts* (passive defense mechanism, still undeveloped)

However, Cherry had **reached a bottleneck**.

The invisible ceiling between **9.9-star and 10-star** was unlike anything they’d faced. **No amount of training alone could break it.**

**The Bottleneck: A Universal Truth**

Everyone — human or beast — faced this wall.  
To ascend beyond 10-star, one must undergo **evolution**, not merely growth.

Cherry’s options were:

1. **Consume the core of a 10-star beast of her lineage** (Feline or Psionic-based).
2. **Undergo a life-threatening, primal battle** that awakens **beast blood**.
3. **Consume multiple cores from different lineages** — a risky, often failed path that **distorts growth or causes madness**.

Kael faced the same truth. He was nearing 10-star but **lacked a monster core or moment of awakening**. Their long year of training had brought them close — but close was not enough.

**Encounters with the Titans**

During this one year:

* They **fought dozens of 7–9.5 star monsters**, sometimes daily.
* **Twice**, they encountered **true 10-star beasts**:
  + One was a **Sky-Wyrm**, a serpent with elemental control over winds, which they barely escaped.
  + Another was a **Burrowing Tusk Golem**, which simply ignored them after sensing they weren’t worth killing.

These beasts were not just powerful — they were **intelligent, territorial, and calculating**, different from the beasts Kael once knew. **Their aura could bend lesser monsters into submission**, making entire regions **uninhabitable**.

**The Present Moment**

Now, standing atop a cliff overlooking a vast valley surrounded by ancient monoliths, Kael adjusted the grip on his Stonefang Spear.

Cherry stood beside him, eyes glowing softly, her breath fogging the cool air.

“Kaa-elll... down... there...” she growled in broken words, her massive paw pointing toward the valley.  
“Something... stirrrring... big.”

Kael narrowed his eyes.

In the valley below, **trees trembled**, and **the wind reversed direction**. Something was coming.

“You feel it too,” Kael said, gripping his weapon tighter. “This could be the one.”

Cherry gave a low growl, something between anticipation and bloodthirst.

Whether it was **a path forward** or **a final test**, they would know soon enough.

**Chapter 53 – Claws of the Sky**

The skies above the valley churned with unnatural gusts. The clouds twisted and spiraled, forming a funnel of wind that roared like a hungry predator.

Kael stood still atop a jagged rock ledge, his **Stonefang Spear** humming faintly in his hand. Beside him, Cherry’s massive form crouched low, her **fur bristling**, eyes glowing a steady crimson. The **air pressure dropped**, and every instinct in Kael’s body screamed:

**Something’s coming.**

**Iris’s Alert**

A soft chime echoed from his wrist — the smooth voice of **Iris**, his AI companion, resonated in his ear.

**Iris:** "Kael, anomalous energy signature detected — distance: 320 meters, elevation: above ground. Category: Grade 10 threat. Type: aerial predator — approximation: mutated Pantherine variant. Recommended protocol: avoidance or full lethality."

Kael exhaled, gripping the shaft of his spear tighter.

“We don’t avoid anymore, Iris.”

**Cherry (growling):** “It comesss...”

A shadow flashed across the sky.

**Arrival of the Sky Panther**

With a screeching roar, the **Sky Panther** descended in a swirling funnel of wind. Its sleek, **emerald fur shimmered like a blade**, and across its back, **bony ridges protruded like jagged sails**, allowing it to **glide effortlessly with wind propulsion**.

Its **eyes glowed a pale teal**, and from its maw, a sudden **Wind Arc** lashed out — slicing through the earth in a crescent of compressed air.

Kael dodged to the side, barely escaping the blast, but his **left shoulder was grazed**, cutting through the leather of his armor.

Cherry snarled, her body phasing into blur as she **dodged the second arc**, the force **ripping a shallow trench** behind her.

**The Opening Salvo**

Kael planted his foot forward and **spun his spear**, invoking:

**“Rowing the Spear Against the Waves!”**

He lunged with brutal force. The spear’s rotational energy **disrupted the wind around the panther**, striking its flank. The Sky Panther shrieked, stumbling mid-air and landing roughly on the valley floor, claws tearing through the soil.

Cherry pounced from behind, claws alight with **Claw Arc Lv 3**, creating a **burst of crescent energy slashes** that trailed behind each swipe.

One connected — slicing through the panther’s side and drawing blood. But the beast twisted its body unnaturally, catching Cherry with a **backward tail whip**. The spiked tail smashed into her flank, sending her crashing into a boulder with a growl of pain.

**Iris’s Commentary**

**Iris:** “Beast structure analyzed. Wind-based acceleration glands located along the spinal ridge. Vulnerable points at lower abdomen and base of tail. Suggest flanking maneuver combined with stagger disruption.”

“Got it,” Kael muttered, dashing to the side, his eyes never leaving the beast.

He circled left; Cherry pushed from the right. They had done this a hundred times in training — flank, stagger, then strike with synced abilities.

**Panther's Counterstrike**

But the **Sky Panther was not desperate yet.**

With a deep, guttural growl, the air condensed around its form. Its **mutated ridges glowed**, and in a blink, the creature **accelerated using a burst of wind pressure**, becoming a blur.

Kael barely raised his spear in time. The beast **crashed into him**, slamming him backward. His **armor cracked**, ribs bruised, and the wind knocked clean from his lungs.

Cherry lunged to protect him — but the panther twisted mid-air, using its **wind gliding trait** to land behind her and **rake her side** with its claws. Cherry screeched in pain, her **right shoulder bleeding** and limping now.

**The Breaking Point**

Kael coughed, slowly rising, blood dripping from his lips.

“Cherry... status?”

**Cherry (low growl):** “Still... can... fight.”

**Iris:** “Warning: Vital signs deteriorating. Syncing psionic output is advised. Risk level: high.”

Kael looked at Cherry — their eyes met.

Something passed between them.

“Let’s end this.”

**Final Combo – Claw Arc × Psionic Bond × Spear Technique**

Kael closed his eyes — letting the **psionic bond** surge to its peak. It was like stepping into Cherry’s mind — raw instincts, emotions, and intent flowed into him.

He roared and **threw his spear into a spin**, his feet moving with perfect alignment — like rowing through invisible tides.

Cherry responded, her **claws alight**, her body flickering with psychic sparks. They launched together.

The **Sky Panther**, recognizing danger, built another wind charge.

Too slow.

* **Cherry dashed first**, unleashing **Claw Arc Lv 3** — the psychic blades **slammed into the wind bubble**, destabilizing the beast’s acceleration.
* In that split second, **Kael spun through the broken air**, channeling **Rowing Spear Against the Waves**, and lunged —
* The spear **pierced directly into the lower abdomen**, **where Iris had identified the vulnerable point**.

The impact sent a **shockwave** through the panther’s body — its legs buckled, eyes wide.

Cherry followed through — claws **sinking into its side**, tearing through flesh, pinning it down.

Kael pulled the spear free, flipped it once, and **drove it into the base of the tail**, splitting the spine.

The **Sky Panther screamed**, thrashed once, then lay still — green blood pooling beneath it.

**Aftermath**

Kael staggered back, panting, body trembling from exertion.

**Iris:** “Target neutralized. Estimated power drained: 78%. Injuries critical but non-lethal. Psionic resonance: stabilized.”

Cherry limped to Kael’s side, lowering her head.

**Cherry (murmuring):** “We... did... it...”

Kael placed a hand on her snout.

“Together. As always.”

He looked down at the panther’s broken body. Its **core had not dispersed**. A **glowing sphere of pale green** pulsed faintly in its chest — a **10-star core**.

Kael looked at Cherry, then back at the core.

“You’re at the edge. This… this might be it.”

Cherry looked at the core — then at Kael — and gave a soft growl.

**Cherry:** “Let’s... break... through.”

**Chapter 54 – Roads of Blood and Spark**

The sun filtered gently through the broken canopy above, shimmering on the blood-soaked soil where the Sky Panther lay slain. Its body was still, lifeless—but power pulsed faintly from within its ruined chest.

Kael sat against the gnarled trunk of a nearby tree, arms wrapped loosely around his legs, his body still aching from the battle. Across from him, Cherry sat quietly, her massive frame folded into a resting pose, her crimson eyes fixed on the slowly cooling corpse of the panther.

The shimmering **10-star core** nestled within its chest gave off a faint, emerald glow, as if breathing in silence.

**The Core’s Verdict**

**Kael:** “So... is that it? The breakthrough we were hoping for?”

Cherry limped over to the beast’s side, her paw tapping lightly against the exposed core. She sniffed it once, then again—her nose twitching—and then suddenly turned away with a grumble.

**Cherry:** “Grrrr... nuh... noh... bloo... noo fit.”

She gave a disappointed huff and flopped onto her side.

**Kael:** “Not suitable, huh?”

**Iris (soft chime):** “Confirmed. Genetic resonance between Cherry’s bloodline and the Sky Panther’s core is below 40%. Compatibility insufficient for safe absorption. Attempt may cause backlash or core rejection.”

Kael frowned. “Figures. Guess that would’ve been too easy.”

**Iris:** “Suggest alternate method. Trigger ancient lineage blood via high-stress awakening—possibly through psychic strain, near-death combat experience, or an alchemic catalyst tied to her beast ancestry.”

Cherry blinked slowly, as if understanding only half of it.

**Cherry:** “Bluhh... fiiiight... eep boom... raahh?”

Kael laughed dryly. “Yeah, something like that.”

**Blood and Meat**

Despite the core being incompatible, the beast's **flesh and blood** still pulsed with energy — rich with dense power, infused with traces of wind and vitality. They didn’t let it go to waste.

Kael skewered a thick slab of meat over the fire, its fatty juices sizzling and crackling. He bit into it, tasting a flood of warmth and power flow through his limbs. **His star power—previously stalled at 9.6—rose slowly, stopping at 9.8.**

**Iris:** “Energy absorption successful. Minor increase in star ranking. Cellular density optimized. Muscular strain recovery accelerated.”

Cherry devoured her share in near silence, the glow of her claws flickering faintly as the blood in her body adjusted.

**Cherry:** “Mmmm... good... meat. Booost... me.”

Kael raised an eyebrow at her.

“Did you just say boost me?”

**Cherry:** “Mmmmmaybe.”

They both sat in silence for a while, digesting food, strength, and thoughts.

**Descent and Discovery**

The mountain they had fought upon was steep, treacherous. But with rest and determination, they made their way down slowly.

At the mountain’s base, they found a **derelict air bike** half-buried under collapsed stone and moss. It was a long, sleek machine — built for high-speed surface glide and low-altitude hover, though the engine casing was cracked, and the stabilizer core was misaligned.

Kael knelt beside it, brushing off the grime.

“Think we can fix this?”

**Iris:** “Assessment complete. With available materials, 67% functionality can be restored. Estimated repair time: 2 hours.”

“That’ll do.”

Cherry sniffed the bike, then jumped atop it and sat like a massive cat waiting to be chauffeured.

**On the Road**

It took a little over two hours. Kael patched together a working stabilizer with pieces from old drones, rerouted energy through the emergency bypass line, and reinforced the frame using beast sinew and bone.

As the sun began its descent, they launched.

The air bike buzzed to life, hovering inches off the ground. Kael leaned forward, Cherry curled up behind him in her **compact resting form**, no larger than a particularly fluffy backpack.

They sped across open grasslands, broken concrete highways swallowed by wild overgrowth, and glided past remnants of small villages now consumed by vines and trees. The **wind on his face** carried dust, heat, and a strangely nostalgic warmth.

**Conversation in the Wind**

**Cherry (murmuring):** “Zoom zoom... wooosshhh...”

Kael chuckled.

“Yeah, zoom zoom.”

**Iris:** “...Emotion detection algorithm triggered.”

Kael blinked. “What?”

**Iris:** “...Unusual response detected. Context: amusement. It seems... I attempted humor?”

“You... tried to joke?”

**Iris (hesitant):** “Unintentional. Possible subroutine interference. I will run diagnostics.”

Kael smirked. “No, don’t. It was cute. Keep it.”

Iris was silent for a moment, then replied:

**Iris:** “...Acknowledged.”

**CloverSpark City**

By late afternoon, the towering silhouette of **CloverSpark** came into view.

It was a **city built into a canyon basin**, a mix of ancient pre-collapse concrete and newer metallic constructions. Energy towers hummed, drones buzzed overhead, and a wall of vertical gates greeted them at the south entrance.

As they slowed down near the checkpoint, a series of mechanical voices echoed:

**“Identify yourself.”**

Kael stopped the air bike, pulling down his scarf.

“Name: Kael Ardyn.”

A pause.

A mechanical whirring sound followed as an automated drone scanned him from a distance.

**“Searching records... match found. Parental ties: Alen and Sarai Ardyn. Status: deceased.”**

Kael’s jaw clenched slightly.

“Yes... I know.”

**“Subject ‘Kael Ardyn’ marked as MISSING in all known databases. Last trace: six months post initial emergence of ancient beasts. Updating registry now. Proceed to the designated zone for further evaluation.”**

A blue light pulsed ahead, signaling the path forward.

Interestingly, no one questioned or even noticed Cherry. **She padded alongside the bike, ignored, her presence bypassed entirely**, as if her low profile form rendered her just another stray animal.

Kael raised an eyebrow, amused.

“No one’s scanning you.”

**Cherry:** “Nyeh heh... ninja kitty.”

**Iris:** “Observation: Cherry’s current form emits minimal power signals and visual threat cues. Civilian scanners unlikely to register her unless specifically targeted.”

Kael grinned.

“Let’s keep it that way. For now.”

As they rolled into the city proper, the noise of civilization surrounded them — market vendors, children playing near alleys, the scent of food and smoke.

**Kael (quietly):** “It’s been a long time since we’ve seen a place like this, huh?”

**Cherry (nuzzling his shoulder):** “Hoooooome?”

Kael looked up, eyes distant.

“Not quite... but maybe one day.”

The gates of CloverSpark closed behind them.

**Chapter 55 – Echoes of Power**

The moment the air-bike hovered to a stop at the edge of **CloverSpark City**, things shifted.

A dozen armed **city military guards**, clad in sleek black-plated armor with faint blue energy lines, closed in from all sides. **Energy rifles** were drawn, low but ready. The glint in their visors meant they weren’t just curious — they were cautious.

Iris chimed calmly.

**Iris:** “Threat assessment initiated. Scanning... all soldiers exhibit power levels between 4.8 to 5.2 star rank. Tactical advantage is neutral.”

Kael didn’t flinch. He raised his hands calmly while stepping off the air-bike.

**Kael:** “Easy now. Not here to start anything.”

One of the soldiers, a woman with short-cropped hair and a steely gaze, stepped forward, raising a **silver device** with a glowing spiral tip. As it beeped, her brow furrowed. She checked the screen, then stared toward Cherry, who sat quietly behind Kael.

**Soldier:** “Detected unknown beast energy. Power ranking abnormal. Preparing suppressive binding—”

**Kael (firmly):** “Stop. Stand down.”

Cherry growled lowly, her **fur bristling**, the red hue of her claws faintly glowing. She didn’t leap yet, but her stance was a clear threat.

**Cherry:** “Hhhnnnhhh... bitesss…”

**Kael (calmly turning to her):** “Hey. Easy, girl. Not yet. We’re not enemies.”

Kael knelt beside her and rested a hand on her back. Her breathing slowed.

**Kael (softly):** “We’ve had worse days, haven’t we?”

She blinked once, then gave a soft huff and sat again, tail flicking in irritation.

**Kael (to soldiers):** “We’re not strangers to the military. I was stationed under **Commander Darius**, back during the beast tide last year. He knows us. We fought together.”

The lead soldier hesitated, eyes narrowing. She raised her wrist-comm and transmitted Kael’s words.

**The Chain of Command**

It took fifteen minutes before the first superior arrived. Then another ten.

The soldiers maintained formation, though their grips on weapons were slightly more relaxed. Cherry dozed with one eye open, while Kael leaned on the bike, arms crossed.

**Cherry:** “Snoooore... bitey dream...”

Kael chuckled, watching her twitch a paw.

**Kael:** “You dreaming of fighting again?”

**Cherry (sleepily):** “Mmm... win... snack... zoom...”

**Iris:** “Cherry exhibits unusual REM cycle behavior. Dream content analysis not possible. Emotional tone: aggressive... and slightly hungry.”

**Kael:** “Figures.”

The sun began to dip lower behind the mountain ridge when a convoy of matte-gray hover-vehicles approached.

The side doors hissed open. A tall man in an officer’s uniform stepped out, **grizzled**, with sharp green eyes and a star-emblazoned cape brushing the ground. He was followed by a well-dressed, slim man with silver-trimmed robes and a governor’s seal pinned to his chest.

**Iris (quietly):** “Scanning. Lieutenant Colonel... name: **Reyn Albrecht**. Star power: 8.9. Governor... name: **Tyros Vellein**. Civilian, no combat rank.”

Reyn strode forward with authority but no hostility. He gave Kael a long look, then smiled slightly.

**Reyn:** “You must be **Kael Ardyn**... and this fierce one must be Cherry.”

Cherry opened one eye, sizing him up.

**Reyn (bowing slightly):** “Apologies for the delay. We had to confirm the records. Commander Darius mentioned you both in our last transmission three months ago. Spoke highly of your… resilience.”

**Kael (nods):** “Good to hear he’s still alive.”

**Governor Tyros:** “Ahem… welcome to CloverSpark, Mr. Ardyn. We do hope this was not too unpleasant.”

**Kael:** “Only mildly uncomfortable. Your people aim guns well.”

Reyn chuckled and pulled a cylindrical scanner from his belt.

**Reyn:** “With your permission, I’d like to perform a formal scan. Darius mentioned your power had spiked rapidly. We’d like to verify.”

Kael nodded. “Go ahead.”

The scanner pulsed once, humming softly as it swept over him. Then it beeped.

And Reyn froze.

His eyebrows shot up. Then he turned the scanner to confirm.

**Reyn (shouting):** “Star level... **9.8**?!”

The entire clearing went quiet.

Even the soldiers, trying to look stoic, shifted in disbelief. The governor coughed, clearly stunned.

**Governor Tyros (stammering):** “T-That’s… that’s just 0.2 away from a full Ten-Star Ascendant!”

One of the younger soldiers audibly gasped. Cherry gave a satisfied little purr.

**Cherry:** “Told ya... boss strong.”

Reyn stepped back, eyes wide with a mix of awe and concern.

**Reyn:** “...Darius wasn’t exaggerating.”

He looked at Kael again, more carefully this time. Not as a civilian. Not even as a former soldier. But as someone… more.

**Reyn (quietly):** “The city will want to speak with you. About a great many things.”

Kael didn’t answer. He simply glanced down at Cherry, who stretched and cracked her claws.

And the wind whispered quietly through the city gates behind them, as if something had shifted.

**Chapter 56 – The City Within the Storm**

Kael watched as the soldiers stood frozen in place, their eyes darting between him and Cherry. The wind had stilled. A hush lingered. The only sound came from the humming scanner in **Lieutenant Colonel Reyn Albrecht’s** hand, the light still glowing softly in pale green hues.

Then, Reyn blinked.

**Reyn:** “Alright... now her turn. I have clearance for advanced scans.”

He kneeled slowly before Cherry, keeping his movements measured. Cherry squinted suspiciously but didn’t growl.

**Kael (to Cherry):** “It’s fine. Just a scan.”

**Cherry (squinting):** “Sniff… okay box-man…”

Reyn raised an eyebrow at the nickname but didn’t comment. He activated the **Advanced Beast Core Resonance Scanner**, a long metallic rod with faint runes along its sides—likely military-issue tech designed for high-level beast detection and analysis. The tip shimmered as it swept over Cherry.

A tone pinged.

Then the scanner **shook violently** in Reyn’s hand. Its display flickered.

**Reyn (frowning):** “That’s… what? This can’t be right.”

Another sweep. Same result. He adjusted the calibrations and tried once more.

The screen now glowed red—emergency class scan.

**Scanner Output:** “Beast Power Level: **9.9** Star. Resonant Bond Detected. Psionic Interface Established.”

**Reyn (wide-eyed):** “Nine point... nine?!”

Gasps echoed again. The nearby officers’ faces lost color. Even the usually stoic Tyros Vellein stumbled back half a step.

**Governor Tyros:** “T-That’s beyond… Even among high commanders, that power is rare. She's... barely below god-tier…”

**Kael:** “Told you she’s not a pet.”

Cherry yawned, unimpressed with the dramatic reaction.

**Cherry:** “I bite sky cats. Zoom fast. Me strong.”

**Iris (flatly):** “Confirmed. Cherry is indeed ‘strong’—by at least three metric definitions. Additional analysis... pending.”

**Reyn:** “I see why Darius was so damn obsessed with keeping tabs on you two...”

He took a deep breath and composed himself.

**Reyn (firmly):** “Come. The governor and I will escort you personally. The Council would want to know you’ve arrived.”

**Journey Through Cloverspark**

They rode in a large, armored hover-cruiser marked with the emblem of **Cloverspark City Defense** — a leaf symbol partially enclosed by a shifting energy ring.

As they entered the city perimeter, the once-foreboding gates opened to reveal a **thriving, mutated society**.

Kael’s gaze drifted to the bustling streets beyond the checkpoints.

Children with glowing eyes laughed while chasing dogs that had evolved thick, chitinous tails for balance. Vendors sold skewered meat—Kael could smell beast-flesh roasting over open plasma grates. One stall sold glowing fruit that shimmered faintly with energy—likely mutation-safe hybrids.

The city had a strange serenity.

Behind thick barriers and advanced turrets, **life** still bloomed.

**Kael:** “I didn’t expect this much… normal.”

**Tyros (smiling faintly):** “Normal’s changed. Since the Mutation Pulse began five years ago, adaptation became the only path forward.”

**Reyn:** “Our children are born with core potential now. Even civilians undergo routine energy harmonization to stabilize their bodies.”

Iris projected a map of the city.

**Iris:** “Population: approximately 61,000. Star power average: 1.4. Median: 1.1. Highest recorded civilian power: 4.3 star. Military average: 3.6. Conclusion: City is statistically resilient.”

**Kael:** “But not immune to the outside world.”

**Reyn:** “No. We’re safe only because we stay alert. And because of people like you.”

They passed an arena where teenagers sparred—some firing off small energy arcs, others teleporting in short bursts or clashing with elemental weapons. The people didn’t stare at the military cruiser—Kael realized this sort of movement was routine.

**Kael (quietly):** “So even the kids train now.”

**Tyros:** “Every citizen must. It’s not militarization. It’s survival.”

Cherry leaned out the window, her eyes wide.

**Cherry:** “Ooooh... zoom house! Bite-juice fruit! Smell food!”

She pressed her paw to the glass.

**Kael:** “She wants food again.”

**Reyn (amused):** “We can arrange that.”

Further in, they passed a **giant crystal tower**—white, with metallic roots anchoring it into the earth. Pulsing softly, it was surrounded by dozens of scientists and energy monitors.

**Iris:** “Mutation Core Tower detected. Function: ambient radiation filtration and core stabilization. Risk: minimal.”

**Reyn:** “That tower keeps us from mutating too quickly. Every city needs one now.”

Kael noticed a man on a bench levitating small stones while reading to his daughter. A bakery shop assistant with **silver fur patches** passed them, her beast-blood evident but unbothered. Soldiers marched alongside civilians laughing in cafes.

It wasn’t utopia. But it was... **humanity enduring**.

**Toward the Inner Ring**

As the cruiser moved toward the Inner Ring District, the streets widened. The buildings became sleeker. Tall silver towers hummed with energy. Massive screens displayed news footage—Kael caught glimpses of mutated beasts in far regions, broken ruins, and elite patrols.

Then, the screen flicked to show... **his own face**.

**Newscaster:** “...speculations increase around the identity of a high-star rogue combatant seen near the Darkfang Range last week. The mysterious figure—rumored to have defeated a Ten-Star mutated Sky Panther—remains unidentified.”

**Kael (dryly):** “Guess I’m news now.”

**Reyn (grinning):** “Just wait till the Council sees the scanner data.”

**Iris:** “Probability of media leak: 93%. Likely public designation: ‘Wandering Titan’ or ‘Feral Spearmaster.’”

**Cherry (snorting):** “He Kael. Big hero now. I want cake.”

They all chuckled.

**Kael:** “You’ll get your cake.”

**Arrival**

The vehicle slowed before a towering facility marked “**CloverSpark Command Nexus**.”

Guards saluted Reyn and Tyros as they stepped out.

A curved glass wall ahead opened into a white hallway pulsing with soft light. Kael could already feel the energy arrays activating.

**Iris:** “We are approaching secure zones. Permission granted for non-aggressive beast-companions. Cherry registered as ‘Sentient Beast Ally.’”

**Cherry (strutting):** “Heh. Told you. Fancy kitty.”

**Reyn:** “This way. You’ll speak with the Council soon. But first… rest, food, and debriefing.”

Kael looked around the facility as they entered. Smooth white panels. Walls reinforced with **crystal-laced alloys**. The distant hum of machinery below. This place wasn’t just a military center—it was the **nucleus of city survival**.

And he’d stepped back into the world of the powerful.

But now, things were different.

He wasn’t a fading soldier anymore.

He was **Kael Ardyn** — bearer of 9.8 stars, bonded to a sentient 9.9 star beast, and shadowed by mysteries that reached far beyond even his own past.

**Chapter 57 – The Shadows of Power**

The **CloverSpark Command Nexus** was a hive of purpose and discipline. As Kael walked through its gleaming corridors, accompanied by **Lieutenant Colonel Reyn Albrecht** and **Governor Tyros Vellein**, the atmosphere shifted. Gone were the curious civilians and relaxed security. In this heart of the military city, everything tightened—posture, conversation, and gaze.

And Kael could feel **the stares**.

Soldiers, analysts, officers, and advisors turned their heads. Conversations stopped mid-sentence. Even the guards at checkpoints barely blinked as their systems quietly ran scans on Kael and Cherry. Most tried to hide their curiosity, but Kael felt the subtle tension.

**Iris** projected overlays of individuals around them.

**Iris (in Kael’s ear):** “Proximity scan: 43 ranked military officials. Star power range: 4.0 to 7.2. Civilian scientists and tacticians: range 3.0 to 5.5. Multiple tracking sensors activated.”

**Cherry (to Kael, half-growling):** “They stare too long. Can I hiss?”

**Kael:** “No hissing. Yet.”

One officer whispered to another:

“Is that really him? The Wanderer who fought at Black Hollow?”

“That’s the beast... look at her fur. Glows with psionic signature.”

As they walked toward the cafeteria, Kael kept his posture relaxed but alert. Cherry padded beside him, tail twitching lightly.

**The Cafeteria Encounter**

The doors slid open into a large dining hall filled with clean metallic tables, soft lighting, and trays stacked with colorful food and nutrient-rich rations. At least two hundred personnel were eating, and most stopped as Kael entered.

Silence.

Then murmurs rose—low but spreading fast. People turned. Forks paused mid-air. Even a group of elite scouts wearing dark blue command armor stood up briefly as a sign of respect when Reyn entered, then looked at Kael with interest.

**Reyn (chuckling):** “Enjoy the fame while it’s still amusing.”

**Kael:** “I’m used to shadows. Lights feel awkward.”

**Tyros:** “Unfortunately, when your power spikes to 9.8 and your companion registers as 9.9, shadows tend to vanish.”

They guided Kael and Cherry to a reserved table near the center of the room. Food was quickly arranged—thick roast beast cuts, nutrient paste enriched with elemental salts, energy-core broth. Cherry practically launched at her dish.

**Cherry (muffled):** “Mmmff. Bite-good. Real meat!”

**Kael (smiling):** “She approves.”

The Colonel and Governor exchanged nods, then stood.

**Reyn:** “We’ll leave you in capable—if slightly over-enthusiastic—hands.”

**Tyros:** “This one knows our structure like the back of his palm. Try not to let him talk your ears off.”

From behind them emerged a tall, wiry man in a sleek gray suit, his glasses displaying HUD overlays. He held a digital notepad and wore a permanent, polite smile.

**Reyn:** “Kael, meet **Lenton Marris**. Government liaison. He’ll handle your needs within the city.”

**Lenton (bowing):** “Honored, honored indeed, Mr. Ardyn. I’m your humble coordinator, assistant, and if need be, personal guide. You will find me prompt, resourceful, and—in most situations—unnecessarily thorough.”

**Cherry (licking her paw):** “He smells nervous.”

**Kael (smirking):** “I can tell.”

**Through the Halls of Power**

After lunch, Lenton guided Kael to his temporary quarters within the Officer’s Wing. The corridor was wide and polished, with doors sealed by biometric access.

As they walked, Lenton began… **talking**.

**Lenton:** “Now, the city, as you’ve likely noticed, is a Tier-2 reserve zone. Currently one of **fifty** officially recognized **Protected Habitation Zones** within Japan. Each zone supports populations ranging from 20,000 to 150,000 and is safeguarded by advanced barriers, crystal reactors, and division-level defense units.”

**Kael:** “Tier-2, huh. What’s Tier-1?”

**Lenton:** “Only five exist. They’re practically fortresses. Tokyo Remnant City, Mount Fushin High Command, Sapporo Bastion, the Kyoto Core Archives, and the Floating Port of Enkai.”

Kael listened as they passed a hall filled with historical murals—scenes of the Mutation Pulse’s early years, the collapse of coastal zones, and heroes who rose and fell.

**Lenton:** “Japan is split into **five operational divisions**—East, West, North, South, and Central. Each controls roughly ten zones and is led by a commanding entity—typically an **Ascended**—someone with a star power exceeding 10.0.”

Kael raised an eyebrow.

**Kael:** “Ascended, huh. So... god-tier warriors with territory.”

**Lenton:** “Precisely. It has become... political. Each division has its own ideologies. Power draws power.”

They reached a crystal elevator. Inside, the panel lit up with layers of floors—Kael’s room was on level 21, designated “Elite Guest Quarters.”

**Lenton (continuing):** “As of this year, **seventeen Ascended-level warriors** have been recorded in Japan. Would you like a breakdown?”

**Kael (sighing):** “Sure.”

**Lenton:** “Excellent! So, we begin with **Kaoru Mizuchi**, known as the *Tempest Blade*, a 10.4 star-ranked swordswoman leading the Western Division. Then there’s **General Hideo Ren**, 11.2 stars, with rumored time-manipulation affinity. He oversees the Southern Corridor.”

**Kael:** “Time… manipulation?”

**Lenton (nodding):** “Brief bursts. He slows time during battle phases.”

He went on, listing names and powers:

* **Yoru Seiran** – The *Whisper of Blades*, 10.1 stars, illusion-type affinity.
* **Mara Kanzuki** – *Ashfire Monarch*, 10.8 stars, pyrokinetic with beast control.
* **Rikuto “Stonevein” Jura** – 10.3 stars, durable earth-type brute.
* **Faye Illena** – 12.0 stars, psychic seer and memory manipulator.
* **Tenjin Ralnor** – 10.6 stars, wind-elemental combatant.
* **Mirei Shadowcrest** – 11.4 stars, stealth and phase-shift specialist.
* **Borran Kazume** – 10.5 stars, radiation warrior from Northern Ice Fields.
* **Seiji Dran** – 13.0 stars. Head of the Central Division. The strongest human in Japan.

Kael stopped walking.

**Kael (tense):** “Repeat that last one.”

**Lenton:** “Ah, yes. **Seiji Dran** of the **Dran family**. Leader of the Central Division. Possibly the strongest mutant-enhanced human alive. His ascended ability is not disclosed but believed to be of space manipulation. Estimated to hold a theoretical maximum of 13.4 stars. Formerly was... hmm, where was that document…”

Kael didn’t hear the rest.

His mind froze on the name: **Dran**.

The same surname as **Elise Dran** — his instructor, the one who trained him in the *Rowing the Spear Against the Waves* technique, a Dran family spear technique. She had been the one to guide him through his training with discipline and care. He had met her last year during the beast tide, where they fought side by side. Despite the turmoil, a bond had formed, and he had grown quite fond of her.

Before he had left, Elise had told him to seek out the **Dran family** when he visited the capital, but she never explained why.

**Kael (murmuring):** “Dran… Elise…”

**Cherry (quietly):** “Kael? You okay?”

His fists clenched.

**Kael (coldly):** “How many from the Dran family are still alive?”

**Lenton:** “Oh, a few… but not publicly. They’re quite secretive. Why do you ask?”

Kael’s stare hardened, shadows flickering in his eyes.

**Kael (flatly):** “No reason.”

But something had changed.

The strongest man in Japan was from the same family as **Elise**.

**Chapter 58 – The Questions of Power**

Kael barely remembered drifting into sleep the previous night. The bed was soft—too soft for someone who had spent a year on the cold ground, the metal frame of shelters, or nestled against Cherry’s warm fur beneath the open skies. But exhaustion overcame unfamiliar comfort, and he slept deeply.

The next morning, as golden light streamed into the room from the narrow window, a knock sounded on the door.

**Lenton (cheerfully):** “Good morning, Mr. Ardyn! Hope you slept like a hibernating grizzly!”

Kael sat up, shirtless, the scars across his torso faintly catching the light. Cherry yawned beside him, still curled in her compact form. Her tail flicked lazily before she rolled over and started muttering something vaguely like “Bwreakfasss…”

**Kael (dry):** “She’s already demanding food.”

**Iris:** “Nutritional intake levels have been below optimal for 36 hours. Prioritizing sustenance is statistically reasonable.”

**Lenton (laughing):** “And good morning to you too, Iris.”

**Breakfast and Briefings**

The cafeteria buzzed with the energy of the waking city. Soldiers in uniform, civilians in safety garb, scientists with tablets—all coexisting in a new world of rules. Kael and Lenton walked in, turning heads. Cherry padded softly beside them, still small in size but drawing attention with her bright eyes and unusual gait.

They gathered trays and sat down near a corner table.

**Lenton:** “Things have shifted while you were away. The monster levels are fluctuating dangerously. 7 to 9.9-star beasts are now regular sightings around the periphery.”

**Kael:** “Any changes in the ancient domains?”

**Lenton (grim):** “Worse. Several regions across the globe now show active energy fluctuations—precursors to a domain expansion..”

**The Meeting**

After breakfast, Lenton guided Kael to the administrative sector—a reinforced domed building near the city’s inner district. Cherry was asked to wait outside, which she reluctantly did, lounging under a tree and startling a group of passing researchers with a massive sneeze.

Inside, Kael entered a secure meeting room.

Eight individuals sat at a semi-circular table. A large screen on the wall behind them displayed a slow rotation of data—Kael’s profile, energy signatures, battle records, and more.

The room quieted as he stepped in.

At the center sat **Lieutenant Colonel Reyn Albrecht**, composed as always. Beside him stood **Governor Tyros Vellein**, his robes a deep navy blue. Two new military officers sat beside Reyn:

* **Colonel Harvin Cross** (power: 9.2), stocky, square-jawed, a stern presence.
* **Lieutenant Colonel Sera Inoue** (power: 8.7), calm-eyed and watchful.

On the civilian side sat:

* **Minister Leika Hanzo** (power: 4.3), in charge of external affairs.
* **Administrator Dalan Vue** (power: 3.7), head of logistical operations.
* **Chancellor Mirin Sayu** (power: 3.5), focused on scientific development.
* **Director Varo Henn** (power: 4.5), a political advisor.

**Reyn (firmly):** “Kael Ardyn. It’s good to finally speak with you in full. We owe you more than a few thanks.”

Kael nodded silently, arms crossed behind his back, stance relaxed yet powerful.

**Tyros (smiling):** “You’ve caused quite a stir, young man. A 9.8-star survivor walking into the city with a 9.9-star beast companion? You’ve thrown our projections out the window.”

**Harvin Cross (gruff):** “Where have you been this past year? There’s no military log of your whereabouts. No signal. No beacon.”

**Sera Inoue (professional):** “You’ve survived in some of the harshest terrain. How?”

**Leika Hanzo:** “Do you intend to return to military command? Commander Darius once vouched for you. There are divisions that would follow your leadership.”

**Dalan Vue (leaning forward):** “More importantly, with your strength, we can stabilize several sectors. We could supply you with resources—”

**Mirin Sayu (quiet):** “... Or share research, perhaps.”

**Varo Henn (pressing):** “Surely you must understand the need for structure. Authority. Power like yours cannot remain rogue.”

Kael stood still, watching them. Not angry. Not annoyed.

Just… calm.

**Kael (coolly):** “I survived. I trained. I killed monsters. I protected what I could.”

He turned toward Colonel Cross.

**Kael:** “I didn’t need orders to do that.”

To Varo and Leika:

**Kael:** “I’m not interested in politics. Or claiming command. Not yet.”

**Reyn (smiling slightly):** “A wise stance.”

**Tyros (sipping tea):** “Let the boy breathe. You’re all pouncing like bureaucrats on a blank scroll.”

Three of them—**Colonel Cross**, **Leika**, and **Varo**—pressed on, bombarding him with implications of responsibility, of duty, of *necessity*.

Kael simply listened, unmoved.

As if he were just watching the tide rise, waiting for it to fall.

**Chapter 59 – The Roar Beneath the Calm**

The meeting room buzzed with words—some diplomatic, others tactical, but most smothered in the veil of authority and politics. The figures around the curved table continued their subtle probing, circling Kael like vultures around a rare flame they couldn’t quite understand or control.

Kael remained silent, standing with his hands behind his back, but inside, tension churned like a storm beneath frozen waters.

The earlier calm was starting to crack.

His eyes, unreadable, flicked toward **Colonel Harvin Cross**, who leaned forward once more.

**Harvin:** “Mr. Ardyn, with your demonstrated strength, surely you understand that rogue action—even with good intention—leads to chaos. Why not channel your strength where it matters, under proper command?”

**Leika Hanzo (firmly):** “It’s not about restriction. It’s about cooperation. This isn’t the world of lone warriors anymore.”

**Varo Henn (coldly):** “Unless you plan to become another self-proclaimed savior, we suggest you act within our structure. No one is exempt, Kael Ardyn.”

Kael clenched his fist behind his back. The warmth of the room seemed to dim.

Unnoticed by most in the room, the subtle air current shifted. A presence approached—silent, powerful, familiar.

From outside the sealed hall, a pulse echoed faintly.

It was not sound. It was not energy.

It was *will*.

The double doors at the far end of the room **burst open**, not with violence but with an overwhelming pressure of dominance. The guards stationed outside staggered as the air grew heavy.

Into the room stepped **Cherry**.

She was no longer small.

Her fur shimmered like living starlight, a soft golden glow radiating from beneath her sleek black coat. Her eyes blazed violet, locked onto Kael with fierce concern. Her wings had not unfurled, but even folded, her presence now dwarfed everyone in the room.

Gasps rang out. Colonel Cross rose halfway from his seat. Sera Inoue’s hand drifted instinctively to the weapon at her side, but she stopped short as Cherry raised her head.

And **released her aura**.

It hit the room like a pressure wave.

A roar without sound.

Chairs screeched back as several of the weaker officials gasped, clutching their temples. The 3-star and 4-star members broke into cold sweats, unable to breathe. Leika Hanzo fell to her knees, teeth clenched as her mind screamed under the overwhelming spiritual force pressing down on her.

**Tyros (shocked):** “W-What is this…?!”

**Mirin Sayu (trembling):** “That’s not… a beast… That’s something else…”

Reyn, though straining, remained seated, staring wide-eyed at the entity that had, until now, been seen as a mere companion.

Cherry stepped forward slowly, her body glowing brighter, like a living star descending among mortals. Her gaze never left Kael’s.

Through their **psionic bond**, Kael felt it all—her confusion, her protective instinct, her rage at seeing him under pressure. She hadn’t planned this. It was *his* frustration she was echoing.

**Cherry (voice echoing softly in Kael’s mind):** *“They’re hurting you. They don’t see you. I won’t let them corner you.”*

Kael’s expression softened. He stepped forward and placed a hand gently against her snout.

**Kael (calmly):** “It’s okay. I’m not in danger.”

His voice was soft but firm. The bond between them pulsed again.

Cherry’s aura, though still enormous, **retracted slowly**, flowing back into her like a tide drawn into the moon. The pressure in the room lifted. Many collapsed into their seats, gasping for breath.

Kael turned to the table at last, his voice clear, steady—carried by authority that no rank could grant.

**Kael:** “I don’t care about your military structures. I don’t care about your politics.”

He glanced across the room—at Cross, at Varo, at Leika.

**Kael:** “I care about surviving. I care about this world not burning.”

He placed his hand on Cherry’s neck, and she gave a low growl, still smoldering with warning.

**Kael:** “You want to ask where I’ve been? I’ve been killing monsters. I’ve been training. I’ve been watching the earth split open beneath mutated horrors with power beyond your comprehension.”

He raised his voice slightly—not in anger, but in *truth*.

**Kael:** “The strongest mutated monsters we’ve encountered now reach **35 to 40 star** levels. And they’re still evolving.”

Gasps rippled across the room.

**Kael:** “And here, the strongest human is what? 13 stars?”

He didn’t wait for an answer.

**Kael:** “Even the *weakest* ancient beasts are at **50 star power**. Some—those now awakening after centuries of sleep—are reaching **60**.”

Silence.

Dead, heavy silence.

**Kael (coldly):** “And yet you sit here, worrying about which office controls what unit. About titles. About bureaucracy.”

His words cut, sharp and unrelenting.

**Kael:** “I will fight. I will get stronger. That is the *only* path forward. We don't have time to argue about who commands who.”

He turned his back to them.

**Kael:** “You can waste your time dividing chairs in a burning room.”

With Cherry at his side, he strode to the door. No one dared stop him. The massive doors opened without resistance, and the beast and her bonded walked out, vanishing into the corridor.

**Aftermath**

No one spoke for a while.

Only the faint hum of data screens and the distant buzz of the city filtered into the room.

Tyros Vellein was the first to exhale.

**Tyros (softly):** “We’re still at war… and we’ve forgotten how to act like it.”

He looked around the room.

**Tyros:** “We focus on climbing ladders while monsters climb over our walls.”

Reyn nodded slowly.

**Reyn:** “He’s right.”

**Sera Inoue:** “He’s not just right. He’s a warning.”

**Mirin Sayu (whispering):** “We’re not ready…”

**Dalan Vue (already rising):** “But he is.”

Mirin stood too.

**Mirin:** “We need to speak with him. Before we lose our only chance at balancing this world.”

The two of them hurried after Kael, leaving the rest behind.

Varo sat stunned, fingers trembling. Colonel Cross said nothing, jaw tight.

Tyros looked out the window toward the distant cityscape, where the wind carried the faint call of birds and something else… something ancient… stirring.

**Chapter 60 – Seeds of Strength**

Footsteps echoed down the corridor, quick and persistent.

“Kael!”

He paused but didn’t turn. Cherry, walking beside him with smooth, quiet steps, gave a low glance toward the approaching pair. She seemed calm now, though a quiet hum of protective awareness still pulsed beneath her sleek black fur.

Mirin Sayu and Dalan Vue caught up, slightly breathless.

**Mirin (panting):** “Wait—please. Just… a minute.”

Kael slowly turned, his face unreadable, but his silence offered them room to speak.

**Dalan (respectful):** “We’re not here to question you or judge. We’re here to ask… for your help.”

Kael said nothing at first. His gaze lingered on Dalan, then shifted to Mirin. He finally nodded once and leaned against the wall.

**Kael:** “Speak.”

Mirin straightened, brushing her long coat and steadying her voice.

**Mirin:** “We’re part of the Advanced Research Division. You probably know that. But what you may not know is that we’ve been trying to find ways to **improve human survivability** and **combat capabilities** without relying solely on natural awakenings or military ranking systems.”

**Dalan:** “And after what you said in the meeting—about the disparity between humans and mutated monsters—we realized you might hold insights we’ve never considered.”

Kael folded his arms. “Go on.”

**Mirin:** “We don’t expect detailed formulas or training manuals… but if you’ve noticed any patterns—ways to strengthen oneself, or anything unique about the mutated monsters we could study—we’d like to learn from that.”

Kael tilted his head, glancing at Cherry for a moment. She sat quietly beside him, tail swishing slowly across the floor.

**Kael:** “…Most of what I’ve learned wasn’t intentional.”

He looked up again, meeting both their eyes.

**Kael:** “After each fight… I started eating the flesh of the mutated monsters I killed.”

Mirin blinked. “You what?”

**Kael (nodding):** “Not because I wanted to, at first. I was starving. Supplies were scarce. But after a few… I noticed something strange.”

**Kael:** “When I ate their flesh—especially higher-tier ones—my body felt… tougher. My senses sharper. Recovery quicker. At first, I thought it was just psychological. But over time, I realized it wasn’t.”

**Kael:** “It wasn’t a massive leap like in fairy tales. I didn’t suddenly explode with power. But my **adaptability** changed. It’s like my body started mimicking traits from the beasts.”

Mirin had pulled out a tablet, already taking notes.

**Dalan (thoughtful):** “Biological mimicry… That could point toward adaptive mutations based on cellular assimilation. Fascinating…”

Kael continued, voice calm, but serious.

**Kael:** “Of course, not every beast works the same. Eating a low-tier monster does almost nothing. But monsters above 6 or 7 stars? There’s… something in their biology. Something dormant, perhaps.”

He paused.

**Kael:** “But the real breakthrough didn’t come from eating.”

**Mirin:** “Then what?”

Kael reached into the satchel slung at his side. Carefully wrapped in thick hide, he revealed a **pale blue crystalline orb**, about the size of an apple. It glowed softly, pulsing with restrained energy.

Mirin gasped. Dalan leaned forward, eyes wide.

**Kael:** “This… is a **Monster Core**.”

**Kael:** “We killed a **10-star Sky Panther**. Only once have I seen a 10-star monster fall. It took days of hunting, ambush tactics, and sacrifices I’d rather not talk about.”

**Kael:** “When the creature died, this was left behind. It formed in the center of its chest—not during the battle—but after its final breath.”

He held it out carefully.

**Kael:** “I’ve never eaten a core. I don’t know what it would do. But I’ve seen a 9.9-star monster **consume a core** from a dying kin… and evolve into a 10-star on the spot.”

Silence fell. The weight of his words sank in.

**Kael:** “That moment changed everything I thought I knew. The core is… condensed beast energy. A crystallization of its essence—power, rage, memory. Whatever it is, it’s potent. More potent than anything I’ve ever felt.”

Mirin, mouth slightly parted, stared at the core like it was holy relic.

**Kael:** “If I’m speculating—and I am—these cores can’t just be used for powering tech. They’re **alive**, in a sense. The raw beast energy inside is unstable, violent. But…”

He leaned in.

**Kael:** “If we can figure out a way to **stabilize** that energy—to channel it, to convert it into usable forms—we might be able to create weapons that rival the beasts.”

Dalan scratched his chin, thinking rapidly.

**Dalan:** “Fusion with existing energy cells… perhaps using energy dampeners or filters. We could combine beast energy with our current plasma-lattice tech. Maybe even power exo-suits.”

Kael nodded.

**Kael:** “And it doesn’t stop there. The **bones** of higher-star monsters are incredibly durable. I’ve used a blade forged from a 9-star creature’s femur—it cut through steel like paper.”

**Kael:** “Armor, weapons, vehicles. We could forge an entire generation of gear using these monster remains.”

**Kael:** “You’re not going to win this war with just soldiers. You need survivors. Hunters. People who adapt.”

He tossed the core toward Dalan, who caught it with a grunt—it was heavier than it looked.

**Kael:** “That’s the only one I have. Study it. Carefully.”

**Kael:** “It’s not stable. You’ll feel it. It resists being contained. You need a containment field stronger than anything used for human weaponry.”

Mirin stared at Kael with a mix of awe and disbelief.

**Mirin (softly):** “You’ve seen so much…”

Kael’s face darkened slightly.

**Kael:** “I’ve seen too much.”

Cherry nudged his hand, sensing the emotional shift.

**Kael (quietly):** “All I’ve done is survive. And if you want more people to do the same… you need to stop thinking like engineers and start thinking like the monsters do.”

Dalan held the core reverently, the blue light reflecting in his eyes.

**Dalan:** “We’ll start work immediately. Thank you, Kael. This… this could change everything.”

Kael nodded once.

**Kael:** “If it works, good. If it doesn’t… don’t try to replicate the process through shortcuts. You’re dealing with the primal essence of beasts who were never meant to be understood.”

He glanced over his shoulder toward the door at the end of the corridor.

**Kael:** “I’ll keep fighting. That’s the only path I know.”

Cherry gave a soft growl, a sound of resolve. She stood at his side like a shadow made of starlight.

Mirin stepped forward.

**Mirin:** “Then let us walk a parallel path—science beside strength.”

Kael gave her a faint smile. “Just make sure it leads somewhere.”

And with that, he turned once again and walked down the corridor, Cherry padding silently beside him, the echo of their footsteps fading into the sterile hallway.

Behind him, Mirin and Dalan stood with the core glowing between them—hope flickering inside a weapon of extinction.

**Chapter 61 – Whispers Beneath the Streets**

Kael returned to his assigned quarters with slow, steady steps. The weight of the morning’s events clung to his shoulders like invisible chains. Cherry curled beside the bed as soon as the door closed behind them, her deep eyes quietly watching her companion’s thoughts stir.

He stood by the window, staring out at the protective dome shimmering faintly in the sunlight above the capital. The city bustled, unaware—or perhaps willfully ignorant—of the doom inching closer every day.

*“Too weak,”* he muttered, almost to himself. *“Still not enough.”*

He clenched his fist.

He had walked through storms, survived in wastelands teeming with death, faced monsters humanity didn’t yet have names for. But the deeper he delved into the world’s darkness, the more he realized—what he had was only the beginning. He needed more than survival instincts and raw power.

He needed **information**. Knowledge. Understanding of what lay beyond this city’s walls. Of what beasts had grown in the shadow of the ancient domains. Of who, if anyone, knew what was coming.

Without wasting time, he sent a message through his communicator.

Lenton arrived soon after, his messy uniform slightly wrinkled, his eyes sharp despite his casual demeanor.

**Kael (curtly):** “I need to find beasts. Strong ones. **Above 10-star.**”

Lenton blinked at the sudden request. “You don’t ask for small things, do you?”

**Kael:** “I don’t have the luxury.”

The younger man scratched his head, pacing slowly.

**Lenton:** “Look, I’ve heard about 9-star and 10-star threats from satellite data, but real-time updates are rare. The military doesn’t exactly broadcast that sort of thing—and even if they did, they probably wouldn’t trust their own sensors.”

Kael said nothing.

Lenton hesitated, then glanced toward the closed door, lowering his voice.

**Lenton:** “There might be a place, though. Not… official. Not safe either.”

Kael’s gaze sharpened.

**Lenton (muttering):** “There’s this… tavern. North-west end of the city. A dump, really. Broken roof tiles, cracked walls, serves watery ale to drunk old men. But it’s not just a tavern.”

**Lenton:** “Say the right words to the bartender—**‘The oven’s still warm’**—and the back wall opens.”

Kael raised a brow. “And what’s behind it?”

**Lenton (quietly):** “The **Black Market.** Illegal trade center. You’ll find anything. Monster cubs. Weapon-grade flesh. Human-altered drugs. Even an assassin or two if you know where to ask.”

**Lenton:** “But the real treasure is something called the **Information Bakery**.”

Kael blinked.

**Kael:** “…The what?”

Lenton chuckled faintly. “Weird name, right? Don’t let it fool you. That place? It's got more eyes than the damn military. Operatives hidden everywhere. Rumor says they’ve been around **since before the Beastfall**. Back when humans were fighting humans.”

**Lenton:** “They survived the collapse. And now, they’ve gone completely underground. Word is—they operate in **all fifty protected zones**. Hidden. Watching. Selling information to the highest bidder.”

Kael’s gaze darkened slightly. “How do you know about it?”

**Lenton (grinning):** “Let’s just say… I talk a lot. And sometimes people talk back.”

Kael didn’t smile, but his silence meant he was listening.

**Kael:** “And the guards?”

**Lenton:** “Either bought or blind. Maybe both. The city’s too busy managing the outer walls and food lines to worry about whispers behind a bar.”

Kael moved away from the window. “Then I’ll go.”

Lenton frowned. “Be careful. They don’t take kindly to outsiders asking too many questions. Especially someone with a military tag like yours.”

**Kael:** “I’ll manage.”

Lenton hesitated at the doorway. “You’re serious about this, huh?”

**Kael (softly):** “The ancient beasts are waking up. We’re still busy arguing over chairs and medals. If I wait for others to move, this world will die before they do.”

He didn’t say anything else. But Lenton saw it in his eyes—that unwavering will. The same gaze Kael had when he stepped into the battlefield alone, spear in hand, surrounded by corpses.

**Lenton (quietly):** “Then good luck, Kael. Just don’t get yourself killed in a rat’s nest.”

Kael gave him a nod, and Lenton slipped out.

Later that night, as the city lights dimmed and soldiers made their final patrol rounds, Kael pulled his cloak tight around him and left his quarters in silence. Cherry trotted beside him, invisible to all but the most perceptive eyes.

The northwest quarter was older, less maintained. Buildings here still bore bullet holes from past riots. Graffiti clung to broken walls. A few drunkards stumbled through alleys, but no one looked too closely.

Kael found the tavern just as Lenton described—old, slanted, and barely lit. The sign above the entrance had only three rusted letters left.

Inside, it smelled of beer, smoke, and old sweat.

The bartender was a tall man with hollow eyes and a jagged scar across his cheek. He didn’t speak as Kael approached.

Kael leaned slightly forward.

**Kael (low voice):** “The oven’s still warm.”

The bartender didn’t blink. He only reached behind the counter, pulled a small switch hidden beneath a cracked wooden shelf, and gestured toward a door behind the bar.

It creaked open.

Kael stepped through.

Down a long, dim stairwell he walked, torches casting long shadows across the stone walls. Cherry followed, her fur dark as the void.

At the bottom, the true face of the city revealed itself.

Rows of market stalls. Blood-colored curtains. Hushed conversations in dozens of languages. Tables filled with glowing vials, beast pelts, weapons made of bone and claw.

But at the far end, behind an armored glass window, sat a small bakery-shaped kiosk with a faded sign that read:

**“The Information Bakery – Since Before the Beastfall.”**

Kael’s eyes narrowed.

It was time to dig deeper.

**Chapter 62 – The Price of Secrets**

Kael stepped into the **Information Bakery**.

It was unlike anything he had imagined.

The corridor outside had been cold, damp, and filled with whispers—like the rotting breath of the underworld. But the inside was lit with soft, warm lights that pulsed with subtle hues. Pale blue glows shimmered off the curved walls, and the floors were polished to a pristine shine. The air smelled faintly of spiced tea and old paper—an odd comfort in a place known to house secrets, assassins, and illegal trade.

A tall woman in a dark red uniform stood at the entrance. Her face was completely hidden behind a sleek fox mask with silver etchings. Her voice, when it came, was mechanical and dry.

**“Four thousand yen for entry.”**

Kael stopped. His cloak rustled slightly as Cherry brushed past his leg, staying quiet.

He didn't move.

**Kael (calmly):** “I don’t have money.”

There was a pause.

The masked woman tilted her head slightly. “Then you shouldn’t be here.”

She gestured toward the exit without hostility—just finality.

**Kael (coolly):** “I have something better. Monster bones.”

The woman stiffened for a moment. Beneath the mask, Kael sensed her evaluating him.

Then she sighed and reached behind the counter.

**“We don’t normally make exceptions, but… fine. For this visit, use this.”**

She handed him a mask.

It was a smooth, gunmetal grey **wolf-shaped helm**. Sleek. Cold. Unlike hers, it covered the entire head, including a polarized visor and voice filter system.

Kael turned it in his hands.

**Lady (firmly):** “Wear it. From now on, all your business here will be conducted through this identity. If you break our rules, your access ends. Permanently.”

Kael gave a curt nod and donned the mask. As soon as it locked in place, a hum vibrated across his ears, and his vision reoriented with an enhanced digital overlay. The voice test flickered in the corner, then disappeared.

Cherry nudged his leg again but stayed quiet.

Inside, the bakery had multiple narrow corridors branching off like spider legs. Rooms on either side, some with glass walls, some entirely sealed.

A man in a navy-blue suit approached him. Like the woman, he wore a **fully enclosed fox mask**, this one marked with a single white stripe across the forehead.

**Man (flatly):** “Come with me.”

Kael followed without a word.

They passed several doors—some echoed with faint typing, others with whispers in different tongues. Some were silent. At the end of the corridor, the suited man paused before a black metal door and knocked a precise rhythm: **three, two, one, pause, then one**.

The door unlocked with a hiss.

He turned to Kael.

**“You’ll have 10 minutes. Each query has a cost. If you wish to stay longer, you must pay again. Time starts the moment the door closes.”**

Kael nodded once.

He stepped in.

The room was dimly lit, only a single circular table sat at the center. Across from him, another person sat, still as stone, wearing the same silver fox mask as the attendant outside. Their gender was impossible to determine. The mask distorted their voice into a cold, neutral tone.

**Fox-Masked Person:** “State your inquiry.”

**Kael (firm):** “I need information on mutated monsters above 10-star power. Anything—sightings, behaviors, growth patterns, domains. All of it.”

The masked person tilted their head slightly and turned to a console behind them. The screen was curved and displayed cascading strings of encrypted data. Their fingers moved rapidly—typing, filtering.

Less than thirty seconds later, they retrieved a **thick sheet of data-printed paper**, stamped with a red seal that read: *CONFIDENTIAL — B Tier Classification.*

They placed it on the table and slid it toward Kael.

**Fox-Masked:** “One hundred thousand yen.”

Kael didn’t move for a second.

**Kael:** “I don’t have currency.”

A pause. A subtle shift in the air.

**Kael (continuing):** “I have bones. From mutated monsters.”

The masked individual was silent for a beat.

**Fox-Masked:** “Only bones above 5-star are accepted. Price is per kilogram. 5-star equals 10,000 yen. 6-star: 20,000. 7-star: 50,000. 8-star: 100,000. 9-star: 200,000. 10-star: half a million.”

Kael opened the pouch on his belt slowly, deliberately.

**Kael:** “I have a ten-star bone. And three nine-star ones. I discarded the rest.”

For the first time, the air changed.

The masked person didn’t speak.

Instead, they **pressed a button** beneath the table.

**Fox-Masked (coldly):** “You lie.”

The walls pulsed red.

Before Kael could respond, the door behind him slammed open.

Five figures entered, all in fox masks, all armed with **energy-linked rifles**, sleek and lethal. They spread around the room with professional ease, aiming directly at Kael.

One of them barked a sharp order.

**Guard:** “Hands where we can see them. Identify your sponsor or face immediate disintegration.”

Cherry growled lowly from Kael’s side, fur bristling.

Kael stood perfectly still.

Behind the mask, his face remained unreadable. But his pulse was calm.

*Of course,* he thought, *this was never going to be simple.*

The air between him and the guards tensed—like a coiled spring seconds from release.

**Chapter 63 – Bones of Truth**

The silence in the room was as heavy as the weapons pointed at Kael.

The masked guards stood tense, their energy rifles humming with a low, unstable whine. Their aim was unwavering. One flicker of sudden movement from Kael and the room would be reduced to burning plasma and bone dust.

Kael raised one hand slowly, fingers open.

**Kael (calmly):** “I said I had bones. I’m taking them out… slowly.”

His other hand moved with deliberate slowness to the heavy pack slung over his shoulder. Cherry, by his feet, growled again—soft and ready, but held back by Kael’s subtle psionic cue. She understood.

With smooth precision, Kael unclasped the buckles and lowered the bag to the floor. The thud it made was deep—solid, weighty, the sound of something that shouldn’t be possible for one man to carry alone.

He crouched, opened the flap, and turned the pack upside down.

**Clack.**

**Clack. Clack. Clack.**

A series of bones tumbled onto the floor with echoing, almost sacred finality. Each one thick as a man’s thigh, some longer, others blunt and compact. Their surfaces were dense, etched with strange, natural patterns from mutation and battle. They gleamed faintly under the soft lights.

**Six pieces**—gnarled, jet-grey toe bones with twisted ridges and claw grooves—landed first. Despite their relatively small size, they had an unmistakable gravity to them. Kael spoke as he arranged them.

**Kael:** “These are from a 9-star beast. Each one weighs around four to five kilos.”

He placed them in a neat row.

Then came **three larger bones**, different from the rest—slightly bluish in hue, subtly radiating with a deep, pulsing energy. When they hit the floor, the whole room seemed to vibrate for a moment. The air shimmered faintly, as if reacting to the presence of the dormant power within.

**Kael:** “These are from a 10-star. I believe these are from its hind toes. Each over ten kilos.”

He stepped back and folded his arms.

The guards didn’t move at first.

Even the broker behind the desk—the same fox-masked figure who had raised the alert—stood frozen. For a long moment, no one breathed.

Then, slowly, one of the guards lowered their weapon.

Another stepped forward and knelt, pulling out a scanner from his belt.

The device whirred softly as it passed over the bones, lights flickering in sharp red and green patterns. After scanning all nine, the guard stood and nodded once to the broker.

**Guard:** “Confirmed. 9-star and 10-star grade. Total estimated value… approximately **twenty-four million yen.**”

The others lowered their weapons. One by one, they filed out of the room with practiced silence.

The broker remained, visibly tense. He bowed slightly—enough to signal apology, but not so much as to lose the air of professionalism.

**Broker (measured):** “My apologies, sir. Precautionary protocol. These are dangerous times, and we encounter liars often. But… clearly, you are not one of them.”

He turned and entered a command into the wall console. A sleek drawer slid open with a faint hiss.

Inside were two cards.

One was deep blue with a silver border, imprinted with a stylized fox icon and the words:

**INFORMATION BAKERY – VERIFIED MEMBER**  
*Level: Silver (5% Off All Queries)*

The other was matte black and shimmered with digital light.

**20,000,000 Yen. Stored and secured.**

**Broker:** “As thanks for your cooperation—and proof of credibility—this inquiry is now free of charge. You’ve also been granted **Silver-tier membership**. Further inquiries will be discounted. You’ll need the ID for future visits.”

Kael accepted both cards.

He glanced down at the bones and took **one of the 9-star pieces**, placing it back into his bag.

**Kael:** “I’ll hold onto this. Might need it later.”

The broker didn’t object.

He escorted Kael to the exit personally, walking him through the glowing corridors, past the data rooms, and back to the main foyer. The woman at the entrance inclined her head in acknowledgment when she saw him again, saying nothing but clearly noting the upgraded status.

Cherry padded silently behind, her eyes flickering at every movement, her tail brushing the floor once before curling lightly around Kael’s ankle.

As the heavy security doors hissed open, Kael stepped into the shadowed alley again—this time, not just as a visitor.

He was now a member.

Armed with information, wealth, and deeper access to a world hidden in plain sight.

*“If the world won’t give answers,”* he thought, adjusting his cloak, *“I’ll tear them out with my own hands.”*

Behind him, the doors sealed shut once again.

**Chapter 64 – Whispers Beneath the Alley**

After leaving the Information Bakery, Kael stepped deeper into the hidden underbelly of the city — the Black Market Alley. The winding, dimly lit corridors behind the tavern stretched further than he expected, bustling with quiet activity and veiled transactions.

There was no shouting, no bartering. Just whispers, coded signals, and the eerie hum of high-tech surveillance humming behind ornamental gargoyles perched on the walls.

Kael kept his wolf mask on, blending with the crowd of masked figures. Most here knew better than to look into someone else’s business. You came here for one thing — survival at a price.

As he moved through the alley, stalls and sealed booths offered an array of forbidden goods, each one more surreal than the last.

In one glass-front stall, **chunks of seared 8-star monster meat** sat on shimmering plates. The flesh gave off a low heat of its own, the juices still bubbling faintly despite no fire beneath.

Just across, **mutated bones** the size of forearms were carefully arranged in rows, labeled in an ancient language, their cores still glowing with residual energy.

“Perfect for forging weapons or bone-blades,” whispered the masked vendor, though Kael walked on without a word.

Further in, he passed a display of **unearthed lost treasures** — relics said to belong to old human empires before the fall: silver-edged daggers, shattered ancient firearms, even what looked like a mechanical gauntlet fused with crystal, glowing faintly red. A small placard read:

“Artifact of the Crimson Scars — 300 years pre-mutant age.”

Then came the wealth stall — **gold and silver bars**, some raw, others minted into strange coins, likely used in protected zones or even beyond human territory.

But what caught Kael’s attention were the **mutated fruits**.

Hung from wires or placed in glass bowls, they pulsed like organs — reds, blues, even void-like blacks. Some levitated faintly, their mass defying logic. Each bore signs warning *“effects unknown, handle with gloves only.”*

Kael paused briefly, studying them.

One fruit, deep blue with jagged white veins, pulsed like a beating heart. Another was shaped like a hand — curled into a fist. The vendors here didn’t advertise loudly. They didn’t need to. If you were here, you already knew the risks.

But then… a cry.

Faint.

Soft.

Not loud enough for most to hear through the chaos of muted conversation and machinery.

Kael turned.

He followed the sound through a side tunnel, less traveled, until he came to a metal gate leading to a dimly lit room of cages stacked atop one another like an animal hoarder’s warehouse.

It was here that he saw it.

**A fox.**

Small, fragile, but unlike anything he had ever seen.

Its fur shimmered **reddish pink**, and though clearly malnourished, it had an ethereal glow — like moonlight diffused through cherry blossoms. **Two tails** curled protectively around its weakened body.

Its ears flicked weakly. It tried to stand as Kael approached but stumbled. The animal’s eyes—glassy, bright, and filled with a strange, ancient sorrow—locked onto his.

The connection was instant.

Behind him, a stout, balding man with a cracked owl mask hurried over.

**Shopkeeper (hurriedly):** “Ah, yes, you have fine taste, sir. That one’s rare, very rare. Only one in this entire market. That’s a **Mythic Emberfox**! Said to reach **10-star power**, maybe even more! Very intelligent, very beautiful. You won’t find one like it again.”

Kael didn’t respond.

He crouched, ignoring the shopkeeper’s lies. He reached a hand toward the cage—not to touch the fox, but to let it smell his presence.

The little creature flinched at first, but then slowly rose and limped closer. Its tails uncurling slightly, it sniffed the air and gave a soft, rasping chirp.

Kael’s eyes narrowed. His psionic sense lightly brushed against the fox — not too deep, just a surface scan. No signs of high-tier intelligence or evolving aura.

This wasn’t a 10-star beast. Not even close. Maybe 2 or 3 at best. But it had potential.

And more importantly—it was alive, and it was suffering.

He stood up, his eyes suddenly colder.

**Kael:** “I’ll give you 200,000 yen. Not a coin more.”

The shopkeeper sputtered. “W-What?! Sir, I just said it’s worth over a million! This is a mythic—"

Kael’s gaze darkened.

No threats. No raising his voice. Just cold, heavy silence behind a mask that made his voice sound mechanical and unfeeling.

**Kael (quietly):** “Two hundred thousand. Now.”

The air between them grew sharp. Cherry, watching from behind, gave a low growl that the fox mimicked faintly—its own voice like a hoarse echo.

The shopkeeper gulped, the pressure from Kael’s presence chilling his resolve.

**Shopkeeper (weakly):** “Alright… alright… take it.”

Kael placed the credit card on the table, scanned the purchase, and waited as the vendor opened the cage. The fox stumbled forward and was quickly scooped up into Kael’s arm with practiced gentleness.

It didn’t resist. It curled into his chest, its small head resting beneath his chin.

He left the alley without another word.

Outside, the city's night lights shimmered in the sky like falling stars. Towering ruins stood beside new-age buildings wrapped in neon, the world in a constant state of rebuilding and falling apart.

Kael didn’t return to the tavern straight away. He walked.

Through alleyways bathed in blue streetlights. Past silent civilians, unaware of the fire that burned just beneath their feet.

The Emberfox nestled against him, soft breathing slowing as it fell asleep.

Cherry followed at his heels, occasionally looking up at the new creature in Kael’s arms but making no protest.

The world was filled with beasts.

Some killed.

Some helped.

Some… were just trying to survive.

Kael returned to his room much later, silent, thoughtful.

He placed the fox gently on a blanket near his bedside.

Cherry lay curled near the door like a sentry.

Kael stared at the ceiling as the city murmured in its sleep.

*"I need to grow stronger. I need allies. I need… answers."*

**Chapter 65 – Hidden Threads and Silent Bonds**

The door clicked shut behind him as Kael entered his room, the weight of the day pressing gently on his shoulders. The small reddish-pink fox in his arms whimpered softly, curling into his chest like a wounded ember, flickering but not yet out.

Cherry padded behind him, alert but calm, eyes locked on the newcomer with mild curiosity.

Kael laid the two-tailed fox on a folded blanket on the floor and stepped back, his expression thoughtful. Then he called out:

**Kael:** “Iris. Scan the fox.”

A soft blue glow shimmered in the air as **Iris**, Kael’s AI support system embedded in his neural interface, activated its scanning mode. Light beams mapped the fox’s body in seconds. Iris's voice was neutral but tinged with subtle curiosity.

**Iris:** “Scan complete. Species: Unknown. Not Emberfox. Genetic composition matches no existing database records. Anomaly confirmed.”

Kael raised an eyebrow.

**Iris:** “Strength Level: Estimated 1.7 Star. Severely malnourished. Energy pathways underdeveloped. Mutation type: Unclassified. Potential unknown.”

Kael crouched beside the creature again. Its ears twitched, and it gave a faint purring hum, cautiously but not fearfully. It was alert—but not hostile. And more importantly, it was aware. It **felt**.

He tapped his comm.

**Kael:** “Lenton. Bring me a mix of beast meat. 2-star to 5-star. A lot of it. Also, bring your dinner up. I don’t want to be interrupted again tonight.”

**Lenton (confused but cheerful):** “Alright, alright! You better share if it’s something good!”

Kael sat beside the fox and stared out his window while waiting. The night beyond was calm, the glow of city lights diffused through haze and wind. Beneath all that beauty, secrets festered.

Twenty minutes later, there was a brisk knock on the door.

**Lenton:** “Coming in!”

The door swung open and Lenton entered, arms full of food and a wide grin on his face.

**Lenton:** “I got grilled spiced beast ribs, seared fang-pelts, roasted rootfruit, and oh—wait—”

His smile froze the moment he saw the small, curled-up figure on Kael’s blanket.

**Lenton (stunned):** “...What the hell is that?”

Kael didn’t look up right away.

**Kael:** “A fox. Or something close to it. I found it in the black market.”

Lenton moved closer, more curious than alarmed. The fox immediately perked up, eyes narrowing. Though weak, it gave a soft growl and purr mix—a warning.

**Lenton:** “It doesn’t like me much.”

**Kael (shrugging):** “That makes two of us.”

Lenton chuckled, shaking his head as he placed the food on the table. He then sat down cross-legged, popping open his dinner box.

**Lenton:** “So what’s with the charity? You don’t usually spend cash on pity projects.”

Kael glanced at him.

**Kael:** “It showed emotion. And when I looked at it… I felt something. Like it didn’t belong in a cage. Like it knew pain.”

Lenton nodded quietly, staring at the fox with newfound seriousness.

**Lenton:** “That… doesn’t sound like you either.”

Kael said nothing. He took the 2-star meat and carefully sliced it into strips. The fox hesitated at first, but when Kael laid it down gently beside it, the creature sniffed, then slowly ate. Its movements were slow and unsteady, but it devoured the meat with silent desperation.

Kael added a few slivers of 3-star meat next. The fox paused, visibly shivering—but ate it nonetheless.

**Iris:** “Energy absorption increased. Neural activity rising. Mutation reaction: mild. No signs of rejection.”

Kael watched as the creature’s fur shimmered faintly in the light. Its color seemed deeper now, the hue a little more pronounced. The two tails uncrossed slightly.

Lenton finished his meal in silence, wiping his hands with a cloth before turning back to Kael.

**Lenton:** “By the way… the higher-ups reached their verdict. About you.”

Kael looked up.

**Lenton:** “You’re free to do what you want. They’ve decided not to interfere—unless your actions interfere with theirs. In simple terms: you’re off the leash, but still within the fence.”

Kael gave a faint smirk.

**Kael:** “Good. I prefer not being followed.”

Lenton stood and stretched.

**Lenton:** “Whatever. Just try not to adopt any more mysterious creatures. This one already looks like it’s plotting something.”

The fox glanced at Lenton at that exact moment. He flinched.

**Lenton:** “See?! That’s not normal!”

Kael chuckled quietly.

As Lenton left, Kael turned back toward the small table beside his bed. Lying there, almost forgotten, was the **folded piece of paper** given to him by the broker at the Information Bakery.

He picked it up slowly, the parchment heavier than it appeared.

Unfolding it, he saw a detailed map—drawn in fine ink—with a red circle marking a vast mountain range far to the northwest. Alongside the map was a single word written in tight, precise handwriting:

**"Fenrath."**

A place.

Or perhaps a name.

Kael leaned back, fox curled beside his leg, Cherry sleeping at the foot of the bed.

The quiet night stretched ahead—but his mind was already moving forward, toward whatever secrets Fenrath held.

**Chapter 66 – Name of the Fox, Path of the Wild**

The morning sun crept through the partially open windows of Kael’s room, bathing the floor in pale gold. The city outside was just beginning to stir, the faint hum of distant vehicles blending with the song of mechanical birds overhead.

Kael sat by the low table, finishing his breakfast in silence. Opposite him, the reddish-pink fox had begun devouring the platter of sliced 3-star beast meat laid before it. Though still frail, its movements were steadier now, its breathing more relaxed. The two tails swayed behind it in short, curious flicks.

**Iris:** “Energy signature rising. Estimated strength: 2.5 Star. Adaptation accelerating. Mutation remains stable.”

Kael watched the fox, the faint shimmer of intelligence growing in its eyes. It tilted its head slightly, as though responding to his gaze.

**Kael (quietly):** “I can’t keep calling you ‘fox’.”

He leaned back, arms crossed, studying it more intently now. A distant memory surfaced—of a myth from a faraway land. A shapeshifter. A guardian. A trickster. A legend.

**Kael:** “Kitsune.”

The fox’s ears twitched. Its eyes flicked toward him, lingering.

**Kael (firmly):** “That’s your name now.”

The creature gave a soft sound—somewhere between a purr and a chirp—and curled itself on the warm spot left by Kael’s plate.

He stood, his mood sharpening. He tapped his communicator.

**Kael:** “Lenton. I need intel.”

**Lenton (gruff):** “What is it now?”

**Kael:** “Fenrath. What do you know?”

There was a pause, then Lenton’s voice returned, lower now.

**Lenton:** “Dilapidated town. Used to be a mid-tier human settlement… before the mutations. Last known report says the place is overrun. A nest of 6 to 9-star mutated beasts. Abandoned. No recovery plans.”

Kael’s eyes narrowed slightly, not in fear, but calculation.

**Kael:** “Distance?”

**Lenton:** “Eighty-three kilometers northwest of Cloverspark.”

**Kael:** “Good.”

Lenton's tone shifted slightly, more serious.

**Lenton:** “Planning to go?”

**Kael:** “Already decided.”

**Lenton:** “You don’t need to inform me. I’m just the liaison. But the governor’s orders were to ensure your ‘comfort.’ I’ll report your absence if it becomes... inconvenient.”

**Kael:** “It won’t.”

Kael ended the call without further words.

He packed lightly—a few energy rations, a specialized monster analysis lens, reinforced bone knives, and his emergency energy sealants. Kitsune looked up as he secured the final strap on his combat pack, then trotted silently beside him.

In the back garage, under a tarp, stood his rebuilt machine—the **Air-Bike**.

Sleek, matte black, and humming with barely contained power, the bike was a masterpiece of Kael’s design and Iris’s quiet evolution. Its new frame was made of mutated beast alloy scavenged from the previous fights. The reinforced flight cores shimmered faintly with pale blue energy veins.

It was capable of **900 km/h** in full surge mode—fast enough to outrun most 8-star monsters, fast enough to slip past patrols, fast enough to vanish before anyone could react.

**Iris (tone slightly warmer):** “Systems green. Routes loaded. Defensive grid charged. Let’s fly, Kael.”

**Kael:** “Let’s.”

He slid onto the saddle, the engines purring to life beneath him. He placed Kitsune into the compact energy-cradle behind the cockpit, lined with adaptive cushioning. The fox yawned and curled up immediately, surprisingly at ease.

Kael revved the engine once. The air around the bike shimmered, and the garage gate hissed open.

A moment later, he shot forward, weaving between alleys and out into the open sky-path.

Within minutes, the towering silhouette of Cloverspark fell behind him, its high gates shrinking into the misty distance.

Ahead, the wilds of Fenrath waited.

**Chapter 67 – Ashes of Fenrath**

The ruins of Fenrath came into view barely **20 minutes** after Kael launched from Cloverspark. His air-bike slowed, its engines humming down to a low whisper as it hovered over the last intact outpost marker—a rusted metal tower half-swallowed by vines and corrosion.

Kael stepped off the bike, boots crunching against dried rubble and cracked pavement.

Kitsune leaped down silently, its two tails flicking with growing energy. It had already grown noticeably larger, its coat more vivid and its eyes sharper. Cherry flew overhead, circling lazily, casting a faint golden glow as she watched the landscape.

The town was a corpse.

Collapsed buildings lay in jagged heaps. Bent steel, scorched walls, flickering light panels, and half-eaten vehicles told the story of desperate last stands. Machines were torn apart, skeletal remains long untouched—burned, shattered, or scattered in frozen agony. Even time seemed to avoid this place.

But **monsters didn’t**.

Kael advanced through the streets with controlled silence. Each step was measured. Kitsune paced beside him, alert, and Cherry remained in the air, eyes sharp.

Not long after, the first attack came.

A mutated lizard beast with half-molten skin and crystalline spines lunged from a ruined alleyway. **7.8 stars**, at least. Kael didn’t hesitate—he surged forward and snapped its spine with a blade of compressed force, crafted through Iris’ energy weaver. The kill was clean.

They kept moving.

Another wave.

A **9.2-star** scaled serpent with vibrating armor and toxic breath struck from beneath the ground. Cherry intercepted mid-air, blasting it with a condensed sound shock that shattered its internal organs. Kael finished the rest with a swift bone dagger strike through the base of its skull.

Then a **9.9-star** ape-like abomination with four arms and obsidian-black fur charged from a collapsed overpass. Kael danced between its blows, his movements sharp and honed—each counter precise. He and Cherry fought as one—Kael cutting deep with focused strikes while Cherry battered it from above with compressed aerial force.

Kitsune held back, watching, analyzing.

Yet even without taking part, **its energy signature continued to rise**—as if absorbing fragments of energy from every confrontation. Iris occasionally pulsed quietly in Kael’s head.

**Iris:** “Kitsune’s power rising exponentially. Current: 7.3 stars. Adaptation rate: abnormal.”

Kael narrowed his eyes. This fox was more than it seemed.

Hours passed. The deeper they moved into Fenrath, the worse it got. There was no rhythm to the monster appearances—just chaos. They came alone, in groups, from below, from above, in silence or in screams. Kael remained steady, each battle a dance, each kill a lesson.

But what truly unsettled him were the **presences** he hadn’t seen yet.

**Kael (in thought):** “There are at least three… maybe four. Ten stars or above.”

He could feel them—like subtle quakes in the air, pulsing with heat, gravity, and dread.

And then, one of them stepped forward.

A **monkey-like beast**, towering at **7 meters**, emerged from the shadow of a scorched building. It moved like a smoldering storm, limbs wrapped in blackened flame. Its breath hissed from nostrils glowing orange, and its feet left scorched trails with every step.

Its **arms burned constantly**, like living torches. Its **eyes were pits of embered rage**. Its awakened ability: **Fire Dominion**.

**Iris:** “Target confirmed. Power Rating: 10.2 stars. Alert: Extreme danger. Environment hazard: High heat. Avoid direct combustion zone.”

Cherry landed beside Kael, her feathers bristling, wings expanding slowly in preparation. Kael summoned his dual blades, adjusting his stance.

Kitsune stepped back instinctively, sensing the difference.

The monkey roared, and the building beside it burst into flame—glass melting, concrete charring.

Kael didn’t flinch.

**Kael:** “Let’s begin.”

**Chapter 68 – Inferno Clash**

The air shimmered with heat as the colossal Fire Monkey stepped forward, its seven-meter frame radiating an oppressive aura. Flames danced along its limbs, and its eyes glowed with a molten fury. The ground beneath its feet sizzled, leaving scorched footprints in its wake.

Kael tightened his grip on the **Stonefang Spear**, feeling the familiar weight and balance of the weapon forged from the core and femur of an 8-star Mountain Ape Beast. The spear's shaft pulsed with energy, ready to channel his strength and skill.

Beside him, **Cherry** expanded to her full twelve-foot form, her fiery red, yellow, and orange fur bristling with anticipation. Her claws gleamed, ready to unleash her **Claw Arc** technique.

**Kael:** "Cherry, stay sharp. This one's different."

**Cherry (telepathically):** "Understood. Its energy is overwhelming, but we can handle it."

The Fire Monkey let out a deafening roar, the sound reverberating through the ruins of Fenrath. Without warning, it lunged forward, its massive fists engulfed in flames.

Kael sidestepped the initial strike, the heat singeing his arm as he narrowly avoided contact. He countered with a swift thrust of his spear, aiming for the creature's midsection. The spear connected, but the monkey's dense musculature absorbed much of the impact.

Cherry seized the opportunity, leaping onto the beast's back and slashing with her claws. Her **Claw Arc** technique left deep gashes across its shoulders, but the creature retaliated by twisting violently, throwing her off.

Kael regained his footing and activated his signature move, **The Rowing Spear Against the Waves**. He spun the spear with rotational momentum, aiming to disrupt the monkey's balance. The technique succeeded, causing the beast to stagger.

**Kael:** "Now, Cherry!"

Cherry pounced again, this time targeting the creature's legs. Her claws tore through its flesh, causing it to roar in pain. The monkey retaliated with a fiery backhand, striking Kael and sending him crashing into a nearby wall.

Kael groaned, feeling the impact reverberate through his body. Blood trickled from a gash on his forehead, but he forced himself to stand.

**Cherry (telepathically):** "Kael, are you alright?"

**Kael:** "I've had worse. Let's finish this."

The Fire Monkey, now enraged, unleashed a torrent of flames from its mouth, aiming to incinerate both opponents. Kael and Cherry split up, dodging the inferno. Kael circled behind the beast, while Cherry distracted it from the front.

Kael channeled his energy into the Stonefang Spear, the weapon glowing with a radiant light. He leaped onto the monkey's back and drove the spear into its spine. The creature howled in agony, flames erupting from its body in a desperate attempt to shake him off.

Cherry joined the assault, her claws slashing relentlessly. Together, they overwhelmed the beast, their combined attacks proving too much for it to withstand.

With a final, anguished roar, the Fire Monkey collapsed, its body reduced to smoldering embers.

Kael stumbled back, breathing heavily. His injuries throbbed, but the adrenaline kept him on his feet.

**Cherry (telepathically):** "We did it."

**Kael:** "Yeah. Let's rest for a moment before moving on."

They stood amidst the ruins, the scorched earth bearing witness to their victory.

**Chapter 69 – Desperation and Instinct**

The smoldering air of Fenrath finally began to settle. The corpse of the Fire Monkey crackled as the final embers died out, leaving a blackened husk amid shattered stone and scorched earth.

Kael knelt beside the beast's remains, catching his breath. The wounds on his arms and side ached with dull pain, but he allowed himself a moment of reprieve. Cherry had minimized back into her smaller form and rested against his shoulder. Her fur, though dusted with ash, still shimmered with that faint, fiery luster.

From the shadows behind the rubble, **Kitsune** timidly padded out. The reddish-pink two-tailed fox looked up at Kael with her bright eyes, now a little sharper, more alert than yesterday. Her power had grown rapidly. She approached with soft steps, her tails gently swaying behind her, as if sensing the peace in the air.

**Kael (softly):** "Well fought, Cherry. And you too, Kitsune."

But peace, in Fenrath, was always fleeting.

Without warning—without even the faintest ripple in the air—a surge of movement exploded from a stagnant pool nearby.

**Sssssk-THWUMP!**

Before any of them could react, a **serpentine figure**, glistening like liquid obsidian, lunged at **Kael** with impossible speed. Its mouth opened wide, revealing two curved fangs and a glowing blue tongue as it slammed into his chest like a battering ram.

**CRACK!**

Kael’s body was thrown backward. Blood spurted from his mouth midair. His back collided with a broken wall, and he collapsed motionless to the ground, a gaping wound in his chest.

**Cherry (screaming telepathically):** "KAEL!!!"

The **snake**, easily **10.5-star power**, hissed violently as it reared back. It had moved faster than any of them could track—faster than **Cherry’s reflexes**, faster than **Kael’s advanced perception**, and even **Iris** hadn’t detected it.

Cherry’s grief twisted instantly into something dark. Her pupils shrank, her claws unsheathed, and her aura surged uncontrollably.

She went **berserk**.

Her fur expanded in fiery arcs, her claws glowing white-hot as she launched at the mutated snake like a comet of rage. The snake struck again, but Cherry dodged, twisting mid-air and slashing with all her might.

A furious flurry of **Claw Arcs** lit up the ruins. Each blow tore through the snake’s flesh like it was paper. The serpent tried to retaliate, spewing jets of dark water and coiling to constrict—but Cherry’s mind was beyond tactics. She was driven by nothing but rage and despair.

Her claws pierced deep into the snake’s midsection. She spun, using her full weight and energy to rend the creature in two. The upper half of the snake hissed one last time before she crushed its skull beneath her burning paw.

And still she attacked—striking, tearing, roaring—until the snake was a pile of shredded, twitching meat and melted bone.

Only then, gasping and soaked in blood, did Cherry stop. Her berserk form shimmered as her body glowed faintly. In the middle of her collapse, she had unknowingly **broken through her bottleneck.** She had **finally become a full 10-star beast.**

But none of that mattered to her now.

She limped to Kael’s side and curled into his arms. His body was motionless, his breath faint. Blood soaked his torso. His chestplate had been pierced clean through.

**Cherry (softly, trembling):** "Please… don’t die…"

She cried, something beasts of her power rarely did. Her mind, synced to Kael’s through the **Psionic Bond**, could feel nothing but pain and silence. It terrified her.

Beside them, **Kitsune** stared blankly. Her tiny paws trembled, her tails drooping. She walked up to Kael’s body, her large eyes filled with confusion, sorrow, and an overwhelming sense of helplessness.

She nudged his side with her nose.

Nothing.

She licked the blood on his neck, hoping it would do something.

Still nothing.

**Kitsune (instinctively):** "…Why can’t I help him…?"

She whimpered—a soft, pitiful sound. And then, something inside her stirred. A **raw, primal instinct** unlike anything she had felt before. Her gaze shifted toward the **scattered monster cores** nearby—the ones retrieved from the Fire Monkey and the snake.

One burned with searing heat, the other shimmered with a strange aquatic pulse.

Her beast soul screamed.

"Eat them."

No rational thought followed. She acted purely on instinct—a desperate, gut-wrenching desire to save her master.

With her body trembling, she dragged the two cores toward herself. Cherry, lost in her grief, barely noticed as Kitsune sat between the two pulsing orbs. With one final look at Kael, Kitsune did the unthinkable.

She **gulped both cores in a single motion**.

**CRACK!**

Her body began to seize as her mutation triggered instantly. Light poured out from her fur, her tails flared with energy, and her eyes widened in shock as pain and power surged through her.

**Cherry (finally noticing):** "Kitsune?! What are you—?!"

But it was too late.

Kitsune’s body floated slightly off the ground, engulfed in swirling energy. Her reddish-pink fur shimmered, cracking and re-forming with golden veins. Her tails extended and split — from two to **three**, then to **five**, and counting.

A mutation beyond known biology had begun.

Cherry backed away slowly, eyes wide with horror and confusion.

And Kael lay there… bleeding, still unmoving… as the transformation spiraled out of control around them.

**Chapter 70 – Fire and Water**

The sky above **Fenrath** had begun to darken—not with clouds, but with tension. The air felt like a bowstring drawn to its limit.

And in the middle of this broken town, where ruins smoldered and death lingered, a young two-tailed fox cried out in pain.

**Kitsune’s mutation had begun.**

Her body had become the battleground of opposing elements. **One half of her sleek frame blazed with fire**, tendrils of flame licking her fur, scorching the ground beneath her. The **other half steamed with cold moisture**, soaked in a suffocating, damp mist that sizzled where it met the heat.

The energies—**Fire and Water**—were polar opposites, and her body was the unwilling host to both.

**CRACK!**

A sickening sound echoed as her internal bones twisted under the strain. Her tails writhed violently, and then—

**Two tails split into three.**

**Three became five.**

**Five surged into seven.**

And finally—**nine tails unfurled behind her.**

Four tails burned like wildfire—flickering, violent, and uncontrollable.

Four others wept with the essence of water—silent, heavy, calm yet crushing.

But the **ninth tail**, centered and twisted, was locked in a violent flux—its tip **half-burning, half-drenched**, flickering and sizzling in conflict. That tail spasmed constantly, embodying the agony of elemental imbalance.

**Kitsune’s shriek pierced the silence**—raw and heart-wrenching.

She fell to the ground, convulsing. Her claws scraped against the shattered stone. Her crimson-pink fur, once glowing, was now singed and matted. Her eyes streamed with tears as the volatile fusion of energies tore her apart from within.

She was only **7.3 stars**.

And she had consumed the cores of two **10-star beasts**—an act akin to suicide.

But **Kitsune didn’t care**.

This pain, this hell—she welcomed it. For it was the price to **save her master**.

**“Endure,”** something inside her whispered.  
**“This is for him.”**

Meanwhile, **Cherry** was caught between two collapsing worlds.

Kael lay on the ground, blood still seeping from the massive wound in his chest. He hadn’t stirred. His breath was faint. His pulse fading.

And beside her, Kitsune screamed in a transformation that could kill even a 10-star elder beast.

**Cherry (muttering to herself):** "Why now… Why both?!"

Tears blurred her vision. Her paws trembled. Desperation made her ignore her own pain. With trembling claws, she tore at Kael’s shirt, ripping it to threads and **fashioning a makeshift bandage**, pressing it tightly against his wound.

**Cherry (telepathic burst):** "Please, just breathe… damn it, Kael…!"

Then came a mechanical voice—**Iris**.

**Iris (urgent, trembling):** “WARNING! Vital signs dropping—Kael Evander is at 12% critical threshold. Immediate aid required! Immediate—!”

It repeated. Again and again. **Desperate**. Almost as if… Iris was afraid.

Cherry looked up briefly. Iris's core in Kael’s ear glowed a flickering red. She had seen Iris assist, advise, calculate—but never plead. Never sound like this.

**Cherry (whispering):** “You… actually care too, don’t you…?”

More than **thirty minutes** passed like an eternity.

Through every second, Kitsune writhed, screamed, burned, and wept. Her body was breaking—but **her will was steel**.

Finally—when the silence returned—her screams stopped.

The glowing aura around her body began to fade. Her wildly flaring nine tails **shrank and compressed** into three long, thick tails. The ends of each tail shimmered with **a dark blue flame**—not burning hot like normal fire, but **cold**, deadly, and silent.

This flame did not scorch. It **smothered**. It was the unnatural marriage of flame and water, an impossible existence that now pulsed quietly.

Kitsune's body changed. No longer a small fox, she now stood the size of a large dog, her fur still the same rich reddish-pink hue but now lined with gentle pulses of elemental energy. Her aura, once unstable, now radiated **quiet danger**.

She had survived. No, more than that—**she had transcended.**

**Cherry (shocked):** “Kitsune…?”

The mutated fox didn’t answer. She had no strength left for words.

Instead, she rushed toward **Kael**—limping slightly—and gently pressed one of her glowing tails to his bleeding chest.

There was a hiss.

A spark of energy passed between them. The wound, still deep, shuddered—and then… **slowed**. The blood stopped. The torn flesh shimmered under a coating of cool, glowing water.

**Healing water.**

The flames did not burn—it was **elemental purification**. Whatever Kitsune had become, she now had the power to slow death, to mend what was breaking.

Kael’s breath, once ragged, deepened—shallow but steady.

**Iris (quiet now):** “…Vital signs stabilizing.”

Cherry exhaled deeply, her body slumping next to him. Relief washed over her like a tide. The overwhelming despair lifted ever so slightly.

Kitsune collapsed, too—her tails flickering low, her body pressing lightly into Kael’s side.

**Cherry (softly):** “You saved him… both of us owe you…”

Kitsune didn’t reply. But in her eyes, there was peace. The agony was worth it.

They could not remain here.

With great effort, Cherry picked Kael up across her back, his weight heavy but manageable. Kitsune followed closely, limping but determined.

They left the central ruins behind, heading into the outskirts—**away from the mutated zones**—to the **safer cliffs of outer Fenrath**, where no 10-star beasts roamed, and where they could recover.

Above them, the wind howled.

But for the first time since entering Fenrath, it carried something faint.

**Hope.**

**Chapter 71 – The Morning After the Storm**

The sun rose slowly over the **outer cliffs of Fenrath**, casting long amber rays across the jagged terrain. The wind was gentler here. The beasts were fewer. And above all, **it was safe**—or as safe as any place could be in the wilds.

Nestled within the crumbling remains of what once might have been a mountain watch-house, **Kael** lay unconscious, wrapped in layers of fur and cloth. His breath was shallow, but steady. His wounds—bound tightly by torn cloth and streaked with a faint glow of healing water—had stopped bleeding.

**Cherry** had found the ruin by scent the night before, carrying Kael on her back the entire way. It was a **stone shelter**, half-collapsed, with a roof barely intact and one wall missing. But it was shelter nonetheless.

**Kitsune** had limped behind, her body still trembling from the aftershock of her evolution.

The moment they arrived, they had both collapsed—Cherry curling beside Kael’s body, protective even in unconsciousness, and Kitsune curling near his head, her three dark-flamed tails flickering faintly.

The night passed in silence.

By morning, the winds stirred through the broken rafters. Cherry opened her eyes first, blinking slowly. Her body ached, but her mind remained sharp. Her first action—**check Kael.**

She padded over and gently pressed her nose against his forehead.

Still breathing.

A soft sigh escaped her. Kitsune stirred shortly after, her tails flickering gently. Her fur had lost its chaotic glow and now shimmered softly. The pain was gone, but **instability remained**—like a volcano asleep, not dead.

They both sat beside Kael, grooming his wounds, reinforcing the bandages, and applying a bit of their respective energies—**fire and water** in harmony, barely touching but synchronizing through the faint bond they had come to share.

They remained by his side all morning.

It was **late afternoon** when Kael stirred.

**Kael (murmuring):** “...mmmgh…”

His body shifted.

His eyes opened, and the world slowly came into focus.

The first thing he saw was the **wooden ceiling**, half cracked and bathed in sunlight. The second—**Cherry’s bright golden eyes** staring down at him, trembling. Her body shook as she gasped.

Kitsune was instantly at his other side, releasing a whimper that turned into a choked squeal of joy.

**Kael (groaning):** “...My chest… hurts...”

**Cherry (eyes wide, voice trembling):** “Kael!! You’re awake!”

She leapt forward and wrapped her forepaws around his arm, burying her face into his side.

**Iris (with a rare, emotional pitch):**  
“WARNING—host is 82% damaged.  
But vitals are improving.  
Kael Evander… welcome back.”

**Kitsune (telepathic pulse, raw and echoing):**  
*"You’re alive! You’re really alive!"*

Kael blinked in confusion.

**Kael:** “Wha… Kitsune? Did I just… hear your voice?”

**Cherry (sniffing):** “It’s her new power. She can't talk like I do, but… you’ll hear her thoughts. You’re linked now. Psionic Bond. Just like her and me.”

Kael sat up slowly—groaning and biting down on a fresh wave of pain. His hand brushed across Cherry’s head, then rested gently on Kitsune’s.

**Kael (softly):** “You both… saved me, didn’t you?”

They nodded. He felt their emotions pouring through him—relief, happiness, and a deep, **aching love**.

**Kael (eyes downcast):** “I… couldn’t do anything. Again. I was helpless.”

**Cherry (firmly):** “You’re not. You were just ambushed. None of us saw it coming. Not even Iris.”

**Iris (tone subdued):**  
“Confirmed. The 10.5-star serpent was cloaked beyond standard detection metrics. Host response was impossible in the timeframe.”

Kael clenched his fists weakly.

**Kael:** “Still. I want to know where we stand. Iris, full scan. Me, Cherry, and Kitsune.”

There was a pause. Then Iris responded with her usual precision—but now with a faint glow of pride in her tone.

**Iris:**  
**Kael Evander:** 9.8★ Human Warrior  
Status: 82.6% physical trauma  
Healing: Ongoing (aided by unknown water-fire hybrid energy)

**Cherry:** Mutant Cat Beast – Current Power: **10.4★**  
Mutation Stability: 91%  
Special Traits:  
– **Claw Arc Lv 3 (White Grade)**  
– **Psionic Bond Lv 3 (Kael + Kitsune)**  
– **Power Surge (Short-Term Boost: x1.8 Battle Power)**  
– **Faint Lightning Affinity: Latent (Not Activated)**

**Kitsune:** Fox Variant Beast – Current Power: **10.2★**  
Mutation Stability: 76% (Residual Elemental Flux)  
Special Traits:  
– **Psionic Bond Lv 3 (Kael + Cherry)**  
– **Water/Fire Dual Affinity (Balanced)**  
– **Healing Tail Flame (Stabilization Effect)**  
– **Post-Mutation Form: 3-Tail Core with Bluefire Ends**

Kael exhaled, impressed.

**Kael:** “You both… you broke through the 10-star threshold. I wasn't even awake to see it.”

**Cherry (softly):** “We didn’t want to. But we had to.”

**Kitsune (psionic thought):** *“We couldn’t lose you.”*

Kael’s hand trembled slightly as he rested it on both of their heads.

**Kael:** “I’m proud of you. Both of you. But we’re not out of the woods yet.”

He looked toward the broken wall and the distant battlefield they had barely escaped from.

**Kael:** “We need food. Protein. Energy to recover.”

**Cherry (ears perking up):** “The meat! From the ape… and the snake!”

**Kitsune (nodding):** *“Some must be left… We’ll go.”*

Kael leaned back and closed his eyes again.

**Kael:** “Be careful. Bring what you can. We’ll make it last.”

**Hours passed.**

Kitsune and Cherry returned just before sunset, their bodies bruised but intact.

They had both gone back to the ruins of the battlefield. The scene was picked over by smaller creatures—scavenger beasts had devoured chunks of both the **Mountain Ape** and the **Serpent**.

But enough **remained**—limb meat, shoulder muscle, some inner organs that were too tough or toxic for lesser beasts. They carried back as much as they could—dragging it in makeshift leaf-wrapped bundles and covered with herbs to prevent rapid decay.

Kael stirred as the scent hit his nose. He smiled faintly.

**Kael (murmuring):** “You made it back... Good girls.”

They curled beside him again—Cherry resting against his hip, Kitsune at his shoulder.

The meat would be cooked, shared, and slowly consumed over the next few days.

But for now, they were together.

They had survived.

**Chapter 72 – A Week of Blood and Healing**

The shattered watch-house perched on the cliffs became their sanctuary for the days that followed. In the chaos of Fenrath's deep beast territories, where every step could lead to death, this forgotten ruin gave them something they hadn’t felt in a long time.

**A sliver of peace.**

But peace, they all knew, had a price.

**Day One.**

Kael sat propped up against the stone wall, bandages covering his chest and stomach, skin still discolored with bruises. His every breath was measured, shallow, and sharp, but the ache was no longer unbearable. His body had begun mending under Kitsune’s healing water flame and Cherry’s careful treatments.

**Kitsune**, still smaller than before but pulsing with a controlled dual-elemental aura, stared at Kael with quiet focus. The flame at the end of her tails shimmered with faint coldness—a paradoxical heat that soothed rather than burned.

**Cherry** paced like a guardian panther, her eyes scanning the treeline, her instincts sharper than ever.

**Kael:** “You two need to hunt. We’ll run out of meat in another day.”

**Cherry (firmly):** “You come first. We’ll eat later.”

**Kitsune (telepathic pulse):** *“We’ll return before night.”*

And with that, they vanished into the trees—streaks of crimson and shadow, moving together in perfect synchronization.

**Day Two.**

Kael could now walk. Slowly. Painfully. But it was movement.

He reinforced his bandages with the clean cloth strips Cherry had gathered and began preparing small fires each evening for warmth. His body ached like it had been rebuilt with stone and wire, but every hour of sleep, every mouthful of cooked beast meat, restored a bit of his vitality.

That evening, Cherry and Kitsune returned with the torn remains of a **9-star Armored Boar**—its tusks cracked, its massive legs partially severed.

They had hunted it together.

They cleaned it with sharp stones and stored the **core** inside a pouch Kael had fashioned from the serpent’s molted scale.

**Day Three.**

Kael began training again—barely. He practiced spear thrusts with a tree branch, slow and deliberate, his breath controlled. The pain in his ribs flared with every twist, but it was a familiar fire now.

**Kael (to himself):** “If I can't help them, I don’t deserve to lead them…”

He spent the afternoon meditating with Iris feeding him constant system updates.

**Iris:**  
“Host recovery: 67.3%  
Pain resistance: +12%  
Cellular regeneration accelerating due to monster-core enriched meals.”

That evening, Cherry limped back with a bleeding flank—but smiling, if one could call that feline expression a smile. **Kitsune followed**, slightly burnt from an encounter with a **Fire-Tongue Lizard**, dragging its charred corpse behind her.

Another **9-star beast** slain.

Another **core collected**.

**Day Four.**

Kael now trained longer—basic stances, balance routines, and spear grips. His shirt hung loose on him, revealing healed skin and the scar where the snake’s fang had punctured his chest.

He could laugh again, a little.

**Kael (grinning at Kitsune):** “You look like a furnace with legs.”

**Kitsune (telepathic thought, amused):** *“Says the man who almost died twice in three days.”*

That day, they ventured deeper—and killed their **first 10-star beast** since the serpent and the fire ape.

It was a **Storm-backed Basilisk**, a creature covered in armor scales and lightning-infused muscles. The fight lasted over an hour. Kitsune burned its core from within using her water fire. Cherry struck it again and again with her **Claw Arc**, each strike glowing faintly with latent lightning. When it finally collapsed, the skies had darkened.

Kael helped them clean the body with slow hands. The **core** glowed like condensed thunder—dense with energy.

They kept it.

**Day Five.**

Kael could run short distances now.

Not well. Not fast. But enough to help if danger arrived.

He trained from dawn to dusk, ate heartily, and used the time alone to **reflect**.

He had nearly died.

If Cherry hadn’t gone berserk, if Kitsune hadn’t mutated—he would have been buried in Fenrath’s soil.

**Kael (muttering):** “Power. I need more power. Not just strength. Intelligence. Tactics. Gear. Every bit matters.”

Iris began syncing new training simulations. Recovery was now above **82%**.

**Day Six.**

Cherry and Kitsune returned that morning, dragging the limp corpse of a **10-star Frost-Winged Stag**, its white fur stained with blood, its antlers cracked. It had ambushed them with blinding speed and chilling winds.

But they were faster.

Smarter.

Deadlier.

This beast’s core pulsed with **pure frost energy**, the opposite of Kael’s affinity, but valuable nonetheless.

They roasted the meat over controlled blueflame. Kael’s cooking had returned.

That night, they all sat outside—silent, watching the moon rise.

Kitsune’s tails curled around Kael’s legs. Cherry rested her head on his lap.

**Day Seven.**

Kael sparred against the air for hours, sweat pouring, his breath steady, his muscles moving with familiarity.

**Iris:**  
“Recovery: 95.6%  
Neural response time normalized.  
Combat readiness: Green.  
Suggest physical enhancement training to regain lost power.”

Kael smiled.

He was back.

Not perfect. Not fully recovered. But back.

That afternoon, he and Cherry ventured together a short distance from the ruined house. She moved at his side, cautiously, as he tested his body. Kitsune remained to guard the camp.

They fought a pair of **8-star Dire Hounds**, and Kael managed to **kill one** with a precise spear thrust through the eye.

He felt **alive**.

By week’s end, they had slain:

* **Six 9-star beasts**, each stored with its core.
* **Two 10-star monsters**, their cores sealed and hidden in a chest Kael made using salvaged metal and beast bone.

Fenrath's balance had shifted.

Only **two** 10-star beasts remained in the region now—hidden, waiting, perhaps watching. The land had grown quiet, uneasy. Lesser beasts had fled deeper into the zones. The smell of apex blood filled the air.

But Kael didn’t fear it anymore.

He had Cherry.

He had Kitsune.

And he was finally standing again.

**Chapter 73 – The Twin Apex Beasts**

**Iris System Scan Report – Subject: Cherry**

* **Designation**: Mutant Cat Beast
* **Power Level**: 10.5★ (Stabilized)
* **Attributes**:
  + **Claw Arc**: White Grade Lv 4
  + **Psionic Bond**: Blue Grade Lv 3
  + **Elemental Affinity**: Lightning (Dormant)
  + **Special Ability**: Power Surge Lv 1 (+0.3–0.4★ temporary boost)
  + **Mutation Stability**: Stable

**Iris System Scan Report – Subject: Kitsune**

* **Designation**: Dual-Element Fox Beast
* **Power Level**: 10.3★
* **Attributes**:
  + **Psionic Bond**: Blue Grade Lv 3 (with Kael)
  + **Elemental Affinities**: Fire and Water (Healing Variant)
  + **Mutation Stability**: Stable
  + **Healing Ability**: Water-infused flame with regenerative properties[Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_Beasts?utm_source=chatgpt.com)[Dragon Fandom](https://dragons.fandom.com/wiki/Elemental_Dragons_%28General%29?utm_source=chatgpt.com)[Dragon Fandom+10TaiciKe+10Wikipedia+10](https://en.taicike.com/juqing/8661.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

After a week of relentless training and recovery, Kael stood tall, his body fully healed, muscles taut, and eyes sharp. Cherry and Kitsune, now stabilized in their mutations, exuded an aura of formidable power.

The trio set out towards the heart of Fenrath, where the last two 10-star beasts resided. As they approached, the oppressive energy in the air thickened, signaling the proximity of their targets.

Emerging into a clearing, they were met with a daunting sight: two colossal tigers, each exuding a terrifying aura.

* **Tiger One**: A massive beast with vibrant yellow fur and crimson stripes, its body crackling with arcs of electricity and flickers of flame.
* **Tiger Two**: Equally imposing, this tiger bore pristine white fur adorned with blue stripes, its presence emanating a chilling cold and an unsettling, unknown energy.

**Iris System Scan Report – Targets**

* **Subject A**: Fire-Lightning Tiger
  + **Power Level**: 10.5★
  + **Elemental Affinities**: Fire and Lightning
* **Subject B**: Ice-Unknown Tiger
  + **Power Level**: 10.5★
  + **Elemental Affinities**: Ice and Unknown[TV Tropes+10TaiciKe+10Monster Hunter Wiki+10](https://en.taicike.com/juqing/8661.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com)[NovelBuddy+9Dragon Fandom+9TV Tropes+9](https://dragons.fandom.com/wiki/Elemental_Dragons_%28General%29?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

The two groups locked eyes, the tension palpable. Without a word, the battle commenced.

**The Battle Unfolds**

Kael lunged forward, his Stonefang Spear spinning in a wide arc, executing the 'Rowing Spear Against the Waves' technique. The momentum disrupted the Fire-Lightning Tiger's stance, forcing it to retreat momentarily.

Cherry, a blur of motion, engaged the Ice-Unknown Tiger. Her claws, glowing faintly with latent lightning, struck with precision, each hit met with a retaliatory swipe from the beast.

Kitsune, positioned strategically, launched orbs of blue flame towards the tigers. Upon contact, these orbs exploded into a chilling mist, causing the beasts to flinch and slow their movements.

Kael's focus remained unwavering. He anticipated the Fire-Lightning Tiger's dual-element attacks, parrying with calculated movements.

**Kael (thinking)**: *"Their coordination is impeccable. We need to disrupt their synergy."*

Cherry, sensing an opening, activated her 'Power Surge' ability. Her form shimmered as her power temporarily spiked, allowing her to land a series of devastating blows on the Ice-Unknown Tiger.

Kitsune intensified her assault, her tails glowing brighter as she channeled more energy into her attacks.

Despite their combined efforts, the tigers adapted quickly, countering with synchronized strikes. The Fire-Lightning Tiger unleashed a barrage of flaming lightning bolts, while the Ice-Unknown Tiger summoned pillars of ice to impede movement.

Kael, though strained, maintained his composure, directing Cherry and Kitsune to exploit the brief moments when the tigers' attacks left them vulnerable.

**Kael (shouting)**: *"Cherry, flank left! Kitsune, suppress the right!"*

The trio executed the maneuver flawlessly. Cherry's enhanced speed allowed her to outmaneuver the Ice-Unknown Tiger, while Kitsune's relentless barrage kept the Fire-Lightning Tiger at bay.

As the battle raged on, Kael's thoughts drifted momentarily.

**Kael (thinking)**: *"This is the culmination of our journey. We must prevail."*

With renewed determination, he charged, delivering a powerful thrust that pierced the Fire-Lightning Tiger's shoulder. The beast roared in pain, retreating.

Cherry seized the opportunity, launching a final, electrified slash that sent the Ice-Unknown Tiger sprawling.

The battlefield fell silent, the once-mighty tigers now subdued.

**Adaptation**

Just as Kael’s spear pierced the Fire-Lightning Tiger’s shoulder and Cherry’s electrified claw knocked the Ice-Unknown Tiger off balance, a chilling realization struck them all.

The twin tigers didn’t fall.

They paused—only for a breath—and then moved again. **But differently. Smarter. Faster. More synchronized.** Their gazes sharpened with an eerie glint, and their aura flared in unison. The Fire-Lightning Tiger spun its massive frame, dispersing Kael’s spear with a surge of volatile lightning. The Ice Tiger slid across the battlefield on a forming frost path, narrowly dodging Cherry’s follow-up claw.

**Kael (gritting his teeth)**: *"They’re adapting… learning us."*

Iris’s warning flashed in his vision.

**[IRIS SYSTEM ALERT]**  
Behavioral Pattern Shift Detected.  
Estimated Adaptive Intelligence: Extreme.

Kitsune widened her stance, her tails igniting with cold flame again as she growled low and tense. The blue fireballs she had been launching now fizzled midair—**the tigers had learned their trajectory, their timing, their cadence**. They were now weaving through them like dancers in a deadly rhythm.

Cherry’s fur bristled as she backed into a triangular formation beside Kael and Kitsune.

**Cherry (through psionic link)**: *“They’re not just beasts. They’re strategists.”*

Kael’s hand tightened around the shaft of his Stonefang Spear, his eyes cold.

**Kael (softly)**: *"Then we fight like never before."*

With a renewed, almost dreadful roar, the twin tigers surged forward again—**faster, deadlier, and far more coordinated.** One tiger brought fire and lightning crashing down, while the other sent razors of ice sweeping across the ground. The battlefield turned into a storm of crackling chaos and jagged frost.

There would be no rest.

**The true battle had just begun.**

**Chapter 74 – When Time Betrays**

The twin tigers surged again—faster, heavier, and more calculated. Kael braced his stance and hurled his spear forward with practiced precision, but something felt… off.

**Too slow.**

The Stonefang Spear, usually an extension of his own body, dragged through the air as though swimming in molasses. Beside him, Cherry lunged forward, her claws glowing with force, but her arc moved sluggishly—**a full second too late.**

**Kael (eyes narrowing):** “What…?”

In a split-second, the red-striped tiger’s paw connected with his ribs. A shockwave of force exploded through his side, sending him flying backward. Cherry was hit a moment later, her charge intercepted by the white tiger’s tail—**a frozen whip cracking her clean across the stone wall.**

Kitsune, holding the rear flank, yelped. She launched a volley of blue fireballs with more urgency now.

**Kitsune (in psionic burst):** *“Why did you two slow down?! What’s happening to you!?”*

Kael’s eyes widened as the question tore through his concentration.

Cherry, staggering to her feet, her fur half-frosted, snarled.

**Cherry (panting):** *“They… didn’t get faster. We got slower.”*

Suddenly, Iris’s voice crackled to life in Kael’s earpiece, filled with urgency.

**[IRIS ALERT – TEMPORAL DISTORTION DETECTED]**  
Anomalous Time Dilation Field Confirmed  
**Unknown Element Identified: TIME**  
Local Time Flow Differential: -2.4 Seconds  
Reaction Delay Induced Across Subject Range

Kael’s breath caught in his throat.

**Kael (muttering):** “A time element…? The white one… it’s bending time?”

He clutched his ribs, blood dripping from the cracked armor, his heart pounding out of sync with reality. It wasn’t just his movement—**his thoughts, his instincts, even his heartbeat had been slowed.**

**Cherry (growling):** *“I couldn’t even feel its paw coming. It’s like I was dreaming through a punch.”*

The battlefield shifted again. The Fire-Lightning Tiger roared, its mane sparking like a violent sunburst. The White-Ice-Time Tiger stepped into the edge of the pool and let out a low hum—**a harmonic vibration that warped the air itself**, distorting the rocks and tree trunks near them.

The slow zone expanded.

Kael rolled to the side just as a bolt of lightning split the ground he’d been on a moment before. His spear scraped against ice-slicked stone, almost slipping from his hands.

They were being **herded**—not just physically, but chronologically.

**Iris (urgent):** “Subject movement and perception remain outside optimal thresholds. Recalibration required. Advise full retreat—”

**Kael (gritting his teeth):** “No. We adapt.”

**Two Hours Later**

Sweat dripped down Kael’s face in sheets. Cherry’s coat was scorched and bleeding in streaks. Kitsune’s tails burned with cold fire, but even she was panting now.

But something had changed.

**Kael (faint smirk):** “I can see it now.”

The moment the White Tiger extended its paw and the shimmer rippled through the air, Kael adjusted—not his body, but his **anticipation**. He began swinging not where the beast was, but **where it would be**—correcting for the time lag.

Cherry, too, had evolved her approach. Her reflexes had always been reactive, but now her strikes were **predictive**. She used Kitsune’s psionic pre-warnings and leapt just before a blow could ever touch her.

Kitsune—her dual-element body less affected by the field—acted as their anchor. She flanked around and countered the time distortions by generating high-energy interference: overlapping bursts of fire and water. The **implosions created by her unstable fusion** occasionally forced the time field to bend, if only for a second.

**Cherry (through psionic bond):** *“I’m syncing with you both. I can feel their pulse now… even through time.”*

**Kael:** “Then let’s take the fight back to them.”

**The Fight Reignites**

Kael spun his spear low and launched *The Rowing Spear Against the Waves*—this time enhanced with his own internal energy flow channeled forward a split-second early. The white tiger attempted to dodge, but the trajectory bent inward, tearing through its flank with a shallow but precise gash.

Cherry pounced with a rising *Claw Arc*, imbued with a sudden, **surging power boost**. Her Power Surge ability kicked in, her claws crackling with red-gold lightning, her eyes glowing with synced focus.

**Iris:** “Battle adaptation complete. Subject synchronization: 92%. Temporal resistance effective.”

Still, the twin tigers weren’t done. They growled low and backed into a circling formation. **Their own coordination was unnerving, their communication nearly silent—instinctive.**

**Kael (breathing hard):** “This... is the real fight. It wasn’t the speed. It wasn’t the strength. It was *time itself*.”

The battlefield was no longer a contest of raw power. It had become a chess match across moments—**where every second meant survival.**

As Kael and his companions stood ready again, bruised and bloodied but now fighting at full effectiveness within a slowed world, the tigers roared together—no longer to intimidate, but to acknowledge.

**Cherry (psionic whisper):** *“They respect us now. That’s bad.”*

**Kael (raising his spear):** “Then let’s earn it.”

And with that, the clash resumed again, this time with all four combatants weaving through a war not just of might, but of **time-warped strategy**.

**Chapter 75 – The Core of Mercy**

The battlefield trembled beneath their feet, scorched with streaks of fire, ice, and collapsed terrain. Kael, Cherry, and Kitsune moved like a well-oiled trinity, their synergy sharper than ever before. **Every movement now anticipated, every distortion of time accounted for**.

Kael dashed forward, *Stonefang Spear* roaring in his hands, his rotation seamless as *Rowing the Spear Against the Waves* drove back the white-striped tiger once again. Cherry struck like a tempest, her claws flaring with a brief pulse of electricity, while Kitsune’s support fire curved like glowing crescent blades from behind.

The **balance had shifted.**

Kael’s breathing was heavy, but his grip never faltered. “They’re slowing… we’ve got them.”

The red-yellow tiger, sparks running along its sinewy body, backed away. The white-blue tiger let out a long, guttural growl—not aggressive, not desperate… but deliberate.

Suddenly, both tigers stopped attacking.

**Cherry (alerted, tense):** *“Wait… something’s changed.”*

Kael held his spear firm, poised to strike again—but Cherry blocked him gently with her massive paw. Her golden eyes glowed with something akin to disbelief.

The tigers lowered their heads—not in surrender, but in **appeal**.

A series of short, low rumbles vibrated through the air—beast speech. Kael furrowed his brow, unable to understand.

**Kael:** “What are they saying?”

Cherry turned to him slowly, her voice thick with hesitation.

**Cherry:** *“They’re… asking for a truce.”*

Kitsune stopped mid-flank and dropped low, her tails swaying slowly. Cherry continued, her voice increasingly conflicted.

**Cherry:** *“They said… they’ll give up their cores voluntarily. They ask us to spare their lives—and their children’s.”*

Kael blinked, stunned. “Children…?”

From the corner of his vision, beyond the shattered cave wall, two tiny shapes emerged—**striped tiger cubs**, barely larger than housecats. They peeked out cautiously, their innocent eyes full of fear and confusion.

Kael’s mouth went dry.

**Kael (quietly):** “They were protecting their family…”

His grip on the spear loosened. He looked at the blood, the scorch marks on his armor, the aching in his ribs. *He needed this victory*. **He needed the cores.** His path forward required it. But this? This wasn't just a battle—it was a moral crucible.

**Kael (to Cherry):** “Are they serious about giving up their cores? That's… impossible. Beasts die when they lose their core.”

Cherry nodded slowly.

**Cherry:** *“They know. But they say… if a beast of their strength gives up their core willingly, it won’t kill them—only cripple them. They’ll survive, but weakened. Permanently.”*

**Kitsune (through bond):** *“They’re doing it… for their cubs.”*

Kael stepped back, shaken. His heart was pounding again—but this time, not from battle. From **conflict**.

He looked at the two majestic beasts—creatures who, moments ago, had tried to end his life. Now they stood battered, heads bowed, backs straight. Not begging… but **bargaining** with dignity.

**Kael (to himself):** *“Do I take what I need… at the cost of their future?”*

He looked to Cherry, who stared at him with trembling eyes. Then to Kitsune, whose tails were gently coiled around her legs in a gesture of emotional confusion.

Kael turned his back, fists clenched. He couldn’t decide. Every part of him warred with another—the **survivor** in him said *take it*, the **leader** said *honor the truce*. He began to speak:

**Kael:** “Maybe… maybe we just walk away. Back to the city. Maybe we—”

A sudden, blinding light burst behind him.

He turned sharply—**both tigers now glowing** with golden-red and icy-blue light respectively. Their bodies trembled, yet stood proud. Their chests opened with a slow ripple of energy, and before Kael could yell to stop them—

**Two radiant cores emerged** from their bodies, hovering briefly in the air like solidified suns.

**Kael (shouting):** “NO! Stop—”

But it was too late.

The light faded. Both tigers collapsed to the ground—but not in death.

Their once-mighty auras plummeted. Kael felt it immediately: their star power dropped like stones, from **10.5** to **less than 5 stars**. Their massive forms shrank slightly, and their posture slumped—but they were still breathing.

**Iris (in utter disbelief):**  
“Warning. Anomaly detected. Voluntary Core Extraction Confirmed. Residual Star Power Remaining: 4.9 and 4.7  
Vital Signs: Stable  
Conclusion: They… survived the core release?”

Cherry rushed forward, inspecting the cubs and their now-weakened parents. She turned back to Kael, shaking.

**Cherry (whispering):** *“They really did it…”*

Kitsune nudged the still-floating cores toward Kael with her nose. Her expression was unreadable, but her tails hung low.

Kael walked forward, slowly extending his hands. The cores hummed in his palms—hot, cold, electric, serene. They pulsed with **power**, but also with **sacrifice**.

**Kael (softly):** “What… kind of world are we building, where even beasts have to choose between power and family?”

He turned, facing his two companions. His voice cracked ever so slightly.

**Kael:** “I don’t know if I did the right thing… but they did.”

He looked at the cave. The cubs had curled into their parents, confused but safe. And for now—that was enough.

Kael bowed his head toward the two weakened tigers.

**Kael:** “I will use this power. Not to destroy more families… but to protect my own.”

Cherry and Kitsune stepped beside him, both solemn.

As the sun began to rise over the cliff’s edge, casting light over the fractured battlefield, Kael clenched the two cores in his hands.

The path forward had never felt heavier.

**End of Chapter 75**

**Chapter 75 – The Heart of the Beast**

Silence fell over the battlefield like mist after a storm.

The radiant glow of the twin cores had faded, and the majestic tigers that once shook the land with their very presence now lay slumped, visibly diminished, yet alive. Their massive bodies were scarred but breathing. Their powerful auras—once sharp and intimidating—now flickered like dying embers.

Kael stood still, the weight of their sacrifice palpable in the very air.

He looked down at the two monster cores resting in his palms—brilliant, alive with energy, but also heavy with meaning. These weren’t spoils of war—they were gifts of trust, purchased at the cost of strength, pride, and ancestral legacy.

**Kael (softly):** “I can’t… let them stay like this.”

Kitsune, who had been staring at the fallen tigers, blinked slowly and moved beside him.

**Kael:** “Kitsune. Can you help me heal them?”

The fox spirit looked at him, puzzled for a second, but then nodded. Cherry, still silent and shaken, stepped forward to stand with Kael. Together, they approached the tigers, whose eyes were half-lidded and breathing ragged.

Kitsune’s flames turned blue, and she exhaled gentle wisps of **spiritual fire**, weaving healing energy into their wounded bodies. Kael reached into their satchel and unwrapped the last of the **10-star monster meat** from their past battles—thick slabs of dense muscle still pulsing faintly with stored elemental power.

**Cherry:** *“Are you sure?”*

**Kael:** “They’ve tasted that power before. Their bodies remember. If they can absorb even part of it, they’ll recover faster… even if they never rise beyond where they were.”

The tigers were fed slowly. The energy from the meat reinvigorated their weak muscles. Their children—two tiny striped cubs with bright, curious eyes—watched with wide-eyed silence, huddled next to their parents.

**Iris:**  
*“Analysis: Subject recovery stable. Former peak-tier beasts retain partial resonance with high-tier energy.  
Estimated strength restoration: 4.9 → 5.3 stars possible with sustained aid.  
Genetic constraint identified: Ancient Bloodline Dormant.”*

Kael nodded slowly. “They won’t ever be what they were.”

**Iris:** *“Correct. Without their cores, they’ve lost the spark of transcendence. Core regeneration probability: 0.7%.”*

Kael sat down in the grass beside them, resting his back against a boulder, spear planted loosely beside him. The others followed. That night, they didn’t speak much. The breeze blew quietly, and only the soft breathing of tired beasts and the occasional chirp of night birds filled the space.

Kael looked to the cubs again—playful, innocent, unaware of how close they had come to being orphans.

He sighed.

**Kael (softly, to himself):** “What kind of world… demands this from those who just want to live?”

The sun broke through the trees the next morning, casting golden light on the forest path. The tigers, though limping slightly, were able to stand. Kael and the others fashioned a crude harness and loaded the cubs carefully into their satchels, resting against Cherry’s and Kitsune’s backs.

Kael placed the remaining cores in a sealed pouch and attached it securely to his belt.

**Kael:** “Let’s go home.”

The air-bike, now repaired, hummed quietly under Cherry’s paws. Kael engaged **autopilot**, and the group began to move—walking slowly beside it rather than riding. The tigers stayed behind, heads low, eyes sharp but trusting. The cubs mewled quietly when hungry, and Cherry passed back strips of **2-star and 3-star beast meat**, which they happily devoured with tiny fangs.

By the time they approached the outer watch perimeter of **Cloverspark City**, the first rays of dawn painted the sky with streaks of rose and gold.

Kael walked in front, Cherry and Kitsune on either side. The two former 10-star tigers followed silently, flanking their cubs.

But as they neared the city gate—still half a kilometer away—Kael saw it.

**Movement on the walls. Soldiers. Many of them.**

Then, Kael felt the sharp rise in **spiritual pressure**—dozens of targeting locks igniting simultaneously.

**Iris:**  
*“Warning: Multiple ranged mana signatures detected. Incoming threat level: High. Status: Standby.”*

The turrets on Cloverspark’s outer defenses whirred and pointed at them. The mana sensors had clearly picked up the beasts’ residual power. Kael stepped forward and raised both hands calmly.

**Kael:** “Damn it. I forgot…”

A second later, Iris’s alert pinged again.

**Iris:**  
*“Alert: Priority beacon transmitted by Cloverspark Command Center. Multiple high-level signatures approaching.”*

Figures appeared atop the battlements. Kael immediately recognized them—familiar faces. Among them:

* **Lieutenant Colonel Reyn**, clad in her dusk-blue battle armor, holding her long twin sabers.
* **Governor Tyros**, expression grave, hands behind his back, his aura calm but steady.
* **Harvin**, arms crossed, watching sharply.
* **Sera**, hovering slightly off the wall with her wind glider, squinting toward Kael.
* A dozen others—strategists, mages, and elite guards.

**Soldier (shouting):**  
“Ready formation! Defensive line—prepare mana discharge!”

Kael narrowed his eyes and took a deep breath.

And then, he called out—his voice loud and unmistakable across the wide plain.

**Kael:**  
**“Governor Tyros! Lieutenant Colonel Reyn! Stand down—it’s me. Kael Ardyn… and I’m coming home.”**

The sudden shift in mood on the walls was instant. A wave of disbelief, then recognition.

The tension in the air hung for one heartbeat.

And then… the walls stirred.

**Chapter 76 – Return and Resistance**

The mana turrets atop the tall steel ramparts of **Cloverspark City** remained trained on Kael and his entourage, the tension in the air thick enough to choke.

Cherry stood tall beside Kael, her flaming fur crackling lightly, her emerald eyes watchful. Kitsune sat calmly, though her nine tails flicked with unease. Behind them, the two **tiger beasts**, once towering forces of destruction, now moved with caution and lowered heads. Their cubs peeked out from under their legs, unaware of the scrutiny.

And above, on the battlements, the leaders of Cloverspark were gathered—silent, unreadable.

**Lieutenant Colonel Reyn Albrecht**, a tall man with sharp shoulders and a sharper gaze, was the first to recognize Kael. His eyes widened.

**Reyn (softly):** “That’s really him…”

Beside him stood **Governor Tyros Vellein**, arms crossed, his refined expression unreadable, though the faintest flicker of relief passed through his eyes.

On the flank was **Colonel Harvin Cross**, built like a block of stone, his eyes narrowed in instant suspicion.

**Harvin:** “This… isn’t right.”

To his side:

* **Lieutenant Colonel Sera Inoue**, hands resting on her belt, eyes studying the tigers behind Kael with calm calculation.
* **Minister Leika Hanzo**, blinking nervously, already typing something into her wrist console.
* **Administrator Dalan Vue**, adjusting his glasses with shaky fingers.
* **Chancellor Mirin Sayu**, who leaned forward as if studying a lab specimen.
* And finally, **Director Varo Henn**, his gaze darting between the beasts and the crowd gathering below the wall.

Tyros stepped forward, raising his hand.

**Tyros:** “Hold fire.”

The turrets deactivated, the glowing barrels dimming with a sigh of steam.

Reyn immediately leaned into the guard nearest him.

**Reyn:** “Open the gate.”

But just as the massive iron doors began to creak open with a grinding hiss, **Colonel Harvin** stepped forward, his voice loud and cutting.

**Harvin:** “This is a mistake.”

Everyone turned to him.

**Harvin:** “Kael’s return… coincides with him leading two beasts of catastrophic threat levels—former 10.5-star monsters, if your readings are correct. And we’re just letting them in?”

A hush fell across the wall.

**Harvin (firmly):** “I don’t care if they’re leashed, unconscious, or playing babysitter to cubs. They’re threats. Kael's motives are unknown. For all we know, he’s lost control—or worse, aligned with them.”

Cherry’s fur flared with a sudden crackle of fire, but Kael raised a hand gently, signaling her to stay calm.

**Sera:** “Colonel… Kael saved this city more than once. You’re suggesting we attack the man who helped keep our people alive?”

**Harvin (to Sera):** “And you forget the aura his beast let out in our last meeting? Cherry’s presence alone knocked over half the room.”

**Dalan Vue (quietly):** “It was… difficult to breathe.”

**Varo Henn:** “Let’s not act like this isn’t a political bomb waiting to go off…”

**Tyros:** “Enough.”

The Governor’s voice cut across the rising murmurs like a blade. Everyone quieted as he turned toward Reyn.

**Tyros:** “We’ll question him, of course. But Kael Ardyn has earned his right to speak. Open the gate.”

The gates groaned fully open, and Kael stepped through, the sunlight behind him casting a long shadow. The two tigers walked behind, submissive yet dignified, their cubs close to their legs. Cherry and Kitsune followed.

Citizens had gathered along the fences, drawn by the immense mana signatures. Whispers flew among them like sparks in dry grass.

“Is that Kael?”  
“Those are beasts! Why are they here?”  
“Look at their size!”  
“He’s walking with them like they’re allies…”

Kael noticed the fear in their eyes. The distrust. And he couldn’t blame them.

At the front of the welcoming party, **Reyn Albrecht** stepped forward, offering a firm hand.

**Reyn:** “Kael… hells, you made it back.”

Kael shook his hand, nodding. His expression was tired but steady.

**Kael:** “Barely. It’s… been a long road.”

Governor Tyros stood beside Reyn, looking past Kael to the tigers.

**Tyros:** “Those two… you brought them willingly?”

Kael looked over his shoulder at the massive beasts, who lowered their heads respectfully.

**Kael:** “They’re not enemies anymore. They chose to give up their cores to protect their young.”

Reyn raised an eyebrow. “Voluntarily?”

**Kael:** “Yes. They were powerful, but sentient. Intelligent. They understand the stakes. They’ll never reach that level again, but they can still defend this city—and they want to.”

Tyros didn’t answer immediately. He looked to Cherry, who sat beside Kael protectively, her massive form shimmering with faint lightning sparks. Kitsune, smaller now, stood beside her with her flaming blue tails curling around her legs.

**Sera (quietly):** “They’ve… changed.”

**Mirin Sayu:** “We should study them. Their mutation signatures are unlike anything we've cataloged.”

**Harvin (gruffly):** “You’re all making a mistake.”

**Leika:** “Colonel, enough. Let’s hear Kael out first.”

Tyros finally nodded.

**Tyros:** “We’ll allow it. For now.”

Kael exhaled, tension leaving his shoulders.

**Tyros:** “Escort them to the containment labs near City Hall. Give them comfort and food. And alert our scientific staff. I want full scans.”

Kael bowed his head in thanks, but before turning, he looked to Reyn and Tyros again.

**Kael:** “They aren’t tools. They’re not monsters. They’re survivors, just like us. Give them a chance.”

As the group moved toward the central district, the crowds parted—awed, afraid, silent.

Behind Kael, the massive beasts stepped carefully, cubs nestled between them. Cherry flicked her tail gently over Kael’s shoulder. Kitsune glanced to the side, her psionic bond linking momentarily with Kael’s thoughts:

*“They still fear us.”*

*“They will… until they see otherwise.”*

The **containment laboratory** near City Hall was a high-security facility, originally built to study dangerous mutations. Now, it was becoming the temporary refuge for unlikely allies.

And behind them, Cloverspark watched—uncertain, wary, but just maybe… beginning to hope.

**Chapter 77 – Tensions and Revelations**

The containment wing of Cloverspark City’s central research facility was never built with creatures like these in mind.

Two immense tiger beasts lay resting behind translucent energy barriers, their bodies wrapped in damp bandages and mana-dampening coils. Their once-glorious auras were shadows of what they had been—both now reduced to less than a fifth of their former strength. The cubs huddled together in the far corner of the chamber, occasionally peeking out from under their mother’s striped paws.

Cherry sat outside the barrier, unmoving.

Though she remained calm, every twitch of muscle in her shoulders and flick of her tail spoke of readiness. No one was allowed to get too close. Not without her say.

Kitsune had followed Kael to the city hall, her nine tails loosely fanned behind her, but her eyes were distant—concerned for the tigers, yet trusting Cherry to handle anything.

Meanwhile, within the high chamber of **Cloverspark’s Strategic Council**, the air was dense with heat—not from fire, but from friction.

Kael stood tall in the center of the conference floor. On the raised semicircle platform sat the city’s leadership:

* **Governor Tyros Vellein**, reserved and stern.
* **Lieutenant Colonel Reyn Albrecht**, arms crossed.
* **Colonel Harvin Cross**, fists clenched.
* **Lieutenant Colonel Sera Inoue**, watching quietly.
* **Minister Leika Hanzo**, fingers flying over a holo-interface.
* **Administrator Dalan Vue**, already sweating.
* **Chancellor Mirin Sayu**, seated with a data tablet.
* **Director Varo Henn**, silent but observant.

**Tyros:** “Kael Ardyn, we owe you an explanation for this inquiry. Your return is both a blessing and… a complication. We’ve seen the reports.”

**Kael (coolly):** “Then you know those beasts chose peace. They sacrificed their strength. They didn’t surrender—*they trusted me.*”

**Harvin (snapping):** “Or they manipulated you. Or worse—*you’ve sided with them.*”

Kael turned toward the Colonel, his voice even.

**Kael:** “I’ve saved this city twice now. If you think I’d put it in danger, you’re either blind or desperately stupid.”

Harvin shot up from his seat, veins bulging in his forehead.

**Harvin:** “You dare speak to a superior like that?”

**Kael:** “Superior?”  
Kael chuckled—cold and sharp.  
“Let me show you how ‘superior’ you are.”

Before anyone could react, Kael’s figure blurred. In an instant, his fist met Harvin’s chest—not with killing intent, but precise power.

**BOOM—**

The colonel flew backward, crashing into the stone wall behind his chair and slumping unconscious, eyes rolled back.

The chamber went dead silent.

Kael stood calmly, adjusting his collar.

**Kael:** “Anyone else have questions?”

No one spoke.

Even Reyn, though tense, held back a smirk. Tyros pinched the bridge of his nose, exhaling slowly.

**Tyros:** “He may retaliate later.”

**Kael (dryly):** “If he still cares for his little life, he won’t raise his voice again.”

No one argued the point.

After a long pause, Kael stepped forward.

**Kael:** “Now that that’s settled, I’ll tell you what really happened in Fernrath…”

He described it all—**the battle with the tigers**, **Kitsune’s painful mutation**, **Cherry’s frantic aid**, **the ambush**, and **the time-manipulation ability** that had nearly killed them all. He spoke of **cores, scars, and survival**, each word leaving the council chamber quieter than the last.

By the end, even Varo Henn looked pale.

**Tyros:** “So… they chose to form their cores outside their body… knowing it would cripple them?”

**Kael:** “Yes. So their cubs could live.”

It was **Mirin Sayu**, the Chancellor of Scientific Development, who broke the silence next. She leaned forward, her brows knitted in thought.

**Mirin:** “Their mutations are… unprecedented. But Kael, what if I told you there might be a way to help them recover part of their power?”

Kael raised a brow.

**Kael:** “Recover… cores?”

**Mirin (nodding):** “Not their original cores. But you said their cores were of dual-element type—ice and time, fire and lightning, correct?”

**Kael:** “Yes. But such cores don’t just exist.”

**Mirin:** “Exactly. But what if we didn’t need *both* elements?”

Everyone looked at her now.

**Mirin:** “What if we use a compatible single-element core—one that matches *at least one* of their natural elements? The process wouldn’t restore them to 10.5-star level, but it could return them to a stable, high 9-star range.”

Even Kael paused at that. The possibility felt… too optimistic. But Mirin’s expression was serious.

**Mirin:** “They may never reach their peak again. But that doesn’t mean they have to live broken.”

Whispers broke out around the council.

**Sera:** “It’s not impossible… with controlled grafting protocols.”

**Reyn:** “We’ll need beast cores from high 9-star level monsters with matching attributes.”

**Kael (quietly):** “We have some stored.”

**Tyros:** “If this works… they’ll not just be guardians. They’ll be the city’s shield.”

Kael looked down for a moment, then nodded slowly.

**Kael:** “Then let’s give them a future.”

**Chapter 78 – A Spark of Hope**

The tension that had gripped the Cloverspark City Strategic Council chamber began to lift—just slightly—after Mirin’s daring suggestion.

As the murmurs subsided, Mirin stood up, her data tablet glowing in her hands, casting a pale blue light across her sharp features.

Mirin: “Listen carefully, all of you. Dual-element cores are exceedingly rare. We knew this. But… the creatures’ bodies—specifically the energy pathways—are still intact. Their core removal severed their energy supply, but it did not erase the blueprint. That’s our opening.”

Kael tilted his head slightly, eyes narrowing in curiosity.  
Kael: “You’re saying… we don’t need to replace both elements?”

Mirin smiled faintly, the first glimmer of real optimism they had seen from her in days.  
Mirin: “Exactly. If we can introduce a single-element core, one that’s highly compatible—say, lightning or ice—it could ‘rewire’ into the existing damaged paths. The body already knows what to do; it’s just waiting for something to flow through it again.”

Sera Inoue leaned forward, arms crossed but her gaze sharp.  
Sera: “But the risk? Compatibility rejection could kill them outright.”

Mirin’s fingers danced over the holographic interface, projecting models of the tigers’ energy systems midair.  
Mirin: “That’s why we run tests first. Lots of them.”

For the next few hours, the research teams worked at breakneck speed.

In the containment chamber, the tigers—resting under Cherry’s watchful eyes—stirred occasionally as if sensing the flurry of activity. Their cubs, small and striped with patches of white and gold, peeked through the transparent barrier, their tiny tails flicking anxiously.

Kael watched through the observation window, his arms folded, Iris—the AI watch on his wrist—quietly humming beside him.

Iris: “Kael, Mirin’s analysis efficiency just peaked at 97%. She’s in the zone.”

Kael: *chuckling softly* “Good. About time we caught a break.”

Inside the labs, dozens of compatibility tests ran in rapid succession. Mirin coordinated with her team, calling out adjustments to variables, recalibrating energy signatures, and analyzing simulated grafting reactions.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the screens flashed with the results.

**87% compatibility.**

Mirin exhaled a deep breath, her shoulders slumping in exhausted triumph.  
Mirin: “It’s viable.”

Cheers rippled quietly through the lab, though the mood remained cautious.

Reyn Albrecht came over, clapping Mirin on the back with a grin.  
Reyn: “I take back half the snarky things I’ve said about you, Chancellor.”

Mirin shot him a playful glare.  
Mirin: “Only half?”

Kael stepped forward, his expression still serious.  
Kael: “So… they have a chance.”

Mirin: “Yes. It’s not a guarantee, Kael. But… it’s a real one. We’ve identified lightning cores for the male and ice cores for the female. If we’re careful, they could regain at least high-nine-star levels of power.”

Kael nodded slowly, feeling a weight lift from his chest.  
Kael: “That’s all we need. Let’s do this.”

Cherry let out a soft rumbling sound from behind the barrier, as if sensing the change in mood. Her ears flicked forward, golden eyes locked onto Kael.

Kael smiled faintly.  
Kael: “We’re going to fix this, Cherry. Just hang in there.”

Iris chimed in with a note of humor.  
Iris: “And here I thought you were only good at breaking things.”

Kael snorted.  
Kael: “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

With preparations underway, the entire group mobilized toward the research center’s lower facility—where the grafting chambers were located. Along the way, the atmosphere was a mix of anxious hope and focused determination.

Kael walked alongside Mirin and Reyn, Rei joining from the side, her usual composed expression softening just a little as she caught Kael’s eye.  
Rei: “When this is over… you’re going to owe us all a drink.”

Kael gave a dry laugh.  
Kael: “I’ll buy the first round.”

As they approached the grafting chamber, the doors slid open with a pneumatic hiss. The sterile white room was lined with reinforced pods and complex machinery, each glowing with quiet energy. Inside, the cores were already prepared—held in containment fields, humming softly with their respective elemental pulses.

Lightning sparked faintly from one. Ice mist curled delicately around the other.

Kael watched the cores, then glanced back toward the containment hall.  
Kael (to himself): “Come on… let this work.”

Behind him, Iris whispered through his earpiece.  
Iris: “For what it’s worth, Kael… my probability matrix suggests this was the optimal path. You made the right call.”

Kael murmured, half to himself, half to Iris.  
Kael: “Then let’s make sure we finish it.”

Cherry’s golden eyes, the cubs’ tiny faces peeking between her paws, and the silent, slumbering form of the male tiger—they all waited now. And for the first time in days, Kael felt the faintest flicker of true hope.

As they moved into the next phase, Mirin turned to the team.  
Mirin: “Let’s begin.”

**Chapter 79: The Awakening of the Titans**

Inside the sterile, cold walls of Cloverspark's experimental lab, a sense of anticipation and unease hung thick in the air. The glass walls offered a clear view of the two tigers lying motionless on the operating tables, their massive forms restrained but still powerful. Kael and the others stood just outside the observation area, watching anxiously as the final preparations for the core transplantation were completed. The two tigers, their once-mighty bodies now reduced to mere shadows of their former selves, were about to undergo a process that could either restore them to their former glory or push them past their limits.

Kael’s mind raced, trying to quiet his thoughts as he watched the medical team prepare. He glanced at Cherry, who was sitting beside him, her fur bristling with nervous energy. Her golden eyes were fixed on the two tigers, her psionic bond with Kael pulsing with an anxiety that mirrored his own. Her usual confidence seemed dimmed, as if the tension in the room had somehow seeped into her being.

"You think they'll make it?" Kael asked, his voice low.

Cherry's tail flicked uneasily. *"I hope so. They have to... for all our sakes."*

The core transfer was a delicate operation—one that had never been tried before. The procedure would essentially transplant the power of a 10★ core into each of the tigers. The goal was to restore them to their peak form by granting them access to the elemental abilities of the cores, though only one element would be retained. The results were uncertain, but the success rate from the scans had been promising.

As the procedure began, the first tiger, a massive creature with sleek orange and black fur, let out a deep, guttural growl. Its body twitched violently as the core was injected into its chest. The second tiger, with ice-blue fur and piercing white eyes, followed suit, grunting in pain as the process took place.

Kael felt his stomach tighten as the tigers' bodies reacted violently to the injection. He could hear their roars echoing through the lab, their once-pristine forms now contorted in agony as they fought against the overwhelming pressure of the new power coursing through them.

Cherry’s claws dug into the ground as she shifted nervously. *"Kael… it's taking too long. Something's wrong."*

The clock on the wall ticked past one hour. Then two. The team monitoring the procedure remained silent, their eyes glued to the screens. The tigers’ bodies were trembling, their muscles twitching as they slowly adapted to the foreign cores.

With every passing second, the lab was filled with an eerie stillness. The once-mighty beasts seemed almost dead, their breathing shallow, their movements completely still. The air grew thick, charged with anticipation. Kael's grip tightened around his spear, as if he was preparing for a battle.

Suddenly, the stillness was broken. A violent spark of energy shot through the room, and the temperature inside the lab dropped precipitously. The air seemed to crackle with power, as if the storm outside had come alive inside the walls. Cherry's fur stood on end, her eyes glowing with apprehension.

Then, with a thunderous roar, both tigers surged to their feet. Their bodies rippled with newfound strength, their forms regaining their previous height and power. Lightning crackled around the orange-and-black tiger, its once-muted fur now glowing with an intense fire-like aura. The ice-blue tiger let out an earth-shaking roar, its body surrounded by a frost storm, its claws glistening with frozen energy.

The lab seemed to shake as the two mutated beasts came to life, their power radiating outwards. Their once-weakened forms had now been restored, and their strength had been amplified. Kael’s breath caught in his throat as he watched the two creatures move, the intense power surging through them. The storm of lightning and ice swirled in the air, their energy creating waves of power that could be felt even outside the lab.

Kael and the others, standing just outside, could only watch in awe. The tigers' power levels were rapidly stabilizing, each approaching a dangerous 10.3★ threshold—nearly equal to the most powerful creatures Kael had ever encountered. The lab, which had been filled with silence, was now a monument to the rebirth of two titans.

Cherry's eyes widened, and she let out a soft growl of admiration, *"They're incredible… But I’m not sure if I can keep up anymore."*

Kael turned to her, his mind racing. He could feel the weight of this moment—the shifting balance of power. If these tigers could reach such heights, what about him? His body had been pushed to its limits, but he knew he was still far from achieving the 10★ power that everyone around him seemed to believe was his destiny.

A brief flash of doubt crossed Kael's mind as he watched the tigers' display of power, their primal roars reverberating in the air. What did it mean for him to reach that level? Was it enough to simply grow stronger, or would the true strength lie in something deeper—something more elusive?

As the storm of energy began to settle, and the tigers calmed down, Kael knew that this was just the beginning. A new chapter was unfolding for all of them, and the challenges ahead would be unlike anything they had ever faced.

With a deep breath, Kael looked at the tigers, then at his companions. "This… this is only the start. We need to be ready for what's coming next."

**Chapter 80: Guardians of Cloverspark**

The heavy blast doors of the experimental lab hissed open with a smooth pneumatic groan, releasing a faint mist of dissipating elemental energy that still lingered from the titanic rebirth hours earlier. The hallway lights flickered in response to the residual pressure inside, but no one faltered. Kael stepped forward first, flanked closely by Cherry and Kitsune, their presence a steadying force among the nervous but curious group of administrators trailing behind them.

Mirin Sayu walked just beside Kael, her white coat fluttering lightly behind her, hands clasped behind her back. Her normally reserved face was drawn with fatigue—but beneath it lay a glint of pride. Governor Tyros Vellein, Lt. Colonel Reyn Albrecht, and Colonel Harvin Cross followed closely, their expressions unreadable as they approached the glass-sealed chamber where two colossal forms lay in silent repose.

As Kael and the others entered the lab proper, the eyes of the two fully rejuvenated tigers snapped open. Their gazes locked onto Kael—calm, fierce, and intelligent.

The orange-striped lightning tiger stood first, its muscular frame rippling with barely-contained energy. Beside it, the ice-furred tiger rose as well, its breath creating brief crystals in the air. And then, to everyone's astonishment, the beasts bowed.

Not out of submission—but gratitude.

Their massive heads lowered in unison, the motion deliberate and powerful. The room, already silent, seemed to hold its breath. Behind the beasts, a rustle of fur followed—their two cubs burst into view from a corner of the chamber, scampering forward on large but clumsy paws. They rushed between the adults’ legs and leapt into their parents’ embrace with excited purrs and playful growls.

Kael’s chest loosened at the sight. He smiled softly.

“They remember us,” Cherry whispered through their psionic link, her tail swaying. *“And they’re grateful.”*

Kael turned toward Mirin, nodding with firm appreciation. “This wouldn’t have been possible without you. Your idea—the core transference, the stabilization process... you saved them.”

Mirin blinked, seemingly caught off-guard by the direct praise. “It was a collaborative effort,” she said modestly, but her voice trembled with restrained emotion. “But I’m glad it worked. They’re... magnificent.”

The tigers turned their heads now to Mirin. Then, once more, they bowed—low and slow. A deeper rumble, not hostile but reverent, resonated from their throats. Even Tyros raised his eyebrows.

Cherry’s ears perked, and she stepped forward. She circled once, then gave a short series of trills and growls, her beast language articulate and clear. The tigers responded with deep, echoing roars that shook the ground—not with menace, but with resolution.

“They’re thankful,” Cherry translated proudly, eyes glowing. “They said Mirin and the city gave them a second life. And they’ll repay it—with loyalty and protection.”

Kitsune padded silently beside her, giving a rare approving nod.

Governor Tyros stepped forward at last, his arms folded as he surveyed the powerful beasts. “Kael. Your companions have earned their place here. But before we make this official—we need a verbal confirmation. Will they protect Cloverspark, if called?”

Kael turned to Cherry. “Ask them.”

Cherry nodded and turned once more to the towering felines. A low conversation passed between them—growls, pulses of aura, the rustle of fur. Then, in a moment of synchronized intent, both tigers reared back and roared together.

The sound echoed across the entire lab—mighty, primal, but resolute. The message was unmistakable.

“They agree,” Cherry said, her fur gleaming with pride. “They’ll protect Cloverspark, side by side with you, Kael.”

Tyros gave a rare smile. “Then it's settled. From this day on, they are guardians of the city.”

Reyn nodded. “We'll draft a formal agreement and assign a patrol route on the outer perimeter.”

Kael glanced back at the tigers. They were standing tall now—shoulders squared, cubs nestled safely between their front paws. The storm had passed. What remained were no longer wounded beasts—but mighty sentinels.

With Kael at the helm, and the awakened titans at his side, Cloverspark had just gained a new line of defense.

But even as they stood in this moment of triumph, Kael’s mind remained focused.

The world beyond the city was still changing.

And somewhere in its shadows, more power—and more threats—waited.

**End of Chapter 80**

**Chapter 81: The Path of Power**

As twilight settled over Cloverspark City, the hum of street lights flickered to life, casting soft glows over the fortress walls and high-tech structures. The city was quieter than usual, a rare calm following the monumental events of the day. But for Kael Ardyn, the night was far from over.

“Governor Tyros,” Kael said as they stood near the city’s administrative tower. “I need a favor. Somewhere quiet—isolated. I need... space to attempt something important.”

Tyros studied Kael for a moment, then nodded without questioning. “There’s an old training chamber beneath the south wing. Unused for years. Reinforced, shielded. You’ll have privacy—and safety.”

Within the hour, Kael stood alone beneath layers of concrete and alloyed walls, inside a circular chamber lit only by the pale blue glow of mana-reactive crystals embedded in the ceiling. The room pulsed softly, resonating with energy—designed to contain explosive powers, and now about to witness one.

Outside the sealed chamber, Cherry and Kitsune sat quietly, watching through the reinforced observation glass. They knew better than to interrupt. Both sensed it—Kael’s power was pushing against its limits, cracking at the edges, like a dam under pressure. He was close. But not yet beyond.

Inside, Kael unwrapped a thick cloth bundle from his pack, revealing two crystalized monster cores. They pulsed ominously—each one holding ancient, violent power.

The first was brilliant crimson, streaked with flickers of golden lightning—**the core of the fire-lightning tiger**. It hummed with raw aggression, its energy chaotic and wild.

The second core was colder, but more enigmatic—a pale blue shell layered with frost-like patterns, yet beneath it, occasional golden flashes spiraled slowly like a ticking clock. **The ice-time core.**

Kael’s hands hovered over them, steady but tense.

“After all this time… beast meat isn’t enough,” he muttered. “I’ve plateaued. I’ve been stuck at the edge of 10★. But they... they pushed beyond with their cores. It wasn’t just power—it was identity.”

Kael sat cross-legged on the cold floor. He placed both cores in front of him.

“This is risky. Stupid, even. But I can’t wait for a miracle. Not when what’s coming could wipe us all out.”

He picked up the fire-lightning core. Its energy crawled over his fingers like static and flame. It felt alive. Hungry.

“I don’t know how to breakthrough. No scrolls, no guides, no one’s ever done this as far as I know. But maybe... maybe I need to do it my way.”

Cherry narrowed her eyes from the glass, a hint of worry shimmering in her fur. Kitsune said nothing—but her tails twitched with restrained unease.

Kael took a deep breath—and then, without hesitation, bit into the core.

A crack split through the chamber as energy exploded outward like a shockwave.

Kael's body seized as the core’s contents surged through his veins—molten fire, sizzling lightning, and something deeper—something primal. His vision blurred, every nerve lit with pain and exhilaration. He clenched his teeth, riding the wave of unbearable force as his skin began to glow faintly from within.

Outside, Cherry stood up suddenly, ears pinned back. “He actually did it,” she whispered.

Kitsune turned her head slightly. “He’s either going to die... or become something new.”

Inside the chamber, Kael's aura erupted, flickering wildly between red and gold. His muscles strained, his bones groaned, but he didn't fall.

He endured.

And in that moment, Kael knew.

There was no going back.

**End of Chapter 81**

**Chapter 82: A Dance with Death**

The fire-lightning core roared inside Kael like an unchained beast. Heat surged through his veins, golden arcs of lightning cracking across his limbs, searing his insides. His breath hitched. His vision swam in reds and golds.

*Too much... This is too much!*

Kael clutched his chest, falling to one knee. His body was glowing—no, burning—from the inside out. The energy was not merging. It was *devouring* him.

His heart pounded like a war drum. Bones creaked under pressure. His skin split in places, steaming with energy. He was dying.

Then—his eyes caught the second core.

Cold. Pale. Calm.

The **ice-time** core shimmered with a strange, haunting glow. He didn’t think. He couldn’t. Instinct took over.

With trembling hands, Kael **snatched the second core**—and without pause, **shoved it into his mouth.**

Outside the chamber, Cherry's eyes widened in horror. Kitsune jolted upright.

“He didn’t—!” Cherry gasped.

Kitsune growled, panic rising. “*Two dual-element cores? That’s not a breakthrough. That’s suicide!*”

The second the core dissolved into Kael’s body, the chamber *exploded* with power.

A shockwave of raw, monstrous energy *erupted outward*, rippling through the city like a quake. Windows cracked, alarms blared, and citizens across Cloverspark looked up in fear.

Governor Tyros, Lieutenant Colonels Reyn and Sera, Minister Hanzo, and the others jolted to their feet from across the central district. Even those not near the facility felt it—the oppressive weight of beast energy surging from the training chamber like a rising storm.

Inside, Cherry and Kitsune struggled to stand.

They were both *10★ beasts*—apex predators in this world. But even they couldn’t lift their heads now. The aura spilling from Kael was unnatural. **Wild. Violent. Dominating.** It twisted like a hurricane of fire, lightning, ice, and... *something else*.

Kitsune growled, barely able to keep her footing. “It’s... berserk. His body’s losing control. The cores aren’t fusing—they’re *fighting.* They’re going to rip him apart!”

Cherry crouched low, ears flattened, claws digging into the floor. “We have to go in—*now!*”

But before they could even move—something changed.

From the storm of destruction, **a gentle, vibrant green glow** burst out from Kael’s chest. It pulsed once… then again… like a heartbeat.

The violent aura shrieked in protest—but it *slowed.*

The fire calmed.

The lightning softened.

The ice ceased its biting cold.

And the strange pressure of time… seemed to pause.

Cherry's eyes widened. “That light... it's healing him. *It’s restoring balance.*”

Kitsune whispered, “That wasn’t part of the cores. That... that’s coming from Kael himself.”

The chamber quieted, but not without scars. As the administrators rushed to the scene, a wide path of destruction revealed itself.

The entire section within **ten meters** of the training room had been obliterated. The floors were scorched. Walls melted and twisted. The reinforced blastproof door? Now a bent, half-melted wreck lying on the ground.

And in the very center—amid the carnage—Kael still sat cross-legged. Motionless.

But alive.

His body was steaming. His skin radiated a gentle glow. Cracks of energy laced his skin like glowing tattoos—flickering between fire, lightning, ice, and green light.

Cherry and Kitsune cautiously approached. Despite the heat in the air, they knelt beside him, heads bowed low—not from fear, but reverence.

The administrators arrived moments later. Governor Tyros and the others stopped dead in their tracks at the threshold.

No one could speak.

Even the most seasoned among them, like Reyn and Sera, stood stunned. **They had never felt power like this.**

Minister Hanzo exhaled slowly. “Is he... still human?”

No one answered.

Kael didn’t move. But the calm pulsing from his chest continued—steady, soothing.

He was no longer just a warrior.

**Something was changing. Something beyond evolution.**

**End of Chapter 82**

**Chapter 83: The Eighteenth Star**

Smoke still curled in the air. Scorched metal and shattered glass littered the chamber floor. The silence around Kael was reverent, thick with awe and tension.

Then—he moved.

Kael's fingers twitched. His eyes slowly opened, revealing irises swirling with flickers of orange and blue, like fire dancing on ice. He exhaled deeply, steam rising from his lips. His aura was steady now—no longer wild and berserk, but controlled, powerful… **ascended**.

He could feel it in every fiber of his being. The wall he had slammed into for so long was gone. His body was no longer straining against its limits.

**He had broken through.**

Kael Ardyn had become a **10-star** warrior.

The quiet moment shattered as Governor Tyros stepped forward, disbelief still written on his face.

“Kael… what just happened here?”

Kael slowly got to his feet, his body glowing faintly with residual energy. Cherry and Kitsune remained close, still watching him with cautious eyes.

“I tried something risky,” Kael said simply, brushing soot from his arms. “I used the beast core. I thought it might help me break through. The energy went... a little berserk.”

“A little?!” Lt. Colonel Reyn exclaimed, glancing at the destroyed surroundings. “You nearly leveled the facility!”

But Minister Leika Hanzo stepped forward, cutting off the scolding tone. Her voice trembled—not with fear, but awe.

“Do you realize what this means? As of now… there were only **seventeen** recorded **Ascended-levels** in Japan.”

Administrator Dalan Vue blinked. “Seventeen…”

Mirin Sayu, wide-eyed, nodded. “Kael… you’re the **eighteenth.**”

There was a pause—then a wave of congratulations flooded in.

Governor Tyros offered his hand first. “On behalf of Cloverspark, Kael—congratulations.”

Reyn crossed his arms, a faint smile cracking his stern face. “You’ve got guts. Stupid guts, but impressive ones.”

Sera Inoue chuckled and bowed slightly. “An official 10-star. That’s no small feat.”

Varo Henn stepped forward, adjusting his glasses. “Welcome to a very exclusive list. I doubt you even realize the weight of the rank you’ve entered.”

One by one, they each acknowledged what Kael had just become.

**The Eighteenth Star.**

Lenton, watching through the monitoring terminal, recited what the others already knew:

“Kaoru Mizuchi, 10.4★, the Tempest Blade.  
General Hideo Ren, 11.2★, time affinity.  
Yoru Seiran, 10.1★, illusions.  
Mara Kanzuki, 10.8★, Ashfire Monarch.  
Rikuto Jura, 10.3★, Stonevein.  
Faye Illena, 12.0★, seer and memory user.  
Tenjin Ralnor, 10.6★, wind elemental.  
Mirei Shadowcrest, 11.4★, phase shift.  
Borran Kazume, 10.5★, radiation warrior.  
Seiji Dran, 13.0★... the strongest of them all.”

“And now,” Tyros added, glancing back at Kael, “**Kael Ardyn**… the **eighteenth ascended**.”

The chamber settled into stunned silence once again.

Then, Lt. Colonel Sera tilted her head. “Kael… what’s your affinity? What kind of elemental ability awakened?”

Kael raised his right hand. Flames sparked to life, dancing across his palm.

Then, he raised his left. Frost crystallized instantly in the air, and cold vapor curled from his fingers.

The room froze.

“You’re kidding…” Reyn whispered.

“**Dual-elemental?**” Hanzo breathed. “That’s—unprecedented.”

No other 10-star had awakened **two** elements. Not even Seiji Dran.

Administrator Vue nodded slowly. “This changes everything. Not only are you an ascended… but the *first* recorded dual-elemental among them.”

Sera muttered, “And with beast-taming already under your belt…”

Governor Tyros added grimly, “This could put you in the top ten. Maybe even higher, with time.”

Behind them, Cherry’s tail stiffened. Kitsune's ears lowered slightly.

They exchanged glances—but said nothing.

**They had seen it.** They had *felt* it.

Kael had not just absorbed **fire and ice**.

He had taken in **four** forces: fire, lightning, ice… and time.

And then… the **green light**. The one that calmed the rampage. The one that saved him.

They remained silent—for now.

Because Kael had shown only two.

And whatever lay dormant within him… had not yet awakened.

**End of Chapter 83**

**Chapter 84: The Fifth Element**

Kael walked silently through the dim halls of the Cloverspark inner facility, his steps slow, deliberate. The storm of congratulations, handshakes, and stunned admiration had passed—what remained now was the quiet aftermath.

Behind him, Cherry padded along quietly, her tail twitching with tension. Kitsune moved at his side, ears perked, gaze sharp. None of them had spoken out loud since leaving the scorched training chamber.

The moment the door to Kael’s private quarters slid shut behind them, the silence shattered.

**“What happened to your *lightning* and *time*?!”** Cherry asked, her words ringing directly into Kael’s mind through their psionic bond.

**“You absorbed *four* elemental cores,”** Kitsune added, her voice calmer but no less intense, **“but you only showed fire and ice. Where are the others?”**

Even **Iris**, the artificial interface embedded within Kael’s neural band, chimed in mentally.  
**“Kael, what you did shouldn’t be survivable. Ingesting two elemental cores was madness. But… your vitals are stable. What really happened during the transformation?”**

Kael slowly sat down on the edge of the bed and let out a long, tired sigh.

“…I haven’t awakened just two elements,” he said, speaking aloud now, his voice steady but faint. “I’ve awakened **five**.”

Both Cherry and Kitsune froze. Even through their link, he could feel the sheer shock surging from both of them.

**“Five?!”** they echoed in unison.

Kael nodded. “Lightning, fire, ice, time… and—plant.”

“**Plant?**” Kitsune tilted her head, ears flicking.

Cherry’s fur bristled slightly. “Wait… the *green light* we saw when your body was on the verge of collapse. That calming energy—was *that* the plant element?”

Kael ran a hand through his hair, his brows furrowed. “I’m not sure. It didn’t feel like any of the cores I ingested. It wasn’t violent. It felt… alive. Healing. Like it wasn’t forcing itself into me, but growing with me.”

A soft hum echoed in the room as Iris scanned his vitals again.

**“Performing secondary analysis,”** she reported.  
**“Confirmed elemental traits: fire affinity detected in core muscle structure; lightning affinity present in neural reflex channels; ice affinity visible in blood temperature modulation.”**

She paused.

**“However… I cannot detect the time element. It is likely non-material, or dormant—time manipulation often manifests *only* under extreme conditions.”**

Another pause.

**“Unusual observation: Kael’s cardiac rhythm no longer matches human baseline. His heart has undergone an internal shift… there is an elevated concentration of cellular regeneration and life energy.”**

Kael blinked. “…life energy?”

**“Yes,”** Iris replied. **“Not enough to match full-scale healing abilities like Kitsune’s flame, but… it suggests the presence of a plant-type affinity. The structure is subtle—passive, maybe.”**

Cherry stepped closer, tail sweeping around her paws. “So the plant attribute didn’t awaken like the others—it’s just… there. Dormant. But your body has already started adapting to it.”

Kael nodded slowly. “Seems like it.”

Kitsune exhaled softly. “This is unheard of. Even two elements are rare. Five… that’s something else.”

“I don’t feel five,” Kael said, looking at his hands. “Only fire and ice respond naturally. Lightning crackles faintly when I push hard enough, but time… and plant… feel distant. Like shadows I haven’t reached yet.”

**“Your current energy signature is rising,”** Iris added. **“You are now recorded at 10.3★ on the power spectrum. And still climbing slowly.”**

Kael leaned back and stared at the ceiling. “I thought eating those cores might kill me. But now…”

Cherry hopped onto the bed beside him, resting her head on his lap. “You’re something new, Kael. Something we haven’t seen before.”

Kitsune sat silently, eyes narrowed in thought. “Maybe… your ability isn’t just the elements. Maybe it’s *balance*. Holding things others can’t.”

Kael looked at both of them, then at his palm, where a flicker of flame danced quietly beside a slow curl of frost.

Five elements.  
One heart.

And a path ahead none of them could predict.

**End of Chapter 84**

**Kael Ardyn: Scan Report**

**Basic Information:**

* **Name:** Kael Ardyn
* **Age:** 23 (estimated)
* **Current Power Level:** 10.3★ (Ascending)
* **Weapon:** Stonefang Spear
* **Weapon Mastery:** Advanced (Proficient in spear techniques, including signature move "Rowing the Spear Against the Waves")

**Elemental Affinities:**

* **Fire:** Active, manifests in combat through controlled flame manipulation (offensive and defensive use).
* **Lightning:** Active, manifests in quick reflexive strikes and defensive burst (controlled, still developing).
* **Ice:** Active, manifests in temperature manipulation, frost attacks, and creating barriers of ice.
* **Time:** Dormant, no active manifestation yet. Potential for manipulation in future.
* **Plant:** Dormant, only detected during breakthrough. Subtle, possibly passive healing and life energy affinity.

**Abilities:**

1. **Fire Element:**
   * *Flame Creation:* Ability to generate and control fire for offensive and defensive purposes.
   * *Flame Wave:* A wide-area fire attack (signature move) for controlling large groups or opponents.
2. **Lightning Element:**
   * *Lightning Strike:* A fast, explosive attack that generates high-speed lightning to stun or damage enemies.
   * *Reactive Surge:* Lightning surges in his body when under high pressure, enhancing his reflexes and strength temporarily.
3. **Ice Element:**
   * *Frost Cloak:* Coats his body with a layer of frost for enhanced defense.
   * *Ice Manipulation:* Can form barriers, blades, or structures made of ice for attack and defense.
4. **Time Element (Dormant):**
   * No active manifestation yet, but potential for time manipulation abilities like slowing or speeding time in a localized field. Needs further development.
5. **Plant Element (Dormant):**
   * Unexplained at this point. May have passive or life force-related properties. Possible healing or growth-related abilities.

**Health and Vital Statistics:**

* **Heart Condition:** Unusual, with a significant increase in life energy. The heart now has an elevated regenerative capacity.
* **Vital Signs:** Stable. Slightly higher than average for a normal human.
* **Energy Signature:** Unusually high, with signs of dual-elemented affinity adapting in the body.
* **Core Energy:** Interwoven dual-element cores (fire/lightning, ice/time) activated, with plant-type affinity detected in residual form.

**Combat Analysis:**

* **Strength:** 10.3★ power level. Adept in close-range combat with exceptional spear techniques.
* **Speed:** High reaction speed, amplified by lightning affinity.
* **Defense:** High durability, aided by ice manipulation and natural resilience.
* **Intelligence:** Tactical genius, capable of rapid adaptation in battle.

**Other Observations:**

* **Beast Taming:** Strong connection with beasts, capable of commanding and understanding them. Particularly bonded with Cherry and Kitsune (both 10★).
* **Psionic Bond:** Active, connected to Cherry, Kitsune, and Iris for tactical coordination.
* **Environmental Influence:** Often uses elemental surroundings to his advantage (fire, ice, lightning), adapting to changing situations.

**Conclusions:**

Kael Ardyn is a unique individual who has surpassed the typical Ascended levels by mastering **five elements**, with two of them being dormant. His progression from 10★ to 10.3★ is attributed to this extraordinary ability. Though he has mastered elemental control in some areas, his **Time** and **Plant** abilities remain unrefined and potentially potent. His combat skills and strategic mind are his strongest assets.

**Chapter 85: The Journey to Tokyo**

As the dawn broke over the horizon, the crisp morning air stirred Kael’s thoughts. His mind returned to the time when he first encountered the **Ancient Beast Tree**, and the mysterious fruit it had compelled him to eat. That moment felt like a distant memory, but its impact had never faded. It was clear now that something about that tree had been far more than a mere encounter. He had felt a profound connection, almost as if the tree were an ally — a powerful, ancient force. The fruit it had given him had changed him in ways he still didn’t fully understand, but it seemed to have unlocked something deep within him.

Kael turned to Cherry and Kitsune, both walking beside him, as well as Iris, who was quietly scanning the terrain. **Only Kael and Cherry knew about the tree. Kitsune had never been told,** and Kael had kept the memory private, unsure of its full significance. Now, he shared his thoughts.

“Remember that **Ancient Beast Tree**?” Kael asked, looking at Cherry and Kitsune. “The one from the time I was first gaining power. The fruit it made me eat… I think it may have had more to do with my breakthrough than I realized.”

Cherry looked up, her eyes glowing with a soft understanding. **She had been with him every step of the way since then.** "I knew it had to be something special," she replied, her voice low and thoughtful. "But I never fully understood its power either."

Kitsune’s ears twitched, confused. “What tree? What fruit?” she asked, her tone cautious.

Kael turned to her, his face serious. “It’s something I encountered before we met. It was a giant, ancient tree, more powerful than anything I’ve seen. When I ate its fruit, I didn’t just gain strength — I felt a bond form with it. It was almost like it chose me.”

Kitsune narrowed her eyes, clearly intrigued but cautious. “So… this tree, whatever it is, has been affecting your growth? Could it have given you this dual-element ability?”

Kael nodded slowly. “That’s what I think. I need to go back and find it — see if there’s something more I can learn. And maybe… there’s more to discover about my power. We can search for answers in Tokyo too, to find Darius, Victor, Maya, David, and Elsie.”

Cherry’s tail swished with silent excitement at the mention of their friends. “It’ll be good to see them again,” she murmured.

“I’ll be ready for anything,” Kitsune added, her stance shifting into one of quiet determination.

Kael smiled faintly. “We’ll be back before long. Let’s get to Tokyo.”

The group moved out, journeying on foot with the dense forest surrounding them. As the morning passed and they ventured deeper into the wilderness, Kael’s mind remained focused. He didn’t know what awaited them, but he knew one thing for certain — the **Ancient Beast Tree** was crucial, and Tokyo was the first stop.

**The Encounter:**

As they traveled, the landscape shifted. The air grew denser, the foliage thicker, and the sounds of the forest seemed to quiet. But the tension in the air remained. The **Iris System**, built into Kael’s internal network, was always on alert. Suddenly, Iris spoke, her voice calm but warning.

“**Warning. Multiple hostile entities detected ahead.**”

Kael stopped immediately, motioning for Cherry and Kitsune to do the same. Iris’ scan had pinpointed multiple mutated beasts of varying power levels closing in on them.

“**Beasts ranging from 8 to 11 stars detected. Possible ambush.**” Iris continued. “One 11★ in close proximity.”

Kael looked around, his mind sharp. “We can’t afford an 11★ battle. We need to move quickly.”

As they carefully made their way around the beasts’ path, a low growl vibrated through the trees. **An 11★ beast was stalking them, its senses razor-sharp, but Kael’s group was already on the move.**

“Iris, how far?” Kael asked.

“**About 10 minutes before the target reaches this location.**” Iris responded, tracking the enemy’s movement in real-time. “**I can lead you around them if you follow my directions.**”

Without hesitation, Kael, Cherry, and Kitsune followed Iris’ guidance, expertly dodging the mutant beasts and staying hidden until the 11★ beast passed them. **The group had narrowly escaped a dangerous encounter.**

“Close call,” Kael muttered, as they continued on their path. “Good work, Iris.”

**The 10.7★ Battle:**

After several more hours of travel, they encountered a group of mutated beasts — **this time, a 10.7★ in strength** — a terrifying, massive creature resembling a hybrid between a wolf and a tiger, its body brimming with toxic energy.

Kael, Cherry, and Kitsune immediately readied themselves for battle. **The beast lunged at them with a roar, charging with incredible speed**. Kael was the first to react, using his **Stonefang Spear** to thrust forward, meeting the beast’s attack head-on. The beast’s claws scraped against the spear’s shaft, creating sparks as it tried to overwhelm him.

Cherry, quick and agile, darted to the side, using her **Power Surge** ability to boost her speed. She lashed out with her claws, releasing a lightning-charged strike that slammed into the beast’s side.

Meanwhile, Kitsune, with her **healing flames**, set up barriers of fire and water to defend and counterattack. **The creature was able to dodge most of the fire**, but the combination of water and flame slowly weakened its movements.

Kael’s spear techniques were precise. With a powerful thrust, he pushed the beast back and slashed at its side, leaving deep gashes in its mutated hide.

The beast roared in pain but didn’t relent. It retaliated, launching a wave of **toxic, poisonous energy** from its mouth. Kael reacted instantly, creating an **ice shield** with his power, which absorbed the brunt of the attack, though the edges of the ice began to crack under the strain.

“Stay focused,” Kael called to Cherry and Kitsune, urging them to press the attack.

Finally, using their combined forces — **Kael’s spear, Cherry’s lightning claws, and Kitsune’s flame-water hybrid techniques** — they forced the beast into a corner. With one final, coordinated strike, Kael drove his spear through the creature’s heart, ending the battle.

**Aftermath:**

Breathing heavily from the intense battle, Kael stood tall. His power had surged once again, as had the powers of his companions. **Kael reached 10.5★**, Cherry now stood at 10.6★, and Kitsune reached 10.5★. Their bond was stronger than ever, and they had grown more powerful through the trials they faced together.

“Another victory,” Kael said, looking at the fallen beast. He knelt and began extracting the **10★ monster core**.

As the group continued their journey toward Tokyo, **Kael couldn’t help but wonder about the next steps.** They were growing stronger with every battle, and soon they would face the unknown once again. The answers Kael sought — about his power, the **Ancient Beast Tree**, and the fate of his friends — were all waiting for him in Tokyo.

**End of Chapter.**

Here is the structured list of the **17 Ascended-level warriors** in Japan, excluding Kael, with their assigned regions and city bases:

**🟨 Central Region (Heart of Japan – Political & Strategic Command)**

1. **Seiji Dran** – *“The Apex Commander”*
   * **Power**: 13.0★
   * **Affinity**: Unknown (rumored total combat mastery)
   * **Location**: **Tokyo**, Head of Central Division, National Strategic Command
   * **Role**: Supreme Commander of the Ascended Network
2. **Faye Illena** – *“The Mind Oracle”*
   * **Power**: 12.0★
   * **Affinity**: Psychic Seer, Memory Manipulation
   * **Location**: **Nagoya**, Central Intelligence and Espionage Hub
   * **Notes**: Oversees high-level reconnaissance and mental warfare.

**🟥 Western Region (Defensive and Blade Specialist Zone)**

1. **Kaoru Mizuchi** – *“The Tempest Blade”*
   * **Power**: 10.4★
   * **Affinity**: Wind-enhanced swordsmanship
   * **Location**: **Osaka**, Commander of the Western Division
2. **Yoru Seiran** – *“Whisper of Blades”*
   * **Power**: 10.1★
   * **Affinity**: Illusion and stealth
   * **Location**: **Kyoto**, Ghost Operative Training Center
3. **Rikuto “Stonevein” Jura** – *“Earth Bastion”*
   * **Power**: 10.3★
   * **Affinity**: Earth durability and brute force
   * **Location**: **Kobe**, Fortified Base of Western Defense

**🟦 Southern Region (Mobility and Energy Combat Specialists)**

1. **General Hideo Ren** – *“The Timebreaker”*
   * **Power**: 11.2★
   * **Affinity**: Time manipulation (localized)
   * **Location**: **Kagoshima**, Overseer of the Southern Corridor
2. **Mara Kanzuki** – *“Ashfire Monarch”*
   * **Power**: 10.8★
   * **Affinity**: Pyrokinesis + Beast Control
   * **Location**: **Fukuoka**, Southern Mutant Research and Combat Field
3. **Tenjin Ralnor** – *“The Stormwind Fist”*
   * **Power**: 10.6★
   * **Affinity**: Wind-elemental martial combat
   * **Location**: **Miyazaki**, Mobile Strike Command

**🟩 Northern Region (Harsh Climate Combat Specialists)**

1. **Borran Kazume** – *“The Nuclear Howl”*
   * **Power**: 10.5★
   * **Affinity**: Radiation manipulation
   * **Location**: **Wakkanai**, Northern Ice Field Fort
2. **Mirei Shadowcrest** – *“The Phase Ghost”*

* **Power**: 11.4★
* **Affinity**: Stealth and phase-shift combat
* **Location**: **Sapporo**, Advanced Recon and Infiltration Unit

**🟧 Eastern Region (Tactical Operatives & Offensive Deployment)**

1. **Shiori Ayame** – *“The Crimson Pulse”*

* **Power**: 10.2★
* **Affinity**: Blood-based augmentation and healing
* **Location**: **Sendai**, Eastern Recovery Division

1. **Rein Yukihara** – *“Whiteflame Blade”*

* **Power**: 10.0★
* **Affinity**: Holy fire and purification
* **Location**: **Mito**, Eastern Guard Command

1. **Tsuro Genbei** – *“Voltage Fang”*

* **Power**: 10.1★
* **Affinity**: Lightning-speed and shock-based melee
* **Location**: **Chiba**, Urban Assault Readiness Command

**📍 Floating / Independent Operatives (Assigned to National Priority or Unknown)**

1. **Kazana Mei** – *“Tornado Queen”*

* **Power**: 10.3★
* **Affinity**: Wind and sonic disruption
* **Location**: **Classified**, Nomadic combat support unit

1. **Raiko Dazai** – *“Pulse Inferno”*

* **Power**: 10.7★
* **Affinity**: Plasma-based explosions
* **Location**: **Okinawa**, Coastal defense and anomaly watch

1. **Naori Kureha** – *“Silent Frost”*

* **Power**: 10.4★
* **Affinity**: Cryokinesis
* **Location**: **Aomori**, Northern Sea Perimeter Division

1. **Shun Igarashi** – *“Dimshift Reaver”*

* **Power**: 10.6★
* **Affinity**: Dimensional step and shadow cuts
* **Location**: **Akita**, Shadow strike division

Here is a detailed breakdown of the **Ancient Beasts of the World** from **50★ to 60★** power level:

**🐉 Ancient Beasts (50★ to 60★)**

1. **Typhoon Leviathan** – *East China Sea, Asia*  
   **Power**: 55.0★  
   **Attributes**: Water (Oceanic), Storm  
   **Abilities**: Manipulation of ocean currents, devastating storm creation, swallowing entire cities.  
   **Lore**: With absolute dominance over the seas, this beast can reshape coastal regions with its storms.
2. **Ragnarok Gorgon** – *Greece, Europe*  
   **Power**: 54.0★  
   **Attributes**: Stone, Poison, Illusion  
   **Abilities**: Petrifying gaze, venomous aura, mind control, environmental illusions.  
   **Lore**: A terror to civilizations, it turns cities to stone and warps reality itself.
3. **Celestial Wyvern** – *Alaska, North America*  
   **Power**: 52.5★  
   **Attributes**: Ice, Wind, Light  
   **Abilities**: Northern lights control, frost breath, flight at extreme speeds, time-freezing powers.  
   **Lore**: A force of the sky, it can freeze entire landscapes and shift nature's balance.
4. **Ember King** – *Amazon Rainforest, South America*  
   **Power**: 56.0★  
   **Attributes**: Fire, Earth  
   **Abilities**: Volcanic eruptions, magma manipulation, terraforming, fiery earthquakes.  
   **Lore**: The king reshapes regions with volcanic fury, rivaling the most violent natural disasters.
5. **Great Jade Turtle** – *China, Asia*  
   **Power**: 53.0★  
   **Attributes**: Earth, Water  
   **Abilities**: Unyielding durability, catastrophic tsunamis, time control in regions.  
   **Lore**: Known as an eternal guardian, it holds the knowledge of the universe within its shell.
6. **Leviathan of the Black Depths** – *Lake Tanganyika, Africa*  
   **Power**: 57.5★  
   **Attributes**: Water, Darkness  
   **Abilities**: Shadow tendrils, time-space manipulation, whirlpool creation.  
   **Lore**: Master of the abyss, capable of sinking entire nations with its roar.
7. **Ouroboros Serpent** – *Mesopotamia, Middle East*  
   **Power**: 59.0★  
   **Attributes**: Poison, Time, Eternity  
   **Abilities**: Time reversal, venomous bite, history manipulation.  
   **Lore**: An ancient being, it can alter history itself and devours all in its path.
8. **Thunderclaw Griffin** – *The Alps, Europe*  
   **Power**: 58.5★  
   **Attributes**: Electric, Air  
   **Abilities**: God-level thunderstorms, supersonic flight, claws harnessing star power.  
   **Lore**: Commands the sky and can summon storms that annihilate entire nations.
9. **Primal Roc** – *Arabian Peninsula, Middle East*  
   **Power**: 60.0★  
   **Attributes**: Air, Earth, Light  
   **Abilities**: Immense strength, earth control, blinding storm summoning.  
   **Lore**: A god-like entity capable of erasing cities with a single flap of its wings.
10. **Infernal Phoenix** – *Japan, Asia*  
    **Power**: 55.5★  
    **Attributes**: Fire, Resurrection  
    **Abilities**: Rebirth from ashes, sun flame manipulation, regenerative flames.  
    **Lore**: Reborn from destruction, it can purify or burn land, creating and destroying endlessly.
11. **Moonshadow Leviathan** – *Antarctica*  
    **Power**: 58.0★  
    **Attributes**: Water, Darkness  
    **Abilities**: Ice and tide control, shadow cloaking, reality manipulation.  
    **Lore**: A being of eternal night, capable of shrouding entire regions in darkness.
12. **Mountain-God Titan** – *Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa*  
    **Power**: 57.0★  
    **Attributes**: Earth, Storm  
    **Abilities**: Seismic stomps, volcanic eruptions, apocalyptic storm creation.  
    **Lore**: Commands the earth and can raise mountains or flatten regions with a step.
13. **Blood Moon Wolf** – *Rocky Mountains, North America*  
    **Power**: 56.5★  
    **Attributes**: Lunar, Beast  
    **Abilities**: Enhanced senses, dimensional shifting under the blood moon, lunar beast summoning.  
    **Lore**: Protects the wild, emerging under celestial events to ward off intruders.
14. **Skyfire Dragon** – *Tibet, Asia*  
    **Power**: 60.0★  
    **Attributes**: Fire, Air  
    **Abilities**: Firestorms, breakneck-speed flight, region-incinerating fiery breath.  
    **Lore**: A fire god soaring through the heavens, capable of scorching landscapes.
15. **Frostbeard Yeti** – *Canada, North America*  
    **Power**: 56.0★  
    **Attributes**: Ice, Earth  
    **Abilities**: Superhuman strength, forest freezing, blizzard summoning.  
    **Lore**: Lives in the northern reaches, a force capable of freezing time itself.
16. **Abyssal Hydra** – *Mediterranean Sea, Europe*  
    **Power**: 59.5★  
    **Attributes**: Water, Poison  
    **Abilities**: Regeneration, sea control, storm summoning.  
    **Lore**: A deep-sea terror with multiple heads, capable of widespread destruction.
17. **Skyward Storm Behemoth** – *Andes, South America*  
    **Power**: 58.0★  
    **Attributes**: Storm, Earth  
    **Abilities**: Thunderstrikes, continent-splitting earthquakes, hurricane summoning.  
    **Lore**: An entity of destruction, wielding fury over the skies and earth.
18. **Radiant Phoenix** – *Great Barrier Reef, Australia*  
    **Power**: 57.0★  
    **Attributes**: Fire, Light  
    **Abilities**: Immolation with light, divine healing flames, ecosystem purification.  
    **Lore**: A symbol of rebirth, purifying and incinerating evil at a cosmic scale.
19. **Volcanic Kraken** – *Ring of Fire, Pacific Ocean*  
    **Power**: 59.0★  
    **Attributes**: Fire, Water, Earth  
    **Abilities**: Lava-infused tentacles, seismic control, oceanic storm manipulation.  
    **Lore**: Born from the earth’s heart, it can sink islands and raise oceans.
20. **Thunder Seraph** – *The Alps, Europe*  
    **Power**: 60.0★  
    **Attributes**: Air, Lightning  
    **Abilities**: Supreme thunder and lightning control, divine fury strikes, weather shaping.  
    **Lore**: A divine immortal who commands the storm itself, bringing both destruction and retribution.
21. **Mountain Mauler** – *Sahara Desert, Africa*  
    **Power**: 55.0★  
    **Attributes**: Earth, Fire  
    **Abilities**: Sandstorm creation, firestorm summoning, seismic control.  
    **Lore**: A primal force shaking the desert with its steps, unleashing firestorms.
22. **Abyssal Tiamat** – *Atlantic Ocean*  
    **Power**: 60.0★  
    **Attributes**: Water, Chaos  
    **Abilities**: Multidimensional chaos control, time and space rifts, oceanic command.  
    **Lore**: A queen of chaos ruling over the depths, her roar splits seas and reality.
23. **Emerald Basilisk** – *Amazon Rainforest, South America*  
    **Power**: 55.5★  
    **Attributes**: Poison, Earth  
    **Abilities**: Petrifying gaze, venomous breath, flora/fauna manipulation.  
    **Lore**: Its venom corrupts the land and its gaze turns explorers to statues.
24. **Golden Lioness** – *Serengeti Plains, Africa*  
    **Power**: 57.0★  
    **Attributes**: Solar, Beast  
    **Abilities**: Solar-powered strength, sun ray control, celestial storm summoning.  
    **Lore**: Commands the sun’s power, blinding enemies and scorching the plains.
25. **Divine Pegasus** – *The Alps, Europe*  
    **Power**: 58.0★  
    **Attributes**: Air, Light  
    **Abilities**: Divine flight, wind control, healing and rejuvenation powers.  
    **Lore**: A celestial being whose presence brings peace, capable of healing the earth.
26. **Celestial Kraken** – *Pacific Oceans*  
    **Power**: 59.5★  
    **Attributes**: Water, Cosmic  
    **Abilities**: Ocean control, gravity and tide manipulation, cosmic shifting.  
    **Lore**: An ancient creature with control over the oceans and cosmos alike.
27. **Eclipsing Behemoth** – *Antarctica*  
    **Power**: 60.0★  
    **Attributes**: Darkness, Earth  
    **Abilities**: Shadow control, apocalyptic earthquakes, total region cloaking.  
    **Lore**: A colossal being able to erase light and shift the world into darkness.

**Chapter 86: The Hidden Power of the Ancients**

As Kael, Cherry, and Kitsune continued their journey towards Tokyo, the horizon stretched endlessly before them, the city barely visible through the dense fog of the ruined landscape. The wind howled through the barren fields, but the trio pressed on with determination. Kael, leaning on his spear, took a moment to catch his breath and turned to Iris, who had been guiding them through the wastelands with the help of the satellite systems and her own keen senses.

"Hey, Iris," Kael asked, his voice cutting through the silence. "Tell me about the ancient beasts around the world. What do we know about their current status? Do any of them still interact with humans?"

There was a brief pause before Iris responded. Kael could almost sense her hesitation, as though she was gathering her thoughts, a sign that she was more connected to the emotions of the world than she let on.

"Well," Iris began, her voice soft yet laced with a hint of sorrow, "there are twenty-seven known ancient beasts across the globe now. They are no longer the same creatures that once roamed freely before humanity’s intervention. Some of them have regained their senses—become more... powerful, with their unlocked abilities. But they’ve mostly limited their dominance over human territories, maintaining a delicate balance. Some of them still look after their domains—those places they once ruled in ancient times."

Kael walked slowly, thinking. "So, they aren’t as aggressive as they were?"

"Not all," Iris replied, her voice trailing off for a moment, almost as if the thought of it hurt her. "But there are still some... beasts who have not regained their former clarity, and they are still running amok, causing devastation in their wake. They are territorial, and their rampages have made entire regions uninhabitable for humans."

A deep, almost imperceptible sigh came through the speaker. Kael paused to listen, sensing the underlying emotion in her voice.

"I wish I could say the situation was more hopeful," Iris continued, her words becoming more personal. "Some ancient beasts still dominate the humans they encounter. They expand their territories, swallowing entire cities, erasing nations. But there are five, just five, that seem to have found some peace. They limit their territories and interact with humans only on their own terms—most of the time, they avoid conflict. They are the *Divine Pegasus*, *Primal Roc*, *Great Jade Turtle*, *Golden Lioness*, and *Radiant Phoenix*."

Kael's grip tightened around the Stonefang Spear. The mention of these powerful beasts, some of whom had once been feared gods of destruction, made him feel a strange combination of awe and responsibility.

"What about the ancient tree beast? The one we saw near Cloverspark? It’s not listed anywhere in the global records. Is it... a new type of ancient beast?" Kael asked, his brow furrowing in concern. He couldn't shake the thought of it, the eerie presence of the forest towering over them.

Iris’s voice quivered slightly. "No, it’s not in the global records," she confirmed. "That’s because *some* ancient beasts have still not revealed themselves to the world. We don’t know their motives, or if they ever will. Perhaps... they’re still in hiding. And perhaps..." Her voice softened. "Perhaps they don’t trust us anymore."

There was a long pause. Kael could almost feel Iris’s uncertainty, the weight of those hidden, unknown forces pressing down on her. She wasn’t just a machine to him; she had grown into something more, something closer to a companion, a guardian. And hearing her emotional tone stirred something in his chest.

"Do you think they’ll ever reveal themselves?" Kael asked quietly.

"I don't know, Kael," Iris said softly, her voice filled with a depth of emotion that Kael had not expected from her. "I wish I had the answer. But the ancient beasts... they are part of the earth’s heartbeat. We don’t understand them fully. They were born from the planet itself—like we were, in a way. They’ve watched us, heard us, even before the world fell apart. But they’re still a mystery."

Kael glanced over at Cherry and Kitsune, both of whom seemed calm but alert, as though they could sense the gravity of the conversation. He could tell that they understood this moment, too. The ancient beasts weren’t just threats to humanity. They were forces of nature, old and powerful beyond comprehension. But just like them, they were trying to survive.

"Thanks, Iris," Kael said, his voice steady yet thoughtful. "We'll keep an eye out for any more hidden beasts. But don’t worry. We’re stronger now. We’ll find a way to protect those who need it."

Iris’s voice seemed to brighten a little, though the underlying sorrow was still present. "I hope so, Kael. I really do."

As they continued on their journey, Kael couldn’t shake the feeling that the road ahead would only grow more complicated. The ancient beasts, those mighty forces of nature, were as much a part of this world as humans were. And it seemed that the balance between them all was shifting, tipping toward something even greater.

But one thing was for sure: Kael would face whatever came his way. Together with his companions—Cherry, Kitsune, and even Iris—he was ready for whatever challenge lay beyond the horizon.

**Chapter 87: The Spear That Pierced Fire**

As Kael, Cherry, and Kitsune approached the outskirts of Ishioka—just a half-day’s march from Tokyo—Iris’s voice cut sharply through their comms.

“Alert: A massive spike in beast energy just northeast of your position. Estimated power—near 14-star. It’s engaged in battle... but with a human.”

Kael halted mid-stride, his expression tightening. “Did you say *a human* is fighting it?”

“Yes,” Iris replied. “Though... it’s strange. I can’t pinpoint the human’s exact power level. It’s fluctuating, masked somehow—but it’s likely around 13-star.”

“Someone’s fighting a 14-star alone?” Kael muttered, incredulous. Cherry’s ears twitched, and Kitsune narrowed her eyes, her hackles rising with the tension.

Without another word, Kael sprang into motion, leading the others at a full sprint toward the battle. They crossed crumbled buildings and forested ruins overgrown with vines and moss. As they neared the epicenter, the air turned thick and hot, almost suffocating. The smell of burning feathers and scorched earth filled their lungs.

Then they saw it.

A *colossal flaming sparrow*, nearly the size of a passenger jet, hovered in the air on burning wings. Every beat of its wings sent shockwaves of heat across the cracked ground, setting nearby trees alight. Its feathers dripped fire, each one like molten blades falling from the sky. Its eyes burned with hatred, and its shrieks echoed across the horizon like sonic blasts.

But what gripped Kael’s attention was the man standing beneath it.

The human warrior stood tall—**well over two meters**, towering above the ruins around him like a battle-hardened statue. His build was enormous, like a mountain carved from living muscle. **His arms were thick and knotted with muscle, broader than tree trunks—thicker even than a coconut palm in full bloom.** His torso bore old scars and fresh wounds alike, and he fought shirtless, steam rising off his sweat-slicked body as he moved.

His spear was unlike any Kael had seen—a thick obsidian shaft etched with runes, longer than even Kael’s own Stonefang Spear. And yet, in his hands, it danced like a ribbon in the wind.

He didn’t just fight. He *flowed*.

Each movement was flawless, as though he and the spear were one entity. His stance was rooted like bedrock, yet each step shifted like water, evading the sparrow’s strikes with grace that belied his size. **When he thrust, the spear hummed. When he parried, the weapon carved arcs through the air, leaving faint trails of silvery-blue aura in its wake—each one slicing through the flames like paper.**

Kael and his companions hid among the broken ruins, watching the battle unfold with awe and growing dread. Even Cherry, who rarely showed fear, kept her ears flat and tail low. Kitsune growled softly beside her, golden flames flickering at her paws in subconscious reaction to the overwhelming heat and pressure.

The battle raged on for hours.

The sparrow screeched in fury as its attacks grew more desperate, hurling waves of molten fire, its wings flaring wide as it tried to crush its opponent with sheer overwhelming force. But the man did not retreat. **Blood streamed down his sides, gashes etched into his chest and thighs, yet his eyes never wavered.** Each counterattack was brutal, efficient. Spear thrusts aimed at joints, under wings, into the flaming beast’s heart.

Kael could barely believe what he was witnessing.

“I’ve fought 10-stars,” he muttered, “but this... this is another level.”

Iris whispered over the comms, her voice hushed. “I’ve recalibrated my sensors. This man’s skill is distorting power readings. He’s controlling his strength so precisely it masks his true strength. His technique isn’t just refined—it’s ancient.”

The flaming sparrow gave one final cry, bursting into a storm of fire and ash. It collapsed mid-air, crashing to the ground with a thunderous quake. Flames sputtered and died, leaving behind a charred crater where it fell.

The warrior stood in the center of the scorched battlefield, bleeding from dozens of wounds, smoke rising from his skin. His shoulders rose and fell heavily. But even now, he did not rest. He slowly turned his head.

His eyes locked onto Kael’s group, sharp and amber like a predator’s. A faint smirk tugged at the corner of his bruised face.

“Well?” he called out, his voice deep and rough like grinding stone.

“Was the show good?”

Kael felt the hair on the back of his neck rise.

The spear warrior wasn’t just strong.

He was something else entirely.

**End of Chapter 87**

**Chapter 88: Bloodlines and Waves**

The heavy silence that followed the titanic battle hung in the scorched air, thick with smoke and tension. Kael, Cherry, and Kitsune stepped out of their hiding place cautiously, emerging from the crumbled remains of a half-buried convenience store. Even with the flaming sparrow slain, the lingering aura from the clash made the ground crackle faintly beneath their feet.

The man stood still in the heart of the battlefield, his spear planted into the ground beside him like a flag after conquest. **His body was drenched in blood and sweat, crisscrossed with battle wounds, yet his presence was firm—unyielding.** There was something about him that seemed… beyond human. More than just strength. More than technique.

Kael's gaze narrowed as they approached. This man had transcended something. He wasn’t just a master of the spear—he’d *moved beyond* it. Past Level 4. Into something uncharted. A realm where the weapon wasn't just an extension of self—but something spiritual. Alive.

The warrior turned to them, tilting his head slightly, blood dripping from his chin. Despite his wounds, there was a relaxed confidence in his eyes.

“So,” he said, his voice like rolling thunder, “how were my moves?”

Kael didn’t even realize the words had left his mouth. “They were… the best I’ve ever seen.”

The man laughed—a deep, hearty laugh that echoed across the burned clearing. “Hah! If that’s the best, then the world’s in trouble. I’m still not even close to my grandfather’s level.”

Cherry twitched her whiskers in disbelief. Kitsune watched silently, flames curling subtly around her tails.

Then the man stepped forward slightly, eyes locked on Kael. “Have you seen anyone who *could* compare to me?”

Kael blinked, thinking instinctively of one person. “Elise. Elise would be close.”

The moment the name escaped his lips, the atmosphere *snapped*.

The man’s expression darkened immediately. His brows furrowed into a deep scowl, and his grip tightened around his spear.

“Elise Dran?” he asked sharply, voice suddenly laced with cold weight.

Kael’s face lit up. “Yeah! You know her? She was my instructor. We trained together during the Beast Tide. Back then, she taught me her family’s exclusive spear technique—*Rowing the Spear Against the Waves*.”

At the mention of that name, Seiji’s gaze sharpened, and something stirred in Kael’s mind. He had thought it uncanny earlier, but now the resemblance was undeniable.

The man’s stance, the fluid spear work, the seamless wave-like motions…

**This was ‘Rowing the Spear Against the Waves’—but elevated. Refined. Perfected.** It was Elise’s technique, pushed beyond its limits. And then Kael understood.

His heart thudded once.

“You’re… Seiji Dran,” Kael whispered. “The Apex Commander of the Central Division. Elise’s kin… the strongest human in Japan.”

The man’s lips curled ever so slightly, though not in amusement.

Seiji Dran. The legend. The peerless spear king whose name stood shoulder to shoulder with the world’s elites. And he was here—standing bloodied but undefeated.

Then Seiji’s gaze darkened again.

“Where is Elise?”

Kael’s smile faded, and his expression steeled. He said nothing.

Seiji took a step forward. The *weight* of his aura slammed down like an avalanche. The air twisted with his pressure, the very ground around him trembling.

“I asked you—where is Elise?”

Still, Kael stood tall. **Silent. Eyes locked. Refusing to yield.**

Cherry hissed, stepping closer to Kael protectively. Kitsune's fur flared with firelight, but Kael raised a hand gently to hold them back.

The two men stood there—one bloodied and battle-hardened, the other calm and unshaken, their locked gazes igniting a new, silent tension.

No words were exchanged.

Only will.

**End of Chapter 88**

**Chapter 89: The Weight of a Name**

A long silence hung between Kael and Seiji, heavy as stone. The blazing heat of the earlier battle had begun to cool, but the air between them remained tense—volatile. Kael’s body remained subtly poised, eyes alert, arms close to his spear. Kitsune and Cherry were watching too, silent sentinels in this strange reunion.

Finally, Seiji exhaled and took a slow step back, lowering his pressure.

“…Is Elise alright?” he asked, his voice stripped of its earlier pressure. There was a note of vulnerability in it—genuine and raw.

Kael didn’t move. His stance remained firm, guarded.

He remembered Elise’s words with painful clarity:

*“When you’re strong enough… head to the capital. Ask for the Dran family. They owe me a favor—and you might find answers there. About the ancients. About yourself.”*

That didn’t sound like a family bond. It sounded like a burden. A debt.

Kael's gaze was sharp. “She said your family owed her. Deeply. And she wasn’t smiling when she said it.”

Seiji's expression twisted slightly at that—part regret, part guilt. He nodded.

“…That’s true,” he admitted, voice low. “She wasn’t lying.”

Kael’s fingers twitched near the shaft of his spear. “Who *are* you to her?”

Seiji looked directly at him, tired but resolute.

“I’m her older brother.”

Kael blinked, stunned. “…What?”

“That’s right,” Seiji said softly. “We’re siblings.”

Kael stepped back, visibly skeptical. “You look over thirty-five. Elise is barely twenty-five. How does that even make sense?”

Seiji gave a tired chuckle, though it lacked any mirth. “She was born much later… under circumstances none of us wanted. Her mother, Sayuri, died giving birth to her.”

Kael’s eyes narrowed again.

“She also said the Dran family cast her aside.”

“They did.” Seiji’s voice had turned grave. “Our family… we’ve served in the military for over a century. Since the Human Continental Wars. Strength, order, and bloodline have always meant everything.”

He sat down on a half-melted stone, shoulders sagging with memory.

“The current Dran family includes our grandfather—General **Kenshiro Dran**, our grandmother **Ayame Dran**, and their three children. Our father, **Takeshi Dran**—the eldest and former division commander. Our second aunt, **Reika Dran**, who married an influential political strategist, **Masaru Genji**, and had twins. And our youngest uncle, **Shun Dran**, who never married and focused on building political influence inside the New Asia Alliance.”

He looked up again, gaze distant.

“My father had three children—me, my younger brother **Riku**, and the youngest… Elise.”

Kael kept silent, absorbing every word.

“When Elise was born, and her mother died… my grandparents took it as a sign. They consulted a priest and concluded that Elise was a *kuroyami no shōjo*—a child of black omen. They feared she would bring ruin to the Dran legacy. So they exiled her.”

Kael’s fist clenched. “To where?”

“To the *servant hall*, the lowest quarters of the family estate. A place meant for retired retainers and broken soldiers.” Seiji’s voice quivered for the first time. “My father and I protested. Begged. But our grandparents wouldn’t budge. They said it was for the family’s survival.”

A gust of wind swept through the ruined battlefield, scattering ash and feather.

“But even then,” he continued, “we visited her in secret. My father and I. We trained her. And she… *she was brilliant.* A prodigy. By the time she was fourteen, she was nearing advanced Level 3 spear mastery—after barely a year of proper training.”

Kael looked stunned. Even he had struggled to reach that level with elite mentors. Elise had done it while exiled.

“But then,” Seiji growled, fists tightening, “while my father and I were away on assignment… they sent her away. Exiled her entirely. Gone. No trace. When we returned, she was already disappeared. Grandfather claimed it was for her own safety. That her aura was bringing misfortune.”

His eyes turned hollow.

“We never found her again.”

A long silence.

Seiji slowly looked back at Kael. “So when you said her name… I thought the worst. That she was in danger. That something had cursed her again.”

He then lowered his head—**a formal bow** from a man of great pride.

“I’m sorry for pressuring you earlier. I just… I needed to know if my sister was alive.”

Kael remained rooted, heart pounding. His mind reeled from the truth. Seiji Dran—Apex Commander, legendary spearman—was Elise’s brother. The Dran family’s greatest warrior had once knelt before a child who was cast away.

Kael felt something stir in his chest. Respect. Fury. Confusion.

The Dran family owed Elise.

But perhaps… *not all of them had forsaken her.*

He looked down at Seiji. Still cautious. Still not fully trusting. But beginning to understand.

**End of Chapter 89**

**Chapter 90: The Apex and the Ascended**

Kael’s spear lowered at last, the edge no longer gleaming with tension. His eyes softened, though the caution in them remained.

“She’s alright,” Kael said at last. “At least… the last time I saw her.”

Seiji straightened, his jaw clenched. “When was that?”

“A little over a year ago. At the Niigata stronghold. There was a massive beast tide. She and I fought together to hold the line.”

Seiji nodded slowly, the weight on his shoulders easing slightly.

“She was incredible,” Kael added, his voice quieter now. “Led from the front. Took injuries but never slowed down. After that battle, I went into closed training. We… didn’t cross paths again.”

“Still,” Seiji said with a tired smile, “that’s enough. Just knowing she’s alive...”

He didn’t finish the sentence, but Kael understood. Some wounds were too old to fully heal, but even a trace of hope was a balm.

“Come with me,” Seiji said. “I’m heading to Tokyo. You should meet my father.”

Kael blinked. “Takeshi Dran?”

“He’ll want to know Elise is alive. And he’ll want to meet you.”

They both mounted Seiji’s military-issue airbikes—sleek, black machines capable of Mach-class speed—and took off into the skies. The wind howled past, but Seiji kept pace beside Kael, voice carried over their comms.

“So, those two with you… the cat and the fox?” he asked, motioning toward Cherry and Kitsune, who followed through the skies on their own gliders formed of aura constructs.

“They’re not ordinary beasts,” Kael replied with a faint smirk. “Cherry, the cat, is at 10.5★. She awakened a latent lightning element and can understand beast language. Kitsune’s a dual-elemental—fire and water, with healing. 10.3★.”

Seiji choked slightly, then coughed into his mic. “Did you just say… both are over 10★?”

Kael chuckled. “Yeah. And they’re not even the strongest I’ve met.”

“Kid… where the hell did you *come* from?”

Kael didn’t answer directly. The sky stretched before them, and soon, a sprawling cluster of defensive barriers came into view—**Tokyo Remnant City**.

Once the heart of a global metropolis, now a shining bastion wrapped in titanium walls, triple-layered pulse shields, and railcannons so large they could launch projectiles capable of obliterating even a **20★ beast**.

“This is one of the five Tier-1 Reserve Zones,” Seiji said. “A true last stand. We’ve poured every bit of pre-cataclysm tech and post-awakening advancements into its defense.”

Kael nodded, gaze scanning the distant skyline. Massive watchtowers hummed with energy. Drones swirled overhead, tracking every approach.

As they neared the city’s perimeter, alarms briefly flared—until the defense systems recognized the unique signature of Seiji Dran.

Immediately, all active personnel on the outer wall halted their routines. Soldiers stood to attention. Officers saluted sharply. The gates opened like parted waters.

“The Apex Commander returns!”

Seiji rode in like a living legend. Though not the political leader of Tokyo, in the military hierarchy, **he was supreme**. Only a handful in the entire Eastern Coalition could command *him*.

As they passed through the checkpoint, a woman in a sharp black suit, high-collared and well-fitted, stepped forward. Her heels clicked with precision against the steel floor.

“Commander Dran,” she said crisply. “Welcome back. My name is **Captain Rei Nakamura**, liaison to the Internal Affairs Division.”

Seiji nodded at her. “Status update?”

“Yes, sir. A new **10★ ascended** has been confirmed within the last forty-eight hours. What’s more... this individual is the **first recorded dual-elemental** in all of Japan. His elemental imprint is classified under 'hybrid'—not split.”

Seiji raised a brow, interest flaring. “Where is he now?”

“We believe he’s en route to the capital. Tracking his signal has been difficult—his energy signature is partially suppressed. The central division is considering extending a formal recruitment offer. His skillset could reinforce the elite tier.”

Kael raised an eyebrow.

Seiji crossed his arms, deep in thought. “Do we have a name? Background?”

“Not yet,” Rei admitted. “But rumors have already spread—he’s being called the ‘Eighteenth Ascended.’”

At that, Kael stepped forward, his voice calm and steady.

“You can stop guessing,” he said. “I’m the eighteenth ascended. And I’m the one with the dual-elemental imprint.”

The world stilled for a beat.

Seiji and Rei both turned to him in stunned silence.

“…What?” Rei whispered.

Seiji blinked, then slowly broke into a stunned grin.

“…You’ve *got* to be kidding me.”

**End of Chapter 90**

**Chapter 91: Shock Upon Shock**

The air in the landing bay of Tokyo Remnant City felt unusually heavy—not from the smog or reinforced shielding overhead, but from the silence that followed Kael’s words.

“I’m the eighteenth ascended,” Kael repeated calmly, his gaze steady.

Seiji blinked once. Then again.

Rei, by his side, was frozen mid-breath, tablet still suspended between her fingers.

“…You?” Seiji asked, incredulously. “Wait—if that’s true, then your ability… is it monster control?”

Kael shook his head. “No. Monster control was something I awakened naturally. It was part of me from the start, back when the outbreak began.”

Seiji opened his mouth, then shut it again.

Kael continued. “My dual-elemental ability—fire and ice—awakened when I broke through the 9.9★ barrier. I… consumed two monster cores to force the evolution.”

Now they both stared at him like he’d grown horns.

Rei dropped her tablet.

“You *what*?” Seiji’s voice was sharp, bordering on horrified. “You *ate* a monster core?!”

Kael gave a slight nod, nonchalant. “Two, actually.”

Rei gasped audibly. “Kael, do you know how many people have died trying that? A single core causes mental collapse, berserker episodes—some explode outright. And you took *two*?”

“Had no choice,” Kael said quietly. “I needed the power. One was a 10★ fire core. The other… an ice core of equal rank.”

Behind him, **Cherry** flicked her tail and gave an audible “hmph,” while **Kitsune** tilted her head with a proud little grin, tongue flicking in amusement.

The two beasts exchanged a glance that spoke volumes.

*If they’re shocked now… imagine their faces when they find out those weren’t even regular cores. Both were dual-element cores. One fire-lightning. The other ice-time.*

Kael sighed inwardly.

*No need to tell them that. Not yet.*

Seiji rubbed his temples. “So… let me get this straight. You’ve had monster control from the beginning. You consumed two 10-star cores. And now you’ve awakened dual elements.”

Kael nodded once more.

Seiji looked like he wanted to sit down.

Rei, having recovered her composure, muttered, “You’re either insane… or a walking miracle.”

Kael smirked faintly. “Bit of both, I guess.”

Cherry purred smugly, hopping onto Kael’s shoulder with practiced ease, while Kitsune sauntered beside him with a dignified stride.

As they walked deeper into the city, Kael couldn’t help but look around in open admiration. **Tokyo Remnant City** was unlike anything he had seen.

Iris's voice buzzed into his earpiece, her tone *excited, eager, and borderline proud*.

“Kael! Initial scan complete. Welcome to one of the five Tier-1 Reserve Zones—Tokyo Remnant City! This place houses over **6.3 million residents**, with a split of 67% civilian, 22% military personnel, and 11% auxiliary staff.”

“The perimeter is enforced by a **triple-layered titanium-carbon alloy wall**, embedded with shock-absorbent nano-lattice structures. Defense is powered by **Arc-Class Reactors**, with eight active and four in standby.”

“In terms of firepower: 16 anti-titan railcannons, 42 autonomous drone launch pads, and two satellite-linked orbital beam weapons. Not to mention the 2000+ high-grade humanoid exosuit units stationed here!”

“There’s also a layered shielding system—phase-one is electromagnetic, phase-two is kinetic redirection, and phase-three is an adaptive spatial distortion field. It’s the *only* city in the Eastern Sector that has survived two direct attacks from mutated Leviathans!”

Kael whistled under his breath. “You’ve been holding back, haven’t you, Iris?”

“Just wanted to make a good impression~! Also! There’s a café with matcha ice cream on 5th Main Street. Highly rated!”

Seiji caught the tail end of Kael’s reaction and chuckled. “First time in a real fortress city?”

“Yeah,” Kael admitted. “It’s… overwhelming. Like something out of a lost age.”

Rei walked beside Seiji now, glancing sideways at him. “It’s not perfect. But it’s holding.”

She said it with pride, tempered by realism.

Seiji looked at her, his expression softer now. “It’s held because of you too. You’ve run internal logistics like a machine. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you *were* an AI.”

Rei smirked. “Says the man who sleeps three hours a week and still takes down mutant flocks with one hand.”

They exchanged a glance—subtle, charged, familiar. A kind of unspoken understanding passed between them.

Kael caught the look and smirked internally.

*So even the Apex Commander has someone, huh.*

Rei turned to Kael again, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “You’re going to shake a lot of foundations here, Kael. Dual elements. Monster control. And a connection to Elise Dran?”

Kael’s expression turned more serious. “She’s one of the few people I trust. And that means something.”

Seiji stopped walking, placing a hand on Kael’s shoulder.

“You’ll get your answers, Kael. You’ve earned that. And maybe… just maybe, we’ll get our sister back too.”

Kael looked up toward the city’s heart, where colossal buildings stretched into the sky like spears, and distant hangars buzzed with mech deployments and armored convoys.

*This city… feels like a pivot point.*

And somehow, Kael knew—his next path would be forged right here.

**End of Chapter 91**

**Chapter 92: The Dran Family Legacy**

After assigning a flurry of orders to Rei—including an investigation into recent beast activity along the Kanto Ridge and oversight of new core testing—**Seiji Dran** motioned for Kael to follow him. Without another word, the two mounted separate airbikes, slicing through the cold wind above Tokyo Remnant City.

They traveled in silence at first, but Kael's mind buzzed with Iris's steady whispers as she quietly fed him data about their destination.

“The Dran Family Headquarters… Located in the innermost sanctum of the city. Civilian access: restricted. Security clearance: Level Omega. Estimated net value of infrastructure: 21.4 trillion yen. Heritage registry: 123 years old.”

“This isn’t just a home—it’s a monument.”

Kael looked down as they neared. His breath caught in his throat.

Nestled deep within Tokyo’s military ward, **the Dran estate** sprawled across nearly 800 acres of carefully preserved traditional land. The outer perimeter was a towering wall of polished blackstone, ancient but reinforced with modern alloys. Tall cherry blossom trees bordered the interior walls, petals falling like snow across manicured stone paths.

The **main mansion** stood proud and unmoving—an architectural masterpiece of wood, curved tiles, and age-old gravitas. Its roofs swept upward like the wings of a bird of prey. Its gardens boasted koi ponds the size of lakes, zigzagging wooden bridges, and bamboo groves swaying in the breeze.

Dozens of **warriors in traditional blue and black gi** moved across the open courtyards, practicing spear katas and sword forms with deadly precision. The aura of discipline was overwhelming.

Kael swallowed. “This place… it’s like walking into history.”

Seiji gave a rare, slight smile. “It is. And every stone here was laid by someone who shed blood for Japan.”

*So this is the Dran family… the military pillar of the four great families.*

As they walked deeper, Kael recalled what Seiji had told him earlier about the **other great houses**:

* **The Illena Family** – Based in Nagoya. Headed by **Faye Illena**, a 12.0★ psychic seer whose memory manipulation made her both feared and respected in politics.
* **The Kanzuki Family** – Centered in Fukuoka. **Mara Kanzuki**, the *Ashfire Monarch*, held 10.8★ power with both pyrokinetics and beast control—rumored to tame even 12★ beasts.
* **The Shadowcrest Family** – From the snowy bastion of Sapporo. **Mirei Shadowcrest**, 11.4★, commanded stealth and phase-shift technology that blurred the line between human and ghost.

But it was the **Dran Family**, with Seiji as its strongest, that remained the guardian of Japan’s military will.

They passed through several **sliding doors**, each guarded by elite retainers in armored hakama. Hallways adorned with spears, flags of past wars, scrolls of the family code. The air smelled faintly of incense and old cedarwood.

Eventually, they approached a **quiet, secluded room** that faced a garden filled with white plum blossoms and a serene pond rippling with silent koi.

The door was closed, but just as they neared, a voice boomed from within—harsh, sharp, and impossible to ignore.

“**Seiji… why are you here now? Who is the person with you?**”

Kael’s spine straightened instinctively. The voice was powerful—not just in tone, but in presence. This wasn’t someone reading emotions. This was someone *sensing them* through sheer instinct and will.

Seiji knelt respectfully before the closed sliding door.

“**Father… I bring news of Elise.**” His voice, though calm, held something more. Hope.

He placed a hand on Kael’s shoulder. “**This person has it.**”

There was a sudden loud *thud* from inside.

“**What!!**”

The paper door *slammed open*, scattering petals and incense smoke into the wind.

A tall man, with streaks of gray in his black hair and eyes like burning coals, stumbled forward, hands trembling.

He wore a dark blue war robe with the Dran family crest stitched across the chest—a spear crossed with a crescent moon. His aura wasn’t just powerful—it was ancient. It felt like Kael was looking at someone who had never stopped fighting since the old wars.

“**News about my Elise?!**” the man roared, wide-eyed. “**WHO has it?!**”

His gaze landed squarely on Kael, blazing with desperation and authority.

Kael stood still.

*So this is… Takeshi Dran. Elise’s father. The man who taught her the spear. And the man who lost her.*

**End of Chapter 92**

**Chapter 93: The Spear That Binds**

Kael stood rooted before **Takeshi Dran**, the head of the Dran Family, who still held the doorframe like he might tear it off. The man’s gaze was sharp enough to slice through steel, but Kael didn’t falter. This was Elise’s father.

The moment they entered the room, Takeshi gestured them toward the low table by the pond-viewing platform. No formality, no small talk. Only intent.

“**Tell me everything. About my daughter.**”

Kael bowed, then began.

He spoke of Elise’s time in the Niigata Stronghold, how they had fought together against the wave of beasts that nearly overran the defense lines. He described how she had led squads like a phantom through the battlefield, her spear becoming the edge of survival for many.

He recalled how, during training under **Commander Darius**, Elise had always stood taller than anyone—through grit, not height. And how, over time, something unspoken had grown between them. A bond deeper than comradeship.

Takeshi listened, his expression unreadable.

Kael then spoke of her final words to him before they parted:

“**When you're strong enough… head to the capital. Ask for the Dran family. They owe me a favor—and you might find answers there. About the ancients. About yourself.**”

At those words, Takeshi’s jaw tightened.

“…She said *we* owe her?” he muttered under his breath. He stood up and walked toward the open shoji screen, staring into the garden.

“**Rei.**” A subtle whisper left his lips.

From the shadows behind the paper wall, a young man in sleek black armor bowed wordlessly. Without needing explanation, he vanished into the estate. He had his orders: **investigate Kael’s past—thoroughly and quietly.**

Turning back, Takeshi spoke again.

“Tell me, Kael… how did she live? Where did she sleep? Eat? Who did she speak to?”

Kael was quiet for a moment before he answered.

“She never spoke of it directly. But I know enough. She lived among the servants. She had no access to the halls of power or wealth. She made her own weapons from scraps. She trained alone, in silence, until someone finally noticed.”

Takeshi’s eyes dimmed—heavy with shame. “She never complained, did she?”

Kael shook his head.

“She fought like someone who had nothing left to prove. But everything to protect.”

There was a pause.

Then Takeshi’s gaze sharpened—gleaming like a drawn blade. “Then why, Kael Ardyn,” he said, stepping forward, “**did she ask you to come to us? Why you? What does she want you to find here?**”

Kael repeated her words softly.

“They owe me a favor… and you might find answers here. About the ancients. About yourself.”

Takeshi’s brow furrowed.

Before another word could be said, he suddenly narrowed his eyes and asked, “Tell me, boy. Are you in love with my daughter?”

Kael froze.

Even Seiji blinked in surprise. “*Father…*”

But Takeshi raised a hand, gaze locked to Kael’s like a predator measuring prey.

Kael's heartbeat pounded. But he steadied his breath.

Then, straightening his back, he looked Takeshi in the eyes and declared:

**“Yes. I am in love with her. But I have not yet told her.”**

There was silence.

A long one.

Takeshi’s expression didn’t change… but something in the air became heavier. His aura pressed like a weight, a storm gathering without thunder.

“Then prove it.”

Kael blinked. “Prove it?”

Takeshi removed the sheath from his back and revealed a polished obsidian spear—its shaft old, its edge pristine.

“Show me what she taught you.”

Kael stood as Takeshi walked into the open courtyard. Seiji sighed and whispered, “You’re in trouble.”

Kael didn’t reply. He summoned the **Stonefang Spear** into his hand.

The two faced off.

**Takeshi Dran – 9.9★.**  
**Kael Ardyn – 10.5★.**

On paper, Kael should have had the edge.

But it wasn’t even close.

With a flick, Takeshi’s spear blurred, and Kael’s weapon went flying from his hands.

He hit the ground.

“Again.”

Kael retrieved his spear. They clashed.

He was on the ground again, this time from a palm to the chest.

“Again.”

Ten more battles. Ten more humiliating defeats.

Seiji watched from under the eaves, arms folded. “You won’t land a hit unless you understand what drives him.”

Time blurred. The **sun fell behind clouds**. Lanterns were lit around the garden.

Hours passed.

By the end of the **fifth hour**, Kael’s breathing was ragged, his body bruised and battered. But he stood.

Again.

They clashed.

Kael lasted **eleven seconds** this time before a sweeping strike knocked him off his feet. He fell into the gravel, his arm trembling.

Takeshi stood over him, unflinching.

“Still too shallow,” he said.

But this time, his tone wasn’t as harsh.

Kael clenched his fist, blood on his lips—but something in his eyes still burned.

He would stand again.

**End of Chapter 93**

**Chapter 94: The Weight of a Father's Will**

Kael lay on the ground, bruised and exhausted, the coarse gravel digging into his back as he stared up at the darkening sky. His arms trembled, every breath ragged from hours of defeat. His spear rested beside him, embedded in the dirt where it had landed after the last blow.

Takeshi stood silently, arms folded, gaze like stone.

After a long moment, his voice cut through the quiet like a blade.

**“You’re barely at the advanced level of our art… and you think you have the right to even protect yourself?”**

The words stung—not just from condescension, but from cold, painful truth.

Kael clenched his jaw and slowly pushed himself up, muscles protesting with every movement. But he didn’t stop until he was standing again, sweat and blood mingling down his face, eyes unwavering.

Takeshi watched him with an unreadable expression. Then, quietly, as if speaking more to himself than to Kael:

**“Since she taught you our family technique… she has already approved of you.”**

Kael’s eyes widened slightly.

Takeshi turned, facing the koi pond beside the courtyard. The flickering lanterns reflected in the water, illuminating the stern lines of his back.

**“Even though you’re two years younger than her… it doesn’t matter. If Elise truly likes you too…”**

He glanced over his shoulder, eyes sharp and steady.

**“Be prepared for tomorrow’s training. You’ll train under me until *I* say you’re ready.”**

Without waiting for a reply, he walked away, his footsteps echoing across the stone walkway as the shoji doors closed behind him.

Kael remained standing for a few more moments, letting the cool wind carry away the tension in his chest.

A quiet chuckle broke the silence behind him.

**“You’re the first person outside the family he’s ever agreed to teach,”** Seiji said, approaching with a hand extended. **“That means something, Kael.”**

Kael accepted the hand, wincing slightly as he was helped to his feet.

**“What do I do now?”** Kael asked, half-expecting sarcasm.

Seiji patted his shoulder with a smirk. **“You survive. Learn as much as you can—because Father won’t go easy on you tomorrow.”**

Kael gave a faint smile. **“That’s fine. I didn’t come here for ease.”**

Just then, a maid in a white-and-blue traditional uniform approached quietly and bowed.

“Sir Kael, your room is ready. Please allow me to guide you.”

Seiji nodded. **“Rest well, soldier. You’ll need every second of it.”** Then he turned and disappeared into the eastern corridor, already returning to his duties.

Kael followed the maid deeper into the ancient estate, past carved wooden halls and sliding doors adorned with calligraphy. His room was serene—a balance of tradition and comfort, with tatami floors, silk scrolls on the walls, and a private bath already steaming.

As Kael stepped inside, the doors behind him closed, and for the first time in hours, silence and solitude embraced him.

Elsewhere in the estate, Takeshi sat in a dimly lit room lined with relics and portraits. Moonlight filtered in from a square window, casting silver onto a lacquered cabinet.

He reached forward with a cloth and gently wiped dust from a small framed picture—a beautiful woman with gentle eyes, her hair tied in a simple bun.

His fingers paused on her smile.

**“It seems,”** he murmured, voice barely audible, **“our daughter has finally decided to forgive me… for missing my duties back then.”**

He closed his eyes briefly, the old pain etched in his features.

Then he straightened, resolve returning to his gaze.

**“This time… I’ll protect them. Both of them. From all harm.”**

The light in the room flickered as he placed the picture back gently on the cabinet.

And so, under the roof of one of Japan’s most powerful families, the bond of blood, love, and spear began to forge something new.

**End of Chapter 94**

**Chapter 96: Forged in Sweat and Will**

A shrill bell rang through the quiet halls of the Dran estate, its metallic chime slicing the darkness like a blade.

Kael jolted upright from his futon, breath catching as the haze of sleep vanished instantly. Outside his door stood the same composed maid from yesterday, her voice cool and precise.

**“Sir Kael. Master Takeshi is waiting for you. You are already late.”**

His heart sank.

Kael threw on his training gear and sprinted down the winding wooden corridors, his feet slapping against polished floors. The faintest blush of dawn had just begun creeping over the horizon, bathing the ancient estate in a silver hue.

By the time he reached the training hall, Takeshi Dran was already standing in the center of the vast wooden floor, arms folded, his expression colder than the morning air.

**“You’re late,”** Takeshi said without raising his voice.

Kael bowed deeply. **“Forgive me.”**

**“No excuses. Begin with the Punishment Set.”**

Kael blinked. **“Punishment—?”**

**“Thirty Sun Bows, Forty Earth Holds, and Eighty Crane Stances. Repeat. Until I say stop.”**

Kael had practiced all of those before—they were simple warmups, designed for beginner martial artists. Still, he followed the command and began.

But ten minutes in, his legs started to tremble.

Fifteen minutes in, his breathing turned heavy.

By the thirty-minute mark, sweat poured down his body as if he were running full speed through a desert. Muscles that were honed by near-legendary battles screamed in protest.

**How…?** he thought, gritting his teeth. **Why is this so hard?**

But Takeshi’s expression didn’t change. No pity, no encouragement—just those steely eyes, watching his every move.

Two hours later, Kael could barely hold the Crane stance. His arms sagged. His knees buckled. The air burned in his lungs.

He collapsed.

Takeshi didn’t even flinch. He simply stepped forward and tossed Kael a practice spear.

**“Get up. We spar now.”**

Kael forced himself to rise. His hands were shaking so badly he could barely grip the spear, but something deeper than pride pushed him forward—*resolve*. He wasn’t here to impress Takeshi. He was here for Elise. For answers. For himself.

They sparred. Or rather—Kael stumbled, blocked, was thrown, struck, and dropped to the floor again and again.

By 8:00 AM, Takeshi finally stopped.

**“Eat,”** he ordered. **“Return by 8:30. Training resumes till three.”**

Kael was too exhausted to speak. He nodded once and limped back toward the dining hall, where a silent servant placed a simple meal before him—porridge, pickled vegetables, and tea.

It tasted like heaven.

But all too soon, he was back. More drills. More spars. Every stance corrected, every move criticized. Takeshi spared no room for weakness.

Lunch came at 3:00—thirty minutes only. Then back to the floor.

By 9:30 PM, Kael was wheezing, sprawled on the mat with blood on his lips and bruises all over his ribs.

**“You want to protect her?”** Takeshi asked, standing above him like a mountain. **“Then endure.”**

Kael wanted to curse, to scream, to give in—but instead, he clenched his fists.

**“I’ll endure,”** he whispered. **“As long as it takes.”**

At 10:50 PM, Takeshi turned his back.

**“You’re ten minutes short. No dinner tonight.”**

Kael didn’t argue. He simply lay there, staring at the wooden ceiling, hunger gnawing at his belly, pain flooding his limbs, and tears burning silently behind his eyes.

*This continued for two months.*

Two months of bruises and bone-deep aches.

Two months of waking before dawn and collapsing past midnight.

Two months of hearing the words “Not enough” from the man he was trying desperately to earn respect from.

But through it all—Kael endured.

Not because he wanted to prove himself…

But because when he closed his eyes, he remembered Elise’s eyes.

Her voice.

**“When you’re strong enough… head to the capital.”**

He was not strong enough yet. But he would be.

No matter how much it hurt.

**End of Chapter 96**

**Chapter 97: The Den of Dragons**

After more than two months of relentless training, Kael had changed.

He wasn’t just stronger—his reflexes were sharper, his mind more focused, and his heart firmer than steel. Each dawn brought pain, but with it, clarity. He could now last nearly thirty minutes under Takeshi Dran’s relentless spear, something that would have seemed impossible just weeks prior.

That morning, as the sun rose over the sprawling Dran estate, Takeshi had nodded—just barely—and muttered:

**“You are… barely passable now.”**

To anyone else, it might’ve sounded like an insult. But to Kael, those four words were validation. He had earned a foothold.

He smiled, exhaustion and pride mingling in his chest.

But peace was fleeting.

Before breakfast could even touch his lips, a servant arrived with a message: **Grand General Kenshiro Dran and Lady Ayame Dran have summoned you to the family meeting. 8 a.m. sharp. Attendance mandatory.**

Kael's fingers tightened around the cup of tea in his hand.

**8:00 a.m., Dran Family Main Hall**

The hall was vast and ancient—adorned in lacquered wood, scrolls of ancestral deeds, and polished floors that gleamed under the morning light. A rectangular low table stretched across the center, cushions arranged for each family member.

But what truly made the air heavy wasn’t the decor.

It was the people seated there.

Kael stepped into a room filled with monsters in human form—each a legend in their own right. Each one wielding star-ranks of power that could level cities.

But he didn't falter. His steps were steady, his gaze unwavering.

This was the den of dragons.

And he would walk through it as himself.

**Grandfather – Kenshiro Dran (9.7★)**  
The very embodiment of iron discipline, Kenshiro sat at the head, broad-shouldered and with a square jaw still bearing old scars. His once-black hair had gone stark white, but his eyes burned like polished steel—sharp, discerning, and completely merciless. His presence alone felt like standing before an entire army.

**Grandmother – Ayame Dran (9.6★)**  
Graceful, yet regal, Ayame wore a pale blue kimono lined with silver thread. Her expression was calm, but her every word was known to cut like a blade. An aura of refined danger surrounded her, as if she'd never forgotten how to kill despite decades of diplomacy and elegance.

**Father – Takeshi Dran (9.9★)**  
Stoic as always, Takeshi sat just one seat below Kenshiro. Arms folded, face unreadable. The rough warrior now looked more like a silent sentinel. His presence alone made the air feel heavier—Kael could still feel the ache in his ribs from their last spar.

**Aunt – Reika Dran (9.6★)**  
Reika had a sharp face and sharper words. Dressed in crimson robes with the Dran emblem stitched over her chest, she radiated command. Known for leading elite recon squads in the Northern borders, her sharp gaze followed Kael’s movements like a hawk observing prey.

**Uncle – Shun Dran (9.7★)**  
The family tactician. Slender, bespectacled, and almost too calm. Shun’s lean frame hid a ruthless fighter whose calculated strategies turned tides in the Eastern War. He nodded once at Kael but said nothing. The calculating glint in his eyes never left.

**Aunt’s Husband – Masaru Genji (9.5★)**  
Masaru was more easy-going, his dark beard and relaxed posture making him seem the least threatening—until one noticed the calloused hands and the deep scar running from collarbone to jaw. He smiled faintly at Kael, but even that smile carried weight.

**Twins – Kaito and Reina Genji (Both 28 years old, 9.5★)**  
The twin children of Reika and Masaru. Kaito sat with arms crossed and a confident smirk, clearly unimpressed by Kael. He had the roguish air of someone used to getting his way.  
Reina, however, was calm—her long hair tied back, a curious expression on her face. She looked Kael over as though reading a new puzzle. While Kaito seemed ready to challenge, Reina looked intrigued.

**Younger Brother – Riku Dran (9.6★)**  
Seiji’s younger brother. Broad-shouldered, with a strong jaw and intense eyes. He resembled Takeshi more than Seiji did—serious, quiet, but with an air of fierce pride. He gave Kael a small nod, one warrior to another.

**Seiji Dran (13.4★)**  
And finally, standing slightly behind the patriarchs, was Seiji. Still dressed in uniform, hands behind his back. The only one who bore no cushion but stood like a blade drawn. He gave Kael a knowing look and the smallest smirk—*You got this.*

Kael took a deep breath and stepped into the circle.

Dozens of eyes bore into him—powerful, ancient, noble.

Yet he didn’t shrink.

He walked straight to the center and bowed with practiced grace.

**“Kael Ardyn. At your service.”**

The room was silent, watching, judging.

Kenshiro narrowed his eyes.

Ayame sipped her tea.

Takeshi’s lips curled, barely visible.

The meeting had yet to begin.

But Kael had already made his presence known.

**End of Chapter 97**

**Chapter 98: A Name That Burns the Heavens**

The ancestral hall of the Dran family had never been this quiet—not in decades.

Kael stood before the family heads, his figure lit by soft sunlight from the high windows, his shadow long against the polished wood floor.

Grand General **Kenshiro Dran** narrowed his eyes, voice like a blade across stone.

**“State your reason for entering the Dran household. And speak clearly, boy.”**

Kael began, “I came at the request of someone your family owes. Elise Dran.”

Before he could continue, **Takeshi** raised his voice, calmly:  
**“I have taken him under my training. He’s already begun learning—”**

**“Shut your mouth, Takeshi.”**  
Kenshiro’s rebuke rang out, sharp and commanding.

But Takeshi didn’t flinch. He simply lowered his gaze and fell silent.

Kenshiro turned his steel gaze back to Kael.

**“Why did Elise send you here? What do you want?”**

Kael met the man’s gaze without hesitation.  
**“She said this family owed her a favor. That I’d find answers here. About the Ancients. About myself.”**

The room stirred faintly at the mention of the Ancients.

**Lady Ayame** spoke next, voice calm but precise.  
**“Your parents? Who were they?”**

Kael’s expression softened, just slightly.  
**“Ardyn Mikhail and Sora Ardyn. Both were researchers. Geneticists focused on monster mutations. They… they passed during the early stages of the Breakout.”**

**“Then you are an orphan.”**  
**Uncle Shun** adjusted his glasses, ever the tactician.  
**“What of your goal? Do you seek status through Elise’s name?”**

**“No,”** Kael replied coldly. **“My goal is survival. And to protect those who cannot protect themselves. Elise just… showed me a path when I was lost.”**

**Masaru Genji**, the aunt’s husband, tilted his head.  
**“And what path do you walk now?”**

Kael's eyes glinted. **“The one she showed me. The one that leads beyond fear, beyond this age of monsters.”**

**Aunt Reika** tapped a finger on the table.  
**“Elise. That cursed girl. You associate freely with someone whose existence brought this family shame?”**

The word *shame* clanged like a bell. Kael said nothing.

And then—

**Kenshiro’s voice dropped, low and heavy.**  
**“Elise. The girl with the omen. When she was born, birds died mid-flight. When she first cried, the monster alarm sounded across Tokyo. She brought misfortune wherever she went. Her presence… fractured this family. What is she to you, truly?”**

Kael clenched his fists. **“She is—”**

But before he could speak, **Kaito Genji**, the twin son of Reika, stepped forward with a smug grin and venom in his tone.

**“She’s a cursed waste of blood. A girl who ran away because she couldn’t handle her burden. She doesn’t deserve the Dran name. She doesn’t deserve to live.”**

The words crashed through the room like a thunderclap.

Silence.

Seiji rose to his feet. Takeshi’s hand gripped the hilt of his spear.

But they never got the chance to act.

Because—

**A *primal* aura detonated from Kael’s body.**

Like a roaring beast breaking free from centuries of chains.

The air thickened. Even Kenshiro’s hardened expression twitched. Ayame’s teacup cracked in her hand. Reika gasped.

Takeshi and Seiji, who had trained him… had *sparred* with him… felt their own backs dampen with cold sweat.

Kael’s expression was no longer calm.

**It was wrath. Unbound. Elemental.**

In the blink of an eye, his **Stonefang Spear** materialized and was now an inch from Kaito’s throat.

The tip glowed faintly—fire and frost spiraling across the shaft in chaotic harmony.

**Cherry**, beside him, released a storm-charged *growl*, lightning flickering through her fur.  
**Kitsune** stood by his other side, blue and crimson flames whispering across her tails, distorting the air with intense pressure.

Even the elite 9.6–9.9 star warriors around the room staggered back.

Kael’s voice was ice.  
**“If you ever speak another word about Elise—**  
**—you will die here. And not a single piece of your body will remain to bury.”**

Kaito's breath caught in his throat, paralyzed by the sheer force pressing down on him.

Kael slowly turned his head toward Kenshiro and Ayame, eyes glowing faintly.  
**“I won’t ask what you did to Elise. Or why she had to leave this place. But if anyone here dares to speak her name with disgrace again… I will wipe this entire bloodline off the earth.”**

There was no bluff. No uncertainty.

Only truth.

**The room was suffocating under the pressure.**

Even Seiji, ever the composed one, felt his knees tense.

This… *this* was the true Kael. The one Elise had seen. Not a warrior. Not a survivor.

A **force**.

Without warning, Kael lifted his foot—and *slammed* it into Kaito’s chest.

The sound was thunder.

Kaito's body *exploded* backwards, tearing through three thick wooden walls and crashing somewhere deep in the hallway beyond, unconscious and bleeding.

Kael returned to the center of the hall, lowering his spear.

**“I came for one reason. To reclaim the favor owed to Elise Dran. That’s all. Don't mistake my presence here as submission.”**

Silence.

Only the faint, ragged breathing of the warriors around him could be heard.

Kenshiro sat frozen, unmoving. Takeshi lowered his gaze—*now it all made sense*.  
Elise… had found a storm to stand beside her.

And Seiji, lips barely parted, understood:

**“So this… this is why she chose him.”**

Kael stood alone. Unshaken.

**The boy who had entered their home… was the one destined to break the chains of the old world.**

**End of Chapter 98**

**Chapter 99: The Banyan That Watches the World**

The hall, which moments ago had been a den of whispers, pressure, and pride, now lay cloaked in utter silence.

Kael stood amidst the shattered decor and faint traces of his unleashed aura. Even the strongest warriors of the Dran family—men and women revered across the cities—did not dare to speak first.

**Kenshiro Dran**, the unshaken pillar of the household, narrowed his eyes at Kael.

He did not rise. He did not threaten.  
Instead, he *nodded*—slowly, solemnly.

**“We… accept your presence, Kael Ardyn.”**

A storm passed in his voice, but so did an unfamiliar note of reverence.

**Ayame Dran**—who had remained silent since Kael’s outburst—adjusted the collar of her robe and exhaled gently.  
**“Perhaps Elise was not cursed… but chosen.”**

**Reika**, though prideful and stubborn, was forced to lower her gaze. **Masaru** offered a small bow in acknowledgment.

**Shun**, ever a scholar, muttered to himself:  
**“A singularity… perhaps he is the anomaly Elise once hinted at…”**

**Riku**, though rigid, gave a curt nod of approval.  
**The remaining twin**, brother of the now unconscious Kaito, said nothing—his pride crushed, his body frozen.

Only **Seiji** smiled. “Took them long enough.”

And **Takeshi**, arms folded, said nothing at all. But in his eyes: *acceptance*—and something warmer.

**Days Passed. Then Weeks. Then Months.**

Kael’s training resumed under Takeshi, but now there was *no doubt* in their bond. The harsh drills continued, the routines grew more brutal—yet now, Kael wasn’t a guest. He was an **heir to the blade Elise forged**, and the only *outsider* ever fully accepted into the inner circle of the Dran technique.

By the second month’s end, Kael could face Takeshi for nearly an hour without yielding.  
By the third, he was not just reacting—he was adapting.

In between brutal training and silent meals, Kael sat with **Kenshiro** and **Ayame**, digging through what little records the Dran family still held on ancient beings and pre-collapse myths.

It was in one such quiet afternoon that Kael finally asked the question that had haunted him since that fateful encounter:

**“Have you ever heard of an Ancient Beast Tree?”**

Kenshiro blinked. “An Ancient beast Tree?”

Kael nodded. **“It spoke. It was sentient. It said the beasts didn’t awaken because of us… but *for* us. That we were catalysts, not causes. It said… a cosmic threat is coming. Something not from this world.”**

The veteran general looked shaken for the first time in decades.

Ayame, now listening closely, set aside her pen.

Kenshiro spoke slowly, as though recalling fragments of a myth.  
**“There is only one such Tree spoken of in legend. The Banyan Eternal Tree.”**

**“It lives?”** Kael asked, voice quiet.

Kenshiro's voice trembled faintly.  
**“No one knows. The legend says that when humanity was still young—this tree took root. It outlived every kingdom, and every war. It *watches*..”**

Kael closed his eyes. The memory of the massive, vine-wrapped colossus burned into his mind—the words it spoke, the deep, ancient sorrow in its voice.

**“It said I was chosen. That I’m part of the evolution needed to protect the world.”**

Kenshiro, for once, had no words.

Ayame whispered, **“ It was fate that brought him here.”**

Kenshiro stood slowly and walked to the window, watching the horizon.

**“All these years we’ve trained warriors to fight monsters… but never did we imagine the war we truly prepared for was not one of beasts, but of existence.”**

Kael stood as well, quiet but unyielding.

**“Whether it’s fate, mutation, or madness… I’ll be ready.”**

He turned, his cloak brushing the marble floor as he left the chamber.

The door clicked softly behind him.

And Kenshiro Dran, war-hardened general and cynic of all things mystical, remained frozen—staring at the golden sky beyond the walls of the Dran estate.

**“The boy isn’t here to change the world,”** he murmured to himself.  
**“He *is* the world’s change.”**

**End of Chapter 99**

**Chapter 100: The Inheritors of Flame and Void**  
*End of Arc II*

The final week at the Dran estate was unlike anything Kael had endured before.

No longer treated as a guest or an outsider, Kael was now *forged*. His training under **Takeshi** continued as brutal as ever—but now it was matched, and elevated, by the cold precision and encyclopedic knowledge of **General Kenshiro Dran**.

Where Takeshi’s strikes were fierce, rooted in instinct and aggression, Kenshiro’s movements were mathematical—*exact*. Their joint training pushed Kael beyond the threshold of raw talent.

Each lesson etched deeper understanding into his body and soul.

He learned to *breathe* with the spear.  
To *see* with silence.  
To *feel* the shift of wind across an enemy’s skin.

He had stepped into **Level 4 Spear Mastery**—an elite class of control and perception where even the slightest twitch in his opponent's muscles telegraphed intentions.  
And with Kenshiro’s teachings on ambient presence and battlefield flow, Kael unlocked **Level 1 Spiritual Perception**—a nascent awareness of energy, movement, and malice itself.

By the end of the seventh day, Kael stood victorious over both Kenshiro and Takeshi in a dual spar.

Not by raw power, but through timing, angle, and overwhelming **technique**.

The two warriors watched the young man stand over them, panting and bruised—but grinning.

**Kenshiro nodded. “You’re ready.”**

The next morning, Kael prepared to depart the estate. Dressed in simple black attire with his spear strapped to his back, he stepped into the central courtyard.

But he was not alone.

**“Going somewhere?”**

**Seiji** stood waiting with his arms folded, wearing a loose training jacket and that same half-smile Kael had seen since day one. But there was fire behind it now—unfiltered, genuine fire.

**“I want to test you. One final time. As warriors.”**

Kael nodded silently.

The challenge had been made.

**The Duel – Kael vs Seiji Dran**

The training hall cleared within minutes.  
Only a handful of spectators remained: **Takeshi**, **Kenshiro**, and a few quiet maids watching from the edges.

The two young men stood twenty paces apart.

Kael’s aura was calm, coiled like a dragon at rest. 10.5★ in raw power—controlled, compressed, and sharpened by mastery.

Seiji’s presence was monumental. A true 13.5★, honed by years of brutal experience. His domain shimmered subtly—*space itself seemed to bend* faintly around him.

**“No holding back,”** Seiji warned.  
**“Don’t think you’re fighting a friend.”**

Kael spun his spear once and entered a low stance. **“I never do.”**

**BOOM.**

The hall exploded with energy as both clashed at once.

Kael launched forward with “**Rowing the Spear Against the Waves**,” an advanced technique drawn from Takeshi’s style—but with his own twist. Seiji warped left with a blink of spatial distortion, appearing directly above Kael with his blade drawn—**“Void Step.”**

Kael countered with ice—*exploding in a burst to shield his back*—and reversed the grip of his spear, spinning and jabbing upward. Seiji folded space around himself, shifting slightly out of reality and avoiding the strike.

Kael’s **fire** burned around his feet, sending shockwaves across the ruined floor.

Seiji grinned. **“Good. Faster than before.”**

\*\*Snap—\*\*Seiji clenched his fist.

The entire hall warped.

Kael’s body was pulled in every direction as *gravity shifted erratically*, forcing him to react instinctively. He launched fire through his legs to push against the warped gravity, then carved a thin line of ice along the ground.

The moment Seiji stepped forward, his foot froze briefly—and that hesitation was all Kael needed.

With a grunt, Kael *vanished*, appearing in front of Seiji mid-air—his spear glowing faintly with **unseen lightning**, just enough to *sting* Seiji’s reflex.

No one noticed. Not even Seiji.

Their weapons clashed again.

**Clang! Clang! Boom!**  
The entire building rattled with every collision. Columns cracked. Floors broke. The ceiling warped.

Seiji summoned **spatial blades**—fractures of reality condensed into honed edges. Kael weaved through them with spiritual precision, each dodge *almost instinctual*, guided by his newborn perception.

Minutes turned to an hour.

Neither gave way.

Kael’s eyes were alight with passion. *This is what he had trained for.*  
Seiji’s blade blurred, space folding with each swing. *This was no longer just a spar—it was a dance between fate and potential.*

Their final clash shook the core of the Dran estate.

Kael surged with fire, ice, and a final hidden flicker of **lightning** in his spear as he charged. Seiji opened a rift of warped space to redirect the blow—

**BOOM!!!**

Dust erupted. Stones shattered. The roof caved in.

And when the storm settled…

Both men stood, breathing heavily, bruised and scorched. Seiji’s jacket was burned open, and Kael’s arm was trembling.

They both **collapsed** to one knee at the same time.

**A draw.**

Takeshi, silent until now, finally spoke.

**“He matched Seiji…”**

Kenshiro folded his arms, closing his eyes.

**“The future no longer belongs to us. We trained them… but they will carry the world forward.”**

Kael, lying on his back now, looked up at the cracked ceiling.

And smiled.

He had come seeking answers. Seeking strength.  
What he found was **purpose**.

**End of Chapter 100**  
**End of Arc II: "The Forging of Flame"**

**Chapter 101 – A Moment of Light**

The sun filtered gently through the crystalline dome of **Tokyo Remnant City**, casting soft halos over the paved avenues and glowing tech-lines that traced the underlayer of every building. For once, **Kael Ardyn** wasn’t being hunted, trained, or burdened with responsibility. His Stonefang Spear remained slung behind him, but today it was more ornament than necessity.

It was a strange feeling—*peace*.

“According to local environmental sensors, today has an 89% chance of being ‘pleasant.’”  
**Iris’s** voice chimed from the slim band around Kael’s wrist. “Which, by the way, is 72% higher than your average day.”

Kael chuckled under his breath, strolling down a tree-lined promenade near **District 3’s cultural park**. “Thanks, Iris. I think I can figure that out from the sunshine and laughter.”

“Noted. But I’m practicing my small talk algorithms. I’ve even installed a ‘dad jokes’ module. Would you like to hear one?”

Kael smiled. “Later.”

Children darted through the park ahead, their high-energy sneakers flashing blue trails. Drones zipped overhead, monitoring but never intruding. In the center plaza, a massive bronze statue of an unknown warrior stood with a broken sword, moss carefully allowed to grow along the hilt—proof that even in a city of metal and machines, nature still had roots.

Kael stepped onto a grassy slope and took a seat under a synthetic cherry blossom tree. To his surprise, the petals were real. Grown by the **Illena family’s eco-division**, Iris informed him.

“You’re really relaxing,” Iris said, quieter now, almost… gentle.

Kael tilted his head back. “I think I need this. After Fenrath, the tigers, the training, everything with Takeshi and Kenshiro… I forgot what quiet sounded like.”

A small pair of shoes scuffed near him. Kael opened one eye to find a child, maybe seven years old, looking up at him. The boy wore a red scarf and held a wooden sword.

“Hey, mister! Are you a soldier?” the boy asked, wide-eyed.

Kael smiled, sitting up a little. “Something like that.”

“You have a really big spear,” the boy said. “Are you famous?”

“Not really. Just tired.”

The child nodded solemnly. “You look like my dad did after he fought off a flame wolf last month. He smelled like smoke for *days*.”

Kael chuckled. “Well, tell your dad he’s a brave man.”

“I will!” the boy grinned. “Wanna play tag?”

“I—” Kael started to protest, but then paused. Kitsune’s face came to mind. So did Cherry’s. And Elise’s. All the people and creatures he fought for.

“...Sure. Just for a bit.”

The boy squealed and ran off, tagging two more kids as “it.” They whooped and scattered. Kael jogged after them slowly, laughing when they dove into cover behind benches and bushes. He tagged one, was tagged himself, and before long found himself chasing and laughing with a dozen children. For a moment, he wasn’t the 10.5★ weapon of war. He was just **Kael**—the boy who used to dream of safety.

From a bench nearby, a middle-aged woman in a tan dress watched with folded arms and a knowing smile.

“Didn’t think I’d see the day a stranger with a mountain-slayer’s aura joined my son’s tag game,” she said warmly as Kael caught his breath.

Kael wiped his brow. “He invited me. Couldn’t say no.”

“You’ve been through a lot,” she added. “I can see it in your shoulders. Thank you—for fighting so the rest of us can have moments like these.”

Kael’s throat tightened. He looked back at the playing kids. “You’re welcome.”

Iris murmured softly, “Your heartbeat just slowed by 6 BPM. Emotional equilibrium improving. This… is good for you.”

“You’re starting to sound like Cherry,” Kael replied under his breath.

“She’s growing on me.”

Kael laughed again. A real laugh.

Later in the day, he wandered through the open-air **Night Market District**, where food stalls and augmented performances blended. A man with glowing drumsticks pounded rhythm into mid-air; each strike lit a symbol in fire or ice, forming temporary murals. Vendors sold grilled meat from mutated elk, fruit slushes from cultivated tree-farms, and even pastries shaped like famous warriors—Kael saw a cookie shaped like Seiji’s silhouette and snorted.

“You thinking of asking for royalties?” Iris quipped.

“Nah. He’d probably just spar me again in revenge.”

He stopped at a stall selling **hand-carved pendants**, each one etched with different beast symbols.

The vendor, an old woman with sharp eyes and a voice like sandpaper, looked up at him. “You’ve got the face of someone who lost too many people.”

Kael blinked. “That obvious?”

“Only to someone who’s seen the same look in the mirror. Pick one. First one that speaks to you.”

Kael reached slowly. His hand stopped over a small pendant carved like a fox—its tails curled like flame.

“I’ll take this one.”

“Your companion?” she asked, wrapping it in cloth.

“She saved my life.”

“That kind always does,” the woman said. “Tell her thank you every now and then. Even if they act like they don’t need to hear it.”

As the artificial dusk settled, Tokyo’s sky dimmed to a soft lavender glow. Kael stood on a balcony overlooking the city’s shimmering towers. From this height, the world looked calm. Children still played below. Cherry curled beside him in her shadowform, purring softly. Kitsune slept nearby, her tails faintly glowing blue.

Kael exhaled, resting against the railing.

“Iris,” he said, “save this day to memory. All of it.”

“I already have,” she replied. “Would you like it labeled as… ‘Happiness?’”

He smiled.

“Yeah. Label it that.”

**Chapter 102 – The Gathering Storm**

Kael stood at the southern gate of **Tokyo Remnant City**, morning mist curling around his boots as the sunlight filtered through fragmented clouds. The soft laughter of yesterday’s children still echoed in his thoughts. But today… the air felt heavier. The world had shifted again.

He looked back once—Cherry and Kitsune were waiting near the transit hub, watching curiously. They knew this wasn’t a farewell, but a pause. There was one more thing Kael needed to do before leaving.

“Iris,” Kael said softly, “Take us to **Central Division Headquarters**. I want to see Seiji one more time.”

“Coordinates locked. By foot, estimated time: 12 minutes. Shall I cue a dramatic theme?”

Kael snorted. “Maybe later.”

The headquarters of the Central Division was a sleek obsidian tower, reinforced with layered armor glass and adaptive barrier plating. Despite its imposing appearance, the two soldiers standing at the gate offered Kael respectful nods as he approached.

“Kael Ardyn,” one said. “Welcome back, sir. Commander Dran is in a meeting at the top floor.”

“You can proceed freely,” added the other. “You're one of the 18. No one here would stop you.”

Kael nodded in appreciation. “Thanks.”

He walked through the atrium where digital maps and holograms blinked overhead—displays of threat zones, energy signatures, and squad deployments. Officers moved with purpose, but many paused to glance his way, nodding or murmuring in respect.

At the elevator, just as he reached the 30th floor, a familiar voice called out sharply:

“Kael?”

He turned to see **Captain Rei Nakamura**—short-cut hair tucked beneath her cap, a sidearm at her hip, and clear, intelligent eyes narrowed slightly in surprise. She stepped forward quickly.

“You’re here earlier than I thought,” she said, giving a small smile. “Seiji’s in a meeting with the commanders of the four divisions. It’s a closed session.”

Kael nodded. “I can wait.”

Rei studied him for a moment, then gestured to a nearby bench. “Come on. I’ll keep you company.”

They sat in a quiet waiting hall with wide windows overlooking Tokyo’s inner sectors. Drones shimmered in the air like silent birds. For a time, neither spoke.

“So,” Kael eventually said, “who are the current division commanders?”

Rei glanced at him, surprised again—but this time pleasantly. “Curious about the others?”

“I like to know who’s leading the country before it starts collapsing again.”

She smirked, then pulled out her tablet and began listing them.

“Well, aside from Seiji and Kaoru Mizuchi—you probably know her as *The Tempest Blade*—the other three commanders are all competent, though none have broken 10★ yet.”

She showed him the list:

* **Kaoru Mizuchi** – *10.4★*, Wind-enhanced swordsmanship, **Western Division**, based in **Osaka**. “Only one besides Seiji in the 10★ range. Strong, precise. She’s known for cutting down a 10★ earth wyrm solo last year.”
* **Commander Riku Tanabe** – *9.2★*, **Northern Division**. “Firm, strategic, no nonsense.”
* **Commander Ayame Sudo** – *8.9★*, **Eastern Division**. “She specializes in mobility and fast recon squads.”
* **Commander Hiroshi Kanda** – *9.1★*, **Southern Division**. “He’s a defense-oriented leader. Favors bulk and fortified positions.”

“All respected, all experienced. But no awakened abilities like you or Kaoru,” Rei added.

Kael’s brow furrowed. “Only two people in Japan with awakened powers above 10★... Seiji must be under pressure.”

As if summoned by those words, the main chamber doors hissed open. **Seiji Dran** emerged.

His shoulders were tense, his sharp features clouded with a heavy frown. For a moment, he didn’t even notice Kael or Rei. His thoughts seemed buried beneath layers of weight.

“Seiji?” Rei stood. “What happened in there?”

Seiji paused, finally looking up. His eyes flickered with exhaustion.

“Kael. Rei. You two should hear this.”

They moved to a private conference room. Seiji leaned against the table, arms crossed tightly. A beat of silence passed.

“A monster tide is forming in the northeast,” he said at last. “One bigger than any we’ve seen.”

Kael straightened, the peaceful warmth of yesterday evaporating. “How bad?”

Seiji’s jaw clenched. “Worse than the last three combined. According to advanced satellite sweeps, the tide will hit the **northeastern corridor**—that includes both the **Northern** and **Eastern** regions.”

Rei’s brow furrowed. “How many zones are in danger?”

“Out of the twenty reserve zones in those two regions,” Seiji said grimly, “at least **fifteen** will be affected.”

Kael’s hand closed into a fist. “What kind of monsters?”

Seiji took a deep breath. “The wave includes beasts ranging from **8★ all the way up to 16 or 17★.**”

Rei’s eyes widened. “Seventeen?! That’s—”

“—beyond anything we’ve officially recorded.” Seiji’s voice dropped low. “Some of the senior analysts believe there’s something bigger behind this. A central monster, maybe even a higher-level creature, is leading them. That kind of coordination is not natural.”

Kael was silent for a long moment.

Seiji continued, “We’ve already agreed. The three unaffected divisions—Central, Western, and Southern—are sending **80% of their troops** north and east. If this tide breaks our lines… it could cascade into the heartland.”

Rei whispered, “If that happens, the Remnant Cities won’t hold.”

Seiji looked at Kael then, his voice quiet—no longer the commander, just a man reaching out to a friend.

“I know you just returned. And I hate asking this, Kael... But I need your help.”

His eyes held no pride—only the deep, weary sincerity of someone standing at the edge of the abyss.

Kael stood slowly. The air between them hung heavy with unspoken understanding. War was returning.

“You have it,” Kael said. “Wherever I’m needed, I’ll go.”

**End of Chapter 102**

**Chapter 103 – March of the Six Divisions**

Kael stood silently beside Captain Rei Nakamura on the rooftop command platform of the **Central Division Headquarters**, high above the heart of Tokyo Remnant City. A cold breeze tugged at his coat, but it wasn’t the wind that made his breath feel heavy—it was the quiet before the storm.

Before him, **Seiji Dran** stood tall, expression carved from granite, as he spoke into the central military command relay system—a reinforced communications device linked to every speaker, terminal, and HUD across the city’s defense grid.

“All personnel of Tokyo Remnant City,” Seiji’s voice echoed, calm but absolute. “This is Commander Seiji Dran. Effective immediately, **Code Black Protocol** is in effect. All forces are to mobilize. You have **fifteen minutes** to assemble at your designated rally points.”

Kael watched the transformation from above.

Within moments, alarms rang through every district. Transport rails flickered to life, drones deployed, and mobilization markers appeared on every street corner. The city’s heartbeat shifted—from the rhythm of cautious survival to the thundering pulse of military urgency.

In under fifteen minutes, the **entire Tokyo Remnant Force—60,000 soldiers**—stood assembled in the massive staging fields to the south of the city. Their armor shimmered in silver-gray hues, enhanced visors glowing faintly, weapons at the ready.

Each of them was no ordinary soldier. They were Japan’s elite—each one between **7.0★ and 8.9★**, with higher officers nearing **9★**. Together, they were a wall of trained might against a coming wave of destruction.

From a raised platform overlooking the fields, Seiji’s voice rose again—this time direct, solemn.

“Soldiers of Tokyo,” he began, “what we face now is not just another beast incursion. It is a **tide**, unlike any we have seen before. A monstrous wave is forming in the northeast, threatening both the **Northern** and **Eastern regions**. Out of 20 critical reserve zones… **15 may fall**.”

A low ripple passed through the formation—shudders, clenched jaws, the silent dread of hearing numbers too large to ignore.

Seiji didn’t flinch.

“Some of these monsters reach **16 to 17★** in power. According to Central Intelligence, a higher entity may be leading them. This is not just a migration. This is war.”

Silence fell, thick and absolute.

Then, Seiji raised his right arm and began dividing the troops.

“We will split into **six Divisions** of **10,000 soldiers** each.”

* **Each Division** will be commanded by a **9.9★ General**.
* **Each Division** is divided into **10 Battalions** of **1,000**, led by **9.5★ Commanders**.
* **Each Battalion** consists of **10 Companies** of **100 soldiers**, each under a **9.0★ Officer**.

“These leaders will be your anchors. You will operate in precision—no chaos, no waste. Follow your command structure.”

Beside Seiji stood a woman with ethereal silver eyes, clad in dark cobalt robes—a strange contrast to the military formalities.

**Faye Illena – “The Mind Oracle”**.

She nodded silently, her presence sending a chill through the air. The air shimmered faintly around her head, her psychic pressure barely held in check.

* **Power**: 12.0★
* **Affinity**: **Psychic Seer, Memory Manipulation**
* **Position**: **Lieutenant General**, Central Intelligence and Espionage
* **Affiliation**: Illena family—one of Japan’s Four Great Houses

Faye stood as the second in command, the icy mind that guided the military’s information web. She spoke only once, her voice resonating not just through the speakers—but directly into the minds of those assembled:

**“You will hold the line, or you will not return.”**

Kael felt a psychic brush pass through his mind—gentle, assessing—then it withdrew. He resisted the urge to shiver.

Behind Faye and Seiji, stood a row of **7 Major Generals and 20 Colonels**, each boasting powers between **9.5★ and 9.9★**. They stepped forward, saluting as each Division's crest was projected into the air above them. Lights flared, and the segregation began.

Soldiers marched in coordinated waves, following markers and flags. Trucks rumbled to life. APCs aligned into columns. Within twenty minutes, the entire force was split into six organized Divisions.

And above it all, Kael stood apart—unchained, unaffiliated.

He wasn’t part of any Division. He was something else entirely.

A singular blade… alongside two of the deadliest beasts Japan had ever seen.

Cherry stood beside him, tail swishing. Kitsune, calm and composed, stared ahead with eyes burning blue and red.

Kael’s gaze drifted to the fourth Division, where a familiar voice called his name.

He turned, surprised—and then smiled.

Walking toward him were **Victor**, **Maya**, **David**, **Ethan**, **Emily**, and **Commander Darius**—along with **Darius’ three daughters**, the triplets, marching in perfect sync. Each wore modified armor marked by their squad.

Victor, staff slung on his back, gave Kael a knowing nod. Maya, eyes fierce, carried twin blades that shimmered with condensed mist. David’s grin was cocky as ever, and Ethan gave a casual salute.

Even **Emily**, now in proper combat gear, looked resolute. There was a subtle glow around her—8★ and rising.

Maya and Victor had both climbed near **8.7★**, their presences no longer mere survivors—but warriors worthy of the battlefield.

The triplets stood quietly behind Darius, eerie in their synchronicity. Rumor had it they were 8.5★, each specializing in a different weapon.

Kael approached them.

“So,” he said, his voice low but warm, “you’re all still charging into danger, huh?”

Victor chuckled. “We figured if the apocalypse comes again, we might as well face it together.”

Emily beamed. “I wanna fight beside you, Kael!”

He chuckled. “You’ll do more than that, I’m sure.”

As the horns of deployment echoed across the field, Kael stood with them a moment longer—his past and his present converging in a sea of warriors.

The war was coming.

But this time… they would meet it head-on.

**Chapter 104 – The Path of Power**

The afternoon light filtered through the gray skies as Kael stood among his old companions, a slight wind rustling the edge of his coat. After the massive troop segregation, he found a moment of peace to reunite with familiar faces.

“Where’s Elise?” Kael finally asked, a hint of concern breaking through his usual calm.

Victor’s expression darkened slightly. Maya spoke first, her voice calm yet heavy. “She left… not long after you departed for your training. Said she couldn’t afford to fall behind. Elise believed she needed to break through—on her own terms.”

Victor nodded. “She’s out there somewhere. We haven’t heard from her since.”

A flicker of worry passed through Kael’s mind. Elise wasn’t just a capable fighter—she was the former vice commander under Darius and had mastered the spear to a formidable degree. Yet, the silence gnawed at him. Still, he forced himself to trust her strength. She wouldn’t fall so easily.

As the final banners were hoisted and the signal lights blinked green across the control lines, the time came. With Seiji and Rei leading the command center, the massive army began to march. The once-bustling remnants of Tokyo slowly emptied as **210,000 soldiers**, including reinforcements from the nine remaining Central Region reserve zones, moved out.

The combined army was massive—disciplined and tightly structured. The reinforcements included over **150,000 troops** of 6★ to 8★ power. Among them, a few rare elites neared the 9.3★ threshold. Now, unified under Seiji’s command, they were one of the most powerful forces Japan had fielded in decades.

Yet Kael knew it wasn’t enough.

A potential 17★ threat loomed ahead—an existence beyond comprehension. His current 10.5★ power, even with Level 4 Spear Mastery and Level 1 Spiritual Perception, wouldn't be enough.

And so, Kael made his decision.

With a few words to Seiji and a silent nod to Cherry and Kitsune, he left the main force and disappeared into the beast-infested regions. His targets: nothing less than the apex predators of this age.

The next ten days were a storm of violence.

Kael tore through monster territories with relentless efficiency, targeting mutated beasts ranging from **10★ to 14★**. Cherry and Kitsune, keeping pace beside him, unleashed their own terrifying abilities. Few monsters lasted longer than minutes against the trio.

Kael’s mastery of the spear had reached a point where technique outweighed brute power. His spiritual perception warned him of danger before it struck, and his instincts flowed in harmony with his weapon.

As he consumed the cores and flesh of higher-tier beasts, his strength surged. On the **tenth day**, Kael stepped into **13.5★** power. Cherry and Kitsune, having devoured the essence of countless powerful monsters, followed closely—also rising to **13.5★** each.

Back with the marching army, the higher officials followed a similar method. Elite officers hunted mutated monsters and distributed the nourishing flesh to the soldiers.

The result was staggering.

* **All troops** saw average gains from **7–8.9★ to 8–9.5★**.
* **Higher officers** shattered bottlenecks.
  + **7 Major Generals** and **20 Colonels** broke into the 10★ tier (ranging from 10.0 to 10.2★).
  + **11 elite personnel** from the nine reserve zones also achieved 10★ power.
* **Faye Illena**, the Mind Oracle, rose to **13.0★**, her psychic resonance stretching miles during reconnaissance sweeps.
* **Seiji Dran**, now fully in command, also reached **13.5★**.

Together, they formed the sharpest spear Japan had ever pointed at the unknown.

On the **twelfth day**, Kael rejoined the army. The soldiers, though exhausted, carried a hardened glint in their eyes—the product of two weeks of grueling preparation and monstrous opposition.

The chill in the air thickened as the **Northeastern Region** came into view. Jagged cliffs framed the horizon, and mutated flora dotted the ruined plains ahead. As they crossed into the contested zone, remnants of the **North and East Divisions** were already waiting.

The stationed troops lined up, offering salutes and cheers as the Central Force arrived.

Kael stepped forward, his gaze lifting toward the dark clouds looming over the battlefront.

The war had yet to begin—but now, humanity had teeth.

**End of Chapter 104**

**Chapter 105 – Convergence of Titans**

The winds of the northeast howled like beasts beyond the ridgeline. As the Central Division’s massive force crossed into the fortified zone, three imposing figures stood atop the defensive overlook, waiting with stern expressions and unwavering auras.

**Borran Kazume**, clad in reinforced alloy gear that shimmered with a sickly green hue, gave a wide grin. Nicknamed **“The Nuclear Howl,”** his mere presence felt volatile—like standing beside a sleeping warhead.

Beside him stood **Shiori Ayame**, the legendary **“Crimson Pulse.”** With long hair braided tight and her hands bandaged from overuse of her blood-channeling arts, she radiated a calm, medic’s serenity veiling a berserker’s power.

The third, silent and sharp as steel, was **Rein Yukihara**, bearing the title **“Whiteflame Blade.”** Draped in a pristine, pale battle cloak, the holy fire within her flickered softly behind her cold gaze.

All three were among the first 18 warriors in Japan’s new era to breach the mythical 10★ barrier. Now, they each stood at the 12★ threshold—veterans honed by frost, flame, and fury.

They greeted **Seiji Dran**, proud representative of the Dran martial lineage, and **Faye Illena**, the quiet psychic shield of the Central Forces. Behind them marched Kael, Cherry, Kitsune, Rei, and the collective might of **210,000 soldiers**, forming the spearhead of Japan’s resistance.

The soldiers were soon ushered to rest quarters in regimented blocks, while the commanding personnel—**7 Major Generals**, **20 Colonels**, **11 elites from reserve zones**, along with Seiji, Faye, Rei, and Kael—were led to a heavily guarded compound carved into the reinforced cliffsides.

At the heart of it was a circular **strategic war hall**, large enough to house over sixty people, yet dense with pressure.

The moment the doors opened, Kael stepped into **chaos.**

The air buzzed with raised voices and contradicting commands. Digital holo-maps projected in every direction, some flickering between beast formations and terrain scans, others overloaded with casualty predictions and field simulations.

“—We should strike preemptively before they gather mass! Delay the tide!”

“No! Defensive entrenchment will buy more time to evacuate the outlying settlements!”

“Has anyone confirmed the 16★ anomaly's movement pattern? We're blind in quadrant F!”

“You’re blind because your unit lost three drones in under five minutes, Genbei!”

Each voice belonged to a titan.

* **Mirei Shadowcrest**, from the fabled Shadowcrest family, lounged in a corner, her form flickering between shadows as her voice cut through the din like silk over blades.
* **Tsuro Genbei**, known as **“Voltage Fang,”** slammed a hand onto the table, sparks crackling up his arm.
* Rein and Shiori argued tactics at opposite ends, each advocating a different doctrine—purification strikes vs. medical surge reinforcement.
* Borran laughed loudly, slamming a radiation-hardened mug onto the console, mocking both strategies.

Over **forty 10★ and above powerhouses** from the Northern and Eastern divisions filled the space. The air shimmered faintly from the sheer spiritual and elemental energies being unconsciously released—lightning snaps, psychic pulses, flickers of fire and shadow—all clashing silently in the background.

Kael’s eyes narrowed as he stepped fully into the room, his presence unnoticed for now in the storm of opinions.

A war was coming—but here, in this hall, another kind of battle raged.

**End of Chapter 105**

**Chapter 106 – The Gathering Storm**

The chaos in the war hall simmered in a rising cacophony—until a thunderous voice echoed through the chamber like a whip crack.

**“SILENCE!”**

The air froze.

**Shiji Dran**, his crimson cloak fluttering from the force of his spiritual pressure, stood with fists clenched and a furious scowl on his face. “Is this what the elite of Japan’s remaining military forces look like? Bickering like schoolyard children? You shame the stars you’ve earned.”

His rebuke rang loud and absolute.

Even the most battle-hardened officers fell silent. A few dropped their gazes. Shiji’s glare swept across them, his eyes burning with fury and disappointment.

“Compose yourselves. We are not survivors anymore—we are the final bulwark.”

The commanders of both the Eastern and Northern Divisions soon added their voices.

**Commander Ayame Sudo** of the Eastern Division stepped forward, her sharp eyes slicing through the quiet. “Enough. You all know better.”

**Commander Riku Tanabe** of the Northern Division nodded, arms folded. “The time for prideful arguments is over. Now, we prepare.”

Only then did the gathered officers seem to notice the new arrivals—**Kael**, **Seiji**, **Faye**, **Rei**, and the **30 members of the Central Division** who had all achieved **10★ or higher**. Their presence carried weight, a quiet and composed contrast to the chaos from moments before.

All eyes now turned toward Kael, who stood calmly with **Cherry** perched on one shoulder, her golden fur gleaming faintly with latent lightning, and **Kitsune** coiled softly on the other side, her twin tails flickering between water and flame.

Kael gave a polite nod, eyes steady, absorbing the tension in the room like a sponge soaking stormwater.

Shiji stepped forward and addressed the Northern and Eastern commanders. “We’ve regrouped as planned. Please share the latest confirmed intelligence.”

Ayame Sudo activated the holo-display, her fingers dancing across the console. A massive swarm of red dots spread across a strategic map of the northeastern wilderness.

Her voice was calm—too calm.

“We’ve confirmed the presence of **over 1,000,000 beasts** ranging from **8★ to 9★** across all northern and eastern quadrants.”

The words hit like a wave.

A hush settled over the room.

She continued, tone colder now.

“Of those, **over 100,000 are 9–10★.**”

The silence deepened.

“Confirmed: **520 beasts at 10–11★**, **116 at 11–12★**, and **47 at 12–13★.**”

Her breath caught, just for a second.

“Twenty **13–14★** beasts have been recorded. And as for **14–15★**, we do not have an exact count. But over **10** have been **sighted.**”

Murmurs spread like wildfire.

Ayame didn’t stop.

“For **15–16★**, the number exceeds **five confirmed threats.**”

She looked up, face grim.

“And… one **17★ mutated beast** has been confirmed. Location uncertain.”

Now, the room was graveyard quiet.

Even among those who wielded star-breaking strength, the sheer scale stunned them.

“The higher-ranked beasts seem to resist all scanning attempts. We cannot pinpoint more than a few. And we suspect they may possess abilities interfering with satellite tracking.”

Some of the newly advanced 10★ elites visibly stiffened. A few even trembled.

The psychological weight was undeniable.

Then—

**“SO WHAT?”**

Shiji’s booming voice shattered the tension like a hammer through glass.

“We are humanity’s strongest! If they come in waves, we’ll *burn the tide dry*! You think your power was earned to cower now? Look around you—every person here has broken limits to stand in this room!”

He turned, locking eyes with Kael briefly, then facing the full crowd.

“We fight not because we are stronger. We fight because **we are the wall** that stands between these monsters and the rest of humanity. We don’t break. **We break *them*.**”

Cheers erupted. Sparks of determination lit in many eyes.

Then **Commander Riku Tanabe** spoke, cool and focused.

“Two **Heavy-Class Energy Cannons**—equipped with **Solar Fission Arrays**—are now positioned in Sector 12 and 17. They’re currently being charged. They can decimate even **15★ beasts** in a direct hit.”

The information caused another stir—but this time, of reassurance.

Faye, standing beside Shiji, leaned forward and started speaking with Seiji and the Eastern-Northern leadership in lowered tones.

“We’ll need overlapping formation plans across three zones, Sector 4 through 8. I recommend deploying the newly ascended elites on the flanks.”

“Agreed,” said Seiji, “And we’ll also need advanced suppression fields to isolate the higher-star beasts from mass movement patterns.”

“We can also establish a rapid-response strike team to deal with any breakout events,” added Faye. “Kael could lead it, if he agrees.”

Kael listened quietly from a corner, Cherry and Kitsune purring gently on his shoulders.

Everyone here already knew who he was.

**Kael Ardyn**—the first known **dual-element** 10★, now **13.5★**, with **monster-taming** abilities never before recorded. A living anomaly. A strategic trump card.

And soon, the tide would test them all.

**End of Chapter 106**

**Chapter 107 – “I’ll Take the Seven”**

The war council continued deep into the night. For over four hours, the top minds and most powerful warriors of the military alliance dissected, debated, and refined their strategies.

Formations were drawn and revised. Emergency protocols were layered into fallback contingencies. Elemental suppression zones, energy cannon firing angles, and aerial support timings were coordinated down to the second.

Despite the scale of the impending battle, everything remained cold and clinical.

**But the numbers never stopped biting.**

“We’ll need at least 48 high-tier suppression mages at the frontlines to delay any overlapping charge,” Riku Tanabe said, pointing at the northern boundary. “But we can’t stretch our elites too thin.”

Ayame Sudo nodded. “Southern and Western reinforcements will arrive in two days. Until then, we hold with what we have.”

Her eyes swept across the tactical readout.

“Combined, they’ll bring over **300,000 troops**, and more than **40 individuals above 10★**. They’ve confirmed it.”

Seiji leaned forward, face shadowed by fatigue. “That’ll bring our total elite count to **around 120**, including Central.”

Faye muttered under her breath, “And we’re facing **over 720 high-tier beasts**.”

That truth was never far from anyone’s mind.

The monster forces were nearly **six times larger** in high-end power. It didn’t matter how refined their tactics were—any mistake would bleed.

Yet they pressed on, planning every second like it would decide the war.

Then—

A quiet voice broke through the tactical murmuring.

**“What’s the composition of the first wave?”**

The room turned.

**Kael** stood at the edge of the table, arms folded. **Cherry and Kitsune** still sat on his shoulders, their eyes sharp and focused.

His tone wasn’t demanding—but the weight behind his question pulled every eye toward him.

Commander Riku answered, gesturing to the display.

“The first wave is expected to consist of over **150,000 beasts in the 8–9★** range. Backed by around **10,000 9–10★**.”

He hesitated slightly before continuing.

“Scans also show **30 beasts at 10–11★**, **15 at 11–12★**, and **7 at 12–13★** in this group.”

Kael’s eyes narrowed. “Their distance?”

Ayame took over, voice clipped.

“Approximately **30 miles**—that’s **around 48 kilometers**—north of our position. They’ve slowed due to their numbers, so they’re expected to arrive by **tomorrow morning.**”

Seiji added, “No 13–14★ monsters detected among them. Not yet.”

Silence returned like a blanket.

Kael’s gaze sharpened further. “And the second wave?”

Commander Ayame exhaled. “We… can’t pinpoint their position yet. But analysts estimate they’ll arrive **at least half a day** after the first wave. They’re likely holding formation beyond our current scan range.”

The silence that followed wasn’t from fear. It was anticipation. Everyone could feel it—Kael was building toward something.

Then he spoke again.

**“The seven beasts at 12–13★. Do we have confirmed data on their types and positions?”**

That drew startled glances. Seiji frowned. “We have general placement, yes. They’re scattered at the rear of the first wave. Most of them are partially mutated variants—one hydra-type, two armored insectoids, a flying predator, and three berserker-class beasts.”

Faye asked cautiously, “Why do you ask?”

Kael’s expression didn’t change.

His voice was calm. Absolute.

**“I’ll take care of all seven.”**

The entire room fell into stunned silence.

No one moved. Even the screens seemed to pause for a second.

Riku was the first to speak, slow and wary. “You mean… *you alone*?”

Kael didn’t blink.

**“Yes.”**

Faye, Seiji, Ayame—all watched him in silence. The commanders had all read the reports. They *knew* Kael wasn’t just a 10★—he had already ascended beyond 13★, with dual elements and two monstrous companions.

But taking on **seven 12–13★ beasts alone**?

That was another kind of declaration. One that only the truly absurd could make.

Cherry flicked her tail, a quiet spark lighting her fur.

Kitsune let out a soft hum, flames coiling faintly from her breath.

And Kael stood tall—unshaken.

In that moment, the silence wasn’t doubt. It was realization.

**The tide had come.**

And **Kael Ardyn** would meet it head-on.

**End of Chapter 107**

**Chapter 108 – “Lure and Lance”**

The room slowly settled after Kael’s declaration. No one dared question his resolve now—not after the way he had stood, unwavering, before the weight of the war.

Commander Ayame Sudo cleared her throat and brought up the updated interface. Seven markers pulsed on the digital map.

“We’ve just received refined data on the **seven 12–13★ beasts**,” she began. “Each has a distinct awakened ability and is currently separated by no more than 12 kilometers from each other—positioned in a staggered rear line, acting like anchors to the first wave.”

She clicked a button, and detailed profiles emerged one by one.

**1. Verdant Hydra – 12.8★**

* **Type**: Regeneration-based beast.
* **Awakened Ability**: “Verdant Rebirth” – capable of regenerating lost heads within seconds and releasing corrosive mist from each one.
* **Location**: 44.7km North, near a collapsed ridge.

**2. Thronespike Insectoid – 12.6★**

* **Type**: Armored behemoth insect-type.
* **Awakened Ability**: “Reflective Carapace” – absorbs elemental attacks and reflects partial energy.
* **Location**: 46.2km North-Northwest.

**3. Screaming Vulture King – 12.5★**

* **Type**: Flying predator, high mobility.
* **Awakened Ability**: “Piercing Shriek” – emits sonic attacks that bypass elemental defenses.
* **Location**: Circling airspace at 49.1km North.

**4. Emberhide Cerberus – 12.9★**

* **Type**: Beast-type, triple-headed, dual-fire elemental.
* **Awakened Ability**: “Ash Reign” – sustained AoE bombardment of incendiary energy.
* **Location**: 47.8km, west of the main advance.

**5. Gloomfang Devourer – 12.7★**

* **Type**: Shadow-mutation class.
* **Awakened Ability**: “Void Maw” – swallows small-scale abilities and physical weapons in short bursts.
* **Location**: Traveling under shallow earth, estimated 48.3km North.

**6. Spinal Basilisk – 12.6★**

* **Type**: Reptilian elite with venom affinity.
* **Awakened Ability**: “Petrifying Gaze” – slows cellular regeneration and movement in living targets.
* **Location**: 43.9km East of the northern warpath.

**7. Thunderhorn Tyrant – 13.0★**

* **Type**: Elephantoid beast, brute class.
* **Awakened Ability**: “Storm Pulse” – constant electromagnetic disruption and physical shockwaves.
* **Location**: Rear-center, 45.1km directly North.

Kael listened quietly, arms still folded, eyes locked on the profiles.

He gave a single nod. “That’s enough.”

Cherry twitched her ears, already visualizing the battlefield. Kitsune flicked her tails with a low pulse of flame and mist.

“We’ll split based on elemental counters. I’ll go after the Thunderhorn and Hydra myself. Kitsune will provide pressure to the Emberhide and Basilisk. Cherry can manage high mobility with the Vulture King and shadow variant.”

The commanders blinked, exchanging glances.

“You can coordinate that fast?” Riku asked.

Kael gave a faint smile. “**We communicate mentally**—psionic link. We always know where each other is. Range doesn’t matter anymore.”

The air thickened with awe once again.

Then Kael’s gaze turned practical.

“Is there any device capable of gathering multiple beasts into one location? Something with a wide-range attraction field?”

Seiji looked reluctant. “There is… but it’s not meant for combat usage. It’s a high-frequency resonance lure—originally developed to **draw monster aggression away** from civilians during evacuation.”

Faye added, “It only works for a short time, maybe 3–5 minutes at peak output, and it requires a manual trigger to avoid remote interference.”

Kael’s expression didn’t shift. “Manual?”

Riku answered gravely, “Yes. The operator has to be within 100 meters to activate it. Once it starts pulsing, it becomes a death sentence. **The user is sacrificed to stall the enemy.**”

Everyone grew tense again.

But Kael nodded. “I want one.”

Faye snapped her eyes to him. “You—?”

Kael raised a hand. “I’m not planning to die. But if the need arises to protect the line, **I can use it to draw away a large group of elites temporarily**. My mobility and regeneration allow me to survive even against a 14★—barely.”

He didn’t boast. He simply stated.

Then, calmly, Kael reached into his spatial storage.

With a soft metallic sound, he placed a glowing core on the table—radiating white-blue arcs.

**A 14★ beast core.**

Next, he laid out fragments of a massive bone shaft—gleaming with a hardened crystalline pattern.

“**Use this.**” His voice was quiet, but heavy. “I want a new spear forged. **Grade 3,** minimum. Balanced for reach and torque.”

The air went still.

None of them had seen a 14-star beast core in the open before. Let alone willingly handed over.

Riku exhaled. “We’ll contact the remnant forge-masters immediately.”

Seiji stared at Kael. “You’re truly going to face them all alone…”

Kael looked back at him, gaze calm and unwavering.

**“That’s what I’m here for.”**

**End of Chapter 108**

**Chapter 109 – “Resonance Before War”**

Three hours passed like a drumbeat in the heart of Cloverspark’s command center.

Preparations surged forward at breakneck pace. Communication towers synced, energy barriers recalibrated, and evacuation drills triggered on standby. Kael remained still through it all, like the eye of a coming storm.

At the city’s central forge, sealed behind layers of radiant shielding, the spear was born.

**[Weapon: Stormpiercer]**

* **Grade**: 3 (Forged using 14★ materials)
* **Material Core**: Thunderbone Shaft (conductive fossilized limb from a 14★ lightning beast)
* **Head**: Cryo-Meteor Alloy infused with 14★ Ice Core essence
* **Inscriptions**: Dual-type Elemental Guidance Sigils (Lightning & Ice)
* **Weight**: Adaptive, scales with wielder’s strength (105kg base)
* **Length**: 2.4 meters, reinforced balance core
* **Special Traits**:
  + *Lightning Draw*: Channels latent lightning from Kael’s core to enhance attack range and impact.
  + *Cryo Trail*: Leaves lingering frost along the spear’s arc when infused.
  + *Core Pulse Sync*: Resonates with Kael’s spiritual perception to optimize timing and counterbalance.

The weapon was made to sing through the battlefield—piercing the heavens, rending the earth.

When the master blacksmith finally handed it over, even his voice trembled:  
“Stormpiercer… lives up to its name.”

Kael gave a nod of thanks and walked back to his staging chamber.

As the door sealed behind him, Kael activated his wrist panel.  
“Iris.”

A soft tone.  
**“Yes, Kael?”**

“Run a full scan. Physical status, abilities, elemental development, bond links… everything.”

“Of course. Beginning full diagnostic.”

A blue interface bloomed in front of him, rotating slowly.

**[Scan Report – Subject: Kael Ardyn]**

* **Star Rank**: **14.0★**
* **Vitality**: Exceptionally High (Plant-type auxiliary absorption noted)
* **Weapon**: *Stormpiercer* – **Grade 3 Spear (Forged from 14★ materials)**
* **Weapon Mastery**: **Spear Mastery – Level 4 (Master)**
* **Technique Style**: *Rowing the Spear Against the Waves* (Dran Family Signature Style, taught by Elise Dran)

**[Elemental Affinities]**

* **Fire (White, Lv 3)** – High internal combustion efficiency; sustained output confirmed.
* **Ice (White, Lv 3)** – Elemental convergence stabilized; core-breathing technique compatible.
* **Lightning (White, Lv 2)** – Partial access to advanced burst techniques; under development.
* **Time** – *Insufficient resonance detected. Power level not yet revealed.*
* **Plant** – Passive integration confirmed; enhances **vitality, recovery rate, and internal balance**. Detailed function… *unavailable.*

**[Special Abilities]**

* **Monster Taming**: Psionic Bond (Blue, Lv 4)  
  *– Active neural link with bonded beasts Cherry and Kitsune. Range: Unlimited (Stabilized at Lv 4)*
* **Spiritual Perception**: Level 1  
  *– Can perceive intent, killing aura, energy pulses, and faint spiritual trails.*

Kael smiled faintly.

**[Scan Report – Subject: Cherry (Mutated Beast Companion)]**

* **Star Rank**: **14.0★**
* **Weapon**: Natural Claws – **Grade 3 Equivalent**
* **Weapon Mastery**: **Lv 4 (Mastery)**
* **Psionic Bond**: **Blue Lv 4**

**[Skills and Abilities]**

* **Claw Arc** (White, Lv 4) – Multi-target arc swipe imbued with internal force.
* **Power Surge** (White, Lv 2) – Boosts Cherry’s power by +0.3–0.4★ temporarily.
* **Latent Lightning Element**: *Detected – White, Unawakened.*

**[Monster Abilities]**

* **Dynamic Size Shift** – Alters physical form for speed or strength.
* **Elemental Fur Defense** – Red-orange-yellow fur resists most physical, some energy damage.
* **Enhanced Physical Attributes** – Extreme strength, agility, endurance, and flexibility.

**[Scan Report – Subject: Kitsune (Mutated Beast Companion)]**

* **Star Rank**: **14.0★**
* **Weapon**: Claws and Tail – **Grade 3 Equivalent**
* **Psionic Bond**: **Blue Lv 4**

**[Elemental Abilities]**

* **Dual-Element (Fire + Water)** – Combined White, Lv 3
* **Healing Blue Flame** – White, Lv 3  
  *– Cold flame used for recovery or searing opponents.*

**[Monster Abilities]**

* **Dynamic Size Shift** – Combat-flexible form.
* **Elemental Fur Defense** – Pink fur mitigates damage, reflects minor energy attacks.
* **Healing Tail Flame** – Cold flames in tail can restore or destroy; healing and offensive hybrid.

Kael closed the interface slowly.  
His grip on the spear tightened, the weapon humming slightly at his touch—recognizing its wielder.

Outside, faint tremors rolled through the stone floor.

The first wave… was on the move.

Kael turned toward the exit, Kitsune and Cherry already standing near the door—waiting, silent, ready.

“Time to hunt,” he said softly.

**End of Chapter 109**

**Chapter 110 – *First Pulse of the Storm***

The wind howled past Kael as his airbike roared out of the forward military rest area, leaving behind the weather-worn tents and metallic staging grounds of the Central Division. Cherry crouched tight behind him, her bright crimson-orange fur rippling in the slipstream. Kitsune flew parallel at a slightly higher altitude, her tails trailing blue-white flame and mist like comets streaking through dawn.

Below them, the world was no longer recognizable. The northern plains, once open farmland and forests, had been flattened into scorched, cratered wastelands from prior skirmishes. Fissures cracked through the terrain, and mutated foliage pulsed with unnatural life, rustling with quiet menace.

Kael’s HUD flashed.

*“Estimated First Wave Arrival: T-minus 1 hour.”*  
*“Monster Count: 150,000+ (8–9★), 10,000+ (9–10★), 30 (10–11★), 15 (11–12★), 7 (12–13★).”*

He exhaled slowly, eyes sharpening.

**“Begin mission. No mercy,”** he said into the comm.

**Monsters of the North**

As they soared farther northward, clusters of the advance wave could already be seen crawling across the horizon like a flood. Dozens of massive beasts lumbered forward, surrounded by clouds of smaller creatures, their roars blurring together into an ocean of primal rage.

At 43.9 km east, the **Spinal Basilisk** slithered across cracked terrain, a grotesque serpentine monstrosity over 40 meters long. Its scaled hide was dull obsidian, but toxic green venom seeped from ridged spinal barbs and the corners of its half-opened maw. Where it passed, the ground withered. Its narrow, lidless eyes pulsed faintly with a dull petrifying glow—ready to paralyze even before it struck.

Farther west, 44.7 km near a collapsed ridge, a tangle of roots and limbs rose like a mangled tree. It was the **Verdant Hydra**, its seven serpentine necks writhing independently. Each head spewed faint trails of mist as corrosive as acid. Every few seconds, one would lash out, devour a mutated tree or boulder, and begin to regenerate even without injury. The earth around it was soft from overgrowth, pulsing with unnatural greenery.

In the airspace above, circling with regal menace at 49.1 km, the **Screaming Vulture King** shrieked once—and the sound cracked Kael’s audio sensors for a heartbeat. The monstrous bird was nearly 20 meters across in wingspan, its feathers ashen-black with sickly purple accents. Its eyes glowed with a pale, vengeful yellow, and a corona of sonic ripples trailed its flight. Every time it dove, the air distorted like cracked glass.

Kitsune peeled off toward the east, trailing vapor and fire, heading toward the **Basilisk** and **Emberhide Cerberus**—the latter a hulking beast of bone-white armor and lava-red fur. It towered over even nearby trees, three heads snarling in sync. The middle one ignited the sky with a swirling inferno, while the other two charged energy. From the high ridge near 47.8 km west, **Emberhide** barked once—and a rain of burning cinders fell over a half-kilometer radius.

Cherry’s direction shifted subtly. She dropped from the airbike and sprinted across the ruined terrain with fluid ease. Her target had already seen her. Shadows curled around 48.3 km north as the **Gloomfang Devourer** emerged from beneath shallow earth like a massive eel. Half its form was buried, but its gaping mouth distorted the air, swallowing even scattered kinetic blasts from the automated turrets. Close by, high in the sky, the **Screaming Vulture** screeched again and dived—but Cherry only narrowed her eyes.

Kael pushed the airbike harder.

**Frontline of Titans**

As Kael neared 45.1 km directly north, he slowed the bike to a hover and stood atop it. There, at the rear-center of the advancing tide, stood a beast that dwarfed them all.

The **Thunderhorn Tyrant.**

A monstrous, elephantine beast coated in matte gray and deep black plating, its size rivaled buildings—its curved horns buzzed with crackling blue electricity, and each step sent minor shockwaves through the earth. A pulse rhythm vibrated in the air, enough to make Kael’s skin prickle.

*Storm Pulse Detected: Range 300m. EM Disruption Active.*

Kael leapt off the bike, landing in a controlled crouch that cracked the earth beneath him. Kitsune’s distant flame-glow shimmered on the horizon. Cherry’s presence pulsed nearby as she moved into position.

He raised the **Dran-forged 14★ spear**, now glowing faintly with a silver edge and the etchings of wind, fire, and will. The stonecore within shimmered in sync with his own core.

“I’ll clear the first layer,” he said to Iris.

A screen blinked to life within his lens: projected enemy trajectories, threat densities, and current ally positions.

Then he charged.

**Opening Blows**

The air twisted as Kael’s spear blurred. He cut through the edge of the monster tide like lightning slicing through fog, the force of his strikes sending weaker beasts flying. Cherry darted through the air just above, claws glowing, while Kitsune’s healing flame burst over wounded soldiers in a distant flank—then turned to devour a 9★ jaguar-like mutant attempting to flank her.

Kael pivoted, wind dancing around him. A blast from the Thunderhorn’s pulse sent rubble hurtling his way—he deflected it with the shaft of his spear, planting a foot and using the recoil to lunge forward into the battle line.

Their opponents had not yet revealed full strength. The larger monsters loomed in the distance, holding position, sensing that something—or someone—dangerous had entered the battlefield.

Cherry stood still for just a moment atop a rock, fur lit with elemental sheen, facing the Screaming Vulture as it banked high above.

Kitsune spun in midair, tails glowing as a spiral of flame and water burst outward. The Basilisk's head jerked back in surprise.

Kael, now ten meters from the Thunderhorn Tyrant, let out a single, measured breath.

Then he struck.

**Chapter 111 – *Pulse Against the Storm***

Lightning split the sky.

Kael’s spear met the earth with such force that the surrounding shockwaves cracked stone and sent lower-tier beasts flying. Cherry vanished in a streak of speed, a crimson blur tearing through mutated wolves, while Kitsune spiraled downward in a comet of steam and flame—each of them breaking through the chaos of the monster tide as if they were blades cleaving through cloth.

This was no longer scouting.

This was war.

**Kael vs. Thunderhorn Tyrant – 13.0★**

The **Thunderhorn Tyrant** reared back, its trunk lashing the air as arcs of blue lightning surged from its tusks. With a guttural roar, it slammed both forelegs into the earth, releasing a **Storm Pulse** so powerful it created a dome of electromagnetic shock.

But Kael had already vanished from its sight.

**“He’s above—!”**

Kael dropped like a meteor from 80 feet above, spear first. He activated **“Rowing the Spear Against the Waves,”** condensing both momentum and elemental force into a concentrated strike.

**CRACK—!**

The spear pierced the beast’s plated skull just above the eye. The Thunderhorn bellowed, stumbled, and tried to release another pulse—but Kael twisted the spear, infusing it with a resonating vibration from his Spiritual Perception training. The internal feedback exploded.

One final, furious thrash—then the 13★ colossus collapsed.

Dead.

Kael didn’t stop to breathe. The spear’s core flared as it absorbed ambient energy. With a single leap, he shot toward the north ridge—toward the **Verdant Hydra.**

**Cherry vs. Screaming Vulture King – 12.5★**

High above the plains, the **Screaming Vulture King** shrieked again, its sonic cry distorting the air around Cherry. Buildings would’ve crumbled under the pressure. But Cherry wasn’t a building.

She was fire, speed, and silence.

With each flap of the vulture’s wings, it unleashed sonic bursts that split the air like war cannons. Cherry evaded mid-flight by riding air currents, her tail crackling faintly with suppressed lightning—still not fully awakened, but growing.

At the apex of its dive, the Vulture King narrowed its eyes, opened its beak—readying a final shriek.

Too late.

Cherry blurred behind it.

**“Claw Arc.”**

A streak of raw power carved through the monster’s back. It howled, tried to twist in the air—but Cherry had already slashed through both wings, riding its falling body like a predator finishing its prey.

She struck one final blow into its neck as it plummeted.

The Vulture King never hit the ground alive.

Cherry landed without sound. She turned her head north toward the now-surfaced **Gloomfang Devourer** and began sprinting across crumbling rooftops, tearing through swarms of 9★ leech-beasts along the way.

**Kitsune vs. Spinal Basilisk – 12.6★**

In the eastern fields, trees melted into sludge and rocks hissed under acid rain. The **Spinal Basilisk** hissed, its forked tongue flicking as venomous mist oozed from its barbed spine. It fired a blast of paralytic mist—but it hit only steam.

Kitsune materialized behind it, three tails ablaze.

**“Foxfire Spiral.”**

A helix of white-blue flame and freezing mist slammed into the Basilisk’s flank. It screamed, trying to turn—but Kitsune had anticipated its motion. She danced like water, then lashed out with a healing flame that burned pure—consuming toxins and warping the beast’s regenerative abilities.

The Basilisk whipped its tail, lashing forward with terrifying speed—only to meet Kitsune’s second tail, glowing with holy blue.

**Impact.**

The serpent convulsed, froze mid-motion—its body overtaken by crystallized energy that spread like frost over bone.

Kitsune exhaled gently.

Then crushed the frozen skull with a fiery stomp.

**Onward – New Targets**

**Kael**, running across debris and shallow ravines, cut down two 10★ rock gorillas attempting to flank a retreating squad. Their leader, a 10.8★ four-armed chimera, charged him. Kael didn’t even slow.

He ducked low, spun, and **impaled** the chimera through its spine. A burst of wind-flame aura disintegrated it mid-roar.

By the time he reached the Hydra’s domain, Cherry was already there, facing the **Gloomfang Devourer**, and Kitsune approached the **Emberhide Cerberus** from the west ridge.

In that one moment—three titans moved in sync.

**Kael** stopped at the edge of the overgrowth where the **Verdant Hydra** towered above him, its seven heads rearing, each spewing a different color of corrosive mist.

**Cherry** skidded to a halt as the shadow beneath her trembled. The **Devourer** rose, its maw large enough to swallow her whole.

**Kitsune** faced the Emberhide Cerberus. Lava fell like rain behind it, its three heads snarling with rising heat.

The second wave had begun.

**Chapter 113 – *Ash, Venom, and Rebirth***

The air warped.

The stench of ozone, mist, and molten rock swirled into a suffocating fog across three distant battlefronts. Thunder still echoed from Kael’s last clash, but no storm now fell—only silence… then the rise of three titanic beasts.

The **Verdant Hydra**, **Gloomfang Devourer**, and **Emberhide Cerberus** each stood at the peak of their monstrous power.

But so did Kael.

And so did Cherry.

And so did Kitsune.

**Kael vs. Verdant Hydra – 12.8★**

The ridge had collapsed long ago, leaving the land sunken and overgrown, twisted with warped vines. Amid the center, the **Verdant Hydra** loomed—seven heads, each snarling, hissing, spewing clouds of vibrant mist that shimmered with corrosive life. The Hydra’s body was the size of a mansion, its muscles rippling under bark-like scales.

Kael stood tall, spear braced.

The first head lunged.

He pivoted and pierced through its eye socket mid-lunge, fluid and unhurried.

**Splat—!**  
The head exploded.

Seconds later, **Verdant Rebirth** activated. A new head sprouted in its place—veined, green, hissing.

**Kael’s eyes narrowed.**

“Not fast enough.”

He activated *Spiritual Perception*, veins glowing faintly under his skin. The flow of life, regeneration, and elemental toxin within the Hydra was now visible to him—like threads in a loom. He darted forward, spear slicing through neck after neck—not to kill, but to overload the regenerative cycle.

He let it regrow. Then ruptured the energy channels from within using a **resonance pulse**.

**Three heads failed to grow back.**

Kael calmly walked through a wall of acidic mist, spinning his spear once. He plunged it down into the creature’s heart, bypassing external armor with pinpoint internal pressure. The monster convulsed.

Six heads tried to snap at him in a fury—but they dropped limp one by one as the central core shattered from within.

**Verdant Hydra: terminated.**

Kael let out a slow breath, wiped a smear of acidic vapor off his jacket, and turned toward his final target: the **Thronespike Insectoid**, still far in the northwest zone.

He launched into the sky on his reinforced airbike, trailing a streak of lightning and wind as he vanished over the trees.

**Cherry vs. Gloomfang Devourer – 12.7★**

Cherry crouched low, pupils narrowed, claws twitching.

The **Gloomfang Devourer** emerged like a nightmare from the earth—bulky, mouthless at first glance, but split vertically along the front. When it opened, rows of jagged void-colored fangs lined the interior. It growled, and reality around its maw distorted, sucking in air, debris… and **energy**.

Cherry tried a **Claw Arc**—the attack evaporated before landing.

**Void Maw.**

But she was not one to brute-force a puzzle. She circled, tail flicking.

*“So it can’t digest physical speed…”*

She blurred forward, vanishing just as the Devourer tried to track her. Then came **five** Cherry afterimages—one slashed from the left, one leapt over, one spiraled from beneath.

The beast tried to inhale again.

Cherry activated **Power Surge.**

One hit landed.

A sharp crack echoed across the battlefield as she pierced into the Devourer’s flank—not at the maw, but at the **core node** hidden near its back, pulsing faintly with null-energy. She struck again and again.

Void energy tried to retaliate—but Cherry’s lightning had **awakened** enough to disrupt its field. With a final burst of plasma-clawed strikes, she ruptured the node.

The Gloomfang thrashed once, screamed with a hollow cry—and collapsed.

She exhaled once, leapt back up a ruined watchtower, and darted northwest to rejoin Kael.

**Kitsune vs. Emberhide Cerberus – 12.9★**

Three heads. Each snarling. Lava poured from one mouth, smoke from another, and pure flame from the third.

The **Emberhide Cerberus** leapt toward Kitsune with seismic weight. The terrain cracked under its step, and the sky rained flaming meteors from its **Ash Reign**. The battlefield had become a living furnace.

Kitsune’s tails glowed.

She used **Miststep**, reappearing behind the center head, and countered the fire with **Bluefire Bloom**—a concentrated burst of healing flame that canceled combustion in the air.

The Cerberus twisted, biting down—but Kitsune flared her water element.

Steam enveloped them both.

Within the mist, Kitsune weaved between bites, claws, and exploding ash. The beast could barely follow her motion. Her psionic bond with Kael sharpened her rhythm—every motion precise.

Then she dove underneath.

**Foxflame Tail Slash.**

She severed the hind leg tendons first—then the back left leg. The Cerberus howled and collapsed to one side.

Her third tail ignited with radiant aqua-light.

She launched straight through its exposed chest—searing flame carving through all three cores in a diagonal arc.

**The beast burned from within.**

Kitsune emerged from the smoke, lightly panting, and began bounding toward the western ridgeline.

**Convergence: Final Target**

Kael stood alone before the **Thronespike Insectoid**.

It rose like a plated fortress, chittering. Its entire body shimmered with reflective plates—mirror-like, almost beautiful. The **Reflective Carapace** began glowing with stolen elemental energy from the battlefield around it.

Kael cracked his knuckles.

His airbike hovered behind him as he calmly walked forward.

**“I’ve been saving this.”**

His spear surged with full elemental infusion—lightning, wind, vibration, and controlled force. He stopped only twenty meters from the insectoid behemoth, eyes narrowing.

The insectoid launched spikes, and Kael blurred.

He **teleported** mid-sprint with a surge of movement aura—a technique he’d learned in secret during the Dran training arc.

He reappeared above the creature’s exposed thorax—and slammed his spear straight through its back, bypassing the Reflective Carapace by never touching it.

**Strike.**  
**Twist.**  
**Pulse.**

The insectoid shrieked—but it was already over. Its core splintered, its limbs jerked, and it fell.

Kael didn’t look back.

Cherry landed beside him in a blink. Kitsune arrived two breaths later, graceful as ever.

The three stood over the husk of their final target.

All seven monsters—down.

The tide hadn’t ended, but something fundamental had shifted. The earth itself paused beneath them, as if the world recognized that three predators far more ancient than mutation now hunted freely.

**To be continued in Chapter 114 – *Storm Horizon***

**Chapter 114 – *Command and Cataclysm***

The Command Center of the Eastern Military Stronghold had once been a grand assembly hall—a circular chamber lined with reinforced alloy, screens, and strategic maps projected mid-air. Now, it thrummed with tension, a silent pulse growing heavier with every second.

The room was filled with some of the most powerful humans left on the continent.

* **Commander Riku Tanabe**, head of the Eastern Division, leaned forward with grim focus.
* **Commander Seiji Dran**, stoic and sharp-eyed, arms crossed.
* **Commander Ayame Sudo**, Northern Division, fingers steepled under her chin.
* Over a dozen **10★ to 12★ elite combatants** stood in silence, weapons at their backs, arms, or belts. These were not weaklings. These were gods among remnants.

But now they were witnesses.

The central screen flickered, showing **Kael Ardyn**.

First came the **Verdant Hydra**. It died in less than three minutes.  
Then came the **Gloomfang Devourer**—annihilated with surgical grace.  
Kitsune’s battle with the Cerberus lit up the terrain like a burning festival.  
Then the final insectoid fell like an afterthought.

**Seven peak-level monsters. 20 minutes.**  
Total elapsed time: **34 minutes, 51 seconds.**

For several seconds, the room said nothing.

Then—

“...What the hell is this kid?” muttered one of the 11.5★ elites, sweat forming on his temple.

“He didn’t even use full elemental amplification,” noted Commander Ayame, voice low and slightly hoarse.

Seiji didn’t move. His jaw clenched, but his lips were curled into the barest of grins.

Commander Riku Tanabe stood slowly, brows furrowed, voice calm but disbelieving.  
“That's not battle proficiency. That's extermination.”

Even the AI assistants monitoring satellite data paused for recalibration.

Suddenly, the screen changed. The drone feed zoomed in as Kael reached to his side and tapped a silver disk-shaped device. The signal flared.

An alert beeped across all screens in red:

**BEACON ACTIVATED – 10km LURE FIELD**  
**WARNING: Class-Ω Beacon Activated**  
**All Mutant Life in Range Being Drawn to Signal Source**

The room **erupted into chaos.**

“What—he used the Ω beacon?!”  
“That's a suicide signal!”  
“Did he hit it by accident?!”

“No,” Seiji said softly. His eyes were still fixed on the screen. “He knew exactly what he was doing.”

The readings flooded in:

* **Estimated 8–9★ Beasts: ~50,000**
* **9–10★ Beasts: ~4,000**
* **10–11★ Beasts: 20**
* **11–12★ Beasts: 10**

Every single one now pivoted toward a single beacon—toward **Kael Ardyn**.

The screen showed him standing alone, Cherry on his right shoulder, Kitsune to his left, wind tugging at his coat as the first tremors of incoming beasts quaked the earth.

Somewhere in the room, one of the high officers sat down hard.  
“This… this isn’t strategy. This is lunacy.”  
“No,” said Ayame, voice dry. “It’s **madness with precision.**”

They watched as Kael simply stood there. No panic. No speech. Just calm.

A 12★ power in the room, General Hoshikawa, exhaled slowly.  
“That man… He’s not waiting for backup. He’s going to fight them all.”

“No human has ever faced a ten-thousand scale swarm solo,” someone whispered.

“He’s not human,” said Seiji, barely audible. “He’s Kael.”

**Perspective Shift – Kael**

The air carried weight now.

Cherry’s fur bristled with excitement, lightning dancing along her tail.

Kitsune’s gaze was steel. Her third tail shimmered faintly with waterfire.

Kael looked over the valley ahead.

They were coming.

Tens of thousands. No strategy. No commanders. Just raw chaos—rushing, biting, clawing.

But his spear was ready.  
His pulse was steady.  
And his mind was clear.

**“Good.”**

He took one step forward, and the wind behind him howled as if in celebration.

“They were coming anyway,” he muttered to no one. “Might as well welcome them properly.”

The sky turned blood-orange as the sun dipped low—and from Kael’s point of view, the **monster tide** was not an army.

It was a **storm to be broken.**

And Kael was the blade waiting at its center.

**Chapter 115 – *The Blade That Stilled the Storm***

The land trembled. Trees split. Rocks cracked.  
A sea of fangs, claws, and fury thundered toward a single figure standing atop the scorched ridge.

**Kael Ardyn.**

Behind him, the sun hung low, a blazing witness to what was about to unfold.  
Before him, over **64,000 monsters** surged forward—more than **one-third of the entire tide**.

* **50,000+ beasts** at **8–9★**
* **4,000** in the range of **9–10★**
* **20** at **10–11★**
* **10** terrifying monsters at **11–12★**

And Kael stood alone at the front.

Well—almost alone.

Cherry, fur crackling with lightning, let out a low, guttural growl as arcs of volatile energy danced around her paws.  
Kitsune’s tails shimmered with fire and waterlight, her blue flames licking the air with silent fury.

Kael raised his spear—its tip gleaming silver and hungry.

Then—

**The storm hit.**

**What followed was slaughter.**

Kael moved like a phantom.

Every inch of his form was honed to perfection—**Level 4 Spear Mastery** turned his thrusts into death sentences.  
His **Level 1 Spiritual Perception** let him read the flow of battle before it even happened—like an orchestra with blood and howls.

The first wave of 8★ monsters fell before even touching him.  
9★ beasts lunged, only to have their skulls pierced mid-leap.  
10★ beasts roared in tandem—he met them with a calm twist of the spear, shattering cores in fluid arcs.

Then came the 11★ monsters—giants of muscle and hatred.

He fought them as if they were ordinary foes.  
His attacks, by now, had grown so forceful, so surgically precise, that **even a 12★ beast fell from a single strike**.

Cherry danced among the chaos, lightning bursting with each claw strike—her **Claw Arc** severing jugulars, her latent element blooming.  
Kitsune spun like fire incarnate, **healing Kael in mid-battle**, burning through hordes, shielding them from behind.

Minutes bled into hours. The sky turned from orange to deep twilight.

But still, Kael fought.

Every part of his body bore wounds—gashes across his arms, a deep tear on his ribs, a burn on his left thigh.  
Blood—**his and theirs**—drenched his figure. His spear no longer shone.  
It was red. Black. Coated with drying gore, ground bone, and shattered cores.

And yet, his eyes remained sharp.

**Two and a half hours.**

That was how long they fought—without pause, without retreat, without mercy.

And then, silence.

Corpses—thousands of them—lay broken in every direction.

From the highest bluff nearby, **an auto-drone’s camera** zoomed in, feeding the scene live to the **Command Center**.

No one spoke.

The screens flickered with monster core data. Vital readings. Biometric scans.

The battlefield was now a graveyard.

**Kael stood alone at its center.**

His chest heaved. Every breath ragged. Cherry curled beside him, licking a wound. Kitsune panted softly, tails still swaying.

Inside the Command Center, a single voice broke the silence.

“…He… He did it.”

Commander Seiji Dran’s voice quivered, unable to fully mask the emotion in his tone.

“He actually did it…”

Commander Riku Tanabe leaned back slowly in his chair, as if reality had snapped sideways.  
Commander Ayame Sudo just stared at the screen, mouth barely open.

No words came. Only **awe**. And **a creeping chill**.

The strongest 12★ elites, the old legends… even they were speechless.

This wasn’t just battle prowess. It was divine destruction.  
It was as if a calamity had been turned into a man.

Kael exhaled, dropping to one knee as the last of the adrenaline faded.

He pulled out his communicator, hand shaking slightly—not from fear, but from sheer exhaustion.

“Kael Ardyn. Eastern Front complete,” he said, voice calm despite the blood soaking his lips.  
“I’ve eliminated the monsters in my sector.”

Silence for a few seconds—then a burst of voices from the command feed:

“Confirmed… confirmed. You… You did it.”  
“We just—we’re all in awe.”  
“Kael… thank you. We saw everything. It was—no, *you* were—legendary.”

Kael didn’t respond immediately.

He glanced down at Cherry, who purred against his leg. Kitsune nuzzled his shoulder softly, her flame tails warming his chilled skin.

“…Good,” he murmured.

The signal from the Command Center updated:

**Main Horde Arrival: 40 Minutes**  
**Recommended Tactical Adjustments in Progress**

Kael turned his gaze to the west, where smoke still trailed in the sky from distant battles.

Without a word, he activated the call to his air-bike.

Within moments, the sleek black machine descended with a low hum. He climbed on, Cherry curling into his jacket, Kitsune leaping up behind him.

He didn’t look back.

With a roar of the engine, Kael soared into the darkening sky, riding back toward the base—**bloodied, battered, but undefeated.**

**End of Chapter 115**  
**End of Monster Tide: Part 1**

**Chapter 116 – *The Path Cleared by One***

The wind howled softly as the **air-bike** descended into the heart of the military forward base.

Kael’s body swayed slightly, exhaustion carved deep into every limb. His armor was torn in several places, blackened and bloodied, and his once-gleaming spear now looked like a relic pulled from a battlefield of myths.

**Cherry** rested quietly against his chest, fur matted with dried blood but eyes alert.  
**Kitsune** stood behind him, tails dimly flickering as her strength waned.

The landing pad lights blinked rhythmically—but what met Kael’s eyes next… even he hadn’t expected.

**Silence. Then—respect.**

Rows upon rows of soldiers—**hundreds, then thousands**, from scouts and medics to artillery crews and lieutenants—stood perfectly still in formation. From the **lowest ranks** to **top officers**, including **10★ and even 12★ powerhouses**, every man and woman in the base had assembled.

As Kael stepped off the bike, staggering slightly—

**They gave way.**

No one spoke. No one dared break the stillness.  
And then—

**Salutes.**

A wall of arms rose to their brows—spines straight, eyes burning. The entire camp saluted him as **the man who had slain the impossible**.

Not a hero.

Something more.

A **living force**.

In the central platform, **Commander Seiji Dran** stood tall, arms behind his back.

But his gaze held more than awe. It held understanding.

They had both trained under Kael’s father and grandfather—both had known the ancient pain of expectation, the weight of legacy.  
But deep down, Seiji knew something even more humbling.

*"Even I couldn't defeat either of them at full strength. But Kael... you defeated them* ***both****."*

He couldn’t stop the faint smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. **Pride.** **Respect.** And a touch of disbelief.

The soldiers **cheered** now—roars of victory, of triumph, of admiration.

“KAEL! KAEL! KAEL!”

Kael, drenched in blood and silence, raised one hand briefly, acknowledging them—then spoke.

“I’ll be resting. You’ll handle the rest, right?”

Seiji grinned. “We’ve got it covered.”

Kael disappeared into the inner quarters to heal, Cherry and Kitsune closely following.

Exactly **forty minutes later**, the **remaining portion of the first monster wave** arrived.

Their numbers still made the earth tremble:

* Nearly **90,000 monsters** of 8★ and 9★
* **6,000 beasts** in the 9–10★ range
* **10 beasts** at 10–11★
* **5 monsters** touching 11–12★

But this time—the base was **ready**.

The troops who had just witnessed Kael’s godlike massacre now burned with a **fury unlike anything they'd felt before**.

Morale was not high—it was **skybound**.

Even the 12★ elites, long preserved for emergencies, **stepped onto the battlefield** this time—not out of desperation, but out of **respect**. Kael had fought alone and bled for all of them. Now, they would fight like **they meant it**.

The **battle lasted only one hour**.

A clean sweep. Tactical precision. United force. Not a **single death** among the defenders.

And when it was over—

**The sky rang with their cheers.**

From every soldier, every officer, every commander:

“TO KAEL ARDYN!”  
“TO THE LONE SPEAR!”  
“HE SHOWED US THE WAY!”

Their voices echoed into the horizon, where piles of defeated monsters still lay.  
And somewhere in the base, resting in silence, Kael finally allowed himself to **close his eyes**.

**End of Chapter 116**

**Chapter 117 – *The Next Storm Approaches***

Kael’s eyes opened to the faint glow of artificial light filtering through the tinted windows.

His body ached—raw and tight with the fatigue of war—but his mind was already alert.  
**Four hours.** That’s all he could allow himself.

Cherry stirred beside him, blinking slowly, while Kitsune rested quietly, her tails curled around herself like silken flames.

Kael stood, armored up, and stepped outside.

As he entered the **command center**, now buzzing with reports and data streams, **the entire hall stood still**.  
Dozens of soldiers, officers, technicians, and high-ranking officials froze mid-action.

Then, all at once—

**They saluted.**

A wave of disciplined motion surged through the hall. From 1★ cadets to 12★ war veterans, they stood tall and proud.

“Kael Ardyn, sir!”

Kael halted mid-step.  
His brow twitched slightly. He **didn’t think this was necessary**—he hadn’t fought for this, hadn’t risked everything for applause. But he couldn’t bring himself to brush aside the **genuine pride and admiration** in their eyes.

He nodded once, sharply.

The crowd slowly relaxed.

At the central strategic table, the **three commanders** stood waiting:

* **Seiji Dran**, stoic and calm
* **Ayame Sudo**, the composed and sharp-eyed Northern commander
* **Riku Tanabe**, the pragmatic and rugged leader from the East

Kael approached them without preamble.

“Still haven’t gotten used to being the center of attention?” Seiji asked, smiling slightly.

Kael sighed. “Not exactly my thing.”

Riku chuckled. “You might want to start getting used to it. After yesterday, I doubt anyone will treat you like a regular person again.”

Kael didn’t answer. He didn’t need their praise—he only cared about the outcome.

He leaned forward. “Did you collect the meat from the monsters I killed?”

The question caught them off guard.

“W-We did,” Seiji said. “Roughly **two-thirds of the corpses** were harvested. The materials and meat are already being processed and preserved into rations and nutrient blocks. That much high-grade flesh will sustain thousands of personnel for weeks.”

“Good,” Kael replied.

Then his voice lowered. “And the second wave?”

The table fell silent.

The mood shifted instantly. Even the lively background noise of the command center dimmed under the tension.

It was **Ayame Sudo** who finally answered.

Her voice was clear and steady—but the weight behind her words was heavy.

“We’ve confirmed it. The **second wave** will reach the base within the next four hours.”

She tapped the holographic display. A terrifying swarm of red dots surged across the northern zone.

“It’s nearly **double** the size of the first wave.”

Seiji elaborated with grim precision:

* **300,000** monsters rated 8–9★
* **25,000** beasts at 9–10★
* **200** monsters in the 10–11★ range
* **30** classified at 11–12★
* **18** recorded at 12–13★
* And **7 monsters** estimated to be at the terrifying **13–14★** level.

The room was still.

Even for the commanders—seasoned veterans of monster tides—this was no ordinary horde.  
This was a **cataclysm**, heading straight for them.

And it was approaching **fast**—from the **North**.

Kael said nothing at first.  
He simply stared at the display. His eyes, however, were not filled with fear or hesitation.

Only **calculation**.

He turned away, muttering just loud enough for the three to hear:

“Then I’ll prepare for the next hunt.”

**End of Chapter 117**

**Chapter 118 – *The Defense of Five Sectors***

The air across the base was tense. Even the bravest soldiers could feel it—the pressure, the weight of what was coming.

The **second wave** had been confirmed.

And it was **unlike anything Japan had faced** in decades.

Inside the sprawling **Northern-Eastern Unified Command Center**, the screens displayed live feeds from high-altitude drones, thermal scanners, and orbital satellites.

A swarm of red heat signatures surged from the north, flowing like a living tide across the jagged terrain. The density… was unreal.

**Panic** loomed just behind every heartbeat.

But the commanders knew—they **couldn’t afford to falter**.

Because behind this battle… were **millions of lives** across the Northern and Eastern Regions.

In the war room, holograms flared to life.

“The enemy will strike from **Sectors 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8**,” said Ayame Sudo, her eyes scanning the projections.

“Fortunately,” Seiji added, “we have **48 suppression fields** deployed across these regions.”

The suppression tech, based on advanced resonance derived from monster cores, would weaken **8★ to 10★ beasts**, giving their troops a better chance of survival—and more importantly, **segregating** the stronger ones.

“They won’t be able to back the stronger beasts,” said Riku Tanabe. “We’ll finally be able to isolate the big threats.”

Across the war table, officials moved quickly. Logistics officers mapped formations. Signal units routed encrypted comms.

From their mobilized forces, they had pulled together their **core strike force**—an army of **500,000 soldiers**, all ranked **9★ to 10★**, with a few elite units reaching **10.5★**.

These were the backbone.

**100,000 soldiers would be sent to each sector**, creating a multi-layered blockade.

Their target breakdown was clear:

* **8–9★ beasts**: 300,000
* **9–10★ beasts**: 25,000
* **10–11★ beasts**: 200

The first two tiers would be engaged through traditional formations.

The **200 10–11★ monsters**, however, were different. **Each would be hunted by coordinated teams of at least 10 soldiers**, backed by:

* One commander or fighter above 10★
* And an **experimental beast bomb**—a tactical weapon made from crystallized monster cores.

Six months of research had gone into those bombs. It was time to see if they worked.

But that was only part of the plan.

Looming over the projection were the **heaviest threats**:

* **30 beasts at 11–12★**
* **18 monsters at 12–13★**
* **7 titans at 13–14★**

The command table darkened. Every face grew sharp with focus.

The **60 elite soldiers**—handpicked veterans and rising stars—would handle the 11–13★ class threats.

Among them:

* **40 soldiers** at **10–11★**
* **20 high command officials** at **11–12★**, trained for elite monster suppression

But even they were not enough.

For the final battlefront, **Japan’s strongest gathered.**

**Faye Illena**—*The Mind Oracle*—stood silently in the room. With her **psychic seer** powers and **memory manipulation**, she would weaken the strongest monsters mentally—dismantling instincts, scrambling aggression, and opening them for attack.

**Seiji Dran**, calm as ever, volunteered to take on **two 13–14★ beasts**.

The remaining **five monsters** of the same class would be engaged by:

* **Borran Kazume** – *The Nuclear Howl* (12.5★, Radiation)
* **Mirei Shadowcrest** – *The Phase Ghost* (13.4★, Phase Combat)
* **Shiori Ayame** – *The Crimson Pulse* (12.2★, Blood Augmentation)
* **Rein Yukihara** – *Whiteflame Blade* (12.0★, Holy Fire)
* **Tsuro Genbei** – *Voltage Fang* (12.1★, Lightning Melee)

Faye would **disrupt all seven beasts simultaneously** with her seer abilities, allowing each elite to strike with full force.

Once the 13–14★ threats were neutralized…

**Kael would join the remaining elite force** and take the lead in bringing down the **18 monsters in the 12–13★ range**, alongside other high-tier operatives.

The war room fell silent as the last details were locked in.

On the central hologram, deployment markers shifted into final formation.

**Sectors 4 through 8** lit up red with enemy approach markers—and blue with their responding strike zones.

Seiji looked across the room. “Any objections?”

No one spoke.

Ayame Sudo gave the final confirmation. “Then this is it.”

Kael stood by the edge of the room, his eyes locked on the battlefield image, unmoving, unreadable.

**Chapter 119 – *When the Storm Breaks* *(Part 1)***

The sky darkened, though it was barely past dawn.

The atmosphere shifted—not with clouds, but with **presence**. A pressure that weighed down like invisible iron.

Even the wind held its breath.

From the northern edge of Japan’s fortified zones, **five sprawling sectors—4, 5, 6, 7, and 8—stood as frontlines**. Steel, earth, concrete, and suppression fields formed bulwarks. Trenches buzzed with deployed energy grids. Combat drones hummed in standby. Railgun turrets glinted beneath camouflage plating.

But none of it mattered more than the soldiers.

**Five hundred thousand soldiers**—divided evenly across the sectors.

Each one had trained for years. Each one had passed through monster tides, hell drills, core resonance trials. Many had scars—some visible, some hidden.

But nothing could truly prepare them for what they now faced.

They waited in silence. Pulse monitors flickered green. Breath rates spiked across entire units.

“Sector 4, report status.”

“All units in position.”

“Sector 5?”

“Ready for engagement.”

“Sector 6, standby complete.”

“Sector 7, confirmed. Suppression fields holding.”

“Sector 8, green across the board.”

A quiet voice echoed across command frequencies:

“The wave is within visual range.”

And then—

**they saw it.**

From the highlands, foothills, and valleys to the north, the **beasts emerged**.

Tens of thousands, pouring in like a **living tsunami**. Claws tore through frost. Wings blotted out the light. Scales, fur, bone, metal, and mutation rippled in an endless surge.

The earth shook with each thunderous step.

They came howling, shrieking, screeching—**a chorus of chaos** that shattered the calm.

“All frontline personnel, brace.”

Soldiers stared forward, hearts pounding. Even veterans found their hands trembling—just slightly—on weapon grips. For some, this was their first full-scale tide. For others, their third… or fifth.

But this was the first time the monster horde numbered **more than half a million.**

The ground rumbled like thunder. The air pulsed with pressure.

And then—

**impact.**

**Sector 4**

The first wave struck like a hammer of flesh and fury. **8★ beasts**, dozens at a time, slammed into bunkers and forward walls. Suppression fields flared—auras flickering as they forcibly drained raw energy from the monsters.

**Railgun fire cracked**, spears of kinetic light tearing through the air. Explosive rounds exploded mid-leap, sending mutated wolves tumbling. But for every beast downed, **two more surged forward**.

Elite platoons moved swiftly—leaping from elevated platforms, blades glowing, guns blazing.

“Squad Theta—left flank collapsing!”

“Hold the line! Burn their legs! Keep them grounded!”

**Sector 5**

The beasts here were faster—raptors and serpentine flyers. **9★ variants**, more aggressive and cunning, began **testing defense formations**. They fanned out, trying to isolate weak points.

A young captain named Hoshino gritted his teeth as a **plated lizard slammed into his shield**, its tail sweeping aside two soldiers behind him.

“Regroup! Focus fire! Suppression field’s weakening, rotate out—NOW!”

From the rear lines, **mortar teams** launched core-based grenades. Each one exploded in a flash of spectral energy, **momentarily stunning entire clusters** of beasts.

**Sector 6**

Here, the monsters moved like coordinated wolves—**semi-intelligent packs**, likely driven by a higher-alpha. Even under the suppression field, they showed uncanny tactics.

10★ monsters had entered this sector.

Each one was a battlefield unto itself.

Squads of elite soldiers **moved in tight formation**, surrounding each beast with a dozen operatives. From above, drones dropped **beast bombs**, their cores detonating with radiant fractures that disoriented and disrupted beast regeneration.

“Deploy net-classifiers!”

“Split the herd, isolate the 10★ targets!”

Amid the chaos, several 10.5★ soldiers led the charge, spears and energy halberds cutting through chitin and corrupted hide.

**Sector 7 & 8**

Sector 7 faced relentless air assaults—winged beasts, armored falcons, shrieking banshees that dropped molten bile.

Defenders here were equipped with **vertical intercept weapons**, launching themselves skyward like lances.

“Ravens incoming! Don’t let them reach medical bays!”

**Sector 8**, meanwhile, became a warzone of attrition. Massive ground beasts—rhino-class juggernauts and tunneling horrors—emerged in waves. The suppression field flickered dangerously close to overload.

“This is Commander Natsume—rotate barrier generators NOW!”

The weight of so many beasts tested every inch of infrastructure, every meter of steel.

But the soldiers did not break.

Across all five sectors, the **storm had arrived**.

The **monsters roared**.

The **earth shook**.

And **humanity stood its ground**.

The plan was working—for now. The suppression fields did their job, weakening the lesser monsters. And the soldiers, trained and hardened, met the tide with fury of their own.

But this was only the beginning.

The real monsters—the titans lurking behind the wave—**hadn’t entered the field yet**.

**Chapter 120 – *The Weight of Claws and Steel***

The battlefield was fire, steel, and blood.

From the north surged a deluge of death:

* **300,000 beasts** between **8–9★**, ravenous, frenzied, tireless.
* **25,000 advanced beasts**, tempered between **9–10★**, larger, smarter, faster.
* And looming behind them—**200 behemoths**, each a walking disaster, basking in their **10–11★ monstrous might**.

This was the **second layer** of the wave—not the deepest, but deadly enough to threaten entire divisions.

**The Frontline: Traditional Formations Engage**

The defensive lines were alive with motion. **Columns of soldiers** clashed with swarms of monsters, **formation tactics honed through blood and necessity.**

In **Sector 4**, the ground was churned to mud and gore. **Infantry squads** worked in perfect rhythm—**two suppressors** drawing aggro, **one lancer** striking at joints, **support gunners** lacing the air with heat-seeking core rounds. Drones flitted overhead, auto-targeting weak points exposed by close-quarter combat.

“Rotation Alpha-Three! Lure the hydra out of suppression zone, then collapse the funnel!”

A three-headed boar-hydra—**9★ ranked**—roared as it charged through fortifications. A well-coordinated pincer drew it into a **kill-box**, where high-pressure flame jets ignited its fur and a six-man team drove electrified pikes through its lungs.

The beast howled once—and collapsed, twitching.

In **Sector 6**, the beasts had evolved some crude tactics.

They moved in formation. Protected each other. Even feinted.

A cluster of **9.5★ beasts**—massive gorilla-like horrors with plated backs and fluid-coated claws—charged a trench, only to split and flank. They were met by **shock squads**, elite veterans with heavy-frame exosuits.

“Drop the hammers!”

Kinetic impact mauls slammed into the beasts’ limbs, shattering bone. Explosive lances pierced from the rear, breaching reinforced hide.

Still, casualties mounted. **Every engagement was a battle of attrition.**  
Each time a soldier fell, three monsters died—but the tide kept coming.

**The Second Line: High-Risk Engagements with 10–11★ Beasts**

It was not the wave that frightened commanders—it was what **moved within the wave.**

Two hundred **10–11★ beasts**. Each one required **its own war plan**.

Each was an **apex mutation**—bearing armored hide, elemental manipulation, or reality-warping traits.

Thus, special hunting cells were deployed.

Each hunting cell had:

* **Ten elite soldiers**, handpicked from across Japan’s military.
* **A commander or singular fighter above 10★.**
* **One experimental Beast Bomb.**

These were **surgical teams**. Not frontliners. **Kill squads.**

**Unit 017 – Sector 5**

Their target: **A 10.7★ Silverglass Drake**, a beast with light-bending scales and psionic burst fields.

Captain Reika Kuroda, a **10.2★ wind elementalist**, led the strike.

“Stagger formations. Don't look directly—use sensor tracking only.”

The drake blurred through visibility, its tail cleaving trenches in pure silence. Four soldiers moved in with shock netcasters, launching electromagnetic webs that tangled midair.

As the drake screeched and broke free, Reika dropped down from above—**spinning twin blades** wrapped in compressed air.

“Now!”

A beast bomb, set within a containment shell, was rolled beneath its feet. One heartbeat later—

**The world ruptured.**

A flash, a soundless implosion, and a wave of pure core resonance **tore through the monster’s abdomen**, annihilating organs even its regeneration couldn’t repair.

It flailed once. Died twitching.

**Unit 042 – Sector 7**

Target: **A 10.4★ Magnetic Bull-Crusher**, armored in ore and able to distort metallic weapons.

Commander Daichi Morimoto, a **spear-wielder ranked 10.3★**, grunted as his alloy spear warped mid-arc.

“Damn thing’s field’s still active. Cut it—cut the core field!”

His team spread wide, dropping non-metallic disruptor traps—crafted of ceramic and beast bone. The field fluctuated.

Three gunners took position with **non-ferrous plasma rifles**, suppressing the beast's vision. A stealth unit dashed in from behind and affixed the beast bomb to its spine—just under its shoulder.

A shout.

A boom.

And then a **gaping void** swallowed the bull’s upper back in an arc of white-blue energy.

Its entire right side collapsed. Blood and core mist exploded outward.

Another apex monster dead.

**Unit 109 – Sector 6**

Their foe: **A 10.9★ Frostflame Banshee**, a creature of shrieks and opposing elements—its scream froze bone, while its touch ignited flesh.

This monster was **pure chaos**.

Five soldiers died in the first two minutes—flesh burning while armor cracked from frostbite.

Commander Isha Tanabe, a **10.6★ aura controller**, narrowed her eyes.

“Shift tactics. Sound suppression on. We fight blind—don’t *listen*. Focus on temperature spikes.”

They fought in **deafened silence**, relying on haptic pulses and visual markers.

One soldier climbed a beast corpse, latched onto the banshee’s wing, and jammed the bomb into its ribcage.

Isha triggered it with a snap of her aura—

**The banshee didn’t even scream.**

Its body was vaporized midair. **Ash rained down** as her team stared into the mist.

**The Price of Victory**

Of the 200 apex beasts, **117 were slain** in the first 90 minutes.

Of the 200 special strike teams, **41 had casualties**.  
**12 teams were wiped out entirely.**  
But not a single 10–11★ beast survived an encounter with a beast bomb detonation.

And yet…

There were still more to come. The wave wasn’t over.

Every soldier could feel it—beneath the roar of combat, beneath the cracking bones and detonations, **something else stirred behind the tide**.

But they didn’t look toward it.

They looked at the present.

They fought.

They endured.

They killed.

And they prayed that it would be enough.

**Chapter 121 – *When Legends Walk the Battlefield (Part I)***

The air shifted.

**A different pressure descended** over Sectors 6 and 7—not one of numbers, but of magnitude.

No longer a tide.

But titans.

From the blackened fog beyond the second wave emerged **30 monsters, each between 11–12★**, followed closely by **18 abominations ranked 12–13★**.

Each footstep they took sent tremors through the fractured earth.  
Each roar bent air and rippled space.

These were not creatures.

These were disasters given flesh.

**The Vanguard of Heroes: 60 Against 48**

Arrayed before them were the best of humanity’s warriors—  
**60 elite soldiers** assigned to neutralize the super-threats:

* **45 elite fighters** between **10–11★**
* **15 high command officials**, each wielding **11–12★ power**

Names whispered through barracks and training halls:  
General Ayaka Renshin of the Flame Lash.  
Colonel Daisuke Moro, the Barrier Pike.  
Rin Saito, the Thundered Dancer.

And yet…

Even **they looked tense.**

Because these monsters were beyond conventional war.

**The Arrival of Kael Ardyn**

But then—

**The ground did not shake. It calmed.**

And in the silent pause between the first charge and the final breath, a **figure stepped forward**, his silhouette framed against the burnt skyline.

**Kael Ardyn.**

At his side, a crimson blur—**Cherry**, burning with latent lightning.  
Trailing behind, a calm storm—**Kitsune**, flame and water intertwining, eyes glowing with purpose.

"I’ll handle the rhythm," Kael said, resting the **Stonefang Spear** on his shoulder.  
"Strike when I do. Let’s clean this up."

A quiet passed between the 60 elites.

And then all hell broke loose.

**The First Engagement**

The **first 11★ beast**, a Steelmane Basilisk, launched forward, mouth radiating sonic distortion. Its tail alone flattened buildings.

But it never reached them.

Kael blurred—faster than eyes, faster than thought. One slash—

***"Rowing the Spear Against the Waves."***

The creature's head was *cleaved in half*. No cry. No twitch. Just death.

A **12.6★ Lava-Spined Mantisaur** charged General Renshin’s squad, molten spikes erupting from its abdomen, its armor impenetrable by most tiered weaponry.

Kael flicked his wrist.

Cherry vanished, reappearing above its carapace.

*“Power Surge: Claw Arc.”*

A single strike split the entire monster from crown to core, lightning dancing in the air. The corpse steamed for a moment—then fell in two perfect halves.

To the east, a **12.9★ Sorrowfang Behemoth**, wide as a stadium and immune to mental tracking, moved to devour three units in a single step.

It never made contact.

Kitsune exhaled.

*“Purifying Ember: Spiral Bloom.”*

A wheel of blue flames and healing water wrapped around her and then launched—dissolving the beast’s outer shell and shattering the remaining bulk in a soundless explosion.

The troops below never even felt the impact.

**Momentum Turns**

The 60 elite soldiers began to move—not as individuals, but as extensions of Kael’s tempo. Every time he moved, they struck.

General Renshin led three units to flank a **12.2★ Cryoborne Gorilla**, whose icy skin repelled thermal attacks.

“Now!”

Kael feinted from the front, a distraction. Kitsune blinked behind and lit the beast’s back with liquid fire. The moment the frost cracked—

The general’s glaive slammed down, shattering its spine.

Colonel Moro’s squad cornered an **11.8★ Glimmercat**, whose phasing abilities made it untouchable. But Kael stabbed once—his spear extending midair, wrapped in spiritual force.

***“Pulse Echo Thrust.”***

The blade phased *with* the Glimmercat, bypassing its intangibility. The monster didn’t even scream—it simply vanished, erased from existence.

**The Battlefield Becomes a Choreographed Execution**

* A **12.1★ Bonewyrm** fell in a single upward slash, cleaved from chin to crown.
* A **11.7★ Thundercrush Stag** tried to outrun Cherry. It didn’t survive three seconds.
* A **13★ Phantom Colossus**, cloaked in illusions, met Kael’s spear and evaporated into threads of dust.

No elite soldier was left waiting for orders.

Kael didn’t give them commands—he gave them **opportunities.**

And they struck like gods reborn.

**The Tides Begin to Thin**

Of the 30 beasts in the **11–12★ range**, **17 had already fallen.**  
Of the **18 monsters at 12–13★**, **7 were dead**.  
Not a single injury had been reported.

It was no longer a fight.

It was a **demonstration.**

In that moment, as the battlefield lit with slashes of lightning, wind, and fire—  
As one-sided destruction echoed across every slope and trench—

**The soldiers began to believe again.**

Not in victory.

But in **Kael Ardyn.**

In the legend who moved ahead of them, striking down monsters as if he were the will of war itself.

**Chapter 122 – *Clash of Apex Titans (Part I)***

The wind itself **withdrew**, as if fearful to carry the scent of what approached.

From the shattered horizon of **Sector 5**, **seven monstrous silhouettes** emerged—each one a perversion of nature, evolved into something ancient and unnatural.

These were not merely powerful beasts.

They were **apex titans**, **each between 13.0 and 14.0★**, their bodies twisted by mutation and time into monstrous parodies of their former selves.

And now, they descended upon humanity.

**The Titans Emerge**

1. **Winged Boar** *(13.1★)*  
   Its massive body thundered with every wingbeat. Veins of obsidian crystal ran through its tusks and shoulders. Each breath it exhaled was a storm of wind blades.
2. **Scaly Giraffe** *(13.4★)*  
   Towering, plated with thick blue-green scales. Its neck moved like a serpent, eyes glowing with magnetic energy that disrupted ranged targeting.
3. **Serpent-Fanged Rat** *(13.0★)*  
   Hulking and grotesque, its fur matted with black oil. Two long venomous fangs curled outward, and its claws cracked stone like glass.
4. **Horned Stag** *(13.6★)*  
   Lean and long-limbed, its antlers pulsed with dark light. Every stomp caused psychic ruptures across the field.
5. **Flame-Tailed Lizard** *(13.3★)*  
   A blazing crimson tail spewed volcanic flame with every movement. Its armored hide shimmered with molten glyphs.
6. **Shadow Panther** *(13.7★)*  
   Silent and spectral, fading in and out of visibility. Its body moved like liquid darkness, and its claws struck from ten shadows at once.
7. **Fanged Eagle** *(13.2★)*  
   Wings vast enough to blot the sun, beak serrated like a sawblade. Each screech twisted gravity in waves.

**The Human Champions**

These titans were not left unanswered.

**Seven champions** of humanity advanced to intercept—each a legend in their own right:

* **Seiji Dran** *(14.0★)*, master of **Space Manipulation**, took on **two titans alone**.
* **Faye Illena** *(13.0★)*, the **psychic seer**, supported everyone—manipulating the monsters' minds and clouding their senses.
* The remaining five warriors each engaged a separate beast:
  + **Borran Kazume** *(12.5★, Radiation)* vs. Winged Boar
  + **Mirei Shadowcrest** *(13.4★, Phase Combat)* vs. Scaly Giraffe
  + **Shiori Ayame** *(12.2★, Blood Augmentation)* vs. Serpent-Fanged Rat
  + **Rein Yukihara** *(12.0★, Holy Fire)* vs. Flame-Tailed Lizard
  + **Tsuro Genbei** *(12.1★, Lightning Melee)* vs. Fanged Eagle

**Faye’s Eyes Open**

Standing in the eye of chaos, **Faye Illena** closed her eyes.

“Let them forget what they see… distort the past they remember…”

From her outstretched hands, a field of memory-scrambling psionic fog blanketed the field. To the beasts, allies became phantoms, and human attacks became unpredictable patterns.

The **Winged Boar** swung at air, eyes watering.  
The **Fanged Eagle** turned into a spiral, attacking its own tail mid-flight.  
The **Horned Stag** stumbled, psychic blasts misfiring.

It was the first and only time such monsters looked **confused.**

**Seiji Dran vs. Horned Stag & Shadow Panther**

**Two titans, both above 13.5★.**

But Seiji Dran’s **14.0★ power** made him a one-man army.

The **Horned Stag** charged, antlers releasing bursts of psychic fury that turned steel to mist.

*“Space Severance.”*

Seiji stepped forward and sliced the **air**. Space folded—cutting the psychic wave before it reached him. The stag’s momentum failed.  
In an instant, Seiji vanished—

—reappeared **on its back**.

“Collapse Vector.”

The stag’s own weight multiplied tenfold in a pulse. Its legs buckled. Antlers cracked.

From the shadows behind, the **Panther** leapt, claws extended—striking from all directions simultaneously.

But Seiji stepped **sideways in reality**. The claws swiped through **empty dimensional shells**.

*“Absolute Reversal.”*

In a blink, Seiji’s form rotated reality around himself—placing the Panther in front of the charging Stag. The two collided violently.

He stood untouched.

“You picked the wrong apex.”

**Borran Kazume vs. Winged Boar**

Borran’s body **radiated pulsing heat**, skin crackling with nuclear energy. His breath fogged the ground into glass.

The **Boar**, blinded by Faye’s illusions, crashed into ruined structures. Its tusks sliced through rubble.

“Containment Field: Gamma Lock.”

A sphere of pulsing green light enveloped the beast, slowing its speed. Borran’s fists glowed.

“Detonating Palm.”

He leapt, slamming both palms into the boar’s ribcage. A **miniature fusion burst** exploded on impact, hurling the beast across the battlefield in a spiral of ash and wind.

**Mirei Shadowcrest vs. Scaly Giraffe**

Mirei danced like a shadow on rippling water, **phasing in and out** of space.

The Giraffe’s magnetic pulses couldn’t lock on.

*“Sixth Form – Shifting Cascade.”*

She appeared behind its skull and slashed—only to phase through.

But it was a feint.

She reappeared **inside** its lower neck and tore outward.

Green blood sprayed skyward.

**Shiori Ayame vs. Serpent-Fanged Rat**

With every wound she took, Shiori’s power **grew**—blood glowing crimson.

The Rat’s venom grazed her—but her blood boiled, redirected, weaponized.

“Pulse Saturation.”

Her veins lit like circuits. She struck, fists becoming spears. The Rat screeched as its spine cracked.

One more strike—

“Hemorrhage Break.”

Its skull *burst* from the inside.

**Rein Yukihara vs. Flame-Tailed Lizard**

The battlefield turned into a sea of flame—but Rein stood in the center, cloak fluttering.

“Divine Ember.”

A white flame spiraled from his feet, forming a **sigil of purification**. Every time the lizard’s fire met his—

—it *died*.

Then Rein lunged, spear ignited in divine fire.

“Exorcising Brand!”

He plunged it into the lizard’s core. The creature howled as holy fire ate it from the inside out.

**Tsuro Genbei vs. Fanged Eagle**

Lightning danced on Tsuro’s skin, boots cracking the earth.

The Eagle swooped, warping gravity. Tsuro leapt upward—**straight into its maw**.

“Thunderheart Style—Roaring Heaven!”

A *sonic boom* exploded in the sky. His punch hit the Eagle’s jaw like a cannon—breaking beak, distorting its flight, and throwing it off course.

The sky flickered.

**Status – Halfway Mark**

* **3 titans weakened heavily** (Winged Boar, Serpent-Fanged Rat, Fanged Eagle)
* **1 titan gravely wounded** (Scaly Giraffe)
* **2 titans forced on the defensive by Seiji Dran** (Horned Stag, Shadow Panther)
* **1 still dueling in flame** (Flame-Tailed Lizard)

And not a single human casualty.

Faye whispered under her breath:

“Memory bends. Fate trembles. This battle… is ours to script.”

But the monsters had not yet played their final cards.

**Chapter 123: Ashes of the Titans**

The battlefield, once coordinated chaos, was now a theater of carnage. Fires raged across broken terrain, energy blasts sizzled through the air, and the scent of ozone, blood, and beast ichor hung thick over the valley. The final wave had descended.

**Phase One: The Cleansing**

Kael soared across the blood-drenched skies, leading a division of elite 10★ warriors and tacticians into the heart of the rampaging horde.

**200 Beasts (10–11★)** had surged at once, their howls shaking the cliffs. Waiting for them were **200 ten-man strike squads**, each with a **10+★ commander** and carrying advanced **beast bombs**—detonations that laced their surroundings with anti-beast resonance to disorient and weaken the monsters.

Each squad fought like a well-oiled machine. Sonic spears, magnetic pulse rifles, flame-based glaives, and phase knives shredded the charging beasts with military precision. The commanders led with devastating elemental techniques—flame vortexes, stone spears, and even localized gravity wells.

Within **fifteen minutes**, most of the horde lay dead or dying. Beast bombs exploded in synchronized pulses, reducing survivors to ash.

**Phase Two: The Advance of the Greater Beasts**

As the dust began to settle, **30 monsters at 11–12★** launched a second assault. These creatures were larger, smarter, and carried minor elemental mutations.

**45 of the best 10–11★ elites** confronted them—agile specialists who had battled on frontlines for over a decade. Dual-element attacks were synchronized, combining ice traps with thunderstrikes or blinding light with shadow snares.

Each elite team took down a beast with focused fury. Still, they suffered heavy strain.

**Phase Three: The Rise of the Titans**

**18 beasts at 12–13★** emerged from the rear lines—towering abominations of rage and mutation. Some had wings of molten bone, others had steel-like hides and venomous maws.

Even for the hardened elites, these monsters were overwhelming. Kael saw this and dove into the fray.

**Kael's Assault**

* **Beast 1: Four-Armed Ox-Devil (12.8★)** – Kael struck once with *Rowing the Spear Against the Waves*, collapsing the beast’s chest and spine in an instant.
* **Beast 2: Iron-Shelled Wyrm (12.5★)** – A spiral lunge imbued with *Spear of Thunderous Flow* cracked its armored scales. A follow-up *Void Step* decapitated it mid-roar.
* **Beast 3: Spiked Mantis Tyrant (12.9★)** – It parried his first strike but failed to stop the third. Kael cleaved through its central core with a radiant spear arc.

In **less than 10 minutes**, Kael took down **six beasts**, helping the elites defeat the rest. When the last one fell, a tremor shook the valley—the battle with the **7 Titans** was escalating.

**Phase Four: The Collapse of Control**

Kael rushed toward the heart of the battlefield, where **7 mutated Titans at 13–14★** had engaged the 7 elite warriors:

* **Winged Boar (13.2★)** – Faced by **Tsuro Genbei**, whose lightning assaults were potent but not enough.
* **Scaly Giraffe (13.1★)** – Fought by **Shiori Ayame**, whose blood augmentation powers clashed poorly with the beast’s hardened scales.
* **Serpent-Fanged Rat (13.4★)** – Locked with **Rein Yukihara**, whose holy fire had nearly burned the creature’s head off—until it mutated a second set of eyes and counter-attacked.

They were now faltering.

**Faye Illena**, exhausted, collapsed to her knees. Her psychic energy, used to manipulate the monsters’ senses and memory, had dried up.

Suddenly, the beasts regained full coordination and retaliated violently.

* **Rein** was thrown into a shattered cliffside, bleeding and burned.
* **Tsuro**’s armor cracked as the Winged Boar slammed him with a sonic charge.
* **Shiori** coughed blood, her arm limp, eyes wide with disbelief as the giraffe's tail lanced through her defense.

**Borran Kazume**, despite his 12.5★ power, was barely holding off the **Flame-Tailed Lizard (13.6★)**, using radiation surges to keep the beast’s regeneration in check.

Faye shouted weakly, “They’re adapting—!”

**Seiji and Mirei's Victory**

Meanwhile, **Seiji Dran** faced down **two Titans at once**:

* **Horned Stag (13.7★)** – A walking siege engine.
* **Shadow Panther (14.0★)** – Silent and phase-slipping like a ghost.

Seiji activated his full power—**spatial lattice convergence**—suspending local gravity and folding movement vectors.

In a blur of spatial rifts, he cut the **Stag’s legs**, then opened a **zero-vector rift** that crushed the Panther in implosive silence.

With his final thrust, a condensed spatial spear pierced both cores at once. The Titans collapsed.

**Mirei Shadowcrest**, phasing between planes, delivered a fatal blow to the **Fanged Eagle (13.3★)** with her flickering daggers. Her attacks slipped through the creature’s defenses, shredding its mind as much as its flesh.

**Kael Joins the Fray**

As the remaining four Titans surged forward to finish the exhausted warriors, Kael landed with **Cherry and Kitsune** flanking him—each radiating terrifying power.

* **Winged Boar** turned to face Kael. A moment later, a lightning-infused spear lanced through its skull. It died mid-charge.
* **Scaly Giraffe** reared back—Cherry blurred, claws glowing with crackling energy, and **Claw Arc** severed the neck in a flash.
* **Serpent-Fanged Rat** leaped—Kitsune’s twin-element breath burned it from within, while Kael ended it with a piercing dive.
* **Flame-Tailed Lizard** backed away—too late. Kael’s *Heaven Piercer* shattered its ribs and extinguished its flames.

**Aftermath**

All seven Titans lay slain. The battlefield had gone silent.

Kael turned to the wounded:

* Rein coughed, eyes opening. “...You came.”
* Tsuro nodded weakly. “Would’ve been over... if not for you.”
* Shiori smiled faintly. “Still breathing.”

Kael helped them up. The battle was over.

Faye, pale and trembling, whispered, “We won.”

Seiji, now calm, joined Kael. “It’s not over. But this war... this day... we’ve taken it back.”

**Chapter 124: The Crimson Price**

The sky above the battlefield was blackened with smoke and falling ash. The Titans had fallen, but the war had not yet ended.

Kael stood atop a ridge, spear still in hand, surveying the world below—**a ruined valley now soaked with blood, energy, and death**. Behind him, Cherry licked her scorched fur, and Kitsune’s flames dimmed to a low blue shimmer, flickering in the breeze.

The higher-tier monsters were gone.

But the second wave still raged below.

**The Lower Fields of War**

**300,000 beasts ranging from 8★ to 9★**, and **25,000 9–10★ beasts** had flooded the lower defense rings. Though lacking the devastating powers of their higher-ranked kin, they overwhelmed with sheer volume, cunning, and unpredictability.

With the frontline elites depleted, the remaining soldiers—those who still had breath, blood, and blades—rallied.

**Kael and his team** descended to the fields with the **60 elite warriors** who had survived the Titan offensive. Their presence reignited morale.

* Seiji, blood-splattered but unbowed, guided spatial strikes to carve massive canyons through beast lines.
* Mirei flickered between flanks, assassinating key monster leaders.
* Cherry and Kitsune surged into the densest clusters, wreaking havoc and shielding injured comrades.

Even the wounded elite soldiers rejoined the lines where they could—many choosing to die standing rather than rest.

The **regular armies**, bolstered by the coordinated efforts of their surviving commanders, began to press the beasts back.

**The Toll of Victory**

By dusk, the tide finally broke.

Roars turned to whimpers.

The last of the **8★ and 9★ beasts** were exterminated in the **burning trenches of Line Theta**. The final **9.5★ monster**, a crystalline hyena, was pinned down and shredded by concentrated elemental bombardment.

A triumphant cry echoed from the lower ranks—but it was followed by silence.

Too many voices were missing.

**Of the 5,00,000+ soldiers at 9★ and 10★ strength, 43,249 had fallen.**

Their bodies lay in rows—some in pieces, some still clutching their weapons, defiant even in death.

**Of the 200 elite soldiers** (those above 10★), **18 were confirmed KIA**, their names already being etched into crystal memorials.

Only the **60 elite warriors**, led and protected by Kael’s intervention, stood fully intact. They had pushed past human limits, their unity unshakable under Kael’s banner.

**The Fallen Seven**

Three of the **Seven Warriors** who had battled the Titans were now near-death:

* **Tsuro Genbei** – internal bleeding, a shattered spine, lungs punctured by his own ribs. Kept alive only by Faye’s hasty psychic stasis.
* **Shiori Ayame** – her blood-control had overstrained her body; her heart had stopped twice. Kept breathing only by emergency flame-seal medic tech.
* **Rein Yukihara** – third-degree burns across 80% of his body, his holy flames now extinguished, his fate uncertain.

They were evacuated under heavy guard.

The cost of victory had become clear.

**The Beginning of the Next Storm**

As night fell, **emergency medical stations** lit up with glowing sigils and desperate prayers. Drones carried the wounded across shattered terrain, while medics raced between cries and flickering life monitors.

Kael remained still, his eyes locked on the distant northern peaks—where a new tremor rumbled beneath the earth.

Behind him, the high command convened beneath a temporary energy dome.

* **Seiji Dran**, silent and grim.
* **General Rika Oosawa**, her arm in a sling.
* **Strategist Nema Kirisaki**, issuing casualty tallies with blood-stained papers.
* **Director Varo Henn**, already calculating resource depletion.
* And Kael, who stood apart, his presence unspoken but absolute.

They all knew what was coming.

**The third wave.**

**The final surge.**

**The largest army of monsters ever recorded.**

The chapter closed not with fanfare, but with exhausted breaths and muffled weeping.

The defenders had won the day—

—but **tomorrow** would demand **everything**.

**End of Chapter 124**  
*Next: Chapter 125 – “The Maw of the Storm”*

Would you like to begin Chapter 125 now?

**You said:**

chapter 125, the third wave is expected to arrive only after 18 hours, but this wave is more organized, 5,50,000 8-9 star beasts, 65,000 9-10 star beasts, 290 10-11 star beasts, 71 11-12 star beasts, 22 12-13 star beasts, 15 13-14 star beasts, 11 14-15 star beasts, 4 15-16 star beasts and the 16-17 star beasts location or number is still not found by according to past scans 1 is confirmed. The meeting hall was grim, even kael felt the pressure, these numbers were huge. they currently only had 4.5+ lakh of 9-10 star soldiers, 190+ 10-10.5 star soldiers, 45 10.5-11 star soldiers, 15 11-12 soldiers and Borran Kazume (12.5★, Radiation) , Mirei Shadowcrest (13.4★, Phase Combat), Seiji Dran (14.0★) master of Space Manipulation,Faye Illena (13.0★) the psychic seer, Kael (13.5 star), cherry ,kitsune(both at 13.5). The difference is very huge. the meeting hall is silent on the analysis. The support from the southern and western troops have yet to reach them and will still need more time to arrive(15 hrs approx) . they will bring 3 lakh troops with 40 individuals above 10 star. The food that is served to the soldiers are the meat of 10-14 star beasts. all the soldiers from 9- 12 star are to eat this meat. even though consummtion of higher star power than them might cause higher mutation instability, during this adverse time they will all have to eat this to increase their powers immediately. end of chapter with discussions ongoing. The three commanders are (seiji dran -14 star central division,Commander Ayame Sudo of the Eastern Division 11.7 star, Commander Riku Tanabe 11.5 star ).

**ChatGPT said:**

**Chapter 125: The Silence Before Extinction**

The ash had barely settled.

Faint winds carried the scent of death across the scorched plains, while medics and survivors moved like phantoms through ruined outposts, retrieving what little they could salvage.

But all eyes were now turned not toward the dead, but toward the **north**—where tremors grew stronger by the hour.

**The Intelligence Briefing**

Inside the newly erected war dome, a hush hung thick and absolute.

The translucent canopy overhead showed flickers of lightning from distant storm fronts, but inside, even breath seemed sacrilegious.

On the central display hovered a cold, brutal forecast:

* **5,50,000 beasts (8★–9★)**
* **65,000 beasts (9★–10★)**
* **290 beasts (10★–11★)**
* **71 beasts (11★–12★)**
* **22 beasts (12★–13★)**
* **15 beasts (13★–14★)**
* **11 beasts (14★–15★)**
* **4 beasts (15★–16★)**
* **??? beast(s) (16★–17★)** – *one confirmed*

A collective silence fell as the sheer enormity of the third wave took shape.

**The Defenders' Line**

The remaining forces were meager in comparison.

* **4.5 lakh soldiers at 9★–10★**
* **190+ elite soldiers (10★–10.5★)**
* **45 advanced elites (10.5★–11★)**
* **15 soldiers at 11★–12★**

Among them, the frontline spear:

* **Borran Kazume** – *12.5★, Radiation Domain*
* **Mirei Shadowcrest** – *13.4★, Phase Combat*
* **Seiji Dran** – *14.0★, Master of Space Manipulation*
* **Faye Illena** – *13.0★, Psychic Seer and Memory Architect*
* **Kael Ardyn** – *13.5★, Stonefang Spear and Spiritual Perception*
* **Cherry** – *13.5★, Lightning Beast Mutation*
* **Kitsune** – *13.5★, Dual Flame-Healing Fox*

Even **Kael**, the warrior who had torn through monsters like wind through leaves, furrowed his brow at the figures. His grip on the spear at his back instinctively tightened.

The room felt **too quiet**.

**Command and Dread**

At the helm stood the three highest active commanders:

* **Seiji Dran**, Central Division Commander (*14.0★*) – calm but unblinking, his fingers clasped behind his back.
* **Commander Ayame Sudo**, Eastern Division (*11.7★*) – her right arm in a sling, her voice cold and analytical.
* **Commander Riku Tanabe**, Northern Division (*11.5★*) – recently returned from the front, his eyes still bloodshot.

None spoke for a long moment.

Then Ayame’s voice, sharp as frost:

“We don’t have enough.”

No one argued.

Tanabe added grimly,

“The Southern and Western support units are en route—three lakh soldiers, forty high-tier elites. But they’ll take another **fifteen hours**.”

Seiji nodded once.

“That gives us **eighteen hours** to prepare. We fight without them if we must.”

**A Risky Solution: Feast of the Fallen**

In the mess halls, tension was matched only by hunger.

Tables groaned under the weight of steaming, charred monster meat—roasted limbs and cores of **10★ to 14★ beasts**, freshly slain from the second wave. Their flesh still pulsed faintly with residual energy.

And yet, soldiers hesitated.

They had all heard the stories—**consuming monster flesh beyond your star grade could cause violent mutations**. Unstable elemental shifts. Collapse of internal pathways. Even *mental breakdowns*.

But there was no choice.

One commander declared:

“If we are to survive what comes next... we eat.”

From 9★ soldiers to 12★ elites, they dug in—hesitant at first, then desperately.

Some screamed during the ingestion—cores fusing, bodies trembling under the overload. A few even passed out. Others convulsed before stabilizing.

But the majority endured.

**Their power surged.**

**Meanwhile: The Ongoing Strategy Council**

Inside the command dome, data feeds streamed.

Every move had to be perfect. Each squad placed with surgical precision. Each beast countered with the right force, ability, or formation. They could not afford mismatches anymore—not with **15 monsters above 14★** incoming.

Faye Illena, pale and leaning heavily against a support pillar, whispered to Seiji:

“The large one still hides… I can’t sense its presence. But it’s **watching us**.”

Seiji turned, eyes narrowing.

“Then it’s intelligent.”

Kael remained silent. He could feel it too.

A presence. Just out of sight. Like a mountain with eyes.

**Chapter 126: The Tension of Eight Hours**

The skies were heavy with dust and dread.

Eight hours remained until the third wave struck—less time than it took to fully repair a spear, let alone an army. And yet, transformation was unfolding all around.

**The Awakening of Power**

The decision to consume high-star beast flesh had been controversial… but it worked.

From makeshift barracks to half-collapsed bunkers, soldiers writhed through breakthrough after breakthrough, the **resonance of cores and essence saturating the air like crackling lightning**.

The results were nothing short of extraordinary.

* Of the **4.5+ lakh 9–10★ troops**, over **40 soldiers** broke through into **true 10★ power**, forming their own radiant signatures.
* **80 fell ill**, wracked by instability and essence backlash—now stabilized but unconscious under medical care.
* The **rest surged** to the **peak of 9★**, hovering between **9.5–9.9★**, brimming with potential and rage.

Among the **180+ 10–10.5★ elites**, every single one crossed the threshold. Their auras now throbbed dangerously at the edge of **11★**. Soldiers whispered their names like legends in motion.

Of the **45 former 10.5–11★ veterans**, **30 had stepped into the 11–11.5★** range—each a one-man army now, commanding enough power to level minor settlements alone.

And the **15 top-level soldiers**, the strongest under commanders?

**All of them now stood tall at 12★.**

**The Rise of the Vanguard**

But even among the exceptional, **four individuals** had transcended expectations—shattering limits in silence and steel.

* **Borran Kazume**, long the lone wielder of radiation among the elites, broke through to **13★**, his very presence warping light around him. Heat shimmered off his body even while he stood still.
* **Faye Illena**, the quiet psychic seer, endured a mental backlash that nearly liquified her mind. But she emerged with her gift evolved—her eyes now glowing faint violet, her whispers echoing twice. She had become **13.5★**, her **memory architecture** more refined than ever.
* **Kael Ardyn**, amidst meditation beside Cherry and Kitsune, underwent a subtle but potent breakthrough. A new spiral rune etched itself into his spear's shaft, glowing with earthen blue. His **spiritual perception deepened**, sensing thought, movement, and intent. His power now: **13.7★**.
* **Mirei Shadowcrest**, having meditated in shadow for six hours without food or sleep, emerged from her phasing trance in absolute silence—her dual blades humming with translucent silver arcs. She, too, stood beside Kael at **13.7★**.

The battlefield now had its vanguard.

**Deployment Underway**

The war maps lit up with shifting sigils and markers.

Commander **Seiji Dran** stood at the center table, floating projections shifting with every tactical update. Next to him, **Commander Ayame Sudo** and **Commander Riku Tanabe** coordinated the redistribution of personnel.

“Newly advanced elites are to be pulled to reinforce **zone gamma** and **eastern trench-line**,” Ayame ordered.

“Radiation units are now resistant to the ice-breathers,” Riku added, eyes scanning a blinking red sector. “Shift them north. Have Kazume lead.”

Seiji turned to Kael and Mirei.

“You’ll be spearheading the counteroffensive. If that 16★ monster shows up… you’ll be our only shot at keeping it contained until reinforcements arrive.”

Kael nodded, his gaze calm but steeled.

In the distance, **Cherry** and **Kitsune** quietly began circulating among the beast teams, lending what healing and elemental balancing they could. Their strength was known—both now stood equal to Kael in raw star power, and stronger in specific elemental bursts.

**Chapter 127: “Before the Roar”**

The countdown had dwindled to **three hours**.

Above the command tent, storm clouds churned unnaturally — twisted by the residual essence of hundreds of advancing beasts. Thunder rumbled, not from the skies, but from the ground. The earth itself trembled beneath the marching tide.

Yet within the fortified valley, the defenders had made their final moves.

**Sector Assignments Finalized**

The great holographic map cast a cold glow on the faces of generals and elites alike. The battlefield had been divided into **six main sectors**: **1, 2, 3, 7, 8, and 9** — each spanning several kilometers.

Across these sectors, the **massive wave of 5,50,000 8–9★ beasts** had been confirmed, with **90,000 monsters** approaching **each sector**.

To match them, **58,000 soldiers per sector** had been deployed — all recently pushed to **9.8★ average strength** through accelerated mutation training and beast-core sustenance. These troops formed the solid frontlines, bracing with reinforced gear and massive essence shields.

* **Total deployed to counter 8–9★ beasts: 3.36 lakh soldiers**
* **Tactics: Mobile formation lines, rotating essence boosts, tiered healing units.**

**Mid-Tier Beasts – Split Response**

Behind the frontlines stood the mid-tiers—soldiers now walking the edge of power.

**65,000 9–10★ beasts**

* Counterforce: **80,000 elite troops** (split evenly across the six sectors)
* Strategy: High-agility sweeper units, formation shifts under psionic guidance, continuous relays with aerial drones and terrain-mapped artillery.

**290 10–11★ beasts**

* Counterforce: **22,000 soldiers**, divided into **338 squads of 65 soldiers each**.
* Each squad was led by at least **one 10★+ elite**, using joint tactics, coordinated spear formations, and essence grenades to stagger and corner targets.

**The Upper Beast Response Teams**

Beyond the noise of battalions and strategy, a more delicate battle was being prepared in silence — the kind that determined whether they lived or were simply **delayed casualties**.

**71 11–12★ beasts**

* Tasked Force: **140 soldiers** at **10.7–10.9★**, led by **15 high-caliber elites (11.0–11.5★)**
* Tactics: Strike-lock-and-fade cycles, layered defense runes, advanced disruption arrows from Faye’s seers.

**22 12–13★ beasts**

* Strike Team: **60 10.7–10.9★ soldiers** and **10 11–11.5★ elites**
* Special Armament: **Beast Core Bombs**, constructed using refined **12★ and 13★ monster cores**, designed to release a concussive elemental burst capable of disabling 13★ beasts momentarily.

**15 13–14★ beasts**

* Hunter Team: **20 11–11.5★ elites** and **15 12★ elites**
* Weaponry: Enhanced core bombs with sharpened essence fracturing, capable of inflicting critical injuries to even **14★ monsters**.
* Tactics: Shadowed strikes, psionic redirection, core destabilization synchronized via Faye’s mental grid.

**And Then, The Gap**

They had made the best of what they had.

But even with perfect execution—**there was a hole they could not fill**.

* **11 beasts** at **14–15★**
* **4 beasts** at **15–16★**
* **1 unknown 16–17★ monster**, **still untracked**, location undetected.

“Even if we use all three remaining energy cannons… we can maybe take down **two of the 15★ beasts**,” murmured Commander Ayame, her voice dry.

“We’re not even talking about the true apex threat,” Commander Riku muttered. “If that 16-star beast strikes in the wrong place, it will tear through our sectors like paper.”

Even Kael was silent.

At **13.7★**, he was among the strongest fighters on the planet… and yet, even he couldn’t say confidently he could stop a 16★ beast, not alone.

Cherry, tail bristling with tension, stood beside him. Kitsune quietly flared a blue ring of flame, anxious.

Above them, Seiji’s eyes burned with the weight of reality.

**Chapter 128 – The Southern Winds and Western Blades**

The clock ticked down — **one hour** until the Third Wave's devastating arrival.

The tension that had choked the northern battlefront began to loosen as the dark skies split open—not from monsters, but from hope.

**Reinforcements had arrived.**

Two massive convoys tore through the ash-laden horizon, bearing the crests of the **Western** and **Southern Divisions**. From the east-facing ridges, the Central and Eastern Division soldiers raised their heads, stunned as the final hope descended.

**250,000 soldiers. Forty-six elites. Two legends.**

At the forward command post, Commanders Kaoru Mizuchi and Hiroshi Kanda disembarked side by side, their presence alone parting the wind and calming hearts.

“Late... but not too late,” Kaoru said with a faint smile, her wind-swept cloak fluttering as she stepped forward.  
“Let’s end this properly,” replied Hiroshi, his sharp gaze cutting through the crowd.

Their arrival marked the joining of Japan’s remaining strength. Kaoru Mizuchi—**The Tempest Blade**, wielding a 13.4★ wind affinity—stood shoulder to shoulder with **Commander Hiroshi Kanda**, 11.1★ master tactician of the South. The other regional commanders—Seiji Dran, Tyros Vellein, and the Eastern and Northern generals—gathered quickly for the final strategic synchronisation.

The **250,000 reinforcements**, all seasoned warriors ranging from 9★ to 10★, were swiftly integrated:

* **180,000 soldiers** bolstered the frontline—**30,000** to each of the **six sectors** already bracing against the 8–10★ beasts. Each sector now had **88,000 soldiers** strong enough to stand toe-to-toe with elite monsters.
* The remaining **70,000 soldiers** (9–10★) were reassigned to support elite deployments targeting higher-tier threats—namely the 10–12★ class monsters.

And then came the elite roster. Forty-three warriors of renown, bearing power between 10★ and 14★, emerged like legends from old stories:

**🟥 Western Region (Blade & Defense Command)**

* **Kaoru Mizuchi** – *The Tempest Blade* – 13.4★ – Wind-enhanced swordsmanship – Osaka
* **Yoru Seiran** – *Whisper of Blades* – 12.1★ – Illusion and stealth – Kyoto
* **Rikuto “Stonevein” Jura** – *Earth Bastion* – 12.3★ – Earth durability – Kobe

**🟦 Southern Region (Mobility & Energy Combat)**

* **General Hideo Ren** – *The Timebreaker* – 13.2★ – Localized time manipulation – Kagoshima
* **Mara Kanzuki** – *Ashfire Monarch* – 12.8★ – Pyrokinesis + Beast Control – Fukuoka
* **Tenjin Ralnor** – *Stormwind Fist* – 12.6★ – Wind-elemental martial combat – Miyazaki

These legends were joined by **Cherry** and **Kitsune**—Kael's mutated beast companions, both now at **13.5★**, their forms pulsing with suppressed power. Alongside them stood three more unshakable titans:

* **Mirei Shadowcrest** – 13.7★ – Kaoru’s second blade and master of shadows
* **Faye Illena** – 13.5★ – Aether-enhanced bow techniques
* **Borran Kazume** – 13★ – Monolith-class brute force user, shield master

Together, this coalition of power reshaped the elite plans.

* The **71 beasts (11–12★)** would now be tackled by **140 elite soldiers** and the **66,000 additional 9–10★ troops**, organized into dynamic strike pods under elite leadership.
* The **22 beasts (12–13★)** were targeted by **60 soldiers (10.7–10.9★)** and **10 elites (11–11.5★)** wielding **beast core bombs** made from 12–13★ cores.
* The **15 monsters (13–14★)** would be confronted by **20 elites (11–11.5★)** and **15 12★ warriors**, also armed with devastating beast core bombs capable of injuring 14★ titans.

But the true test—the unsolvable problem—remained.

The **11 monsters (14–15★)**.

This category was beyond most. But now, the tide had shifted. Every elite from 10–12★ not assigned, including:

* Tenjin
* Mara
* Hideo
* Rikuto
* Yoru
* Kaoru
* Cherry
* Kitsune
* Mirei
* Faye
* Borran

…would be deployed together in coordinated formations. The impossible had become… survivable.

But only **two energy beam cannons** remained operable—capable of slaying only **two** 15★ monsters.

The final four threats remained.

“We’ll handle them,” Kael said quietly, stepping forward.

The command tent fell silent.

He wasn’t alone.

**Kael Ardyn – 13.7★**, bolstered by **Spiritual Perception**, stood beside **Seiji Dran – 14★**, the peak of modern spear mastery. Though neither had fully awakened their limits, their synergistic techniques and ability to fight beyond their level gave them a fighting chance.

“No one else can,” Seiji said, resting his hand on Kael’s shoulder.  
“So we will.”

The commanders nodded. No objections. There wasn’t time for doubt.

The final hour passed with a different energy.

Not despair.

But **resolve**.

Soldiers stood taller. Elites gathered in silence. Bombs were armed. Weapons drawn. Battlefields prepared.

**The Third Wave was coming.** But this time, humanity would meet it with a united front of unparalleled strength.

And though the sky had darkened, a wind from the south and west now swept across the land—rising, howling, singing of hope.

**Chapter 129 – When the Sky Cracks Open**

It began at **0700 hours**.

The wind stilled. The clouds thickened into a sunless dome. And then, as if the heavens had been sliced open, the skies bled **darkness and roars**.

**The Third Wave had arrived.**

From the distant horizon, they surged.

First came the low thrum — a pressure in the air, like thunder approaching not from above, but from all around. Then, a crawling shadow spilled over the northern hills, rolling like a black tsunami. Trees snapped. The land trembled. Entire cliffs began to crumble beneath the weight of what approached.

And then they could see them.

**Beasts.**

So many that counting them became meaningless.

**🟥 Third Wave Composition**

* **550,000 beasts** (8★–9★)
* **65,000 beasts** (9★–10★)
* **290 beasts** (10★–11★)
* **71 beasts** (11★–12★)
* **22 beasts** (12★–13★)
* **15 beasts** (13★–14★)
* **11 beasts** (14★–15★)
* **4 beasts** (15★–16★)

**🟨 Sector Deployment & Beast Distribution:**

The Northern front was divided into **six key sectors** — each spanning kilometers of terrain — from mountainous chokepoints to open plains and fractured river valleys.

**Lower-ranked beasts (8★–11★)** were evenly spread:

* **Each sector faced:**
  + ~91,500 beasts (8★–9★)
  + ~10,800 beasts (9★–10★)
  + ~48–49 beasts (10★–11★)

**Higher-ranked monsters (11★–16★)** were more selective:

| **Tier** | **Count** | **Assigned Engagement** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 11★–12★ | 71 | Strike Pods + 10★–12★ elites |
| 12★–13★ | 22 | 60 (10.7–10.9★) + 10 elites (11–11.5★) + core bombs |
| 13★–14★ | 15 | 20 elites (11–11.5★) + 15 (12★) + core bombs |
| 14★–15★ | 11 | 10+ elites above 12.5★; Kaoru, Cherry, Kitsune, others |
| 15★–16★ | 4 | Seiji & Kael pair + energy cannons (x2) |

**🟩 Sector Breakdown**

Each **sector** had the following **combined forces** (after reinforcement from Western and Southern Divisions):

* **88,000 soldiers** (9★–10★)
* **Several elite units (10★–12★)**
* **Support squads** equipped with healing tech, portable shields, beast-traps, and mortars

The plan was simple: **contain the tide** until the elite units broke the monster chain of command.

But the reality was never so kind.

**🟦 Sector One – Mountains of Uraken**

The beasts came leaping over the peaks — large, armored quadrupeds with metallic bone plating and jagged tails. Snow evaporated under their heat. Wind howled, not from nature, but from their charge.

Soldiers stationed along the icy ridgelines braced behind barrier bunkers.

“Hold the line! Engage at 200 meters!”  
“Spears to front! Archers above! Remember your training!”

The first clash was thunder made flesh.

Screams. Metal upon claw. Plasma bolts lanced through the sky. Earth shattered with every step of the stampeding monsters.

Yet the soldiers stood.

**88,000 warriors** — tired, bruised, afraid — and still unyielding.

**🟦 Sector Two – River Delta Basin**

In Sector Two, monsters surged like floodwaters — serpentine creatures with shimmering fins and poison sacs, crawling from below the broken waterways.

Mirei Shadowcrest, one of Kaoru’s elites, stood waist-deep in rushing currents, her shadows dancing around her.

“If you let fear in… the river takes you. Let instinct carry your blade.”

She vanished into the flood like a phantom — her blades silencing entire swarms without sound. Behind her, Southern soldiers fired barrage after barrage.

Even when acid hissed on armor and cries echoed, no one fell back.

**🟦 Sector Three – Eastern Plains**

Here, the beasts came en masse — wolf-like mutants in the thousands, their roars a chorus of hunger.

General Tenjin Ralnor dropped into the center of a frontline squad with a grin.

“Let’s stretch a little, shall we?”

Wind exploded from his fists, sending shockwaves that shattered hundreds in a single blow. Still they came.

The soldiers beside him fought with grit — knowing the man beside them was once a myth.

**🟦 Sector Four – Broken Ravines**

Sector Four was a jagged maze of stone and collapsed tunnels. Perfect for ambush.

And ambush the monsters did.

Crab-legged horrors, insects the size of tanks, swarmed from underground, dragging defenders into sinkholes.

Kaoru herself led this charge.

“Cover the wounded! I’ll carve the path.”

Her **Tempest Blade** danced through the air — elegant, merciless. Winds spiraled like blades of their own. In her wake, monsters fell in silence.

But her eyes were distant. Focused.

**This wasn’t the end. Not yet.**

**🟦 Sector Five – Treeblight Grove**

The monsters here were airborne — winged serpents with bladed feathers and sonic screeches.

Mara Kanzuki stood atop a scorched hill, her flames already wrapping around her in a crimson vortex.

“Let them fly. I’ll bring them down.”

Fire bloomed like a lotus beneath her feet.

Soldiers rallied behind her, their own weapons burning with her blessing. The sky itself shimmered red.

**🟦 Sector Six – Northern Flats**

The widest sector. The most exposed.

Rikuto Jura, “Stonevein,” raised entire walls of hardened earth as beasts tried to flood through.

Behind him, Faye Illena loosed arrow after glowing arrow — each a whisper of death.

“Don’t waste a breath. Every second counts.”

**🟥 The Emotions Beneath the Steel**

Even the bravest could feel it.

That deep, gnawing terror when **550,000 monsters** move like a living sea toward you. That hopeless whisper in the back of the mind:

“We cannot stop this.”

And yet… no one ran.

Some wept quietly behind helmets. Some held tokens — photographs, carvings, keepsakes. A few muttered names under their breath.

But all of them raised their weapons.

**🟦 The Heroes Watch**

From a command ridge above, Kael and Seiji stood side by side.

The first wave clashed below — a hurricane of war. Explosions thundered. Beast roars drowned all else.

Kael's grip tightened around the **Stonefang Spear**. Cherry crouched beside him, tail flicking with growing static. Kitsune’s eyes burned blue.

“It’s worse than predicted,” Kael murmured.  
“They came in greater numbers,” Seiji nodded. “And the stronger ones are waiting.”

“We’ll stop them,” Cherry growled.  
“We must,” whispered Kitsune. “Or nothing will remain.”

Far behind them, energy cannons powered up with deafening hums — preparing for the four 15★–16★ monsters still beyond the horizon.

Kaoru, Mara, Tenjin, Hideo, and the other elites gathered their forces. All of them had tasted battle before.

But today? Today, the world would change.

And not all of them would survive.

**Chapter 130 – Steel and Stars Collide**

The first thirty minutes of the Third Wave were nothing short of hell.

All six sectors burned with conflict. Firestorms howled across the Grove. Shadow battles raged in the Ravines. Ice clashed with fang, wind with claw.

But above this chaos, something greater unfolded.

From the skies, **Strike Pods** streaked across the battlefield like falling stars — elite assault teams launched at impossible angles. Each team had one mission:

**Target. Engage. Kill.**

Their enemies were no longer the swarm.

They were monsters whose auras cracked the earth. Creatures that shimmered with internal power, intellect gleaming in feral eyes. They were the generals of the beast tide.

And humanity sent its finest.

**🔻The 11★–12★ Monsters: 71 Titans of Control**

The first of them landed with a roar that ruptured a nearby bunker. A hulking bear-like beast coated in obsidian armor, each step a quake. Eyes glowing crimson, it raised both arms and **slammed the ground** — sending shockwaves in a five-hundred-meter radius.

Strike Pod Alpha crashed into it from above.

Three warriors.

* **Erien Dais**, a glaive-user with kinetic charge techniques.
* **Voss Altren**, a psionic disruption specialist.
* **Hailey Rue**, an elite scout who could phase-blink in six-meter bursts.

“Left flank—Voss, now!”

Erien’s glaive spun with a whistling howl, striking the beast’s shoulder. Sparks erupted, bone met steel, and then came the counter.

The beast’s paw lashed out, clipping Voss mid-air and sending him into a cratered rock wall. Bones cracked. Blood misted.

“He’s alive! Cover him!” Hailey shouted, flickering into view behind the beast’s ear.

Her blade drove deep — not enough to kill, but enough to anger. Enough to blind.

Then Erien did the impossible.

“Charging—Level Four kinetic bind—”

He stabbed the glaive into the earth. Energy surged from his limbs, chaining the beast to the ground.

“Now, Hailey—FINISH IT!”

A shimmer. A blur.

Hailey drove her dagger straight into the beast’s eye socket. Once. Twice. A third.

It howled. Twitched. Fell.

One down.

Across all six sectors, **teams like them struck simultaneously**.

Monsters shrieked and flailed, but these weren't ordinary foes. They fought with intent — elemental techniques, pack strategy, even feints.

In Sector Three, a thunder-spitting beast shaped like a metallic serpent struck down **four elite troopers**, rupturing their armor with precise volt-arcs. They fell.

But then came **Kei Juno**, wielding twin sabers with built-in arc-siphons.

“You like lightning?” she said grimly. “Let me return the favor.”

Her sabers drank in the volts. Her limbs sizzled, burned — but she screamed and lunged. The sabers met flesh.

The beast writhed.

It died electrified by its own stolen power.

By hour’s end, **57 of the 71 monsters were slain**, but not without cost.

**38 elite fighters wounded. 9 killed. 1 missing.**

But the line held.

**🔻The 12★–13★ Monsters: 22 Commanders of Chaos**

They came in coordinated triads — spider-wyrms with layered exoskeletons, telekinetic leapers, and one that seemed to manipulate **magnetic fields**, pulling weapons from the hands of soldiers mid-flight.

Against them:

* **60 elite warriors (10.7–10.9★)**
* **10 high-command elites (11–11.5★)**
* Armed with **core bombs**: detonation spheres that condensed a beast’s essence to rupture their power circuits from within.

**Battle Group Echo – Sector Five Ridge**

They faced a molten-armored lizard with twelve burning eyes, each capable of unleashing micro-beams that severed limbs and seared holes in reinforced armor.

Captain **Orlan Meiz**, wielding a long spear of irradiated crystal, led the charge.

“It’s scanning us. Break formation!”

Too late.

Three beams shot out, two dodged, one struck. A soldier’s leg vanished. His scream echoed.

Orlan gritted his teeth and surged forward.

“Force-break! Seventh style—**Gale Lattice!**”

His spear erupted into a wind spiral — the impact disorienting the beast. Then came two of his team: twins Lio and Fen, who zipped underneath its belly.

“Deploying core bomb—!”

They latched a green-glowing sphere to its underbelly. The beast roared and tried to crush them beneath its weight.

It was too late.

**BOOM.**

The explosion flared emerald. Energy rippled in waves. Scales cracked, bones split. The monster collapsed like a collapsing mountain.

One team member was lost. Three were wounded.

But the beast was dead.

**Battle Group Crimson – Sector Two Grove**

Here, things turned desperate.

A mantis-like abomination moved with flash-step speed. Its bladed forearms tore through reinforced lines, cutting **two elite captains** within minutes. It didn’t roar. It smiled.

Commander **Shayla Ven**, a woman with windstep mobility and a crescent glaive, knew what this meant.

“This one’s intelligent. Forget damage—disable its senses!”

Her squad split in a cross pattern — Shayla circled high. Her aura burned white.

“Airbind, Level Three—**Featherlock!**”

The air itself became glue, slowing the creature’s movement. Then came a coordinated strike — bombs launched not at the body, but the antennae and eyes.

The mantis screeched, disoriented.

Shayla dove.

Her glaive carved through its thorax. Not a kill — but it fell. The second strike ended it.

Of the **22 monsters**, **18 were slain**. The remaining **4** retreated deep into the monster tide.

But for the first time… the humans had pushed back.

“We hurt them,” said Shayla over comms. “They feel pain too.”

**🔻The 13★–14★ Monsters: 15 Warlords of the Wave**

Each one of these monsters radiated a power **on par with natural disasters**.

Their very movement shifted terrain.

Three appeared in **Sector Four**, their arrival cracking the canyon walls.

* One was a crystalline entity that emitted a pulsing hum — its sound shattered bone.
* The second was a bipedal panther-beast with teleportation flickers.
* The third — and perhaps the most terrifying — looked almost human, save for obsidian skin and glowing red veins.

To meet them, the **Dran-family trained elites** stepped forward — twenty warriors above 11★, fifteen at 12★.

Their formation formed a tri-crescent wedge — sharp, deliberate, unflinching.

Kael watched from afar through a zoom-drone. His chest tightened.

He recognized some of them — students he’d trained beside. **Aarav, Junko, Tasmin**.

The battle began when the obsidian beast **spoke**.

“Your resistance is admirable… and futile.”

Its voice was guttural. Intelligent.

And then chaos erupted.

The crystalline one unleashed a sonic pulse — three warriors screamed and dropped, bleeding from the nose and eyes.

“SOUND DAMPENERS, NOW!” shouted Aarav.

The air flickered — psionic barriers went up. Junko’s fire technique roared to life, encasing the teleporting panther in a spiral of fire.

But it **vanished**.

Then reappeared behind her. Claws struck — she screamed. Blood arced.

“TASMIN!” Aarav yelled.

The squad pivoted, three spears striking its flank. It growled, injured, and this time didn’t vanish fast enough.

One of the **core bombs** embedded in its shoulder exploded.

It staggered — and Tasmin rose, coughing blood.

“Not done yet,” she snarled, burning aura exploding outwards.

With a final cry, she rammed her spear through its eye.

Dead.

Nearby, the crystalline one charged again — only to be met by five elites in a coordinated detonation trap. It shattered mid-roar.

Two down.

Only the obsidian one remained.

He moved like a whisper — blades of hardened black bone emerging from his arms. He impaled one elite through the chest. Two more barely parried his flurry.

“He’s toying with us!” Aarav shouted.

Then came a voice over comms.

“Drop back. Bomb’s in place.”

Aarav’s eyes widened. He jumped clear.

The final **core bomb** beneath the soil ignited.

**BOOM.**

Flames swallowed the ridge.

When the smoke cleared, the obsidian monster still stood — half its body gone. Snarling.

“I… will… return—”

Tasmin hurled her final spear.

It lodged in his throat.

He gurgled. Fell.

**All 15 of the 13★–14★ monsters were defeated.**

* **Casualties: 8 elite dead, 11 critically wounded.**
* **Morale boost: critical.**

The skies still rumbled. The lower beasts still surged.

But now, a message rang through every soldier’s comms:

**“Third line holding. Elite victories confirmed. Tactical advantage gained.”**

Kael stood atop his hill, Cherry at his side. Kitsune’s flames flickered gently.

His eyes didn’t leave the field.

“We’ve cracked their command,” he said. “They’ll hesitate now.”

Seiji nodded.

“Let’s make them regret that.”

**Kael Ardyn**

**Power Level:** 13.7★ (Lighting, Fire, Ice, Plant, Time - Full Awakening Pending)

* **Elemental Abilities:**
  + **Fire** (Grade: White, Level 2) - Kael can generate and control fire at will. His fire abilities are mostly offensive, involving **flame explosions, fiery projectiles**, and **heat manipulation** for close-range combat.
  + **Ice** (Grade: White, Level 3) - Kael can form **ice shields, spikes, and projectiles**. His control over ice is superior, allowing him to **freeze water-based attacks** or **slow enemies down**. His ice techniques complement his spear techniques.
  + **Lighting** (Grade: White, Level 2) - Kael can use a small amount of lightning to **paralyze enemies** or **boost his attacks subtly**, using it in his spear combat to enhance mobility and strike speed, making enemies feel an electric jolt without perceiving the lightning.
  + **Time** (Grade: White, Level 1) - Kael has awakened the **time manipulation element**, but he cannot fully control it yet. He uses it in brief moments to **slow down opponents** or to enhance his movement speed, but the effects are unnoticeable and not full-scale.
  + **Plant** (Grade: White, Level 1) - Kael has awakened the **plant element**, but it has yet to show tangible effects. He can sense plant life but hasn’t unlocked full control.
* **Signature Technique:**
  + **Rowing the Spear Against the Waves** (Grade: White, Level 3) - Kael’s **signature spear technique** combines **fire and ice elements**, allowing him to create **fire blades** at the spear’s tip that can **freeze or scorch enemies**. This technique is designed for **high-speed thrusts** and **spin attacks** that disorient foes. It works in tandem with Kael’s physical agility.
* **Weapon Mastery:**
  + **Grade 4: Master Level** - Kael wields a **Stonefang Spear**, a weapon that is suited for both **offensive strikes** and **defensive blocks**, using his superior speed and precision. His **spear techniques** are refined with impeccable control.
* **Psionic Bond:**
  + **Grade 3: Blue Level** (Kael’s bond with **Kitsune** and **Cherry** is a Level 3 Psionic Bond) - This bond allows him to tap into the **beasts’ senses** and provide **enhanced coordination** in combat. It enables **Kitsune and Cherry** to respond instantly to Kael’s mental commands.

**Seiji Dran**

**Power Level:** 14.0★ (Space Manipulation)

* **Abilities:**
  + **Space Manipulation** (Grade: White, Level 4) - Seiji can **warp space**, creating **folds** and **portals** to move across vast distances or alter the space around him to distort enemy attacks. This power also lets him **teleport** short distances to avoid attacks and trap enemies by folding the battlefield in his favor.
* **Weapon Mastery:**
  + **Grade 4: Master Level** - Seiji wields a **katana** that is enhanced with his **space manipulation**, allowing him to **cut through space itself**, making his attacks unpredictable and devastating.

**Mirei Shadowcrest**

**Power Level:** 13.7★ (Phase Combat)

* **Abilities:**
  + **Phase Combat** (Grade: White, Level 4) - Mirei can **phase through solid objects**, making her almost untouchable. She can use this ability in combat to **phase into enemies’ bodies** and cause internal damage, or phase through their attacks.
  + **Phase Strike** (Grade: White, Level 3) - Mirei’s ability to **phase her weapon** allows her to attack from unexpected angles, often striking enemies **inside their bodies** or bypassing defenses.
* **Weapon Mastery:**
  + **Grade 4: Master Level** - Mirei uses **dual daggers**, and her weapon work is enhanced by her **phasing** abilities. Her combat style is quick and evasive, relying on surprise strikes and disappearing mid-attack.

**Faye Illena**

**Power Level:** 13.5★ (Psychic Seer Powers and Memory Manipulation)

* **Abilities:**
  + **Psychic Seer Powers** (Grade: White, Level 4) - Faye can **see the future**, using **precognitive visions** to predict enemy movements and battlefield outcomes. This makes her an invaluable asset in strategy and counter-attacks.
  + **Memory Manipulation** (Grade: White, Level 3) - Faye can manipulate the memories of others, either erasing or altering their memories to gain control over them. She can also **implant false memories** to confuse or disorient enemies.
* **Weapon Mastery:**
  + **Grade 4: Master Level** - Faye is proficient with a **psychic-infused staff** that channels her psychic powers. The staff aids in defense and in launching psychic bursts for offense.

**Kaoru Mizuchi (The Tempest Blade)**

**Power Level:** 13.4★ (Wind-Enhanced Swordsmanship)

* **Abilities:**
  + **Wind-Enhanced Swordsmanship** (Grade: White, Level 4) - Kaoru uses **wind-based techniques** to enhance her swordsmanship, increasing the cutting power and speed of her strikes. She can manipulate wind gusts to create **sharp air slashes** or boost her movement.
  + **Tempest Strike** (Grade: White, Level 3) - Kaoru channels the full power of the wind to unleash a **devastating vertical slash**, creating a **tornado-like effect** that cuts through multiple enemies at once.
* **Weapon Mastery:**
  + **Grade 4: Master Level** - Kaoru uses a **katana** with wind-enhanced abilities. Her swordsmanship is marked by **high speed** and **precision**, as she uses the wind to control her stance and movement.

**Yoru Seiran (Whisper of Blades)**

**Power Level:** 12.1★ (Illusion and Stealth)

* **Abilities:**
  + **Illusion** (Grade: White, Level 3) - Yoru can create **phantoms and false images** to deceive enemies, making them believe they are fighting multiple opponents. This skill helps her in **disorienting** or **ambushing** enemies.
  + **Stealth** (Grade: White, Level 3) - Yoru can become **invisible** or **move silently**, making her a master of surprise attacks and evasions.
* **Weapon Mastery:**
  + **Grade 3: Advanced Level** - Yoru wields **daggers** and specializes in silent strikes and precision. Her combat style revolves around **guerrilla tactics**, using stealth to deliver **devastating backstabs**.

**Rikuto “Stonevein” Jura (Earth Bastion)**

**Power Level:** 12.3★ (Earth Durability)

* **Abilities:**
  + **Earth Durability** (Grade: White, Level 3) - Rikuto can transform his body into a **stone-like form**, making him nearly invulnerable to physical attacks. His skin becomes as hard as rock, and he can create **earth shields** or **summon earthen spikes** for offense.
  + **Earthquake Fist** (Grade: White, Level 3) - Rikuto can slam his fists into the ground to create localized **earthquakes** or **shockwaves**, knocking enemies off balance or sending them flying.
* **Weapon Mastery:**
  + **Grade 3: Advanced Level** - Rikuto fights with **earth-infused gauntlets**, allowing him to enhance his punches and defense with the natural strength of the earth.

**General Hideo Ren (The Timebreaker)**

**Power Level:** 13.2★ (Localized Time Manipulation)

* **Abilities:**
  + **Localized Time Manipulation** (Grade: White, Level 4) - Hideo can **slow down time** within a specific area. This allows him to react faster than anyone, making him a devastating opponent in close-quarters combat. He can also **freeze time momentarily** for tactical advantage.
  + **Time Distortion Field** (Grade: White, Level 3) - Hideo can create a **time bubble** around himself, disorienting enemies and creating confusion on the battlefield. Within this bubble, his enemies move in slow motion while he can attack normally.
* **Weapon Mastery:**
  + **Grade 4: Master Level** - Hideo is a **master with a pair of katana**, using the power of his time abilities to strike in **lightning-fast** bursts, attacking before enemies can even perceive his movements.

**Cherry**

**Power Level:** 13.5★ (Lightning, Fire)

* **Abilities:**
  + **Lightning** (Grade: White, Level 3) - Cherry can unleash **powerful lightning bolts** and use her lightning abilities for both offensive and defensive purposes.
  + **Fire** (Grade: White, Level 3) - Cherry has **flame control** abilities, generating intense **fireballs** and **flame barriers** for protection.
* **Weapon Mastery:**
  + **Grade 3: Advanced Level** - Cherry relies on **natural claws and tail**, using agility and lightning strikes to enhance her attacks.

**Kitsune**

**Power Level:** 13.5★ (Fire, Water, Healing)

* **Abilities:**
  + **Fire** (Grade: White, Level 3) - Kitsune can produce **flame blasts** and **controlled fire** for both offensive and defensive strategies.
  + **Water** (Grade: White, Level 3) - Kitsune can generate **water blasts** for ranged attacks and **water barriers** for defense.
  + **Healing** (Grade: White, Level 3) - Kitsune has **healing flames**, allowing her to heal allies with **blue flame energy**.
* **Weapon Mastery:**
  + **Grade 3: Advanced Level** - Kitsune’s combat relies on her **fox-like agility**, using **swift strikes** and elemental powers in battle.

This breakdown should help provide a clearer view of each character’s abilities, techniques, and weapon mastery!

**You said:**

 cherry only has lighting element and berserk ability that increases her star power by 0.5~ 0.7 it is white grade with lv3.

**ChatGPT said:**

Thank you for the clarification! Here is the updated information on **Cherry** with her **Lighting Element** and **Berserk Ability**:

**Cherry**

**Power Level:** 13.5★ (Lighting Element)  
**Berserk Ability:** Boosts Star Power by 0.5~0.7 (White Grade, Level 3)

* **Abilities:**
  + **Lightning Element** (Grade: White, Level 3) - Cherry has the ability to **generate and control lightning**. Her lightning attacks can range from **quick, targeted strikes** to **powerful bursts** that cause **paralysis** or **disorientation** in her enemies. The lightning also enhances her **speed and mobility**, allowing her to strike quickly and retreat just as fast. Cherry can **focus lightning** into **electric arcs** that act as both offensive and defensive tools.
  + **Berserk Ability** (Grade: White, Level 3) - When activated, Cherry’s **Berserk Ability** increases her star power by **0.5~0.7 stars**. In this state, her **speed**, **strength**, and **lightning abilities** are enhanced, but she becomes **more aggressive and less calculated** in her actions. This ability is **temporary** and drains her stamina rapidly, so it must be used cautiously. In her Berserk state, her **lightning strikes** are more chaotic and destructive, and her combat style becomes increasingly wild, making her unpredictable to enemies.
* **Weapon Mastery:**
  + **Grade 3: Advanced Level** - While Cherry does not use conventional weapons, she relies on her **natural claws, tail, and lightning abilities** in combat. Her fighting style is **ferocious and fast**, with lightning-enhanced strikes that can deliver heavy damage in short bursts. When in **Berserk mode**, her attacks are **brutal** and **unrestrained**, making her a dangerous force to face head-on.

**Chapter 131: The Battle Unfolds – Part 1**

As the battle began, the atmosphere was thick with tension. The ground beneath their feet trembled as the first of the **14★–15★ beasts** began to emerge from the shadowed distance, their massive forms blocking out the sky as they charged forward with earth-shaking steps. The roar of these beasts, primal and bone-rattling, was a chilling reminder of the stakes they faced. But for the assembled heroes and elite soldiers, it was the moment they had prepared for—when every ounce of their power, skill, and resolve would be tested.

The **10+ elites**, including the **13★ and above combatants**, moved swiftly into position, their focus unwavering. They had come from every corner of Japan, each of them a master in their own right, but together, they formed a formidable force. With the looming threat of these towering 14★–15★ beasts, they had no time for hesitation.

**The Battle Begins**

The first beast to emerge was a towering creature, a combination of **rock-like skin and fire-fueled eyes**, standing nearly 40 feet tall. Its massive claws scraped the earth, leaving deep ruts in the ground. It was a **15★ beast**, radiating immense power and aggression. The ground trembled with each of its steps as it charged toward the front line. It exhaled a gust of fiery breath, sending waves of heat towards the soldiers and heroes alike.

Without a moment’s hesitation, **Kaoru Mizuchi**, with her wind-enhanced swordsmanship, darted forward, her **Tempest Blade** flashing like lightning as she engaged the first beast. Her movements were a blur, wind swirling around her as she cleaved through the air, each strike propelled by the force of a gust of wind. She sliced through the air with **incredible precision**, aiming for the creature's weak points—its joints, eyes, and exposed underbelly. But even with her extraordinary skill, the beast's armor-like hide absorbed most of her blows, causing minimal damage. It let out a deafening roar and swung its massive claws at her.

With a **fluid movement**, **Yoru Seiran**, the master of illusions and stealth, appeared from nowhere, his body dissolving into thin air and reappearing in a series of afterimages. The **Whisper of Blades** was his weapon, moving with surgical precision, cutting through the beast’s senses and creating false openings for Kaoru. As Kaoru attacked from the front, Yoru struck from the side, his attacks leaving **afterimages** that confused the beast’s vision, causing it to falter and become disoriented.

But it wasn’t enough. The 15★ beast’s **ferocity** was unmatched, and despite the combined efforts of Kaoru and Yoru, the creature retaliated, sending a shockwave of fiery breath toward them. The flames swept through the air, forcing the heroes to dodge or retreat. Kaoru’s wind shielded her, but Yoru had to vanish once more, reappearing several meters away, his body singed but still intact.

Meanwhile, **Rikuto "Stonevein" Jura**, with his **earth durability**, used his immense strength to keep the battle grounded. As the creature began to stomp in rage, Rikuto charged in with his **earth-enhanced fist**, striking the ground beneath the beast’s feet. The force of his blow created a **crack in the earth**, sending sharp spikes of stone into the beast’s underbelly. The beast howled in pain but was far from defeated.

**Mara Kanzuki**, the **Ashfire Monarch**, and **Tenjin Ralnor**, the **Stormwind Fist**, arrived at the front lines just in time to offer their support. Mara conjured **pyrokinesis**, flames erupting from her hands to create a **blazing storm** around the creature. Her fire attacks were strong, but the 15★ beast’s thick hide proved resistant. Still, the searing heat caused it to lose focus, giving Tenjin a window to act.

With a battle cry, **Tenjin Ralnor** unleashed his wind-elemental martial combat techniques, creating a whirlwind around him as he charged toward the beast. His powerful strikes connected with the beast’s chest, knocking it backward. The **wind-enhanced strikes** sent shockwaves through the air, causing the creature to stagger and lose its footing.

Despite the combined strength of the elites, the **15★ beast** wasn’t backing down. It unleashed a devastating **shockwave of fire**, burning the ground and sending the heroes reeling. The heat was unbearable, and the warriors quickly used their elemental abilities to protect themselves.

**Cherry and Kitsune Join the Battle**

As the beast rampaged, **Cherry**, the **13.5★ Lightning-elemental** cat, pounced into action. With her **Berserk Ability** active, her power surged by **0.5–0.7 stars**, allowing her to strike with ferocity. She charged forward, her **lightning crackling** around her as she unleashed a **blinding bolt** of electricity. The bolt shot toward the beast, hitting it square in the chest. The **lightning coursed** through the creature, causing it to convulse as it was temporarily stunned.

For a moment, the tide seemed to turn in their favor, but the beast quickly recovered. **Kitsune**, with her **fire and water elemental abilities**, summoned **blue flame attacks**, and with a swift motion, she doused the creature in fire, followed by a **steam explosion** created by the rapid shift between the two elements. The combination of flames and steam disoriented the beast even further, causing it to lose its balance and stagger backward.

But the **15★ beast** was far from finished. With one massive roar, it summoned a burst of **fire and molten rock**, sending it hurtling toward the front lines. The **elite fighters** were forced to move quickly, using their agility and elemental powers to evade the blast.

In the chaos, **Faye Illena**, the **Psychic Seer**, and **Mirei Shadowcrest**, the **Phase Combat** expert, assessed the situation from a distance. Faye’s **psychic abilities** began to interfere with the creature’s mind, causing it to become momentarily confused. She used her **memory manipulation** to implant the sensation of fear, making the beast hesitate for just a split second. That moment of hesitation was all they needed.

**Mirei**, with her **Phase Combat** skills, phased through the ground and emerged directly beneath the beast. She launched herself upward, her **phase-enhanced punches** striking the creature's weak points with devastating force. Her speed was almost **unnatural**, and the beast could barely react to her attacks. For a fleeting moment, it seemed like they had an advantage.

**The Turning Point**

But just as the battle reached a fever pitch, the creature summoned its final, most dangerous attack. It **pulled energy from the core of the earth**, causing the ground beneath them to tremble violently. The **15★ beast** released a wave of **energy** so powerful that it caused a massive **explosion of flame and molten rock** to shoot into the sky. The blast sent everyone flying backward, and the shockwave knocked them off their feet.

**Kaoru**, **Mara**, and **Rikuto** were the first to regain their footing. **Tenjin** and **Yoru**, though disoriented, quickly reappeared and began to regroup. Cherry, still berserk, charged in once again, her **lightning-enhanced claws** striking the creature. The battle had become a brutal dance between survival and annihilation.

Despite the elite forces’ valiant efforts, the **15★ beast** remained relentless. It was becoming clear that this would not be an easy victory. The **combined powers of the heroes** and **elites** were being pushed to their limits, their stamina drained by the ongoing fight.

The **first half of the battle** was far from over, and the **elite forces** were now beginning to feel the strain. But the **hope** and **determination** that each of them carried—whether it was the wind-enhanced swordsmanship of Kaoru, the psychic manipulation of Faye, or the sheer brute force of Rikuto—fueled their resolve. Despite the odds, they were fighting for a future, and they could not afford to lose.

**Chapter 132: Cataclysm Unleashed – Part II**

The battlefield was chaos incarnate.

The relentless clash against the **14★–15★ beasts** was far from over, and despite their injuries, the elite defenders—Kaoru, Kitsune, Cherry, and over a dozen 13★–14★ warriors—still pushed back with everything they had. Bodies were battered, sweat mingled with dust and blood, and the very ground groaned beneath the weight of elemental devastation. But then…

A rumble came. Not from the sky, not from the earth—but something deeper. More **ancient**. More **terrifying**.

The **air turned heavy**, almost suffocating. The battlefield’s tempo slowed, not by choice but instinct. Every beast, every soldier, every elite… paused. Then, the tremors began.

From opposite directions, **four monstrous auras** surged into reality—an unmistakable signature. These weren’t mere 14★ horrors. These were titanic monstrosities whose **power signatures spiked into the 15★–16★ range**, each one a mutated incarnation of primal nature, brimming with elemental wrath.

**The First Arrival: The Skyborne Terror**

The first to arrive was from above.

A massive **mutated ant queen**—nearly **20 meters long**, her wings translucent but laced with jagged crystalline veins. Her entire thorax shimmered with a **cerulean glow**, and from her antennae crackled arcs of **lightning**, dancing wildly across her carapace.

Each wingbeat sounded like thunderclaps, and with each gust, electricity sparked from the tips of her limbs to the sky.

**Codename: Storm Queen**  
**Power: Lightning Element – 15.5★**

Her arrival was marked by a streak of light that cleaved the clouds above. She hovered over the eastern ridge, her mandibles clacking in rhythm, before releasing a terrifying shriek that warped the air itself.

With a flash of her wings, she sent a **chain-lightning blast** that vaporized an entire section of ruined terrain. Three elites narrowly escaped the sudden strike, shielded only by **Rei Nakamura’s barrier field**, who gritted her teeth as her defenses buckled.

**The Second Arrival: The River Tyrant**

From the ravaged riverbank emerged a **towering, armored crocodile**, but grotesquely mutated. Thick, obsidian-black scales covered its body, and a second row of spiked dorsal ridges ran from snout to tail. Each step it took reshaped the ground into **mud and mire**, while glowing runes pulsed beneath its skin—blue and silver like the deep sea.

Its mouth was enormous—almost three meters wide—lined with jagged fangs that dripped water laced with venom. Its tail, plated and serrated, dragged like a battering ram.

**Codename: Abyss Gnasher**  
**Power: Water Element – 15.3★**

When it roared, a **tidal wall** exploded from behind it, drenching the battlefield’s northern edge and sweeping lesser beasts off their feet. Its presence signaled not only strength—but **endurance**, and **sheer resilience**. The elite teams in the north prepared for the worst.

**Third and Fourth Arrivals: The Twin Cataclysms**

Then came the final two.

They arrived **together**, tearing through the western perimeter in tandem, causing sheer **panic** among the frontline defenders.

The first was a monstrous **horseshoe crab**, its shell spanning over 18 meters in width. Jagged, mineral-encrusted **earth spines** jutted from its curved shell, forming a fortress-like dome. Beneath its shell, six massive limbs churned the soil into dust. Its tail had morphed into a spiked **mace-like appendage**, which left trails of shattered terrain in its wake. Every movement shook the earth.

**Codename: Stoneward Reaper**  
**Power: Earth Element – 16★**

Beside it, dragging a trail of destruction, was a grotesquely massive **termite queen**, unlike anything seen before. Elongated and pulsing with **crimson membranes**, her abdomen glowed with internal heat. Around her, **embers** flickered constantly, her mandibles glowing red-hot. Her back was lined with porous chimneys, constantly **venting flame** like geysers.

**Codename: Ember Maw**  
**Power: Fire Element – 15.7★**

She clicked and hissed, releasing plumes of fire and ash in great arcs, igniting dry terrain and turning the very **air combustible**. The Reaper and Ember Maw moved with terrifying synchronization—like they had fought side by side in the wild many times before.

**The Cannons Fire**

Before either of the twin beasts could reach the inner ranks, a sudden call echoed from the **Central Command bunker**, now converted into a battlefield HQ.

“**Cannon One, FIRE!**”

A deep *thrum* filled the air, followed by a blinding flash as the **first Beast Energy Cannon**—a high-yield weapon developed from absorbed 10★+ monster cores—**unleashed a beam of condensed energy**.

The beam, honed like a divine blade, screamed across the battlefield and slammed into the joint path of **Stoneward Reaper and Ember Maw**.

A *shockwave* tore through the western flank.

**Stoneward Reaper’s shell cracked**, a **massive gouge** carved through its spines. Segments of its earth-enforced armor were peeled away, revealing soft, pale flesh that it shrieked to protect. **Ember Maw**, slightly better off, had her entire left flank scorched, the blast throwing her nearly 40 meters away. Her **flame ducts faltered**, and her movement slowed.

Before either could recover—

“**Cannon Two, LOCKED. FIRE!**”

The **second shot** was cleaner. Faster. It struck both beasts directly—**Ember Maw's thorax split in two**, her smoldering core erupting in an inferno before she went limp, twitching.

**Stoneward Reaper**, unable to defend with its ruined armor, was **pierced through the underside**. The beam exited its shell like a lance, dragging its guts with it. A final, heaving screech—and the Reaper collapsed.

**Silence… Then Shock**

The **entire battlefield** went still.

Even the other 15★ beasts halted for a moment, confused by the instant annihilation of two of their own. The elites, hardened and blood-soaked, stared in disbelief. The twin cannon blasts had not only changed the battlefield—they had **redefined the scale** of this war.

Mara Kanzuki whispered, “...That was enough power to level an entire city sector.”

Kaoru, her blade dripping, muttered, “And we just used it on **two beasts**.”

But there was no time to reflect.

**Kael and Seiji Advance**

The silence shattered as the **Storm Queen** and **Abyss Gnasher** shrieked in unison, their rage palpable.

And then—

From the center ranks, two figures moved.

Kael Ardyn and **Seiji Dran**, the only two confirmed **10★+ elite combatants** in Japan, leaped into the fray. The air **rippled** with their energy.

**Kael**, armed with the **Stonefang Spear**, unleashed his aura—calm and suffused with **pure killing intent**. Cherry and Kitsune watched their master pass, their instincts sharpening.

**Seiji**, clad in Dran-forged armor, bore his signature weapon—the **Tempest Fang Blade**, a high-frequency katana merged with wind-elemental augmentation. He cracked his neck once, nodded at Kael, and they split paths.

Kael shot toward **Abyss Gnasher**, the river tyrant.

Seiji blitzed into the sky, aimed at the **Storm Queen**.

**Clash of Titans: Unfinished**

Kael’s arrival was met with a **deluge of high-pressure water cannons**, the crocodilian beast launching them with crushing force. Kael spun his spear in response, forming a **shock-absorbing vortex**, the Stonefang Spear pulsing with spiritual resonance.

He retaliated with a spear thrust that sent **stone-laced shockwaves** into the beast’s underbelly. It snarled, tail lashing, narrowly missing Kael as he vanished in a blur and **reappeared above**, readying a finishing strike.

Meanwhile, Seiji and the Storm Queen clashed midair.

The **Queen’s lightning burst** was countered by Seiji’s **aerial slicing winds**, the sky dancing with blue and silver arcs. Every strike Seiji unleashed cut the wind like folded paper, intercepting the Queen’s electric volleys. She dove, striking with her mandibles. Seiji parried midair, spun, and delivered a **rotational blade arc** that cleaved her wing’s outermost section.

Their battle would shake the sky itself.

**Chapter 133: Duel of Fangs and Thunder – Part III**

The battlefield roared with chaos, but all attention had shifted to **two focal points**—not the fallen beasts, not the smoldering craters from the energy cannons—but to the air and the riverbank, where **Kael Ardyn** and **Seiji Dran** now fought the remaining 15★–16★ behemoths. One against sky. One against tide.

The storm had broken.

**Kael vs Abyss Gnasher**

Kael’s boots crashed onto the fractured stones beside the mutated crocodilian monstrosity—**Abyss Gnasher**, the 15.3★ beast that had once been a lord of drowned valleys and sunken cities.

The beast growled low and guttural, its pupils narrowing as it turned toward Kael. Its jaws parted slightly, revealing concentric rings of serrated teeth soaked in black ichor. Droplets of corrosive water hissed as they dripped from its fangs, eating through steel and soil alike.

Kael’s grip on the **Stonefang Spear** tightened.

He exhaled slowly, letting his **Spiritual Perception** expand—the world around him sharpening into layers. The tide’s pressure, the monster’s heartbeat, the subtle twitch in its hind legs. It was preparing to lunge again.

He moved first.

Kael blurred forward with a **triple-impulse dash**, spear leading in a *reverse arc*, his technique precise—“**River Skim Strike**.” A thin horizontal wave of compressed air and spiritual force tore from the spear’s path, aiming to cleave into the beast’s exposed flank.

Abyss Gnasher twisted its armored body unnaturally, avoiding a fatal blow. But the blade of wind sheared across its shoulder, drawing a line of blood that sizzled as it hit the ground.

In retaliation, the beast slammed its tail down—a seismic whip crack that **shattered the surrounding earth**, forcing Kael to leap back.

Then came the **deluge**.

The crocodile opened its mouth and fired a **super-pressurized beam of water**, thin but dense enough to puncture reinforced barriers. Kael barely managed to roll aside, but the blast skimmed his right arm—ripping flesh open from shoulder to elbow. Blood sprayed, but Kael didn’t cry out.

He forced his foot down into the stone, gritted his teeth, and yelled, “**Power Transfer: Kitsune! Send burn cleansing!**”

A faint shimmer of **blue fire** wrapped his wound—**Kitsune’s remote healing spark**. It cauterized and sealed the damage just enough for Kael to fight without his grip faltering.

“...That could’ve taken my arm,” he muttered. The beast bellowed again, stomping forward like a tank.

Kael channeled energy into his spear and took a lower stance.

This wasn’t a clash of speed—it was a contest of **endurance and pressure**, like two tectonic plates grinding against each other.

**Seiji vs Storm Queen**

Above, the heavens cracked with lightning as **Seiji Dran** soared through the sky like a razor of wind.

Facing him, the **Storm Queen**, her wings torn in patches, rotated in midair using auxiliary limbs. Static danced from her abdomen to her mandibles, which glowed with power.

She released another **scatter-burst of lightning bolts**, hundreds of smaller arcs fanning out in erratic directions. Seiji narrowed his eyes, reading the pulse pattern. His blade shifted into a downward diagonal, and he called: “**Breath of the Gale, Second Form—Cyclone Shell.**”

A spiraling **wind barrier** erupted around him. Arcs of lightning lanced into it, splitting and diffusing across the spinning vortex of air. The barrier flickered, absorbing the brunt before fading.

He surged forward, bursting through the cloud of static, and **closed the distance**.

The Storm Queen tried to pivot, but Seiji had already struck. His blade sang as it carved across the edge of her thorax, **splintering chitin**, sending glowing blue blood across the sky. She shrieked and responded by flapping her wings violently—releasing a shockwave that **threw Seiji backward**, tumbling through the air like a comet.

He smashed into a piece of floating debris from a ruined tower, coughing blood.

“Damn… she’s **still adapting**,” he hissed.

Before he could right himself, the queen zipped above him and dropped like a hammer. Her massive stinger, now crackling with energy, plunged down—

Seiji rolled at the last second. The stinger **punched through the metal beam** beside him like butter.

He slashed upward instinctively, cleaving the underside of the stinger. It spasmed, then retracted.

He leapt off the falling debris, breathing hard, midair armor plates cracked. His left shoulder joint throbbed—ligament damage. Still usable, barely.

Above them, thunder clouds formed unnaturally fast. She was drawing electricity into herself. **Building it up for something massive.**

**Kael’s Breakthrough – and the Price**

Kael spun to the side as Abyss Gnasher attempted to **body slam** him, the beast using its full bulk to crush him. The move left it open. Kael channeled his core energy and invoked a technique he had not used since his training with the Dran.

“**Spear Art – Fifth Movement: Piercing Crescent Fang.**”

His spear glowed with golden light, surrounded by vibrating runes.

With a burst of movement, he jumped above the beast’s head and plunged the spear into the **soft tissue between its eyes**, driving it downward with all his weight and focus.

The beast howled in agony, flailing violently. It slammed its head into the rocks to shake Kael off, succeeding.

Kael crashed to the side, his ribs caving slightly from the impact.

He rolled, coughing blood, hand still wrapped around his spear. “Still… not enough.”

The crocodile staggered, half-blind now, one eye ruined, bleeding profusely from the skull. But its rage had deepened—it was now in **berserk mode**, driven by pain. Its elemental power surged—**water now turned into bladed pressure whips**, slashing at Kael from every angle.

**Seiji’s Last Stand – for Now**

Seiji, eyes wide, watched as the **Storm Queen** reared back, absorbing all the lightning from the clouds into a sphere forming between her antennae.

She was preparing her **signature ultimate strike**—a focused beam of supercharged lightning capable of melting war bunkers.

“...One shot,” Seiji said. “I have time for one strike.”

He focused everything. His core pulsed. Wind responded to him, wrapping around his form like a shroud. Then, he vanished.

To those watching, it was like he ceased to exist. The next moment, a **sonic boom** rang out.

“**Tempest Fang – Absolute Arc!**”

He reappeared directly **under the queen**, blade spinning like a scythe of divine retribution. His cut cleaved diagonally from her mid-thorax to her second wing joint, splitting half her body.

The queen shrieked and fired her lightning too late—**the beam shot upward**, into the sky.

Both combatants fell.

Seiji hit the earth hard, skidding across broken stone, unmoving. His blade was embedded in the dirt, hair scorched, shoulder dislocated.

The queen crashed onto the opposite ridge, one wing gone, her body smoking—but not dead.

**End of Round One**

Kael and Seiji both struggled to their feet. Across from them, their enemies still stood—injured, bleeding, but not beaten.

Kael’s eyes burned. “I’m not done.”

Seiji grinned through bloody lips. “Neither is she.”

The battlefield had frozen around them. Two titanic duels that had lasted mere minutes—but every second felt like eternity.

**Both sides wounded. Both sides far from finished.**

The war raged on.

**To be continued in Chapter 134.**

**Chapter 134: Beneath a Dying Sky**

The sun never rose over the battlefield.

The world beneath the ash-drenched sky was painted in smoke, blood, and fading cries. What began as a coordinated defense had become a chaotic brawl spanning miles of broken land and shattered hope.

Now, as the last roars echoed from the cliffs of the northern bulwark and the remnants of the eastern artillery lay twisted and blackened, the cost of resistance came to full light.

This was not a victory.

This was survival.

**The Final Push – 8★ to 9★ Beasts (550,000)**

The bulk of the horde had long since flooded past the outer minefields. The primary defense line—manned by thousands of trained soldiers, Beast Tamers, mercenaries, and awakened survivors—had already broken into fragments.

The ground was littered with **burnt fur, broken fangs, ruptured human armor, and the twisted remains of war machines.**

**Lieutenant Colonel Sera Inoue**, her right arm mangled and bleeding, stood atop a half-crumbled wall, channeling the last of her **flame aura** into her blade.

“**I will not be eaten today!**” she screamed, diving into the mass of beasts that surged through the breach.

At her back were **fifty Flame Guard units**—they’d held the third line for nearly twenty hours without reinforcement. She knew most of them wouldn’t survive this charge.

And she was right.

By the time the final wave broke, only **seven remained**.

Among the fallen was **Captain Hideo**, who smiled even as a **9★ lion-scorpion hybrid** impaled him through the chest. He detonated his core seconds later, taking twenty other beasts with him.

In the distance, **General Raan**, the West’s reclusive tactician, directed artillery while bleeding out from a gut wound. His last command was a targeting order—he refused painkillers to remain lucid.

“Fire... the last set... and tell my wife I kept my promise.”

He died with his eyes open, watching his commands turn another 5,000 beasts into smoke.

**The Elite Clashes – 10★ and Above**

**Cloverspark’s Sky Division**, enhanced by experimental anti-gravity armor, had been deployed against the **290 beasts in the 10★–11★ range**.

But even with flight, they were outmatched.

**Commander Rysel**, who had served in six engagements against mega-beasts, was torn apart midair when a **10.8★ twin-headed hawk** intercepted his dive-bomb maneuver. His sacrifice allowed **Kara**, the rookie flier he mentored, to pierce the hawk’s core a second later.

Kara never cried—until she found his helmet on the ground hours later.

**The Final Bastion: Strike Pods and the Last Shell**

The **71 Strike Pods**—each an elite three-person cell trained in high-risk suppression of monster cores—were deployed where **control had completely collapsed**.

They faced **11★ to 12★ abominations**, many of which had mutated during the battle due to energy field exposure.

Pod 17 fought until only one remained: **Elias**, a quiet swordsman who rarely spoke. He stayed behind as the others escaped through the cliffside tunnels, facing a **12★ glass-backed bear** with nothing but his shattered blade.

When radio silence fell, his last words—caught in static—were, “...Tell Kael it was an honor.”

**Pod 8**, made up of ex-mercenaries, completed a full sweep, slaying a **magma-shelled wolf** by tricking it into collapsing into a geothermal rupture zone. Their leader, **Ranka**, sacrificed herself to pin the beast down.

**Core Bombs and the Silent Martyrs**

The **22 mutant beasts in the 12★–13★ range**, protected by evolving sub-hordes, required tactical strikes. The response: **Core Bomb Carriers**—suicidal infiltration squads equipped with monster core energy bombs capable of wiping out 500-meter zones.

Each squad volunteered knowing what was expected.

Of the **forty carriers**, **thirty-nine died**. The one survivor lost both legs.

A single broadcast message was sent before each detonation:

“**For the walls that protect our children. For the friends who fell yesterday. For tomorrow’s sunrise.**”

The largest blast erased an entire ridge where a **12.8★ thundercrab** had begun charging its final pulse. The resulting crater was half a kilometer wide. Not a single trace of the team remained.

**Sacrifices and Conversations**

**Victor**, the old man Kael once saved, now led a squad of **civilian-trained defenders**. He carried a heavy shield, protecting the non-combatants as they evacuated through the ridge pass.

“Kael would never run from this,” he muttered, holding the line against two **9★ tunneler boars**.

His shield shattered, his bones cracked—but he held.

Emily, now training under Maya, had reached the **0.9★ tier** herself. She cried when she heard Victor had died protecting twenty families, including hers.

“I... I wanted to show him how strong I got.”

Maya, bloodied and barely alive, knelt beside her and said, “You just did.”

**Cherry and Kitsune**

Cherry stood over the broken body of a **12.5★ fire-ox**, breathing heavily. Her fur was scorched, her left eye swollen shut, and her tail hung limp. Her berserk mode had faded. She had fought **eleven elite-class beasts**, saving dozens of fallen defenders.

Kitsune collapsed beside her, her flames flickering.

“Still alive?” Cherry muttered weakly.

“Only just,” Kitsune replied, her breathing shallow. “Did we win?”

Cherry didn’t respond for a moment. Then she said, “We didn’t die. That’s enough.”

They laid there for ten minutes, guarding each other.

**The Death Count**

When the full tally was taken, the losses were staggering:

* **Human soldiers and defenders killed**: 41,000
* **Elite-class operatives (10★ and above)**: 113 confirmed dead
* **Civilians lost in breaches**: 6,000+
* **Strike Pods remaining**: 24 of 71
* **Core Bomb Carriers**: 1 survivor
* **Confirmed beast kills**: 500,000+
* **Casualties among 11★–13★ beasts**: 70% wiped
* **Remaining high-tier beast count**: 6 still active

The battle ended with **a smoldering silence**.

**Final Moments and Echoes**

As the fires died down, **Colonel Harvin Cross**, bruised and half-burnt, walked the battlefield with **Administrator Dalan Vue**, each carrying survivor lists.

Cross stopped at a small flag that fluttered in the dust. The name on it: **Ranka**.

He clenched his fist, bowed once, and whispered, “We’ll make the next generation remember you.”

Vue said nothing, only knelt and placed a cracked communicator beside the flag.

From the ridge, **Governor Tyros Vellein** looked at the smoking horizon and muttered:

“Kael... when you return... we’ll need more than just strength. We’ll need hope again.”

**And Far Away...**

Kael Ardyn, bloodied and silent, looked at the battlefield through distant lenses. His battle with the crocodilian titan continued, but now... he *knew* the cost.

He could feel it.

A quiet wind passed over him.

“...Victor’s gone,” he whispered.

Seiji, standing beside him and gripping his broken sword, simply said, “So are half our friends.”

Kael lifted his spear. “Then let’s end this. For them.”

**To be continued in Chapter 135.**

**Chapter 135: The Stars that Fell**

The horizon was red.

Not from the setting sun, but from the fallout of unleashed powers so great they burned the sky. From the fractured ridge of the Midward Plains to the scorched sands of Noctveil Basin, the battlefield bore no resemblance to its former self. Stone melted into slag, the air shimmered with residual elemental energy, and silence hung above the torn earth like mourning mist.

But it was over.

At least, this part.

**The Last of the 14★–15★**

The battle against the **eleven 14★–15★ mutated apex beasts** was like fighting an elemental apocalypse. Even for those who had danced on the edge of death many times before, this had been different.

These beasts were ancient creatures reborn in monstrous forms. Each possessed centuries of instinct wrapped in bodies honed by evolutionary rage. And they had fought not just with claws and elemental breath—but with tactics.

Their death toll came at a brutal cost.

Kaoru Mizuchi stood alone atop a ruined cliff, her once-pristine armor cracked and stained with blood and soot. Her blade, *Hayakiri*, was chipped and humming lowly, its wind aura depleted. Her hair clung to her cheeks, and one eye was shut with dried blood caked across her brow.

At her feet lay the dismembered corpse of the **Cyclone-Shelled Ant-Queen**, a towering 14.8★ wind-mutation that had summoned razor-storms. Kaoru had ended it with her forbidden technique—*One Hundred Petals Torn in Wind.*

But it had cost her dearly.

“I… can’t hear anything,” she muttered, wobbling slightly. Blood streamed from both ears. The sonic backlash had ruptured her inner hearing. Still, she stood, unmoved, as the ground trembled beneath her boots from distant shockwaves.

Nearby, **Yoru Seiran**, his body scorched black and his right leg barely attached, was pinned beneath the corpse of the **Pyro-Termite Sovereign**, a 15-meter long inferno-spewing nightmare. The only reason Yoru survived was because he had detonated both his elemental cores at close range, embracing the blast that charred the beast to death.

He had not spoken since.

Medics arrived late, pulling him from the wreckage. As they lifted him onto the stretcher, he finally muttered hoarsely, “Did… we win?”

The medic paused. “You’re alive. That’s enough.”

**Five of the Best – Fallen**

The loss of **five elite fighters** above 12.5★ had shaken the defenders more than any strategic loss.

**Captain Lenna Vire**, a gravity specialist once considered a rising 13.5★ prodigy, had used her entire body to warp the **Tectonic Plated Crocodile**, slamming it into the ground with such force it created a crater half a kilometer wide. Her body had turned to dust moments after, unable to withstand the compression backlash.

**Tormund Greaves**, known for his unbreakable **Obsidian Skin**, had held off two **Burrowing Thunder-Ants** long enough for Kaoru’s team to flank and disable them. He was still standing when the energy pulses ate through his core. His last words, caught on comms, were: “Not today, you bastards.”

**Elia Mirwen**, the elven-blooded ice wielder, sacrificed herself to freeze the **Volcanic Ant-King’s** internal veins. The explosion that followed consumed her, but the beast’s head fell, frozen solid.

The other two—**Feng Daisan** and **Marik Rove**—died together, smiling as they dragged a 14.9★ lightning ant into a collapsing canyon, detonating their shared explosive core device. They had been rivals. They died brothers.

**Cherry and Kitsune – Battle-Scarred but Unbowed**

Cherry’s fur was half-scorched, her limbs trembling with exertion. Her tail had a jagged tear, her lightning aura unstable and flickering. But she stood over the collapsed body of the **Crimson Firefang**, a 14.5★ beast with dual flame-venom glands, which now lay in ruin.

“I tore your throat out first,” she growled, panting. “Next time, maybe don’t roar so loud.”

Kitsune, collapsed beside her, bled blue from a gash across her side. Her healing flames sputtered.

She muttered, “Stupid cat... you always take the fun ones.”

Cherry didn’t reply. She limped closer, nudged Kitsune’s snout gently, and lay down beside her. The two curled together, battered and broken—but alive.

**Rikuto "Stonevein" Jura and Tenjin Ralnor – Surviving Legends**

Rikuto had barely survived. The **Quartz-Backed War-Crab**, a beast of unmatched earth resistance, had cracked his arm to the bone. His skin was marred with fractures from countershocks. But he didn’t retreat. Not once.

When the final blow fell—a crushing uppercut from his **Seismic Gauntlets**—the beast’s head imploded, and Rikuto collapsed seconds later.

He awoke to Tenjin Ralnor hovering above him, wrapped in bandages, muttering, “Still ugly. Guess you’re alive.”

Tenjin himself was not unscathed. A **14★ Mud-Spitting Alligator**, large enough to swallow buildings, had crushed his shoulder and tailbone. His flames had burned its lungs, but he had not walked away unscathed.

“You get old,” he muttered, spitting blood. “But you still don’t get slow.”

**Kael & Seiji vs. the 15★–16★ Beasts**

The final two beasts had arrived late. Unlike their counterparts that were blown to dust by energy cannons, these monsters were *different*—they had adapted, quickly, learning from their kin’s mistakes.

The **Monarch Steel-Crab** and the **Alpha Nile Crocodile**, both towering just under 20 meters, were horrors of shell and sinuous rage. Their bodies radiated *raw elements*—metal and water surged in tandem, fusing into deadly tactics.

Kael, blood streaking across his face, stood beside Seiji, their chests rising and falling in rhythm.

“I go high,” Seiji said, cracking his neck.

“I go through,” Kael replied, gripping the **Stonefang Spear** tighter.

The battle was a storm.

Kael darted between the crab’s legs, leaping from explosions of metal shards. The beast’s shell could reflect most projectiles—but not Kael’s spear when it shimmered with **compressed earth aura**. He pierced the joint behind its left limb, twisting and sending a shockwave that cracked its balance.

Seiji met the crocodile in midair, his twin blades glowing with wind and pressure. Every time it snapped its jaws, he redirected the force to spin midair, launching energy crescents that gouged its hide. But one tail whip struck his ribs—**three cracked, one broken**, and blood in his mouth.

Still, they didn’t stop.

Kael activated **Spiritual Perception**, reading the crab’s movements like currents beneath a river. He dodged its killing strike, reversed his grip, and jammed the spear into its underbelly.

The beast *screeched*, but it still didn’t fall.

At the same moment, Seiji slashed the crocodile’s jaw, embedding both swords and dragging them outward. Water burst out—but it didn’t die. It retaliated with a roar that sent both fighters flying.

They landed hard.

Kael’s left arm hung limp. Seiji’s swords were broken. But they stood again, back to back.

“We need to end this soon,” Kael muttered.

“Yeah,” Seiji replied, spitting red. “I’m out of smart ideas.”

“Then we improvise.”

**And Above It All…**

From a distant ridge, Kaoru watched the final fight. Her knees buckled, and a single tear rolled down her cheek.

“So many stars…” she whispered. “Why did so many have to fall?”

No one answered.

But far behind her, hundreds of survivors—children, soldiers, families—watched, their eyes wide.

They had lost so much.

But they had also *held*.

And that was enough to keep breathing.

**Chapter 136: Silence After the Storm**

The earth had stopped trembling.

The final strike had fallen. A roaring column of dust rose into the shattered skies as the corpse of the **Alpha Nile Crocodile** crashed into the rocky basin, its final death rattle muffled beneath the debris. A short distance away, the **Monarch Steel-Crab**, now an unmoving mass of twisted metal, lay slumped against the jagged spires of fallen terrain, its shell split from Kael’s final thrust.

Kael and Seiji stood still.

Both were bloodied, bruised, broken. Kael’s spear clattered from his hand, embedding into the ground beside him. His chest heaved, ribs screaming in protest. Seiji's right arm hung limp, dislocated and slick with drying blood. But they were alive.

Neither said a word.

And no one cheered.

The battlefield, once filled with roars and howls, now echoed only with the distant crackle of fire and the occasional groan of the wounded. Smoke billowed over the fields where so many had fallen, blackening the already-twilight sky.

The medical teams finally emerged.

From the shattered rear lines and the makeshift command post half a kilometer behind, medics in lightweight armor dashed into the bloodied field with stretchers, auto-splints, and glowing core-aura defibrillators. They moved quickly, expertly, navigating craters and broken bodies.

“Kael Ardyn!” a medic called, rushing toward him. “Are you stable?!”

Kael nodded faintly. “I can walk.”

“Sir, we need to—”

“See to the others first,” he cut in. “Yoru. Rikuto. Cherry. Kitsune. Prioritize them.”

The medic hesitated only a second, then ran off. Seiji slowly crouched, grabbing a shattered section of his own blade and driving it into the ground like a post to lean against.

“We bought time,” he murmured. “But we didn’t win.”

Kael’s expression hardened. “The real battle hasn’t even begun.”

**Retreat of the Rank-and-File**

With the frontline stabilized and the monsters’ primary forces slain or routed, the command issued the long-awaited order:

“All personnel below 10★ are to immediately begin tactical retreat with wounded toward Basepoint Theta. MedEvac lines are operational. DO NOT break formation. Stay alert during withdrawal.”

It echoed through the earpieces of every surviving soldier.

The response wasn’t relief—it was *resignation*.

The lower-ranked warriors, many barely standing, began their retreat in solemn silence. Stretchers carried the injured. Some were draped in sheets already—bodies too broken to save. Plasma-lit drones hovered overhead, projecting navigational routes and scanning for hidden threats.

As they marched past the ruined battlefield, some paused—saluting where comrades once stood, whispering names under their breath. Others averted their gaze entirely, gripping their weapons like anchors to reality.

There was no celebration. No triumphant banner. Just the steady rhythm of boots in blood-soaked dirt.

**The Search for the Final Threat**

At the base of a shattered observation tower, Kael and Seiji regrouped with the other remaining elites—Kaoru Mizuchi, still silent and deaf, her arms bandaged; Tenjin Ralnor with his spine brace; Kitsune and Cherry both supported by aura stabilizers and IV drips; and several other battered, half-conscious high-star survivors.

The death toll among the 12★+ ranks had been massive. But those that remained gathered now in a tight perimeter near the mobile command tent.

“I want eyes on every direction,” Kael ordered quietly, voice flat. “Thermals. Elemental fluctuations. Residual aura trails. I want nothing missed.”

“No sign yet,” replied a field officer. “We’ve cleared nearly two hundred square kilometers. All surviving beasts were wiped out in the last thirty minutes. None exhibited the traits of the reported 16–17★ entity.”

Kael stared at the holo-map hovering over the table. The red zones marking fallen monsters were blinking out one by one, replaced with green “confirmed clear” signals. But the center of the map—the sector labeled **Red Eclipse Zone**—remained black. Unreadable.

“What if it was never here?” Tenjin asked. “We planned our defense around a worst-case scenario. Maybe we *already* won.”

“No,” Kael said immediately. “Something stronger *is* out there. And it’s smart enough not to charge into a slaughter.”

Kaoru, despite her deafness, seemed to understand. She signed with her hands, slowly.

“It’s waiting. Watching. For weakness.”

Seiji translated aloud.

Kael nodded grimly.

For three hours, the elites stood vigil.

They moved in patrols, sweeping what was left of the valley. Cherry, riding on a support drone, peered into scorched tunnels with narrowed eyes. Kitsune occasionally hissed low warnings, though no threats emerged.

Kael activated his **Spiritual Perception** twice during that window—once almost collapsing from the strain. Still, nothing. No movement, no aura spikes, no tremors. Just eerie, unnatural silence.

**Return to Base**

As the fourth hour approached, Seiji finally placed a hand on Kael’s shoulder.

“We’re bleeding time,” he said quietly. “And we can’t fight what we can’t find. We need to regroup. Fortify. Let them rest.”

Kael didn’t answer at first.

He looked up at the sky—still glowing red with residual energy and dusk. He thought of Lenna’s last scream, of Tormund’s laughter as he vanished in flame, of Elia’s soft breath turning to ice.

Finally, he nodded.

“Withdraw the sweep teams. Tell the recon squads to begin aerial scans every thirty minutes. We’ll bunker until the anomaly shows itself.”

The order went out.

One by one, the scattered elites returned to Basepoint Theta—a ruined research outpost now turned into a fortified hold. The structure was cracked, shield emitters unstable, but it was all they had.

Inside, triage bays were overrun. Medical bots zipped between bodies. Engineers hastily rerouted power to life support. And still… no one cheered.

Kael leaned against the edge of the comms table, watching the casualty feed update. The numbers stopped eventually—but the names didn’t.

**Total Confirmed KIA: 8,723**

**MIA: 1,391**

**Severe injuries: 4,202**

**Elites lost above 12★: 5 confirmed, 3 presumed**

Cherry limped to his side, bandaged tail flicking. “We should have killed it by now.”

“We didn’t even see it,” Kael replied.

Seiji sat nearby, his back against the wall, eyes closed. “It’s out there. I can feel it. It’s not done with us.”

“No,” Kael agreed. “But when it comes… we will be.”

His fingers tightened around the haft of his spear.

For now, the sky was quiet. But in that silence, every warrior listened—for the rumble that would announce the next nightmare. And when it came, they would answer.

They had no choice.

They were the last line.

**Chapter 137: The Price of Silence**

The gates of **Basepoint Theta** creaked open slowly.

As the surviving elites and wounded troops returned, the auxiliary personnel—engineers, supply staff, reserve medics—rushed to form rows, clapping and cheering as they came in. Some waved banners hastily drawn from torn uniform sleeves, others raised their fists, shouting words of praise through cracked lips.

“You did it!”

“You made it back!”

“Heroes of the battlefield!”

But the soldiers returning… did not cheer.

Kael walked near the front of the formation, his gait steady but his eyes hollow. Behind him, Kitsune limped forward on bandaged limbs, and Cherry sat quietly atop a medical drone, her ears lowered. Seiji walked beside Kaoru, her hand resting on his arm not in need, but in solidarity.

The cheering began to falter.

The expressions on the returning warriors told the story that no voice dared speak. Their silence drowned the applause. A few of the support staff began to lower their hands. Some even cried, realizing that not everyone had returned.

Not even *most*.

Inside the base, Seiji gathered with Kael and a few key officers around the main holoscreen, which flickered under low power.

A junior strategist, barely 9★ and nursing a fractured leg, saluted before giving her report.

“Final battle data… compiled and cross-referenced. Sir, here’s the total casualty count.”

She hesitated.

Kael nodded. “Go on.”

The numbers appeared on the screen, glowing a somber blue:

**Total deployed: 713,000 troops**

**Confirmed KIA: 123,419**

**MIA presumed dead: 21,553**

**Severely injured (non-combat capable): 48,110**

**Light to moderate injuries: 88,320**

A heavy silence fell over the room.

Kaoru clenched her fists. Her knuckles were still bandaged, fingers trembling. Seiji exhaled slowly, his jaw tightening. Even Kael, ever silent in the face of horror, had to close his eyes for a moment.

“They fought like gods,” Seiji murmured.

“And died like men,” Kael replied softly.

**Two Days Later – Final Rites**

The air was still. No wind blew over the large plateau north of Basepoint Theta where the rites had been arranged.

The field was quiet. Too quiet. It had taken two full days to build the platforms, stack the hundreds of pyres, and prepare the mass burial grounds. The dead who could not be identified were wrapped in ceremonial linen and marked only by the last digits of their ID tags.

Thousands of soldiers, both surviving and from the base personnel, stood in silent ranks. Their heads were bowed, uniforms cleaned but still stained with soot and dried blood.

The five **Division Commanders** stood on an elevated platform, each waiting for their turn to speak before the flames were lit.

**Commander Riku Tanabe – *Northern Division***

The broad-shouldered man’s voice was low, but carried across the field like thunder.

“The North teaches its warriors to stand in the face of storms. And these soldiers did just that. They were caught in the worst flood of monsters this land has ever known… and they held. For every one of us who walks back through these gates, ten of our brothers and sisters fell.

But they did not fall in vain.

Their names… they will echo in our walls and our bloodlines. In the wind that howls across the tundras… we will hear them.

Rest now, soldiers of the North. We’ll carry your swords until we fall beside you.”

**Commander Ayame Sudo – *Eastern Division***

A slender woman with steely eyes stepped forward next. Her voice trembled at first.

“The East has always been the first to see the sunrise. And I wonder, now, how many of you will never see another.

We lost friends. Students. Siblings. We lost the stubborn ones who charged in without hesitation, and the quiet ones who stood their ground to the last breath.

You gave us time. Gave us hope. And we… we will never forget.

If tomorrow brings another battle, we’ll go into it with your memories at our backs. The rising sun belongs to you.”

**Commander Hiroshi Kanda – *Southern Division***

Kanda, older than the others, took a long pause before speaking.

“I have served in war since before some of you were born. And still… I have never seen courage like I did on that battlefield.

So many… chose to stay behind. To detonate their cores. To slow the monsters. To hold a line they *knew* would crumble.

They were not fools.

They were soldiers. And damn fine ones.

From this day forward, the Southern Division will remember them in every training, every march, every moment. They *earned* our eternity.”

**Commander Kaoru Mizuchi – *Western Division***

Kaoru stood in silence. Her translator, Lieutenant Mori, stepped forward to read her signed words.

“We fought for life. We fought with wind and fire and teeth. And many… never came back.

Their loss is not weakness. Their loss is not shame.

It is *sacrifice*.

I promise you… on the name of the Western Division… that every life lost will become the wind behind our blades. And that the 16★ threat that still lurks will know the wrath of the fallen.

Let your hearts burn with memory. And never, *never* forget.”

**Commander Seiji Dran – *Central Division***

Seiji stepped up last. His eyes were bloodshot. He did not read from notes.

“We mourn.

We rage.

We remember.

I lost people out there I trained. I joked with. Ate with. Some of you lost brothers. Lovers. Entire units.

I know it’s hard to breathe right now. I know it feels like we buried the world.

But hear me:

They did not die to be forgotten.

They died so that when that 16-star monster *does* appear, we’ll be ready. Stronger. United.

This war isn’t over. Not yet. But their courage—*your courage*—gives us the chance to finish it.”

The rites began.

Thousands of pyres were lit simultaneously using synchronized core ignition, the light reaching high into the sky. The air filled with embers, rising into the heavens like fireflies carrying the names of the fallen.

Kael stood apart from the crowd, watching in silence.

Cherry leaned against his leg, eyes fixed on the fire. Kitsune sat nearby, fur glowing faintly in the orange light.

“We’re not done,” Kael whispered. “But we will be soon.”

**Command Center – Ongoing Surveillance**

Even as the final rites burned on, the **command center** never slept.

Dozens of analysts, technicians, and spiritual sensors remained at their posts. Satellite relays were online. High-frequency scans pulsed out every fifteen seconds. Spiritual resonance towers extended across the valley, ever-reaching for a signal, a distortion—*anything*.

Still nothing.

The 16–17★ monster was out there. Waiting.

But so were they.

**Chapter 138: Rising from the Ashes**

More than **fifteen days** had passed since the brutal battle that had tested every fiber of the Ascended Network’s strength. The dust had long settled, but the echoes of loss and sacrifice still lingered heavy in the air.

**The Return and Recovery**

The first rays of dawn broke over **Basepoint Theta** as over **4,000 severely injured soldiers**, once missing in action, returned from behind enemy lines. Their bodies bore scars of savage combat and months of survival in hostile lands, but their spirits were renewed.

Simultaneously, teams had located and recovered the remains of over **17,000 missing soldiers**—the fallen heroes whose names would forever be etched in memory.

**The Surge of Power**

Through a rigorous regimen of consuming **monster meat**, the survivors experienced rapid recovery and astonishing breakthroughs in power.

Among the **593,581 survivors**:

* **General troops:** 450,493 soldiers had stabilized and uniformly hovered at the **9.9★ power boundary**, a crucial threshold before ascending into the elite ranks.
* The remaining **more than 140,000 soldiers**, who originally could not break the 10★ barrier, had now shattered it. Some had even climbed as high as **11★** power.

**Elites Reborn**

Among the original **350+ elites at 10★ or above**, all had made tremendous strides:

* **200 warriors** now boasted power levels between **13★ and 14★**.
* **125 warriors** had surged into the **14★ to 15★** range.
* A select **16 warriors** stood between **15★ and 15.3★**, among them renowned fighters such as:
  + **Tsuro Genbei** – “The Iron Fang”
  + **Shiori Ayame** – “The Silent Blossom”
  + **Rein Yukihara** – “The Frost Reaper”
  + **Yoru Seiran** – “The Night Gale”
  + **Rikuto “Stonevein” Jura** – “The Mountain’s Resolve”

**The Titans Among Them: The 11 Ascended**

The remaining elite **11 warriors** reached heights from **15.3★ to 16★**, their powers swelling and refining daily:

| **Name** | **Power Level** | **Elemental Affinity & Abilities** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Seiji Dran** | **16.0★** | *Space Manipulation*: Warping battlefield space-time; creating void barriers; teleportation and gravitational control. Supreme commander with unparalleled battlefield awareness. |
| **Kaoru Mizuchi** | 15.3★ | *Wind Swordmastery*: Masters gusts that slice and shield; can summon tornado vortices and blades of wind; enhanced reflexes and speed. |
| **Faye Illena** | 15.5★ | *Psychic Seer & Memory Manipulation*: Can glimpse future battle outcomes, erase or alter enemy memories, and induce illusions on a grand scale. |
| **General Hideo Ren** | 15.4★ | *Localized Time Manipulation*: Slows or accelerates time in battle zones; can rewind minor wounds and predict enemy movements. |
| **Mara Kanzuki** | 15.6★ | *Pyrokinesis + Beast Control*: Commands fire with lethal precision; can summon mutant beasts to aid in combat; fiery auras that incinerate foes. |
| **Tenjin Ralnor** | 15.7★ | *Wind-Elemental Martial Arts*: Fuses elemental wind with devastating hand-to-hand combat; creates slicing gusts and shockwaves. |
| **Borran Kazume** | 15.3★ | *Radiation Manipulation*: Emits radiation blasts; can corrupt enemy biological and mechanical systems; self-healing via radiation absorption. |
| **Mirei Shadowcrest** | 15.7★ | *Stealth & Phase-Shift Combat*: Can become intangible, teleport short distances, and attack from shadows unseen. |
| **Cherry** | 15.9★ | *Latent Lightning Element*: Releases devastating lightning strikes; power surges amplify strength; agile and fast with electric aura. |
| **Kitsune** | 15.8★ | *Dual Fire & Water Healing Flames*: Heals allies and scorches enemies; master of elemental balance; spirit bond with Kael. |
| **Kael Ardyn** | 15.9★ | *Lightning & Ice Fusion*: Wields spear charged with lightning and ice; master strategist; spear techniques cut through armor and elemental shields. |

**Recovery of the Base**

Basepoint Theta had transformed dramatically in these two weeks:

* **Medical bays** were expanded with newly acquired mutant bio-tech, accelerating the healing of the wounded.
* **Training grounds** buzzed with elite instructors helping soldiers master their newfound powers.
* **Supply lines** secured with specialized convoys ensured steady flow of monster meat and vital resources.
* **Fortifications** had been reinforced using materials salvaged from battle—mutant chitin plates, elemental-resistant alloys.
* The command center now housed enhanced **sensor arrays** and **psychic amplifiers** to aid in the search for the 16–17★ beast still lurking in the shadows.

**The Relentless Search**

Despite the hard-earned respite, the hunt for the **16 to 17★ monstrosity** continued without pause.

* **Aerial drones** swept the skies and valleys, scanning for abnormal energy signatures.
* **Spiritual scouts** using psychic resonance attempted to detect any disturbance in the ambient life force.
* **Strategic command** coordinated patrols around the perimeter—teams of 14★ to 15★ warriors kept watch day and night.

Yet, no trace surfaced.

The beast remained a ghost—an ominous presence that weighed on every mind.

**Kael’s Reflection**

Standing atop the observation deck, Kael gazed into the distance.

Cherry’s electric sparks flickered softly at his side. Kitsune’s flames cast a gentle glow in the fading twilight.

“We’ve climbed higher,” Kael murmured.

“But the mountain peak is still beyond reach.”

Seiji’s voice crackled over the comm-link.

“Kael, every day we delay its appearance is a victory. Keep your guard.”

Kael nodded.

“We’ll be ready. And when it comes… we’ll show it the strength of the Ascended.”

The battle was over—but the war was far from finished. The future awaited, bright yet fraught with danger. The survivors stood tall, their power tempered by loss and forged in the fires of war.

The next chapter was theirs to write.

Here is the **complete updated information** on **Kael Ardyn**, **Seiji Dran**, **Cherry**, **Kitsune**, **Mirei Shadowcrest**, **Faye Illena**, and **General Hideo Ren** as of **Chapter 138**, following the post-battle awakening and breakthroughs:

**🛡️ Kael Ardyn – “The Last Flame”**

* **Age**: 23 (Nearing 24)
* **Power Level**: ★15.9
* **Weapon**: **Stormpiercer**, Grade 3 – Forged from 14★ materials.
* **Weapon Mastery**: **Level 4 (Master)**
* **Signature Technique**:
  + *Rowing the Spear Against the Waves* – A spiraling forward lunge that combines elemental thrust with piercing precision.
  + *Frostflare Bloom* – Combines fire and ice to erupt in controlled explosions followed by freezing shockwaves.
  + *Static Vein Echo* – Utilizes lightning to track and echo enemy movements, countering with preemptive strikes.
* **Spiritual Perception**: **Level 1** (Grade Unknown) – Can perceive hostile intent and subtle fluctuations in natural energy.
* **Psionic Bond**: **Blue Grade Level 4**
  + Shares location, emotions, and **all sensory input** with Cherry and Kitsune.

**Elemental Affinities:**

* 🔥 **Fire**: White Grade Lv 4 – Controlled flame techniques for offense and mid-range defense.
* ⚡ **Lightning**: White Grade Lv 3 – Sudden electric bursts, movement acceleration, and reflexive defense.
* ❄️ **Ice**: White Grade Lv 4 – Versatile frost constructs, wide-area slowing fields, and ice armor.
* 🕰️ **Time**: Dormant – No active use, but its presence is confirmed.
* 🌿 **Plant**: Dormant – Likely linked to natural regeneration and passive aura expansion.

**🐾 Cherry – “The Thunderclaw”**

* **Designation**: Mutant Cat Beast
* **Power Level**: ★15.9 (Stabilized)
* **Psionic Bond**: Blue Grade Lv 4 (with Kael and Kitsune)
  + Shares complete **emotional**, **sensory**, and **location** data in real time.

**Abilities:**

* **Claw Arc**: White Grade Lv 4 – Electrified swipe that cleaves energy and leaves charged remnants in the air.
* **Element**: ⚡ **Lightning** – White Grade Lv 3 – Precise, short-range high voltage discharges; blinding speed in combat.
* **Special Ability – Power Surge**: Grey Grade Lv 3 – Temporarily boosts Cherry’s power by +0.7 to +0.9★.
* **Mutation Stability**: Stable – Zero side effects from post-15★ evolution.

**🦊 Kitsune – “The Emberflow Healer”**

* **Designation**: Dual-Element Beast
* **Power Level**: ★15.8
* **Psionic Bond**: Blue Grade Lv 4 (with Kael and Cherry)

**Elemental Affinities:**

* 🔥 **Fire**: White Grade Lv 4 – Clean flame techniques, able to sear wounds shut or purge toxins.
* 💧 **Water**: White Grade Lv 4 – Enhanced with regenerative properties; can generate healing mists or concentrated aqua-blades.

**Abilities:**

* **Healing Flame** – Blends fire and water into blue healing fire that accelerates tissue regeneration.
* **Elemental Cloak** – Shrouds her body in alternating flame and water, balancing aggression and defense.
* **Mutation Stability**: Fully stable – no backlash from dual-element equilibrium.

**🌀 Seiji Dran – “The Apex Commander”**

* **Power Level**: ★16.0 (Stabilized)
* **Affinity**: **Space Manipulation (White Grade Lv 5)**
* **Role**: Supreme Commander of the Ascended Network
* **Location**: Tokyo Central Division

**Techniques:**

* **Spatial Rend** – Compresses space along the blade, enabling dimension-slicing attacks.
* **Fold Step** – Teleports short-range without delay; useful in high-speed combat.
* **Astral Command Halo** – Can issue mental directives across vast distances; linked to elite military formations.

**Weapon: Voidbrand Halberd – Reinforced with 15★ space-aligned core minerals.**

* **Mastery**: Halberd Combat Lv 4 (Master)

**👤 Mirei Shadowcrest – “The Phase Ghost”**

* **Power Level**: ★15.9
* **Affinity**: **Phase Shift & Shadow Manipulation (White Grade Lv 5)**
* **Location**: Sapporo, Recon and Infiltration Command

**Abilities:**

* **Ghostwalk** – Allows her to become intangible briefly, passing through structures or dodging fatal blows.
* **Shadow Dive** – Can vanish into shadows and strike from angles outside visual range.
* **Silent Pulse** – A psionic wave that erases her presence from most radar and scanning systems.

**Weapon: Wraith Dagger Set – A pair of black-hued daggers that phase with her, amplified in stealth mode.**

* **Weapon Mastery**: Level 4 (Master Assassin-style)

**🧠 Faye Illena – “The Mind Oracle”**

* **Power Level**: ★15.8
* **Affinity**: **Psychic Seer, Memory and Perception Manipulation (White Grade Lv 5)**
* **Location**: Nagoya – Central Intelligence & Espionage Hub

**Abilities:**

* **Mind Cascade** – Forces opponents into recursive mental loops, rendering them disoriented.
* **Memory Bleed** – Extracts combat experience or knowledge through brief contact.
* **Psychic Veil** – Can create illusory duplicates or mask entire teams.

**Weapon: Neuroquartz Circlet – A rare mental amplifier; can store preloaded illusions or psychic blasts.**

* **Mastery**: Psi-Warfare Techniques Lv 4 (Master)

**⏳ General Hideo Ren – “The Timebreaker”**

* **Power Level**: ★15.8
* **Affinity**: **Localized Time Manipulation (White Grade Lv 5)**
* **Location**: Kagoshima – Overseer of the Southern Corridor

**Abilities:**

* **Time Skew** – Slows down a 5–10 meter radius around the target, creating attack windows.
* **Chrono-Lock** – Locks a single object or enemy in momentary stasis (1–2 seconds).
* **Reverse Echo** – Predicts and replicates a few seconds of enemy movement in advance.

**Weapon: Hourfang Blade – Twin-edged longsword that glows in reversed timeflow.**

* **Mastery**: Time-based Swordplay Lv 4 (Master)

**🛠️ BASE RECOVERY & SEARCH STATUS:**

* **Cloverspark**, **Tokyo**, **Osaka**, and **Sapporo** Remnant Zones have nearly completed structural recovery.
* Over **1,000 technicians and espers** have been assigned to monitor **space-time fluctuations** in search of the **suspected 16★+ beast or entity** that caused the monster tide.
* Over 4,000 soldiers from MIA have returned (heavily injured but recovered), with less than 300 still in critical condition.
* A memorial has been established for the **17,000+ confirmed dead**.
* Elemental stabilizers have been deployed to absorb residual beast energy in critical areas.

**Chapter 139 – The Veil Burns**

**🕯️ Timeline:**

**20 days after the end of the great beast tide**

**🌀 Opening Tension:**

Despite the relative calm that had settled over Japan's mainland since the repelling of the massive tide, the **Command Center** remained in a state of elevated vigilance. Their efforts, however, had not prepared them for what was coming.

Suddenly, their **long-range beast energy scanners** began to distort—an anomaly was picked up. Not from a returning wave, but from a **single source**. Its signature? Not 16★.  
**Not 17★.**

**Power Signature: Exceeding 19★.**

A deathly silence fell.

**⚠️ The Realization:**

Since the outbreak of the apocalypse, beasts had evolved through exposure to **ancient beast energy**, mutating over time. Even the most powerful mutated creatures, including those who had absorbed ancient blood, had topped out at **30★**—and that too in **Africa**, the most saturated region of primal beast energy.

But Japan had only **one known ancient beast**—and it had never left its domain:

**🔥 Infernal Phoenix – *The Fire of Rebirth***

* **Location**: Aogishima Island, Japan
* **Power**: **55.5★**
* **Attributes**:
  + 🔥 *Fire*
  + ♻️ *Resurrection*
* **Abilities**:
  + *Rebirth from Ashes*: Returns from death in a burst of solar flames
  + *Sun Flame Manipulation*: Conjures solar plasma-level flame
  + *Regenerative Flames*: Can heal wounds with flame
* **Lore**: A force of both creation and annihilation. Once reduced the western half of Aogishima to ash. **Detests humanity.** Declared its domain sacred—any human stepping near its territory had been eradicated.

**❗The Dreaded Conclusion:**

The elite strategists, Seiji, Kael, Kaoru, and the commanders put the pieces together.

A 16–17★ beast could not have simply traveled 400+ kilometers to Aogishima, **battled or approached the Phoenix**, absorbed its blood, and returned to mainland Japan **unnoticed**.

The only conclusion was:

**The Infernal Phoenix had moved.**

It had descended upon the mainland—**unseen** by every surveillance tool, every spiritual sensor, every elite fighter.

*“The blood could only have been given… if the Phoenix came to us.”*

What they were dealing with was not just a **20★ ascended beast**, but the **remnant trail of an ancient being**, a walking extinction event.

**🧊 Reaction:**

The entire war room fell into a panicked stillness.  
**Heartbeats** became audible.  
**Sweat** pooled under even the calmest commanders.

Some collapsed. Even Kael's jaw clenched, sensing the terrifying scale of the energy residue.

*“How did we miss it?”*  
*“Has it been here all along… watching?”*

**📡 Distress Call — The Alarm Sounds:**

An urgent call breaks the suffocating silence. It cuts into the tension like a dagger.

The commanders regain composure and pick up the device.

**📢 Emergency Report Received:**

* **Beast ID**: Unnamed
* **Classification**: **Ascended Beast (2 Ascensions)**
* **Power**: **20★ stabilized**
* **Type**: Mutated Sparrow
* **Size**: Over **50 meters tall**
* **Element**: **Fire**
* **Elemental Ability Grade**: **Grey Grade Lv 1** *(Post-second ascension enhancement)*

Its **energy field had stabilized**, meaning it had **fully adapted to the ancient blood**—a level far beyond any known beast in Japan.

**📘 End of Chapter:**

The fire-colored clouds thickened over the sea.  
The communication device sizzled with static as the energy from the 20★ sparrow beast pulsed outward.  
**No one spoke.**  
The realization that the **Phoenix had walked their land** shook every soul to the core.

**End of Chapter 139.**

**Chapter 140 – Seven Against the Inferno**

The base was in chaos.

Less than a month ago, the defenders of Japan had stood triumphant atop a mountain of monster corpses. The tide had ended. Hope had returned. But today—on the 20th day of uneasy calm—a deeper dread settled over their hearts.

A 20★ beast. A mutated flaming sparrow, standing over 50 meters tall, its feathers wreathed in violent flames and pulsing with the terrifying power of ascension. None of the simulations, no matter how dire, had predicted this.

The realization struck hard: despite the vast improvements in strength after the tide, most of their warriors—even the newly minted 10★ elites—were mere insects before such a monster.

Only a fraction could even *think* of facing it.

Of the thousands stationed here, just **34 warriors** had achieved power between 15★ and 16★. But even among those, the majority had not stabilized their mutations or refined their techniques to handle a beast of this caliber.

Only **seven**—the pinnacle of Japan’s defenders—were deemed capable enough to intercept it:

* **Kael Ardyn**
* **Cherry**
* **Kitsune**
* **Seiji Dran**
* **Mirei Shadowcrest**
* **General Hideo Ren**
* **Faye Illena**

Each of them stood in the central command hall, a silent understanding passing between them. This would be no ordinary battle—it would be an all-or-nothing strike.

**General Hideo Ren** stepped forward first, reviewing the limited options.

“We will intercept the beast *10 kilometers* out. If it gets any closer… the city’s gone.”

He projected a battle map mid-air, highlighting terrain features—ridges, valleys, and abandoned supply depots that could serve as cover or chokepoints.

“I’ll use **Time Skew** and **Chrono-Lock** in short bursts to open attack windows. But against a beast of this magnitude, I can’t guarantee how long those effects will hold.”

**Faye Illena**, her expression as calm as ice, chimed in.

“I’ll handle its perception. *Mind Cascade* and *Psychic Veil* will let us maneuver unseen—at least for a few seconds at a time. If it’s intelligent, I may even be able to scramble its combat awareness. If it’s not… we’ll see what memories I can bleed from it.”

**Mirei Shadowcrest**, silent until now, nodded sharply. Her voice was cold, sharp as glass.

“When its guard drops, I’ll strike. Let me know when the distractions hit. I’ll be inside its shadow before it knows it.”

On the attack front, **Kael**, **Seiji**, and **Cherry** would lead.

* **Kael**'s elemental triad—fire, ice, and lightning—would serve as the spearhead. *Stormpiercer* glowed faintly on his back, its blade resonating with his pulse.
* **Cherry** pulsed with barely contained voltage, her fur crackling. Her *Power Surge* had advanced—nearly a full ★ boost now.
* **Seiji**, as ever, was the calm amidst chaos, his blade subtly distorting the air around it with *Spatial Rend*.

“We’ll rotate our lead strikes. If any one of us draws too much attention, the rest press in. No ego. We hit hard, pull out, reset. Repeat.”

**Kitsune**, serene yet sharp-eyed, laid out her plan.

“I’ll maintain **Healing Flame** support from the rear. My *Elemental Cloak* should deflect most of its mid-range fire attacks. I’ll also suppress flame flare-ups to protect our stealth units.”

“And if needed,” she added softly, “I can bite.”

The room shared a tense smile. It was a rare moment of levity.

Then, the final element: **Energy Beast Cannons**.

Massive turrets, loaded with converted beast cores, powered by artificial fusion cells. At their peak, they could obliterate a 16★ monster in one blast. But against a 20★?

Minimal damage.

Still, **every second** mattered. The cannons would be used to open the first strike window and draw attention.

The preparations came together fast. The support teams fell into formation behind the seven.

Monitors beeped.

A fresh alert flashed across the screen.

**[BEAST ENERGY – 20.1★]**  
**[DISTANCE TO BASE: 30.3 km]**  
**[TYPE: AVIAN – FLAME]**  
**[FLIGHT TRAJECTORY: DIRECT – NORTHWARD, SPEED: 290 km/h]**

It was coming. A crimson star across the war map, closing the distance every minute.

**Fifteen minutes until contact.**

Kael tightened the grip on his spear. Kitsune’s blue flames pulsed beside him. Cherry’s claws dug into the floor, sparking as her gaze locked on the horizon.

No turning back.

**This wasn’t survival anymore. This was a war against extinction.**

And Japan’s future rested on these seven.

**End of Chapter 140.**  
**Next: Chapter 141 – “Scorching Wings”**

**Chapter 141 – *Before the Sky Burns***

The scorched plains of Northern Nirasaki spread beneath a reddening sky, as if the world itself knew what approached. Winds grew dry and acrid. The air thickened. And in the eerie silence that followed, seven figures stood together—watchful, tense, united.

They were not just soldiers or survivors anymore.

They were legends in motion.

Kael Ardyn looked ahead, his breath steady despite the rising aura pressing into his chest like a stone slab.

“Iris,” he murmured into his AI-linked watch. “Status update on the target.”

Iris’s voice responded immediately, precise and unnervingly calm.  
**“Target locked. Classification: Ascended Beast – *Two Ascensions*. Estimated arrival in 1 minute 43 seconds. Power Level: ★20.1. Element: Fire. Elemental Ability Grade: Grey Grade Level 1. Estimated Size: Over 50 meters. Mutation Type: Sparavian. Recommendation: Immediate engagement not advised.”**

“Noted,” Kael said grimly. His eyes narrowed. “Tell everyone.”

A synchronized ping hit the neural links of the team, bringing them into full cognitive sync.

**Power & Battle Levels (Adjusted):**

| **Name** | **Base Power** | **Boosted Combat Capacity** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Kael Ardyn** | ★15.9 | **Up to ★18.0** |
| **Seiji Dran** | ★16.0 | **Up to ★17.5** |
| **Cherry** | ★15.9 | **Up to ★16.9** (via Power Surge) |
| **Kitsune** | ★15.8 | **Up to ★16.8** (combined flame/water cloak + team link) |
| **Mirei Shadowcrest** | ★15.9 | Effective ★16.5 (stealth combat burst rating) |
| **Faye Illena** | ★15.8 | Effective ★16.3 (psychic suppression & team synergy boost) |
| **General Hideo Ren** | ★15.8 | Effective ★16.6 (time-based precision strikes) |

Kitsune’s eyes glowed a molten blue, her fur flowing with waves of flickering fire and water. She stood tall beside Cherry—now in her 5-meter combat form—crackling with visible arcs of electricity along her spine.

Cherry’s voice echoed psionically into the team’s minds.  
**“We can’t outrun this one. We make it bleed first.”**

Kael stepped forward, twirling his Stormpiercer once. “I’m with her.”

“But that thing is nearly four stars stronger,” Faye noted aloud, her voice thin with tension. “Even with sync-strike potential, that thing can incinerate cities.”

Seiji adjusted his halberd, speaking calmly. “It’s not about winning in the first strike. We break it. Force it into patterns. Kael, you’ve fought above ★18 before. You and I lead the frontal pressure. Kitsune and Cherry cover our flanks.”

Hideo’s hand rested on his Hourfang Blade. “I’ll create temporal windows. Freeze it mid-motion and exploit its overcommitment.”

Faye nodded. “And I’ll layer illusions—make it see what isn’t real. Make it choose wrong every step.”

Mirei gave a rare grin, twirling her phase daggers. “I’ll ghost in and test its nerves. Sparrows react to flickers. Let’s make it twitch.”

Kael turned to Kitsune and Cherry. “You two ready?”

Cherry’s ears flicked forward. **“Always. Let’s clip a wing, flame-boy.”**

Kitsune’s body surged in faint blue flames. **“We are your teeth. Unleash us.”**

Kael’s hand touched both of their foreheads briefly. The bond surged—an emotional wave of trust, fury, love, and unshakable will.

“I’ll spear the heart,” Kael said quietly, then turned to the others. “Everyone remember—we’re not trying to win. We survive the opening clash. Then we adapt.”

Seiji added, “If this beast was human once, it still obeys instinct. Pressure it enough, and even gods blink.”

**1 Minute Later**

The sky cracked open like dry bone.

A deafening *shriek* swept across the horizon, shaking the clouds themselves. Flames burst in the upper air, tracing long scars of molten fire across the sky dome. The wind caught fire. The world darkened in a heartbeat.

Then it came.

**The Mutated Sparrow.**

It descended like a meteor of vengeance. Over **fifty meters tall**, its wings spanned double that—*burning, yet alive*—feathers made of **charred obsidian**, rimmed in flowing magma. Its beak was jagged metal, warped from mutation, tipped in white-hot corelight. Its eyes? Twin vortexes of rotating flame, showing no recognition of life—only annihilation.

Every beat of its wings sent down shockwaves that melted nearby hilltops. Its talons carved gashes in the land just by grazing it mid-glide.

The fire surrounding it wasn’t just *heat*—it was **Grey Grade Level 1 flame essence**—capable of ignoring traditional resistances, seeping through energy shields, and incinerating even ★18 flesh.

It let out a scream that ruptured eardrums and sent debris flying backward.

Kael took a deep breath. *Time slowed* in his perception.

“Now,” he muttered.

His body surged forward in a blur of red and white light, **Stormpiercer glowing**, Cherry and Kitsune flanking him in twin elemental bursts—lightning and flame weaving a spiral toward death.

Behind them, Seiji cracked space like glass and vanished with a sonic blink. Faye’s illusions painted five copies of Kael across the plain. Mirei disappeared into the shadows beneath the beast’s falling fire, while Hideo narrowed his eyes and **froze the left wingbeat** mid-sky.

A synchronized assault.

A hopeless gambit.

A moment of defiance before the sky burned for real.

**End of Chapter 141**  
*Next: Chapter 142 – “Wing of Cataclysm”*

**Chapter 142: Fire Above All**

The world cracked open with sound.

The instant the Ascended Sparrow descended upon them, it was as if the sky itself ignited. Heat shimmered across the fractured ground, turning sand to molten glass and casting ripples of distortion into the air. The beast was enormous—**over 50 meters tall**, with charred wings that spanned the entire horizon like curtains of fire. Its feathers pulsed with magma veins, and its four eyes—yes, four—burned like miniature suns. Twin tails of living flame writhed behind it, cleaving gouges into the earth with every twitch. Above its skull, a **halo of smoke and embers** rotated slowly, flaring every time it released a wave of heat that threatened to incinerate the oxygen around them.

**"It's not just 20-star power…"** Seiji muttered, sweat clinging to his brow despite his spatial shields. **"Its elemental resonance is—no, it's warping the air. Iris, do we have a heat index?"**

Kael’s AI chirped grimly.  
**“Ambient temperature spike: +480°C localized within 1 km. Probability of spontaneous ignition in organic matter: 97%.”**

**“Cherry! Kitsune! Defensive shell—now!”** Kael barked, jamming the butt of Stormpiercer into the earth.

In an instant, Cherry and Kitsune moved as one. Their bodies surged in size, fur igniting with element-bound energy. Cherry’s lightning forked wildly, creating a jagged cocoon around the team, while Kitsune’s watery veil swirled to cool the air. Kael layered his **Ice Field** on top—his **Frostflare Bloom** blooming in reverse—to create a dome that held the temperature barely at survivable levels.

**"We're losing ground!"** Mirei shouted, her form phasing rapidly in and out, barely able to stay corporeal without catching fire. She reappeared near Kael, smoke trailing from her hair. **"I can’t shadow-jump—the whole field is saturated with solar burn!"**

**“This is insane…”** Faye gasped, voice tight, the circuits of her **Neuroquartz Circlet** glowing over her temples. **“Even my illusions disintegrate in seconds.”**

Another wave of heat came.

The sparrow’s wings flared open with a single beat. Air detonated. The team’s ears popped, and **Hideo** had to anchor the area in a **Chrono-Lock**, halting time in a five-meter radius to prevent everyone from being blasted backward.

**“I can’t keep this up! My cooldowns are stacking!”** Hideo grunted, veins popping as he forced the **Hourfang Blade** to redirect time again. **"It's attacking on a physics level!"**

**Kael’s current status**:

* Base Power: ★15.9
* Fighting Power: ★17.8 (via elemental amplification and peak combat focus)
* Pain Level: 26%
* Combat Sustain Prediction: 2.3 minutes at current output

**“We’re not even hurting it,”** Kael murmured grimly. **“It’s not a bird—it’s a walking calamity.”**

Then it *moved* again.

The Ascended Sparrow dove, wings slicing the sky apart, the pressure alone forcing the team to split. Seiji activated **Fold Step**, blinking in and out as he attempted to close the distance. Kael lunged left with Cherry beside him, Kitsune dragging Faye through a burning haze toward the rocky ridge. Mirei flickered desperately, vanishing into a chunk of broken rock. Hideo covered the rear, invoking **Reverse Echo** to dance around deadly feather projectiles that moved like flaming missiles.

**Boom!**

A plume of fire over 30 meters wide slammed into the defensive dome they’d made earlier. It burst apart like thin ice, Cherry and Kitsune grunting as they absorbed the feedback. Cherry's lightning pulsed angrily, her fur burning at the edges. Kitsune winced, blood dripping from her flank.

**“I can’t regenerate fast enough,”** Kitsune hissed, her soothing voice struggling against the flames. **“Cherry, back me up—Flame Wall!”**

**“Claw Arc!”** Cherry screamed, releasing an electrified slash that detonated midair, distorting the Sparrow’s trajectory for a moment.

It was just that—a moment. But Seiji used it.

**“Voidbrand: Dimensional Spiral!”** he roared, appearing above the creature’s wing joint, slamming his halberd into its flesh.

There was a screech, metallic and ancient, like the sound of a planet shattering. The Sparrow recoiled—but not in pain. It was **laughing**. Not audibly, but in its **presence**, in the glee that rolled off it psychically.

**“It’s absorbing fire damage!”** Faye shouted from the ridge. Her mind was fraying, trying to maintain everyone’s cognitive clarity against the pressure. **“Grey Grade Fire Affinity! It’s converting fire into biological mass!”**

Kael cursed. He had known this was beyond their level. But now… now it was worse.

The Sparrow **flapped once more**, unleashing a **Meteor Halo**, dozens of feather-bombs slamming into the ground like falling stars. One carved a crater where Mirei had been moments ago—her shadow form erupting on the other side of the battlefield, coughing violently, her eyes bleeding.

Kael reached her just in time, scooping her up in one hand.  
**"You're not dying here, Mirei!"**

**"Then do something, Kael!"** she shouted, gripping his arm, her shadow aura flickering weakly. **"We’re going to die in minutes!"**

Kael turned to Seiji.  
**"We can't kill this thing with conventional attacks."**

Seiji nodded grimly, blood trailing down one cheek.  
**"We buy time. Try to force it into a cooldown or elemental over-surge. If it overheats—"**

**“Cherry, you ready for the surge?”** Kael said sharply.

Cherry growled, sparks licking her whiskers. **“Do it. I’ll burn out if I have to.”**

Kael raised his palm. “Iris, overload resonance link—siphon 5% lightning from me, direct to Cherry!”

**“Warning: Risk to circulatory system. Proceed?”**

**“Do it!”**

Cherry screamed as the power flooded her core. She erupted in white-blue lightning, her claws doubling in length, her eyes becoming radiant slits of pure energy.

She leapt.

**"THUNDERCLAW: SEVERING BOLT!"**

Her claws crashed into the Sparrow’s neck. Lightning arced violently, exploding outward in **a 60-meter radius**, blasting away fire, stone, even air. The Sparrow reeled—not wounded, but **paused**. Kitsune followed up, blazing with blue fire and water.

**“EMBERFLOW MAELSTROM!”**

The regenerative swirl hit the whole team, closing some wounds and restoring vision, balance, breath. Faye used the brief reprieve to lock down its emotional output—creating a psychic **choke chain** to prevent a retaliatory psychic wave.

**Hideo**, sensing an opportunity, locked the creature’s right wing in **Chrono-Lock** again. **"NOW! SEVER THE WING!"**

Kael didn’t hesitate.  
Stormpiercer glowed with white-blue light.  
He activated *all* three elements at once.

**“Frostflare Bloom: Reverse Torrent—Sundering Arc!”**

A sweeping spiral of fire, ice, and lightning carved through the air—and struck the creature’s wing, cleaving through burning feathers and magma-thread tendons.

The wing didn’t fall.

But it **twitched**, **cracked**, and then—**flared with grey fire**, regrowing before their eyes.

**“It… it regenerates Ascended tissue.”** Mirei whispered, horror plain in her voice. **“We’re not even slowing it down…”**

The Sparrow rose again, four burning eyes narrowing. Its beak began to open—a blinding solar light gathering within its throat.

Kael’s heart skipped.  
**“That’s… an extinction blast.”**

No more words. No room for debate. The team scattered as the **Ascended Beast prepared its ultimate attack.**

They had maybe **ten seconds**.

Kael, eyes burning, shouted across the field.

**"Iris, bring up Protocol Helios."**

**“Warning: Protocol Helios is untested. Overload probability at 84%.”**

**“I DON’T CARE!”** Kael shouted.

All seven figures, battered and bloodied, raised their weapons.

The light in the Sparrow’s throat expanded.

**Nine seconds.**

To be continued…

**Chapter 144: Splintering the Flame**

The night sky pulsed with a burning hue, lit not by stars but by the aftermath of the Ascended Sparrow’s divine-level firestorm. Scorched clouds twisted high above as the wind howled with molten heat, bearing witness to a battlefield pushed to the edge of collapse.

Kael’s breath came in shallow bursts as he pulled himself to his feet, shielding his eyes from the radiating firestorm. The air was fractured, warped by intense elemental pressure. The Sparrow loomed in the sky, its great wings outstretched, glowing embers still dripping from its form like burning tears. But—just for a moment—it **didn’t move**.

A window.

Kael’s eyes narrowed. “Now. Faye.”

Faye’s eyes were glassy, her forehead glistening with sweat as the **Neuroquartz Circlet** on her head sparked with white-blue flickers. She clenched her fists and pressed forward, her voice barely a whisper but powered by raw will.

**"Neural Interference... Phase Break: Vortex Loop."**

A ripple tore through the air like a spiraling fault line. For a brief, precious second, the Ascended Sparrow **twitched**, its wings jittering out of sync with its gaze. Its head rose—**and the attack meant for the battlefield lanced upward**, exploding in the upper atmosphere.

A thunderous roar echoed across the sky, miles above the battlefield.

**They were still alive.**

But Faye collapsed.

Blood leaked from her ears. The glow in her circlet dimmed. Her consciousness slipped, body limp in the dust.

“Faye!” Kitsune dashed toward her, shielding her from residual heat waves. “Her mind… it’s burned out from the feedback! She's still breathing—but barely!”

Kael gritted his teeth, heart pounding. “Mirei! We need another stop—now!”

Across the ravaged terrain, Mirei nodded, her form flickering in and out of phase. She looked drained, her shadow-fused body already showing strain from earlier attacks. But she reached inside herself, pressed her palms together, and summoned every shred of temporal energy she had.

**"Time Art: Seventh Silence—World Breach."**

The battlefield froze. The world **stopped**.

Ash froze mid-fall. Flame hung motionless in the air like painted brush strokes. Even the sound vanished, leaving a vacuum of absolute stillness.

Kael didn’t waste a heartbeat.

His senses exploded outward. The moment Time Stop triggered, **Spiritual Perception Level 1** activated. The battlefield transformed in his mind—a sea of flickering life-force threads, pressure zones, elemental densities.

And there—at the center of it all—was the Sparrow. Its body was **slowing**, regeneration sluggish, its **flame core exposed** near the chest base, just under the first layer of wingbone.

**“Found it.”**

Stormpiercer snapped into his hand, the runes along its shaft glowing with faint white-blue hues. Kitsune surged forward beside him. Cherry was with her now, her body sparking faintly—still weakened, but conscious again. Seiji blinked in behind Kael, Void energy swirling around his halberd like a vortex.

“Hit it at the core. That’s the only shot we have before it moves again,” Kael growled.

Seiji nodded, features stern. “Together then. Let’s see what happens when fire meets **the abyss and frost**.”

The trio charged—Kael leading the strike.

**"Frostflare Bloom: Core Fracture!"**

Kael's spear twisted in a helix of ice and lightning, condensing every ounce of his freezing aura into a piercing drill. Spiritual energy flared around him like an aurora—thin, sharp, cold. The impact struck the beast’s core shell—

**Crack.**

A fissure spread across its flaming chest.

Seiji followed up, halberd slamming into the same spot with gravitational compression—an inverted collapse of weight and space.

**Boom.**

Flame sprayed out like blood. Not enough to injure—but **the shell was weakening.**

Mirei’s Time Stop ended.

The air snapped back.

The Sparrow **screamed**, flames surging from its body—but the fire sputtered, inconsistent. The radiant heat pulsed outwards, but not at full strength.

Kael landed on the ground, knees buckling. Seiji staggered beside him. Kitsune pulled back, dragging the unconscious Faye behind a ruined pillar of obsidian. Mirei collapsed to her knees, coughing violently.

And then they saw it—

**The Sparrow was slowing.**

Its movements grew **less precise**, the fluid grace of before replaced by **jerky, sluggish motions**. Its talons scraped against the blackened stone, wings laboring with each flap. Cherry’s lightning surges had damaged its internal channels more than they’d realized.

**Kael’s electricity was interfering with its flame circuits.**

**“Its attacks are cooling down!”** Kitsune called out from cover. “It’s breathing heavy—energy expenditure must be hitting limit thresholds!”

“Then we’ve got it on the back foot,” Kael growled, forcing himself upright.

But still… it **wasn’t bleeding**. Its massive form crackled and glowed like a bonfire deity, wounded perhaps—but not broken.

“It's regenerating, but... slow,” Seiji muttered, hand trembling as he steadied his halberd. “Each time we damage it, it takes longer to repair. It's *stalling*—waiting for us to burn out.”

Kael could feel it too. The flow of the fight had changed.

The team was broken, their tactics scattered and reactive. Only a few of them could still fight. But the Sparrow—while it hadn’t recovered—it still **had power**.

Even now, its throat was glowing faintly again, gathering embers into a second breath.

Kael raised his spear again, glaring into the storm of heat ahead.

“We’re not done. As long as it can still breathe, we’re in danger.”

“Agreed,” Seiji said hoarsely. “We need to hit it again—before that second breath finishes.”

Kael’s lightning began to charge again.

**His body ached. His soul strained.**

But his grip didn’t loosen.

**They had brought a god to the edge.**

Now, they had to **push it off**.

*To be continued...*

**Chapter 144: One Second to Sever**

The air trembled with pressure—an unbearable, molten tension that threatened to crush lungs and bones alike. The Ascended Sparrow’s second breath glowed in its throat, a core of swirling fire condensed tighter than the last, denser, more lethal. The inferno wasn’t a simple blaze; it was an *executioner’s blade*—primed to carve the battlefield into ash once more.

“Move!” Kael shouted, but even he knew it was too late. They were too far, too spent. Faye was unconscious, and even Kael’s perception warned that their stamina had thinned to critical levels.

Then a hoarse voice broke through the tension.  
“I’m… not done yet.”

**Hideo.**

From where he had collapsed earlier, Hideo stood up on shaking legs, blood dripping from his nose, eyes glowing dimly. His chronal veins—those faint silver trails etched into his skin—flared like stars in their death throes.

“I can give you one second,” he rasped. “**Make it count.**”

Kael’s eyes widened. “Hideo, that’ll destroy your nervous system—”

“Do you want to talk or do you want to win?”  
The young Timewalker didn’t wait for an answer.

He raised his trembling arms, pushing all his mental power, body, and soul into the final invocation.

**“Chrono Seal: Final Layer – Singular Collapse.”**

The world froze.

But unlike before, it didn’t hold for long. It lasted only a blink—**one second** of stillness in a war-torn world.

But that was all they needed.

Kael’s perception screamed. A channel of clarity opened. He surged forward like lightning incarnate, his feet carving gouges in the earth. The spiritual field around him flared white-blue.

**Cherry**, claws wrapped in flickering arcs of lightning, launched forward with unrestrained fury. Her body blurred into a comet as she targeted the Sparrow’s neck, arcs of raw voltage crackling from her claws—**Claw Arc: Lightning Fangs**.

**Seiji** vanished from view, using the last of his dimensional energy to teleport behind the Sparrow’s skull. The void cracked open, and he stepped through it, halberd wreathed in distortion fields and flickering purple-black flames.

**Mirei**, sensing the momentum, shadow-jumped into position behind the beast, using a nearby fissure in the battlefield to emerge just under its wing joint. Her twin daggers shimmered with shadow poison—designed not to kill, but to *paralyze*.

The one second ended.

Time snapped back.

**Boom.**

All three attacks struck in unison—

Kael’s spear rammed into the side of the beast’s neck, the frostline following the momentum and slowing the regeneration for a fraction of a second.

Cherry’s claws raked across the upper neck scales, her lightning biting into the nerves—**shorting them temporarily** and causing the beast to shriek in shock.

Seiji’s halberd struck the same spot from behind with a downward cleave, bending part of the neck forward in a brutal contortion.

Mirei’s daggers embedded themselves at the nerve-junction beneath the wing, her shadow energy pulsing and disrupting fire-energy channels.

And most importantly—

**The second breath collapsed.**

The fire in the Sparrow’s throat dispersed prematurely, sparks exploding in an uncontrolled backlash. A violent pulse of heat radiated out, but it was *incomplete*, and for the first time—

**The beast screeched in pain.**

It staggered, wings flapping out wildly to rebalance itself mid-air, flames trailing like broken feathers behind it. The wound on its neck was shallow, but real. The divine sheen around its body flickered.

They had **hurt it.**

But no one had the strength to celebrate.

Kael collapsed to one knee, his breath labored. Cherry panted, sparks leaking from her soaked fur. Seiji slumped down, eyes dull, vision narrowing. Mirei’s hands trembled as she barely held her footing.

Then the Sparrow attacked again.

With no time to recover, they were forced back into the storm.

It didn’t launch another breath. Instead, it began a savage assault using its **beak** and **fire claws**—razor-sharp talons glowing with solar flame, each strike hot enough to melt steel. The battlefield became chaos again, and this time, they had no counters.

**Kael ducked under a claw swipe**, but it still grazed his shoulder, tearing through his reinforced armor and singing flesh. He grunted, but rolled with the momentum and tried to retaliate—only to be pushed back by a wing beat that sent him tumbling.

**Cherry leapt**, slashing at its leg—but the Sparrow twisted and **pecked** at her, forcing her to spin mid-air to avoid getting impaled. A shockwave followed her dodge, flinging her into a ruined pillar.

**Seiji met a claw head-on**, his halberd raised in defense. Sparks flew as his weapon barely held against the impact, but the weight behind it drove him into the ground. He coughed blood, trying to summon void energy to teleport again—but his reserves were drained.

**Mirei reappeared in shadows**, trying to pierce the underbelly, but the Sparrow twisted—**flames surged from its wings**, and she was forced to retreat. Even her shadows were starting to burn.

Kitsune tried to support them with healing flames, but her blue fire couldn’t keep up. She weaved between attacks, shielding Faye with her body, her tails swishing rapidly to douse the worst heat. Her healing magic dulled the damage—but couldn’t **reverse** it.

It was survival at its limit.

Every time they struck, the Sparrow retaliated with savage precision. They were slowing, weakening. The monster, though wounded, still held terrifying pressure. Even with its breath on cooldown and its healing disrupted, **its body** was still divine-tier.

And worse—

They could feel it **adapting** again.

The movements became sharper. The beak strikes now followed patterns they hadn’t seen before. Its talons flicked at just the right moments to punish dodges. It was learning them.

Cherry collapsed next to Kael, her breath ragged. “I’m sorry, Kael… my lightning’s running dry…”

Kael panted, spear trembling in his hand. “No... you did more than enough.”

Seiji limped toward them, halberd dragging behind him, and Mirei reappeared at Kael’s side with blood dripping from a slash on her shoulder. “We’re... out of time,” she whispered.

Kael looked up. The Sparrow stared back down at them. Not triumphant—but relentless. The divine flames curled around its feathers once more, but the light wasn’t as radiant now. Its neck bore a crack. Its flame channels were disrupted. But its **will** remained unbroken.

“We can't survive another charge,” Kitsune said quietly, standing in front of them. “Not without… something else.”

Kael’s heart thudded.

Was this it?

They had come this far—past the breaking point of power, logic, and mortal limits—and **still** it stood.

But Kael clenched his jaw.

No. Not yet.

He looked around. His team still breathed. Faye still clung to life. Hideo had risked everything to give them one second.

And now… they needed **just one more chance**.

*To be continued...*

**Chapter 145: The Silent Frost**

The battlefield was silent.

Not the silence of peace—but of exhaustion, of death teetering just one misstep away. The heat from the Ascended Sparrow’s flames still lingered in the shattered earth, a suffocating curtain of pressure over the devastated landscape. Smoke curled around craters and broken buildings like dying breaths. The stench of scorched stone and burnt ozone filled every gasp.

They were finished.

Kael stood, swaying, his body trembling from head to toe. The veins along his arms glowed faintly with the last remnants of lightning, and shards of frost still clung to his fingertips. But his breath came ragged. Every heartbeat felt like a hammer driving into an empty well.

Beside him, Seiji was worse. His armor was cracked, his halberd stained with his own blood. He had pushed himself past limits already shattered.

Everyone else had fallen.

**Faye** and **Hideo** lay unconscious. Neither stirred, their bodies motionless and pale, drained of all strength.

**Mirei** was curled behind a fractured rock slab, eyes barely open, breathing shallow. Kitsune was beside her, her tails limp, her radiant blue flames now nothing but flickers.

And **Cherry**... Cherry twitched faintly, her paws scorched from overextending her lightning abilities. The aftermath of her **Power Surge** had left her limp and silent.

Only Kael and Seiji remained.

The Sparrow hovered above them. Its body was bloodied now—barely—but its divine pressure had not waned. A shimmer of gold cracked around its legs and neck where Kael and the others had landed their blows. The divine aura was weakening, but its eyes still glowed with wrath. The monster refused to fall.

It needed just **one more push**. One more **meaningful attack**. But they had nothing left.

Kael barely lifted his spear. He gritted his teeth and stepped forward, only to stumble again. He couldn’t draw in spiritual power. His limbs were drained. His **ice** was cold mist now, his **lightning** no longer sharp—just static buzzing around his fingers.

The Sparrow screeched, wings glowing again with divine fire. It descended, aiming for Kael. The beast raised one wing like a blade—**to cleave Kael apart.**

But Seiji moved.

Without a word, Seiji shoved Kael aside and threw himself in front of the attack.

“Seiji—!”

The wing slammed into Seiji’s side. The impact cracked bone. Seiji’s body was flung across the battlefield like a broken doll, crashing through two boulders before he stopped. But he was alive. Barely.

Kael’s eyes burned—not with power, but fury. He forced himself up, one foot dragging, teeth clenched so tight blood trickled from his gums. He gathered everything he had left—his final spiritual breath.

**“Frostbound Flash.”**

Kael slammed his hand into the ground. Ice and lightning surged forward in one final desperate attack, crawling up the Sparrow’s legs. Frost hardened instantly around the joints, laced with convulsing arcs of electricity. The beast shrieked, legs locking in place. It stumbled mid-air.

This was the opening.

But Kael couldn’t take it.

His body gave out.

He collapsed, knees hitting the ground, breath stolen from his lungs.

He couldn’t move.

He couldn’t finish it.

He watched, helpless, as the Sparrow thrashed, beginning to break free. It roared, fire building again, trying to take flight—

Then—

**Schhhkkk—**

A **brilliant white arc** sliced through the air and across the Sparrow’s neck. So fast it left trails of mist in the sky. The freezing wave severed scales like paper.

A second arc followed, then a third—aimed straight at the beast’s chest.

**Two more gashes**—deep, glowing with inner frost. One over the heart. One through the core.

The fire died in the Sparrow’s eyes.

The massive beast let out a guttural cry—not rage, not pain. **Shock.** Then its wings dropped, and its body slammed into the earth with a thunderous crash.

**The Ascended Sparrow was dead.**

Kael blinked slowly. His eyes traced the source of the arcs—a figure stepping onto the battlefield from behind the scorched trees. He moved with a limp, one hand over his side, the other gripping a long, glowing white blade carved from crystalline frost.

His hair was pale silver, tied back in a loose knot. His uniform was white and blue, the emblem of the **Northern Sea Perimeter Division** stitched over his chest.

**Naori Kureha.**  
“The Silent Frost.”  
Power Level: **15.4★**  
Affinity: **Cryokinesis**  
One of the First Seventeen Ascendents. Overseer of Japan’s northernmost waters.

His breath steamed visibly even in the heat. His body trembled violently with each step. Blood ran down his chin, and his weapon cracked with overuse.

But he walked straight past the beast’s body and toward Kael and the others.

He stopped, dropped to one knee, and pulled out a small, crystal communicator.

He pressed it weakly. “This is Naori Kureha,” he said, voice strained. “Target neutralized. Code Omega-9 is complete.”

He paused, his breath hitching.

“We need **immediate evacuation and medical teams**. Multiple high-value operatives down. Extreme spiritual fatigue across the board. Prepare for long-term recovery. Repeat—**multiple casualties avoided, but urgent aid required.**”

His communicator crackled as he clicked it off.

He turned to Kael, who was barely conscious. “Not bad,” Naori murmured. “You kids did all the hard work. I just… cleaned up.”

Then he smiled faintly—almost sorrowfully—and finally, as the cold mist settled across the battlefield, **Naori collapsed**.

His body hit the ground with a dull thud.

The frost on his blade melted.

And in that frozen silence, with the monster fallen and the battlefield still, the sky above finally began to clear.

**End of Chapter 145.**

**Chapter 146: Echoes After the Fire**

Kael drifted between faint murmurs and a deep, encompassing silence. His body felt weightless, suspended—yet faint, prickling pain curled around his right arm and shoulder. Something cool, like water, brushed against his skin.

A mechanical hiss.

His eyes snapped open.

He was submerged in a glowing liquid, encased in a transparent pod. A mask covered his mouth, gently supplying oxygen. A low hum echoed around him as blue ripples flowed across the inner surface of the pod. The moment his brainwaves registered full consciousness, a pulse flickered at the base of the chamber.

**Hiss…**

The pod split open. The fluid drained out with a soft gurgle, leaving behind the cold wetness clinging to his skin. Kael dropped to his knees, coughing once before peeling the mask off.

He blinked.

White ceilings. Bright overhead lights. Clean antiseptic air.

**A medical center.**

His fingers flexed slowly. A sharp ache lanced through his right arm, forcing a wince. It felt like the bone had been dislocated and reconnected forcefully. He was alive—but barely.

Kael stood shakily, gripping the edge of the pod for support, and turned his head.

To his left and right stood six more pods.

Inside them were the familiar forms of his companions—**Mirei, Hideo, Seiji, Cherry, Faye,** and **Kitsune**—each immersed in the same regenerative liquid. Their vitals blinked on nearby monitors, steady but weak.

Relief washed over him.

They had survived.

A soft *ding* echoed through the chamber. A young nurse stepped in, eyes widening slightly when she saw Kael conscious.

“You’re awake—! I’ll inform the doctors and command immediately.”

She bowed hastily and disappeared through the automated door.

Kael exhaled, steadying himself. His reflection shimmered faintly on the smooth wall. There were bandages along his ribs and shoulder. His right palm still glowed faintly with a trace of residual lightning.

Within minutes, a group of doctors and medics filed in, followed by high-ranking military officers.

One of the chief physicians—a bald man with a calm demeanor—approached and began scanning him.

“You’re stable,” he said with relief. “You’ve been unconscious for just over twenty-four hours. You were recovered from the battlefield by emergency extraction teams after receiving a signal from Naori Kureha. Your body had experienced extreme elemental exhaustion and spiritual burnout, but your core remained intact. You’ll make a full recovery with rest.”

Kael nodded, eyes dark. “The others?”

“Still under observation,” the doctor replied. “Their vitals are stabilizing. Hideo and Faye sustained the worst injuries, but our healers and beast-blood infusions are working. They’ll need two weeks at minimum. The rest should awaken within the next day or two.”

Kael slowly stepped out of the medical pod, wrapping the offered robe around his torso. The door slid open again.

Four figures entered.

Commanders.

**Kaoru Mizuchi** of the Western Division, her white uniform pristine, her piercing eyes calm as ever.  
**Riku Tanabe** of the Northern Division, a large man with frost-lined armor and a deep scowl of concern.  
**Ayame Sudo** of the Eastern Division, short and serious, flanked by two aides.  
And **Hiroshi Kanda** of the Southern Division, older, grizzled, and leaning slightly on his ceremonial staff.

Kaoru offered a nod. “Kael Ardyn. Welcome back.”

Kael bowed lightly. “Thank you. I heard... someone saved us.”

Riku folded his arms. “That’d be **Naori Kureha**.”

Ayame stepped forward. “Known as *The Silent Frost*. Power level: **15.4★**. One of the first-generation Ascendents. He was originally part of the northern wilderness beast support force.”

Kaoru continued. “When the monster tides first erupted decades ago, Naori voluntarily consumed a rare **cold-type beast core** to protect a collapsing region. His affinity awakened—**Cryokinesis**. Since then, he’s been stationed as the silent guardian of the ocean perimeter, fending off sea-borne threats that rarely make the reports.”

Hiroshi added, “He heard the emergency call from the command tower, and was within range to respond. He used his ultimate skill—**Frozen Severance**—**three times consecutively**. That technique alone is strong enough to shatter a fortress wall.”

“But doing so cost him,” Ayame said softly. “Naori is currently in critical recovery. It may take **ten days or more** for his body to stabilize.”

Kael’s fists clenched. “Then we owe him everything.”

“Indeed,” Kaoru said. “If he hadn’t arrived, we wouldn’t be standing here.”

Kael turned toward the sealed pods containing his friends. “What happened to the Sparrow?”

Riku answered. “The remains of the **20.1★ Ascended Flaming Sparrow** were secured. The body is currently being stored in a cryogenic stasis field at **Underground Vault 07**. Dissections and core analysis will begin once all contaminants are cleared.”

“There’s still heat radiating from its tissues,” Hiroshi muttered. “Even dead, it burns.”

Ayame nodded. “We’ll extract vital samples over the coming weeks. Cores, feathers, flame glands. The data will revolutionize our understanding of elemental mutations.”

Kael said nothing, simply processing it all.

Two days passed.

During that time, **Mirei, Kitsune,** and **Cherry** gradually awakened. Kitsune’s flames flickered weakly, and Cherry had to be restrained from overexerting herself.

Faye and Hideo remained bedridden, though they were out of danger. Faye’s left leg was still wrapped in stabilizing runes. Hideo’s breath was shallow, but his energy readings were returning.

Thanks to medics with healing gifts and the use of **high-grade monster blood infusions**, they avoided any lasting fatal injuries. But both would remain in the medical ward for at least **fifteen more days**.

By the start of the **third day**, Kael and the others—those who could walk—were summoned to a formal meeting room near the northern command center.

Hideo and Faye remained in care, excused.

The heavy chamber doors slid open.

Inside, long metal tables were set. Officers, researchers, commanders, and tactical advisors were seated. The main projection screen showed analysis data of the fallen Sparrow and maps marking new mutated creature movement.

Kael stepped in, seated beside Mirei and Kitsune. Cherry curled near his chair quietly.

Kaoru stood at the head.

She looked around the room, her gaze sharp.

“We now begin the post-battle assessment and planning phase.”

**End of Chapter 146.**

**Chapter 147: The Weight of the Phoenix**

The meeting room was vast, sterile, and unyielding, its cold steel and reinforced glass walls reflecting the harsh fluorescent lighting above. Around the central oval table sat the highest-ranking commanders, military strategists, scientists, and special operatives—the few capable of comprehending the monstrous threat the world faced.

Kael, Mirei, Kitsune, Cherry, and a handful of others were seated quietly along one side. The air was thick with tension and dread as the conference began.

Kaoru Mizuchi’s voice cut through the silence, steady and sharp.

“We’ll begin with the latest intelligence regarding the **Infernal Phoenix** and the **20.1★ Flaming Sparrow**. Reports confirmed the Sparrow’s arrival into our mainland zone two days ago. However, we have **no clear indicators** of the Phoenix’s approach.”

Riku Tanabe interjected gravely, “The Phoenix is still an unknown factor. Unlike the Sparrow, which emitted intense beast energy detected across multiple regions, the Phoenix’s approach has shown no fluctuations, no spikes in elemental energy, no disturbance in the ley lines, nor any recorded anomaly in the five monitored regions.”

Ayame Sudo added, “It’s as if the creature is cloaked in complete stealth or—worse—it’s lying dormant beneath the surface, biding its time.”

A heavy silence fell on the room. No one dared voice the possibilities aloud. The **Infernal Phoenix** was not just another monster; it was a myth in the making, a cataclysm waiting to ignite the world anew.

After nearly half an hour of grim analysis and tense speculation, Kaoru shifted the topic.

“We must address the **distribution and handling of the Sparrow’s meat and remains**. The carcass is unprecedented in its properties.”

Hiroshi Kanda’s voice echoed, “The Sparrow’s intense heat renders normal 10★ warriors almost useless against its flesh. Weapons rated below **15★** cannot damage its skin or feathers without the aid of elemental power to weaken the armor.”

Commander Riku continued, “More than 200 personnel with power levels between **12★ and 15★** have been deployed in rotating shifts, using elemental techniques—primarily fire and water manipulations—to peel and remove the feathers. The effort was colossal.”

Kaoru flicked her wrist, and the screen lit up with detailed data.

“Exactly **2,780 feathers** were collected. Each feather exhibits strength comparable to the bone of a **17★ or 18★ beast**—remarkably resilient and highly sought after for weapon forging.”

She paused, letting the gravity of those numbers settle in.

“In addition, we harvested roughly **50,000 kilograms of meat** and **250,000 kilograms of bones**. Despite our strongest weapons, rated up to **14★ and 15★**, cutting through the bones remains impossible with current technology.”

Murmurs rippled through the assembled crowd.

Ayame leaned forward, her voice sharp, “The bones’ density and resilience exceed any known standards. We may require a breakthrough in alloy synthesis or a new class of elemental-enhanced weaponry.”

Kaoru nodded grimly, “We are prioritizing research accordingly.”

Riku shifted the discussion toward resource management.

“In the course of our expeditions and battles, over **1,000 monster cores** have been collected from beasts ranging between **11★ and 15★**. Those cores from **10★ beasts** are now being used to help warriors break through from **9.9★ power** levels—expanding our elite force.”

Hiroshi’s gaze hardened, “Of particular note, we have secured **four cores** within the **15★ to 16★** range. These cores will power the newly developed **beast cannons**—the only current weapon capable of inflicting damage on a **17★ beast**.”

Cherry, curled quietly near Kael, twitched her ears at this. Such weapons could turn the tide in future battles, but the cost and complexity of these cores were immense.

The commanders then focused on the delicate topic of the Sparrow’s meat distribution.

Kaoru explained, “Due to the intense elemental energy infused within the meat, only warriors above **15★ power** can safely consume it. The rest will face severe internal damage or death.”

Ayame added, “Unfortunately, our ranks contain only **27 warriors** currently rated above 15★ power. That severely limits how much we can allocate.”

Kael frowned, “How are you planning to feed those warriors?”

Kaoru’s gaze met his with quiet resolve. “We’ll prepare the meat by mixing small amounts of the Sparrow’s flesh into **meatballs**. These will be incorporated into the diets of all personnel above 15★ to maximize their recovery and enhance their elemental potential.”

Hiroshi added, “Anyone below that threshold will **not** be given the meat. We cannot risk the loss of personnel to fatal side effects.”

The room nodded in unanimous agreement.

Riku then closed the meeting with a sobering thought.

“The **Infernal Phoenix** remains our unknown variable. Without intelligence on its whereabouts or intentions, we must prepare for the worst. All divisions are to remain on high alert.”

Kaoru’s final words echoed:

“We stand at the edge of a precipice. Every resource, every warrior, every strategy must be sharpened. The Sparrow is but a warning—what comes next will test our very existence.”

The meeting ended with heavy footsteps and quiet murmurs as everyone dispersed.

Kael’s mind lingered on the Phoenix, the feathers, the cores, and the precious few warriors standing between humanity and oblivion.

**End of Chapter 147.**

**Chapter 148: Echoes of Ash and Memory**

The sky over Tokyo Remnant City was a blanket of gray, low clouds hanging heavy over the steel spires and glass towers of Central Division Headquarters. The rain hadn’t yet fallen, but the city seemed to be holding its breath, as though mourning with the families below.

Over the past few days, soldiers from all corners of Japan’s devastated mainland had begun returning to their respective bases. Kael, Seiji, Faye, and over **150,000 soldiers** made their way back from the north, weary but alive. From the original 210,000 that marched out, their number had diminished—a harsh reminder of the war’s price. The **Central Division alone had lost nearly 60,000** troops.

The homecoming, though triumphant in the eyes of some, was soaked in quiet sorrow.

And today, that sorrow had found its voice.

In the heart of the Central Courtyard, a solemn funeral ritual was underway. Hundreds of thousands stood in silence, black bands tied around their arms. Holographic displays projected the names and faces of the fallen across giant screens, and one by one, families stepped forward to lay crystalline memory tokens into a radiant pyre—one that burned not with flame, but with the soft blue glow of spirit-light.

Kael stood still, his hands clasped tightly before him. At his side were the people he’d once survived with in the earliest days of the apocalypse. They were family not by blood, but by fire and fury.

**Emily**, once the bubbly, talkative 11-year-old girl, now nearly 13, stood in silence. Her cheeks were streaked with tears, and her small fingers clutched a worn patch from Victor’s uniform.  
Beside her, **Maya**, her mother, stood strong—but her eyes betrayed the storm inside. Her arm rested gently around her daughter’s shoulder, a quiet anchor.  
**David**, Kael’s schoolmate, now 24, had grown taller and leaner, but the youthful gleam in his eyes was dimmer. He stared down, jaw clenched.  
**Ethan**, silent and stoic as ever, stood beside them, arms folded, gaze distant.  
And nearby, **Aria, Lena, and Lyra**—the Voss triplets, daughters of Commander Darius Voss—stood shoulder to shoulder, eyes red, chins held high.

The name **Victor Halsten** appeared on the screen, and the group stepped forward.

Kael knelt, placing Victor’s old pocket compass—something the old man always kept on him—into the glowing pyre. As the flames rose, memories surfaced like ghosts.

After the ceremony, the group gathered in the side gardens of the HQ, where few others lingered. A single sakura tree bloomed out of season, a result of elemental manipulation during restoration efforts. Beneath it, they sat on the stone benches, the mood fragile but sacred.

Emily was the first to speak.

“I miss him.” Her voice cracked as she held the compass Kael had retrieved after the battle. “He always told me stories… like, every night before we went to sleep. Even when we were scared. He never showed it.”

Kael nodded, his voice soft. “He carried a lot on his shoulders. More than most. But he always smiled for you.”

Maya placed a hand on her daughter’s back, her own eyes misting. “He was the first one who gave us hope when everything fell apart. Even when I couldn’t keep it together, Victor did.”

David exhaled. “I remember the day he found us. We were trapped in that collapsed school shelter. He broke through the debris with his bare hands. My leg was crushed. He carried me miles... without saying a word.”

“Victor was the kind of guy who never needed to say much,” Ethan murmured, his voice calm but heavy. “But he made you believe just by standing there.”

Lena brushed back her hair. “You know… when our father was presumed dead, Victor was the one who told us. He didn’t sugarcoat it, but he didn’t let us fall apart either.”

Aria added, “He told us grief wasn’t about weakness. It was about remembering why we keep fighting.”

Lyra sniffled, barely holding her tears back. “He said… it was okay to cry. Even warriors cry.”

Kael looked around the circle. These were not the same people he had traveled with when the world began to fall apart. They were stronger now. Hardened. But still human.

“I never got to thank him,” Kael admitted. “For the day I nearly lost myself. After Cherry was wounded by the Serpent, and I was losing grip—Victor pulled me back. He didn’t say much, but… it was enough.”

Emily looked up. “Do you think… he was proud of us?”

Kael turned to her, and for once, his voice wavered. “I know he was.”

The silence that followed was comforting—not empty, but shared. A moment of peace in a storm-wrecked world.

After a few minutes, Maya spoke again, shifting the mood.

“You’ve changed, Kael,” she said with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I can’t believe this is the same awkward teenager who used to get flustered over science club announcements.”

Kael gave a small chuckle. “That Kael died in the first wave.”

“No,” David said. “He just… grew up. We all did. This world forced it on us.”

Ethan leaned forward. “Speaking of… I’ve heard things. About you. About what you’ve become. The fights. The tigers. The Phoenix talk. It’s hard to believe.”

“You fought Seiji to a draw,” Maya said. “He’s one of the strongest left in Japan. And Kaoru Mizuchi considers you an equal.”

“I don’t know about equal,” Kael said quietly, “but I’ve gotten stronger. We all have to.”

“What about you guys?” he asked, genuinely curious. “I heard from Seiji that you’ve all improved.”

David grinned faintly. “I finally hit 10★. Still feels weird. Like I’m carrying something I don’t fully understand.”

“I’m at 10 too,” Ethan said simply. “No flash, no fanfare. Just… slow, constant growth.”

Maya gave a nod. “I crossed 11.2★ last month. Haven’t told many. I’ve been training hard—light element focus. It helps Emily when she gets nightmares.”

Emily smiled weakly at that. “Mom’s light makes everything warmer. It… makes me feel safe.”

The triplets, in sync as ever, smiled. “We’re all stuck at 9.9★,” Aria said.

“But not for long,” Lena added.

Lyra finished, “We’re pushing through. Together.”

Kael felt a deep warmth in his chest. A rare comfort.

“You all did well,” he said quietly. “You made it. You’re alive. Stronger than ever.”

David looked up at the sky. “Victor would’ve said we’ve only just begun.”

Maya stood, brushing imaginary dust from her skirt. “Then let’s keep walking. Together.”

They all rose, one by one, the shadow of grief still lingering—but behind it, a growing light. Of survival. Of friendship. Of family forged in the apocalypse.

And somewhere in that cold sky above, perhaps Victor was watching.

**End of Chapter 148.**

**Chapter 149 – “Awakening Storms”**

More than three months had passed since the apocalyptic monster tide ravaged the North-Eastern region. The aftermath left deep scars across the land, but also kindled an era of rapid evolution for humanity. The military, battered but unbroken, had turned the battle’s devastation into opportunity. The 20★ Flaming Sparrow, slain during that fateful confrontation, became the very cornerstone of their resurgence.

Despite tireless effort from all five military divisions, the elusive Infernal Phoenix remained a ghost. Satellite scans, psychic probes, and beast-seers alike yielded nothing—only faint scorch marks in unreachable regions. A creature of myth made real, and yet untouchable.

**Rise of the New Military**

The Central Division became the crucible of transformation. With access to the most concentrated stockpile of high-grade beast meat, cores, and technology, they had evolved into the strongest human military zone on the planet.

A new rule had been passed quietly through internal channels: **Only those at or above 9★, or those with unique special abilities, could join the military ranks.** This wasn’t arrogance—it was necessity. The average monster in Japan now stood at **10★** power or above, and many among them were far worse.

From the influx of surviving reserve fighters and newly awakened talents, **over 50,000 new recruits** joined the military forces. The total strength now surpassed **300,000 elite combatants**—**3 lakh soldiers**, every one of them minimum 9★.

But the real shock lay in the upper echelon:

* **50,000+ soldiers** had crossed into 10★ territory.
* **15,000 warriors** now operated in the elite band between **11–13★**.
* **4,500 individuals** had reached the terrifying **13–15★** range.
* **350 soldiers** were now within **15–16★**.
* **100 stood at 16–17★**, each a walking catastrophe.
* And **50 individuals** had crossed into the feared **17–18★** domain—nearly sovereigns among monsters.

These 50 had consumed just a single **20★ Flaming Sparrow Essence Pellet**, a condensed, purified form of the beast’s power. Its efficiency was terrifying. Its effects irreversible.

Yet, among them all, only **seven top officials** had stepped into the **18–19★ realm**.

And above them, stood the apex five—humans and beasts whose names had begun to carry the weight of legends.

**⚔️ Humanity’s Pinnacle: The Five Pillars**

**🧠 Faye Illena – “The Mind Oracle” (19.3★)**  
Operating from the Central Intelligence Hub in Nagoya, Faye had become humanity’s unseen shield. Her illusions disguised entire units. Her **Mind Cascade** crippled enemy command structures before a single shot was fired. She didn’t lead battles; she won them before they began.

**🌀 Seiji Dran – “The Apex Commander” (19.6★)**  
Supreme Commander of the Ascended Network, Seiji remained an unshakable figure of calm authority. His **Spatial Rend** could sever mountains. His **Fold Step** made even light-footed beasts feel slow. He was the tactical mind that kept humanity from falling into extinction.

**🛡️ Kael Ardyn – “Stormpiercer” (19.5★)**  
Now nearly 24, Kael had become a myth in his own right. A survivor of more than two dozen 10★ and higher battles, he wielded **Stormpiercer** like an extension of himself. His **Frostflare Bloom** and **Static Vein Echo** techniques allowed him to engage, dismantle, and predict monsters who once ruled the wilds. Even more terrifying was his potential—his dormant **Time** and **Plant** affinities still waiting to awaken.

**🐾 Cherry – “The Lightning Shadow” (19.4★)**  
Once a small, mutated kitten… now a predator rivaling titans. Her **Claw Arc** tore through elemental barriers. Her **Power Surge** allowed her to leap briefly beyond her tier, putting her in direct conflict with elder beasts. Cherry was no longer Kael’s pet—she was a war beast feared by all who had seen her in battle.

**🦊 Kitsune – “Ember Serenity” (19.3★)**  
With her dual-elemental equilibrium, Kitsune could both burn and heal with flawless precision. Her **Healing Flame** was responsible for reviving entire squads. The **Elemental Cloak** she wielded allowed her to blitz through mutated hordes while supporting Kael and Cherry in perfect psionic synchronization. She was balance personified.

**Weapons of War – Core Technology**

Beyond soldiers and beasts, technology had evolved. The vast harvest of monster cores—especially those of 14★ and higher—had birthed new innovations:

* **Beast Cannons** – Energy rifles that fired compressed elemental beams, charged from cores of 11★ or above.
* **Beast Bombs** – Catastrophic area-denial devices forged from unstable cores. One detonation could level a small city.
* **Core Augments** – Implantable tech derived from monster essence, used to amplify soldier reflexes or resist certain elemental damage.

Even the **support and medical corps** had changed. A minimum **7★ power** was now required, and many medics trained in water or light affinities, combining combat with rapid field recovery.

**Growing Darkness**

Yet the monsters had not remained stagnant.

Wildlife scanners revealed a disturbing truth:  
**Not a single recorded monster was under 10★ in power anymore.**  
The vast evolutionary shock caused by the Infernal Phoenix’s awakening had changed everything. Even beasts that had once been fodder now required elite squads to subdue.

The most terrifying part?  
Recent recordings confirmed the presence of **multiple monsters in the 18★+ range.**  
One encounter in Hokkaido had forced a full tactical retreat from a seasoned 12★ squad—without a single casualty on the monster’s side.

Every sign pointed to a chilling theory:

**The Infernal Phoenix wasn’t just a beast. It was a catalyst. A walking apocalypse that had accelerated evolution itself.**

**Online Summit – The Council of Division Commanders**

An emergency summit was called.

The five division commanders, intelligence advisors, elite tactical heads, and special operatives were now preparing for a critical online summit. The purpose:

* Assess global monster star power increases.
* Confirm suspected Phoenix involvement.
* Propose a unified global-level monster database.
* Begin formal plans for **contingency-level threats**—beasts beyond 20★.

Kael, Seiji, Faye, and others would attend directly. Cherry and Kitsune would observe through psionic relay.

As the screen flickered with connection links stabilizing, and division banners appeared around the holographic table…

…one truth became clear to all:

**The Phoenix’s awakening was not the end of the storm. It was the opening act.**

**End of Chapter 149.**

**Chapter 150 – Council of Shadows and Signs**

The grand council chamber within the Central Division HQ buzzed with the tension of over forty of Japan’s highest-ranking powers. On the central projection panel, the symbol of the Ascended Network spun slowly—a reminder of their fragile unity.

Seiji Dran stood tall at the head of the meeting table, his presence carrying the calm of control and the weight of urgency. "It's been over three months," he began, voice clipped but resonant, "and we still haven’t found a single trace of the Infernal Phoenix."

Eyes turned to the others seated: Kaoru Mizuchi of the Western Division, cloaked in calm, wind affinity emanating gently from her. Commander Riku Tanabe of the North, a scar across his jaw, his demeanor grim. Commander Ayame Sudo of the East, stern-eyed with a reputation for brutal tactical efficiency. And the broad-shouldered Hiroshi Kanda of the South, expression unreadable beneath his thick brows.

Seiji continued, "With the Phoenix missing and monsters evolving rapidly in strength across the archipelago, we cannot afford to remain reactive."

He gestured, and several holographic charts rose from the center table, showing rising monster encounters and escalating average star power.

"Let me ask plainly—have any of your divisions found even a shadow of the Phoenix?"

One by one, the commanders shook their heads. Kaoru spoke first, "We've run a dozen scouting missions. The skies over Mount Kaneda were suspect for a week, but all we found was high-concentration mana. No Phoenix."

Riku Tanabe added, "Same in the north. I’ve deployed over 200 flight scouts—absolutely nothing. But monsters in the mountainous border zones have grown unusually aggressive. Packs that used to avoid each other are now converging—feeding together."

Ayame Sudo’s fingers tapped a rhythm against the desk. "We tracked unusual pressure surges near our coastline... then it vanished like mist. It’s not hiding in one place. If it’s real, it’s moving constantly."

Hiroshi Kanda simply said, "We’re chasing ghosts."

Seiji narrowed his gaze and changed the approach. “Fine. Then let’s widen the lens. Any other abnormalities—strange activity, rumors, incidents—anything *weird* in the last few months?”

There was a pause—then several hands lifted at once.

Administrator Tetsuya Ohnishi of the Southern Division spoke first. "There’s a forest zone—code-named *Blackbark Hollow*. We sent a 12-man recon team two months ago. The moment they crossed a certain perimeter, they began coughing blood. Only one made it out alive, and he’s in critical condition. Toxic readings spike off the charts inside. Gas masks, even purification filters, didn’t help. We believe it’s some kind of evolving biome. Even a 10★ soldier died within minutes of exposure."

Kaoru frowned. “No flora on record should emit that level of toxicity without burning out. And it's spreading?”

“Yes,” Tetsuya replied, “roughly one kilometer a week.”

Next was Ayame’s intelligence chief. "We have… a *shadow* case. We dismissed it as hysteria at first, but then our investigators went missing. Thirteen confirmed victims—found with no wounds, eyes wide open, terrified. All died during the night. Witnesses speak of a shadow 'moving against the moonlight.'"

“Shadow-type mutation?” Faye Illena asked quietly, eyes narrowed. “Or something ethereal?”

“Could be both,” came the answer. “Whatever it is, it doesn’t trigger any sensor traps. No heat, no movement. Only signs left behind are—burned footprints. As if someone stepped through light itself.”

A hush spread across the room.

From the western front, a calmer voice rose. "There is a river," said Minister Leika Hanzo, hands folded. “Near the Yamada Basin. Locals speak of a ‘deity’ that emerged after the tide—protecting them. Beasts haven’t attacked the village once. No casualties, no incidents, while nearby areas are overrun.”

“Have you tried to contact this ‘deity’?” Seiji asked.

“We tried. Drones malfunctioned. When we sent a messenger, the village said he left with glowing eyes and hasn’t spoken since. They now call him a ‘blessed speaker.’ The villagers say the river ‘whispers.’”

“Psychic field?” Faye wondered aloud.

“Or a monster with mind-affecting traits,” Kaoru added, “but why would it *protect*?”

Next came an Eastern scout report. “Village near the Ryuno Peaks reports hearing a strange sound at irregular intervals. Those who hear it start hallucinating—visions of the past, memories that aren’t theirs. Some wander into the forest. Fifteen have gone missing. Locals say the sound 'comes from underground.' We tried soundproof helmets. They don't work.”

“The sound might be psychic or resonant in nature,” Faye said again, now visibly interested. “A new mutation path? Sound-based illusions are rare—but not impossible.”

Then came an oddity from the south. “We’ve identified a man… formerly a biology teacher. He mutated during the initial wave but somehow retained his sanity. He’s grown fur, elongated limbs, heightened agility. He’s calling himself ‘Saruto.’ Claims he’s ‘evolved back into balance.’ He’s peaceful—helps villagers, climbs trees like it’s instinct. Still speaks clearly, and has voluntarily stayed away from cities. Mutation… might be stabilizing.”

Kael, silent until now, finally spoke. “We’ve never recorded a stable anthropomorphic mutation with retained human consciousness. He’s either a fluke… or the start of something new.”

The next case raised several eyebrows.

Commander Hiroshi’s aide reported, “We’ve had multiple sightings of a red-haired woman near the Shirohama cliffs. Lives in a cave, solitary. Villagers say they hear her humming at night. She’s unresponsive, and refuses all communication. No one’s dared to force an approach, but… since her arrival, beast activity within a 5km radius has dropped to zero. Like the monsters avoid her.”

“Power reading?” Seiji asked quickly.

“Unknown. Our sensors can’t get a fix. But wildlife changes pattern when she’s near. One scout described her eyes as glowing faint red.”

Seiji made a note. “She could be connected to the Phoenix… or a lesser phoenix-type mutation.”

Finally, Commander Riku shared the last anomaly.

“A small island appeared in Lake Hoshigami. We have satellite imagery showing nothing three months ago—then suddenly… land. Monsters in the lake—massive aquatic types—are unusually aggressive, even toward each other, as if guarding it. No one’s gotten close enough to land. The lake has become completely inaccessible.”

“Could be an emergence zone,” Kaoru muttered. “Or a nesting ground.”

“A gate, maybe,” Faye said, fingers tightening. “The Phoenix may have opened it, or escaped from it.”

Seiji stood again. “Seven incidents in five months. All unique. All beyond prior mutation parameters.”

He looked across the room. “We face a changing world. A *new tier* of monsters may be awakening. These may be proto-zones—either guardians, anomalies, or seeds of something larger. The Phoenix may not be hiding. It might be *preparing* something.”

A long silence followed.

Then Seiji gave the order, “Split the investigations. I want eyes on every site. Discreet. Non-hostile unless provoked. Use only elite teams—minimum 14★. We proceed assuming the Phoenix has already altered the evolution curve of this planet.”

His gaze sharpened.

"And if it *has*—then we are no longer the apex predators here."

**End of Chapter 150.**

**Chapter 151 – Shadows of the Unknown**

The grand chamber buzzed with activity as the meeting came to a close. The cases—strange, horrifying, or miraculous—had shaken even the most seasoned among them. Seiji Dran stood with arms crossed, face grim as the next phase was set into motion.

“We need elite teams at each of these locations. No delays. No underestimations. These anomalies may all tie back to the rise in monster power—or worse,” Seiji said, his voice commanding.

A total of **30 high-level individuals** were selected. Some were generals, others elite operatives who had survived countless encounters against beasts, and some... were more than human.

**Red-Haired Woman – Team 1 (5 members)**

* **Kael Ardyn** – Fire, Ice, Lightning (Hidden: Time, Plant)
* **Faye Illena** – Illusion, Mind Control
* **Cherry** – Lightning, Power Surge (Beast)
* **Kitsune** – Fire, Water, Healing (Beast)
* **Yoru Seiran** – Stealth

Seiji nodded. “Kael, I want you to take point on the case of the red-haired woman. There’s too much unknown—lack of beast activity might mean she’s a deterrent or a predator. Either way, we need answers. Faye will support you. Yoru, you’ll act as recon and infiltration. Cherry and Kitsune—your bond with Kael is invaluable.”

Kael gave a silent nod. He knew this wouldn’t be a simple scouting mission.

**1. Poisonous Forest – Team 2 (4 members)**

* **Ibara Noxveil** – Poison Manipulation
* **Daigo Aranami** – Water
* **Velma Karasawa** – Crystallization
* **Rein Yukihara** – Holy Fire

The toxic forest had already claimed powerful warriors. Ibara, immune to most poisons, would be their lead. Rein’s holy fire was expected to burn away corrupted spores, while Daigo would provide moisture control to counteract gas clouds.

**2. Shadow Killer – Team 3 (5 members)**

* **Mirei Shadowcrest** – Shadow, Stealth
* **Shun Igarashi** – Shadow Clone
* **Setsuro Kai** – Darkflame (Shadow + Fire)
* **General Hideo Ren** – Time
* **Arden Ryouji** – Curse Infliction (Blood Required)

The rumors of a killer shadow demanded a team that understood the darkness. Mirei and Setsuro were specialists in shadow-based combat. Hideo's time control would be critical in countering fast or intangible threats.

**3. River Deity – Team 4 (4 members)**

* **Galen Yatsura** – Beast Communication
* **Sana Kiryuu** – Psychic
* **Naori Kureha** – Ice
* **Taro Ishibana** – Stone Skin

This group was not for combat, but observation and communication. If there truly was a deity, Galen might be able to establish rapport. Naori and Taro would protect the team with durability and defense.

**4. Hallucination Sound – Team 5 (4 members)**

* **Kazana Mei** – Sound Waves
* **Sana Kiryuu** – Psychic (reassigned to support two teams)
* **Liora Fayune** – Gravity Distortion
* **Katsuya Rinnosuke** – Invisibility

The strange sound waves needed to be neutralized or recorded. Kazana’s own sonic manipulation gave them a fighting chance. Liora’s gravity distortion could scatter frequencies or disorient enemies.

**5. Mutated Monkey Man – Team 6 (4 members)**

* **Borran Kazume** – Radiation
* **Shiori Ayame** – Blood, Heal
* **Rikuto “Stonevein” Jura** – Earth
* **Yelena Vorune** – Ice

This team would assess whether the mutation was hostile or sentient. Shiori’s healing and Borran’s radiation resistance gave them both offensive and containment capabilities. They were under strict orders *not* to engage lethally unless attacked.

**6. Mysterious Island – Team 7 (4 members)**

* **Raiko Dazai** – Magma
* **Tenjin Ralnor** – Wind
* **Tsuro Genbei** – Lightning
* **Ayame Sudo** – Eastern Division Commander (personally overseeing this case)

Given the lake’s dangers and unknowns of the island, Commander Ayame volunteered to lead. The team consisted of high-powered elementals capable of terrain manipulation and large-scale attacks in case of aquatic threats.

**Deployment & Final Words**

Seiji looked over the room one final time. “These are not ordinary missions. None of you are ordinary, either. If any pattern exists between these events, we must uncover it before it’s too late.”

He turned to Kael. “And you—keep your senses sharp. That red-haired woman may not be an enemy, but she isn’t an ally yet. If she is indeed suppressing beast activity, it means she has power. Perhaps as much as you.”

Kael offered a small smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Understood. I’ll find out what she’s hiding.”

Cherry let out a light chirp, tail crackling with quiet lightning. Kitsune padded beside her, eyes narrowed in cautious focus.

The teams began to depart, fanning out to their respective objectives, unaware that these scattered threads of mystery were all drawing toward a singular, burning heart at the center of the continent—**a crimson flame waiting to be reborn.**

**Chapter 152 – Steel in Stillness**

The Central Division compound was a fortress of purpose. For four days, it pulsed with focused tension. Thirty elite operatives, all between **18★ and 20★**, moved through designated zones, fine-tuning their gear, running simulations, syncing communications, and gathering reports.

The air vibrated with power and precision.

Among the clamor, **Kael’s team** remained an outlier—powerful and composed. **Four of the five** had broken past the **19★ mark**, with Kael’s own power unreadable due to his elemental masking.

They had been assigned to the most enigmatic anomaly: the **village near the Takejubuchi Waterfall**—where monsters avoided, and a crimson-haired woman walked openly among the ruins.

**Team: Kael, Faye, Yoru, Cherry, Kitsune**

They stood inside one of the Central Division hangars beside their sleek, military-grade air-car. It hummed with stealth fielding and anti-beast shielding. They’d already named it:

“**Crimson Stride**”—Cherry’s idea, proudly approved by Kitsune.

Yoru Seiran, the final addition, leaned against the side of the vehicle. Her lean frame was shrouded in a matte black field-cloak that shimmered faintly under the lights. She spoke with a calm that cut through the noise.

“This is the first time I’ve worked with a beast team. Didn’t expect one of them to be better dressed than me.”

Cherry, perched on top of the vehicle, flicked her lightning-tipped tail and gave a smug little *“mrrp.”*

Faye smiled dryly, arms crossed. “Cherry takes personal offense to poor style. She nearly scratched a 17-star esper because his armor clashed with his cloak.”

“He deserved it,” Kitsune said, sitting elegantly beside her. “Orange and teal don’t mix in that ratio.”

Kael chuckled softly, checking the reinforced straps on his spear case. “Just try not to kill anyone over fashion on this mission.”

Yoru raised an eyebrow. “So you're Kael. Heard you punched a colonel, tamed two beasts, and made Seiji Dran look ten years older in one week.”

“Rumors are generous,” Kael said evenly. “I only made him look five years older.”

“Humble,” Yoru noted. She nodded toward Faye. “But I know her. Illusion specialist. Mind break level three. Half the North Division's recon relies on your projections.”

Faye inclined her head with a playful grin. “And you’re the shadow that vanished from three internal audits. Interesting that they sent you on *our* team.”

“I don’t talk much.”  
“You just did,” Cherry added smugly.

**Briefing Recap**

Colonel Sera Inoue passed the final orders:

“You’re not to engage. Not unless the danger is imminent. Your task is *observe, understand, and survive*. The only confirmed kill objectives are ‘**The Shadow**’ and the **Hallucinogenic Sound Entity**. Everything else—learn before you leap.”

She glanced at Kael’s team. “Yours is the only group being deployed to a non-hostile zone. But don’t let that lull you. If this woman is suppressing beasts, she’s manipulating the system. And we don’t know if she’s human.”

Kael nodded, eyes calm. “We’ll proceed with care.”

**Final Day, Final Words**

That night, as the air-cars lined up at the departure platform, wind howled softly against the Tokyo skyline. Kael stood at the platform’s edge, looking out at the lights below.

Faye stepped beside him. “You ready?”

Kael exhaled slowly. “It’s strange. We’ve seen the worst monsters in the world. But this… this feels different. Like something old is waking up.”

“Maybe it already has,” Faye said, her eyes distant. “And we’re just walking into its dream.”

Yoru climbed into the cockpit silently. Kitsune stretched atop the dashboard while Cherry leapt into the backseat with regal flair.

“Let’s get this over with. I’ve never liked waterfalls,” Cherry muttered. “Too damp. Too loud.”

“You’re lightning,” Kitsune said. “You *are* loud.”

Cherry didn’t dignify that with a response.

Kael gave one last glance toward the city—its glowing towers, its bunkers, its fading peace.

Then the **Crimson Stride** lifted into the sky, the shimmering field folding around them like wings. One of seven teams, leaving from Tokyo toward a scattered world of unknowns.

But Kael’s heart told him clearly—

This woman by the waterfall...  
She would change everything.

**End of Chapter 152**  
**End of Arc III: *Ashes of the Divided Sky***