**### ⚔️ \*\*Top 30 Elite Warriors of Japan (Post-Monster Tide, Arc IV Start)\*\***

**All possess \*\*White Grade Abilities\*\* (Lv 2–4), with Kael’s team also having \*\*Blue-Grade Psionic Bonds\*\*.**

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**#### 🔱 \*\*Core 10 (Top-Tier – 19.4★ to 19.6★)\*\***

**| Name | Star Level | Ability Type(s) | White Grade Ability (Lv) |**

**| --------------------------- | ---------- | -------------------------------------------- | ------------------------- |**

**| \*\*Seiji Dran\*\* | 19.6★ | \*\*Space Manipulation\*\* | White Grade Lv 4 |**

**| \*\*Kael Ardyn\*\* | 19.5★ | Fire, Ice, Lightning (\*latent: Time, Plant\*) | White Lv 4 + Blue Psionic |**

**| \*\*General Hideo Ren\*\* | 19.4★ | \*\*Time Distortion\*\* | White Grade Lv 4 |**

**| \*\*Mirei Shadowcrest\*\* | 19.4★ | \*\*Shadow + Stealth\*\* | White Grade Lv 4 |**

**| \*\*Faye Illena\*\* | 19.3★ | \*\*Illusion + Mind Control\*\* | White Grade Lv 4 |**

**| \*\*Shiori Ayame\*\* | 19.3★ | \*\*Blood + Healing\*\* | White Grade Lv 4 |**

**| \*\*Cherry\*\* | 19.3★ | \*\*Lightning + Power Surge\*\* (\*Grey\*) | Blue Grade Lv 4 Bond |**

**| \*\*Kitsune\*\* | 19.2★ | \*\*Fire + Water + Healing\*\* | Blue Grade Lv 4 Bond |**

**| \*\*Rikuto “Stonevein” Jura\*\* | 19.1★ | \*\*Earth Manipulation\*\* | White Grade Lv 3 |**

**| \*\*Naori Kureha\*\* | 19.1★ | \*\*Ice Manipulation\*\* | White Grade Lv 3 |**

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**#### ⚔️ \*\*Upper-Rank Elite (18.8★ – 19.0★)\*\***

**| Name | Star Level | Ability Type(s) | White Grade Ability (Lv) |**

**| ----------------- | ---------- | ----------------------------- | ------------------------ |**

**| \*\*Borran Kazume\*\* | 19.0★ | \*\*Radiation Emission\*\* | White Grade Lv 3 |**

**| \*\*Tsuro Genbei\*\* | 19.0★ | \*\*Lightning Generation\*\* | White Grade Lv 3 |**

**| \*\*Mara Kanzuki\*\* | 18.9★ | \*\*Fire + Mind Beast Control\*\* | White Grade Lv 3 |**

**| \*\*Kaoru Mizuchi\*\* | 18.9★ | \*\*Wind Swordsmanship\*\* | White Grade Lv 3 |**

**| \*\*Tenjin Ralnor\*\* | 18.9★ | \*\*Wind Techniques\*\* | White Grade Lv 3 |**

**| \*\*Kazana Mei\*\* | 18.9★ | \*\*Sound Wave Manipulation\*\* | White Grade Lv 3 |**

**| \*\*Raiko Dazai\*\* | 18.8★ | \*\*Magma-based Attacks\*\* | White Grade Lv 3 |**

**| \*\*Yoru Seiran\*\* | 18.8★ | \*\*Stealth Mastery\*\* | White Grade Lv 3 |**

**| \*\*Shun Igarashi\*\* | 18.8★ | \*\*Shadow Clone Replication\*\* | White Grade Lv 3 |**

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**#### 🌀 \*\*Special Operations Tier (18.2★ – 18.7★)\*\***

**| Name | Star Level | Ability Type(s) | White Grade Ability (Lv) |**

**| --------------------- | ---------- | ---------------------------------------- | ------------------------ |**

**| \*\*Velma Karasawa\*\* | 18.7★ | \*\*Crystalization\*\* | White Grade Lv 2 |**

**| \*\*Setsuro Kai\*\* | 18.7★ | \*\*Darkflame (Shadow + Fire)\*\* | White Grade Lv 2 |**

**| \*\*Katsuya Rinnosuke\*\* | 18.7★ | \*\*Invisibility (Limited Time)\*\* \*(Grey)\* | White Grade Lv 2 |**

**| \*\*Ibara Noxveil\*\* | 18.6★ | \*\*Poison Manipulation\*\* | White Grade Lv 2 |**

**| \*\*Daigo Aranami\*\* | 18.5★ | \*\*Water Control\*\* | White Grade Lv 2 |**

**| \*\*Sana Kiryuu\*\* | 18.5★ | \*\*Psychic Field Projection\*\* | White Grade Lv 2 |**

**| \*\*Galen Yatsura\*\* | 18.5★ | \*\*Beast Communication\*\* | White Grade Lv 2 |**

**| \*\*Arden Ryouji\*\* | 18.5★ | \*\*Curse Infliction (via blood)\*\* | White Grade Lv 2 |**

**| \*\*Taro Ishibana\*\* | 18.5★ | \*\*Stone Skin / Defensive Shell\*\* | White Grade Lv 2 |**

**| \*\*Yelena Vorune\*\* | 18.5★ | \*\*Ice Manipulation\*\* | White Grade Lv 2 |**

**| \*\*Liora Fayune\*\* | 18.2★ | \*\*Gravity Distortion\*\* | White Grade Lv 2 |**

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**### 🧠 \*\*Psionic Bonded (Blue Grade – Kael’s Team Only)\*\***

**\* \*\*Kael Ardyn\*\* → Cherry & Kitsune | \*\*Blue Grade Lv 4 Psionic Bond\*\***

**\* All three share telepathic link, battle instincts, shared senses, and boost each other’s combat efficiency significantly.**

**🌟 [Star Power Scale — Arc III+ Reference]**

**Each 10★ tier increases power by a factor of ×10, starting from 10★ = 100× average human strength.**

| **★ Range** | **Power Equivalent** | **Title (if applicable)** | **Destructive Capability** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **10★** | **100× average human** | **–** | **Enhanced human** |
| **10–20★** | **10,000×** | **–** | **Monster-level** |
| **20–30★** | **1,000,000×** | **–** | **City destroyer** |
| **30–40★** | **1,000,000,000×** | **–** | ***Little Boy* nuke level** |
| **40–50★** | **1,000,000,000,000×** | **–** | ***Tsar Bomba* level** |
| **50–60★** | **1 quadrillion (10¹⁵)×** | **Squire** | **Continental-level** |
| **60–70★** | **1 quintillion (10¹⁸)×** | **Knight** | **Multi-continental** |
| **70–80★** | **1 sextillion (10²¹)×** | **Baron** | **Planet crust cracking** |
| **80–90★** | **1 septillion (10²⁴)×** | **Battle Viscount** | **Moon destruction possible** |
| **90–100★** | **1 octillion (10²⁷)×** | **Captain (1st Rank)** | **Earth destruction** |
| **100–110★** | **1 nonillion (10³⁰)×** | **Captain (2nd Rank)** | **Multi-planet wipe** |
| **110–120★** | **1 decillion (10³³)×** | **Captain (3rd Rank)** | **Gas giant devastation** |
| **120–130★** | **1 undecillion (10³⁶)×** | **General (1st Rank)** | **Star destabilization** |
| **130–140★** | **1 duodecillion (10³⁹)×** | **General (2nd Rank)** | **Star destruction** |
| **140–150★** | **1 tredecillion (10⁴²)×** | **General (3rd Rank)** | **Sun destruction** |
| **150–160★** | **1 quattuordecillion (10⁴⁵)×** | **Half-Marshal** | **Solar system annihilation** |
| **160–170★** | **1 quindecillion (10⁴⁸)×** | **Marshal (1★)** | **Milky Way destruction possible** |
| **170–180★** | **1 sexdecillion (10⁵¹)×** | **Marshal (2★)** | **Galaxy cluster threats** |
| **180–190★** | **1 septendecillion (10⁵⁴)×** | **Marshal (3★)** | **Intergalactic class** |
| **190–200★** | **1 octodecillion (10⁵⁷)×** | **Half-King** | **Half the observable universe (~45 LY)** |
| **200–210★** | **1 novemdecillion (10⁶⁰)×** | **King (1★)** | **Universal bubble collapse** |
| **210–220★** | **1 vigintillion (10⁶³)×** | **King (2★)** | **Sub-universal dimensional shatter** |
| **220–230★** | **1 unvigintillion (10⁶⁶)×** | **King (3★)** | **Macro-universal scope** |
| **230–240★** | **1 duovigintillion (10⁶⁹)×** | **King (Peak)** | **Multiversal edge** |
| **240–250★** | **1 trevigintillion (10⁷²)×** | **Half-Emperor** | **Lower realm dimension wipes** |
| **250–300★** | **–** | **Emperor (1★)** | **Entire low-tier dimensional layers destroyed** |
| **300–600★** | **–** | **Emperor (2★)** | **Middle-tier dimension scale** |
| **600–900★** | **–** | **Emperor (3★)** | **Upper-dimensional warfare** |
| **900–999★** | **–** | **Half-God** | **Total upper-layer dimensional collapse** |
| **1000★** | **–** | **God** | **Absolute Peak – True Multiversal Control** |

**Chapter 153: The Woman Behind the Falls**  
**Year: 2113 | Location: Shizoku Prefecture**

The silver-blue air-car hummed low as it glided over fractured asphalt and root-strangled paths. Kael sat in the front, arms crossed, gazing through the reinforced glass as the forest deepened. Cherry lounged beside him, her fur occasionally crackling with static. In the rear seats, Kitsune remained quiet, tails curled, while Faye Illena and Yoru Seiran monitored the terrain through the side panels.

It had taken them four and a half hours to reach the fringes of Takejubuchi, the waterfall village nestled within the Shizoku Prefecture. Along the way, they encountered numerous mutated beasts—many exceeding **14★ and 15★** in power. Yet none were foolish enough to engage Kael’s team. A few observed from a distance, others slinked back into the deeper shadows.

As the terrain thickened, towering trees blocked the air-car’s sensors. Kael pulled to a stop on a dirt ridge that overlooked the forest’s natural boundary.

“We walk from here,” he said, unstrapping his spear and stepping out.

For the next thirty minutes, they navigated the overgrown trail. The further they went, the stranger the silence became. No mutated birds. No chittering insects warped by radiation. Just normal trees. Untouched flora. Peaceful wind.

Too peaceful.

They finally arrived at the village gate, which stood between two intact cement pillars. The village itself still retained the structure of pre-apocalypse settlements—squared buildings, old irrigation lines, even solar tiles faded by age. Farmers moved silently among the patches of green, planting, harvesting, living.

At the gate, two uniformed soldiers stepped forward. Their expressions were respectful but alert.

“Halt. Identification?” one of them asked, already squinting at Kael’s insignia before recognition softened his tone. “Apologies, sir. We were not expecting an envoy.”

“I’m Kael Ardyn. These are my companions—Cherry, Kitsune, Faye, and Yoru.” His voice was calm, composed. “We’re here regarding the red-haired woman seen near the waterfall. Names and your last update.”

The first soldier straightened. “Private Isao Kento. This is Private Nari Mizue. We’ve both been assigned here since the second year.”

He continued, “Six months ago, during the monsoon season, a loud crash was heard near Takejubuchi Waterfall. Several villagers checked the location and discovered a cave behind the falls—where the cliff wall had previously been flat. They explored it with torches but found nothing. No heat, no signs of life. We posted a rotation of sentries to guard it.”

Private Mizue picked up the thread. “But the very next morning, she appeared. A woman with deep red hair, wearing a matching red flocked cloak. She stepped out of the cave as if she'd always been there. Our people were shocked—we’d kept watch all night, and not once did anyone see her enter. Or exist.”

Kael narrowed his eyes. “And then?”

“She refused all our offers. Shelter, food, protection. Spoke coldly, sharply. Some villagers tried a few more times to reach out, but each time she rejected them. Eventually, they stopped. No one’s gone near the cave since.”

Kael gave a slow nod. “Understood.”

As he passed through the village, he asked a few locals the same questions. The answers never varied. The red-haired woman had emerged. She had refused contact. She had vanished into solitude.

There were no lies in their eyes. Just quiet unease.

Eventually, Kael regrouped with his team at the village edge.

“She could be a Remnant,” Yoru said softly. “Or something older.”

Faye adjusted the scope on her shoulder lens. “We won’t know unless we see for ourselves.”

Kael turned toward the distant roar of falling water. It was time.

“Let’s go to the waterfall.”

**[End of Chapter 153]**

**Chapter 154 – The Hidden Depths**

The waterfall’s crashing sound gradually grew louder as Kael’s team approached. It had been about fifteen minutes since they departed from their last rest point, and aside from the sound of rushing water and birds fluttering away from their path, the journey had been unnervingly quiet.

“**Iris,**” Kael said, his voice low but calm, “**Scan the area—two kilometers radius. Focus on residual beast energy or psionic traces.**”

Iris’s voice responded a second later, **“Scanning… No significant energy signatures or anomalies detected within current range.”**

Kael furrowed his brows. “**Nothing at all?**”

“**Affirmative. No hostile lifeforms or environmental distortions recorded. The energy landscape appears dormant.**”

Faye, who was walking beside him, narrowed her eyes toward the cliff face ahead. “That’s odd. This waterfall is listed in the old maps as a convergence site… even minor leylines passed through here. Something’s *off.*”

Kael nodded. “**Yoru, can you scout around the cave? Don’t go inside yet—just cover the perimeter. Quietly.**”

Yoru gave a subtle nod and disappeared in a silent flicker, merging into the shadows like a breath lost to the wind.

Cherry’s ears twitched. “Feels too quiet,” she muttered, tail swishing. “Even normal birds aren’t making much noise now.”

Kitsune looked up at the sun filtering through the trees. “It’s a false calm. Nature hides before a storm.”

About five minutes passed before Yoru returned, his expression unreadable. He landed lightly beside Kael.

“**The surrounding 3 kilometers are lifeless,**” he reported. “**Not even bugs or small animals. No traps, no arcane barriers, no recent footprints. No anomalies.**”

“…Like someone wiped the area clean,” Faye murmured.

Kael clenched his fist slightly. “Alright. We proceed, but slowly. Weapons at the ready. Eyes sharp.”

The entrance to the cave sat behind the waterfall—just as the reports had stated. The rock opening was narrow but tall enough for a grown adult to pass without crouching. As the group stepped inside one by one, the rush of water behind them dulled into a hushed, distant rumble.

Cherry pawed ahead and sniffed the air. “No scent of anyone living here recently.”

Kitsune walked gracefully to the far wall. “It’s small,” she noted. “About the size of a van… and no energy trails. Not even dust disturbed.”

For over half an hour, they combed the small space—checking for hidden traps, glyphs, illusions, and even heat residue. Nothing.

Faye pressed her palm against the rocky walls, shaking her head. “No psychic impressions either. It’s like this place was *emptied.*”

“…This isn’t right,” Kael said, quietly. Then he closed his eyes and focused inward.

He activated his **Spiritual Perception**.

In an instant, Kael’s senses warped. The seemingly solid end-wall of the cave flickered under his spiritual awareness—like it was transparent. He stepped toward it.

“…This wall,” he muttered, reaching out. “It’s… thin. *Too* thin.”

He laid his hand against it again, then drew his fist back.

**Boom!**

With a controlled burst of force, Kael struck the wall. Cracks spidered instantly before a chunk gave way, revealing a hidden tunnel beyond. Dry heat surged outward like a gasp from the earth itself.

The team tensed.

“…Well,” Faye said, smirking, “Looks like someone didn’t want guests.”

They stepped through.

The deeper path was dry and widened the further they went. The walls glowed faintly orange as residual heat leaked from deeper within. Steam hissed from vents along the ground.

“The air’s thick…” Kitsune said, frowning. “Sulfur… magma nearby, perhaps.”

“Something’s definitely burning,” Cherry added. “But I smell people. Just barely.”

Minutes passed as they descended. Then—

Voices.

Two women. Arguing.

Kael raised his hand, motioning them to halt. The voices were faint, echoing, but they carried urgency.

“Why must we *all* suffer like this?!” shouted one—sharp, furious, and pained. “You were one of us… Why now do *you* supervise us like we’re prisoners?!”

A calmer, gentler voice answered. “I’m not supervising you. I’m *guiding* you. The time to escape our fates is nearly here.”

Kael’s eyes narrowed.

“Yoru,” he whispered. “Stealth technique. Now.”

Yoru exhaled and placed a hand on the cave wall, releasing a ripple of white-gray energy. A subtle, silent veil blanketed the team. Their presences faded—like they were part of the stone.

The team advanced slowly.

They came upon a massive chamber—roughly the size of a cathedral. Lava-like veins pulsed in the stone, giving the space a dim, infernal glow.

Two women stood at the center.

One had long **crimson-red hair** that flowed like fire, her eyes glowing with ember light. She wore a crimson combat cloak half burned at the edges, radiating intense heat in every breath. She stood defiant, almost aggressive.

The other had soft, **light green hair**, tinged with **pale pink at the ends**, flowing down her back. Her expression was serene, eyes a faded amber. She wore a **cream flock gown**, clean and elegant, despite the surroundings.

The red-haired woman stomped forward. “You *lied* to us. I don’t care what you saw in that vision. I’m not bowing down to some fate written in stone!”

The green-haired woman didn’t flinch. “It’s not about bowing. It’s about surviving. About *freedom.* I told you, I’ve found the legendary Condi—”

She stopped.

Her gaze drifted up, unerringly toward the rock outcropping where Kael’s team hid.

“…Hm.” A faint, sly smile crept onto her lips.

“Looks like we have unexpected guests,” she said quietly to the red-haired woman.

The red-haired one turned sharply.

Both women now faced Kael’s direction.

Faye cursed under her breath. “Damn… she saw us. Through *Yoru’s* veil?”

Cherry’s fur bristled. “Her eyes… they’re too clear.”

Kael narrowed his gaze. “They’re not ordinary. Not in the slightest.”

And then the green-haired woman tilted her head slightly, eyes gleaming with curiosity.

“Shall we invite them in?” she asked, not angrily—but almost… amused.

The red-haired woman clenched her fists, molten heat radiating stronger now. “They better not be enemies…”

Kael’s hand inched toward his spear.

**End of Chapter 154.**

**Chapter 155: The Root of Recognition**

Kael and his team—Cherry, Kitsune, Faye Illena, Yoru Seiran—stepped cautiously out of the rocky overhang they’d been hiding behind. The heat was suffocating now, rising in waves from the molten-like earth. The walls glowed faintly in hues of red and orange, the very stone shimmering with stored heat. Each step felt heavier than the last, not from fatigue—but from the sheer pressure exuding from the two women waiting ahead.

The light green-haired woman with pale pink streaks stood barefoot on the heated stone as if it were nothing. Her cream cloak barely moved in the thick air, yet her aura was calm, warm, almost inviting. In contrast, the red-haired woman beside her radiated searing heat, her crimson cloak flickering like flames, her narrowed gaze locked onto the intruders with suspicion and veiled contempt.

Cherry took a step behind Kael, her fur lightly bristling. Kitsune, ears flat, tail lowered, subtly emitted healing water energy to help the team tolerate the heat. Even Faye and Illena, both experienced and capable, were stiff with tension, sweat trickling from their brows. Yoru’s face remained unreadable, though his fingers twitched slightly, prepared to draw a blade at any moment.

The green-haired woman smiled first.

“So, we meet again… Kael Ardyn.”

Everyone froze.

Even Kael’s feet halted mid-step. His gaze narrowed. “...Again?” he asked, voice cautious, suspicious. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

The red-haired woman scoffed, shifting her weight. “You entertain insects now?” she snapped at the green-haired woman. “Why waste your thoughts on such an insignificant human?”

Kael didn’t respond immediately. He tilted his head slightly, lips tight, analyzing. “I’m certain I’ve never seen you before.”

The green-haired woman’s smile didn’t fade. “Not like this, no,” she said gently. “Tell me… do you remember the ancient tree? The one buried deep below, hidden by root and time?”

The moment the words left her mouth, Kael’s expression shattered.

He staggered one half-step back. “...What?” he murmured, breath hitching.

Cherry’s ears perked. Even she remembered it—that dark, living prison of roots, where they had nearly perished.

The memory crashed over Kael like a tidal wave.

Over two years ago. Trapped by a mutated tree. Dragged underground with Cherry. An entire space wrapped in living wood. No light. No air. Only pulsing, breathing bark and a strange fruit he had been forced to eat to survive. Deeper yet—an ancient tree, so immense, so impossibly vast that Iris couldn’t measure its power. The AI had faltered for the first time.

A being older than the apocalypse. It had spoken in his mind.

*“You are the thread… the one who will lead.”*

He had told no one. Not even Iris fully understood what they had seen.

Kael’s eyes widened now, filled with disbelief.

“You… how do you know about that?” he asked slowly.

The green-haired woman’s smile deepened. Her eyes shimmered faintly, like dew forming on ancient petals.

“Because I was that tree, Kael.”

The air shifted.

Kitsune’s tails lowered entirely in disbelief. Faye instinctively stepped closer to Illena. Even Yoru’s mask of calm cracked slightly as he gave Kael a glance.

Kael stared at the woman like she was a ghost.

“That… can’t be. That tree… you were buried underground for thousands of years,” he whispered. “You were a part of the earth itself.”

“I still am,” she said. “But now, I have taken this form—temporary, mortal, and bound in flesh. It’s… exhausting, but necessary.” She turned her head to the side, admiring the shimmering cavern wall. “We’ve waited long enough.”

The red-haired woman snorted, though her expression had turned from irritation to a reluctant silence.

The green-haired woman glanced at her companion, her expression softer now. “Kael is the key,” she said, her voice carrying a quiet reverence. “The one we have waited for… across ten millennia.”

The words struck like thunder.

No one spoke. No one dared.

The oppressive heat, the weight of the ancient aura surrounding the two women—it pinned the team in place. Kael’s mouth was dry. He could feel his heartbeat like war drums in his chest. Iris remained oddly quiet in his mind—perhaps for the first time ever, the AI didn’t know what to say.

Yoru lowered his stance, whispering softly to Faye, “Did she just say ten thousand years…?”

“She did,” Faye whispered back, jaw tense. “And I don’t think she was exaggerating.”

Cherry let out a quiet, wary meow.

Kitsune’s voice echoed telepathically into Kael’s mind, shaken: *She… smells like the old world. Older than anything I’ve known. Be careful.*

Kael didn’t answer. His gaze remained locked on the two women before him.

The red-haired one finally crossed her arms, expression unreadable. “So,” she muttered, “this is the one you’ve tethered all your hopes to.”

“He’s not hope,” the green-haired woman replied softly. “He is inevitability.”

Then she turned fully, her eyes gleaming like morning light filtering through ancient leaves.

“Welcome, Kael Ardyn,” she said. “To the place where destiny begins anew.”

**End of Chapter 155.**

**Chapter 156: The Flame and the Root**

The moment hung suspended in silence—then shattered.

A roar of heat exploded outward from the red-haired woman. The very air twisted, molten waves crashing against the stone walls. The ground groaned under the sudden shift, and a high-pitched whine of vaporizing moisture filled the cavern.

Kael and his team staggered as the temperature spiked. The walls pulsed with red-hot veins. The vast underground chamber—already warm—was now an oven.

“You—” the red-haired woman growled, voice thick with restrained rage. Her crimson eyes flared like twin suns. “Did you give *him* your Amrit Fruit?!”

The words rang like a verdict. Her voice cracked stone along the ceiling, fragments falling and hissing against the heated floor.

The light green-haired woman didn’t flinch. She merely smiled, the same serene expression as before.

Her silence enraged the red-haired woman further.

“You dare!” the red-haired woman shouted. “That fruit blooms once in a thousand years! You gave it to a *human*?!”

The floor split at the edges, the heat now intense enough to blacken the stone beneath Kael’s boots. Cherry hissed, drawing closer to Kael, while Kitsune instinctively spread a layer of mist around the group to offer some protection.

But even that wouldn’t have lasted.

The green-haired woman raised her hand gently. From her palm, an emerald light shimmered outward—gentle yet absolute. A dome of translucent energy enveloped Kael and his team, instantly shielding them from the boiling heat. Within the dome, the temperature returned to normal, though their nerves remained frayed.

The red-haired woman stepped forward, fury twisting her expression. “Have you lost your senses, Sylva?” she spat. “Why would you give it to him? A dull, powerless human? He had *nothing*!”

The name struck Kael like a hammer.

Before he could speak, the green-haired woman—Sylva—gestured to the group behind her. “Then look again,” she said softly.

The red-haired woman’s gaze narrowed. For the first time, she turned her full attention to the others.

Her eyes passed over Faye, Illena, and Yoru without pause. But when they landed on Cherry, they lingered.

Then Kitsune.

Her eyes widened faintly. Her expression shifted from scorn to suspicion—and then to shock. A faint glow circled her pupils as she probed deeper, not with vision, but with something far older—ancient perception.

“You—” she breathed. “They’re linked… psionic bonds…?”

Sylva nodded. “Formed naturally, without force. Without pact. He earned them.”

The red-haired woman drew back slightly, the air beginning to cool. The volcanic atmosphere lessened, and the ground seemed to exhale in relief. The pressure that had pinned Kael’s team to the earth slowly receded.

She looked at Sylva with narrowed eyes, still skeptical, but no longer enraged. “Is this really… *that*?” she asked, the faintest edge of disbelief in her voice.

Sylva’s smile became radiant, almost youthful in its joy. “It is,” she said with certainty. “The legend our leader passed down… is no legend.”

Kael could barely breathe.

He glanced at his companions—each one still pale, shaken. Even Cherry was unusually silent. Kitsune’s fur lay flat, ears alert but subdued. Faye looked like she had seen a god. Illena clutched her staff tighter than usual. Yoru was still, hand near his blade, but unmoving.

*This… this is more than thirty stars,* Kael thought grimly. *This is beyond understanding.*

The pressure of their aura alone was altering terrain. Sylva had effortlessly blocked infernal heat. The red-haired woman’s mere outburst had caused a cave to boil.

Kael steadied himself, swallowing hard.

He forced his voice through the fear. “Who… are you two really?”

There was a pause. Then Sylva stepped forward.

“My name is Sylva Everly,” she said, voice layered with both age and grace. “I am the *Banyan Eternal Tree*. Guardian of this planet, and once… its warden.”

A shadow crossed her face.

“I was the prison keeper of this world.”

The red-haired woman scoffed, folding her arms with a roll of her eyes. “And I,” she said with a smirk, “am one of her prisoners.”

She glanced toward Kael and his companions, her expression darkening with wicked delight.

“You may know me better as the *Infernal Phoenix*,” she said.

The name hit Kael like a slap.

Cherry hissed audibly.

Kitsune froze, eyes wide. Even Yoru let out a low curse under his breath.

Sylva’s expression became sorrowful.

“Her name now is Emberlyn. She was sealed here long ago, along with many others who walked paths of destruction,” Sylva said. “But her fire could never be fully extinguished.”

Emberlyn gave a slow, predatory smile.

Kael’s instincts screamed at him—but he stood firm.

Emberlyn chuckled, voice rich and dangerous. “Don’t look so scared, little humans,” she cooed. “I haven’t decided if I want to roast you yet.”

**End of Chapter 156.**

**Chapter 157: The Truth Beneath the Flames**

A heavy silence hung in the air, only the soft crackle of dissipating embers from Emberlyn's aura breaking it.

Faye, her voice trembling slightly, finally spoke. “W-Wait… did you say *Infernal Phoenix*? The ancient beast with 55.5-star power… the one with the abilities of… fire and reincarnation?”

Emberlyn turned her head slowly toward the girl, one brow raised. A short laugh escaped her lips—sharp and dry.

“*Only* 55.5 stars?” she said with a dangerous smile, laced with equal parts amusement and scorn. “Child, had I not been suppressed, I would’ve soared far beyond that pitiful number.”

Her smile widened, eyes burning with the faint echo of ancient fury. “Even your records are laughably incomplete.”

Kael’s fists tightened slightly. The weight of her presence still lingered in the air despite the returned calm, like invisible flames pressing on their skin.

He stepped forward, steadying his breath. “You mentioned… prisoners,” he said carefully. “Who are they?”

Sylva Everly looked away, her expression dimming, as though a wound long buried had been reopened.

“…All twenty-seven of the ancient beasts recorded in your histories,” she said, her voice heavy with sorrow. “They’re not just beasts. They’re my… charges. They are the prisoners.”

Kael froze.

All twenty-seven?

The same beings the world now feared and studied—the apex predators of myth and nightmare—they were all… imprisoned?

“But… they all look human,” Kael said slowly, brows furrowed.

Emberlyn turned toward him, giving a light shrug. “After reaching the Fifth Ascension—beyond 50 stars—we gained the ability to adopt a humanoid form. It’s easier to move… and speak among mortals this way.”

Kitsune and Cherry’s ears both twitched at the same time, instinctively recognizing the hidden weight in her words.

Kael nodded slowly. His mind reeled with implications, but one question burned hotter than the others. “Why were you all imprisoned here?”

The cave grew silent.

Emberlyn looked away, for once not smirking.

The silence stretched—seconds, then minutes. The only sound was the distant drip of moisture deep within the cave’s core.

Finally, Sylva answered.

“…Once,” she began, “we were not prisoners. We were a team. Thirty of us… from a certain faction—one among many that once ruled beyond this world.”

Kael and the others remained quiet, sensing something profound was being unraveled.

“But…” Sylva’s voice grew softer, almost a whisper. “We offended another faction. A powerful one. There was conflict. And in the end, a decision was made.”

She looked away, eyes dim. “All thirty of us were sentenced. Banished. Suppressed on this world for eternity.”

Kael’s eyes narrowed. “Thirty? But you said twenty-seven prisoners.”

Sylva nodded. “I was the twenty-eighth. The weakest among them… the newest member of our team. But I hailed from a powerful family—one whose name carried weight even in that realm.”

Kael listened intently. He could hear the pain behind her words. The loneliness.

“The factions… compromised. They didn’t imprison me—but forced me to act as warden. I was ordered to monitor the others until I received new orders from my family.”

She chuckled dryly. “But… they never came.”

A flicker of grief passed through her face.

“I waited. One thousand years. Five. Then ten. For more than 10,000 years, I received no summons, no word. We were all… forgotten.”

She looked down at her open hands. “I thought… if we could awaken slowly… perhaps we could remember who we were, regain what we lost. But the humans—curious, persistent—dug too deep. Explored too far. And that… disrupted everything.”

Her gaze swept over the group. “The sudden influx of energy… our sealed bodies absorbing traces of this world’s life essence… we all woke far earlier than we should have.”

Kael felt a chill run through his spine.

“And because of that…” Sylva finished, “…this world now breathes our aura. The land itself begins to change. Beasts evolve. Nature stirs. And what you call the apocalypse—was merely the first ripple of our return.”

A heavy stillness followed her words. The cave, despite its heat, felt colder than ever.

Kael looked at Cherry and Kitsune—both still visibly tense.

The world… was never meant to hold these beings.

And now, their presence was changing everything.

**End of Chapter 157.**

**Chapter 158: Echoes of the Cosmos**

Sylva Everly’s words lingered in the heavy air like an unseen weight pressing down on their shoulders.

She took a slow breath, her gaze steady as she continued.  
“You don’t need to worry about beasts reaching power beyond 30 stars,” she said softly. “Even now, the maximum ceiling for this world’s mutated creatures… is 30-star power.”

Kael frowned. “Why that limit?”

“Because,” Sylva replied, “30 stars is a divine threshold. It’s the line that separates instinct-driven monsters from conscious, self-aware beings. True sentients.”

The group went silent. Even Cherry’s ears twitched with caution. Kitsune’s flames flickered blue and steady.

“To ascend beyond that point, a beast must fulfill multiple impossible conditions: consciousness, emotional resonance, identity, and will. Few ever achieve it. But those who do…” she exhaled slowly, “become calamities.”

Faye’s voice was a whisper. “How many… are there?”

“Currently, there are *seventeen* 30-star beasts scattered across your world,” Sylva said.

A cold hush fell over the cavern.

Kael’s heart skipped.

Seventeen.

He remembered the reports. It took over 80% of Japan’s entire military might—thousands of soldiers, elite Awakened, and powerful commanders—to barely bring down a single 20.1-star mutated beast.

And now—seventeen beings that made even that monster seem insignificant were walking this earth.

“With 30-star power,” Sylva added, “they’re no longer just strong. They are conscious. Intelligent. Patient. Some might be hiding. Watching. Waiting.”

Kael’s voice was tight. “But… how big is the difference really? Between 29 and 30?”

Sylva looked at him. “A 29.9-star beast holds a strength roughly one million times that of your average human.”

Kael already felt his stomach churn.

“But a 30-star beast…” Sylva paused, “…is one hundred million times the power of a human.”

A silence as vast as space fell again.

Faye looked pale. Ethan leaned on his spear as if for balance. Even the ever-composed Maya looked shaken.

Kael’s hands clenched.

They had been fighting monsters, yes. Surviving battles. Winning wars.

But they were barely scratching the surface.

“You’ll need to grow stronger,” Sylva said, her voice calm but resolute. “All of you. Much, *much* stronger. Because what’s coming… won’t wait for you to be ready.”

Kael met her gaze. “What *is* coming?”

Sylva’s eyes flickered with a strange light. “A chance.”

She turned slightly, letting the glowing cavern behind her reflect against her figure.

“Every hundred years, our galaxy—**Tiraval Descent**—hosts a grand competition. A proving ground for all who seek to rise.” Her voice took on a formal tone. “It is called the **Delphic Trials**.”

Kael blinked. “Delphic…?”

“A trial of body, mind, and soul,” she nodded. “Only those under one hundred years of age may enter—what we consider the ‘youth’ of our kind. Those who pass through all levels and reach the final stages… the top ten… are granted access to the higher realms. Specifically, to one of the *three ruling factions* of the known universe.”

She raised her hand, conjuring three shimmering emblems mid-air.

**1. Virexon Syndicate – *Wealth is Dominion***

* A powerful corporate force that dominates through currency, trade, and debt.
* Their influence is felt in every economy and every war.
* **Symbol:** A golden balance scale.
* **Motto:** *"Profit is Power. Ownership is Freedom."*

**2. The Dominion of Vrax – *Power Above All***

* A brutal authoritarian regime fueled by strength and conquest.
* They believe the strong shape destiny and the weak serve it.
* **Symbol:** A red fist grasping a burning star.
* **Motto:** *"Power is the only truth."*

**3. Aelari Concord – *Guardians of the Helpless***

* A coalition of protectors, peace-keepers, and justice seekers.
* They shelter lost civilizations and shield broken systems.
* **Symbol:** A radiant star behind a celestial shield.
* **Motto:** *"To shield the fallen and lift the broken."*

“These three factions each govern one quadrillion galaxies,” Sylva said. “Each vast beyond human comprehension. Each holds countless sub-factions under their banners.”

Kael nodded slowly, absorbing it all. “And… you were all part of one?”

Sylva gave a sad smile. “We were from a sub-faction of the **Aelari Concord**. Our group was called the **Tessarim Union**. Our mission… was preservation. Protection. We were guardians.”

Kael’s jaw tightened.

Guardians… imprisoned like criminals.

Sylva looked away again. “Not all justice is just.”

But before the weight of her past could settle too deeply, she lifted her hand once more.

“There’s one more thing you should know. Above even the great factions—there exists a council.”

A circular symbol shimmered into view—multiple rings aligned perfectly like planetary orbits.

**The Aeon Council – *Silent Sentinels of the Cosmos***

* Formed by an ancient civilization known only as **The Continuum**.
* Their purpose: to oversee, preserve, and intervene only when the universe itself is at risk.
* They do not meddle in politics. They only act when entire realities are threatened—by supernova chains, time-collapse events, or interdimensional invasions.
* **Symbol:** Multiple interlocked circles glowing with starlight.
* **Motto:** *(None officially known)*

“They won’t interfere with us,” Sylva said. “Not yet. But if things keep escalating—if too many ancient beings awaken, or your world destabilizes to a cosmic degree—*they will come.*”

She turned toward Kael, and this time her gaze was sharper. Fierce.

“You have time. But not much. If your people wish to survive the age that is coming… they must evolve.”

Kael felt a fire stirring in his chest.

Not fear.

Resolve.

The storm was coming. But they still had the chance to rise.

**End of Chapter 158.**

**Chapter 159: The Path Ahead**

The final echoes of Sylva Everly’s words faded into silence.

Kael stepped forward, eyes steady despite the chaos unraveling inside him. He voiced the question burning in every heart—Faye Illena, Cherry, Kitsune, and Yoru Seiran all holding their breath beside him.

**“How exactly will participating in this Delphic Trials help us?”**

Sylva gave a warm, knowing smile.

“It’s a question worth asking,” she said gently. “The Delphic Trials are more than just a test of strength. For the top ten participants… a reward far greater than power awaits.”

She raised a finger, and a miniature projection of Earth floated mid-air.

“When a participant reaches the top ten… their home planet is claimed as their dominion. Their sanctuary. Their right.”

The group blinked in surprise.

“No force in the Tiraval Descent Galaxy—not even the *Three Great Factions*—can interfere with a planet owned by a finalist, unless that world poses a threat to galactic peace… say, by holding power capable of destroying entire galaxies.”

Kael’s mind spun with possibilities.

“So,” he said cautiously, “if I reach the top ten, does that mean I could… order the release of all the ancient beasts imprisoned on Earth?”

Sylva’s expression dimmed with a touch of sorrow.

“In theory, yes,” she replied. “But the situation is more… complicated.”

Her tone turned serious.

“Many of the ancient beasts, due to their prolonged imprisonment and the sudden forceful awakening, have lost clarity. Some have become hostile, some have reverted to instinct-driven aggression… and some have yet to regain consciousness at all.”

Kael frowned. “But can’t you or Emberlyn subdue them? You’re stronger, right?”

Emberlyn, who had been observing in amused silence, suddenly burst out laughing—deep and sharp.

“Hah! *Subdue?* Child, you think we’re just sparring with cubs in a garden?”

Kael stepped back slightly at the intense heat surging around her laugh.

Sylva, calm as ever, smiled and shook her head. “It’s not that simple.”

Emberlyn crossed her arms and leaned slightly forward, her eyes gleaming like suns.

“If *I* were to confront them directly, they’d sense a real threat—and retaliate with their full force. None of these beasts have been fighting seriously so far. They don’t need to. But if pushed to that point... cities will burn. No—*nations* will fall.”

A chill spread across the group as her words settled in.

Kael’s face paled. Even Cherry’s fur seemed to puff up slightly.

“Let me put it clearly,” Emberlyn continued with a smirk. “If Sylva here—the so-called ‘weakest’ of us all—used her **full power**, this planet’s **moon** would be turned to dust in one sweep.”

Kael felt his breath leave him. His vision blurred.

Moon... destroyed?

That was the power Sylva kept sealed?

He looked at her again with wide eyes, but she only offered a soft smile tinged with regret.

A long moment of silence passed before Kael gathered himself and asked the next question.

“…What is your actual power? I mean… if even a fraction of it can destroy countries while sealed—”

Before Emberlyn could answer, Sylva swiftly raised her hand.

“That’s enough,” she said gently. “Too much knowledge before you are ready will only burden your hearts.”

She turned to the group—each one still trembling from the reality of what they'd heard.

“For now, all of you must focus on survival, growth, and unity. You must gather allies and prepare.”

She paused, then added, her voice firmer than before:

**“The next Delphic Trials will be held in seven Earth years.”**

Kael’s fists clenched at his side.

**Seven years.**

“That may seem long to humans,” she added, “but for the beasts of this galaxy… that is a blink.”

She turned to look at Kael, Cherry, Kitsune, Faye, and Yoru one by one.

“You must reach at least **30-star power** by then.”

They gasped.

“Because the finalists from 10,000 years ago… the last time the Trials were held… had already reached **35-star power**.”

Kael's legs felt weak.

35 stars?

They had barely begun to scale the peak of 10.

Sylva’s voice turned somber.

“This planet, your Earth, now houses multiple 50-star beings—ancient monsters left behind from the war we were never meant to survive. In the coming years, the evolving beast aura will continue to rise. Mutations will accelerate. More beasts will appear. And in some… unforeseen cases—some creatures *might even surpass the 30-star limit*.”

Kael froze.

“You mean…?”

“Yes,” Sylva said. “The limit is not absolute. For the rarest few, a path beyond remains. A path… to *Transcendence*.”

She lifted her hand into the air, her expression turning solemn.

“This world is changing. It’s already begun. Tread carefully.”

And with a single motion, her hand swept down like a falling leaf.

An ancient green glow burst across the cavern like ripples of wind through a forest—

—and all five of them—Kael, Faye, Kitsune, Cherry, and Yoru—fell into unconsciousness.

**End of Chapter 159.**

**Chapter 160 – Echoes of the Forgotten War**

A low wind passed through the cave.

The broken walls, shattered ruins, and divine energy from moments ago… were gone.

Kael stirred awake with a sharp inhale, his body heavy but intact. The scent of dust and stone filled his lungs.

Nearby, Cherry stretched with a soft yawn, tail flicking cautiously. Kitsune’s ears twitched as she looked around warily, still on guard. Faye Illena was already sitting up, dazed, blinking into the dim light. Yoru Seiran, silent as ever, leaned against a wall—his gaze distant.

For a moment, no one said anything. The silence pressed down like a heavy fog, the surreal stillness broken only when Yoru spoke.

“Was… was it all a dream?”

His voice, low and unsure, echoed in the small cave.

Kael glanced at him, his mind swirling. He could still feel Sylva’s presence, Emberlyn’s laughter, the cold truth of the universe pressing into his soul.

“No,” Kael answered firmly. “We don’t all dream the same dream.”

He stood slowly, dust falling from his clothes, and clenched his fists. “Everything we saw… everything we heard… was real.”

Faye let out a slow breath, her face pale.

“Then this world… our world… is just a prison?”

“A cage,” Kitsune said bitterly, her voice resonating in their shared psionic link. “For beasts that could destroy galaxies.”

Cherry growled softly, her golden eyes narrowed. “And we… we were just the bugs crawling in their dust.”

Kael’s face darkened.

He felt it. That crushing insignificance. The knowledge that all of humanity—everything they had built, everything they had fought for—was no more than a grain of sand in the storm of galactic power.

He looked around at the others—his team, his companions, his family in this chaos. He took a deep breath and made a decision.

“This truth can’t be buried,” he said. “The world needs to know what we’re dealing with.”

Kael pulled out the communicator embedded into his suit, connecting to the **Central Control Room**. He spoke with the operator, requesting a secure multi-division transmission.

A moment later, the holographic visages of **Japan’s Five Division Commanders** lit up before him:

* **Commander Riku Tanabe** – Northern Division
* **Commander Ayame Sudo** – Far Northern Division
* **Commander Hiroshi Kanda** – Southern Division
* **Commander Kaoru Mizuchi** – Western Division
* **Commander Seiji Dran** – Central Division

Kael stood tall, his expression solemn but unshaken. The energy pulsing through his body told them he was no longer the same man they had known before.

“Commanders,” he said with authority, “we need to talk.”

They all regarded him with seriousness—none spoke immediately.

“I assume this is about the anomaly near Mount Shirogane,” said **Kaoru Mizuchi**, her emerald eyes sharp beneath wind-tossed hair.

“Yes,” Kael said. “We found the truth. And it’s heavier than anything we ever imagined.”

Riku Tanabe frowned. “Go on.”

Kael hesitated a beat, then looked each of them in the eye.

“This planet… is not just a battlefield. It’s a prison. A containment zone. For **ancient beasts**, each far beyond anything humanity has ever seen. One of them we met—Emberlyn—holds power exceeding 50 stars. And there are **27 others like her.**”

A stunned silence passed over the commanders.

Seiji clenched his jaw. Kaoru Mizuchi narrowed her eyes. Ayame Sudo whispered, “Fifty…?”

“Worse,” Kael continued, “these beings weren’t sealed by nature or accident. They were **imprisoned deliberately**—by a galactic faction known as the *Tessarim Union*, under the faction *Aelari Concord*. And the reason this apocalypse began is because their slumber was disrupted.”

“Are you saying this world was never ours?” asked Commander Hiroshi Kanda, his tone grim.

Kael nodded.

“We were trespassers in someone else’s punishment. And now the chains are breaking.”

Riku rubbed his temples. “This information… it could shatter global morale.”

“I know,” Kael said. “That’s why this needs to be kept among top brass. I’ll explain the rest **in person**. I request all of you to meet at **Central Division Headquarters** in Tokyo Remnant City. We need a unified front.”

Kaoru Mizuchi folded her arms.

“I’ll come,” she said. “If the threat is that grave, we can’t afford delays.”

Hiroshi Kanda nodded. “The South will comply.”

Ayame Sudo was already preparing her departure. “I’ll fly from Lake Suikan within the hour.”

Riku gave a tired sigh. “Understood. Northern Division will send a transport.”

Seiji turned to Kael last, his voice lower than the others. “We’ll be waiting.”

The call ended.

Kael took a moment to breathe—then activated a secure line with Seiji.

“Any updates on the other six teams?” he asked.

Seiji brought up a digital map, highlighting six more anomaly sites across Japan.

“Here’s the summary,” Seiji said.

🔹 **Team 2 – Blackbark Hollow (Poisonous Forest)**  
**Members:** Ibara Noxveil, Daigo Aranami, Velma Karasawa, Rein Yukihara  
“Progress has been limited. Ibara’s poison manipulation lets him explore the outer edge, but the deeper zones suppress even his ability. The core of the forest remains unreachable.”

🔹 **Team 3 – Nighttime Shadow Killer**  
**Members:** Mirei Shadowcrest, Shun Igarashi, Setsuro Kai, General Hideo Ren, Arden Ryouji  
“Mission successful. The killer was a mutated **Shadow-Blood Grey Wolf**—19-star power. Stealth and blood absorption abilities. It was eliminated with great effort.”

🔹 **Team 4 – River Deity Manifestation**  
**Members:** Galen Yatsura, Sana Kiryuu, Naori Kureha, Taro Ishibana  
“No contact with the supposed ‘deity.’ The river is flooding randomly, creating illusions. The team is investigating but progress is minimal.”

🔹 **Team 5 – Hallucination Sound in Village**  
**Members:** Kazana Mei, Sana Kiryuu, Liora Fayune, Katsuya Rinnosuke  
“Cause found—an 18-star mutated **Snail**, resonating frequency disrupts neural stability. It's defeated, villagers are recovering.”

🔹 **Team 6 – Monkey Mutation Man**  
**Members:** Borran Kazume, Shiori Ayame, Rikuto Jura, Yelena Vorune  
“Successfully retrieved the mutated individual. Low threat. The subject is stable and under observation.”

🔹 **Team 7 – Mysterious Island in Lake**  
**Members:** Raiko Dazai, Tenjin Ralnor, Tsuro Genbei, Commander Ayame Sudo  
“Still under investigation. The island shifts location every night. No contact or entry possible yet.”

Kael absorbed the information quietly.

“Three missions completed, three unresolved. The anomalies… they’re not just accidents, are they?”

Seiji nodded grimly. “They’re symptoms.”

Kael looked up, his voice low and clear. “The prison is waking up.”

“Then,” Seiji said, “we don’t have much time.”

Kael’s eyes narrowed, the fire of resolve returning.

“No,” he said. “We have seven years. And we’ll use every second.”

**End of Chapter 160.**

**Chapter 161 – The Gathering Storm**

The air in Tokyo Remnant City was thick with a tense energy, unlike the usual bustle of the devastated metropolis. The city had been rebuilt in patches, scars from the apocalypse still visible in broken skyscrapers, cracked roads, and makeshift barricades. Yet, beneath it all, a fragile hope pulsed through the veins of those who remained.

Kael and his team entered the central government building, the massive structure rising like a fortress amid the ruins. They had returned from the cave — from the place where ancient truths were laid bare.

In the conference room, the atmosphere was somber but urgent. Seiji Dran sat at the head of the table, flanked by the four other Division Commanders: Riku Tanabe of the North, Ayame Sudo of the East, Hiroshi Kanda of the South, and Kaoru Mizuchi of the West. Their faces were etched with concern and fatigue, eyes sharper than ever from years of constant warfare against the mutated threats.

Kael cleared his throat, his spear strapped to his back, and began.

“Commander Seiji, Commanders Tanabe, Sudo, Kanda, Mizuchi — thank you for gathering so quickly. The information I am about to share will change everything we know about this war, this world, and the galaxy beyond.”

Seiji nodded gravely. “We are listening.”

Kael took a deep breath, recalling the vision and the words of Sylva Everly, the terrifying presence of Emberlyn, and the weight of the cosmic forces they had glimpsed.

“There is more to this apocalypse than mutations and rogue beasts,” Kael said. “Our planet is a prison—a containment zone for ancient beasts, some with power beyond comprehension. Sylva Everly and Emberlyn are remnants of these beings, locked away for millennia.”

The commanders exchanged glances, unease settling like a shadow.

Kael continued, “These beasts number in the dozens, with some exceeding fifty stars in power. To put that in perspective—a 30-star beast is a hundred million times stronger than an average human. The gulf between us and them is infinite.”

Kaoru Mizuchi’s sharp gaze met Kael’s. “You’re saying we’re not fighting mere monsters, but **galactic titans**.”

“Yes,” Kael replied. “They are bound to galactic factions. The galaxy itself is divided among three dominant powers: The **Virexon Syndicate**, the **Dominion of Vrax**, and the **Aelari Concord**. Each controls exactly one quadrillion galaxies, with countless sub-factions beneath.”

Seiji leaned forward, the weight of Kael’s words sinking in. “And our Earth is just a tiny cell within this vast cosmic war?”

Kael nodded gravely. “More than that—it’s a battlefield and a prison. These ancient beasts were sealed here to contain their destruction. But their bonds are weakening. The Delphic Trials, a competition held every hundred years in the Tiraval Descent galaxy, may determine who controls such power next.”

Ayame Sudo swallowed hard. “A competition for power that can decide the fate of entire worlds… and we are pawns in their game.”

Riku Tanabe ran a hand through his hair, jaw clenched. “This is beyond anything we prepared for. Our technology, our military might… it’s a candle flickering against a storm.”

Kael’s voice was steady but urgent. “We must become stronger. The next Delphic Trials are in seven years. To stand a chance, we need to reach at least 30-star power. The previous finalists from 10,000 years ago were at 35 stars. If we fail, our planet and all those who live here will be crushed.”

Hiroshi Kanda leaned back in his chair, eyes wide. “How do we even begin to prepare for that? To face beings who could destroy entire countries, or even the moon?”

Kaoru Mizuchi’s voice was a hard whisper, “And what of the other countries? Are we alone in this fight?”

Kael shook his head. “No. After the apocalypse, only twenty countries remain independent and powerful enough to resist complete collapse or assimilation. They are:

* United States
* China
* Russia
* India
* Germany
* United Kingdom
* France
* Japan
* Brazil
* Turkey
* South Korea
* Italy
* Saudi Arabia
* Iran
* Australia
* Israel
* Indonesia
* Canada
* Pakistan
* Ukraine

These countries have survived due to their military power, strategic alliances, or sheer resilience. The rest have either ceased to exist or have merged into these twenty.”

Seiji’s expression darkened. “These nations will be the backbone of humanity’s last stand.”

Kael nodded. “Exactly. That’s why we’ve called for a **large-scale summit** with representatives from all these countries, under Japan’s leadership, to prepare for the coming war.”

The room fell silent. The commanders understood the enormity of what lay ahead. The threat was no longer regional or even planetary—it was cosmic.

Faye Illena broke the silence. “Kael, do you truly believe we can reach that level of power? In seven years?”

Kael’s eyes burned with determination. “We don’t have a choice.”

Cherry purred softly, tail twitching, as Kitsune nodded beside her.

Seiji clenched his fists. “Then we will make it happen. Japan’s forces will stand ready. The divisions will intensify training and research. We’ll pool all resources.”

Kaoru Mizuchi’s voice was steady, yet fierce. “The Western Division will mobilize immediately. We can’t wait for the trials; the beasts will not.”

Riku Tanabe said grimly, “Northern Division will focus on intelligence and reconnaissance. We need to understand our enemy better.”

Ayame Sudo added, “Far Northern Division will strengthen defense lines and evacuation plans. Civilians must be protected at all costs.”

Hiroshi Kanda concluded, “The South will ensure supply chains remain uninterrupted. War is won as much by logistics as by combat.”

Kael looked around the room, feeling a surge of unity.

“This is more than a war,” he said quietly. “It’s survival itself.”

Seiji nodded. “I’ll inform the world leaders. This meeting will mark the start of a new era for humanity—one where we fight not just for land or power, but for the future of the entire species.”

Kael’s thoughts drifted briefly to the Delphic Trials. The competition of titans, the trials of fire and spirit. The road ahead would be perilous, but they would not walk it alone.

Outside the windows, the ruins of Tokyo Remnant City stood silent, a testament to human resilience and fragility.

But now, with this knowledge, the fragile flame of hope had grown into a blazing inferno.

And Kael was ready to lead the charge.

**End of Chapter 161**

**Chapter 162 – Silence Before the Storm**

The preparations had been grueling.

In the three days leading up to the historic meeting, Tokyo Remnant City was a vortex of activity. All elite teams had returned from their assigned missions—Kael’s team, Team 2 from Blackbark Hollow, the River Deity team, and the others. The reports came in fast, the results mixed, but the air around them was dominated not by the monsters they had fought—but by something far greater.

The **Foreign Affairs Bureau of Japan** was thrown into chaos. Ministers had not slept in days. Diplomatic envoys scrambled to establish secured global lines. Hushed meetings were held behind closed doors. Security was tightened. The reason for the sudden meeting was held close to the chest—only the five Division Commanders and Kael knew the real gravity.

By the morning of the **third day**, Tokyo Remnant City had become the political capital of the world.

At **11:00 AM JST**, the **Global Strategic Council** convened.

The meeting was held virtually on a high-fidelity projection grid. More than **500 of the most powerful individuals** from the **20 surviving nations** connected into the holographic arena—a vast, circular digital amphitheater shimmering above Tokyo’s central command center. These were not mere diplomats or bureaucrats. They were the apex of human strength and influence—each individual a walking catastrophe in power. Even the weakest among them was at least **16★**, the global minimum for political authority post-apocalypse.

Among the gathered:

* **20 individuals were reported above 19.5★**:
  + **Japan**: Seiji Dran (19.6★)
  + **France**: General Louis Bertrand (19.5★)
  + **Germany**: Conrad Faustein & Helena Weiss (both 19.7★)
  + **UK**: Alfred Carmichael & Catherine Eldridge (both 19.6★)
  + **India**: Arjun Vedanta, Kaveri Sinha & Vikram Taneja (each 19.7★)
  + **Russia**: Viktor Kozlov, Irina Volkova & Leonid Sumarov (each 19.6★)
  + **China**: Zhao Wu of the Qin Lineage (19.9★)
  + **USA**: President Grant Maddox, General Elissa Royce, Colonel Blake Hannigan, Dr. Randal Keen (President – 19.9★, others ~19.5-19.8★)

The arena was barely initialized when **President Grant Maddox** of the United States unmuted his channel and leaned back on his polished desk, sipping from a diamond-cut glass of bourbon. His voice thundered across the projection.

“What’s the point of this *stupid meeting*, huh? If this is some global pissing contest to figure out who's got the biggest stick, I can save you all the trouble. **America is the strongest.** Everyone knows it. Let’s stop wasting our time.”

The silence cracked like a dam.

A moment later, a sharper voice replied.

“*Qin Zhao Wu*, President of the Chinese Federation,” the system registered.

A man stepped forward in ceremonial robes—his features regal, his eyes narrow with steel resolve. His lineage traced back to the ancient emperors of China, and he bore it with divine arrogance.

“Who gave you the right to declare yourself king of this ruined world, Maddox? Where were your soldiers when the Sea of Flame consumed Thailand? Where were your scientists when the Raging Tortoise devoured Seoul’s eastern wall?”

His voice rose.

“Did you **discover the truth** behind the awakening? Did you **survive the gaze** of an ancient beast? **If not—then sit down.**”

Maddox’s face twitched with fury, but before he could respond, others joined in.

**Viktor Kozlov** of Russia growled into the feed.

“Enough with American theatrics. The world is in crisis. We are not here to measure egos.”

**Kaveri Sinha** of India added,

“Let’s not forget that even our combined forces couldn’t bring down a single 20.1★ beast without sacrificing thousands.”

**France’s General Louis Bertrand** snapped,

“What arrogance makes you blind to reality? There are things out there even our best satellites can’t scan.”

**UK’s Catherine Eldridge** scoffed.

“The old world is gone. None of our flags mean anything to the 30-star horrors waiting in the dark.”

Soon, the virtual room devolved into overlapping voices and crackling energy as elemental auras flared across channels. Even in this digital space, the pressure was tangible. Sparks flew on screen as power signatures flared dangerously. The meeting was rapidly descending into chaos.

Then a single voice silenced it all.

**“Enough.”**

It was **Seiji Dran**, head of the **Central Division**, Commander of Japan’s unified forces, and **de facto President** of post-apocalyptic Japan. His voice echoed with cold authority. Behind him stood Kael, silent but powerful.

The room froze.

Seiji’s image stood tall and unmoving. His red cloak fluttered as if reacting to the pressure he exerted across the channel. His words followed like a blade:

“You are all gathered here not to measure whose nation is more glorious. **You are here because Japan has uncovered the truth behind this apocalypse.** A truth older than any empire you represent.”

A pin could’ve dropped in the silence that followed.

Even President Maddox fell still, narrowing his eyes as if trying to read through Seiji’s mask of composure.

Kael stood behind him, eyes unwavering, Cherry and Kitsune beside him like guardian spirits. Faye Illena had her arms folded, but her gaze was sharp. Yoru stood like a shadow, unreadable.

“You will hear the truth. Whether you believe it or not... is irrelevant. But after today, **none of us will sleep the same again.**”

There was no reply.

Hundreds of global leaders, warlords, genetic supremacists, and planetary defenders — silenced in anticipation.

The storm had gathered.

The veil of arrogance had shattered.

And in the eye of the storm, stood Japan — ready to speak.

**End of Chapter 162**  
*Next: Chapter 163 – The Truth Beyond Stars*

**Chapter 163 – Revelation**

The digital amphitheater remained still, a deafening silence settling over the more than 500 global representatives. Beings of strength, politics, and terrifying influence—all now humbled not by power, but by the unknown.

Seiji Dran stood unmoved, his gaze sweeping over the projection grid. His words, now calm, came with the weight of history.

“Three weeks ago, we dispatched seven elite teams to investigate the most abnormal and unstable regions across Japan. Each anomaly bore energy signatures that modern science could not explain. Mutated topography, vanishing matter, dimensional folds... all signs of an ancient force at work.”

He tapped into the console on his table. Seven locations appeared behind him as 3D holographic projections—each marked with a blazing red dot.

“Of those teams, only one... encountered something beyond any of our understanding.”

Seiji turned, locking eyes with Kael Ardyn, who stood at ease but sharp with purpose. The very air around him pulsed with quiet force—Cherry and Kitsune by his side like watching stars, Faye Illena’s piercing gaze at his back, Yoru Seiran’s presence nearly unnoticeable to most, yet always a breath away from vanishing.

“Kael. Please.”

Kael stepped forward slowly. All across the global grid, hundreds of holographic feeds zoomed into his form. The leaders, commanders, and generals from across twenty surviving nations waited. His voice, steady, yet edged with something deeper—truth carved from fire—carried through.

“Three days ago, my team was dispatched to **Takebuchi Waterfall**, an anomaly site in the northern mountain ridge. Iris—my internal AI—detected no beast energy. We proceeded cautiously. The cave seemed empty, barely large enough to fit a van. Nothing unusual… until I used spiritual perception.”

Kael paused, remembering.

“I sensed something beyond the wall—something hidden. I punched through the rock, and what we found… was a deeper cave, much larger. The air was dry. Hot. And the further we went, the louder we heard voices—two women arguing.”

Murmurs echoed from the global feed. Cherry stepped slightly forward, her fur bristling, remembering the moment.

“One had **red hair**, radiating unbearable heat. The other had **light green hair** with pink tips—draped in a cream-colored robe. As we got closer, the green-haired woman sensed us... and smiled.”

Kael looked out at the assembly. Even the U.S. President Grant Maddox was silent now. Kael's next words cut through their thoughts like frost against steel.

“She said we’d met before. I didn’t understand... until she described something only I knew. A moment from more than two years ago—when I was dragged underground by a mutated tree… and saw a **colossal ancient tree**, a being even Iris couldn’t calculate the power level of.”

“She said... she was **that tree.**”

Gasps broke across multiple feeds.

“Her name is **Sylva Everly**, also known as the **Banyan Eternal Tree**. She is not just an ancient beast—she is a being who has existed for more than 10,000 years. A prison warden of this planet.”

“The red-haired woman? Her name is **Emberlyn**. You might know her better as the **Infernal Phoenix**.”

That name froze the room. Even high-star powerhouses flinched. Faye Illena’s voice, sharp and cold, echoed next to Kael.

“Yes. **The Infernal Phoenix.** Not a legend. Not a myth. A real being. And we were standing in her furnace of a presence.”

Kael continued, unwavering.

“They told us the truth. There are **27 ancient beasts**, each with a **minimum of 50★ power**, currently sealed—or partially awakened—on Earth.”

“But they are not just beasts. They were once members of a **galactic faction**, part of a 30-member team. Due to a conflict with another faction, they were sentenced to eternal imprisonment on this planet. Sylva Everly, the youngest and weakest, was spared execution... only so she could act as their jailer.”

He took a breath. The projections around him shifted to a model of the galaxy.

“This conflict was not local. These beings are from a galactic system called the **Tiraval Descent**, a spiral of power and ancient politics. Three factions rule over this spiral:

**1. Virexon Syndicate –** *Wealth is Dominion*

“An empire of capitalists who manipulate trade and war.”

**2. Dominion of Vrax –** *Power Above All*

“A militaristic faction believing only in raw strength.”

**3. Aelari Concord –** *Guardians of the Helpless*

“A union of civilizations devoted to peace and protection.”

“Each faction rules over **1 quadrillion galaxies**.”

The crowd gasped again. Some speakers disconnected for a few seconds, returning stunned. Even battle-hardened leaders were beginning to see their world as a drop in a cosmic sea.

Kael looked grim.

“Sylva and Emberlyn's faction was part of the **Aelari Concord**, under a subgroup known as the **Tessarim Union**—a group made of awakened beasts and elemental ancients.”

He raised a hand. Another projection appeared—a circular glyph with concentric rings.

“There is also another body… more mysterious. The **Aeon Council**, formed by a civilization known only as *The Continuum*. They do not govern. They observe. They only interfere when **entire universes** are at risk.”

Another wave of murmurs. Kael’s voice grew serious now.

“But most important of all... Sylva told us about a path forward.”

A silence fell again.

“Every **100 years**, there is a competition called the **Delphic Trials**, held for youngsters below 100 years of age—by galactic standards. The top 10 in this tournament are granted rights by the **Aeon Council** and the ruling factions. Among them, one right is absolute: the ability to **claim their planet** as a protected world. No external interference. No war. No destruction.”

Now everyone was leaning in.

“This... is the only way Earth can survive. Unless we claim that right, the awakening of the ancient beasts will eventually tear this planet apart. Sylva warned us—this world is evolving too fast. In 7 years, the next Delphic Trials will begin.”

Kael’s expression darkened.

“The finalists from the last Trials 10,000 years ago had an average power of **35★**. We must reach that level. Or we will be annihilated.”

He looked at each nation’s representatives.

“Some of you thought your 19★ power was enough. It's not even the beginning. **A 30★ beast can destroy a city in a breath. Emberlyn, at full power, could wipe out the moon.** Sylva, the 'weakest,' could reduce nations to dust.”

The camera feed lingered on many faces: President Zhao Wu’s eyes narrowed in horror. Grant Maddox gritted his teeth. Germany’s Conrad looked pale. India’s Kaveri was quietly nodding. The truth was unbearable, yet undeniable.

“We must unite. Not as countries, but as a species. Earth must not fall—not to itself, and not to a cosmic tribunal.”

Kael stepped back. His voice, though calm, thundered across all feeds.

“You wanted to know why Japan called this meeting? **This is why.**”

He turned to Seiji Dran, who nodded once and stepped forward again.

“Prepare your elites. Train your champions. **Seven years.** That’s all we have.”

**End of Chapter 163**  
*Next: Chapter 164 – Council of the Final Twenty*

**Chapter 164 – The World Responds**

For the first time in decades, **the entire power structure of Earth stood united**—not in strength, but in stunned silence.

The massive virtual conference hall projected across dozens of military bunkers, diplomatic chambers, warships, and command rooms of the **twenty last surviving nations**. At the center of it all was Kael Ardyn, flanked by Seiji Dran and the other Japanese Division Commanders. His words still echoed in the minds of every leader, every commander.

Then, the chaos began.

“Is this truly the reality, or is Japan trying to intimidate the rest of us with a fabricated tale?”

The sharp voice belonged to **General Arthur Caldwell**, the UK’s Defense Strategist. His hawk-like eyes were filled with doubt.

“How can we confirm the authenticity of such beings if no one else has encountered them?”

chimed in **President Zhao Wu of China**, composed but skeptical.

“You’re telling us there are monsters who could destroy the moon, yet we’ve only fought beasts barely at 20-star level? Why haven’t they razed the world already?”

asked **President Grant Maddox of the United States**, his smirk masking concern.

“Why would ancient beings need to be sealed here at all? Sounds like a fantasy.”

**President Catherine Leclerc of France** spoke, skeptical but open.

“And this… ‘Delphic Trials’—who governs it? Who even verifies the legitimacy of this tournament?”

came the voice of **Supreme General Dmitri Ivanov of Russia**, massive arms folded.

The voices came one after another, fast and full of doubt. The conference was quickly spiraling into accusation and mistrust.

But **Seiji Dran** did not flinch.

He stepped forward, hands behind his back, calm but commanding.

“General Caldwell, we understand your concerns. To answer you—this is no intimidation tactic. It’s a revelation, one that we did not ask for either. We have **video records, psionic recordings, energy traces**, and Kael Ardyn’s own Iris AI—a 5th-generation analysis core—to confirm the encounters.”

He shifted slightly.

“President Zhao, your point is valid. But you must understand—these beasts are not fully awakened. Many still lack consciousness. Others are **bound by seals**, or isolated in remote locations. They haven’t razed the world because they do not see it as a threat—**yet.**”

Turning to President Maddox:

“If a 30★ being *did* attack full force, you would not be here questioning this meeting. The beasts we fight now are merely remnants, some with fractured instincts. **That’s why we must prepare.**”

To President Leclerc:

“The prison exists because the factions that govern the universe are real. Not fable—**factional war, politics, and justice on a galactic scale** placed these beings here. We are merely the unlucky bystanders.”

And finally to General Ivanov:

“The Delphic Trials are observed by a higher force called **The Aeon Council**. They do not interfere in mortal matters unless universal extinction is on the line. The tournament is their method of granting power and protection to those who prove themselves.”

The silence returned. But this time it was heavier.

Then Kael stepped up again, his tone even.

“You all know about the ancient beasts. You’ve fought them. But you never truly knew their **strength**.”

“A 19.9★ powerhouse is about **10,000×** stronger than a normal human. A 20★ being? **100,000×.** A 29.9★ beast reaches over **1 million× human power.** And a true **30★? One billion.**”

“Let that sink in. The entire might of your armies, your weapons—**it won’t be enough** unless we grow stronger.”

From the Indian feed, **Commander Arjun Vedanta**, a stoic general with a saffron sash and golden spear by his side, leaned forward.

“You say we must reach 30★ in seven years. Then tell me—**how?** Most of us haven’t even crossed 20. The bottleneck is too deep.”

For a moment, no one answered.

Until **a new window appeared**.

Every holographic screen across the globe flickered—then shifted focus.

A single figure emerged.

A **woman with long, flowing green hair**, her robe composed of leaves and golden fibers. Her smile was serene—but her **presence** caused every elite in the room to feel their hearts race, instincts screaming at them to kneel.

Kael’s eyes widened. He whispered:

“Sylva…”

Before anyone could react, she spoke, her voice like wind through ancient forests.

“Greetings, leaders of Earth. I am **Sylva Everlyn**, the **Banyan Eternal Tree**, ancient beast and prison warden of this planet.”

Gasps exploded through the feeds.

President Maddox jumped up, fury and panic overlapping.

“This is a trick. Some sort of telepathic—"

“To confirm my identity,” Sylva said calmly, interrupting him, “I have sent a **greeting** to each of you.”

And then… it happened.

In the **real world**, inside war rooms, bunkers, government halls, and secret chambers—**twenty saplings** began to grow. From stone, steel, carpet, tile—impossibly, they bloomed at the feet of each world leader.

Gasps. Screams. Silence.

It was no longer theory.

It was **truth**.

Sylva’s smile faded slightly.

“What Kael has said is all true. Each of us sealed beasts possess power beyond your comprehension. If any of us chose to, we could **eradicate entire nations in minutes.** But we choose not to.”

“A 30-star is no longer human. They are a force. 1,000,000,000× the strength of your people. And there are **beings far beyond 30★**, walking the cosmos.”

She turned, looking through the feeds directly at **Arjun Vedanta**.

“Your question is wise. Let me explain.”

“Because of our awakening, this planet’s **beast aura is rising**. This is the window—**the only chance**. For the next **5 years**, the aura will accelerate growth. It will empower humans and beasts alike—but only those who train, fight, evolve. Slay monsters. Absorb cores. Refine your essence.”

“After that window... the evolution will stabilize. Growth will slow drastically.”

The leaders listened, pale.

Sylva raised her hand once more.

“To prepare you, I will personally **host a tournament** in the **final 5 months** before the Delphic Trials. The **top 30 individuals**, all who have crossed **30★**, will receive my direct training.”

“And the **top 3** will be gifted the **Geode Fruit**—a sacred treasure of my clan. It grants a **second ability**, equal in grade to your highest.”

She let her words settle, the weight of them dragging every mind to the same cold conclusion:

**This was not a suggestion. This was survival.**

“Unite, Earthlings. Train. Or perish.”

The feed ended.

But none moved.

None spoke.

Because for the first time... **the power that watched over Earth had revealed itself.**

**End of Chapter 164**