

Reincarnated Avatar; I got 2 SSS-Rank Unique Skills

#Chapter 161: Promotion tournament [7] - Read
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161: Promotion tournament [7]

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[Promotion Tournament:]

[Quarterfinal fixtures:]

>Chaos Inc. vs Crimson Vale<

>Winner- Chaos Inc.<

...

>Apex Reign vs Iron Dominion<

>Winner- Iron Dominion<

...

>Silverfang vs Nightshroud<

>Winner- Nightshroud<

...

>Echelon vs Aetherlight Syndicate<

Out of the 4 battles of the first round of the Promotion Tournament playoffs, 3 were already played with their winners decided.

Out of the 3 different battles stretched across 3 days, the ex pro clubs mostly dominated. Chaos Inc. was the only team from the mundane challengers that became the trailblazing underdog, clutching victory in the quarterfinal.

Just yesterday, Nightshroud showed the true level of the fallen pro clubs, ruthlessly blowing Silverfang out of the way.

All the way from the battle royale elimination round, Silverfang was not a high-rated team in the Promotion Tournament. But due to their propensity for doing the impossible, clawing their way up as underdogs, they grew a fanbase.

People started rooting for them, wanting them to be the dark horse of the Promotion Tournament this year, but Nightshroud ruthlessly shattered that wish.

They didn't just win against Silverfang, they broke their opponents completely with discipline, coordination, and a firm strategy.

They showed their opponents level.

Above all though, the thrilling battle entertained the spectators to no end.

And with that, all eyes went towards the last game of the quarterfinal of the playoff round, the game between Echelon and Aetherlight Syndicate.

This game attracted even more attention, and it was because of a simple reason. Both teams were tipped as favorites to go all the way and win the Promotion Tournament this year.

Echelon was a self-explanatory, it was a team led by the legendary God Noah.

Noah may be retired, but his exploits in the game with his Lord Doom Avatar showed that he still got it and was still a force of nature in Warstar.

He also had his retired teammates with him, so they could not be underestimated.

As for Aetherlight Syndicate though, of the 4 pro clubs that won the playoff slots, Aetherlight Syndicate was the one that was rated highest.

Afterall, Aetherlight Syndicate left the English Pro Alliance just last season.

This was a team that consistently play in the Pro Alliance, until the last season where they played poorly and were relegated.

They lost only 2 of their starting V players after being relegated, but the core of the team still remained, 3 skillful pro players who were loyal to the club.

It was a fearsome team.

Aetherlight Syndicate consisted of a lineup of a Psychic, a Paladin, a Summoner, a Combat Mage, and a Cleric.

It was a typical team lineup focused on aether and psychic-based classes.

Consisting of a Psychic, a Combat Mage, and a Summoner, all classes with high Intelligence and capable of high damage through various means, it was a versatile team. And with a Paladin, they had their tank.

They had their healer in the Cleric, it was a balanced and deadly team.

Against Echelon, who would prevail?

Hours before the game, the arena for the epic clash was randomized.

(Promotion Tournament:)

(Quarterfinal:)

>Echelon vs Aetherlight Syndicate<

[Location: Sand Dune]

[A ruinous desert where 2 great armies once clashed in a cataclysmic battle. The only survivors of the great clash are the mounts, the Sand Worms. Beware of Sand Worms that swallow people whole!]

Sand Dune is an old arena location in the game.

It had a simple design, the main caveat being the sand dunes that occasionally pill up, blocking vision. It was a plain desert which limited the tactics that teams could use, they could only fight and clash in a direct confrontation.

Another feature were the Sand Worms. They rare appear in the Sand Dune, but when they do, these towering beasts are capable of swallowing Avatars whole.

When swallowed, Avatars are doomed to a slow death, their HP being chipped one step at a time by the corrosive digestive inner juices of the worms.

Apart from the fear of being swallowed, when a Sand Worm appear, more dunes appear, reducing visibility to less than a meter ahead of each player.

In the build up to the game, while the two different teams did their tactical setups, discussing their approach to the game, the 2 different fanbases clashed.

Echelon was new, but it already had a staunch fanbase.

All Lord Doom fans were now Echelon fans. And trust them, even in the Promotion Tournament, they came in droves to support their Lord and his team.

Aetherlight Syndicate was no slouch though in the fanbase area. As a Pro Alliance club before now, they had an established fanbase.

The 2 fanbases clashed, fanning the flames to the epic clash.

Like that, time moved fast and, in a jiffy, it was D-day.

...

Day 4...

Neither of the 2 teams tweaked their formations.

The physical arena for the epic clash was Chelsea Football Club's Stamford Bridge stadium in London.

Stamford Bridge was filled to the brim with tens of thousands of passionate Warstar fans, eagerly supporting their teams, and in the electric atmosphere that now diffused this stadium, the challengers spawned inside the game.

The Sand Dune was a massive map, but due to its relatively flat surface, even through the low visibility caused by the sand dunes, the 2 teams noticed silhouettes of each other mere seconds after being spawned.

They were far away from each other, but the flat surface of the terrain did not allow for elaborate tactics, and so both teams simply approached each other.

Echelon used a wedge formation.

Lord Doom moved through the middle with Aetherforge, flanked in the right by Reckless Storm and Captain Batman.

To his left was Enlightened Flame, the Summoner and his army of elite summons. This time, he needed quality than quantity.

Behind the group was the Cleric, Misty Rose, safely protected behind them.

What Nightshroud did yesterday to their opponents would have made this approach, leaving their Cleric behind seem extremely risky but that was Silverfang, and this was Echelon.

Noah and his crew were not scared.

The location hazard didn't trigger as they approached the center of the arena, no Sand Worm made an appearance.

And then, they met at the center.

They clashed.

Chapter 162: Promotion tournament [8]

KABOOM!

Like their fanbase boasted that it would happen, Echelon showed no restraints at all, domineering engaging their opponents on sight.

All of Echelon's Avatars were below level 80, heavily affected by level suppression but it didn't mean much after the clash started.

With Aetherforge, Lord Doom jumped into battle first, the transformable weapon settling on the Greatsword form as he started with a devastating attack.

After level 60 and making it to the Heavenly Domain, Noah and his teammates finally got access to Awakened level skills.

And in the month and weeks that followed since their ascension, they already learned a few Awakened level skills, including this one.

{Earthshatter=}

An Awakened level Berserker skill!

A powerful skill that slams a Berserker's weapon into the ground with immense force, creating a massive explosion that damages all enemies in the area.

This was the skill that Lord Doom started with.

KABOOM!

As a titanic explosion took place, damaging the enemies and throwing them off balance, fueled by adrenaline, team Echelon exploded into life.

With her S-ranked twin blades, the Blades of Aamon, Reckless Storm left an afterimage behind as she chased after the enemies like a Wraith that was unbound by the laws of physics governing the game.

{Blade Tempest=}

Another Awakened level skill, this time a Blademaster skill.

Blade Tempest creates a storm of sword slashes, targeting all enemies within a large radius.

Noah didn't exactly plan with a strategy in mind for this game, they simply approached it. What was happening at this moment was just synergy and teamwork that was honed through over a decade of playing Warstar together.

Lord Doom's Earthshatter barely completed its rampage when Reckless Storm dove into the fray, creating a literal tempest of swords.

As the whistling sound of countless sword strikes reverberated, the atmosphere suddenly turned cold.

{Glacial Prison=}

Captain Batman struck.

Unlike the others, Glacial Prison was not an Awakened level skill, rather just a high-level skill but it had a practical effect.

It creates a frozen world that traps enemies in blocks of ice, immobilizing them for several seconds..., several important seconds.

Lord Doom's attack and Reckless Storm's sword created chaos, and while mocking the enemies with his venomous tongue, Benjamin took advantage of the momentary chaos, catching them off-guard and freezing them.

Glacial Prison was just one step in his plan though.

{Dust Devil=}

An actual Awakened level Elementalist skill!

Behind his monitor, Benjamin's fingers were literally flying, taking his APM to a crazy level as he activated the skill.

Earth and air combined in the air, rapidly rotating to create a spinning vortex of debris, a highly destructive debris barrage that did not just damage enemies but also reduced visibility, and therefore accuracy.

Sand Dune already had low visibility to start with. And with Dust Devil, Benjamin completely nullified Aetherlight Syndicate's most dangerous Avatar, their captain, the Psychic.

Psychics could create AOE psychic storms to deal psychic damage, but their truly dangerous moves were single-target debilitating attacks.

To land their attacks though, they needed accuracy far more than other classes. For Psychics, it was hit or miss, no in between.

If it didn't hit perfectly, most of their skills could be rendered useless.

And with this level of low visibility, the Psychic was suddenly shackled.

Echelon never planned for this, they moved, attacked, and reacted all according to the first move that Lord Doom made.

And that was when Enlightened Flame, the Summoner moved.

{Eldritch Behemoth=}

An Awakened level Summoner skill.

Having summoned high-level summons like the Thunder Djinn, Frost Spirit, and Flame Sprite already before the fight commenced, Caleb did it, going all out with an Awakened-level summon.

Eldritch Behemoth summons a massive, otherworldly beast to devastate the battlefield for a long time.

This move was in reaction to Benjamin obscuring visibility even more.

Eldritch Behemoth was powerful, utterly terrifying but slow. Summoners mostly use it if they have a teammate to tie enemies down.

But now, with such poor visibility, the enemies won't even see the Behemoth coming, so they won't be able to predict the Behemoth's movements to attack.

As soon as the big bad boy arrived, it went on a rampage.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Aetherlight Syndicate's Combat Mage was caught, spelling danger for him.

The Eldritch Behemoth drained this guy's HP with deadly attacks, smashing his body left and right till... his HP hit zero.

1 skill to kill 1 enemy!

While Aetherlight Syndicate were still reeling from the sudden attack, the seamless cooperation and chaining together of powerful skills, taking advantage of the low visibility, Echelon's 2 duelists jumped into the fray alongside the Behemoth.

With her twin blades and with Aetherforge, Lord Doom and Reckless Storm wreaked havoc, causing untold damage inside the sand storm.

Aetherlight Syndicate's captain died next, succumbing to the deadly attack of Lord Doom and Reckless Storm in the sand storm.

2 enemies down..., 3 to go.

It was easy.

The effects of Dust Devil finally disappeared, including the Eldritch Behemoth but the damage was already done.

This was a team of 3 pro players but before Echelon, they were reduced to nonentities, helpless in the face of true might.

Benjamin and Aria focused on the Cleric, eager to quickly wipe her off the map while Lord Doom pounced towards Aetherlight Syndicate's Summoner before this guy could summon a summon that could cause them trouble.

Lord Doom never allowed the poor guy to complete a powerful skill combination. He was always one step ahead, interrupting the sequence before the skill combination input could be completed by the Summoner.

And so, a funny scene occurred, a scene where a Summoner tried hard to no avail to unleash a summon while a Combat Mage toyed with him.

Lord Doom poked the bastard with his battle lance till death.

When he looked back, he noticed that the Paladin was already on Misty Rose but this guy was in for a rude awakening if he thought Echelon's Cleric was an easy target. As soon as the Paladin appeared, Genevieve cleverly retreated.

She evaded attacks with eerie frequency, staying alive long enough till the Paladin was the only Aetherlight Syndicate player left in the arena.

And then, the rest of Echelon swarmed the lone Paladin.

He stood no chance.

He was obliterated.

---<VICTORY>---

Echelon secured a dominating victory.

Chapter 163: Semifinal clash [1]

[Promotion Tournament:]

[Quarterfinal fixtures:]

>Chaos Inc. vs Crimson Vale<

>Winner- Chaos Inc.<

...

>Apex Reign vs Iron Dominion<

>Winner- Iron Dominion<

...

>Silverfang vs Nightshroud<

>Winner- Nightshroud<

...

>Echelon vs Aetherlight Syndicate<

>Winner- Echelon<

4 battles, 4 winners...

At the end of Day 4 of the Promotion Tournament quarterfinals, 4 teams were eliminated out of the tournament, leaving the top 4 teams.

And then, the semifinal draw was released.

[Promotion Tournament:]

[Semifinal fixtures:]

>Chaos Inc. vs Iron Dominion<

>Date: Tuesday, 10:00am<

...

>Nightshroud vs Echelon<

>Date: Thursday, 10:00am<

The semifinal games would start in the coming week.

2 games, 2 blockbuster clashes to decide the finalists of the Promotion Tournament.

Echelon's game was still far, scheduled for all the way Thursday next week.

And so, all the attention focused on the first semifinal clash between Chaos Inc. and Iron Dominion.

A clash of old vs new, a clash of favorite vs underdog.

Once a prominent pro club, Iron Dominion had a solid fanbase that supported them and with their new prodigy, they were always billed as favorites to go all the way in the tournament so their semifinal spot was no fluke.

Unlike them though, a lot of people saw Chaos Inc.'s semifinal spot as a fluke.

At the beginning of the Promotion Tournament, no one expected them to make it this far, and yet, here they were, still fighting.

Even when the true underdog that was widely recognized just weeks ago, Silverfang was already eliminated.

Even with Apex Reign was already eliminated, Chaos Inc. thrived.

People loved a good underdog story, and so they could not help but romanticize Chaos Inc.'s run to the semifinal. They could not help but pray and hope for the thrill of another upset.

Amid the banter, publicity, and anticipation, D-day came fast.

Tuesday, 10:00am...

The venue for the first semifinal game was Manchester City's Etihad Stadium.

The stadium was almost filled with tens of thousands of Warstar fans, either fervently supporting Iron Dominion or just here to participate in the drama.

And boy did the drama unfold.

3..., 2... 1!

FIGHT!

(Promotion Tournament:)

(Semifinal:)

>Chaos Inc. vs Iron Dominion<

[Location: Skyforge Citadel]

[A colossal floating fortress suspended high above the clouds, with fractured platforms, suspended bridges, and ever-shifting rune-etched panels. Each section of the citadel is powered by ancient aether engines, causing segments to rise, fall, or rotate periodically during battle.]

Another popular arena location.

The Skyforge Citadel is popular in the pro scene, it was a unique location with unique features. One of its main features are Aether wells that restores mana and boosts magic damage if controlled.

Another is the shifting platforms that move every 45 seconds, forcing players to reposition or risk falling into the storm abyss.

And then the sky tethers, zipline-style nodes that allow rapid traversal between zones. It was a gigantic arena.

And of course, the environmental hazards, strong wind gusts and unstable tiles that can throw players off ledges.

As one of the most popular locations in the pro scene, the perfect strategies and favored styles to be used in Skyforge Citadel were already deduced long ago by the pro players.

Skyforge Citadel favored mobility-based classes, aerial combos, zone control, and ambush tactics. Classes like Thieves, Assassins, the Witch class, and the Mechanic class excel in Skyforge Citadel.

At a glance, Chaos Inc.'s class combination was better for a location like Skyforge Citadel, comprising of their captain, a Brawler, an Elementalist, a Witch, a Blademaster, and a Cleric.

But could they overcome the raw skill of their opponents?

As soon as the battle started, Iron Dominion moved as a team, their 2 Paladins leading the charge, their genius Blademaster moving directly behind the Paladins, while the Cleric and Ghostblade walked side by side at the rear.

{Poison Glass=}

A low-level Witch skill.

As soon as the sound of shattering glass reverberated above them, Iron Dominion's players scattered, knowing what was coming.

The enemy Witch was already above them!

She rode on her enchanted broom.

Chaos Inc.'s strategy was simple, they simply went for an all-out assault, hoping to win by relying on the slight advantage of their class composition.

With a Witch that could attack from the sky, making her immune to the unstable tiles and shifting platforms, including a Blademaster and Brawler leading the attack charge, both reliably fast classes, they hoped to overwhelm their opponents.

Afterall, Iron Dominion was renowned for their heavy-armor classes.

With 2 Paladins, a notoriously heavy class, they hoped to use the terrain to their advantage, forcing their 2 slower opponents to slip and fall into the abyss.

Falling out of a platform into the clouds meant instant death.

This was their strategy.

It was a sound strategy, but it didn't work. It didn't work simply because they didn't have the required skill to execute such a blitz attack strategy.

BOOM!

The clash started, the Brawler and Blademaster rapidly descending on the 2 Paladins but calmly, the 2 Paladins held their ground against the assault.

Iron Dominion's captain was one of the Paladins.

They were able to avoid being pushed out of the platform as a result of the rapid assault. And luck played on their side, the platform that they stood on was excluded from the first shift of the Skyforge Citadel.

Every 45 seconds, the platforms of the Skyforge Citadel shift, disorienting players and throwing them off if they were not fast enough to reorient themselves.

But Iron Dominion was lucky, and so their genius capitalized.

While Chaos Inc.'s Brawler and Blademaster went on the attack, they left their Cleric undefended. Their Elementalist remained with her, but it didn't matter before a Blademaster of this caliber.

Iron Dominion's teenage prodigy was let loose!

Click! Clack!

Behind his monitor, the kid's APM exploded!

And with it, his Blademaster went berserk, doing a 2v1, no, a 3v1 because the Witch reacted as soon as the Blademaster went on the attack.

Despite fighting against 3 players, it didn't matter, sheer talent and skill prevailed as he cut the Cleric down, the Elementalist barely slowing him down.

Afterall, Elementalist were masters at AOE damage, not protection.

And with the Elementalist so close, as soon as he slayed the Cleric, the Blademaster pounced on the defenseless Elementalist.

He cut him down in seconds!

In less than 2 minutes, he killed 2 enemies, singlehandedly turning the game around in favor of his team.

Iron Dominion didn't need to do much after that. They simply needed to capitulate on the advantage that he bought for them, cleaving through them with reckless abandon like they were never there.

Less than 5 minutes later...

---<VICTORY>---

Iron Dominion won the first semifinal clash.

Chapter 164: Semifinal clash [2]

Chaos Inc.'s journey was cut short.

They had an amazing run, the true underdogs of the tournament but the semifinal became their final bus stop.

They could not prevail over Iron Dominion. That night in Manchester, the excitement among the Iron Dominion fans rose through the roof as they celebrated their team's victory with reckless abandon.

"Pro Alliance, here we come!" They sang excitedly.

Chaos Inc. was extremely resourceful in their journey through the Promotion Tournament, clinging victory from defeat each time but against a vastly stronger team, their tricks were no longer effective.

In the end, sheer skill won.

While Iron Dominion fans celebrated their final placement exuberantly, the focus of the rest of the Warstar fanbase turned to the final semifinal game.

The clash between Nightshroud and Echelon.

It was in 2 days but time moved fast and in no time, the D-day was here.

Thursday, 10:00am...

(Promotion Tournament:)

(Semifinal:)

>Nightshroud vs Echelon<

[Location: Ashen Maw Colosseum]

[An ancient arena carved into the heart of a dormant volcano. The battlefield is encircled by molten lava rivers and obsidian spires. Cracked, ember-strewn terrain constantly trembles with seismic unrest, occasionally erupting with gouts of fire and ash.]

Another relatively popular location.

Both semifinal arena locations were popular ones, this was to limit the terrain advantage, giving the chance for skill and talent to prevail at its finest.

And in this game, that was what happened.

Afterall, it was a clash of titans, a clash of two tournament favorites.

Once a sacred site turned into a battleground by war, the Ashen Maw Colosseum is a massive sunken crater rimmed by jagged obsidian spires.

The floor is cracked and scarred with lava veins that glow ominously beneath crumbling stone plates. Pillars of ash intermittently erupt from the terrain, providing momentary cover, and danger.

Platforms shift slowly, pulled by subterranean chains, and the air is thick with heat and embers. Fighting in the Ashen Maw Colosseum is not just a test of strength, but endurance.

At the very center lies the Maw, a chasm that swallows anything knocked in.

It is a deadly terrain for those not familiar with it.

For these 2 teams though, they had enough Warstar experience to play in the rough and unforgiving terrain at their best.

3..., 2..., 1!

FIGHT!

As soon as the buzzer sounded, on the opposite side of the massive arena location, Nightshroud vanished as soon as the battle began.

Their twin Assassins dispersed in stealth, melding into the ash.

The Thief tossed a black smoke bottle that shattered, emptying its contents and veiling their side in chaos. At the same time, Elyria, the Warlock began her dark ritual, activating a high-level Warlock skill, Chains of Suppression.

All these preparations left only 1 Avatar visible from the 5 Nightshroud players. Santum, the Paladin marched forward alone, shield high, daring the enemy to come to him.

The Paladin was ready to face Echelon alone!

It was a crazy strategy; something was clearly fishy but Echelon didn't flinch.

Even in the face of the battle that was predicted to be their toughest obstacle to the Pro Alliance spot, Lord Doom and his crew were still as calm as ever.

Lord Doom calmly rotated his staff, activating an Awakened level Paladin skill.

{Field of Negation=}

He rendered invisibility useless within a 10-meter radius!

Nightshroud seemed to have expected something like this though, and this was why they moved extremely fast as soon as they started executing their plan.

They knew that unlike when they clashed against Silverfang, they could not afford to bid their time against a team like Echelon.

One of the Assassins blinked into range, a dagger aimed for Benjamin's spin but it was blocked mid-swing by Aria's blade.

The Blademaster was already in the zone state!

A half-step twist and a brutal counter-kick sent the Assassin flying into a pillar of ash, and then...

GRRRRRR!

A Hellhound burst from Caleb's side, pouncing on the Thief who was behind the other Nightshroud players and had just laid a proximity trap.

The fight was on!

The first encounter between both teams revealed one truth, sneak attacks would not work. Both teams were too experienced for that.

And so, an all-out mayhem started.

{Soul Descent=}

Nightshroud's Warlock did it again, activating Soul Descent, a high-level Warlock skill. Instantly, the entire colosseum started to dim, a black fog leaking from the ground, weakening vision and leeching mana.

In response, Genevieve dropped her staff and slammed her palm into the ground, activating a high-level counter Cleric skill.

{Sanctuary Bloom=}

With an eruption of energy, a golden ward appeared around her teammates shielding them from the mana drain and granting slow HP regeneration.

Benjamin cast Volcanic Bloom.

KABOOM!

From the broken floor, flame geysers erupted in a wide arc, fueled by the natural element of the Ashen Maw Colosseum, forcing Nightshroud's 2 Assassins out of stealth.

Aria moved immediately, intercepting one of them with her Reckless Storm, her twin blades flying in a deluge of death.

The other Assassin dived into a lava-veined crack to avoid a direct hit.

The battlefield was now filled with mayhem, but in that mayhem, team Echelon strived. Just as Benjamin and Aria chained their attacks, Lord Doom also reacted, hovering with levitation.

Then while in the sky, he switched Aetherforge to its Rifle form, unleashing fire at the distant Paladin and Thief.

The Paladin cast a defensive skill, protecting himself.

In the mayhem of the battle, Nightshroud's captain, the Assassin that managed to sneak away from Aria and Benjamin finally got a clean angle, diving straight for Echelon's Cleric.

But it was a wrong move.

The Cleric was just the bait, something waited for the Assassin there.

Whoosh!

The Assassin realized when it was already too late.

Caleb's Eldritch Turtle swung its iron-shell tail like a wrecking ball, hitting the Assassin square, wiping a ton of HP and blasting him across the field like a jagged spike. And then, suddenly, a tremor...

The center of the Colosseum opened up, revealing the Ashen Maw.

Falling in means instant elimination.

Nightshroud's captain was unlucky. Hit by the Eldritch Turtle, he could not stop his momentum mid-air as he collapsed into the opened maw.

The Ashen Maw swallowed its first victim, claiming the first life.

"...!"

For a brief moment, the other Nightshroud players were stunned.

Aria took initiative. Using a Blademaster Skill, afterimages flickered across the field as she moved, descending on the other Assassin before her like a hurricane.

With the Elementalist still bombarding him from afar, limiting his options, the Assassin looked wildly, trying to identify the real Blademaster.

But he could not.

BAM!

He only realized when the twin swords slammed into him from the side.

One strike, straight through the ribs.

{CRITICAL HIT!}

One strike, one dead Assassin.

Nightshroud finally panicked.

With one of them dead, Echelon was unleashed. The Warlock cast another skill, trying to escape, but Lord Doom anticipated it.

Lord Doom teleported in mid-channel and slammed her with his battle lance, activating a skill simultaneously to interrupt her spell and silence her.

In a 1v1, a Warlock stood very little chance against the Battle God class.

Lord Doom wiped the floor with the Warlock in no time.

2 enemies out.

Only Sanctum, the Paladin and the Thief remained.

And their fate was sealed.

3 minutes of battle later, a familiar screen appeared...

---<VICTORY>---

Echelon won.

They advanced to the final of the Promotion Tournament.

Chapter 165: 4 months

[Promotion Tournament:]

[Final:]

[Iron Dominion vs Echelon]

>Date: Sunday, 5:00pm<

After the semifinal game on Thursday, Nightshroud brutally eliminated from the tournament by Echelon, the final matchup was set.

From the 300+ teams that registered for the Promotion Tournament this year, only 2 were left standing, the best of the best.

Echelon's victory over Nightshroud created a storm in the eSport community in England. Echelon was not just any club; it was a club led by God Noah.

...The Battle God.

The Battle God title was more synonymous with Stinger of War, Noah's first main Warstar Avatar rather than himself. But still, he was the one who controlled the Avatar, he created the account and forged the legend himself.

Last season, talks of him and his crew being too old for the pro scene were greatly exaggerated.

Now? Noah and his crew were determined to come out of retirement.

A lot more spectators were attracted to the tournament this year, and it was partly because of Echelon. Afterall, a lot of people wanted to see God Noah in action with his new Lord Doom Avatar.

Not just him. Before retirement, everyone of his cohort, from Aria to Genevieve were recognized superstars of the English Pro Alliance.

A lot of these people came to see them, not just to see them but to gauge them.

Did they really have what it takes to fight back from retirement?

Do they still have what it takes to take on the rigors of the Pro Alliance?

Afterall, Noah and his crew's situation was not the first in the history of the English Pro Alliance.

They were not the first who retired a season prior and decided to come out of retirement. Rather, there were multiple scenarios preceding that, it was just that none of them never went quite well.

A whole season outside of the Pro Alliance has its way of affecting pro players, leaving them weary and less sharp.

Their combat instincts that had been honed through years become dulled.

This was why it was almost impossible for a retired pro player to revitalize his career. But Noah and his friends were different though.

They were not regular pro players of the English Pro Alliance. They were the best of the best, the cream of the crop.

So, if anyone could do it, coming out of retirement to thrive, it had to be them, right?

No one knew for certain.

And that was why so many fans followed the promotion tournament this year, focusing on Echelon games. Cyber Squad may be on not too familiar terms with their legend, but the club fans still spectated Noah and the others' games.

The challenge in the promotion tournament could not compare to the best of the Pro Alliance, but still, it was a slightly accurate measure of skill.

And the result of the test?

So far, Echelon passed with flying colors. If anything, armed with SSS-Rank unique skills and weapons now, this cohort of pro players seemed even deadlier than ever before now.

When it came to Benjamin and Caleb, most especially Benjamin, the oldest of the cohort, it was clear that his APM was no longer as fast as his peak.

He was already in a period of sharp decline, but still, he was good.

Besides, with his SS-Rank unique skill, he was still a menace on the arena.

Watching them on the arena, it gave the fans who still clung to nostalgia hope. Maybe, just maybe they could actually pull it off.

Maybe they could win the Promotion Tournament after all.

And maybe, they still had 1 more season of the Pro Alliance in them.

None of them believed that this team of aging players had what it took to get to the World Championship though.

Echelon, Lord Doom especially may have caused a lot of storm in the 11th server and in the Heavenly Domain now, but to many fans in England's eSports circles, there was a new King of England eSports now.

Lord Doom may be deadly, even more so with his SSS-Rank unique skills and weapon but to many, he was already dethroned.

Gabriel, Dain Ironvalor was the new King of England.

To them, he was their biggest chance of winning their first World Championship.

Despite this sentiment though, a lot of fans silently supported Echelon, wishing for them to win over Iron Dominion and secure the final spot to the English Pro Alliance for the next season.

After their semifinal game, they had 2 days before Sunday to prepare.

It was more than enough time to relax.

...

The air inside the Echelon club building was warm with quite energy.

Screens glowed with tactical replays from the semifinals, showing frame-by-frame breakdowns of Echelon's dominance. But none of that mattered right now.

The five of them were gathered in the lounge; Aria, Benjamin, Caleb, and Genevieve, with a monitor connected to a Warstar console directly facing them.

They sat around a low table cluttered with empty cups and energy drink cans, the tension of battle giving way to reflection.

The walls were decorated with old photos, trophies from their past lives, memories of Cyber Squad, memories they had been forced to abandon.

Nightingale did a lot of interior decoration recently.

Aria leaned back with a rare smile on her face. "I still can't believe that snake Shadeweaver fell for the oldest feint in the book".

Shadeweaver was Nightshroud's captain, the only old player and veteran among the talented young players of the enigmatic team.

Benjamin grinned. "Don't act like you weren't bait. You were the bait".

"Shut it," Aria muttered, smirking anyway.

Caleb adjusted his glasses, deadpan. "Four months ago, we were jobless legends with burnt-out avatars. Now, we're a game away from a pro comeback".

Remembering something, Benjamin grimaced. "I still remember when you guys came to find me the first time, you guys..."

"You were gambling". Genevieve looked at him in disdain.

"That, well," he coughed awkwardly.

Hearing them, Aria smirked. "I never thought I'll come back from retirement". She leaned back on her chair with a wistful smile. "After those bastards pushed us to the wall, I got angry, and so I gave up".

"That's why I started dating Gabriel". She said, suddenly blushing in shame.

"You know, I started dating him just to vent my anger at Gabriel".

The others silently stared at her.

"What? I was angry, everything happened because he and his team beat us in that final".

"You're right". Caleb nodded seriously.

Aria looked at him. "You... ahh... nevermind". She stared at the wall.

Benjamin chuckled slightly, making Aria glare daggers at him.

Genevieve exhaled softly, folding her arms. "Feels like a dream honestly. But it still doesn't feel... complete".

That's when the doors opened.

Nightingale walked in; black overcoat, gloved hands, and the kind of aura that silenced every room he entered.

They looked at him with complicated expressions.

Nightingale..., well, he's been their boss, their fixer, and their shadow. The one who refused to accept their forced exile, and the one who helped them rise again under new names, from the ashes of betrayal.

He looked at them each in turn, his eyes sharp beneath golden hair.

"You've done well," he said simply.

No one replied. The silence was too thick. There was something in his voice, a certain weight that was uncharacteristic of him.

The others perked up, looking at him.

Then, he finally said it. "I've made progress, about Noah's body".

The room froze.

On the monitor, Lord Doom's expression didn't change having been listening in since, but the silence around him deepened.

Nightingale stepped forward and placed a tablet on the table.

A holographic image flared to life showing schematics, data strings, bio-readings, and encrypted logs.

"I tracked a series of off-grid lab transactions- private neural link experiments tied to the Warstar project, funded by the same shell corp that was part of the group pushing for Noah's retirement in the media".

"Three months ago, I intercepted a security log from a facility east of New Avalon". He tapped a string of numbers. "It's encrypted, but the code matches Noah's last known neural ID".

Genevieve gasped.

Caleb muttered. "You mean..."

"Yeah," Nightingale confirmed. "They didn't just shut him down, they kept him. His body's still alive. Cryostasis". He sighed. "It's possibly linked into a prototype AI-learning matrix. I don't know why, not yet, but now I know where".

He turned to the monitor, looking at Lord Doom, eyes burning.

"I promised you I'd try my best, right?" He grinned.

"Well, now I swear to you, I'm going to get you out of that damn pod".

Noah's voice came low, steady, like the calm before a supernova. Those close to him could tell that it hid complicated emotions though.

"Then we win the finals, without me". He said. "They won't allow me to play in the finals without being physically present".

"So win it for me, and after that..."

He looked around, feeling slightly melancholic. "We find my body, and I return to the real world".

"Finally". He added.

Chapter 166: Champions

Sunday, 5:00pm...

(Promotion Tournament:)

(Final:)

>Chaos Inc. vs Iron Dominion<

[Location: Tomb of Dread]

[The Tomb of Dread is the resting place of a once mighty Warlord. Even in rest, his profane powers still reign, creating an atmosphere of dread where undead skeletons crawl.]

[NOTE: The Tomb of Dread is not for the faint-hearted.]

It was a cool Sunday evening in London.

And the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium was filled to the brim with tens of thousands of Warstar fans who bought tickets and came to spectate the anticipated final of the Promotion Tournament.

That evening, a lot of prominent names made the occasion.

Scarlet Rose's veteran and captain, Jonathan made it to the stadium, sitting in one of the VIP seats.

He was not the only celebrity who came. Echelon's boss, Nightingale, the famous hip-hop singer also personally made the occasion this time.

There were other prominent faces that graced the occasion, both those in the eSports scene and from outside. Prominent faces like Kendrick Lamar, the popular rap artist graced the occasion.

Apart from Jonathan, England's current Warstar pride, Gabriel, Dain Ironvalor's controller also graced the occasion to watch the final.

All of them came to watch a certain Lord Doom and his crew in action.

And they were eager to know, would Echelon win?

Some of them seemed to know the answer already though, but most were kept in the dark, excitedly waiting to see the game start.

For those who came to see Lord Doom and his crew in action though, they were left disappointed because at the last hour, Echelon made a change.

An hour before 5:00pm, Nightingale, Echelon's boss had a press conference and faced the media. There, he told them a heartbreaking truth.

"I don't know if you've noticed, but unlike most of the other players of Echelon, Lord Doom has never appeared in the stadiums physically".

"This is because God Noah is currently battling with a strange illness".

"But don't worry, he's currently under the best medical care that we can dream of. And we believe that it's just time before he recovers".

"So, for this final game, someone else will have to replace Lord Doom".

"Do you have a replacement already?" One of the reporters asked.

"Why, of course". Nightingale smiled dashingly. "In case you've forgotten, Echelon is an aspiring pro club, and we intend to play in the pro club next season".

"Unlike the promotion tournament, the basic requirement of a pro team in the English Pro Alliance is to have 7 players, 5 in the starting V, and 2 reserve players".

"Lord Doom, Reckless Storm, Captain Batman, Enlightened Flame, and Misty Rose are Echelon's starting V players, but we already have 1 reserve player already".

Nightingale's smile widened. "His name is Jeff".

"Today, he'll be taking Lord Doom's spot".

And just like that, it was done.

Lord Doom was ruled out of participating in the final of the Promotion Tournament while Club Echelon's reserve player took his spot.

The guy was a teenager, still just 17, and he controlled a Combat Mage.

Noah was the one who scouted him.

While his friends had so many things to do outside of the game, Noah was literally stuck in the world of Warstar for almost 5 months now.

He ate, slept, and did everything inside the game.

When his friends were off to rest, alone in the boundless world of Warstar, when he was not raiding dungeons, he had to find ways to kill his boredom. And so, he made a few acquaintances in the game.

This teenager was one of the acquaintances that Noah made. He met him all the way in the beginner domain when he was just level 40+, and recognized the kid's skill during a Wild Boss fight.

Despite over a dozen top guilds getting involved in the Wild Boss fight, including guild Echelon, the slippery little bastard managed to deal the killing blow.

He didn't get the drop rewards, but he got 60% of all XP gotten from that Wild Boss kill.

And after that fight, Noah got interest in him.

When he tried to recruit him, to Noah's surprise, the kid rejected. Lord Doom was famous in the 11th server, but the kid was not impressed.

Not until his true identity was revealed though.

Most Combat Mage controllers in the game revere God Noah, whom they saw as the peak of Combat Mage controllers; the same way Blademaster controllers revere Aria, and Paladin controllers revere Gabriel.

And so, the kid sought him out himself.

Just last week, he went to Club Echelon's club building and he was officially employed by Nightingale as part of the aspiring pro club.

The kid now lived with Gabriel and the others in the big building.

Noah never thought of it too much but he could not help but wonder how it feels to live in the club building, the atmosphere there.

It reminded him of Cyber Squad's early days.

Noah smiled. Though he was stuck in the game, he also had a chance to spectate the final as it was also broadcasted virtually.

He didn't watch the game because he was uncertain of the result, rather, he watched it because of a certain matchup..., Nightshard vs Echoing Blade.

Echoing Blade was the Avatar name of Iron Dominion's young genius, while Nightshard was the Avatar name of Club Echelon's new reserve player, Jeff.

Iron Dominion fans loved their young prodigy, and their love was not baseless, the young Blademaster was prodigiously talented.

But the same thing could be said about Jeff.

Not a lot of people knew him, but almost all members of guild Echelon did.

Jeff may have only joined Club Echelon a week ago, but he was part of the guild for a time already. Most people saw him as Lord Doom's sidekick already.

Wherever you see Lord Doom, you see Nightshard.

The teenager was eager to learn first-hand from his idol, the one player he saw as the best player in the world of Warstar.

Noah was not used to it, having an apprentice, but he relished it nonetheless.

He did his best to teach Jeff all he knew about the Combat Mage class and coming from him, what he knew was a lot.

Now, it was time to put it into action.

3..., 2..., 1!

FIGHT!

As soon as the 5 characters spawned inside the arena, without hesitation, they sought each other out in a direct attack.

In Lord Doom's absence, Aria who was Club Echelon's Vice Captain took Noah's place as the captain.

And under her lead, Echelon's strategy was simple... attack!

Iron Dominion seemed to have accepted that they could not beat their opponents already despite Lord Doom's absence, and so they accepted her preferred style, dancing to the tone of her battle cadence.

There were 10 Avatars on the pitch, why not make it 1v1s? A personal duel?

This was what Aria liked, and strangely, that was what happened.

Aria took on one of Iron Dominion's Paladins, Caleb took on the other Paladin, while Benjamin took on the Ghostblade.

As for Jeff, he engaged in a Blademaster duel.

And strangely, that was the clash that drew the most attention as the 2 prodigious players entangled in a whirlwind of steel.

The Tomb of Dread was a highly strategic location, using it like this was just a waste of resources to any strategic mind. And yet, that was what happened, because it was Aria's will.

While the combat classes dueled, on another side of the battlefield, a comical scene played out as 2 Clerics engaged in combat.

It was almost funny if it was not so ridiculous; people laughed though.

The 2 Clerics simply swung their staffs at each other, spamming debuffs on each other as they engaged in a very simple but brutal duel.

In the end, Aria's battle ended first. She obliterated her opponent, Iron Dominion's captain in less than 2 minutes.

The other battles took far more time and yet, Aria didn't try to help them, rather settling in a good spot to observe the battles, mostly focusing on Jeff's battle.

She even had the leisure to correct the new recruit's mistakes as the duel continued. This was definitely the strangest final of the Promotion Tournament.

In the end, Jeff was the one to complete his duel next.

His Avatar was at red health, below 10% HP and yet, somehow, he managed to prevail, his battle lance dealing the final blow to the Blademaster.

Jeff won and the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium erupted in joy, excited Echelon fans screaming at the top of their lungs.

Caleb finished his battle next, taking more than 8 minutes to grind out the defense of the stalwart Paladin.

He frowned. 'That's 2 seconds more than my calculation'.

Benjamin followed next, winning over the Ghostblade after over 10 minutes and the shameless Elementalist could not stop bragging about it, flooding the chat with his shameless boasting.

As for the clash between Clerics?

It was a strange, slow-paced, and utterly funny occurrence. In the end, despite using all the 30 minutes allocated to the battle, neither Cleric could prevail.

They managed to drain each other below 50% HP but with healing skills at their disposal, it was meaningless.

In the end, the countdown timer ended.

---<VICTORY>---

The victory screen flashed; Echelon won.

Genevieve not winning her duel didn't matter. At the end of the timer, there were 5 Echelon players standing and only 1 Iron Dominion player left standing.

Automatically, Echelon won.

That night, Echelon supporters felt on top of the world.

Chapter 167: Into the night [1]

London, Tottenham Hotspur Stadium...

The final of the promotion tournament was finally over.

(Promotion Tournament:)

(Final:)

>Chaos Inc. vs Iron Dominion<

>Champion: Echelon<

The moment the final bell rang, the entire Tottenham Hotspur Stadium exploded into chaos. A chaos of roaring euphoria, cascading cheers, and unfiltered jubilation.

From the beginning of the Promotion Tournament, there was always this lingering feeling that Echelon was bound to win the 3rd slot of the Pro Alliance.

Despite knowing this, still, watching them do it was nothing short of exciting.

The massive arena, converted into a hybrid eSports colosseum with towering LED displays and holographic projections shimmered in golden light as the words blazed across the central screen.

---<VICTORY>---

[CHAMPIONS- ECHELON]

It was like a comeback declaration.

The retirees. The discarded legends. The anonymous upstarts who climbed from the shadows as an entirely new team, and they had won it all.

They actually went all the way.

Well, in hindsight, it was only normal that they did.

Echelon's fans, once a niche, a tight-knit crew were now an ocean of screaming, weeping, and dancing maniacs.

Flags bearing the team logo waved high.

They chanted excited.

"Echelon forever!"

"Doomless but ruthless!" They echoed as if rehearsed.

The meaning of their chants would not take a smartass to understand. They meant that even without Lord Doom, their captain, their team had what it takes to win at the highest stage of professional Warstar.

The Promotion Tournament could not directly be compared with the Pro Alliance yet, but well, dominating here was a start.

And when the team eventually stepped onto the grand stage for the trophy ceremony, even without their captain Lord Doom, the crowd greeted them like returning war heroes.

Benjamin, with that ridiculous crown he pulled out of nowhere made a pun so bad the audience cried with laughter.

Aria? She was stone-faced as usual, but some fans thought they noticed a single tear escape her eye when she lifted the story as the interim captain.

As for Genevieve, she was radiant and elegant as usual, waving at the front row fans like she was royalty.

And they responded; they loved her.

Caleb, cool as ever nodded at the cameras, waving a hand at a fan or two.

And in the more opulent seats in the stadium, thousands of neutral viewers became instant converts. Kids, teens, and even rival fans were on their feet, screaming excitedly as the spectacle today stole their heart.

Echelon had become more than a team; they were now a symbol.

A symbol of resilience, of rebellion, and of resurgence.

While all this happened, the pro players, some of the biggest names in the scene watched with calculating eyes.

As expected, the cameras panned in their direction to see their reaction.

When the camera panned in his direction, Gabriel simply offered a polite smile and waved, eliciting a reaction in the stadium.

When the cameras panned towards Jonathan though, he was not as polite as his younger counterpart.

Scarlet Rose's captain grinned and said. "Noah is a coward as usual. Sitting back and letting his team do all the work, so shameless".

The cameras quickly panned away; Jonathan's grin widened as he laughed.

But then, out of the spotlight, he could not help but sigh heavily. He had once ordered and let the hit on Aria to suppress Echelon, but by now, those ageless bastards already showed that their desire to keep on playing was not waning yet.

There was no denying it now, Echelon was real and next season..., they were coming for everybody.

Jonathan grinned again. "Come on bastards," he muttered. "I'll give you guys a friendly welcome".

There were whispers of excitement and curiosity all across the stadium, but chief of them all were conversations about Lord Doom, God Noah.

Noah's absence was the elephant in the stadium, a mystery that sparked theories and debates in real-time across social media despite Nightingale's explanation.

Talking of Nightingale, for some reason, shortly after the end of the game, the celebrity didn't stay to appreciate the festivities as he left.

Strangely, Echelon's players didn't stay either, not even for the interview.

They quickly left the stadium about a dozen minutes after lifting the trophy.

To them, winning the final of the promotion tournament was just the prelude. The real story was still unfolding.

The real battle, the war for Noah's body, their redemption, and their vengeance, was only just beginning.

...

England, Club Echelon Building...

About a dozen minutes after the game, the executives of Club Echelon were gathered inside a room in the building.

The atmosphere inside the room was thick, a fusion of adrenaline, anticipation, and dread. The cheers from Tottenham Hotspur Stadium were still echoing across the city, but within these walls, it was dead silent.

The players sat clustered around a massive screen, Nightingale standing at the front, arms crossed, eyes laser-focused.

On screen, a squad of elite marines armored in black tactical gear with Echelon's private security insignia moved in formation along a narrow cliffside road.

Yes, this was the elite security squad sent to retrieve Noah's body.

Nightingale did not know what to expect, but Noah's situation could be described as a twisted case of kidnapping.

This was why he didn't let Aria or the others anywhere near the location. Afterall, they may be formidable existences in the world of Warstar but in the real world, they were just like him, civilians.

Nightingale focused back on proceedings on the screen, tense.

The camera, fixed on a drone above revealed a bleak, ocean-bitten facility, a forgotten compound overlooking the churning waters.

A single rusted sign read,

[Project H.A.R.P- Restricted Access.]

The operation was live, real-time.

This was it.

These were all heavily armed and highly trained elite marines, the best of the best from the military. But still, Nightingale could not help but feel uneasy, because the progress was maybe too swift for his liking.

After months of tracking the bits and pieces of clues to this building, he expected more from it considering to what lengths the owners went to keep it hidden in this remote location.

He expected his marines to engage in a furious battle against the defenders of the building. But that was what left him uneasy.

This was because, nothing happened.

Yes, despite invading into the premises of the building already, there was no reaction from inside the building like the leader of the marines predicted.

It was just ghostly, eerie silence.

The marines breached the gate.

Despite how haunting this building was, the marines moved swift and professional, no random shots fired as they went deeper.

Inside the gate was also eerily silent. No alarms, no defenders, no traps. The squad leader gave a tense report.

"Facility's cold".

"No heat signatures. Whatever was here...", the man hesitated, then continued in his deep, rough voice. "It's gone".

Hearing that, Nightingale let out a deep breath he never knew he was holding. Looking down, he noticed that his hand was shaking.

He frowned and focused back on the screen. "Keep searching".

"Look for the main objective".

"Roger that".

The marines moved inside the building.

As they moved, Nightingale could not help but frown.

He went all out this time, utilizing his money and connections to piece the tiny bits of information and clues to find this place.

His analysts were so sure of their deductions and tracking, and he believed them. So why was this place so empty?

Suddenly, a thought that Nightingale didn't want to entertain came.

What if this was just a dead end?

What if Noah's body is not here?

Or what if... it's a trap?!

Nightingale's body tensed, but he could do nothing, he could say nothing. The marines were the professionals, he left the mission to them.

Moving inside the building, they swept room after room; bunkers, labs, observation stations, they left no stone unturned.

Dust clung to the walls like it had been abandoned for days. Terminals were wiped clean hard drives missing. There were signs of a hurried escape, chairs overturned, papers scattered, even blood stains leading to empty restraints.

Seeing this, Nightingale felt cold and tense, wondering what the hell kind of research happened here.

But at the same time, this was evidence that people once stayed in this facility. 'My analysts were not wrong, after all'.

After going through the whole building, to its deepest parts, when Nightingale was about to give up about the main objective, that was when it happened...

...They found him.

In the heart of the facility, inside what looked like a heavily reinforced containment chamber, there he was.

Noah's real body.

Silence. Nightingale could not breath.

Noah's body floated inside a cryo-stasis capsule, pristine, unharmed, suspended in a faint blue glow.

His face was peaceful, unnervingly so. Not a scratch on him.

The marine medic ran quick vitals.

"Heartbeat... steady".

"Neurological activity low but present, he's alive".

Nightingale exhaled. The others around him were not feeling much better; Aria, Benjamin and the others were so tense their foreheads were covered by a thin layer of sweat.

For a moment, no one in the club building spoke.

Benjamin's mouth just hung open.

Genevieve's hands covered her lips, tears forming.

Caleb muttered. "They just... left him?"

Aria's voice was low, shaking with restrained rage. "They used him... and discarded him like a failed experiment?"

But Nightingale, eyes narrowed, whispered.

"No. This isn't abandonment. This is bait".

He turned to the others, voice calm but ice-cold.

"They're watching. They want us to find him". His eyes narrowed dangerously. "This is the start of something deeper, something darker".

As the marines began extraction, lifting the stasis pod into a secure case, the camera zoomed in on a final detail.

Carved with a scalpel onto the wall behind Noah's capsule was a single phrase.

"This body is no longer needed".

"The real game has already begun".

And with that... the screen went black.

Chapter 168: Into the night [2]

An hour later...

A cool breeze whispered through the open balcony of Echelon's private club building. The city below still roared with the echoes of celebration; flares, car horns, and chants in the night as fans reveled in Echelon's Promotion Tournament triumph.

But within the darkened conference room, lit only by the soft glow of monitors and a dim overhead light, the atmosphere was still, almost reverent.

Noah had awakened.

He sat at the center of the room, cross-legged on a leather couch, dressed in clean clothes, hair slightly damp from the de-thaw process.

His skin was pale, but his eyes, those cold, sharp, calculating eyes were alive. Watching. Absorbing.

The rest of the team was gathered around. They still couldn't believe the reality before them, and so they kept on staring at him with different expressions on their faces.

Aria stood with her arms folded, posture tense.

Caleb paced slowly behind the couch, muttering calculations and theories to himself. He was clearly also tense.

Benjamin was slouched against the wall, silent for once.

Genevieve sat beside Noah, her eyes never leaving him almost as if in fear that if she took her eyes off him, he would disappear again.

As for Nightingale? He stood aloof at the back, cloaked in the shadows, unreadable, giving the friends a little privacy.

Noah broke the silence.

"Come on," he chuckled. "It's not like I died or something".

Benjamin looked at him, suddenly able to smirk again. "Says the bastard that has been in a mad scientist's lab for 5 months".

Benjamin shook his head, muttering under his breath. "How did I even get to know him? Crazy bastard, how did I make friends like this?"

Noah looked at him. "Huh?"

"Nothing". Benjamin waved his hands in exasperation. Noah chuckled.

And then, Caleb finally spoke, a solemn look on his face. "How was it?"

Noah looked at him, already knowing what he meant. He sighed.

"...It's like waking from a long dream. I remember pain, then nothing. A void. Then... your voices".

His hand clenched unconsciously, fingers curling into his palm.

"Where was I?"

Before answering, Caleb looked at him seriously. "What of Lord Doom?"

"Ah, Lord Doom". A distant look came over Noah's face, and then he sighed. "I really thought I was transmigrated into the world of Warstar". He laughed.

His friends didn't laugh though, all looking at him.

He sighed again. "Living months as Lord Doom, it was a novel experience. I don't know how they did it," he hesitated. "But it felt like reality".

"In a way, it was the life of my dreams, if it was not so scary".

"Huh?"

He looked at Genevieve, smiling. "You know, I once dreamt of living inside the world of Warstar once. I love the game, in many ways I'm obsessed with it, so getting to live in it, it was an unforgettable experience".

"But now that I know I was kidnapped, I don't know how to feel about it".

"When Nightingale told us about the operation, at the back of my mind, I still felt that he was wrong and that I was truly gone, stuck in the game forever".

Aria looked at him. "Your last moments as Lord Doom, what was it like?"

Noah leaned back on his chair, a wistful expression on his face. "One moment, I was Lord Doom, still integrated with the world and the next, it felt like I was fading away from the world".

"Everything became blurry, then it all disappeared".

"Everything turned dark".

He raised his hand, looking at it. "I've been out of touch with my body for so long that it feels so foreign to me now". He shivered.

"It feels weird, and creepy. Scary too".

At that moment, Nightingale finally stepped forward, a serious look on his face. He finally answered Sam's initial question.

"You were in an isolated facility. Offshore. Hidden behind five levels of false registrations and dead-end shell corps".

"They abandoned it. All records were wiped".

"And me?"

Nightingale looked at him. "Perfect condition. Stasis. As if they were... preserving you".

Caleb's voice snapped in.

"It doesn't make sense. You don't accidentally freeze one of the greatest Warstar minds of the generation and just walk away. This was calculated, precise, surgical".

"Whoever they are," Aria added darkly. "They didn't expect us to win".

"Heck, they didn't expect us to make a comeback. Just like Marcus did, they expected us to just scatter after the forced retirement, no longer staying in touch".

"If that happened," her eyes narrowed. "We would have never met Nightingale and we would have not known about Noah's strange state".

She hesitated for a few moments, then said coldly. "They expected us to rot in retirement, hide in shame. They didn't expect... vengeance, our resurgence".

Noah's eyes flickered toward her. For the first time since waking, a genuine smile cracked his lips. "Good job not letting it go".

"Of the others, apart from Marcus, I thought you'd be the most adamant about not coming from retirement. Thank you for responding to my call".

Aria didn't respond and Noah only smiled, he was used to her.

Then, Genevieve finally asked the question hanging heavy in the room. "But why you, Noah? Why take you? What did they want?"

At that moment, Nightingale spoke again. "I think... this went further than just Noah. You guys saw the video, apart from the room where Noah was held, there were other restraints spread across the building".

"Whatever experiment they were doing, it went beyond just Noah".

"And we didn't stop them, all we did was rescue Noah".

Nightingale's face turned complicated. "Those other guys, I think they took them with them".

"The only reason they didn't take Noah is because we went for him".

He hesitated. "I think... they don't want attention".

"They want to stay under the radar". Nightingale eyes gleamed. "And this tells me something. Whatever they're doing, it's illegal".

Noah sighed and leaned back. And the moment he closed his eyes, it hit him, memories, fragmented memories.

Not images, not scenes, but impressions.

"There were voices".

All eyes turned towards him.

"There were voices. Always distant. Mechanical, testing something". He looked ahead, as if trying to remember. "They kept asking... 'How does he think so far ahead?' They didn't want my strength".

He looked at them. "I think they wanted my mind".

Noah's expression became complicated, his eyes slightly cold now. "Warstar is just the surface. They're building something else. The game, the tournament, everything... it's a data farm".

"And they wanted to study the apex predator inside it". He sighed, not feeling as proud as he would have expected. "And I guess that Apex is me".

Benjamin muttered. "Sh*t..."

Caleb turned sharply to Nightingale. "We need to trace the shell corps. Whoever pulled this off has more resources than most countries".

Nightingale nodded. "Already working on it. But this goes deeper than we ever imagined. They didn't just want Noah, they wanted what he represented, adaptability, precision, leadership under chaos".

"...They're building a profile of war".

Aria slammed her fist on the table. "Then let's tear it all down".

Nightingale hesitated, and then he added. "Don't you guys think the coincidence is too much?"

"What coincidence?"

"I mean," he sighed. "Noah disappears, and the next thing he becomes the first to get the very first ever SSS-Rank unique skill".

"His disappearance aligns too much with the update to the game".

Genevieve's eyes widened. "Are you saying...?"

Nightingale nodded. "I'm saying exactly that. The timeframe of the Warstar update to Noah's disappearance is too close". He shook his head. "I can't shake the feeling off that there's some connection between the two".

Nightingale's words made the room even more silent. Now, there was an eerie tension in the air as the weight of his words settled among the others.

Noah broke the silence.

He slowly stood up. His body moved fluidly, no stiffness, no weakness. Only quiet, calculated motion.

He looked at them all, his voice low and iron-clad.

"Our plans didn't change. We still built a new club, Echelon, we'll still compete in the Pro Alliance next season".

"We'll still win the Warstar RPG Champions League one last time, and we'll also win the Warstar RPG World Championship".

"But still," he looked at the glass window, at the boisterous world reflecting below. "Still, they kidnapped me".

Noah exhaled, his back suddenly as straight as an arrow. "They dragged me into the shadows. Now we drag them into the night".

"One way or another, we'll discover them... and expose them".

A solemn silence settled on the room, Nightingale and the others looking at Noah, complicated emotions hidden in their eyes.

The camera on the wall flickered briefly. A distortion.

Unnoticed, far away, someone was watching.

And recording.

Just as the silence stretched too long, Aria casually stretched and suddenly stood up, looking at Noah with a crazy look on her face.

Noah looked back at her. That look... he recognized it.

Noah sighed. "Really?"

Aria laughed. "Let's PK".

"I literally just escaped being kidnapped".

"You in or not?"

Noah smirked. "Of course, I'm in".

He cracked his knuckles. "I've missed the keyboard and mouse, let's go shore up on the basics".

He grinned.

Chapter 169: Level 100

[You have been rewarded with XP!]

[You have leveled up!]

[You are now Level 100!]

"Ah... finally". Noah sighed with satisfaction.

Swirling his chair round, he stood up and went to the nearby refrigerator, picking a bottle of water to celebrate the occasion.

Noticing him stand up, his teammates turned to look at him.

Aria had a resigned but still competitive look on her face, Caleb and Genevieve were calm, while Benjamin had an indignant look on his face.

Noah drank the water and chuckled. "What?"

"You cheated". Benjamin spat.

Noah only laughed. "Thank heavens I'm not stuck in the game or something. My computer is right there before you, you can check my logs to see if I cheated or if I used some mod, if those are even possible in Warstar".

Benjamin glared at him some more, then suddenly stood up, going to pick a bottle of water too as he puffed his chest. "Well, I'm second".

"You're not". Noah laughed. "Aria's second".

"One more kill of those monsters and she'll be level 100 too".

Benjamin glared at him again before focusing on his bottle of water.

The others focused back on their computers, continuing the dungeon raid in their absence. And like Noah predicted, after 2 more kills, Aria's Reckless Storm also leveled up to the maximum level of Warstar, Level 100.

Aria nodded in satisfaction. "I'm second".

Well, it was already a few months since the operation to retrieve Noah's body from the offshore building where he was kidnapped and held.

Only the top executives of Club Echelon knew about the operation, and so the news did not spread.

All the workers in the club building knew was that one day, they just started to see God Noah in the building, finally.

Considering Noah's popularity, his life soon fell back to default settings.

During the first week of his body being rescued, all the workers in Club Echelon heckled him, asking for pictures and signatures.

Having spent the past 5 months stuck inside Warstar, Noah was not annoyed by the requests. Rather, he embraced it, meeting their wishes.

During these months since he was found, Nightingale did his job to perfection as a sponsor. Apart from putting Noah finally on the payment system, officially becoming employed, he also made sure that they were comfortable.

Nightingale provided the best environment for them to fully focus on the game. And with Gabriel, Aria's boyfriend, even though they were not in the Pro Alliance yet, they already started the work of dissecting their future opponents.

1 year may not seem like a lot but during this time, the Pro Alliance already changed.

Some pro clubs remained the same, but most changed, even stalwarts like Scarlet Rose. After so many years of Jonathan holding the helm and leading the charge for the big Warstar pro club, he was finally making way for someone else, Chris.

Chris was Jonathan's successor, the teenage prodigy that he was personally mentoring to take over his Crimson Saint Avatar.

Noah already verified the kid's skill when Jonathan ambushed him in the game months ago, but still, he did not expect what Chris would do this season.

Jonathan was still the main star of Scarlet Rose this season, but Chris was definitely the overachieving underdog.

The kid was on course to winning the best young player award for the season as with his clutch performances on a consistent basis, and with a solid mentor like Jonathan leading him, Scarlet Rose was having a resurgent season this year.

This year, Phoenix Rising was even more dominating as Cyber Squad faltered.

Gabriel's Dain Ironvalor was the clear MVP favorite of the season due to his impressive performances. The World Championship experience seemed to have made the captain and his team even more formidable players.

But despite Phoenix Rising's imperious run, another pro club managed to keep up with them this season..., Scarlet Rose.

Jonathan played a big role, but the big secret was Chris.

With his introduction into the fold, this season, Scarlet Rose employed a double Paladin formation and it was working wonders.

With Jonathan's Crimson Saint and Chris' Paladin, Scarlet Rose was as solid as a rock this season. Few teams could break them down, even Phoenix Rising.

The 2 times that both clubs clashed this season, both in home and away ground, they ended up in a stalemate, sharing the spoils.

And it was already the penultimate part of the season.

It was remaining just 1 matchday to conclude the regular Warstar season, after which the top 6 teams of the season would progress to the playoffs.

At this stage of the season, this was how the Warstar table looked like.

(English Warstar RPG Pro Alliance Table:)

Phoenix Rising- 88 points) Scarlet Rose- 88 points) Juggernaut- 76 points) Imperium Tyrannus- 74 points) Nightfall- 73 points) Midnight Revenants- 69 points)

These were the 6 pro clubs that were currently locked in the top 6 spots, the requirement to qualify for the playoffs.

But it was not over yet.

Tonight, matchday 38 of the Warstar Pro Alliance would start.

In the top 6 ranking, there were surprises and upsets. Afterall, despite the summer offloading and spending that Cyber Squad engaged in, they were nowhere near the top 6 this season.

By matchday 38, Cyber Squad was left trailing at 9th position.

Considering that this was a club that always stayed in the top 3 of the Warstar RPG Pro Alliance table every season, it was a fall from glory.

And finally, the club executives were feeling the heat of the retirement of their legends. By now, Cyber Squad fans were beyond impatient already.

In every home game, the fans come out in numbers, carrying banners showing their dissatisfaction with the owners. They demanded for the owners to either sell the club or sack the club manager, or both.

It was safe to say that the mood these days in Cyber Squad was far from harmonious. The club was going through a period of crisis.

As for the very top of the table though, there was a compelling battle this season between the 2 top clubs, Phoenix Rising and Scarlet Rose.

With Cyber Squad out of the way, Scarlet Rose was Phoenix Rising's biggest challenge from clinging another Warstar RPG league title.

At the end of matchday 37, both pro clubs were tied at 88 points each, giving the nearest club a sizeable distance.

A same-point finish at the end of the season by 2 pro clubs was not the first of its kind, but it was exceedingly rare.

If by the end of matchday 38, both clubs were still tied on points, it would mark only the second time that it would happen in the history of the Pro Alliance.

As for the solution? There were simple ways to remedy it.

First, the 2 clubs tied on points would progress to the playoffs like usual. And if of the 2 clubs, one of them manage to go all the way and win the Warstar RPG Champions League trophy, they automatically edge their rivals and also claim the Warstar RPG league title.

But if neither club win the Champions League, the English WA (Warstar Association) organize a final game of the season between both clubs.

Due to the rule changes at the beginning of the season, that final game would use the new 11-point system that was used in the World Championship.

In simple terms, what all these meant was that the season was coming to an end, and with it came excitement, and thrilling final matchups.

Among the clashes of matchday 38 of the Warstar RPG league season, the most attention went to 2 specific features; Scarlet Rose's battle against Lionheart Legacy, and the epic clash between Cyber Squad and Phoenix Rising.

To Cyber Squad, it was a terrible matchup and it could make or break their season. It was the difference between a slightly horrible season and an utterly horrible one.

To Phoenix Rising, it was a must-win game if they were to win the league title this season.

To Scarlet Rose, it was also a must-win game.

But hours before the first game of matchday 38, after almost a year of staying under the radar, news of his retirement causing a storm since, he finally decided to make it official, coming to face the media again.

To Noah, it felt like a lifetime already since that fateful night, and game when Gabriel's Dain Ironvalor doomed him and his teammates.

The memory of being forced into retirement was still fresh in his mind, the wound gaping and still bleeding despite all this time.

The scar lingered.

He still remembered as he and Genevieve tried to move through the sea of reporters, who uncaring about how they felt kept on throwing questions at them, pushing him to the edge of despair mentally.

That time, Noah wanted to drown it all by playing Warstar. He never expected that to lead to him being stuck in the game for months though.

And now, almost a year later, he was to face the media again.

'A complete cycle, huh?'

He chuckled.

"Well, what's the worst that could happen?"

He grinned. "Let's face it".

He walked out.

Chapter 170: Matchday 38 [1]

(Daily Warstar:)

(After almost 1 year of staying out of the spotlight after his sudden retirement, God Noah finally faces the media in an interview. In his words, "Get ready for peak again!")

...

(WA Pro Alliance Hub:)

(It's confirmed, Lord Doom is coming to the English Pro Alliance next season!)

...

(All News Warstar:)

(Lord Doom in the English Pro Alliance! After months of creating storm after storm in the 11th server, dominating different rankings and even creating a guild, Lord Doom officially makes it to the Pro Alliance!)

...

(English WA:)

(God Noah is back! 5-times Warstar RPG Champions League winner, 5-times Warstar MVP winner, Cyber Squad legend, the original Battle God, Noah Harrington finally returns to the English Pro Alliance representing Club Echelon!)

(Click link to access highlights of Stinger of War's best moments:)

(Click link to access highlights of Lord Doom's best moments:)

Noah faced the media for the first time in over a year.

And like expected, it created a storm in England, in the Warstar communities across the cities in England.

Afterall, this was the return of a certified Warstar legend, the Godfather of Warstar in English eSports circles.

Noah's storied history with his old Avatar 'Stinger of War' was already enough to create a storm on his return, and yet that was not his only identity and legend. Apart from Stinger of War, now he had the even more notorious 'Lord Doom'.

Lord Doom's popularity in the 11th server already turned into an obsession of sorts, leading to the rise of various mythical stories.

The first player to get an SSS-Rank unique skill, the first player to get an SSS-Rank weapon, the first player to get 2 SSS-Rank unique skills, the first player to lead a cohort to clear Demon's Tower in Hell Mode, the first player of this, the first player of that...

Lord Doom's popularity, and in extension Noah's popularity was at an all-time high, and Nightingale was the perfect person to take full advantage of it.

Before developing such vested interest in the game, Nightingale was a full-time hip-hop musician. Dealing with popularity was second nature to him.

He was the one who scheduled the time for Noah's first interview.

And after the interview, not just Noah's popularity rose, it created a ripple that affected anything connected to him, in extension Club Echelon.

On all social media platforms, Club Echelon's already big popularity and followership across social media platforms increased even more.

Not just that, the club was now developing a staunch followership and fanbase in London where the club building was based.

Riding the momentum of Noah's interview, Nightingale also faced the media, choosing the moment to make a big announcement.

Club Echelon was to get it's own stadium.

Like expected, the news created a storm in the Warstar community.

All of that storm and news was just the prelude though, the prelude to an even more significant event, Matchday 38 of the Warstar season.

After 37 matchdays that tested the resilience and depth of the 20 teams in the English Pro Alliance, it was finally time for the penultimate game of the season, the matchday

that would decide the top 6 teams, the league champion, and the 3 clubs that would be relegated.

This season, the 3 clubs fighting against relegation were Helix Nova, Exo Genesis, and Titan' Ascent.

As for the top 6 clubs, it was going to be a tight battle between Phoenix Rising, Scarlet Rose, Juggernaut, Imperium Tyrannus, Nightfall, and Midnight Revenants.

The first game of the matchday was between Nightfall and Shadow Dominion, both teams currently occupying 5th and 7th position in the Warstar Pro Alliance table respectively.

Both teams utilized a similar combat approach and strategy, their lineup comprising of light armor classes like Assassins, Thieves, and Psychics.

As for the source of drama?

It was self-evident, both clubs occupied 5th and 7th position respectively, meaning that they both had chances of making the top 6 at the end.

Like expected, it was a ferocious battle.

With their twin Assassins being the core of their team, Nightfall showed their grit and mettle, grinding out a tough win against their opponents.

Shadow Dominion won the individual battle, Nightfall won the 3 vs 3 battle rush, and the true clash occurred in the team battle.

In the end, the 5th-placed team prevailed, solidifying their top 6 spot as they briefly climbed to 4th in the table.

But it didn't last long.

The other games were all played in quick succession.

Like was customary of every last matchday of the English Pro Alliance, all 10 games were played within a time frame of just 2 hours.

This was so that the changes in the table could be finalized quickly, so the league champion would be crowned that same evening.

At the same time that Nightfall and Shadow Dominion duked it out in the Arena, 4 other clashes took place in the English Pro Alliance.

The Midnight Revenants took on Avalon Sovereign, an exciting game where the away side did the impossible, snatching a narrow victory from their opponents from the depths of defeat and despair.

At the same time, Exo Genesis also took on Steel Bastion.

Despite the fact that they were locked in a grueling relegation battle, the only line separating them from relegation being a win, against Steel Bastion at home, despite the energy of tens of thousands of Exo Genesis fans, the Leeds-based club was unable to cause an upset.

They managed to win the 3 vs 3 battle rush, and that was where their luck ended as in the team battle, Steel Bastion thoroughly demolished them.

Exo Genesis was the first club to be relegated.

The drama was on.

At the same time that Exo Genesis was relegated, Helix Nova took on Oblivion Knights and unlike their fellow relegation candidates who failed to turn their fortune around in the last matchday of the season, fueled by the endless energy of their home fans, Helix Nova managed to do the impossible.

On that evening, Helix Nova employed a radical approach, fielding an all-offensive lineup that was uncharacteristic of them; an Elementalist, a Summoner, and 3 Psychics.

It was a strategy that was rarely seen at the Pro Alliance, after all it was just too radical but with their backs pushed against the wall, they did it.

On the night, the 3 Psychics seemed to have entered the flow state.

It was chaos, frenzied attack, and yet amid the frenzy, they thrived, combining a mixture insidious mind attack skills, an explosion of elements, amid a stampede of beasts to secure an unlikely victory.

The game was an all-action one and at the end?

'What... a game!' This was the thought of every neutral fan who watched.

And just like that, Helix Nova fought against their inevitable fate of relegation, putting out their best performance of the season in the last matchday of the season to retain their place in the English Pro Alliance.

That night, a city in England celebrated all night.

He euphoria of having escaped relegation.

At the same time that all that drama happened in one part of England, Titan's Ascent took on Cerberus Core and against the pro club that was predominantly comprised of Shapeshifting class Avatars, a variant of the Summoner class.

These guys could summon beasts and fuse with them, turning into part human, part beasts.

Just like Helix Nova and Exo Genesis, what was on the line for Titan's Ascent was relegation. Despite this though, they could not pull off a miracle.

It was called miracle for a reason; it was hard to pull off.

Playing on away ground, Cerberus Core's home, the loud noise made by the home fans rattled them, dooming them to sure defeat.

Cerberus Core secured a comfortable victory.

After the first round of games, the second round of games of the final matchday soon began within the 2-hour period after giving the fans a little rest time.

The first game of the second round was between Stormborn Esports and Blazing Gryphons, 2 powerhouses of the English Pro Alliance.

It was the tightest game of the matchday so far.

Playing in Stormborn Esports' home ground, the home fans turned the stadium into a cauldron of noise and yet, that was enough to stop the burning will of Blazing Gryphons, the 8th-ranked team in the table.

The 8th and 10th ranked teams engaged in an epic mid-table clash.

With their Elementalists, Blazing Gryphons packed horrifying attack power and yet, it was not enough to overwhelm Stormborn at home.

The home side prevailed with a narrow victory, and yet, it was enough for their fans. Afterall, 3 points were still secured.

The fans celebrated their victory like they just won the league title.

The next game was between Pendragon Esports and Juggernaut. Despite playing in their home ground, Pendragon Esports stood no chance against the 3rd-placed team at 76 points.

Juggernaut tore them apart, and so, Pendragon became the scapegoat, falling to 17th position in the league, taking Helix Nova's spot in the relegation zone.

It was pure drama.

And after all this drama, it finally moved on to the final round games.

The first game of the final round was between Scarlet Rose and Lionheart Legacy.