

Tutorial 521

Chapter 521: Training room

POV Aaron Dalton

It's been three days, and I'm already sick of this goddamn cold. The snow keeps blowing into the camp, and sometimes they send us outside to clear it ourselves just to conserve more mana for the sake of maintaining their war armor.

Dennis and I have always preferred warmer weather, and not even the clothes the lumorans gave us do much to help. Sure, the new clothes do keep out the cold, but they're bulky and difficult to move in.

Nat claims it's because they're trying to avoid spending money on us, and despite Leth's repeated warnings, he's already started modifying them. He's adjusted them for each of us, primarily by adding circuits we can power with our mana to boost their heat retention.

He said the efficiency was "so shitty that someone from Easy difficulty could've done better," but he has no time to make any improvements. Now he and Sophie have gone full psycho mode, and they're pressuring Leth for as much information as possible. Nat even started a couple of fights with the other groups of technician's assistants: once with the thylarin trio and another time with the vyssari, the human woman, and the giant.

Something tells me he would start fights with all of them if he thought it would help. The clashes are becoming more frequent, as each assistant group strives to prove themselves and move on to more interesting tasks.

Dennis groans next to me and tucks his gloved hands away under his armpits.

(Am I the only one who thinks that the clothes and heating that Nat made for Biscuit are a lot better than ours?)

(My man, that corgi eats better than we do, and Nat was thinking about making a heated bed for him the whole time you were training with Kim.)

(Yeah, but he's cute, so...)

(I know... fuck.)

"Dennis, Aaron, my tiny human friends," a deep voice interrupts, resonating nearby and making me groan.

Not this guy, not now.

I turn to see Hed, the giant man from one of the other groups, walking closer. And It doesn't help that those thick protective clothes make him seem even bigger.

"Fuck off, Hed, we're not in the mood for talking," Dennis says, putting my thoughts into words.

"Hahaha. You must be Dennis. Aaron's more polite."

"Aaron is worse, he just doesn't say it out loud."

I nod briskly as Hed looks me over, and shift a bit, to use him as a shield against some of the cold wind.

"Haha. Where I come from, humans aren't quite so... outspoken." He says, as his smile grows even wider, seemingly unfazed by the biting wind and falling snow.

"You'd love the internet, my man," Dennis replies with a smirk.

"Dennis, tiny human, I don't appreciate your tone," Hed states, his voice growing stern, without letting even a hint of anger leak into his tone.

"Do you think we don't know the kind of shit you guys have been saying about us in your reports to technician Quent?" Dennis presses.

“Oh,” Hed finally understands, a smile spreading across his face. “You mean like telling him about the way you guys are constantly sneaking around, trying to break into workshop storage to grab more blueprints and armor parts? I wouldn’t call that talking behind your back, Dennis. It’s nothing personal, those are just the rules we all have to follow.” rÀNŎBẺì

“Try telling that to Nathaniel,” I say, joining the conversation.

Hearing that he immediately straightens up, looking around as if checking for someone, then turns back to us with a growl. “Nathaniel wouldn’t start another fight, not after the last time he got punished by Camp Overseer Serabeth.”

Knowing how it will rile him up, I just giggle, while Dennis adds a snort of his own.

Hed growls again and quickly turns to leave.

(Fuck, that was close. Is it done? I think I did ok hiding it from him and he may be a nice enough guy but he can be nosy sometimes.)

(Yeah, it went perfectly, and the defensive array didn’t seem to react. We’ll definitely need a few more tests to be certain, but we should be able to sneak into some of the less important tents,) Dennis nods.

(Good! Nat will be happy.)

POV Nathaniel

The Exoria deployment camp has a training hall. Or something like it—one or two stories tall, long and narrow, with multiple “rooms.” Sure, some people might think it would be silly for me to be constantly training, even as our worries regarding the current state of the expedition are growing worse.

Is this some kind of secret spy mission deep into monster territory? Is this a suicide mission where the lumoran Champion intends to throw himself up against a hoard of monsters to stop some kind of evil

plan? Is this just the normal way Champions operate, delivering surprise attacks and hiding, in an attempt to prevent the enemy Champions from joining forces?

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This should be the 2nd front. The snow and everything else match what we've learned. The question is: how deep are we into the 2nd front? Things don't look good at the moment. There shouldn't be any reason for us to have "disconnected" from the Absolute's web and hide our presence so much. The web itself disappearing doesn't help either.

So either we're doing something we don't want our own forces to know about or there's something we don't want the monsters to know.

It's exactly the kind of "fun stuff" that I can't help but pity the others for having to deal with, especially since most of the mercenaries and even some of the lumorans seem spooked and won't tell anyone why.

Anyway, back to training.

"Serabeth, hello, can I use training hall number 2? Number 1 would be nice, but you clearly hate humans so much that you won't let me. Tell me, might you be a xenophobe, Serabeth?" I ask.

As usual, I find the camp's third-in-command spending her time here, engrossed in training. She's probably on par with the Champion's two disciples, maybe slightly weaker, but she's undoubtedly one of the top dogs in the camp.

I can almost hear her groan in annoyance, but I'm more than willing to exploit her easygoing nature. "Hed complained about your harassment of their group, Nathaniel. And no, I'm not a xenophobe, I just dislike little shits like you."

"Because I'm human, right?"

“Fuck off. And no, you’re not allowed to use training hall number 1. Number 2 is taken, so take number 3.”

“Sounds good.”

Before I leave, she stops me. “Nathaniel.”

“Yes?” I ask, coming to a halt.

“Just a little warning. A bit of competitiveness is fine; you guys can even beat the shit out of each other if you want, but don’t cross the line.”

“Where is the line?”

“Try me and you might find out.”

“That's as expected of someone so xeno...”

She rouses her mana and I cut the sentence short, before giving her a small bow and quickly leaving.

Not even for a moment do I doubt she would kill me if I screwed up too badly. Hell, if killing me increased the lumorans’ chance of defeating enemy forces by 1%, Serabeth would be willing to skin me alive. She knows I know that, and she doesn’t mind some teasing. I swear, it must be difficult nowadays to find someone who doesn’t jump at every shadow.

I suspect that even she doesn’t know why we’re here. That’s my guess. Simply put, our situation is extremely... precarious.

Entering the training room number 3, I activate a panel on the wall and the canvas door closes, sealing the room and shielding it. It’s fairly simple: rough gray-black stone floor and the walls are made of even more of that incredible canvas, providing plenty of shielding, and a degree of privacy. Still, I’m fairly certain that someone like Serabeth can access the data.

Yup, even though I didn't agree to any cookies, my data is probably out in the open for the lumorans to look at.

If they are selling it though I would like a cut of that money. But there's nothing I can do about it, and it's not like I could do this kind of training in our tent-house thingy.

I allow myself to relax a bit and let my mana cycling become a bit sloppier, allowing a touch of mana to come leaking from my body and fill the training hall. A satisfied breath escapes my mouth. It's like coming home and trading your jeans for a pair of comfy sweatpants.

If the human race were slightly more advanced, we'd wear sweatpants everywhere, free of judgment. They're obviously more comfortable than jeans.

Just one more thing to do after banning invisibility skills. I'll need to look into it after Biscuit becomes Absolute.

Stepping to the side, I activate another panel and a target pops out of the ground on the far side of the room—a metal circular plate complete with shock absorption and a set of fancy inscriptions.

This room is surprisingly durable, only numbers 2 and 1 surpass it. And if the rumors are to be believed there's even a number 0 for the Champion, and damn, how I'd love to see that.

Even number 3 can endure my tricolored orbs, but the problem is mana allocation. There's a set amount of mana for everyone, and if you want more, you're required to use your own. Especially when using a lot of bombardment-style attacks, after all, you don't want Serabeth's assistant cursing you or threatening your salary.

Knowing this, I activate another panel and a small pillar rises up. I put my hand into the groove at the top and start filling it with my mana. And this time I give it a lot, a really nice chunk in fact. Satisfied, I let it slide back down, knowing I should be able to train more now.

[Empyrean Lance] is one of those skills I'm still deciphering, and I'm quite a ways off from fully understanding it.

I form a lance woven from luminous energy, layer upon intricate layer. It radiates with a brilliant glow, quietly humming by my side.

After feeding more mana into the structure, it hums stronger. Its core of white and golden light shimmers, and the tip glows with blinding intensity, pulsing with the rhythm of my mana and heartbeat.

I wonder, is the white part meant to be like a tricolored orb on the verge of destabilizing, while the gold part acts like a stabilizer? Is it just an “evolved” version of the tricolored orb? Wouldn’t that be too lame for a level 300 primary class skill?

I fire it off, and it pierces through the air, leaving streaks of prismatic light in its wake. There’s no extreme shockwave or wasted energy like with the orbs. The lance is much more concentrated and directional.

It hits the target, exploding into a blinding light.

I’d be disappointed that it didn’t pierce through if I didn’t know how insanely tough these targets are.

Even so, there’s a small amount of damage on the target. Some of the inscriptions have been weakened, and the material underneath has bent inwards. The floor below has grooves in it that are now filling with some strange liquid that quickly hardens, restoring them. But the target remains damaged.

Using my eyes, I notice even more subtle damage. Three of my tricolored orbs exploding right next to it never even made its frequency shift, yet this lance at level 9 managed to do so much more.

Someone call the admins.

Stepping closer to examine the target, I tap it with my finger and wonder how the lance compares to Fracture. Sure, Fracture is stronger. No question, that sword is evil. But something about the lance feels kind of similar. Especially the way it releases those concentric waves and destabilizes materials and mana reminds me of Fracture, even with Fracture’s tendency to straight-up erase everything.

So the question remains, was the lance influenced by Fracture, the weapon I made? Was it influenced by [Eclipse] with a focus on destabilization rather than taking over entirely? Is the lance more mana based than Fracture with its reliance on [Disintegration]?

Or am I just overthinking this when the lance has nothing to do with Fracture?

Overall, I'd say it feels like a combination of [Resonance] for the purpose of damaging materials and [Eclipse] to mess with mana, all focused in a concentrated area. The most interesting part though is that weird field that hangs around after the lance disappears—creating a small area where mana is harder to use and materials feel weaker, at least from my testing. It's not exactly mana radiation, but it's certainly close.

This is going to need a lot more testing.

Chapter 522: Ardenyx

The other day the system probably decided we'd been slacking long enough.

Warning! The 1st wave is now in progress.

Just that message and nothing else. Lifting my eyes from the Fracture in my lap and the Logic Core I'm working on, I look at Min-Jae sitting across from me in the living room.

"You too?" he asks.

"Me too!" Izzy says from nearby.

We join the telepathic link the twins have been maintaining and exchange a few warnings. After that, I check the Ley Lines connected to the other members of our group.

(You might want to come see this shit, guys,) Dennis says before signing off.

Locating where he is, I sigh and start putting on these warm clothes. Izzy and Min-Jae do the same. Noodle is coiling himself up somewhere deep inside said clothes. They are better than nothing, but it's

insane to think that I'd even be capable of feeling cold despite the thermal energy I have. So the options are either to use more of it or be more efficient and put some clothes on.

I'm not the type who normally cares about not wasting mana or efficiency. Hell, I could probably walk outside naked with golden flames sizzling around me, and keep that going for days. But it just feels more immersive to walk around in thick layers of warm clothes even with their terribly inefficient inscriptions woven from thread.

Once outside, I join some of the other members of group 4 standing in the cold wind as it blows the snow around us into the air. It only takes me a moment of looking at the piles to know that they'll be asking us to clear it away in an hour or two tops.

Someone like Serabeth or the Champion's disciples could probably blow it away with the slightest thought, but I guess something like that would just be beneath them. That and they are avoiding using too much mana outside of the tents.

"So, what..." I start, looking over at Dennis. Then I follow his gaze and shut up.

One of the three tallest tents in the middle of the camp opens, the canvas flaps of the tent moving to the side pulled by ropes. Revealing a hint of the tent's interior, heat and light radiating forth along with the sounds of a smithy.

Then the ground shakes. Again and again. Massive footsteps sending tremors through the ground, and just like that a war armor steps out of the tall tent.

"Ardenyx," Sophie breathes out. "It fits the description."

The war armor is enormous, its towering frame rivaling a multi-floor building five to six stories high. Its sleek, dark plating is inscribed with glowing mana patterns, intricate lines, and symbols etched deeply into the metal, pulsing faintly like a heartbeat. The armor's surface gleams with a polished metallic sheen, built for both speed and durability. The plates overlap seamlessly, designed to redirect impacts and channel mana efficiently through the entire structure.

Its head is angular and sharp. The cockpit itself is positioned deep within the chest, protected by reinforced layers of plating and surrounded by conduits of mana. From there, the pilot interfaces directly with the armor's systems, controlling it through a blend of mental commands and physical inputs, all powered by the pilot and the mana batteries placed throughout the armor.

Ardenyx's back is fitted with streamlined, wing like appendages—sleek constructs with sharp edges, humming faintly with energy. The arms and legs are long and proportional, covered in segmented armor seeming designed for flexibility and precision, each joint reinforced and marked with faint mana pathways to enhance movement.

Even standing still, it radiates a quiet and deadly energy, as the glow of its mana inscriptions cast their faint light on the snow around it. The suit is quickly surrounded by a handful of level 8 technicians, as they begin running a myriad of checks. The hands open and close, joints twist, and the appendages on its back flex and retract. Brief bursts of mana pulse through its channels, while fields and shields flare into being and fade just as quickly. It's a process that ends up taking several minutes, and one they appear to take very seriously.

My eyes activate and I observe it more, pushing through some of the defensive layers and observing the movements of its mana. A special material replaces the muscles and uses mana to send signals to expand and contract the fibers.

A number of places hide mana batteries all over the war armor, humming with the immensity of the energy stored within. Inscription nodes which must be something akin to a Logic Core, allowing it to turn simple signals like “walk” into a set of orders that shrink and expand these fake muscles, balance the armor, and move the joints.

The sheer complexity of this thing is insane. And the amount of mana it probably requires has to be just as insane. And that's without getting into the inscriptions covering its surface.

It's bigger than I thought it would be and damn, it's only the disciple's war armor.

Back on the 4th floor, there was a Calamity known as The Fallen Hero. A man who reached the level of Champion and died in a suit of Valorplate that wound up using his half broken heart to power itself. I know it was probably weakened by the system, yet I have to wonder how a suit of Valorplate, even at full power, would compare to Exoria, Ardenyx, and Praxion?

Full power Valorplate would probably be equal to Exoria, and even though one of them is the size of a normal suit of armor and the other one is probably bigger than the war armor in front of me, it would be fun to watch.

However, that does leave another big question: what advantages does armor that large actually provide? Shouldn't it be more trouble than it's worth? That question has been bothering me from the beginning. There must be a reason for it.

Ardenyx takes another step and the things on its back expand, and the air around them vibrates, making everything around it grow hazy. Mana flows through it and all sound fades into the background. Some of the inscriptions activate and Ardenyx begins to look like the tents in the camp, seeming almost transparent as it takes on a chameleon like quality.

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Then it lifts off as easily as if it weighed no more than a normal human and accelerates, flying off into the blizzard somewhere far in the distance.

A part of me really wants armor like that. A big part that is easily excited by new and interesting things. I mean, I don't need it, it seems expensive and after a few weeks, I won't have any use for it. But I WANT IT.

The other part forces me to remind myself not to rely on things like that. No, my intention was always simple and very much so.

I will learn everything I can about them. Then I will prepare a very very fancy structure that I will [Focus], and keep stored in the back of my mind. A structure very similar to that of war armor. The only difference being that when I deploy it, I will weave my mana into armor that I will expand. I will set parts of my mind to work like a Logic Core and take care of movement. And I will use mana and kinetic energy to power it.

And I still plan to name it Regalia. A suit of armor woven from my mana and perhaps even [Ley Line]

Until then, likely years and years into the future, I wouldn't mind piloting one of these things.

We're sitting on the ground of the room Lily shares with Sophie and Izzy. Sophie is doing some training with the twins, and Izzy has decided to stay and observe our tests. Noodle and Biscuit are both here for moral support.

Even in his super cute pup form Biscuit still gets a lot of respect from Noodle, damn, probably even more than before. But the corgi pup is merciful and doesn't seem to mind when Noodle comes begging for my mana.

In fact, it seems like Noodle has been doing it even more after my last trait evolution and Primary class upgrade. He's even doing it right now, shrunk down until he's barely as long as my forearm and as thick as a finger, and coiled around my neck as he noms on my mana.

Meanwhile, Biscuit sleeps in Isabella's arms. Even now he sometimes finds himself going into something like a shorter version of his food coma. Tess seems to think that since he's a pup now he needs to sleep more, but I don't agree with that. He is also wearing his own set of clothes, made from the ones we got from the lumorans, modified with help from Izzy and Sophie. They're much higher quality than anything we're wearing, in terms of looks and functionality.

"So, I have compared your arm from before and after trait evolution," Lily starts.

"And?"

"No idea. Sophie could tell you more, after all, she's better with mana. But I can tell that there are a lot of changes that go very deep. Everything from your bones, and flesh to the tendons and skin. It's very very mana-conductive and the boost I get when I [Sacrifice] it is crazy."

"That's good to know. By the way, how's your training with [Disintegration Mantle] been going?"

"I don't like it."

"Give it to me if you don't like it."

"I would if I could! I'd rather just use [Disintegration] or the raw strength of my body. It has an amazing defense. I mean really crazy. And it doesn't use that much mana for the damage it deals to anyone who touches it. I'm pretty sure I'll even be able to shape it to a degree. Additional arms? Wings? Perhaps a longer mantle? Not too much though, the skill doesn't allow for too much deviation."

"Are you trying to annoy me?"

"I'm not! It's just that I usually kill anything that gets close before I'm forced to use it."

"You aren't helping."

"Look, I train every day, just like I promised but it's not as fun as the testing we do together, my ax, or the stuff I've been doing with my bones."

"She likes to spend time with you!" Izzy nods seriously as she hugs Biscuit closer.

"So what else did you try?" I ask, ignoring that sentence.

Before turning to me, Lily hisses at Izzy and when she turns to me she has a slight blush on her cheeks, "I improved my ax and it should be capable of channeling my [Disintegration] without excessive amounts of damage. I've also been experimenting with making armor from my bones..."

"Skele-suit."

"I'm not calling it the Skele-suit, Nat."

"Calcium cage."

"Screw off," she sighs, the blush gone entirely, "I don't know how much I'll be needing it with my mantle, but the way you guys have been talking about war armor all the time made me excited to try something of my own."

“Do you know how horrifying it would be if you made an Ardenyx size mech grown out of your bones and maybe flesh instead of whatever that war armor was using to move?”

“Plus a similarly sized ax! Maybe I could apply my mantle to it too and give it self-healing properties as well.”

“Lily.”

“Yes?”

“Let’s try that sometime. It sounds too creepy and scary not to try.”

“Yes! And by the way, I finished examining the finger bone you got from Jean. I think he has a trait, not unlike your Mana Physique. Maybe he got it when he took his second trait like you when you got your eyes. His trait also changes his body a lot but it seems to ‘reject’ external mana and use powerful bursts of the excess to boost his healing, just like you said. And I think there might be other Physique based traits besides yours and Jean's.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” I note. “Can you get anything out of his? Enhancing myself with the same kind of increased regeneration from mana based attacks could be nice.”

“Maybe? But not anytime soon. That Physique is incredibly difficult to grasp, even a little. With you having a similar Physique, then taking his and improving yours while working around its effects... sorry, but it would take likely years if ever.”

I breathe out, disappointed, and lean back. When Noodle’s tongue tickles my cheek, I send a bit more of my mana his way while I think and curse whoever caused me to be stuck with nothing more than an epic healing passive and this weird-ass skill [Bone Knitting].

Well, at least I can count on the cockroach to bring me the heart of that Champion. That alone should boost my thermal energy by a shitload, and that should improve my healing as well. Until then, there are a few things I need to work on, one of them being the conversion of my heart into a pure kinetic mana heart, without the thermal aspects.

Lily and I have already started experimenting and forming our own theories and now we've brought Sophie in as well. And then, to top it all off, even though it's still likely a few months off, I'm already starting to wonder.

How it's going to feel to have two hearts?

Refocusing my attention on the room, I reach out to the side to set Fracture in between us as I deploy the protective arrays I've been working on over the past few days.

"Maintenance?" Lily asks, taking the cue from our prior runs.

"Yes," I confirm. "The materials are degrading faster and the condition of the protective sheath is getting worse, but this time we should be able to do it without twins."

Chapter 523: Assistant Nathaniel

After the usual "keeptheevilssleeping" maintenance, I find myself serving as one of the many people out here shoveling the snowdrifts. The higher-ups have decided we should do it manually to prevent unnecessary mana leakage, so for now, we can only use mana inside these incredible tents.

Naturally, I wonder if there's some fantastic device we could be using to handle these drifts. Is there a piece of equipment that can just blast them away or evaporate the snow with a minimal expenditure of mana? Maybe a blower that barely needs any magical power?

Nope. We have shovels.

As the Rulers intended.

On the bright side, we're all superhuman, so we can still move at remarkable speed, even in this shitty weather. Another plus is having that giant-race-or-something guy called Hed working alongside me. He's got a massive shovel and, if I happen to be near him, I can slack off a bit. After all, I need to look out for my delicate body, don't I? My Mana Physique is sensitive and I'm a weak, weak man.

Besides, I still have to adapt my [Bone Knitting] skill to keep up with all this physical effort. Sure, it's a pain, but it's already risen two levels, which is definitely a plus. It's still not all that useful overall, but I've

got a good feeling about it. I'm sure I can evolve it into something powerful, or combine it with some kind of synergistic skill. At least it's been pulling its weight by boosting my bone durability to a level well beyond normal, which certainly came in handy in that fight with Jean when my skeleton was forced to withstand a downright ridiculous amount of punishment. At this point my flesh that's holding me back.

"Don't slack off," Hed mutters, shoving away a pile of snow the size of a small car.

"I'll make you a low common item if you pick up my slack," I offer.

He immediately comes to a halt in front of me, looming like a mountain. The sheer amount of fabric that went into his clothing probably could have made a tent for a full party of humans.

"Just do your work, Nathaniel, like everyone else here does."

"Why bother? It's obvious things are gonna go to shit any minute, and you guys know it."

My words make him pause. He lowers himself closer so I can hear him clearly despite the howling wind.

"Do you actually know something more? Do you have a way out?"

"Nope. And also nope. Do you want to leave?"

A puzzled look crosses his face. He may be huge, but his expressions are exactly the same as human's on a larger scale. "We've worked with lumorans before, and the pay was solid. Their level 9 technicians liked us, so we figured we'd do it again. But this? This is nothing like what we signed up for."

"Did you talk to Serabeth and Quent about it?"

"Of course. They just said the mission requires secrecy and that we don't need to worry about it. We knew we'd end up at the second front, but we assumed we'd be safe. I mean, Exoria Champion Feroy is rumored to be almost as strong as Champion Owain, and Owain is supposedly the strongest right after the lumoran Absolute."

"Look, if you're nudging things toward some alliance, go see Tess instead."

"Aren't you the strongest person in your group?"

"Hell no. Haven't you ever seen Biscuit?"

"Who?"

"There should be a death penalty for such an insult. Anyway, I know we've had our share of spats here and there..."

"...you nearly tore off my left arm," he interrupts.

I keep going. "But I think you're a decent guy. I might not be the greatest judge of character, but I'm not totally clueless either. Just remember: my group will always come first."

He gives a rumbling laugh and claps me on the shoulder, the gesture coming across as surprisingly gentle for someone his size. "Human, we velnar are used to that. The strong lead, the weak follow. You protect your own before anyone else."

"Sounds like a neat code. Any other interesting velnar tidbits?"

"We don't like lazy people who slack off and force us to pick up the extra work."

"That's wild. Tell me more."

"Even if someone can't work as hard as the others, they should at least show some effort. It goes a long way."

"That's even crazier. Seriously messed up. Anything else?"

That's as far as I get though, because he's already turning to shovel more snow. For such a massive guy, he's surprisingly chill. And I'm not the only one who's noticed. After all our group's empath, Izzy already confirmed that Hed was probably the friendliest individual here. He's also incredibly skilled in his use of metals and inscriptions, better even than the thylarin trio, including the one with the fragment of Eternal Fire. He even outmatches the other members of his crew, a pair consisting of a vyssari man and a human woman.

I notice the camp guards watching me, so I quickly get back to shoveling. Sticking close to one of the piles Hed already cleared, in an effort to make it look like I've done more work than I actually have.

Caught up in my personal mind space, I'm squaring off against Whitey once again, though "squaring off" might be too strong a phrase since I'm already lying on the ground, with both of my arms blown clean off and a hole through my stomach. Chunks of my flesh and bone are caught, hovering in midair, pinned there by Whitey's Resonance Flow.

He's sitting cross-legged next to me, looking utterly unperturbed by my near-death state and the fact that my blood and shredded flesh are suspended inches away from his face.

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"I never realized it, but we're technically the same level," he comments. "You're level 301 now, and that was my level when I died."

"Fantastic," I spit back, tasting blood. Even if it doesn't hurt as badly as it does outside, it's still unpleasantly close. Why does everything in here have to feel so damned real?

"You're not going to finish me off?" I manage. "C'mon now don't play with your food."

"A little pain should serve to sear that sense of loss into your mind."

"Fucking demon."

“Thank you.”

I groan. “This is so fucked up, so, anyway... when are you taking control of my mind?”

“Honestly? I could try at any time and probably succeed. You haven’t done much to defend yourself.”

“That’s bullshit. You realize I can see just about all of your memories, same as you can see mine, right? I know exactly what you’re planning.”

He gets up, flashing a toothy grin, showing off his inhuman set of canines. “Knowing won’t change anything. There’s nothing you can do.”

Still grinning, he presses his foot onto my forehead and applies kinetic force, making my skull crack from the pressure.

“Soon, we’ll fight unrestricted, and you’ll be using your mana. I know you’ve been thinking about how you should be so much stronger than I was,” he says. The force increases. “I’ll prove otherwise.”

Everything goes black, and then I’m back in my tent again.

“Quent, Quent, hey! Got a moment?” I shout, rushing to catch up to the lumoran technician.

“No.”

“Perfect!”

I hustle after the lumoran before he can enter Workshop number 2, the one I’ve yet to gain access to. He turns, exasperated, and faces me. “Assistant Nathaniel, I’m a level 8 technician. I have no time for silly questions. Ask level 7 technician Leth if you need something.”

“I did. He said he can’t help.”

He sighs. “Ten seconds.”

“I want to work in Workshop number 2, or at least do something more interesting.”

“No.”

“Then how about this?” I continue, having anticipated his answer, I unwrap a piece of fabric to show off a large section of golden chain—the one they used to bind the Champion down in the depths of the mines under Hollowhole. The Champion Biscuit chewed up.

“Are you trying to bribe me?”

“Yes.”

“At least you’re honest,” he replies, touching the chain.

I know it’s not actually gold, just gold-colored, and I still don’t actually know what it’s made of. I can’t even identify it, maybe because it’s too broken to identify, maybe because the system’s being a jerk, or maybe because I don’t officially ‘own’ it enough to identify it.

“That material...where’d you get it?”

“Well, time’s up. Sorry to bother you.” I say as I start to rewrap it.

“Assistant Nathaniel,” he says, a disapproving edge to his voice, “do you realize how often Serabeth, the other level 8 technicians, and the Exoria deployment camp guards complain about you?”

“Not really. Hardly ever?”

“Every single day.”

“Must be a different Assistant Nathaniel.”

“A week,” he snaps. “Technician Leth will administer a test for you and your group to gauge your abilities. If you pass, then I’ll grant you access to Workshop number 2 under his supervision.”

“That’s perfect. Thanks, level 8 technician Quent. See you soon!”

“Assistant Nathaniel...aren’t you forgetting something?”

Having enjoyed our little game, I finally hand over the piece of chain. He cradles it like a precious treasure and walks off with it. It seems the twins’ brand of mischief has rubbed off on me. Gotta admit it’s fun, and now I feel like I may just understand them a little better.

Bearing the good news, I head back to our tent, throwing off my outer clothes before stepping into the living room. As usual, Izzy’s intense blue flame is set for heating, and most of our group is gathered around it.

“They’re going to test us for admission to Workshop number 2,” I eagerly announce.

“Me and Aaron managed to tap into the defensive arrays on a few smaller tents,” Dennis adds, matching my enthusiasm. “With a bit more processing power we might even manage to break into some of the the less secure ones. Perhaps even the storage area!”

“Tess and I just got our asses whooped by Lily in melee combat. Nat, what have you done to her?” Maya demands, shooting me a disgruntled look.

“Even you, Tess?” I ask, turning toward the blonde.

She doesn’t reply, which says more than enough. And I grin holding my arm up for a high five from our petite terminator, Lily, who happily obliges. Group 4,5 wins.

"Anyway, I'm worried things might be even worse than we expected," I say.

"They were way too quick to let you into Workshop number 2, weren't they?" Tess ventures.

I nod. "It's also been several days since Ardenyx left, and judging by the way Serabeth and the others are acting, it shouldn't be taking so long."

"What do you think, Izzy?" Sophie asks her sister.

"From what I can feel, most of the lumorans here are frightened because they're in the dark, but they trust their Champion. They're following him of their own free will, and they absolutely adore him. A lot of them would die for his sake."

"So maybe it's just some secret mission meant to help lumorans," Sophie muses. "Somebody that popular probably isn't evil."

"I tried to get them to move us away from the front," Tess says with a shrug. "But Serabeth refused. Instead, she raised our pay instead."

Sophie snorts. "They can promise entire cities, but none of that matters if they don't expect us to come back. Maybe you should try requesting payment in materials and info, right now?"

"Great idea. I think I'll do just..." Tess begins, only to stop abruptly, as all of us sense a sudden pulse of mana and the camp's defensive arrays burst into light for an instant.

We're instantly on high alert, but no further commotion follows. Instead, I sense something else, an all-too-familiar presence returning. "Ardenyx," I say, the name falling from my lips.

Pulling on our warmer gear again, we hurry outside. Just about everyone in camp, maybe a hundred people or more gathers to watch as Ardenyx comes flying in for a landing near the center of the camp. The war armor collapses onto its knees, its one remaining arm plunging into the snow to keep it from

crashing face-first into the ground. The cockpit area is riddled with holes. A group of Lumorans rush forward to pry it open by hand, as though it were incapable of opening on its own.

They pull the Champion's disciple out, releasing a cloud of hot steam to flood out into the cold air, accompanied by several bursts of mana. Moments later, Ardenyx blinks once before going completely inert, as though its batteries were drained, leaving the armor stranded without the pilot to supply it with additional power.

Before the delirious pilot can be carried away, I notice him clutching something in his hand, something I can't identify, though it radiates an incredibly chaotic mana signature, as he disappears from sight, and I lose all sense of him. Unable to investigate further, I turn my attention back to Ardenyx.

It's in terrible condition: missing an arm, its flight mechanism has been wrecked, the head is gone, and the torso is riddled with gaping holes.

When I try to move closer, a lumoran guard blocks my path just before all non-lumorans are ordered back to our tents, which are locked behind us.

Chapter 524: Signature Isolation Framework

They let us into Workshop Number 2 the next day.

No test needed, leaving both Hed and his group, along with the trio of thylarin behind in Workshop 3 even though they are a bit more experienced on the whole.

I enter, expecting to find something different from Workshop 3, but it's surprisingly similar, the only big difference being the number of war armor parts and level 8 technicians. Even Leth, serving as our guide, seems to have a lot of respect.

I look around, hoping to see Ardenyx, but there are only a few of its parts here; most of the war armor was brought to its own tent to be handled by dedicated technicians.

The rush here is intense, even more so than before. Parts are constantly being shuffled around, materials are delivered, and the machinery remains in constant motion. I see pieces of the arms, a few fingers, plates from the chest piece, and a few portions of the "wings."

“Hurry,” Leth chastens, putting a stop to our ogling before guiding us to our corner, “You will only be assisting me today, nothing else. We don’t have much time, so I won’t be actively teaching you.”

“Leth, why do we not have much time?”

“I’m sorry, Assistant Sophie. I don’t know much, and what I do know I cannot share.”

“I understand.”

We get to work right away, working on the hand and connecting a new finger to it while repairing a bit of damage to one of the other fingers. Leth works incredibly quickly, using a specialized method and an assortment of items that seem to act as keys to unlock the various parts so we can work on them.

The whole experience has the feel of working on proprietary hardware and software protected by passwords, to ensure that only authorized personnel are able to work on it. However in this case it’s probably motivated by a need for security to avoid sabotage rather than because of greed.

Sabotage is a constant worry, and for good reason. Some of the powerful enemy forces are really good at infiltration.

They have to be. The Absolute monster is a mimic, and the others are its kin.

As Leth works—despite his earlier warning—he continues to explain his actions in his normal calm tone. He really is a good teacher. He’s not the most talented, as demonstrated by his extended stint as a level 7 technician, it’s an unfortunate fact that he lacks the skills he needs to push himself higher. But among the level 7 technicians, he’s probably one of the most talented and he certainly loves what he does. There is no bitterness at his inability to break through, and I don’t need Izzy to tell me what kind of guy he is.

Still, even then, he is far beyond any of us. I think we could be considered level 4–6 technicians. It’s hard to say accurately since I’m not sure how they assign rankings here.

Both Sophie and I hungrily take in everything he shows us and almost flawlessly fix the hand, leaving it for a higher-level technician to check over and implement.

After all of this, I still feel fresh, but I notice Sophie and even Leth beginning to look a bit tired. Leth because he did the most work, and Sophie because she doesn't have the same kinds of passives I do. The twins are the same, even though they're struggling to hold on for as long as they can.

We continue for longer, and they are sent away after Leth determines that they're just too exhausted. Then it's just him and me continuing on, moving on to different, and bigger parts, helping other technicians as we go.

At this point, there are rarely any assistants other than me. As before, I follow Leth and support him to the best of my ability. It's been a while since I activated my Mana Wavelength Iris, and I'm fully aware they might recognize it but I just can't bring myself to resist.

I reach into my reserves, letting mana flow through my body as my mind endures more and more strain. And I learn more and more, absorbing the information and filing it away in its own place in my mind, keeping it fresh and ready to store in a mana stone once I'm done. **raNòBÊş**

The proper way to connect the different parts. Methods of constructing circuits so they can continue to function even if some part of them takes damage, duplicate layers, defensive mechanisms, nodes, the proper means of connecting mana batteries, using multiple pathways to deliver mana.

I examine more of these artificial muscles they use to move the armor. They're made of an incredible material I can't quite comprehend, durable yet elastic and highly sensitive to mana. It feels so flesh-like that some part of me wonders if it might be possible to heal them with the proper application of mana or with help from a healer like Lily.

And as the hours pass, I realize Leth is beginning to succumb to exhaustion first, and not just because he did the bulk of the work. Even though it doesn't come up too often, my mid-arcane passive is simply incredible. My Mental Attunement Loop, my experience, my extreme mana reserves, my Physique, my eyes—all come together to make me very good at this.

Finally exiting Workshop 2, Leth takes a deep breath of cold air, "Good job today, Assistant Nathaniel. Please take a good rest; there is so much to be done."

He doesn't give me an opportunity to answer before he heads off toward his own tent, and I return to ours.

Once there, I find myself greeted by the colder weather in the hall before making my way into the living room, where Izzy's flames are keeping the area warm. I noticed it even while working, but it seems like the entire Exoria deployment camp has started using less mana for its functions, almost like it's going into some kind of battery-saving mode.

"So, what happened?" I ask, forming a manablock chair before taking a seat.

"Ardenyx's pilot died an hour ago," Tess states, refusing to beat around the bush.

"I'll take over. Rest a bit," I say, looking over at Izzy as I start generating my own heat and place a set of thermal orbs around the room.

"Thanks," Izzy says, flashing me a weak smile and lying back on the couch while pulling the sleeping Biscuit closer. Noodle even expands slightly so that she can use his body as a pillow.

Otherwise, there is only Lily and Min-Jae here; the rest seem to be doing their own things.

Lily is the next to speak. "I couldn't help him at all. We even destroyed parts of his body to regenerate them from scratch, but whatever was killing him seemed determined to linger. It must have been some kind of curse, or poison, or... or something. I don't know. I only heard whispers, but I think he stayed in some kind of tainted area too long, fully knowing the damage it would cause. All just to retrieve that item."

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

Tess catches my attention and says, "It's one of the few times Lily couldn't heal someone, and it shook her a little."

And I have to agree, Lily seems genuinely down.

"If that happened to any of you, Tess, I wouldn't be able to help. And it would be worse with you. That lumoran was the Champion's disciple and he was somewhere around level 400, so his body could endure it somewhat, but you? Or someone like Nat with his low Constitution?"

"How was it, healing someone so high-leveled?" I ask, changing the subject.

"As we theorized. It took a lot of mana, and it was much slower than it would've been with anyone from our group. I was mostly there as support for the lumoran healers, but even then someone with such a high level, multiple body upgrades, and who knows what else simply requires higher-level and more mana for me to heal."

"Tess, any ideas as to why they went into power-saving mode or theories about the item the lumorans got?"

"Nope. But they sent out some lumorans and mercenaries, perhaps to fight or make sure that Ardenyx didn't leave anyone behind for us to find."

"Got it. Could you get me the warm clothes the others got when they come back? I have a few ideas for some new modifications in case we end up needing to leave the camp. And on that note, how are the twins doing?"

"Dennis and Aaron say they should be able to get into one of the storage tents in the near future, and they're going to look for a replacement tent for us to 'borrow' along with some supplies. But I've been talking to the girls Nat."

"It's about the design, right?"

"Yes."

"What's the problem? They work well."

“Yes, but the changes you made... have made them a bit...unsightly. I know that’s not the main priority, so don’t take it too personally. But if you happen to have a bit of free time...”

“It’s always the girls. The boys love the clothes.”

Tess avoids my gaze for a moment.

“Those jerks, them too?”

“Min-Jae said they look lame and now they’re even bulkier than before, and some of the threads you added restrict his movement.”

"That traitor. If movement is such a big deal, he might as well run around shirtless. Then everyone can admire his scrawny arms and so called abs."

“Please don’t be too harsh on him.”

“Tess, the other day the twins got bored and started giving me nicknames. Min-Jae jumped in and reminded them of ‘Tent Creep,’ and the fact that we’re living in a sea of tents now. And I’m pretty sure the assholes made a set of private links that I haven’t quite cracked yet so that they can laugh about it behind my back.”

“In that case, don’t be too harsh.”

“I knew you would understand,” I say, leaning back in my chair and looking at the ceiling of the tent. As I do I wonder, “They must have known Ardenyx’s pilot was about to die yet they still had us fix the parts, so they must have a replacement pilot ready. I’ll try to get some info out of Serabeth; she probably knows something even if it’s not much.”

“You know there’s no way you’re the replacement they have in mind, right?” Tess taunts, ever the party pooper.

But it's not like I hadn't thought of that. "It's unfortunate, but I agree. I don't even think anyone other than a lumoran could control them, not without an extensive set of modifications."

Tess, deep in thought, stands up after a while, "So the plan remains the same. Since we can't leave, we'll prepare for the event that we end up on our own, and worst comes to worst, we'll head to the 8th floor."

"I guess that makes the most sense," I agree, moving to sit next to Lily. "Try to describe the feelings you got from the thing that killed the pilot of Ardenyx."

That night, a group returns, composed of human mercenaries and lumorans. All of them bear the signs of combat. Damaged equipment and that look in the eyes that tells you when someone still on edge, ready to attack.

Standing near our tent, I observe the process while noting the way the weather has grown even colder, something I can feel even through the clothes I'm wearing, particularly when I'm not supplying them with enough mana. Still, I refuse to let it bother me and watch as they go through the protocols that come into play every time someone leaves and returns to the camp.

One after another, all the mercenaries and lumorans pass through the array and then step into the circle on the ground. A few lumorans from Serabeth's personal unit stand around the circle, other than the Champion and his closest men, they're the strongest people in the camp.

The circle always lights up momentarily, and everyone inside it shows a great deal of relief. Remembering the rules they explained before, I know you'll be killed on the spot if you refuse to go through the test.

As the tests slowly progress, I notice the mood shift. The last remaining human is acting nervous, which doesn't go unnoticed by the guards who shift and grip their weapons.

Mana fills the air.

"I'm not getting in that weird circle. I fought one of them, so some of their blood got on me," he lifts his arm, showing his bloodied sleeve, "I won't let you kill me for that."

“Viden, just go into that damned circle. We saw it before, it’s safe,” one of his friends snorts and turns to one of the guards. “I’m correct, right?”

“Yes, Mercenary Zale, each Signature Isolation Framework was personally constructed by one of our Champions in collaboration with our Absolute.”

“See, Viden, just get in the circle.”

Despite these words, the man continues to refuse, and with each denial, the expressions around him grow darker, even those of his friends.

As he yells, two lumorans grab him and throw him into the circle.

This time, the light doesn’t shine.

The man’s face contorts, half of it twisting as if it were melting, while his body begins to expand. Even his clothes and equipment stretch and grow rather than tearing, their textures remaining intact even as they take on a disturbing resemblance to the flesh. Multiple mouths emerge from the surface of his skin, clothing, and gear, some of which reveal themselves to be about as wide as my arm is long, gaping wide and full of long, sharp, white teeth.

One of those mouths disgorges a series of long tongues, each one covered in a sort of slimy saliva that burns anything it touches.

A dozen or so eyes sprout across his form, varying in size. Some are as large as a human’s, others are bigger than my fist. Each eye glows with an orange radiance framing their black pupils. The grotesque transformation doesn’t spare his equipment either, as mouths and eyes begin to emerge across them as well.

Even then, the mimic still bears some resemblance to the man it replaced, retaining its humanoid figure, despite its engorged and twisted frame.

The mimic doesn't have a chance.

Serabeth's elites surround him, deploying an array and barrier that cuts off any chance of the mimic sending out a signal or damaging the area.

Two guards step inside and rip the mimic apart, their bodies and equipment easily withstanding its desperate attacks. Such is the effect of the array and barrier, that I can't sense so much of a hint of the mana that must be raging within.

When the mimic dies, they collect all the parts of its body, including the bloodied snow and pieces of cloth around it, piling it all in a single heap before placing a dark blue orb on top. Inscriptions flare to life, consuming the orb just before a gout of blue flames surrounds the corpse, burning it until nothing remains.

Everyone in the group is forced to undergo another test before being led over to the tent where Serabeth usually stays, likely for further examination and questioning. I take one last look at the spot where the mimic died before returning to our tent.

Interestingly enough, I noticed the man's level and class name when he was still human. I made sure to check all of them before they left to scout.

Even as a mimic, his level and class remained exactly the same.

Chapter 525: 7th floor's monsters

Three days pass and the weather only seems to grow colder and harsher; the snow, despite frequent cleaning, begins to collect against the tents. The skies grow darker and many times a person can barely see a few steps ahead of them.

Yet we continue as before.

Sophie, Aaron, Dennis, and I continue to help in the workshop and work towards gaining access to more and more advanced parts and information all the while absorbing as much knowledge as we can.

Lily, guarded by the others, is often called to heal as more and more of our smaller expedition units find themselves stumbling upon mimics near our camp and are forced to fight them.

One thing's for sure, sooner or later the enemy will notice the quantity of mimics dying in this area and send someone stronger to take a look.

I also have to wonder why we've been sent here in such a rushed manner why we didn't spend more time in the rear to continue fixing the parts there. Especially since Exoria and Praxion still seem to be damaged in much the same state they were in before we left. Our mission seems to be important, urgent even, That's the only reason we could have been sent here so unprepared.

One of the smaller groups of mercenaries eventually decides to rebel against the lumorans, taking a few technicians as hostages and threatening to kill them. It's a dumb decision, but it speaks to their desperation. They just ask for some equipment so they can leave, nothing else. They know they won't survive in that cold as they are.

Group 4 watches with the other mercenaries as Serabeth kills them all without leaving so much as a scratch on a single lumoran technician.

The mercenaries' bodies implode into small balls of flesh or find themselves pressed into the ground under the incredible gravity, squished into once sentient pancakes.

"What? Now?!" I hear Maya gasp in surprise.

I pay it no mind and upon reaching the tent that serves as her "office", I send a signal.

After a bit of hesitation, the canvas flap opens and I enter to be welcomed by a warm orange light and a clean, minimalistic room aside from the two dozen plants littering the shelves in one of the corners. Serabeth is sitting in her chair behind a wooden table and I grab a chair and wait for her nod before taking a seat.

"So, I begin. I've been wondering if you know what's going on or if you're like us, left in the dark, and my opinion on the matter just keeps changing. One day I think you know something and a few hours later I suspect you know nothing."

“What conclusion did you settle on?”

“You have to know something, but even you don’t know everything. They’re probably limiting the number of people who know, just in case a mimic takes over. It’s also possible, you being you, that you’ve been trying not to think about it, that way if you were to fall to a mimic, it wouldn’t be able to get the information out of you.”

“That’s a reasonable conclusion. In that case, if you came here to ask any of that...”

“I did not. I want to join the scouts for a few runs.”

"No. You're too valuable right now. Even Quent seems to like you, surprisingly enough. Personally, I find you to be a pain in the ass, but the technicians clearly see something in you." rÑôBěš

“I can join scouts in my free time and...”

"No, this conversation is over. Do you think I don't know about Dennis and Aaron rummaging through our storage? I'm aware they took one of the smaller tents and some supplies. I also know about the connection you're making to our array and I saw you examining the Signature Isolation Framework."

She leans closer, her golden eyes dangerous. “All of this was allowed by me because of the value your team brings to the table and the fact you know so annoyingly well where the line is, and haven’t stepped over it, Nathaniel.”

"I'm not naïve enough to think you wouldn't notice—it'd be pretty lame if you didn't. But I also know that heading out with the scouts still stays on the right side of that line."

Serabeth groans, and I feel the pressure on me increasing as pale blue mana swirls inside her crystalline features.

“What do you expect to get out of it?” she asks, clearly annoyed.

“Honestly? I’m not sure yet.”

Her eyes harden even more, but I know I’m still within that line.

“Fine. You may go scouting with tomorrow’s group. And Nathaniel...”

I nod, “If I break the rules, I will be killed.”

Leaving group 4 in the care of Biscuit and to a lesser extent Tess, I head for the meeting spot. All my pyramids are dissipated, The Restrictive Training Emblem is turned off, as are my Burden Enhancement Inscriptions.

Even though I have been working a lot, my crown is humming with a decent amount of mana, not to mention my body with its boosted mana pool after my Primary Class upgrade.

And with my daily training, both on my own and with the other members of our group, my skills have also been leveling nicely, bit by bit.

Active skills (10/10):

Focus - Lvl 60

Perception - Lvl 55

If you spot this tale on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

Redistribution - Lvl 58

Mana Domain (Pride) - Lvl 57

Mana Crown - Lvl 52

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 62

Ley Line - Lvl 47

Bone Knitting - Lvl 29

Eclipse - Lvl 16

Empyrean Lance - Lvl 11

Part of my mind tunes in to the lumoran archer, our leader for this scouting expedition, as he explains the rules. Rules I already know which he nevertheless proceeds to remind everyone of. Breaking any of them will get you killed, whether by the mimics, the weather, or the Lumorans themselves.

All fun stuff.

The group consists of 10 members, Myself included. Five lumorans, two humans, and two thylarin mercenaries. Three of the lumorans are likely approaching level 400, and the rest of the group hovers around levels 300-350.

It's clear that our group chose one of the more challenging options on this floor, judging by the average levels of everyone around us. If we had gone to the 6th Front instead, we'd likely be encountering people around level 300 or lower.

Following our leader's instructions, I adjust my clothes and put on the amulet they gave me. It uses a mana battery to make the cold more bearable, a function that will last for 12 hours before needing a recharge.

I'm also connected to something akin to the link the twins can create, though it's not quite that expansive. This connection apparently allows for the transmission of simple orders: things like "attack," "fall back," and "enemy on the left."

When we pass through the defensive array, the mood shifts and the atmosphere changes as we trudge through the snow, our superhuman bodies easily moving it aside. But the cold increases and the wind strengthens, making audible conversation nearly impossible.

We walk for only a few seconds, but when I look back, the Exoria Deployment Camp is nowhere in sight. It's not just the weather obscuring it—its defensive and camouflage arrays are clearly working together to conceal it as well.

Disconnected from the twins' link and Sophie's web and even forced to cut off my Ley Lines, I feel a sense of dread at that sight. My heart thumps and I feel a chill down my back not caused by the weather.

How easy it would be to never find that camp again, passing by time and again for hours on end, without ever managing to locate it, and neither my eyes nor my skills would help.

Prodded by a signal from the leader, I turn away and keep pace with the group.

For some reason, I've decided to try my very best to keep the leader and any other lumoran that knows the way back alive.

The biting wind intensifies the cold, but no one uses their mana; instead, we stick to relying on our equipment as planned.

We start walking in a huge circle while a few of the other members send out some kind of special detection frequencies, which I examine. They seem to be an attempt at locating mimics without a "host" in our vicinity.

A mimic without a host can take the shape of almost anything: a tree, a stone, hell, maybe even a pile of snow. The limiting factor is the mimic's original size, and the stronger a mimic is, the larger the object it can mimic and the stronger the person it can take over.

Some mercenaries in the camp like to tell rumors about Champion-grade mimics being able to spoof entire buildings, such that they simply let people walk inside before devouring them.

Without a host, a mimic's powers are limited, as is its intelligence. They have dangerous poison, an extremely durable body, and are great at hiding, not to mention their incredibly sharp teeth that tend to possess incredible properties the older or stronger a mimic is.

Once a mimic takes over someone, that's it, it can't return to its original form. That's why they're so selective, especially when it comes to stronger mimics.

Sometimes a powerful mimic can end up taking over a low-level lumoran, thereby having its power limited. In other cases, a weak mimic can luck out and take over a half-dead Champion, and wind up unable to fully utilize the body's powers.

Once the mimic takes over, it has access to most of the host's memories all the while realizing that it is, in fact, a mimic and acting to advance the mimic "cause", or whatever it is. These "rules" change a lot when it comes to powerful mimics and the powerful beings they take over, with any number of exceptions and dozens of little things serving to influence the final result.

The current consensus is that once a mimic takes over, the host is effectively dead, leaving behind only memories that the mimic uses to impersonate them. However, there's a rumor that there's a unit of lumorans that has a theory about reversing the process. Some call it false hope, while others argue that even if it did succeed, the 'person they've brought back would just be a mimic with the host's memories, unaware of its true nature as a mimic.

Either way, it's possible to resist attempts by a weaker mimic to take over. As for the stronger ones, it's best to avoid them whenever possible or focus on taking them out from a distance.

So even though it's not strictly necessary and I'm told I can rely on our scouts, every time we pass by a boulder or a tree covered in snow, I form a dagger and give it a stab.

I know there probably should be lines of text with a level and monster name, but at this point I expect the system to actively hide them until we truly locate them. Even though it goes "against the rules," the system I know, hate, and love doesn't seem to mind twisting these rules to keep the attendees from

abusing them, all for the sake of the “intended experience.” That’s what I think happened to that mercenary when his class and level didn’t change despite having been taken over by a mimic.

It makes me think of another way the system twists the tutorial, about something my handler once told me—not to abuse Beyond Stay tokens to escape danger. Apparently, the more I do so, the angrier the system becomes, twisting things when I return to punish me for it.

I strongly suspect that when I abused it in the mana desert and came back, buried in the white sand and then those damned whales, that was one of these things. So I have to wonder what would happen if I were to do it again. Even so, I know I would still do it if I really needed to.

While I think about that, our scouting expedition continues, and my expectations of danger and battling monsters begin to fade after hours upon hours of uneventful scouting. The romanticized life of constant danger, hunting monsters, and evading powerful foes quickly fades into a monotonous trek through the snow in wide circles, stabbing trees and stones along the way.

It’s the same for the entire 12 hours, not a single mimic, not a single enemy presence in the area, much to the relief of some of the scouts.

We return and I intently observe the way the leader locates the camp, remembering the movement of mana around him, its frequency, and the way it affects the ambient mana around us. I even observe the movement of his body and the vibrations emanating from him.

All this information is compacted, and kept fresh by one of the 6 parts of my mind that immediately starts turning it over time and time again, [Focus] allowing me to push through that boring task and continue my efforts. I also examine the way the Signature Separation Framework examines my body.

For a moment there I wonder what would happen if it just broke and didn’t light up. Thankfully it does, and I live another day, as the lumorans calm down around me.

There are additional checks to get through before I return to our tent though. And I immediately restart my training and allow my body to radiate some heat causing my muscles to feel like they could melt—a feeling almost like jumping into a hot bath on a really cold day.

With Biscuit on my lap, I open the Beyond Community just to see what I've missed.

Hadwin -little pup, I will be joining you on the 7th floor in one month.

Chapter 526: Not lighting up

POV The First Disciple of Nathaniel Gwyn, minion Vega

"You shouldn't do that. Your master tailored it to aid in your growth."

The red-haired human woman has appeared again, as she tends to do.

"Creepy woman!" I call out to her.

As usual, I can't feel her heartbeat, and she insists it's because she's just a projection. But I wonder if she's not really sick and hiding a weak heart out of shame? My master told me never to trust strangers—especially when they act nice.

"Why don't you come up with a better way of addressing me," she says, jumping up to sit on a fallen tree nearby. All the while watching me with those strange yellow eyes of hers as she speaks.

"No."

The woman shakes her head, and I look back to the mana stone Master gave me. Even the first level is packed with information about these seven stances. Master says he got them from a super powerful demon. I wish I could see him. He's probably not as strong as Master, since Master managed to force or trick him into giving up his secrets. But it would be amazing to see them fight!

"Creepy woman, do you know how to unlock the secrets of the stone Master sent me?" I ask lifting the stone toward her.

"Ha! Probably because you can't. My Master's techniques are too much!"

Instead of answering, she only smiles.

Tsk. So she hasn't fallen for it? I could try acting cute. Master said I'm good at that. Or maybe I could try to play on her sympathies; which worked against Master before we opened up to each other. But the way she's looking at me tells me she won't be swayed. Well, it's up to me again. I know the way I'm supposed to do it is probably best, but if I could just tweak it, even a little bit, I'd feel like I was winning against him. Just a little bit.

"Does that envious guy still want to hurt me?" I ask as I start moving my mana the way I was taught, as I continue to examine the stone.

"Sometimes." She nods.

"And Master knows?"

"A little."

"So he's going to kill that envious guy."

The red-haired woman chuckles and moves the hair off her face. "It's not so simple. He might not look like it, but he is very powerful."

"But Master wants to kill him, right? Because that guy said he would kill me, and because he's always messing with him?"

"Yes."

"Then Master will kill him."

"Or die trying," the red-haired woman states bluntly.

I smile and jump to my feet and leap back onto the tree to take a seat next to her. "Yes," I confirm.

She must already know the answer if she's truly observed Master for any length of time, but she still asks, "Wouldn't you be sad if he died because he took on someone too powerful, especially if he was protecting you?"

"A little bit, but so what, as long as it's something he wants to do?" I reply with a smile and reach out a hand, which passes through her body as though it weren't there, though her image remains. "I would do the same."

Once again, she shakes her head and smiles sadly, tapping her finger on one of my horns. Even though I can't touch her, she can touch me, and she loves to pick on me.

"Lady Lissandra, Nathaniel, and you, little minion. People like you live such fleeting lives, yet in that brief span, some shine brighter than any other, like the beautiful final flare of a star as it begins to fade. It's a shame that those like you rarely see the end."

"I don't even know who Lady Lissandra is! But look, I'll give you the horn from a beast I killed a few days ago and a bit of its meat if you show me how to unlock the secrets in this mana stone faster. Master said he was going to call for me during the tournament if possible, and I can't look weak in front of him!"

She taps on my horn again, and before I can try to hit her, she's gone, just like she always does.

POV Nathaniel

For the first time, the mimics launch an attack on our camps. They're weaker monsters without hosts, but they move in groups of hundreds. And even though these weaker variants hover around level 200 and therefore can't possess anyone from Group 4, their bodies are still powerful and more than capable of enduring the cold.

When they're not hiding their natural forms resemble little more than a mass of tentacles which they use to propel themselves forward, while the central mass is covered in a great multitude of mouths and a dozen or so eyes only made worse by the long tongues coated in corrosive saliva protruding from the gaping orifices.

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All of them are wiped out without exception, and a few of the more powerful ones are hunted down by the mercenaries and lumorans.

That's also when the countdown starts ticking, marking the moments until the stronger ones locate our position. Whatever the Champion wants to do here is now on a time limit, and it's not helped by the death of Ardenyx pilot's and the lingering damage to Exoria and Praxion.

The already-tense mood shifts further and our free time is cut short while the lumorans continue to give out an ever increasing flood of supplies in an effort to maintain morale. And I'm sure the point is fast approaching where it won't even matter.

Every day Tess rounds up Group 4, making plans and getting used to the items the twins stole—something Serabeth has continued to let slide. Though our group does miss out on the normal increases to our “hazzard and overtime pay”.

Fair. Honestly, I'd probably be harsher.

Tess keeps going over the plan in case the camp falls, the plan for when the Champions start fighting, the plan in the event that the weather worsens, and the plan if the lumorans turn on us. She also sets measures to ensure no one is taken over by a mimic, making sure no one is ever alone.

Sophie starts working on some kind of web that could theoretically defend someone's mind in the case of a powerful mimic attack. She even thinks about trying to connect our mental strength to defend a single target, almost like the Framework they had in Mindblender City. She really is good at this mind-blending stuff.

Min-Jae is off preparing to leave with the twins soon, waiting for Serabeth to be in the training hall, letting out steam and working off her frustrations. Ever since he saw how she dealt with those mercenaries, he's recognized the similarities in their skills and has taken to asking her for pointers.

Lily is packing another bag full of my arms off to the side. At this point, she could probably do some crazy stuff if she used them all at once, especially now that they're a much better [Sacrifice].

Izzy, Maya, Biscuit, and Noodle are soon heading out too, to talk with Hed and his group in case something happens. They're the group currently recognized as the most reliable.

And I... I also do stuff. I train a lot, yup.

By now, I think I've seen all I can in Workshop Number 2, everything Leth can show me at least. I'm sure he has deeper knowledge, but it's simply knowledge memorized by rote. I want to see Quent at work; I want to see the level 9 technician Ito—the one who oversees Exoria—at work. I want to see Exoria, Praxion, Ardenyx. But I don't think they'll let us. It's more like a shiny jewel they're dangling before us, they're never actually going to let us have it.

I've had that feeling before, that's why I started going on these scouting missions around the camp.

Standing up, I begin preparing. Soon, I'll be heading out again, and at least I can keep testing [Emptyrean Lance] since we encounter mimics almost every time now.

After another twelve hours of scouting and killing some mimics, I follow our leader. Even now, I can't sense where the camp is, so I just keep my eye on him. As before, he reliably leads us until we pass through the first layer of defenses, then we wait for Serabeth's elites to test us with the Signature Isolation Framework.

While we line up for the Framework test, a palpable tension coils through the air. One of Serabeth's elites mutters something to one of the others, quiet enough that I can't quite hear, and they glance in my direction. It doesn't bother me at first, these elites are always looking for threats, always suspicious.

A cold breeze whistles around us, and the other scouts fidget restlessly. Our leader peers over at the technicians manning the control crystals linked to the Framework and taps his foot as if waiting for a signal.

“Good job this time too, Assistant Nathaniel. To be honest, I was iffy about you, but you did well. I can see why the technicians like you,” the lumoran scout leader says, standing beside me as the others pass through the framework.

“Because I’m cheap.”

He laughs shortly and points at my crown. “That too. But also because of that. He says, pointing at my crown. We lumorans have our own methods of storing mana, so [Mana Crown] is extremely rare for us.”

“So you like me because I’m a good mana battery.”

“The fact you’ve acquired a crown shows you have a strong connection to mana, something we also have. Plus, your obsessive nature might anger the technicians, but they like you for it too.”

“All craft-people are a bit weird.”

“I agree,” he says, smiling and gesturing me onward.

I’m one of the last to step into the framework and take my chance, “Maybe you could tell them to show me more. I could help...”

Something in his expression changes—first surprise, then shock, and finally regret. I follow his gaze to the framework around me.

Unlike before, it’s not lighting up.

A sudden hush falls across the area, as though everyone has stopped breathing at once.

Before I can open my mouth to protest, Serabeth’s elites spring into action. In an instant, multiple mana circles blaze to life around me. A swirl of crackling electricity arcs from one side, while jagged shards of ice take form, hovering in midair on the other. Someone hurls a sphere of raw kinetic force straight at my chest—no hesitation, no mercy.

I react on pure reflex, drawing Fracture in one swift motion. Its blade devours the surrounding air. The first barrage of spells collides with the shortsword. Lightning fizzles, ice shards dissolve into mist.

I catch a glimpse of the scout leader's face twisted in regret. But it's too late. The rest of the elites move in, each brandishing weapons or spells, determined to finish me off as quickly as possible. My heart pounds in my ears, and my mana surges again, feeding me with power. A thrill races through me; my entire body hums with the influx of mana, as though my blood had caught fire.

They attack to put me down before I can retaliate. I feel each assault like a drumbeat, slamming into my barriers and into my passives with relentless force. Yet I hold on for that little bit. The world shifts to black and white, my thoughts racing so fast that even the movement of my mana feels sluggish. Sparks erupt across the clearing as spells collide with the barrier, fracturing it. A harsh wind whips up snow and dirt, obscuring the edges of my vision.

In the split second of calm between attacks, my eyes dart around, searching for an opening. The camp's defenses activate, and the scout leader acts alongside Serabeth's elites.

No one waits for an explanation. The Framework's detection is absolute.

I swing Fracture, the blade appearing to devour the very air around it, and I swing it to defend against the onslaught. The mana in the crown above my head compresses, instantly turning pitch-black. It shatters the array surrounding me and begins devouring a dozen extremely powerful attacks, each one adding a surge of mana to my stores.

The air grows heavier as the crown's black mana pulls in the surrounding mana like a whirlpool.

I lift my blade once more.

If they want me dead, they'll need to do better than this.

Chapter 527: Four options

I open my mouth to try to talk to them, to make them stop, to ask them to wait, or so I can explain, but a single glance at the lumorans' faces tells me enough. And I know the rules.

There is no talking the moment someone is identified as a mimic.

The attacks get pulled into the crown, none reaching me at all, so with eerie efficiency they switch—melee attackers rushing toward me.

Some of that absorbed mana channels through me, powering [Redistribution] and halting their movements, providing just the second of reprieve I need to break through.

The scout leader, whose name I don't even remember, lets his hold slip. He blocks my way out of the camp, switching from his bow to two daggers, mana seeping from his crystalline features. And he attacks to kill.

Fracture devours the mana I hold in my body. Resonating as it always does, all the forces it contains straining to break free. [Eclipse] holds it down, but it's more difficult than ever before.

The sword has sensed the Mana Crown, and it either doesn't like it or likes it too much.

Fracture and clashes with the scout leader's sword, my sword slicing through with ease. Destroying mana, material, and connections. All his barriers, defenses, body strengthenings are for nothing as the sword cuts through his chest just over his heart.

[You have defeated Bowbound Seeker – lvl 376]

[Lvl 302 > Lvl 303]

Wraith Dance takes me over his corpse and into the snowstorm, leaving the black crown behind to start devouring the defensive arrays of the camp to force them split their forces and hopefully slow down Serabeth.

Over and over again, I channel kinetic energy and mana through my body to take myself as far as I can.

I cut through every mark and tracking technique they try to tie to me with Fracture. The sword remains unsheathed, its bone-and-white-molten-sand blade fracturing further as black and gray smoke swirl wildly within.

My arm holding it barely has any flesh left on it, and the blade has eaten holes into the bone. The healing marks I activate do hardly anything to fix it, and my mana is unable to hold it back. But left with no other choice, I run, I fly, and I use the sword to break through any attempts to slow me down.

I regulate my heart's signature. I try to stop any movement or vibrations from passing beyond my body. I regulate my mana and keep it inside.

Hour after hour, I'm tracked by lumorans and mercenaries trying to locate and catch up to me in the storm. Each would be capable of facing me alone, and multiple attacking at once would easily be enough to kill me.

When barely anything of my arm remains, I put Fracture in its scabbard which also cracks immediately. Even though we did maintenance not long ago there are signs of it being worn, along with the damage to the sword's handle.

I slide against a tree and make snow fall from it, hiding me entirely. More than before, I calm my mana and beating heart, relying on my eyes alone as I watch for any movement in the mana around me. Even though the ever-present movement of the snow and wind is there, I try to use my kinetic senses as well.

As I do, I open the Community. Ignoring the wall of messages from Group 4 I write mine.

Noname (Hell, Group 4) –I'm fine, just don't be stupid. Keep checking the number of people in Beyond before you declare me dead.

Some of the messages I see are a bit... emotional. Especially from Lily and, surprisingly, from the others as well. After a while, they calm down, likely Tess telling them the same thing I wrote.

Noname (Hell, Group 4) –gonna hide. If things get too dangerous I will go to Beyond.

With that, I close the community to avoid getting distracted by the messages and check my tokens.

Tokens:

Beyond 3 day stay token

Beyond 1 day stay token

Beyond 1 day stay token

Communication with your disciple for 10 minutes

All good.

I give my arm another once over, realizing that it's the most damaged I've seen so far by Fracture. From previous experience, I know it will probably take a week... or three for it to fully regenerate, even with Lily's healing.

Still better than dying. Much better.

Before I continue that train of thought, I teleport myself through the [Ley Line] I set before. The area where I was implodes, and immediately I feel myself pulled to the ground. My insides twist, and before I myself implode, I teleport again and throw another line far off into the distance.

That feeling grabs on my insides again, a pulling sensation as my flesh, bones, and organs start trying to move toward a single spot to implode on themselves. It disappears with the teleport, and I shoot multiple lines and change the defensive field around me, strengthening it with my [Mana Domain] and [Eclipse]. This time, that feeling slides by me, the area behind me imploding into itself, a loud pop resounding through the area as the air rushes to fill the empty space.

Again and again, dozens of these attacks follow me, attempting to slow down my movement or change the gravity affecting me so I fall in a different direction.

Serabeth herself is hunting me. Someone I have no means of surprising as I did with the scout leader before.

Finally, her skill—likely higher level than anything I have—takes hold of me and sends me crashing into the ground. And then it grasps my [Ley Line]. Even though I'm sure it costs her a lot of mana and effort since disruption isn't her specialty, she implodes the line of mana.

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And she is a mile away while doing so. A distance that won't take more than a moment for her to pass, as I observe her mana signature and feel the increasing strength of her hold on me and the effects of her attempting to implode my entire body.

The world loses its colors, and my mind races as black mana powers my [Focus]. Dozens of thoughts rush through my mind at breakneck speed.

Should I fight her? Do I have a chance? Is it worth it even if I win? There are likely multiple people behind her.

The way she uses her skill is interesting, so I try to observe it. Min-Jae could find it useful, so a part of me takes note to create feedback for him.

And through all this, one more thought holds sway over my mind.

Who is the impostor who messed up the Signature Isolation Framework?

"Use Beyond 1 day stay token."

With that, the area around me changes. The bone-chilling cold is gone, the attempts to squash me end, only to be replaced by that never-ending void in a sea of stars and my handler sitting behind her old wooden table.

"Hello," she greets.

"Hello," I reply, and with a groan push myself back to my feet, only to find one of them missing.

Huh, I didn't notice it. That was closer than I thought, Serabeth.

I recreate it with mana which I weave together with mana, making use of the new technique. I do the same for the missing portions of my right arm which may as well be bare bones. Then I allow myself to use Lily's healing marks to restore the parts that weren't damaged by Fracture, which also gives me my feet back and makes me stumble as my mana prosthesis is rapidly replaced with flesh and blood.

"What do I have to thank for meeting you here again?"

"There is information I want to give you, and I think I can because of some guy... doing stuff. But it will cost me a bit, and I won't be able to share much for a while afterward."

"Do I want to hear it?"

"I think you do."

"Tell me."

"If you return to the 7th Floor after one day, it's highly likely that you or some other member of your group will die."

"Why."

"This is the third time you've abused a stay token to avoid danger. The system doesn't look kindly on that."

I form a chair from my mana and sit on it while facing my handler. She is very powerful, so it's possible she could be trying to hide her intentions and manipulate me into something. Hell, her next piece of advice, or offer, whatever words she decides to use will probably be designed to prod me in a direction she wants. But at the same time, I don't think she is lying.

"What are my options?"

"There are two of them. The first is to use all of your stay tokens and extend your stay as long as possible. Then when you return, there will still be backlash, but not as severe, and though it will still be dangerous, you should be able to survive it."

I let my mind race as I imagine all the consequences of that. I should be fine, but Group 4 will have to take care of themselves for a while. After I was wrongly identified as a mimic, with the probability of saboteurs or hidden mimic in the camp, everything spiraled further. Then there's the mystery of what the Champion's trying to accomplish, what the Ardenyx pilot obtained, Exoria, Praxion, and more.

It feels annoying to leave such an enticing mystery behind.

"The second option?" I ask.

"I told you about it before, but all of Earth's rounds of the tutorial have been synchronized, which allows you to take Beyond quests. As your handler, it's up to me to use my influence and resources to sort through the available Beyond quests for you—obviously according to their requirements and your current rank—and that's what I did. Leaving the tutorial for a few days and going on a Beyond quest before returning to the 7th Floor will work even better than using stay tokens to extend your duration."

"You really want me to pick the second option, right?"

Crossing her arms on her chest, she leans back in her chair, that smile of hers crawling on her lips. "Please, don't insult my intelligence. We both know which option interests you more."

"And that option just happens to fit into your plans somehow."

“What plans? I’m just a handler.” Her eyes meet mine with a challenging look, daring me to respond.

“Sure,” I say, waving my hand dismissively. “So what are the options?”

She stops leaning and picks four papers off the table and taps on the first one. “Planet of Cairnthal went through the pairing a hundred years ago. It’s fairly peaceful at the moment. Its Absolute created a court where the four strongest families, each led by a Champion, are competing to become ‘the strongest,’ while the Absolute watches on in amusement. This info is extra from me. So the quest comes from a powerful Champion who is looking for an attendee with a high grade mana based trait.”

“Huh, so my eyes or physique? What do they want? Experimentation?”

“Nope.” My handler shakes her head and lifts her hands. The left one uses the thumb and pointing finger to create a circle and the finger of the other one moves to...

“Okay, okay, got it. Where the hell did you learn that gesture? And no,” I refuse.

She laughs. “Are you sure? The pay is really...”

“No,” I repeat.

With the same big smile, she continues. “The second one is a Champion looking for a teacher for his son who awakened kinetic energy.”

“Wouldn’t a few days be too short for it?”

“He can create some sort of mind space to drastically increase the speed of your thoughts. This gives the illusion of more time passing. It’s probably only three to ten times faster, but with enough preparation, he can maintain it for a long time. It would probably melt your brain without your mid-arcane passive, but you should be able to keep up.”

"It's the best one so far. Why are they picking attendees instead of searching for people from their planets?"

"It tends to be easier than searching normally, and the system allows them to be sure of what they are getting. Maybe they don't have a qualified person on their planet, maybe they don't have a coalition backing them or don't have access to the coordinates of other planets. It could also be that they can't travel to different planets. And the system likes it too because it allows you to gain experience with the system outside of the tutorial, so it subsidizes the payment."

"Oh. Got it. So it's cheaper for them."

"Often yes. It also gives you a chance to build connections. Anyone capable of accessing Beyond quests probably has the potential to become a Champion at some point in the future."

"I see. The third?"

"The third one is looking for someone with a highly mana conductive body for experimentation. It could help you learn more about body modification, but the risk of death is... well, significant. The pay's terrible, but I doubt you'd care about that anyway."

With a sigh, I stand up and let my chair disappear. "So what's the one you really want me to take?"

"Don't worry you're going to like it."

Then she tells me, and I really do.

Trusting my instincts, I decide to go with the fourth option.

We don't wait any longer, and I follow my handler without a moment to send a message to my group. Not that I could do it from Beyond anyway.

My handler waves her hand, and a set of double doors extend from the floor. They even look like normal doors; with no inscriptions or anything crazy like that.

I take a moment to look them over before taking the knob and throwing them open, revealing a long, dark hallway.

Even though this place is taking me out of the tutorial to somewhere extremely far away, there's no wild surge of mana or even the slightest unsettling feeling. I simply step through and find myself outside the tutorial, in a different place.

Just the sheer thought that it could be so easy is incredibly scary, especially given that I now know more about the powers of the beings overseeing the tutorial.

I hear the doors close, and when I turn to look, they're gone.

Chapter 528: Warden

I continue down the hallway. Even though it seems old and neglected, judging by the thick layers of dust, the floor, walls, ceiling, and ornamentation show not a single sign of wear. As if they had been perfectly preserved.

On one side of the hallway, there are doors leading into rooms beyond, each in a different color. Greens, blues, yellows, reds, they all mix in a way that comes together in a surprisingly appealing fashion. The other side is lined with windows, enough to cover the entire wall, though they're dirty and covered in sand. The fine gray sand is everywhere, piling in drifts throughout the hallway, and collecting on the windowsills, inside and out mounding against the glass, and resting against them. Really a lot of it.

I don't check any of the rooms. Instead, I head toward the mana signature I sensed the moment I appeared here, the same one that immediately located me and shines like a beacon even now, guiding my way.

Eventually, the hallway opens up, and eventually, a passage opens in the wall of windows, and I enter a garden filled with bone white trees cleaned of leaves. Each one is beautifully shaped, and I can't resist the urge to touch them, feeling a sense of comfort and warmth emanating from their bark.

Even here though, the fine gray sand covers every surface, piled against the trees, on benches, and gathered in the corners.

I look up at the sky locked away behind a pale blue barrier. The sky is dark and full of beautiful stars, but it's also scattered with debris. The moon beneath us has largely shattered into pieces, each one the size of a continent back on Earth, now orbiting what little remains of the original core of the moon. And here we are as well, protected by the pale blue, dome-like translucent barrier shining weakly in the sky, sheltering all that's left from the void of space and drifting debris.

For the first time since arriving here, I allow kinetic energy to flow, boosting myself into the air. From my elevated position, I find myself looking over a barrier that stretches across a region the size of a truly massive city. Everything inside has been protected, while everything beyond it is a wasteland of ruin, with massive craters filled with the debris of broken cities.

I land back on the ground and head toward the white tower near the barrier's edge, which is also near the edge of the "rock" we are on. The barrier extends just enough to protect the tower; a single step beyond it would take you into outer space, the highest and never-ending jump one could make.

The tower door is made of a sort of stone that almost seems to glow in the darkness against gray sand. It opens, and I enter. There is no dust inside; it's well lit and well maintained. But it's silent. There are no other living beings I can detect save the signature lying in wait at the top of the tower.

Around the midpoint of the tower, the stairway ends, leading through a wall. I go there, only to find that the stairs continue, but they do so outside the tower, spiraling around as they climb. So I keep walking.

There is no railing, and a strong wind pushes my body. My mana dissipates, and I cannot use it. My kinetic energy is gone, my heart continues beating but it fails to generate any. The thermal energy that was healing my body vanishes, and I start feeling colder. And then the mana prosthesis on my damaged right arm disappears too, leaving me with a mess of bones, and the odd muscle and tendon.

The higher I climb, the more difficult it becomes. My body, deprived of its usual resources and buffeted by the wind, feels each gust threatening to knock me off the stairway, which is only wide enough for one person.

I stop for a moment, bracing against the wall as the wind blows into my face, my hair swirling wildly. I feel my clothes stretch and the cold begins to permeate through my body. The pain I'd been ignoring with my skills returns in stronger and stronger waves and the body that felt so light before now feels weighted, harder to move. My senses are so limited. I'm so slow.

Even so, I place my left hand over my chest, feeling my heart pound like a frightened little bird. I look down and realize how high I've climbed, the white tower extending below me. Before me, near the open air, is the barrier, which seems so weak against the endless darkness filled with stars.

I wonder if I jumped, would I pass through the barrier? Or would it stop me? And is it a prison for the man I'm going to meet, or protecting what remains of this moon? And if I fell, would my mana return before I hit the ground?

With these thoughts and many more, I continue my trek. Each step takes seconds, my left hand touching the side of the tower. Feeling the cold, rough stone against my fingertips, and the gaps between the white blocks that make up its structure, and a strange vibration I can barely perceive.

Step after step.

Eventually, I reach the point where the stairs take me back inside the tower. Only after I step in does some of the tension leave my body. My mana and my primordial energies gradually return, bringing my skills back as well, filling me with the power to which I've grown accustomed to.

At another time, I would be furious that everything was blocked so easily. I've worked hard to ensure this would never happen, and this situation will push me to work even harder. But at the same time, I understand: the man I'm heading toward is just that powerful.

Maybe not the strongest, but certainly one of the oldest Absolutes.

Warden of the Parallax Eyes, Kyralon.

POV Maya Jones

Ever since Nat ran away, things have gone to shit. It happened right after Serabeth returned, apparently failing to kill him—judging by the fact that the number of Beyond attendees didn't decrease. The fact he isn't talking likely means he ran to Beyond.

If you come across this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from Royal Road. Please report it.

He really is hard to kill, that guy...

Damn, I'd like to have seen him just once after he was forced to run away. Knowing that guy, he must be so pissed off. He's the type who is confident to the point of hubris, calm to the point of creepy, and petty to the point of scary.

I know his kind; people like him tend to climb high up there, and I plan to ride that wave as his future "knight." Knowing Nat, he's the type who wouldn't mind even if I were to slack off for years and simply collect my wage in the form of items, training, and other benefits—it'd probably even be a while before he asked me to do anything really annoying. That's my ideal employer.

Tess likes to call me shameless and asks if I have no pride, with my willingness to take on a younger guy as my boss. But she's still young; she'll understand as she gets older.

So don't die on me, you asshole even if you do have the most punchable face on the 6th... no, 7th floor!

I lower the effect of my [Focus] for a bit to keep myself from getting caught up in my own bravado, letting more of my natural fear seep in, and only then do I reactivate it, albeit at a lower level.

[Focus - lvl 44 > Focus - lvl 45]

For a moment I wonder what level his [Focus] is, but after thinking about it I decide I don't want to know. Knowing him, he's probably broken past the level 50 bottleneck. What a monster. He was really born for that skill.

It's at this point that Tess passes by, and I step aside so she can head off to Nat's room to loot it. Meanwhile, I continue packing my things as well.

Tomorrow is the day we leave.

We aren't running away though, we're acting on Serabeth's orders, they're sending all non-essential personnel away. Apparently, we've already drawn too much attention, so we're leaving on foot rather than using teleportation.

Personally, I blame Nathaniel's black crown for permanently ruining a large part of the camp's defenses, to the point where the Champion himself had to intervene. Interestingly enough, he didn't waste energy trying to destroy it, opting instead to simply flick it away, sending it miles and miles off. People seem to do that pretty often with Nathaniel's black mana, choosing to just get rid of it and make it someone else's problem. The same way people tend to handle Nat.

But that's enough of that. I take control of my thoughts again and [Focus], suppressing a more targeted range of my emotions.

Like everyone else, I continue my preparations until Lily passes by. I notice the expression on her face so I jump at her, pull her into a hug from behind, and whisper, "It will be fine. He will be fine. We'll all be ok."

I feel her body tense up, but when she looks at me, she's smiling. "It will be. Because I'm here."

I let her go and reply. "You're wrath, not pride."

"It will be fine because I'll destroy anything in our way?"

"Much better! Now, while Tess is busy robbing Nathaniel's room, let's go check on Sophie and the twins. Izzy said they're planning on trying something scary with Blackie and Ardenyx."

POV Myrra

"Little kitten, how have you progressed with the mind defense technique I showed you?"

"I think I'm doing well. It's hard to tell without someone actively trying to take over my mind."

We're both standing at the top of the hill, looking over the bank of a lake. Hundreds of towers pierce the sky down there. But Lady Lissandra seems to be looking somewhere beyond the city instead.

She sits down, motions for me to do the same, then opens her hand. And like I've done many times before, I put mine into hers. Then she brings out one of the last pieces of the heart I took from the man she ordered me to kill when we met Nathaniel.

As before, my body starts to itch and a high-frequency ringing fills my ears. It hurts, but it's something I can endure.

"I'm bored, Lady Lissandra," I complain.

"Train."

"I'm doing that, but I'm tired of all this training."

"Then keep training until you're not tired of it anymore."

I groan, my tail twisting in annoyance as well. At this point, I really wouldn't mind stepping into a city full of mind mages. I bet I could find some interesting things to do there. Fun people to observe, maybe even someone interesting to bully.

"Are we going to kill someone again?" I ask her.

"We'll be testing your mind defense training in the city while I take over that shoddy Framework they made."

"Do I want to know what you're planning to do with it? Actually... just tell me, please. I'm too curious."

"You lynthari make for hopeless students, little kitten. Your attention span is too short."

"I'm not sorry."

"Of course, you're not. Once we secure your status and before we leave this floor, I will take some time to level up."

"A bit?"

"Yes. I will reshape their Framework, the Spatial Locks, and the prison they connect to in a particularly intriguing way."

"I always worry when you say something will be 'intriguing', Lady Lissandra."

She ignores me, her eyes fixed on the empty space above the city. "I'll use it to power my [Singularity]. That should be enough to deal a considerable amount of damage to this Astral Prison. Remaining at level 100 forever is not an option, and this will pave the way for an intriguing Primary Class upgrade."

Lady Lissandra's fingers tighten around the shard of the heart, the faint pulse within it radiating an unsettling energy. She tilts her head, her gaze never leaving that invisible point above the city. For a moment, I think she's done speaking, but then her voice comes, calm and deliberate.

"Little kitten, tell me, what would you do if there were no rules? No boundaries?"

The question catches me off guard, and I blink at her, my ears twitching. "I... don't know. Why?"

"Because that's where you need to exist. Not within the lines someone else has drawn for you but beyond them."

Her words sink in, cold and sharp, but I can't quite form a response. The way she speaks, as if the world itself is little more than a puzzle she's already solved.

She finally turns to me, her pale eyes gleaming with a quiet intensity. "Do you want to play in a city full of mind mages, little kitten?"

I swallow, my tail curling tighter under a sudden wave of fear. "Y-yes."

Her smile is faint and chilling. "Good. Let's begin."

Chapter 529: Beyond Quest

POV Nathaniel

There are no more stairs as I pass through the hallway illuminated by a gentle orange glow. I ignore the multitude of doors lining the walls, at least until I reach one that stands open. The room beyond is shaped like a half circle, and within I find another open door, set in the wall opposite the outer curve of the room, leading to a vast loggia. From there, I can see into the darkness, filled with the shards of the broken moon and countless stars. There is a strange sensation in the air, so tangible it borders on smothering. It's fascinating.

The room itself is tidy, yet the space is practically choked with tables, crystal pillars, statues, boxes of materials, vitrines holding various items, and glass containers filled with odd liquids, along with much more.

Every wall is lined with shelves made of black wood, covering every surface of the wall save a slight buffer around the loggia's opening. Thousands upon thousands of brilliant, pale-blue mana stones rest on these shelves, each about the size of a grape with a more oval shape.

And it's next to one of these shelves that I see a velnar man, the same race as my fellow assistant Hed. Like Hed, he stands many heads taller than me, though he appears slimmer and much older than the other velnar I've met. Gray hair covers his head, and a matching beard extends down to his collarbone. He's wearing a black, long-sleeved shirt and matching pants. The only adornments are the simple silver ornaments around his collar and the ends of his sleeves.

Sensing my presence, he turns fully to face me, and at last, I see his eyes. Parallax eyes, whatever that means.

They are deep black, like a night sky without a horizon, filled with a scattering of tiny, softly glimmering lights that shift ever so slightly—as if the stars themselves were watching me.

“I recognized that technique the moment you arrived,” he tells me, speaking in a deep and calming voice.

And as he does I think I detect a hint of curiosity in the tone of his speech. A sort of almost childlike curiosity that I know all too well, seemingly retained even at his advanced age.

“No. Thank you.” I shake my head.

He smiles. Looking at me with those remarkable eyes, and gives a slight nod. “You seem to have understood that person’s teachings very well.”

Kyralon then gestures for me to come closer. I oblige, my gaze darting across the room straining to take in all there is to see. There’s just so much.

“I would like to ask you a question,” I say.

“Please. There is no need to be overly polite. Your...handler,” he adds, smiling with faint amusement at that word, “must have told you about my preferences.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to find myself being thrown out of the tower for asking too many questions.”

“I’ll admit that’s a possibility; there have been people like that before. While I value curiosity, I also value peace from needless irritation. So, let us strike a balance: for every one hundred questions I pose to you, you may ask me a single question in return.”

“That sounds like a good deal for me, so I’ll take it,” I answer promptly.

"In that case, I want to restate my rules. I'm sure your handler told you, but I prefer to repeat them so there are absolutely no misunderstandings."

He leads me out onto the balcony, where two chairs have been arranged on either side of a small table. The tabletop is circular and made of that same black wood. A dense web of inscriptions has been etched into the surface, with what looks like silver metal wire filling the grooves. There are also a myriad of what are literally the tiniest mana stones I have ever seen, each one no larger than a few grains of sand, scattered across the table in a careful pattern.

"I'm listening," I confirm.

When Kyralon gestures again, I sit in the smaller chair while he settles into his own. His large frame looms over both me and the table, which is already quite big for me but fits his proportions well.

"There are no rewards for this quest," he begins.

"Yes."

"If you touch anything I have not allowed you to, you will die."

"Yes."

"If you try to identify anything I have not allowed you to, you will die."

"Yes."

"This next rule is new, but I think we've already reached an understanding: if you ask too many questions, I'll throw you out of the tower." He smiles.

"That would be understandable," I confirm.

"Then there are the obvious rules. No stealing, no attacking me, and so on. The punishment is likely death, but that may vary."

"Understood."

"Good. Now that we've clarified the more severe rules, let's continue with my request." He straightens his clothing and looks at me. "You will be keeping me company for the next five days. You will answer any question I ask without lying. You can refuse to answer, but we will discuss your reluctance should such an occasion arise."

"Yes."

"You will also help me with certain tasks on request, but as a rule, I won't make you do anything that would kill you."

"That's very nice of you."

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"For all of that, I swear upon my life and upon my title as the Warden of Parallax Eyes to uphold an unbreakable vow of confidentiality regarding anything you share with me about yourself, your life, and your circumstances. I will not divulge it to anyone else, under any circumstances, even if my own life should be threatened, no matter how dire the consequences of my silence. That extends to direct communication, indirect suggestion, or coded references of any kind."

"Huh, okay?" I say surprised by the change of speech, but he seems to be taking it seriously so I listen as he continues.

"I further promise that I will not use the information you provide to harm you, your family, your friends, your associates, your community, your organization, your planet, or any aspect of your life, physically, emotionally, socially, or otherwise. I will not let that happen through my words, my actions, or my inaction."

He looks at me and I nod.

"No record will be made of anything you confide in me. No written documentation, no mana stones, no memory crystals, no proxies, no constructs of any kind. The information will reside solely within my personal memory, inaccessible to others. I will never repeat or transmit it by any means, magical, technological, or otherwise, and I will employ every measure to protect it from intrusion or extraction, regardless of how skilled or powerful those seeking it might be."

I nod again.

"No one else will be present, listening, or observing as I receive this information, not through surveillance, skills, mind links, or any other methods. I will not consent to any force, influence, or entity, even those I would normally trust or control, having access to this knowledge. Even if I die or am rendered incapacitated, I will not pass on this information by inheritance, legacy, or any posthumous mechanism. Should my ability to honor this vow come under threat—by external forces, incapacitation, or the unforeseen—I will sever the knowledge from my memory before I allow it to be compromised or weaponized. This is my vow, binding and absolute."

The honesty of that long declaration is confirmed to me through the system, as well as my title as a Champion candidate. It appears to be a variation of the declaration or perhaps a challenge. And I believe it.

He has taken the system itself as his witness, effectively inviting it to kill him if he breaks this oath.

Kyralon continues, "I'm not entirely shameless, so your reward will be one answered question in exchange for every hundred questions I ask you, as well as anything else you might learn or gain here."

"I agree to all of that."

"Perfect." Kyralon claps his hands together with a gentle smile. His gaze does not leave me as he asks his first question: "Please, tell me the name of your planet."

"We call it Earth. I'm not sure if it'll get a fancy new name after joining the system, or if it'll stay as it is."

“Interesting. What is your planet’s population?”

“About eight billion humans, give or take.”

“How did you learn that information about the population number?”

“I heard it on TV.”

“What is TV?”

“Um, just so you know, don’t expect detailed scientific explanations from me, but I’ll try,” I give him a small warning. “TV can be of various sizes. It’s mostly a thick sheath of plastic, glass, and electronics. It changes what it displays by lighting up internal components. Speakers vibrate to create sound, recorded or broadcast live. TV is connected to a planetary network that allows people to share information.”

“Very interesting. Who manufactures it? What are electronics? What do you mean by lighting up lights? Who makes these recordings? And what is that network? Also, how do most people live? Cities, villages, or settlements? How large are they? Why do you share information?”

He punctuates each question with genuine enthusiasm, his immense frame leaning in while those Parallax eyes remain fixed on me.

I can feel my energy drain at such a barrage of questions, but I press on. The reward is simply too intriguing. I recall that he will answer my single question after one hundred of his, and the information he might reveal will likely not be censored by the system. And, after all, he’s an Absolute. Someone even my handler said he is among the oldest.

“Usually, companies make it. Honestly, it’s some kind of molten rock, I think, and they run electricity through it to create certain effects. Look, like I said, I didn’t pay too much attention in school, and it’s not really my strong point. By ‘lighting up lights,’ I’m guessing there are LEDs or pixels or maybe something more advanced nowadays. I know that in the past, TV used to rely on red, blue, and green lights, and by adjusting how they lit up, different colors could be displayed. As for who records the content, mostly companies again, but sometimes it’s done live, too... it’s complicated. We have massive

cities with millions of people, and I think the biggest city has around forty million. But we also have small villages of only a few dozen. We share that information because people are willing to pay for it.”

I let out a short breath, unsatisfied by my explanation, but it doesn’t deter the curious Absolute before me.

“Such a civilization is not uncommon in the system,” he notes seriously. “Tell me more about these companies. Tell me what you think of this ‘electricity.’ Tell me more about the schools you spoke of. How do you know they used red, green, and blue diodes? Did you learn that in school, or elsewhere? Who gathers such information, and how is it stored? You sound less than fond of these ‘companies.’ Why is that? What is the currency of your planet? How is your world governed, and what system do you use?”

So, I begin answering again, carefully keeping track of the number of questions.

I do my best to be thorough, partly because I want him to answer me in kind, and partly because, strangely, I find this entertaining. He’s asking questions about things I’ve known for years but never really thought about deeply.

At last, when I finish answering the one-hundredth question, I look him in the eye. “That was one hundred.”

Kyralon nods. “Indeed. Please, go ahead and ask yours.”

“You said you recognized the technique I’m using. Tell me about the person who created it.”

He smiles and nods approvingly, as though verifying something about me. Then he reaches for a small pouch on his belt, just large enough for him to slip two fingers inside.

The pouch is simple, crafted from a white leather I don’t recognize, worn with age, and fastened by a red cord woven from several threads of the same color. There is a single pattern upon the leather: a faint black silhouette of an open hand.

Kyralon withdraws two glasses from the pouch, one that is huge by my standards and another smaller, meant for me, followed by a bottle of pale-blue liquid that seems to sparkle. The bottle alone is far too large to fit into that pouch under normal logic.

He notices my eyes lingering on the pouch and asks teasingly, “Have you already settled on your next question for another set of one hundred answers?”

I nod, earning an amused look. After pouring drinks for us both, he takes a long sip before speaking.

“Lissandra Hawthorne, the first and only Absolute of Eladore. She lived so long ago that only a handful of the fourteen Rulers remember her personally, with just a few more Absolutes and other beings. She left her planet after it fell to internal strife, accompanied by the lone survivor, her disciple, Absolute Candidate Ruby, whose surname is unknown, likely due to her upbringing as an orphan. Those who still remember Lissandra Hawthorne call her by various names: Eladore’s Shadow, The Absolute, but most often, The Ancient Monster. She and her disciple are remembered for going on a rampage and killing the Ruler of Greed, the Ruler of Humility, and the Ruler of Wrath before Lissandra Hawthorne finally perished during her challenge against the Ruler of Pride.”

He finishes that statement and looks at me as if gauging whether I consider my question answered.

Though I want to learn more, much more, I hold back my curiosity. Given how generous he’s been in his responses, I interpret it as a sign of goodwill on his part.

After all, we have plenty of time left. There will be more opportunities to ask.

Chapter 530: Among Us

“How do you obtain food on your planet?”

“Usually by purchasing it from a store.”

“Ah, and you pay with the dollars you mentioned before?” Kyralon asks.

“Yes. Though some people are more self-sufficient and choose to raise animals or farm crops to provide themselves with food.”

I answer question after question, and anytime I think he might be ready to slow down, he somehow manages to dig up another. He must have heard some of these answers several times over, especially if he's been putting up requests for a while—which seems likely. Yet Kyralon still asks, instead of presuming the answer.

"What is the primary source of energy for your civilization?"

"What is the dominant species on your planet?"

"How many intelligent species live on your planet?"

"What are the primary languages spoken on your planet?"

And on it goes.

Then it's my turn to ask. "What was that pouch you took that tasty drink and glasses from before?" I ask.

Having anticipated my question, he reaches into his pocket and pulls it free.

"This is my Spatial Cache. This is a smaller model, with a storage area about the size of a big room, and was personally made by the Ruler of Diligence. The ones with the larger storage areas are made by... someone else," he teases.

In one way, I'm sure he's just like me, curious. And this fossil of the Absolute has no qualms about using that against me, likely because he knows how he would feel.

"Currently, I know of only three or four beings capable of creating a Spatial Cache—assuming he's still alive—and it's likely there are only a few hundred Spatial Caches within the system."

"What? Doesn't that number seem low? There are a shitton of planets, and the system has to be tens of thousands of years old."

“That should help you imagine the value of these items.”

“I have a vial that allows me to store water and other liquids, and in much larger amounts than could fit in a room.”

“Let me guess, it’s an Aqua Arcanum Vial from the old capital of the 4th floor?”

“Yes.”

“There are vials and other items that can store large amounts of liquids or gases, but unlike Spatial Caches, they cannot hold other types of materials. While Caches generally cannot store living things, they can hold almost anything else. Additionally, Caches offer several advantages over items like the Aqua Arcanum Vial, such as being nearly indestructible and that’s just the beginning.”

“Understood.”

“Then, I will continue my inquiry. What is the average lifespan of your people? Are there any major differences between the different groups of people on your planet? How do you resolve conflicts between individuals and groups? What is your planet’s most common natural disaster? How do you prepare for and deal with natural disasters?”

Once again he presses the attack with more questions, and I take a deep breath before answering.

This round takes longer than the previous ones because some questions are tricky, but I finally finish up.

“... but some prefer doing cardio before working out instead of afterward. Those people are maniacs, and they should be avoided at all costs.”

“Understood. That was the hundredth question, so ask yours.”

“Tell me more about Ruby, Lissandra’s disciple.”

“I apologize, but I cannot.”

Even that non-answer mostly confirms what I thought for a while, but just in case, I ask more.

“Tell me about the Ruler of Greed.”

Right away, the mood shifts and the air feels still. Each breath and heartbeat slow, akin to a mountain resting on my chest, weighing me down. Everything else fades away except for those black eyes full of sparkling light.

“Attendee Nathanie, please do not mistake me for the shadow of someone’s true self existing within the tutorial. I’m not a tool to be tricked into giving answers, even without explicitly responding.”

Each of these sentences reverberates through the air. Softly spoken, but akin to a declaration.

“So allow me to ask you. Do you insist on an answer to that question?” He asks me.

“No,” in that moment the word sounds alien, and I barely recognize my own voice.

“Thank you for understanding. I do value curiosity, so I forgive your misstep, but be aware that there will be no more warnings.”

“I understand and I apologize.”

“Noted. Now then, I consider your question wasted, and it’s now my turn again. What are the dominant beliefs and philosophies among your people? How do your people govern themselves? How many governments rule over your planet? What kind of animals are most common on Earth?”

My turn comes once again, and I can finally ask my question. It’s something I’ve had the time to think about, and there are so many things I could ask. About skills, the system, the tutorial, my abilities, and other knowledge.

But there are also questions I'm sure I would regret asking, if only because the answers might send me down a path other than my own. I'm sure Lissandra is stronger than this man, she's a fossil even older than Kyralon. Hell, that crazy cockroach managed to kill multiple goddamn Rulers. Since I can try to pull information from her, I don't think I'll be asking Kyralon about any of it.

"There are a few questions I have, but I'm not sure if you can answer them or would even want to."

"If your questions are about the tutorial or what comes immediately after, I'd prefer you not ask them. The tutorial exists for a reason, and most such questions will either be answered in time or their answers need to be earned. Others out on Beyond quests might provide answers, but I believe it's better not to seek them that way."

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"Got it. In that case. What's up with your eyes? My handler called you Warden of the Parallax Eyes. That title seems important, prestigious even."

"My eyes are a trait hereditary in my bloodline. They went through three trait strengthenings and then further... improvements. At any one time, only a single person within the system can possess Parallax Eyes. I won't tell you what they do or go into more detail. In exchange for not fully answering your question, I can tell you that yes, there are more of these similar, special traits. Unique traits that can turn your bloodline into something truly remarkable."

I sigh. "Why is it that anytime I actually get answers, I feel like I know less than I did before?"

He laughs briefly. "It's always like that."

As he stands up, he gestures for me to do the same. "I'm sure you're curious about this place, so you can have a moment to explore a bit while I tend to my own tasks. You can go anywhere you want, so long as you don't open any doors or enter any areas that have been blocked off. We will continue in one hour."

I do as I'm told and leave the loggia and then the room, heading back into the hallway. Then I stop for a moment. The only way out of the tower seems to be the stairway coiling around its outside. I hesitate just for a moment before shrugging and heading outside, where I start climbing down the stairs.

Once again, all my mana, primordial energies, and abilities vanish beyond my reach, and right then and there I plop down to sit on one of the steps.

With a growing feeling of discomfort, I punish myself by sitting with my legs hanging over the edge of the stairs and my back against the wall.

That's what cowards get.

Feeling the wind tug at me, I stare into the distance. Watching the huge, continent-sized hunks of rock slowly float around, and gazing upon the shimmering barrier and the never-ending darkness beyond.

I know it's the ruins of a moon that once had life and cities on it, a sight that either killed an unknown number of beings or left them homeless, yet a part of me still finds it weirdly beautiful.

Slowly recharging my social batteries after answering so many questions, I begin trying to look within myself, observing my mana heart and... well... trying to figure out where my mana and primordial energies went.

It's either an effect caused by some sort of field the Absolute decided to put here, or some quality of the tower, though there could be something beyond the wall I'm resting my back against.

Something that requires this kind of powerful field.

There is no chance in hell for me to break through it. I'm still far, far from the level of a Champion and I'm even further from being able to face down an Absolute, but that won't stop me from trying.

And I do just that.

At first, it feels silly, as if my pre-tutorial self tried to use force or telekinesis. Something I'm sure a lot of kids tried. Maybe even most kids, no matter how silly it looked. No, I'm sure nearly all the little boys tried to awaken those powers when they were young. Surely it is to the point of being considered normal.

Not me though! I would never do something so silly. Never.

Anyway, Victoria had better keep her mouth shut.

POV Tess Hansen

Ten humans and lumorans die after being identified as mimics by the Signature Isolation Framework. Only then do they stop using it, as do the other units. The information isn't being shared freely, but it's safe to say that at least two or three of those people were not mimics. Just like Nathaniel.

Part of me wonders if he was just that unlucky, or if it was timed that way to get rid of him. Did it have something to do with his eyes? His abilities that could help fix it? Or maybe it was because he was on the list of names for the replacement pilot for Ardenyx—as Sophie recently learned from Leth.

I feel a presence behind me, and soon after, Sophie puts her hand on my shoulder. "Tess, I thought of something. I tried it with Noodle and my bond, and they couldn't do it. But don't you think Biscuit would be able to sniff out a mimic, maybe?"

Min-Jae, who is nearby, answers in my stead. "Unfortunately, no. A day ago, I saw Biscuit accepting food from a mercenary without a care in the world, and not long after, it turned out he was a mimic. An actual one, tentacles, dozens of mouths and eyes, and all."

Sophie groans in frustration. "Well, that hope is gone then. I just found out that they've pretty well given up on Ardenyx and are focusing the technicians efforts on Exoria and Praxion, so I was able to leave my bond..."

"Blackie!" Izzy shouts.

“...Blackie nearby. We did some interesting modifications with some help from the twins.”

"Should I be worried?"

"I'm not even sure if it will work." Sophie shrugs.

“How much time do we have before they send us away, Tess?” Maya asks me.

“It should be two hours, but they’ve moved things up. We’ll be leaving the camp in thirty minutes. Until then, we’ll all stay inside the tent.”

“I don’t think we will have to wait that long,” Sophie’s voice turns serious and her mana starts filling the tent to activate her web.

Then I feel it as well, an eruption of immense mana near the center of camp and a dozen or so powerful signatures rising to meet it. Our tent starts collapsing under the weight of the attack, and as we grab our prepared items, we rush out. I keep an eye on everyone, but they stick to our plan. Another attack hits the ground near us, throwing us to the side.

One of the tents in the center disappears, and a suit of war armor steps out. It gleams silver for the most part, with the occasional streak of blue paint. Unlike Ardenyx, it doesn’t have wings; instead, it’s very bulky and extremely armored.

Praxion takes a step and attacks the main tent where Exoria is.

(Stop looking! Run the way we planned!) I send through our link, and I move to take point.

There is a mimic in our path, in its pre-host state. It’s as big as a room, with dozens of swirling tentacles. Before it can even rush us, it implodes in on itself, and another one attacking a different group to our left splats into a pile of flesh under the immense force of gravity. Serabeth hovers over her tent, mana and gravitational forces radiating around her.

Briefly, my eyes meet hers, and I'm sure she can see me, so I nod in gratitude. She is then forced to put her attention elsewhere and disappears from my sight.

Another explosion reverberates through the air. Five or so lumorans start attacking the camp, joined by Praxion and outside forces. I can see it even through the falling debris as we run away.

Lily and Maya clash against a mimic, and Izzy rushes to support them. The twins and Min-Jae deal with another one while Sophie continues to shelter us from their attacks. I keep observing it all, jumping in to help whenever someone finds themselves being pushed back.

Another powerful mimic erupts from the ground, a swirling mass of tentacles, acid-coated mouths, and countless eyes.

[Greater Mimic - lvl ???]

I channel my primordial energy, narrowing it into a concentrated stream, powerful enough to crack one of my javelins. The weapon shoots forward, shattering the air as it pierces through the mimic's grotesque body, only to return and strike again.

Across the camp, the mimic's toxic saliva drips like rain, its tentacles swatting a lumoran guard aside as it rushes toward us with unstoppable force. I fly into the air, drawing more power from my crown, just as one of the main tents collapses. From the wreckage emerges the barely functional Ardenyx, its frame battered and missing limbs, the appendages on its back barely holding together.

There is no pilot. Instead, black smoke swirls ominously around it.

Sophie groans in pain, collapsing to her knees as blood flows from her ears and eyes. Izzy screams, and Noodle reacts instantly, expanding his form to shield her. Blue flames flicker along his scales as he fends off the onslaught of lesser mimics.

Ardenyx takes to the air briefly before slamming into the Greater Mimic. The two massive figures crash together, rolling through the camp in a chaotic explosion of violence, shredded armor, and severed body parts.

And when I glance back for a moment, the main tent finally disappears. And Exoria stands in its place. A suit of war armor not much taller than Ardenyx or Praxion, but nevertheless I can't take my eyes off it.

Out of all the suits of war armor we've seen, it's the least human-looking. Its head is nonexistent, the chest and head molded into one. It has long, thick legs and slim arms with huge forearms.

While Praxion and Ardenyx look advanced, Exoria looks more like a prototype than anything else. Its black surface is so scarred, dozens of damaged areas showing silver metal beneath the black color. Some parts don't fit at all, painted in different colors, or possessed of varying lengths.

Yet, every mimic freezes the moment Exoria moves, and all at once, they all start running away like they didn't expect Exoria to come into play.

A domain deploys around the camp and then stretches further, much, much further. Even with my eyes, I can't see where its shimmering edges end. Attacks screaming into view from beyond my sight start colliding against it, attempting to reach our camp, each one a strike bearing what I can only describe as a city-destroying amount of force.

But the Champion Feroi in his armor holds them all back. He doesn't allow them to reach us, his domain protects what remains of his people along with those who are fleeing.

I take note of the attack origins and adjust our course to avoid them, especially two massive concentrations of mana that are disturbingly similar in power to the lumoran Champion.

The battle between the lumoran Champion and the two mimic Champions is about to begin, and we need to get as far away as possible.