

Tutorial 511

Chapter 511: Primary class upgrade

It seems like arcane Primary classes are on the menu, and I'm here for it. I might have been hoping for something along those lines, but the fact that none of my options are below arcane means... Well, a lot of things, really.

I relay the message through our link and ask Tess to keep an eye on surroundings while I look over my options.

Mana Reforger (Arcane)

An advanced class specializing in augmenting and transforming one's body and equipment through precise energy manipulation. Mana Reforgers push the boundaries of physical and magical enhancement, all the while forging powerful artifacts and refining themselves into dangerous combatants.

Your dedication to self-improvement is extraordinary. You've modified and strengthened your body beyond your level and crafted multiple mid arcane items. You have modified your body extensively. Acquired Bone Knitting. With Mana Manipulation at level 60 and a mana stat exceeding 1,200, you've showcased exceptional skill in enduring and reshaping both yourself and your tools. Your fortified physique alone allows you to withstand attacks that would be fatal to others.

Mindshield Guardian (Arcane)

An advanced class focused on mental fortification and resilience. Mindshield Guardians possess unparalleled mental defenses and are therefore capable of resisting mental manipulation and enduring the strain of powerful abilities and advanced mental calculations.

Your mind is an unbreakable fortress. With passive skills like Mana-Fortified Mind (Low Arcane) and Mental Attunement Loop (Mid Arcane), you've strengthened your psyche to withstand any assault. Your level 60 skill [Focus] allows you to wield potent abilities without faltering.

Primordial Kinetic Master (Arcane)

Your journey through the study of primordial energies sets you apart. Under unique teachings, you've begun to master primordial kinetic techniques, demonstrating remarkable degrees of control and understanding. With skills like Eclipse and constructs such as Vortex Core, along with your mastery of [Mana Manipulation], you've unlocked a set of powers that few can comprehend.

That already makes for a good start, and while they don't compare to the latter two, I still like reading the descriptions. Particularly with the system being the way it is, even these small bits of information tend to contain some important clues.

Though it leaves me wondering if it's supposed to be this way, lining the offerings up from worst to best to hype me up as I read through the increasingly exciting list of primary classes.

One of these days, the system is going to present me with three offerings and extort me for shards with the promise of more, lest I be forced to wait out a timer. In exactly the sort of vile cliffhanger, this asshole system seems to love.

Anyway.

It's easy to see how I wound up with Mana Reforger. The system must have really liked my body modifications and crafting experiments. As with every class I've been offered thus far, I can't help but wonder what skills and passives I may be passing up.

Then there's Mindshield Guardian, which is interesting in its own right. Seemingly an intensely specialized class built around straight-up mental enhancements. I don't like the name very much, but the description clearly hints at a powerful mana-based class with extreme mental resistance. That also reminds me that I'll have to ask the others how many arcane classes, if any, they were offered when they reach level 300. With all the shit I went through to get here, it had better be less than me. Anyway, Mindshield Guardian very nice, but maybe next time.

Primordial Kinetic Master sounds more interesting. Though I'd probably like it more if I were Whitey. Hell, it even sounds interesting to me. Defy conventional magic and physical limitations? What kind of man wouldn't be enamored with that description? I want to defy physical limitations.

It would seem I have Whitey to thank for this one. For the system to acknowledge him that much... the guy must have had a truly incredible talent for kinetic energy, and so far, I haven't met anyone close to him.

And I still have two to go over. Options I never would have expected to see.

Kinetic Mana Harmonizer (Unique Arcane)

A unique class granted to individuals who have taken their first steps towards harmonizing kinetic energy with the manipulation of mana, enhancing their magical prowess through kinetic augmentation. Kinetic Mana Harmonizers utilize kinetic forces to refine and empower their mana-based skills, achieving feats surpassing conventional applications of magic. rÅNØBES

Your body is a lethal weapon. With your exceptional understanding of primordial kinetic energy and mana, you've begun to grasp the potential of combining these forces while exploring the many ways kinetic energy can support and amplify mana based techniques and grasping at the vast array of possibilities for elevating your magic. You have acquired at least one unique epic passive allowing you to transform kinetic energy into mana, you've used mana and body modification to create a core to store and compress kinetic energy, modified your heart to convert mana into kinetic energy, received teachings and techniques from a powerful kinetic user and received the teachings of an Absolute detailing mana control and manipulation techniques.

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Mana Weaver (Unique Arcane)

An unparalleled class for those who have harmonized their mana's wavelength to achieve ultimate control over its flow. Mana Weavers wield mana with such power that their very presence influences the flow of magic around them.

Your unrestrained power is a sight to behold, and you've accomplished feats only witnessed by a select few. You have killed Champions. Have become a Champion Candidate before receiving a primary class upgrade. Have received a unique passive skill. Have studied under an Absolute. Have mana reserves far exceeding your level. Have a second stage, Mana Wavelength Iris. Have mid-arcane passive, allowing you to endure the strain of powerful skills and see mana in a way that few can match. Have reacquired

the Mana Manipulation skill multiple times. You have used mana far surpassing your body's capabilities countless times and survived. Through sheer determination and focus, you reign supreme over your mana.

Unique.

Rarely does the system use this word. The last time I saw it was when I combined two upper epic passives, creating a skill that, in certain situations, is the equal of an arcane skill. Which I'm finally seeing confirmed in the description of Kinetic Mana Harmonizer.

Unique means it was made for me, a new thing, modified, changed, or created based on my performance and stats. At least that's what's been implied.

The same goes for these two Primary Classes. They're probably modified forms of more basic arcane classes, unique to me, and the related skills and passives will probably be the same.

I think it was Lissandra who once told me the system doesn't like to give you options to cover your weaknesses. No, the system strengthens and builds upon what you've accomplished.

Since then, I've been thinking about the two starting skills I got: [Focus] and [Mana Manipulation]. It's almost as if the system pulled them out of us rather than giving them to us, and we've been building on them with the system's help ever since.

Each of these skills feels important and telling and often reveals a lot about us. The twins, constantly seeking some form of [Connection], Tess gaining [Farsight] because of the way she liked to watch that group of friends play, Lily, gaining a healing skill despite all the anger she carries with her, twisting her wrath into [Disintegration].

And me, acquiring [Focus], allowing me to ignore my emotions to a greater degree than I ever did before.

Even now, almost two years into the tutorial, there is so much I don't know. How the system came into being. Who made the tutorial, which even seems to predate the Rulers who learned how to influence it

slightly. What is the First Dungeon, and why did the Rulers build Beyond over it? Why did they connect Beyond to the tutorial and the real world?

Why, why, why, why?

"Nat. We need to move. There is a group of twenty heading our way," Tess says, tapping my shoulder and pointing off into the distance.

Obviously, I don't see anything, but I believe her.

"Need me to slow them down?"

"There is no need for the moment, but be ready to defend, they seem to have long-range attackers as well."

So we move, running as quickly as we can.

Sophie leaves behind some of her webs to make us more difficult to track and does something to the air around us, making it more challenging to establish visual contact.

I use [Eclipse], expanding its reach beyond our small group and dissipating the mana we leave behind.

We don't head back; no, we delve deeper, and the moment I go to reread the descriptions, Tess shouts a warning.

Screaming through the air over our heads, a bone javelin two times the length of my body passes by with a red light glowing inside. The incredible amount of mana packed within begins to expand as cracks spread across its surface.

A quick teleport brings me in range, and I grab it with my outstretched hand. The colors of the world fade around me as the red light shines ever so much brighter. But even that light starts to dwindle,

pulling back and dying off as my [Eclipse] surrounds and suffocates it, as my Mana Wavelength Iris observes the whole process.

When I finally let go, the javelin crumbles, mana potent enough to equal my tricolored orb explosions fading to nothing.

My kinetic energy surrounds me, and another javelin slows to a crawl. I fly towards it, grabbing it, surrounding it in [Eclipse] once more, as the mana within fights back, threatening to destabilize around me, but in the end, even that dissipates into a mist of fine particles.

When I grab the third one, the light simply blinks, slowly changing and beginning to glow a pale shade of blue. The javelin becomes mine, and I throw it into the air, boosting it further with kinetic energy.

It only takes a few seconds for me to see the explosion rippling out from the place the javelin came from.

Resonance Flow expands even further as I fly just behind our group, covering a wide area around us, slowing six more of the bone javelins slowing to a halt in mid air.

More and more mana funnels its way into [Eclipse], and my eyes move to read the wavelengths of each incoming weapon. I modify my frequency, adapting to theirs, and then I take over, overriding the enemy's control and making them my own.

Ley Lines connect to each of the weapons, pumping each one with an increasing flood of mana as I return them to sender, severing my connection in the process.

Six more explosions ring out, still miles away, but this time, I can feel the vibrations of the explosions even without the kinetic senses.

[You have defeated Reanimated Marauder - lvl 306]

[You have defeated Reanimated Marauder - lvl 301]

Seeing no more javelins heading our way, I boost myself in the direction of the others, catching up to the group after taking a moment to deploy some traps triggered by mana threads, along some extremely dense mana threads to cut through the weaker monsters while snaring the stronger ones for a bit. Landing near Tess, I boost my body with kinetic energy and break into a run at her side.

"There's another group to our left and a smaller one ahead of us," she warns.

"Is something attracting them like it was in the previous zone, or is this normal?"

"I already asked Sophie, Luna, and Leticia to look into it, but they couldn't find anything, and Leticia said there shouldn't be anything attracting monsters like we attract lurkers. It seems like they have scouts tracking us and sending them our way."

Then, she speaks through our link to keep the others from overhearing. (Are you going to upgrade your class?)

(To be honest, I'm already starting to get impatient. I already have my choice all lined up. But I don't know if it won't give me some stuff that could make me unconscious in the process, and I don't need a new class to deal with these guys.)

(So yes?)

Damn it.

(Yes.)

Chapter 512: Bye Bye Focused Channeler

We hide inside one of the huge stone pillars connecting the floor to the ceiling. They turn out to be surprisingly durable, and it takes a great deal of effort to carve our way inside, with Sophie manipulating the stone to close the way behind us while I use one of my tiny black orbs to destroy any trace of our mana before allowing it to crumble away.

With our signatures hidden and the area shielded by a multitude of webs and arrays, we take a moment to sit around the gentle light of a normal candle that burns surprisingly bright in the dimness of our hidey-hole, keeping our usage of mana to a minimum.

The hideout is cramped, and the air within is stale and heavy, carrying faint traces of the dust shaken loose by our excavations. The walls, smooth yet imperfect, hold an eerie stillness, their muted gray surfaces serving to absorb the flickering glow of our single candle. It casts elongated shadows that stretch and twist across the stone in an unnerving manner.

As we settle in, so too does the weight of our exhaustion. Every breath feels heavier, every sound rings louder in near silence. Even the candlelight feels fragile, as though the oppressive darkness might snuff it out at any moment.

Put simply, the morale has never been better.

After a day of running and fighting, we all seem to have leveled up, but after having to heal all that damage and disintegrate these unhealing wounds, Lily, now with short black hair, is running out of her mana. So, currently, we sit here waiting for her to recover.

"I'm sorry, Grumpy," Gareth apologizes. "I've been working on modifying my skill so I can do more to help you next time."

"It's fine! I can heal a lot; I just want to have some reserves in case things go to shit." She says, tapping her backpack.

Thankfully, no one asks what she has in it; it would be difficult to explain. Also, what's up with her language recently?

(Go for it,) she confirms.

So I pull myself further into my corner and close my eyes, hoping that the process of upgrading my class won't make me scream or anything. That would be awkward. I have an image to maintain.

First, for good old times' sake, I check my previous class. I know I haven't been giving it a lot of attention lately, but it's served me well.

Focused Channeler (Epic)

Active Skill: [Mana Domain] - Establishes a limited area, granting the user a heightened degree of control and influence over the flow of mana, providing various tactical advantages.

Active Skill:[Tether] - Anchors the user's mana to a specific location, enabling quick return or other location-based effects.

Passive Skill: Mana Reservoir (Epic) - Allows the user to slowly and gradually store mana beyond their natural maximum, effectively increasing their total mana pool.

Bonuses:

Constitution +20

Mana +100

I still have [Mana Domain] even now, and I'm hoping to keep it because of the applied effect of Pride to it. I used [Tether] in a skill fusion to create [Ley Line], a skill I still explore and have great expectations from, and lastly, the passive skill Mana Reservoir, which I've since upgraded into a unique epic passive.

Well, thank you, Focused Channeler, and bye.

Congratulations! You have chosen the Primary class - Mana Weaver (Unique Arcane). In the future, you may be able to upgrade your class or exchange it for a new one, befitting your actions at that point within the tutorial.

Another window pops up:

Congratulations! You have acquired a new Primary Class:

Mana Weaver (Unique Arcane)

Active skill:[Empyrean Lance] - A luminous spear of refined mana, charged with harmonic frequencies that resonate with both matter and energy. The lance punctures its target, releasing concentric waves of destabilizing force that disrupts the target's structure, causing a cascading breakdown as mana vibrations radiate outward. This overwhelming attack leaves a residual field of unstable energy.

Active skill:No available slot detected.

Passive Skill: Mana Wavelength Tyrant (Mid Arcane) - The wavelength of the user's mana imposes itself on the surrounding environment, forcing ambient mana in the vicinity to harmonize with their energy, creating areas of heightened mana density. This synchronization creates a natural pull that gradually collects energy. This field expands outward, drawing ambient energy into a controlled and harmonious stream centered on the user.

Bonuses:

Mana +500

Active skill slots fully occupied. Performance check initiated. Unique class classification confirmed. Champion Candidate status identified. Body modifications detected. Beyond attendee designation confirmed. Winner of the First Tournament, fifth round, detected.

Additional personalization parameters unlocked. Four options generated for selection in place of the Second Active Skill.

Passive skill combination token (mid arcane)

Active skill combination token

Active skill evolution (will not apply to high-grade active skills)

Trait evolution (will not apply to high-grade traits)

Note: Any of these options will be influenced by the Mana Weaver (Unique Arcane) Primary class.

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Please remove one of your passives to apply the new passive skill or reject it.

Well, first, bye-bye, Cognitive Fortress, and welcome Wavelength Tyrant! Also, minus 100 mana because I just lost my bonus from the old class, but then I get another plus 500 from the new class, so that's an additional 400 mana. It might be a lot. Way too much, in fact, but I'm not going to complain; after all the shit I got from the system, I'll take all I can get.

However, I can't help but find it a little funny that I'm not getting a bonus to the constitution this time. It looks like all my efforts have been rewarded.

Damn.

Why would the system do this to me? Please send help.

It's probably going to hurt getting so much mana at once. For some reason, my poor body just isn't built for it.

I blame the system.

As I brace myself, the pain envelops me, and I do my best to hide it. I absorb the movement of my shaking. I use a few of Lily's healing marks. I [Focus] my mind to better ignore the pain. And I observe the process.

The process as my body accepts and changes to accept yet another mid arcane passive. And this time, I begin to notice hints of the ways my active skills affect it. Unlike the passive, the changes are much smaller, but at the same time, they feel much more important.

Active skills are important, in fact, they're probably one of the most important features of the system. But the changes they bring aren't something I can observe all too deeply, not even with my eyes, not even with my passives working together to allow me to process the information. I think someone at the level of a Champion with the right specializations might be able to see and understand more. Assuming one doesn't need to be an Absolute to do so.

As all of this changes are getting applied, my subclass is also active. Not in a way I can actively sense. I would think it's like it's having an effect on each of these new skill and the changes they bring. As a subclass, Pride seems to be pulling everything in a specific direction in much the same way active skills influence the body of the user.

Then my mana pool expands by 400 points and then again by another 400 under the effects of my mana attribute upgrade. Even with Mana Cycling and Sneaky Mode working double time to help me contain it all, I fail.

My mana radiates from me for a moment like a match igniting a large flame. It fills the small area around us. It pierces through our defensive arrays and seeps outside, announcing my presence to anyone who might be looking.

A few seconds pass in silence before the dozens of presences lurking outside extend their senses our way, brushing against the pillar we've hidden inside and finding us. I would swear Luna seems to be the most disappointed out of all the people here.

Jean punches through one of the walls, and we leap out into the open before the first wave of attacks can crash into the pillar.

A pain in my head and running through my body makes me furrow and twist my expression, but I surround us with Resonance Flow, all the material projectiles slowing down as if stopped in time.

I activate [Eclipse] to stop them from detonating, as a huge surge of mana moves through my body, ruining all the fine control I've worked so hard to master and ruining the fine balance of my skills and

techniques, causing [Eclipse] to flare up violently before deactivating, only managing to neutralize half of the projectiles as they lose their shine.

Already far away and noticing I have failed, Sophie's shadow flows out around her, expanding and blending itself with the dust rising into the air. It blocks the shockwave of an attack that tears through the environment around us.

At the front, Jean crashes his way through a group of skeletal monsters, and Tess uses her [Psychokinesis] to rip chunks of stone from the ground and fling them into the path of incoming projectiles to detonate them a safe distance away from us. Even then, the shockwaves from the explosions push us and batter our defenses.

Once again, I move my mana to activate my skills, but I end up using way too much, ruining the carefully cultivated balance of mana in my body and leaving the excess mana to swirl within my body, tearing a hole through my chest near my heart.

All my constructs strain, parts of them breaking, as the pathways fail to endure the heightened strain and movements of my mana. With my eyes and mind, I watch it all happen. The information flows through my mind with ease, failing to strain my focus even under the circumstances.

It's a funny experience, to be honest, and a strong reminder that even with all these free stats from training with the Restrictive Training Emblem, my body still relies on my fine control and my firm grasp on my mana. Increasing my body's reserves has affected me more than using mana from the crown or the reservoir—even if they do hold more mana. More than anything, it's the shift in the amount of mana being generated with each pulse of my heart and being sent coursing through my body that's throwing me off.

When another attack pushes me to my knees, I boost myself to the side with kinetic energy and reach an arm out behind me, forming a shield to block yet another projectile. Before it explodes, my mana encloses it in a bubble.

The red light explodes inside the bubble, stretching the tight membrane of mana before I actively compress it and launch it back at the attackers, where it finally bursts, causing another explosion.

[You have defeated Reanimated Marauder - lvl 304]

[Lvl 300 > Lvl 301]

I quickly reinvest the stats, only to stop at it. A strong sense of amusement washes over me.

Even with all the trouble I've got on my hands right now, I have automatically invested these three stat points into mana. There is something extremely hilarious about that.

With an improved mood, I straighten my back even with all that pain. A big part of my mind separates itself from the chaos and starts working on the task of temporarily fixing my constructs and strengthening the surviving pathways while repairing the broken sections. The another part turns to Mana Cycling, getting used to all that mana roaming through my body. Grabbing it and forcing it to move in the way I'm used to, with the occasional tweak to adapt to my increased pool.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 60 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 61]

The third part turns to the attackers, switching to kinetic energy and supporting the others as much as I can.

But there is a tiny fourth part. A most curious one. That one opens my status, impatient to check it.

Name: Nathaniel Gwyn

Title: Champion Candidate

Difficulty: Hell

Floor: 7 - Battlefield

Time left until forced return: 3y 99d 16h 36m 1s

Traits (2/3): Mana Circuit 2/3, Mana Wavelength Iris 2/3

Lvl 301

Strength: 189

Dexterity: 181

Constitution: 361

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1609 + 1609

Primary Class: Mana Weaver (Unique Arcane)

Sub-class: [Adept of Pride]

Active skills (10/10):

Focus - Lvl 60

Perception - Lvl 55

Redistribution - Lvl 58

Mana Domain (Pride) - Lvl 57

Mana Crown - Lvl 51

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 61

Ley Line - Lvl 44

Bone Knitting - Lvl 25

Eclipse - Lvl 14

Empyrean Lance - Lvl 0

Constructs:

Reinforcement (Construct)

Thermokinetic Mana Heart (Construct)

Mana Regulator (Construct)

Mana Sovereignty Mantle (Construct)

Vortex Core (Construct)

Passive skills (5/5):

Phoenix Embrace (Mid Epic)

Mana-Kinetic Conversion Reservoir (Unique Epic)

Mana-Fortified Mind (Low Arcane)

Mental Attunement Loop (Mid Arcane)

Mana Wavelength Tyrant (Mid Arcane)

Tokens:

Beyond 3 day stay token

Beyond 3 day stay token

Beyond 1 day stay token

Beyond 1 day stay token

Beyond 1 day stay token

Communication with your disciple for 10 minutes

Shards:97,939

Chapter 513: I will crush your pride

I rest against one of the huge pillars and apply pressure with my hand on the wound on my stomach with my hand in an effort to keep my organs where they belong. There aren't any more healing marks that I can activate, so I focus on cycling thermal energy through my body.

One day, I will finally find the person who caused my healing passive to be left behind at only mid epic grade.

The most annoying part is that I can't even use proper armor at the moment or try to weave my mana due to the spike in my mana and the fact that my mid-arcane passive has yet to apply. I think I might have been warned about my absurdly high mana because of situations like this. Maybe all those people knew what they were talking about.

"Healing?" Lily asks, moving closer.

"No need."

She takes a moment to confirm, then rushes off to heal the others, even reattaching a leg that Sophie lost during one of the fights.

Gareth's wide-area healing aura helps me enough for my passive to finish the rest. Plus, I let some of that pain reach me. It helps me to focus and serves an important function as a reminder.

I want my mind and my body to feel what will happen should I lose control, which could happen at any time. I was fortunate enough to live through it this time. For the moment, most of my constructs are working properly. Well, "properly" might be too strong a word, but at least I've gotten them patched up.

My increased mana also causes fewer problems now, moving such big amounts of it feels somewhat familiar. There were always situations where I had a lot of mana flowing through my body or was using a lot of it at once.

(You might want to stop whatever you're doing there, Nat. Your mana affects surrounding mana too much.) Sophie says, sending a message through our link.

(What do you mean?)

(Your mana feels like it's taking control of the mana around you, even the ambient one. I've been feeling it for the past hour, and it's only getting stronger over time. I think Leticia can feel it, too, she's just not letting it show.)

(I'll check on it, thanks.)

With that, I take a moment to focus on what my passive's been doing until now, which I would have done before had I not had other problems to deal with, and it would seem that the passive involves more of a gradual application. Even now, I feel the pain serving as proof of that. As Sophie said, and as

the description shows, it seems to be helping me impose a strange sort of control over the surrounding environment. It's like a weird mix of [Eclipse]

It's Something I'll need to play with when I have some free time, along with the active skill I still haven't had the opportunity to use so far.

Following Sophie's recommendation, I turn off my passive, knowing that I'll just have to find a more fitting time to explore its effects. With it turned off, the pain lessens, though it never truly fades as the skill applies.

Then we have to move again as Tess issues another warning, catching sight of the monsters before even Luna can sense them.

Two days.

That's how long it takes me to fully adapt to the changes and for the pain to fade. It seems like this passive is stronger than my other mid-arcane skills, plenty stronger if the pain is anything to go by.
rÁÑøøÊş

Tess's scouting and Lily's powerful healing are probably the only reasons no one died.

I think every one of us has finally come to realize just how unprepared we were when we entered the zone between the 1st and 2nd safe zones. Confident after reaching the 1st safe zone with so much ease. Especially so after killing the fish. We thought we had all the information we needed and the numbers to pass through without challenge.

The entire time, we haven't seen a single lurker; they've all been skeletal monsters. Extremely durable, possessed of a multitude of skills and mana, or whatever it is the creature's been using to slow our healing and leave such lasting wounds. Their attacks cause powerful explosions. Powerful at range, engaging in concentrated attacks, launching powerful bombardments, and possessed of an extreme sort of durability and sharp bones to act as claws at close range.

I'm sure the next time I come through, it'll only get that much easier, especially knowing what to expect after getting used to my powers, but just for now, I'm perfectly happy to enter the safe zone with others who think the same.

Lily and Gareth are the most exhausted out of all of us. We are happy, but nobody's willing to let their guard down.

The second safe zone we've reached is called the Sphere and probably accounts for one of the weirdest things I have ever seen. The overall shape is that of... well... a perfect sphere made out of black stone with an amazingly smooth surface.

The area surrounding The Sphere is incredibly striking, made even more so by its sheer size. The Sphere itself towers as high as one of Earth's tallest skyscrapers, and its spherical shape gives it a footprint just as wide.

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Looking at it, it almost seems like one could just send it rolling with a push, and yet here it stands, unmoving. Even though it doesn't manage to reach the ceiling and still can't compare to the height of the stone pillars bridging the ground and ceiling, it's huge.

Tunnels have been drilled throughout, leading to the safe zone within its hollow out core, with buildings built out from the walls. At the exact center, a smaller sphere of water hangs, suspended in the air despite being the size of an apartment building. Red, white, and orange lights move through the sphere like sparks, emitting a gentle glow to be dispersed by the water.

The first thing I notice are the attendees sitting on the small terraces of houses built into the walls, watching the sphere and the light inside of it. It doesn't seem just like normal watching; it's more akin to observing studying as if they are trying to learn something from it.

Reaching this place finally solves the mystery of Tacita's disappearance. She sits on one of the benches that are below the sphere and watches it with everyone else, her head turned upwards. As she notices us, she stops and stands up, just a few quick steps, taking her near, totally not caring about Jean, who tenses up, ready to fight.

Tacita passes by him and reaches Lily, who's currently resting weakly against Tess. After looking at her curiously for a moment, she shakes her head. She makes a circling gesture next to her temple with a finger and miming a deep sigh.

And just like that, she's gone again.

We each register our "spawn" point here and head to one of the empty houses. With this, our expedition ends, and there should only be a few hours left on each of our tokens.

Gareth starts talking first. Even with his armor damaged and his silver crown gone, he continues to smile, full of optimism, "I'm sure we will do better next time! I can count on you, right, Miss Leticia?"

Leticia nods, "Only if you do a better job healing the next time, as you promised. We can't just have poor Grumpy handle it all."

Lily waves it off, "It's fine, I just need a bit of rest. My fights don't usually last this long."

From a terminator like her, it sounds like more of a threat than an explanation.

"I think Sset did an amazing job as well. Without her, we would probably have lost someone along the way," Gareth continues as the whole pack of extroverts seems to decide it's time to compliment everyone now that we're finally safe.

"Everyone did their own part. Sure there were some hiccups along the way, but our composition was good, and we were quick to adapt," Tess defends.

"Everyone other than Noname, that asshole just kept luring monsters to us with his mana," that little shit Spacewolf complains.

However, I immediately feel more comfortable once he's disrupted the flowery atmosphere the others seemed bent on creating.

"With all your whining, I'm starting to think 'Spacepuppy' suits you better."

"You... what?"

"Spacewhimper."

"You..."

"Spacewolf? Is that your gamer tag or your furry phase?"

"Noname."

"Did you name yourself Spacewolf because 'Crybaby Cosmo-Pup' was taken?"

"You asshole. Listen here... I'll..."

"Yes, I have been preparing them the whole time we were fighting, you little shit."

"Did you pick Noname because 'No-Talent' was already taken?"

"Yes."

The answer makes him hesitate for a moment, just long enough for Leticia to move closer and drag him into a hug. Which makes him blush as he tries to push her away while Luna comes to a stop in front of me, giving me a judging look in the meantime.

I avert my eyes and recline in my mana-block chair while letting them have fun, theorize, and plan for the future. Tess has always been good at those kinds of things, so I just let her handle it.

Gradually, the time approaches for everyone to return to their respective floors. Plans are made, promises exchanged, and pleasantries shared. And well wishes echo their way through the group, carried by the relief of a somewhat successful end to the expedition. The promise of the shards from the fish likely serving to lighten the mood further.

After the goodbyes, people begin to leave, one by one.

Luna and Leticia disappear first, followed by Gareth as if they had used their Stay Tokens to arrive before the rest of us.

Then Lily, Sophie, and Tess disappear as well.

But I stay behind, having just used a one-day stay token to extend the duration of my stay.

Straightening from my leaned-back position, I return the chair to its original shape, fixing my eyes on Jean.

He quickly picks up on it. I wouldn't call him the smartest, but there are definitely times when he can be surprisingly quick to catch on. So once Lucien disappears, Jean is still there, expending a Stay Token much the same as I did.

Neither of us says a word as we finish healing our wounds with our regeneration and collect our strength.

When the time feels right, I stand up and head out, Jean following behind. We pass under the water sphere, pass through the tunnels leading to the safe zone, and make our exit, jumping down to the grassy surface. After another minute of walking, I stop and turn to him.

"I would declare a challenge and wager, but you rejected the Candidate title."

"My word carries more weight than anything that could be enforced by the outcome of a challenge," Jean declares.

And I trust him.

"Good, then, if you defeat me in the future, I won't stop you when you try to kill her."

That makes him laugh, but at the same time, he is stretching, warming up his body, "Some friend you are. Are you saying you would just stand there and watch?"

"Does it matter? I'm not going to lose," I tell him.

He nods seriously, "Then one of us will have to die."

"Maybe," I bring his attention to me. "If I win, you can't go behind me to attack anyone in my group. But I will be happy to face you anytime you want. It doesn't matter if you decide to wake me up at midnight or if you challenge me at a moment when I'm missing half of my body. You'll still need to defeat me to get to them."

He pauses for a moment, then shakes his head with a hint of curiosity in his expression. "You really mean it, don't you?"

"Yes. Because you will never beat me, and if you're not careful, you will die."

I let my mana flow through my body, the air around me seeming to hum with tension. "I will crush your Pride," I say, my voice calm but deadly. "I will fuck you up."

Chapter 514: Jean Durand

Flashback Jean Durand

A young man, no more than seventeen, victoriously thrusts both arms into the air with a loud, primal scream. His muscles tense as he basks in the exhilaration of winning, of competing, of putting everything on the line to push the limits of his body.

That feeling of victory, the reward for all his effort, etches itself deeply within him. And he knows that he's found something to strive for the rest of his life just to have that experience again.

Three white lights illuminate the judges' panel nearby as the referees confirm the validity of his final lift for the meet.

His heart beating wildly, he steps off the stage. He doesn't even head backstage; instead, he takes a seat nearby, waiting for his only competitor to make their attempt to match his lift. He watches, a sense of elation flooding through him as he sees his efforts affirmed, watching as his opponent tries and fails to deadlift the weight, struggling to even pull it to his knees. As if the bar had been glued to the floor.

Jean's brother and sister rush to him, hugging and congratulating him.

It's not often you set a national record at a mere seventeen years old.

The stage is bigger this time. The referees seem less friendly, the lights more revealing. Every step feels unsteady, and the weight that felt so light in training now seems unbearably heavy.

But not for Jean.

He adjusts his belt, applies a final dusting of chalk to his palms, and slaps them together, sending a white cloud of chalk bursting forth. The slap echoes sharply, and with it, all other sounds fade away.

A few short steps. Pause. Adjust stance. Deep breath in.

One last look at the audience, at his sister, his brother. The referees.

Then, there is only the weight. And it moves. It moves so easily.

His muscles tighten, his skin hugging them tightly. His grip on the bar remains secure, and in one smooth motion, Jean pulls it up, waiting for the signal.

When it comes, he gently releases the weight.

Three white lights.

Jean raises his arms into the air in a triumphant gesture. But this time, his shout isn't nearly as primal or excited. He's a bit surprised. Was it supposed to be so easy? Why hadn't anyone else lifted it?

He shrugs it off with a smile. It's time to celebrate, not ponder useless thoughts. There must be more opponents to draw his focus. More records to break.

At twenty-four years old, Jean Durand retires from powerlifting.

He built his body to compete in the open category and lift the heaviest weights. Every record he sought, he has broken. Every opponent he aimed to defeat, he has conquered. There is nothing left for him to accomplish here.

Striving to relive that first taste of victory, Jean gives up the sport and turns his attention elsewhere.

Strongman.

Sports like rugby, hockey, football, and golf may get higher ratings, but Jean doesn't care. He never liked team sports to begin with, and he's declined offers from more teams than he can count.

No, he relies solely on himself. Money doesn't matter; he's only interested in chasing that feeling of victory, even after all these years.

And the title of the world's strongest man has a nice ring to it.

At twenty-seven years old, Jean Durand becomes the World's Strongest Man. After three fruitful years of learning, adapting, and growing ever stronger. After mastering every event and facing an endless parade of strongmen. After losing his first strongman competition. After placing second in his second competition. He finally secures the win. 🏆

Surrounded by cheers, Jean looks down at his hands. Covered in calluses, there's even some bleeding. He stares down at them as the blood mixes with the white chalk.

That's it? Did he do all this just to end up in the same place as before?

When his brother and sister rush to him again, he forces out a loud laugh and gently scoops them up, being careful not to hurt them.

Next year will be different.

It must be.

At twenty-eight years old, Jean Durand wins and successfully defends his title.

At twenty-nine years old, Jean Durand wins again.

The crowd erupts as the cameras zoom in, capturing the sweat dripping down his face and the intensity in his eyes. After lifting the trophy, he steps down for the post-event interview, his demeanor calm while carrying a sharp edge.

When the reporter asks what sets him apart, Jean leans into the microphone, his voice steady and deliberate. However, his usually friendly face reveals a strong dose of frustration.

Support creative writers by reading their stories on Royal Road, not stolen versions.

"I don't do anything special," he begins, his words cutting through the noise. "But here's the truth. Winning isn't just about lifting the heaviest weights. It's about stepping onto this stage and leaving no doubt in anyone's mind who the strongest is."

He pauses, scanning the room, his gaze piercing. "To my competitors—ask yourselves, did you really come here ready to take this title? Or were you just hoping to see me stumble? Because from where I'm standing, it doesn't look like you were prepared to face me."

Jean steps away, the trophy gleaming in his hand, leaving the crowd and his rivals behind.

At thirty years old, Jean Durand wins again.

As the cameras close in and the crowd surges with applause, he stands tall, trophy in hand, and addresses the reporters. His voice is calm but resolute as he declares, "The next competition will be my last."

The announcement sends a ripple of shock through the gathered crowd. Gasps and murmurs spread like wildfire, and even his manager, standing at his side, buries his face in his hands in dismay. But Jean doesn't flinch. His expression remains steady, unaffected by the noise around him.

Then, after a deliberate pause, he adds, "If any of my competitors felt so much as a shred of relief when I said that, maybe that's the reason they've never beaten me."

Later that night, after a long conversation, his manager, feeling he can't hold himself back anymore, shouts, "A challenge, what do you mean challenge, someone to beat, to compare yourself to? So what? Jean, just take it easy, make some money, win competitions, get sponsorships, and retire to a nice villa by the sea. That's what normal people want."

"That's not for me, Luis."

"Damn it, man," the manager sighs, downing another shot. "You were born in the wrong era. A thousand years ago, people like you led armies and fought to their heart's content. But now? There's nothing you can do about it."

For a moment, a new idea lights up his eyes. "Martial sports? What do you think? I could get you some boxing matches, maybe MMA."

"I would probably end up killing someone, Luis. I just want to compete and relive that feeling. That's all."

“Damn musclehead. And what will you do if you meet someone you have no hope of defeating, no matter how hard you try?”

Jean smiles brightly as he downs his shot. “I will always win in the end, Luis. You know that.”

“Yes, yes, but what if you really, really can’t win?”

Jean leans back, scratching his much longer beard as he gives it some thought. Finally, he shrugs with a faint grin. “Then I’d still be happy. It’d mean I finally know what my opponents have been feeling all these years. And I’d finally know if I have what it takes to rise above or if I’d break just like they did.”

POV Jean Durand

Noname doesn’t even try to fly his way into the air. He removes that sword he carries on his hip, the one I haven’t seen him use even once, and tosses it aside like trash.

Then, he surrounds himself in armor, forming it from a three colored mass of mana. It’s simple but beautifully functional in design, and it grows until he stands as tall as me.

Before the mask of his helmet covers his face, I notice the corners of his lips curling upward.

I use [Regulator] and, for the first time since I left the fifth floor all those months ago, I let my full strength flood through my body.

POV Nathaniel

Even as we face each other, I continue to weave armor around my body. In the back of my mind, I prepare to weave Ley Lines into the mix, focusing on the immensely difficult structure so that I can deploy it at a moment’s notice.

Then Jean takes a step, and the ground beneath him explodes into a crater. A huge smile lighting up his face as stones are hurled into the air by the explosion. He grabs a few and throws them at me. They crash against my armor and crumble to a fine dust.

I form a long spear and jam it into the ground, increasing its length as Jean throws another punch at me. The pressure alone blows away a shower of stones, grass, and even a boulder the size of a car, sending it rolling into the distance like a bowling ball.

Then he stands before me, punching my armor. The kinetic energy of his punch flows through its structure as I activate Counter Flow and take the blow head on. The resulting flood of energy winds up being much higher than expected. Far more than anything, he's demonstrated so far, but I manage. I accept it, redirect it, and then I attack, throwing it back at him. His body is flung through the air, skipping across the ground like a flat stone on a lake.

Wraith Dance brings me closer, and I maintain the stance until I reach him as he finally recovers and begins to stand.

My fist meets his, and he punches me in the chest again. Counter Flow takes it all in, and my attack returns it. The forest behind him is torn, trees find themselves uprooted and sent flying, but he endures it, holding his forearms crossed in front of his body.

He punches, and I absorb it again, but this time, it's stronger, and a crack forms in my armor. I restore it quickly, but before I can throw another punch, he hits me again, doubling the amount of energy I've absorbed.

My attack sends him flying and crashing into one of the pillars, burying his body within.

Quick Wraith Dance brings me back into range. I slow into walking, rolling my shoulders to warm up as I clench and unclench my fist.

Jean falls out of the pillar, covered in dust, scratches, and bruises. He moves his arm, and my head snaps back as he hurls a stone at my helmet, driving it with immense force.

The man smiles at that and pounds his chest, the dust falling from his clothes.

“Well, I don’t like using these skills, but what else can I do if you’re too scared to get close?” he smirks, reaching a hand toward me. “Pull.”

My [Eclipse] triggers multiple times, fighting the frequency of his skill, but my body still moves toward him at incredible speed. I cancel it and focus on absorbing my own inertia, coming to a stop right in front of him.

I duck under his swing and punch him in the chest, releasing kinetic energy as I do. Then I dodge an incoming kick and punch again, moving to the side to avoid another strike, delivering two of my own in return.

Each of his swings leaves a noticeable degree of damage in its wake. That incredible pressure would’ve surely torn my body apart without my armor and kinetic energy to blunt the impact.

“Pull,” he repeats.

This time, I’m ready to disrupt the effect, managing not to stumble for more than an instant.

All the debris he pulled in with me crashes against my body.

Resonance Flow activates, absorbing the energy of their motion in midair. But Jean’s already gotten a hold of my left arm.

“Got you.” He declares, squeezing down and crumpling my armor like tin foil, crushing flesh and bone in the process.

“It’s always the left arm.”

“What?”

Before he can ask more, I compress multiple tricolored orbs inside it and cut it loose, then kick him away. Teleporting through a [Ley Line] and searing the wound closed with thermal energy and recreating the arm from mana.

Something crashes against my armor at incredible speed, radiating a powerful mana signature.

It's my severed arm.

The moment I recognize it and teleport again, my arm explodes somewhere behind us, the shock waves crashing over me in rapid succession.

I allow my body to be pulled by Jean again and expand my armor around me, crashing into him at a speed boosted with kinetic energy. Two more arms form from my back, reaching out to restrain his arms while I press the attack with the remaining two.

Even so, I can't hold him. That incredible strength swells inside his body, and he throws me off balance before punching me again, drilling a hole through my armor and body.

I shrink my armor, make it denser, and form a sword in my hand, slashing at his arm as he lifts it. The blade pierces his flesh only to stop as it comes into contact with his extremely durable bones.

A number of projectiles form above me and burst forth, each creating a booming shockwave as I boost them with kinetic energy. They pierce through his body, staggering him backward.

But there is no look of defeat to be found on his face.

None at all.

In fact, he just seems to be getting warmed up.

Chapter 515: Tournament winner against Tournament winner

Mana seeps out of my body, and for the first time in a long while, I let it, in fact, I even help the process along with Mana Cycling.

Starting with my body's reserves, doubled by my attribute upgrade.

Bolstered by my Reservoir, which triples those reserves.

And further expanded by the mana from my crown.

Jean isn't breaking easily as most people do, and for once, I don't need to be worried about any teammates who might get caught in the crossfire.

My mana floods out in waves, swirling, radiating into the area, and crashing against his body in a display of raw force.

And something about his body resists. Maybe there's something about his bones or some aspect of his psychology that's just different. It isn't a skill, it isn't the power of his stats, but something about him just seems inherently resistant to mana-based attacks, reducing the impact they have on his body.

Jean pulls himself from the debris, and I send a tricolored orb through a [Ley line,] forming it right next to his head.

He notices it and lifts his forearms to protect his face.

It damages his body, pulling him in and compressing him under the force of the resulting vacuum and stray debris, but when it falls to the ground, Jean climbs out of it.

Under the artificial sunlight cast by the crystals in the ceiling, his exposed bones and bare skin reveal the powerful muscles beneath. He's wearing barely any clothing, and his terribly damaged body is already beginning to regenerate.

He withstands the pressure of my mana with ease. Never mind that, I'm certain that kind of force would've driven Lily, Tess, or the twins to their knees, gasping for air and on the verge of passing out, and yet it barely seems to bother him.

Jean takes a deep breath, lifts his arm, and then closes it into a fist before smashing it against his chest, sending a shockwave crashing through the area.

He repeats himself, creating another shockwave to blows away the dust we've kicked up.

"Is that all you have?"

That's all he says.

And so I reply in my own way.

My hand rises, palm open, as mana gathers around me. The light surrounding us dims, the raw brilliance of my mana surging into form. Threads of luminous energy weave themselves together, layer upon layer, condensing into a single radiant lance that hums with immensely compressed mana.

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 0 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 1]

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 1 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 2]

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 2 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 3]

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 3 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 4]

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 4 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 5]

The lance manifests in mid air, floating over the palm of my hand, and the air surrounding it shimmers with a seemingly volatile charge. The lance's tip glows with blinding intensity, pulsing in sync with the resonance of my mana. ~~RAZOBES~~

Threads of energy weave together, glowing brighter with each layer, forming a luminous weapon that virtually seems to hum with mana. Its core radiates a deep, golden-white light, while its edges glimmer with streaks of pale blue and violet that ripple and pulse like the heartbeat of a star.

I launch it forward with every ounce of focus I can muster, and the weapon streaks through the air like a comet, its path inescapable, leaving behind a prismatic trail of afterimages.

The very space it passes through vibrates, the air bending and warping as if the spear itself were defying reality. The streaks of white, gold, and blue flare brilliantly as the spear hurtles toward Jean.

Jean's body jolts as all that mana resonates through him, tearing at his structure. His skin ripples unnaturally, his bones vibrating under the assault, and for a moment, even his incredible regeneration begins to slow. The unstable field lingers around him in a chaotic storm of energy that continues to crackle and spark, leaving behind a scarred and fractured structure.

Yet as the light fades, Jean still stands amidst the destruction, His body smoldering as steam rises from his skin and he steps out of the epicenter of the blast, his muscles tense and his expression unwavering.

The left side of his body is nearly gone, only the bones remain, held together by whatever tendons and pieces of sizzling, bubbling, and flesh as his regeneration starts to kick in.

He opens his mouth to speak, but the lower part of his chin is gone. Only the bone remains, his tongue and the surrounding flesh having been stripped away.

Even so, he squints his eyes in a deranged form of a smile as wrinkles form in the corner of his eye.

He reaches his hand towards me and Pulls. But this time, he pulls himself. His body launches itself at incredible speed toward me, but the moment he enters my reach, he comes to a stop mid-air, his arm reaching out, his bones showing even as his flesh continues its regeneration.

I see, so that thing of his resists mana.

Even held in place by my efforts, Jean starts moving his arm slowly, that enormous strength moving his body despite my hold.

For a moment, we wrestle with each other. My mind and [Redistribution] doing their best to hold him while he does his best to generate as much energy as he can to slip through my hold. Before that happens, three tricolored orbs form around him.

At that moment, he breaks free, curling his body as the explosion hurls him into the ground, inflicting even more damage.

He doesn't even stop rolling when he Pulls again, this time keeping his legs on the ground so he can use them the next time I try to hold him. His pulls are shorter but more powerful, and by stringing them together, he finally reaches me.

Another [Empyrean Lance] forms, and the skill levels as I hurl it at him.

This time, he doesn't let it hit him; instead, he grabs it and attempts to break it, which releases the stored energy once again, the golden-white core flashing as it leaves behind yet another destabilizing field, which I make a note to examine.

I take a deep breath, and the set of Ley Lines I've been forming in the air around him materialize, just two threads, each only a bit longer than I'm tall. Even with all my effort, it's difficult to do more. These pale blue shimmering threads move and coil around him before joining together and tying him down until he stops moving.

The tale has been illicitly lifted; should you spot it on Amazon, report the violation.

With a step, I activate Wraith Dance and reach his body.

"I think this is..."

[Ley Line] threads snap. The very threads I've only ever seen damaged by [Disintegration]

The most powerful pull I've felt up to this point drags me to him and him to me.

My body crashes against his, forcing the air from my lungs.

At that moment, my eyes lock with his, he's missing half of his skull along with one of his eyes and large sections of his body. And the instant I make contact, I feel it: an effect emanating from him. Whether it's his body, his bones, or some other trait, it actively repels mana. I can sense it clearly now. Mana twists in the air around him, dissipating and weakening in his presence.

Jean is made to fight mages.

That incredible strength tears off my right arm with ease. Even all the kinetic energy at my command doesn't help me resist.

I release a burst of kinetic energy toward his head in a blast of force, stripping away the rest of his flesh, skin, his skull alone in place, and his brain safely inside.

For a moment his head starts to roll back, but some of the muscles in his neck reattach themselves, and he swings his head, smashing it into mine as he grabs me once again, coiling his arms around my body.

My unique passive activates, weakening the blow as a huge amount of mana fills into my reservoir. Even so, I feel my skull crack.

As his body works to weaken my mana, I push through, reforming my arms with raw mana and enveloping parts of my body in armor crafted from a set of Ley Lines I prepared earlier. The armor is a blend of dark blue threads interwoven with shimmering, pale blue Ley Lines.

[Ley Line - lvl 44 > Ley Line - lvl 45]

[Ley Line - lvl 45 > Ley Line - lvl 46]

I endure another hit and switch to Breaker Style, slamming my open palm into his side, causing a geyser of flesh and blood to erupt against my armor.

How absurd this man is.

His body doesn't just reject and resist mana and mana-based attacks. No, it takes bits of any mana that does manage to damage it and uses it to fuel its regeneration.

Jean's eyes come back, as does his mouth, emitting that quiet laugh anew, and he squeezes harder, cracking the armor around me As he ignores my golden flames burning him.

I know I could withdraw my mana and stop using it for attacks. I could channel it all into my crown and send it elsewhere to counter his ability.

But still.

Just who does he think I am?

Instead, I draw it all in, wrapping it around my body, flooding myself with it, and reinforcing my armor. Then, I keep attacking him.

His regeneration speeds up to a ridiculous degree, and to show my point, I move that raw mana and oscillate it the same way I did back on the first floor.

It damages him. It heals him. It damages me as well.

With a body boosted by mana instead of kinetic energy, I punch him in the face, dissipating the mana in my arm in the process, only for me to reform the limb, punching him over and over again in the process.

Jean squeezes harder, and my ribs crack. He opens his mouth to say something, but my oscillating mana tears his face off, it grinds down his skin and muscles, and I only keep increasing pressure. I keep

compressing it until the mana surrounding us feels almost tangible, like I could breathe it in and swim in it.

The air wavers and the colors around us start changing and growing hazy.

I take a deep breath.

And push.

Jean's torn-apart muscles give in, his arms snapping open, and my knee buries itself in his belly. A barrier forms around my face, and I slam it into his head, making him stagger back.

He pulls on me, but four massive arms form on my back, stabbing themselves deep into the ground and holding me in place.

I take a step towards him, compressing my arm made of mana, weaving the mana within, I focus on the path of my strike. And I attempt to mimic the structure of [Empyrean Lance].

Miserably failing, something that can barely be called an imitation takes shape. My mana prosthetic begins to reveal a faint glow, a pale shadow of the lance's brilliance, as I drive my fist into his face once more.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 61 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 62]

The explosions bloom towards him instead of pouring out on all sides. A stream of concentrated mana-generated heat throws the man away from me while blowing off my mana prosthesis. It explodes three times, each blast stronger than the one prior.

Mana moves around me, pulled through my body and into my crown as I cycle it once again. My heart beats, generating thermal energy and burning everything around me, fighting hard to keep me alive. Wraith Dance erases the distance between us, and my armor reforms, and a sword forms in my hand as well, ready to strike.

Just a palm's thickness from his body, I stop. Jean isn't moving.

He isn't dead, his powerful heart is still beating, though his body is regenerating much slower, but he is unconscious and incapable of fighting.

I've won.

I close my eyes, savoring the sensation as I replay the fight in my mind—the danger I faced, his abilities, the techniques I think I have a chance to replicate, and the things that could use testing and improvement.

Then I look at him again. The winner of the 1st round, 1st tournament.

I could kill him. I could ensure that he never threatens my group again. I even conjure a sword, aiming it directly at his head. His Community alias, CarrotCake, suddenly comes to mind, and I stop.

Old me would probably do it. The 1st floor Nathaniel wouldn't hesitate, not too much. But the person I am now doesn't want to.

Because I don't want to taint this beautiful sensation of victory.

I'm stronger now, no longer so afraid. I'm confident I can face him, no matter how many times he comes after me. And I'm certain he'll keep his word, if he tries to harm anyone in my group, he'll come for me first.

Finally, I want to face him again. I want him to grow stronger, so that he can push me to become even stronger.

My mana seeps from my body, and I surround him in it, aiding his regeneration while observing the process. Is it a trait? A unique passive? Surely, it has to be one of those things allowing him to recover like this. Plus, whatever strange aspect of his body makes him so capable of resisting all mana-based attacks.

What a ridiculous base, and it will almost certainly grow stronger.

I confirm once more that he's unconscious and cut off the tip of one of his fingers, slipping it into my pocket. It'll be something Lilly and I can examine later.

Then, just to be sure, I cut off two more.

He'll regrow them.

Jean is also heavy as hell, so I strengthen my body, which is now, for the most part, entirely composed of mana, filling in for all the missing pieces just so I can function and move. Both of my arms, a piece of my leg, there's a patched hole in my belly and a missing eye.

I carry him into the safety of The Sphere and throw him on the ground while I sit on the stone bench under the water sphere. My mana continues flowing into him, keeping his regeneration active while I feel like I barely have the energy to mana-manabloc a chair instead of this uncomfortable bench.

Then, I grab the arm Jean tore off and Hold it to my shoulder, fueling my passive to get it to reconnect. It's just faster than relying on my passive regeneration, which seems to struggle with rebuilding bones. Especially after all the bone knitting I've done.

Tacita is still here, sitting nearby and observing the sphere in much the same way I saw before.

Curious, I spare some of my mind to give it a look at it as well. I give it an hour, two hours, three, but there is nothing of interest that I can see. The group of natives and attendees that are watching it seem to be the types with low mana, so maybe it's something useful for someone with a build based on physical stats.

For the remainder of my stay token's duration, I focus on regenerating my body and some light training.

By the time I'm about ready to leave, Jean is fully healed but still unconscious.

As he disappears back to his floor and group, I look at Tacita one more time. Even now, she stares up, eyes wide, as her pupils track the movements of the particles in the giant sphere of water.

Then I feel the pull of my return to the 7th floor.

Chapter 516: A mercenary group called Angry Kittens

The setup of the 7th floor is fairly interesting, especially since we can leave at any time. Taking into consideration there are two ??? rewards in the floor quest it surely means these rewards may even end up being 1 shard, knowing the system.

It's been a week since we returned from our Beyond expedition and we've taken the time to gather enough information to know that we should be able to move and do stuff without much chance of a Champion rank monster popping up and killing us all in a single attack.

The event here isn't even a Pairing, rather, a powerful Absolute grade monster apparently managed to move to this planet without the local Absolute noticing. And while I would like to bash the guy, this planet seems to be fairly new in the system and their Absolute hasn't been around very long. With the enemy being more powerful than him, all he can do is to protect what territory hasn't been taken by monsters and stop the monster Absolute from wiping it all clean.

There's clearly more to it than that and I still have questions, but it's nothing that would be available to lowly chumps like us.

Around 20-30% of the planet has been overrun by monsters, and that's where we come in. Mercenaries are being hired from the surrounding planets to help in the battle against the unending horde. This planet seems to be a member of a coalition, making this response possible.

There are limits to it likely and the question comes to mind, why wouldn't an Absolute from a different planet just come by and fuck up the invading monster, 2 Absolutes vs one? Is it because something like that would run the risk of destroying the planet? If so, wouldn't that just make it easier for them to suppress the monstrous Absolute? Is there some rule forbidding it that the system enforces? Or would it be too much trouble for the average Absolute to bother?

Damn it, I want to know.

One day I will find some friendly Champion or Absolute and pull from them all the information I can. The kind of guy who would randomly spoil the ending of a book mid conversation without ever noticing. Then I will drag as much information from them as the system will allow.

And then I'll be angry at myself for spoiling it all.

Anyway, we've registered a mercenary group. We call it Angry Kittens.

I don't have the energy to fight it anymore and sometimes I notice myself thinking of us as such. We made jokes, back on the 4th Floor, when we first created our guild, that Angry Kittens would rule over the Earth, but the more floors we pass the more likely it seems.

Part of me thinks it's hilarious, but obviously, I can't let it show. I have a reputation to uphold.

I've actually been in a good mood lately. What with the satisfying fight I had with Jean, my new class, making some breakthroughs, acquiring a new active skill and a new passive skill, and now I've unlocked another small reward just waiting for my decision. There are four amazing options waiting for me. This time, I won't rush. This time, I'll take my time to think it through and choose the one that elevates my build as much as possible.

Though these options did take the place of the 2nd Active skill my class would have granted me - I do still have to thank my class's "unique" feature for allowing me to personalize my growth a bit more.

It also makes me wonder how the system will deal with the others when they reach level 300 if they don't get offered a unique class. Will it give them something else? Will it pick on its own - or will they have options based on the performance of the attendee?

I know that even now there aren't a lot of people who have 10 active skills. The average for someone around level 250 seems to be around 6-8 active skills. And group 4 is no exception, despite their high performance compared to most of the other Hell difficulty groups.

Is it just me collecting active skills like that? Are you supposed to be more careful about what you train to avoid filling your slots with unwanted skills? Do generations after the 1st, who have no idea what they're doing, follow a more focused path of gaining skills to reach certain builds?

At this point, I'm sure of it. Every generation after the 1st will have the advantage of our advice.

We are the most talented people in our world, handpicked by the system to be future leaders, teachers, and protectors. Future possible Champions and Absolutes. With that come advantages - access to the system shop, more options to decide our paths. But there are also disadvantages like a lack of information and a higher potential to make mistakes that cannot be undone. Like filling slots with useless active skills, choosing unfitting traits, or opting for classes that don't suit you.

We're essentially forced to rely on our natural talent to push us through, but overall I would say I prefer this over having information and a clear path to follow. It's exciting, it's more fun that way, and there's always this great sense of exploration and adventure. Some of us even have access to Beyond where we have the opportunity to meet some of the people we share the system with, along with the chance to form future alliances, and take beyond quests to visit places out of the tutorial to collect these bits of information.

The setup is well executed, at least in my opinion, focused on growth, but damn, we've been here for almost 2 years, with the 2nd tournament just a few months away and I'm still thinking about this stuff. There just aren't many clear answers.

Glancing at my lap I pet Biscuit who's still pretending to be asleep anytime I'm nearby. He only moves around when I'm outside doing my training as if he thinks I don't know.

I have no idea why he even bothers but I won't complain.

Reaching down I boop his small nose and pull gently on his whiskers. I grab one of the ears and flop it around and then lean closer to blow into it weakly. Using kinetic energy I sense him trying to keep his hind leg from twitching in annoyance, so I repeat the action and give his belly a poke. The skin there is very soft, and it feels nice.

This story is posted elsewhere by the author. Help them out by reading the authentic version.

As I bully him, I can sense more and more signs of annoyance through my kinetic senses.

Just when I have a feeling he will stop pretending and bark at me, I stop.

Refreshed, I close my eyes and appear back in my mind space, once more finding myself on the desert planet. Whitey's already sitting at the top of the dune and looks down at the oasis below.

There, a young crippled demon is getting beaten by a girl a head shorter than him. She moves incredibly well for someone so young, attacking an older demon who has his hands full trying to keep his broken heart under control while using kinetic energy to move his damaged body. Over and over again he takes his beating, as the girl refuses to hold back and inflicts him with a number of bleeding wounds.

It takes five minutes, but she gets bored and leaves him there on the ground, unable to move, as the painful wounds cover his figure.

"You know what?" Whitey starts out of nowhere. "I always thought Jaen was much more talented than me. I thought she was strong as fuck and though it may seem pathetic now, I looked up to that tiny girl just a little bit."

"You should've asked her to take you in as a disciple back then."

"Oh, you think you're so funny, don't you, dickhead." Whitey smirks, and I know I will pay for my comments during our sparing match.

Looking after Jaen he continues, "Seeing her now, like this, I realize how dumb I was."

"Let me guess, she sucks at using kinetic energy."

"Exactly. Some of it can be forgiven based on her age, but it's irritating to see someone using the same two moves over and over and using them wrong. When our tutorial started she ended up in Hard difficulty and died in the 1st year. I never learned how."

"Does it make you sad?"

"No. The weak die and the strong survive." Whitey says as he stands, brushing the sand from his clothes before settling into his stance.

I know this will be a tough fight. Whitey has been a lot more fired up lately after witnessing my fight with Jean through my memories.

Quickly sliding into a stance I face him.

As has become a habit for Group 4, we find ourselves in our small, sitting room. It's a bit too cluttered for my taste with the twins and Min-Jae sitting near me on the couch and me in my manablock chair. The others have taken their own seats around the room and there are a bunch of mana stones loaded with information laid out on the table.

"So, every mercenary group received some form of pay even before they arrived on this planet - something to prod them into coming here," Tess begins.

"Let me guess," I ask, "We won't be getting any of that because of the system's settings."

"Exactly."

"Knew it."

"We all did, Nat. That's just how the system works. So, starting at that moment it's up to mercenary groups to make themselves useful. Each gets registration and a 1 year entrance pass, with the chance to leave once a month during scheduled interplanetary teleportations."

"I have a question."

"Yes, Min-Jae?"

"Can we move to one of these planets? Stay there while 'waves' pass and reap the rewards?"

“There are a few ways that could play out,” Tess responds. “In the 1st scenario, the floor’s setup stops us from leaving that way. While in the 2nd we can leave but we can’t return and possibly end up on a peaceful planet stunting our growth and forcing us to leave for the 8th floor.”

“What if we could learn more that way? Gain some knowledge, that kind of thing?”

“It’s possible, but I personally would prefer to follow the default settings of the tutorial. So far it’s helped us progress in a number of ways on each floor. But if any of you want to try, we can come back to it and go on from there, what do you think?”

“Sounds reasonable!”

“Thank you, Min-Jae. So as I said, it’s up to us to make ourselves useful. We can go to one of the fronts, we can enter monster territory on our own, and hunt while getting paid for each kill, we can stay in the outposts and do things here like trading, crafting, training, and the like

She reaches out and picks up one of the mana stones, “There are 6 fronts. The 1st and 2nd are not recommended, Champion grade monsters appear there pretty often. The 5th isn’t really a good idea either, a monster of similar rank was spotted nearby. The 3rd front is doable but it’s also one of the most dangerous and it’s pretty close to the place where this planet’s Absolute and the Absolute monster clashed for the first time. The 4th front is having a lot of trouble with a myriad of weaker monsters. As for the 6th, it’s the newest so there’s not much information to be had about it.”

After looking through the stone for a bit longer, she sets it back on the table, “Healers are highly valuable here, so we could become Lily’s bodyguards and make our way through the fronts while getting paid for her healing. We could do something similar with Nat and have him make items to sell. Or we could combine those strategies.”

“It sounds good, but I’m worried that Nat didn’t say anything. He didn’t even try to suggest that we go to the 1st front to check out the Absolute monster or something equally ridiculous.” Dennis complains, pointing at me.

“I’m focused on training and improving my skills, I can level up on the front later when the floor’s difficulty increases and things go to shit.”

“Yeah, that sounds more like him,” Dennis says, turning to Tess. “You seem to have a plan.”

Tess smiles. “I do. There’s a rumor that Champion Feroy is coming to this outpost on his way to survey the newly opened 6th front. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind having a skilled healer as powerful as Lily and someone capable of creating mid-arcane items.”

Oh my, that’s more daring than I thought.

And Sophie seems to mirror my opinion. “Staying near a Champion? Like the ones we just escaped back on the 6th floor? You know, the assholes capable of destroying entire continents?”

“Yes, Sophie, exactly - someone that powerful, with plenty of knowledge and resources to spare,” Tess says, tapping on the table. “Apparently, he has a specialized team dedicated to maintaining his war armor. It’s called Exoria, and some of the technicians responsible for its creation just died on the battlefield. And now the ones who remain need assistants to take care of the smaller tasks. Getting that information and a means of contacting one of the technicians cost me materials worth ten thousand shards, but I feel like it was well worth it.”

My curiosity, which Tess had been carefully and deliberately stirring, finally reaches its peak, and I sit up straighter in my chair. “Tell me more about this Exoria.”

I know she has me right where she wants me, but I don’t care. This is far too interesting.

Chapter 517: Lumorans

There’s no way a true man wouldn’t get excited at the idea of a suit of fantasy mana/energy driven power armor. We’ve even seen it before: in the Valorplate we encountered back on the 4th floor, the living suit of armor that took over the body of a dead Champion and used his damaged heart to power itself for hundreds of years.

Even now, I’m working on plans to create my own when I get back to Earth. Something capable of resisting Champions and the like. Not because I want it as a means to bolster my own power, but because it would be fun.

And I will totally name it Regalia.

Yes, I will shamelessly steal the name of my old skill to name the item, I don't care how much sense it makes. Or I will use Valorplate. That name was also fancy.

But that's still far off in the future, for now, I've got my eyes set on Exoria.

Tess doesn't have much more info, unfortunately, just that the Champion wore Exoria into battle and the enemy waited until he was occupied to attack the base when they managed to kill the technicians responsible for helping him take care of the armor. Apparently, the remaining technicians are either too busy or lazy and therefore find themselves in need of more assistance.

Not gonna lie, I would prefer being a Technician over serving as an assistant. Sure, I don't know the difference, but one certainly sounds more important while affording more access. Not to mention that I have my own theories regarding why the hell that Champion would need so many people to take care of his armor.

So, we've decided to stay here for the next few days and keep close to the outpost while focusing on training. I'm also using this time to study the natives. Strangely enough, the inhabitants of this world are lumorans, a race that was rare even in Beyond.

Lumorans are humanoid, and their skin is black. Most of them have golden eyes. They have crystalline features embedded in their skin that look like half-transparent crystals.

I haven't interacted with any of them yet, but from what I've observed, it's clear they take pride in their crystalline features. Contrary to expectations these crystals don't tend to protrude; rather, they lay flush against the skin, resembling a thick layer of paint despite their crystalline composition.

They might continue deep under the skin, but it's hard to tell. I have a very strong suspicion that they can serve as mana batteries, allowing them to store small amounts of mana, increasing in capacity the stronger the lumoran becomes.

It's like a half-baked trait or some bizarre form of body modification, but if I'm completely honest, it does fit a certain kind of aesthetic. In fact, the lumorans even seem to favor clothing that highlights these crystalline features.

“Nat.”

I refocus my attention on Sophie and the proto-type Logic Core between us. We made it a few days ago. It's a far cry from anything as high-quality as the one connected to Fracture, but it's good enough to practice with before I start messing with that evil sword.

“Yes?” I ask her. “I can still work on the practice core even with something else on my mind.”

“I know, but I'm just curious. How many parts do you have your mind split into right now?”

“Huh. Six.”

“You do realize how crazy that is, right?”

"I don't. It's normal."

Her shoulders drop and she shakes her head. “Of course you don't. So what are they doing?”

“The first is managing my Mana Cycling. That one is probably the ‘oldest’, given that it has to be working at all times,” I say with a hint of amusement at the thought, “the second one is speaking with you now, while doing most of the thinking, and dealing with people or helping the others fight when necessary. The third is working on the core. The fourth is running a constant scan of our surroundings, mana, kinetic, and heat. The fifth is working on arrays, building their structures in my mind, and keeping them there so I can activate them if needed. The sixth is handling my restrictive training emblem.” ɾaÑÖbEş

“Can you make more?”

“I could probably manage a few more if I needed to, but each one would be weaker. Even though I can split my mind a lot, the problem is that my ‘mental power’ has to be divided as well, decreasing my efficiency. I can work around it a bit and strain my mind; my passives are amazing for that, but there are still limits.”

"Totally normal group 4 behavior," Dennis calls out from somewhere in the corner, sprawled on the ground and unable to move thanks to the Burden Enhancement Inscriptions I created for him.

"We can split ours into two parts, maybe have five if we were to combine our minds," Aaron adds, also lying nearby.

Huh. They shouldn't even be able to talk. Is it time to raise the difficulty? They're getting good so they clearly think they can show off.

While I think about that, Sophie asks them, "Is there anything else you want to brag about?"

"Remember when that vyssari Champion we met called me cute?" Aaron remarks.

If you find this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the infringement.

"She called me cute, not you," Dennis corrects him.

"We have the same face, you idiot, so her compliment applies just as much to me. It's simple logic."

I gesture at Sophie to get her attention and ignore the twins, having grown accustomed to filtering out their bickering.

"Do that thing you did to the core again, but twist the structure like this," I say, shaping a bit of mana in the air to demonstrate the structure I'm describing.

"Nat, the practice core is simple and working. You should learn how it works instead of trying to modify it at such an early stage."

"Just do it."

With an annoyed huff, she grabs it from the table and makes the modification. She was the one who made it, so it's filled with her mana, which should make it easier for her to make the necessary changes. As she applies them, the entire structure of the core breaks. A resonating pulse cascades through it until, piece by piece, it disappears.

Sophie grins and gives me a look that clearly says, "I told you so."

"You did it wrong."

"What?!"

"You applied the structure I showed you incorrectly and failed to adapt quickly enough after it started to destabilize."

"What am I, some Easy difficulty attendee?! I did exactly what you asked for. That structure is terrible. It redirected the mana flow, disconnected a key structure from the loop, and increased pressure on a nearby connection node."

"In translation, you applied it wrong."

"How the fuck do you translate it that way?" She raises her voice, annoyance clear in her tone.

Maya, sitting in a chair next to the twins, so that she can kick them every so often, calls out, "Tess, they're fighting over mana stuff again."

"Has Nat already started calling Sophie's abilities worse than a noble lady's pets?" Tess calls out from another room.

"Not yet, but it looks like he's about to."

With a groan, Sophie leans back in her chair and starts working on the mana stone, creating another simple practice logic core. Knowing from previous experience, it will take her a few hours.

"One day you will tell me what the fuck that thing about noble ladies' pets actually means," she mumbles as she gets back to work.

Today should be the day Champion Feroy passes by our outpost, so everyone's ready, all our stuff is packed so that we can either run or join him. Hopefully, Tess's conversation with that technician goes well.

As I observe the outpost, I think about how well the others are cooperating. There are barely any fights between mercenary groups, much less clashes with the natives.

This world is at war, and the Absolute here takes it seriously, his forces severely punish anyone who does anything that could cause problems on our side. Any kind of infighting is punished severely, and the other groups were informed even before coming here.

Even demons, though rare here, seem to keep it together and favor going to the more dangerous fronts.

There are so many fun rumors: an Absolute Candidate Demon someone spotted on the 1st front; a crazy thylarin Champion fighting on this planet for free; a nameless human man who's been in the war since day one, thus earning the nickname "The Immortal" for surviving countless battles; and the lumoran Champion Owain, a disciple of the lumoran Absolute, single-handedly hunting enemy Champions.

It's the kind of rumors that people share to raise morale, whispering in quiet admiration, revered like legends. The kind of things that make you feel a touch of excitement, a hint of adventure combined with curiosity, and a healthy dose of fear somewhere far in the back of your mind.

We haven't seen the invaders yet, we haven't clashed with the monsters either, so all these things may as well be a simple romanticization, like tales of adventure before reality steps in to slap us in the face. No matter what we go through, it always starts this way.

It's with these thoughts that I wait in our house near the wooden wall. It's easy to spot the moment the Champion's people enter the city. The atmosphere changes in an instant, and they deploy multiple scans even before entering, detecting any and all powerful signatures, counting people, searching for monsters, checking the number of active arrays and barriers, and more besides.

The speed and thoroughness on display are incredibly impressive. And it's on that note that just three lumorans enter the city, each one bearing far more crystalline features than any other lumoran I've seen since we found ourselves in this outpost, each one has three question marks over their heads. Leaving them somewhere between levels 322 and 449, as I can only see the exact level of people up to 20 levels above me.

One of them seems to take the lead and makes way for the building in the center, with another lumoran following him as a bodyguard as the other one splits off to keep watch while they walk through the city.

They all wear simple clothes, but each one of them has a mark made on the inside of their left forearm. The mark itself seems to be made of a material not unlike their more normal crystalline features, forming a simple circle of white and pale blue surrounding an obvious thumb imprint.

Tess waits outside the house the two lumorans entered, patiently waiting with Lily at her side. She waits for the leader of the outpost to finish his business with the Champion's technician, as they exchange information and requisitions for materials.

She gets called in soon enough and enters the building. The rest of the group on the other hand snaps to full attention in an instant, but no signal comes.

Just a minute later, Tess sends through the link: (Can you come here? You can teleport.)

I do as I'm told and move through the [Ley Line] connected to Tess. Inside I find her, Lily, and four lumorans, two of whom are newcomers and two who help form the leadership of this outpost. The one I take to be the technician looks at me, and for a moment his eyes pass through the air, tracing the path of the invisible [Ley Line] connecting me to Tess.

He then looks at the Fracture on my waist. "You made that?"

From his tone, it's obvious he knows the answer.

"Yes, though I had some help," I confirm.

“Good, we will be taking them. Take care of the necessary documents and share the information with HQ.”

“Understood,” the lumoran leader of the camp nods and bows. “Should I note the destination as the sixth front?”

“No, we’ve had a change of plans, we will be heading to the second front. We’re leaving in 5 minutes, so make your preparations, and we will have a contract ready for you.” He waves me and the others off, causing us to stumble out of the house.

Oh boy.

Chapter 518: Exoria deployment camp

Tess, Lily, and I return to our current base, where everyone is already waiting, packed and seated in my trademarked manabloc chairs v3.1. We join them too.

I let a minute pass before saying, “So, second front?”

“I’m thinking, Nat.” Tess sighs, waving me off.

“What do you mean the second front!?” Sophie objects, to no one’s surprise, “You said we would be going to the 6th.”

“I know, Soph. It seems like something’s changed on the 2nd front and they need the Champion there.” Tess explains, seeming exceptionally frustrated as she does; she always gets this way when things don’t go according to plan. Her frustration making itself known as she begins to fidget, tapping on the back of her hand with the opposing index finger.

“We could still refuse, or just run away. I don’t think they would hunt us down just to conscript us,” I remind her.

“I know, I know. Backing out would be easy too, I could just tell them we were expecting to move to the 6th front. But I’m still trying to work out whether or not the danger outweighs the potential gain. It’s

entirely possible that we won't even need to fight, they might even ask us to stay on base because of the nature of the 2nd front. We could also register as non-combatants in the contract."

"It would still be possible for a Champion-grade monster to attack the base," Aaron points out.

"You're right," Tess agrees, as she groans in frustration. "I had everything planned out so nicely, we were going to start with the sixth front, and work our way up to the fourth front over the next few weeks, gathering more information, and going on some hunts in the process, all that."

Tess's reaction makes it clear she'd already thought of that. She just nods. "How about this: we all go and sign on as non-combatants for a few weeks. If we sense any danger, we leave. We can even bail for the eighth floor if it gets to be too much."

No one seems to have a better idea.

"I'll go with you to sign the contract." Sophie stands up. "And I swear, Tess, if they try to push us into anything more, we're rejecting it."

"Deal."

The signing goes smoothly, and they even offer us a salary, mostly in materials, items, and information. I leave the others to handle it, if only because it sounds boring.

There isn't much opportunity for slacking around as we leave the camp with the three lumorans and head out to meet up with the rest of the Champion's group. It winds up taking us 15 minutes to reach it, in what feels like the middle of nowhere.

I sense around 100 mana signatures about half of which are comparable to ours, and in many cases they're even stronger. Ten in particular, stand out as especially powerful, likely approaching or just managing to exceed level 400. All gathered to support this one Champion, all these men and women placing themselves at his disposal.

That one signature that shines the brightest within the camp.

I don't touch anyone with my senses directly; mostly collecting this information from the air, and the lingering remnants of their presence.

In the middle of the camp, we find a huge square tent with a pointy roof, tall enough to fit a large apartment building inside, and damn if it doesn't have some of the best defenses I've seen until now. Just looking at it with my eyes activated makes my vision start to haze over at the edges. All these mana threads, circuits, nodes, spirals, arrays, layered reactive barriers, and other things I can't quite make out. ʀαÑòøÊ\$

There are two slightly smaller, if still big tents, with dozens of smaller ones filling out the surroundings, all with a similar set of defenses, though not to the same extreme. Much like the larger one, every tent is white and feels transparent despite my eyes telling me otherwise. It's a weird, and unsettling feeling. Leaving me to wonder if they're doing something to merge into the background. Like to hide themselves or something.

As two of the Lumorans split off, the remaining one turns to us. "I'm Quent, level 8 technician and assistant to Exoria Overseer Ito, level 9 technician."

He points his finger at me, the twins, and Sophie, "You, you, you, and you will serve as assistants under level 7 technician, Leth."

I force myself to start remembering the names and put the questions away, just nodding. The twins and Sophie nod after a while.

Quent seems satisfied, "Lady Healer Lily will join Lord Champion's healing squad, and the rest of your guild will serve as her assistants, companions, or protectors. As noted in the contract, none of you will be leaving the camp, and you will be registered as non-combat units under the Exoria deployment camp."

With that, we enter the camp, heading towards one of the smaller tents.

"I'm Sarabeth, third in command and the one responsible for the defense of Exoria deployment camp," a lumoran woman says, introducing herself as we enter.

Great, yet another name to remember.

The tale has been illicitly lifted; should you spot it on Amazon, report the violation.

We introduce ourselves in a similar fashion, and wait as they get us registered with Quent's aid, giving us that same circular mark complete with thumb print on the inside of our left wrists. It burns like ice for a while, and I take the opportunity to examine the mark itself. It seems to take a bit of our mana signature as identification, and after confirming it, charges it into a circular crystalline structure, causing it to vibrate at a highly specific frequency.

I'll need to examine it further, but I already like it. The way Sarabeth presented it to us is a clear display of skill. Not to mention that the fact that she's third in command, likely after Champion Feroy and someone else, speaks volumes as well.

Level 400? Higher? A bit lower? Would it be too rude to ask? Most likely. That's unfortunate, I want to know.

"This will be your group's tent. Your identification marks will allow you to enter. Later, we will add more locations to the mark as needed. But if you try to enter any location you are not authorized for, you may be killed without question. Please make sure to remember that. Any modification to the tent's arrays is forbidden. You are not allowed to leave the camp's proximity and doing so could trigger reactive defenses leading to your death. You are free to take a short rest, and in a few hours someone will stop by to lead you to your tasks as required."

And with these words, Quent leaves.

I look around inside our tent. Even though it seemed transparent from the outside, inside I can see that the walls are made out of a thick, canvas-like material, supported by metallic rods, while the flooring is made of polished, compressed stone, likely created by some stone manipulator.

There are multiple rooms as well, so calling it a small tent might be an understatement. It's more like a small house. Even the furniture here is mostly wood, nicely shaped and looking as if each piece were made from a single section of wood without any nails or joints.

I quite like the style, so like the others, I walk around, exploring our new living space. Pretend-to-be-sleeping Biscuit is obviously in my arms, and I notice him curiously sniffing away when he thinks I'm not paying attention.

When I reach out to pet his small head, his tiny tail twitches as if to wag from side to side, but he catches himself and stops mid-movement, his body tensing up.

"When they come to us to help with the Champion's armor maintenance, do you want to try taking it over to take it for a ride?" Dennis asks, striding up to stand my side and shower me with questions. "Do you think it's in that huge tent? Is it a simple suit of armor? Or is it the size of a building? You can make something like that with your mana, so it must be at least that big if not more powerful, right?"

His brother steps up to me from the other side, blocking my path so I can't escape, "Nat, I'm serious now. We need to learn how to build a suit for ourselves. I want my own Gundam."

"It sounds fun, so why not if there's an opportunity and time."

"Ha! I knew you'd see it our way!" Aaron shouts, carelessly clapping my shoulder in an uncharacteristic manner with a happy smile on his face, "What do you want in exchange?"

I give that a bit of thought but can't come up with anything at the moment, "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

Sophie comes closer when I gesture at her, and we all put our heads together as I say, "Remember as much as you can. Dennis and Aaron, collect and store as much info as you can. Sophie, make your memory pockets, or whatever you call them, and do the same. They probably won't show us the most important parts, but even the slightest bit of information will be helpful. For the Gundam for Aaron, for your golem and bond, Sophie, and for my Regalia."

"Do you really want to call it Regalia? After the skill? don't you think that's kinda lame?"

“Shut up, Soph, it’s a perfectly good name!” Dennis interrupts, quickly rising to my defence and poking her, which gets an irritated noise from her. He turns to me, “Does this mean we will be getting less training?”

For that, he gets a look full of disappointment from Aaron, who knows exactly how I will respond.

“Hell no,” I reply. “Since we’re in camp and won’t be fighting monsters for the time being, we’ll be using this time to train even harder. I have a lot of things I want to test out.”

As promised, they come to get us a few hours later, escorting us outside and over to one of the larger tents next to the big three in the middle.

There are small entrances on either side, and we enter through one of those. As we enter, the bustle of movement takes the place of the eerie silence we heard outside, now unrestrained by the canvas of the tent, and we find ourselves bombarded with the sounds of powerful flames burning, metal clanging, people shouting at each other, chains rattling, and the rush of steam. There’s also a lot of concentrated mana in the air, the temperature is higher, and the air smells like metal, oil, and something hard to describe.

Our guide this time is a man introduced to us as level 7 technician Leth, the man we will be working under as assistants. Like all lumorans, he has black skin, crystalline features on the sides of his neck and across his shoulders. His hair is pale yellow, and his eyes are golden. He also likes to smile a lot, excitedly showing us inside the tent.

“You now have access to this site. We’ve temporarily dubbed it Workshop Number Three! Workshop Number One is managed by level 9 technician Ito, and Workshop Number Two is currently for level 8 technicians only. This is where I work, and you will be helping me to the best of your abilities!”

Sophie, the twins, and I just nod, much to his amusement. “Don’t worry! The shyness will fade soon. There is no time for that kind of thing here when there is so much work to be done!”

He gestures for us to follow, and so we do, quickly coming to a stop beside two other lumorans, each accompanied by a small group of their own. One of the groups consists of three thylarin—two men and one woman with pale blue skin, and four very muscular arms, unlike most thylarin I’ve seen.

Leth, after taking a moment to greet the two lumorans, returns and explains in a quieter voice, “The other groups here are mercenaries like you, each led by a level 7 lumoran technician like me.”

He gestures at the thylarin group, “That trio seems very interesting. They have experience working on armament-type equipment, and one of them even possesses a fragment of eternal fire, so that helps!”

Our eyes move to the other group and Leth continues in a similar manner, “That one is more experienced. We’ve worked with them before, and even level 9 technician Ito took a liking to them.”

The group in question consists of a vyssari woman, a human man, and a tall man who is probably several heads taller than even Jean was, clearly a member of that giant-like race I encountered before.

I get a sense of competition whenever I catch the gaze of the thylarin party, but the second group seems disinterested and confidently follows their lumoran technician to their corner of the tent.

We follow Leth as well until we finally reach a piece of metal that towers above us, reaching for the ceiling of the tent. It’s as thick as I am, and the inside is plated in an entirely different metal than the surface. And there are inscriptions etched throughout, each one carved into the metal at the depth of my finger. There are even channels made of mana-conductive metals, leading to nodes of inscriptions.

Most of all, it reminds me of a pauldron. A pauldron for something very big.

“This is just a spare, but let’s see what you guys can do!”

Chapter 519: Cyclist Destroyer

It’s early morning the next day when I wake up from my usual few hours of sleep. Ever since the body upgrades and everything that came with them, going days without sleep hasn’t been a problem. Still, I’ve gotten into the habit of sleeping 2-4 hours most nights whenever I can.

I’ve noticed that I’m less irritable, make fewer mistakes, and even find training easier when I get at least some sleep. Surprise, it’s just like how normal people feel when they get enough rest.

Still, when I wake up, I bring a few of my evil pyramids into existence and start working on my usual mana-shaping exercises. Another part of my mind checks over my body and Mana Cycling, only to ramp it up again.

I know some Champions like to talk a lot of trash about the mark Lissandra left on me and on Mana Cycling as well. They even call her a fossil. An ancient being, As if she were just some old grandma insisting on driving a 50-year-old vehicle while other people use electromobiles.

My thoughts pause there, and I give it some consideration. Did I come up with the perfect metaphor?

Mana Cycling is dangerous, even I've noticed that. The technique was clearly created by someone without the proper knowledge and time. I strongly suspect Lissandra created it during that war she was born into. She probably spent her youth on the battlefield, without the benefit of the time and knowledge to refine it further.

For a moment, I imagine her at Isabella's age, constantly fighting for her life and hoping that some Champion-grade being wouldn't just come along and squash her.

The technique feels like a true remnant of those times. Far, far from perfect, and I don't think it's as simple as a lack of skill, no, nowadays she could easily make it better. Mana Cycling's drawbacks were left there on purpose, requiring effort many times greater than that of a more refined technique.

It's just like the car metaphor: Lissandra's car would be a 50-year-old, rusty wreck—a cyclist-destroyer held together by wire, duct tape, and a few prayers. Like the kind of machine that takes every trick in the book just to keep it running.

In this metaphor, my body is the cyclist. Mana Cycling allows me to harm my own body, sometimes even unintentionally. When I'm not careful, it turn all by itself to run over a cyclist biking on the side of the road.

Amused by my own silly metaphor, I lie in bed for another 30 minutes, waking myself up and preparing to interact with people. I try to drain as much energy as I can from the bed to endure the day.

The tent isn't very big, so I share the "room" with Min-Jae, who is already up. He has his eyes closed and sets his metal orbs to float around him on a strange set of erratic trajectories. After watching them for a while, I can see the rules of their movement. Just a slight mistake in positioning would probably cause the orbs to collide.

For a moment, I release a burst of mana to scare and test him.

He opens his eyes quickly and identifies the source. I'm satisfied to notice that even then his orbs continue to move without being affected. Nice.

"It'll take more than that to affect my training!" he says.

Not wanting to cool his excitement first thing in the morning, I nod and say, "You really have gained a lot of muscle. You used to be so thin."

He's currently sitting on the edge of the bed with his shirt off. Even though he's still slim, his shoulders have gotten wider, and he's even begun to develop some tone in his abs. Looking closer, I even begin to notice that the contours of his face seem to be getting sharper.

"I know, right? I asked Maya for a training routine and, even though she grumbled about it, she gave me some pointers! Plus I'm always using [Gravity Well] on myself, so that helps. Did you see that anime where the character took weights off his ankles and then moved incredibly quickly? That's what it's gonna be like when I finally deactivate my skill!" PΛNÔBÊŞ

"Possibly," I say, turning to Biscuit sleeping on the bed next to me. "What do you think, will it be like that?"

The silly corgi, the best corgi of the six, no, now the 7th floor! He still pretends to sleep, and I sense his ear twitch as I talk to him. But he doesn't answer, choosing instead to continue... pretending.

It's incredibly silly, everyone knows he's awake. I'm sure he's even heard us talking about it, and yet...

With a groan, I reach out and pull him closer, gently tapping his soft belly.

"I refuse to listen to your belly rumble. Just. Stop. Pretending. To. Sleep. Go and eat something," I say, tapping him after each word.

Finally, he opens his eyes and nips at my fingers as I pull back. He sits on my bed and barks softly at me.

"Sure, sure. You did very well, I didn't notice until just a moment ago," I tease.

I notice his tail start wagging, so I reach out to pet him, prompting him to push his head into the palm of my hand. "So sneaky, you got me there."

He barks again and then pushes my hand away, lifting himself into the air, probably in an attempt to surprise the others.

"Have you tried lifting anything really heavy?" I ask Min-Jae.

He nods and, after a moment of thought, increases the speed of the orbs floating around him. "For a while, I trained by lifting a bunch of really heavy stones and holding them in place for as long as possible. That was a few months ago. If I had to do it again, my max would be something like a small apartment building. Tess is better when it comes to raw power, so it's nothing impressive compared to her."

"Want to bet it's already better than what most Hard difficulty participants will ever manage?"

"Do you really think so? In the next three years, the right person from Hard difficulty could get pretty strong."

"Not like us. We'll be like the apex predators when we make our return to Earth."

Min-Jae giggles, nodding seriously as I stand up, "That has a nice ring to it. One of the few hundred most powerful people on Earth. Angry Kitten Island might not be a dream."

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"I hope you mean a floating island; otherwise, I'll be disappointed with your small thinking."

"Sure! We'll also put one in orbit and then get to work on your Moon base."

I nod in confirmation. "Gravity Emperor Kim Min-Jae, with his fleet of floating islands," I tease.

His smile widens even further, and I can see just how much the thought delights him.

With a dismissive wave, I settle down and focus, preparing to enter my mind space before heading over to workshop number three.

Like the day before, the twins, and Sophie head for the shoulder guard. There's a damaged section where the inscriptions have been removed. Other technicians restored the metal, and our job is to connect the new section to the rest of the shoulder guard.

We have blueprints, and this part shouldn't even be all that difficult. The problem is that inscriptions of this scale tend to behave differently.

Sophie came up with a temporary structure for us to work and comment on through the twins' connection. All of us have access, but she's responsible for maintaining it relative to all the changes and modifications we're making as we prepare for the inscription process.

"There has to be a simpler way to do it," Aaron notes. "It's fine for this part, but what are we going to do when we need to handle bigger, more difficult structures?"

"Maybe there isn't," Sophie says, shaking her head and gesturing toward the structure in our minds. "What we're doing is a lot like creating a template for a tattoo, and the tattoo in this case is the inscriptions. You can store some parts of a template to reuse later, but you still need the skill to 'tattoo' it, to make it permanent, and even before that, you still have to modify it for each person."

"Damn, Nat's 'explain like I'm five' mentality has really rubbed off on you," Dennis remarks, provoking her, as he is wont to do.

“How did these little trolls survive six months with you?” Sophie asks, looking at me with a sigh before turning back to Dennis. “What we’re dealing with is essentially a framework for mana inscriptions. The framework acts as a schematic—a preliminary construct outlining the mana pathways and nodes. Portions of this schematic can be stored for later integration, but permanently inscribing it requires precise mana-weaving techniques to anchor it into the target’s unique mana lattice. Moreover, the framework must be meticulously recalibrated to harmonize with the individual’s mana resonance before it can be stabilized.”

Dennis smiles even more. “Perfect. So anyway, wanna try a practice run? Me and Aaron are ready.”

“Are we sure? Leth said to wait for him,” Sophie says.

This is where I join in, “It will be fine. Let's do it for real. There isn't any need to waste that much time.”

Upon seeing the life leave the twins’ eyes, Sophie gives me a confused look, right up until Aaron explains, “Something always explodes when he says that.”

Putting away the blueprints, I jump onto the section of the armguard we’ve been instructed to work on and give it a tap. The cool hardness of the metal feels nice under my knuckles.

Then I reach towards the structure and “pull” it closer, stretching it over the surface. I find the points connecting the section to the rest of the structure and check the blueprints again. I also make a set of preparations in the back of my mind and let mana collect inside my body.

Sophie scratches out some of my changes and makes her own. I do the same, replacing them. She does it again, and this time I just modify them. She changes them again, and I modify them in turn.

Each version gets better and better. I test it by sending a few pulses through the structure, nearly breaking it, but the mana still flows well.

Then, using the twins’ [Connection], we start work on inscribing the improved structure, using [Connection] to make everything work in harmony. There are a number of ways we could do this, but we’ve decided on this method for now.

After a few days of working in the workshop and plenty of preparation, the actual inscribing goes smoothly. As expected though, it requires a lot of mana to inscribe it into the section.

There are also locks that prevent the inscriptions from fully connecting to the rest of the structure - something only a level 8 technician can handle. There are protections in place to stop tampering, and even the section we're working on had to be unlocked and stripped of multiple safeguards. It's fascinating. The more we work on it, the more I learn about how it all fits together.

And we succeed, quite easily too, and earlier than Leth expected, judging by his face when he checks over the result.

Ever in a good mood, he smiles and says, "Great job! There are a few tiny missteps here and there, but that's fine for a replacement part. You guys did well. Still, I'll have to come up with a suitable punishment for your refusal to wait for me."

He hands us a few blueprints. "Tomorrow, you'll be working on a section of the inner plating for the war armor of one of the Lord Champion's disciples."

When we get back Min-Jae is off training somewhere else, and I head back to our room, close the door, and take a seat on my bed. One last time, I stop and take a look at the trait that's been part of my build for all this time. Level 10? Or something like that? Time really does fly.

Mana Circuit –Integrates a network of mana channels throughout the user's body, optimizing the distribution of mana and amplifying the power of their mana-based abilities without additional mana consumption. This enhancement allows the user to draw upon their mana more efficiently, resulting in more potent abilities while reducing overall mana expenditure.

It shows its age though. Even strengthened, it's nowhere near as high-tier an option as Mana Wavelength Iris.

So yeah, the decision is simple. I've also been considering combining some of my active skills, given the way some of them are starting to lag behind, like [Mana Domain], which I've been using to keep control of my mana. It's still very useful, but it's nowhere near as powerful as [Eclipse] and a few of the others.

The same goes for [Bone Knitting], but that one is relatively new, and I always planned to use it as a foundation to create something better in the future.

Evolving skills? I can handle that myself if I really really want to. But combining passive skills to create a unique passive? That's very enticing.

The main reason I'm going for the trait, though, is simple: so far, I haven't seen any options for trait evolutions. Not in the Floor rewards, not in side quests, not even once. I strongly suspect it's only possible through the advancement of my Primary Class. It even makes sense.

Plus, the trait will likely stay with me for as long as I live, while I can always replace a passive with something stronger within a year or two, perhaps even while I'm still in the tutorial.

I claim my reward and a notification pops up:

Your trait Mana Circuit has been evolved!

The evolution has been influenced by your performance up until now and by your Primary Class: Mana Weaver (Unique Arcane).

The number of trait strengthenings has been reset to 0.

Mana Physique - The user's trait evolves into a tightly woven network that resonates perfectly with their mana wavelength, transforming their entire physique into a finely tuned vessel for their mana. Mana circuits seamlessly integrate into every fiber of the user's being, amplifying the potency of their mana manipulation and enabling precise control and immense output.

Let's see how much this is going to hurt... I black out before I can finish the thought.

Chapter 520: Disconnected

"Yo, Nat, you alive?"

Huh. That sounds like Dennis.

I open my mouth. "Fuck off."

"He's fine," Dennis confirms.

"He is NOT fine! He's bleeding all over, and I can feel how hot his body is even from here! I swear I can see something moving under his skin!" Kim shouts.

"Kim, my boy," Dennis replies casually. "That... is just Nat being Nat, this is probably his optimal state. I'd be more worried if he'd gone more than a day or two without hurting himself. Right, Nat?"

"Dennis, my boy," I mimic him, voice dripping with sarcasm, "it hurts to talk. It hurts even more to listen to your voice. So, one more word, and I'll put you into my "optimal state" for a week."

Silence follows, and I sense the two of them leaving the room, only for their presence to be replaced by two different signatures: Biscuit and Noodle. Biscuit sits off to the side, feigning innocence—so exaggerated it kind of feels suspicious.

Examining my body despite the pain, I notice strange sensations on my nose and belly, as if someone has been repeatedly tapping on them. Even the hair at my temple feels slightly wet, as though something very small had been biting and tugging on it.

Meanwhile, Noodle is lying on the ground near my bed, noticeably larger, his belly bulging significantly. His eyes are closed in a satisfied expression, and I half expect him to open his mouth and let out a burp.

Keeping my eyes closed, I turn my attention inward, carefully observing my body without activating any healing marks. Damn. Who knows what could happen if my body started healing while my evolved trait is still applying? I can already imagine any number of horror-show scenarios. That also makes me wonder, how do people with his level of regeneration even handle stuff like this?

As always, my racing thoughts distract me from the pain, dulling it bit by bit.

I give myself half an hour to assess my still-changing body before stopping.

As I thought, the circuits are still there, but now they feel like they've been etched deeper into my being and there are a lot more of them. Where once there were pathways for channeling mana, there are now countless additional ones: reinforced for moving larger amounts of mana, and narrower for finer control. True to its name, this trait has evolved to reshape my physique, making it even more accommodating for mana than before.

The fun part? Now I have to modify my constructs again. A lot of the pain and damage I'm dealing with now is a result of my changing physiology clashing with my damaged constructs. It looks like I won't make it to my shift in Workshop Number 3.

I'll need to let Sophie know so she can come up with an excuse. Sorry, Leth, it's going to take me at least a day to optimize everything.

Overall, it's exactly what I expected: an evolved version of my old trait, now heavily influenced by my Primary Class, which specializes in mana. I'll need a few more days to test things properly, but even now, I'd estimate it to be at least on par with Mana Wavelength Iris.

Slowly but surely, my body is adapting to channeling increasingly insane amounts of mana, while my mana pool grows to equally absurd levels. It reminds me of that Lord from the Bastion—whose heart was used to power the fallen floating island.

Surely, I'm not just turning myself into the best mana battery ever.

A few days have passed, and it's becoming pretty clear they have no intention of letting us anywhere near Exoria.

We're just newbies, after all, and it takes at least a level 8 technician to get close. Even Leth doesn't have that level of clearance, and his boss, Quent, only gets access under the strict supervision of level 9 technicians like Ito. ~~ŘÄ NøBÈS~~

But damn, I want to see that thing. It's already been long enough, so it should be about time, right? Right? I need more access. I want to take advantage of this abundance of equipment and resources they have.

While Sophie takes her time speaking with Leth I find myself standing off to the side with the twins, looking over the inner plating of a suit of war armor that belongs to one of Champion Feroy's disciples. As before, this is a replacement part.

Apparently, Champion Feroy has two disciples. Someone told me their names, but I've already forgotten. I just know they have their own suits of smaller, less powerful war armor than Exoria. Their names are Praxion and Ardenyx.

The inner plating we're looking at is Praxion's. Judging by the scale, this armor is probably half as tall as Exoria and slimmer, likely focused on speed, though that's just a theory I have.

As for the inner plating, it looks like a piece that would fit under the chest plate. It's like a mesh or web and made from a strange alloy of metal that's ever so slightly flexible, likely allowing for better absorption of any physical attacks that may bend the outer plating. I also give it a once over with my enhanced eyes, taking notice of the inscriptions. They seem to take some of the impact and redirect it somewhere else through a mechanism elsewhere in the armor.

It's hard to say though since I don't think we'll see the full suit of armor anytime soon. We only get small parts, and even if we figure out what they do, we can't learn much about their full function.

Lumorans are very patient. Even before the Tutorial, they lived at least twice as long as humans. This war has already lasted 10 years, and they seem to be taking their time with the mercenaries, getting to know us better before allowing deeper access.

It says a lot, they're clearly not desperate enough to be more open yet. But with this floor's setup, I think we'll eventually get there.

My plan remains the same: test [Empyrean Lance] and figure out what that skill's doing to mana to make it behave in such a strange manner. The same goes for my Mana Wavelength Tyrant passive, which I still activate every once in a while to run tests with help from the twins and Sophie. Even so, I think the Mana Wavelength Tyrant will remain deactivated most of the time to avoid interfering with my training and the surrounding mana. I've noticed that at a certain point, its passive ability makes things too easy and could even slow the growth of my skills. It's just that powerful.

I still have more tests planned for my evolved trait, but that's going to require Lily's help. In a moment of brilliance, I cut off my hand before evolving the trait, so now we can run before-and-after comparisons.

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Sophie seems to be done talking with Leth and now she's heading towards us, holding a number of mana stones, likely containing blueprints.

"You are currently looking at the new leader of the Level 7 Technician Leth's assistants," she declares smugly.

I don't even have time to complain before she gestures for me to wait and, with that same smug smile, mimics Leth's voice: "Assistant Nathaniel is talented, but he can be hotheaded, so I'll rely on you, Assistant Sophie, to lead your group."

"Bullshit."

That only makes her smile more, as she continues the impression: "What? No, even Level 8 Technician Quent told me to be careful with Assistant Nathaniel. That weapon he designed and made is proof of his incredible talent, but I'm worried about what he would do with more resources and no supervision. So please, I will be relying on you, Assistant Sophie."

Huh. I find myself at a loss for words.

She checks to make sure no one is listening and then sends through the link, where me and the twins are, (But you know what? Screw Leth and screw Quent. We'll play the "nice assistants" for now, but later, when we get better access...)

Sophie lets those words hang in the air, and I could almost swear I hear one of the twins whisper something about a Gundam.

All of the hired personnel stand away from the base on a nearby hill. Only the lumorans remain in the camp, packing things up and making preparations to move us.

It's been almost a week since we joined them, and now it's time to make way for the 2nd front where Champion Feroy is to be deployed. They're apparently preparing a teleportation array around the entire camp—something pre-prepared and used to connect with another array elsewhere, moving tents, war armor, and people in the most efficient way possible.

I think it's possible to move faster with less preparation, but apparently, they do it this way to hide our movement from enemy forces and reduce the chances of them interfering with the array.

Long ago, I'd have been like: "Just teleport, bruh," or something silly. But now I know the kinds of things that even I can do with the remains of a teleport structure, so a Champion-grade enemy could really do some nasty stuff. Maybe redirect the teleport somewhere into space, destabilize it, and tear people apart, or teleport us right in front of an enemy Absolute. Fun stuff like that.

Even so, they finish fairly quickly. It's clear they're used to this. Between Angry Kittens, two other mercenary groups currently working as technician's assistants, and three more groups of stronger mercenaries set to join the fighting on the battlefield everyone's gathered to watch. It's funny—there's a kind of competition between the groups, especially between ours and the thylarins since we're both so new to the role of technician's assistant.

I mostly just observe as they get into the occasional spat with the twins, trash-talking each other. It's especially amusing to watch the thylarin try to tease us for having only one pair of arms.

We're called back once the preparations are complete. As we enter, I continue to observe, expanding my senses to probe the teleportation array linking us to the web covering the Lumoran territory, a web created and defended by their Absolute in an effort to ward off the opposing Absolute.

For the first time, I see Champion Feroy as well.

He steps out of his enormous tent which is practically a small skyscraper. Like all lumorans, his skin is black, and his eyes have a golden shine to them. His crystalline features are far more pronounced than any I've seen on a lumoran before. Far too many to compare to the others, and none of them have been concealed by his clothing. Crystals adorn his shoulders, forearms, the sides of his neck, and even his thighs.

But two stand out the most: a large, inverted pyramid-shaped crystal at the center of his chest. Unlike normal lumoran crystals, this one is clearer, with a pale blue light swirling inside, giving it an almost otherworldly presence. The second is a circle on the inner side of his left wrist, made of the same material, with that same pale blue light swirling inside. Its speed increases even more, shimmering light radiating into the area.

He wears simple white clothes, and his hair is pale yellow. Standing in the middle of the camp, he lifts his left arm toward the sky. A pulse of mana explodes into the area, emanating from the circle on his wrist, lighting up the array and powering it with an immense surge of energy. He connects to the Absolute's web, and clears the identification checks, allowing him to use it.

Another pulse of incredible mana radiates outwards and the ground under my feet shifts as the environment around us changes.

The mild weather is immediately replaced by harsh cold and loud winds, threatening to blow us away, even with our powerful bodies.

Champion Feroy pulses his mana again. And the lights of a defensive array flare up, drawing in even more mana. The wind quiets and the cold becomes bearable, though it's still chilling even to me with my thermal energy. The weather is just that extreme.

We're sent to our tent to wait while they re-establish the workshops and defenses. On the way, snow begins piling up outside, gathering between the tents and on top of them. As far as I can see, there's nothing but snow falling from a dark, wind-blown sky. We're nestled against a mountain, the rocky wall serving to provide some shelter from the wind, but it remains relentlessly strong nonetheless.

"Izzy, heat the room, please," Sophie asks before we even fully enter.

No one takes their jackets off. Instead, we huddle up in the living area as Izzy gets to work generating heat and Sophie makes a barrier to insulate us. It's getting better as the camp heats up, but not enough to be comfortable, so having Izzy help is great.

"So I wasn't the only one who was cold," Maya says, sitting next to Izzy and pulling her closer, to use her as a heating pad. Noodle, now smaller, coils closely around her as well.

Sophie just rolls her eyes at her sister's antics. "Lily, you have the highest constitution here. Could you feel the cold out there too?"

"Yes! I thought I would never feel cold again, but the weather outside is something else!"

"It's probably the work of a Champion, either the lumoran's in an attempt to slow the monsters or it's coming from one of the monsters themselves," Tess says, sitting beside me and gesturing as she speaks. "I'll try to find out, but I'm not sure how much they'll actually share with me."

With a sigh, I create a thermal pyramidal contraption with empty spaces for me to send kinetic energy through, and in this way, I can now almost perfectly mimic the sound of crackling firewood. Even the light has improved vastly, shifting in intensity rather than providing a constant radiance to give it a more natural feel. I expand it a bit more and pump more thermal energy into it, adding to Izzy's heat.

"Even if they are higher level than us, how do they plan to fight? Aren't most of the mercenary fighters here around level 350?" Min-Jae asks.

Tess reaches her hands towards the thermal cube to warm them up, "They're probably issued some kind of special equipment. And then they probably only fight for a few hours at a time. Do the war armors have built-in heating?"

Sophie snorts. "At this point, we're no better than boot polishers. But honestly, I wouldn't be surprised, it wouldn't even be that hard to implement."

"But we are goddamn good boot polishers!" Dennis cries in an attempt to defend our team's honor as assistant technicians.

"Isn't it better this way?" Aaron says. "We can learn gradually and improve before they set us to doing the fancier stuff."

Sophie doesn't answer, gesturing to me with a nod instead.

Tess picks up on it, "Nat, please don't do anything stupid."

In response, I deactivate my Mana Wavelength Iris and lean back, “We might have no other choice sooner or later.”

I pick up Biscuit and put him on my lap, then extend a mana arm to retrieve his favorite blanket, wrapping it around him with only his small head poking out.

“The Champion just disconnected us from the Absolute’s web and cut off all connections. Even my Ley Lines leading back the way we came are gone. At the same time, the Absolute’s web covering this area started to disappear. Soon it’ll be gone permanently, or at least until the Absolute decides to remake it.”

“Oh boy,” one of the twins mutters. I sense them and Sophie doing their own checks, confirming my words.

I continue, “Either they tracked us down and we’re disconnecting to hide, or...”

Tess finishes my words, “Or we were always supposed to disconnect.”

I nod and lean back, thinking of all the reasons that might be the case.