

Tutorial 531

Chapter 531: Questions

“What is your name?”

“Nathaniel Gwyn.”

“Do you have family and what are their names?”

“Sister Victoria and mother Thalia.”

“Your father?”

“His name was Robert. He’s dead.”

“I just noticed your mood shift and your body tense when you spoke about him just now. Did you have a bad relationship with him? Also, you can refuse to answer these questions.”

“There’s no need. And yes, our relationship was bad most of the time.”

“Do you hate him?”

“What did you come to understand?”

“He and my mother were both minors when they had my sister. They were in love back then and decided to keep her instead of going for another option. It’s crazy to think they were younger than me, actually younger than some of the others in my group .”

“Do you blame them?”

“Not really. Watching my group has taught me that people can be illogical from time to time, and even the best of intentions can end terribly. One of the people in my group killed one of her friends by mistake back on the 1st floor. She still hasn’t forgiven herself, and I’ve noticed how it holds her back from taking full advantage of her skill.”

“Any other examples you’ve noticed?”

“There’s another member who could have gotten our group killed because she was desperate to improve our group’s bond. Another one would have sacrificed all the others just to keep her sister safe. And the brothers would have done the same, all because they felt like they could only rely on each other. I saw another one who bullied others, and I could sense his satisfaction whenever he felt he’d proven that he was stronger than the others around him. Then there’s the young girl who killed real people, attendees just like us, on the third floor when her sister manipulated her mind and walled off her fear.”

“I’ll count that as five answers.”

“Thank you.”

“You’ve opened up a lot and answered my questions without a lot of complaint. Is that because of the vow I made?”

“Yes. I also find it surprisingly calming to tell you this, knowing that you don’t care about me personally—only about my behavior as a human being and my answers.”

“That makes me sound like a really cold person.”

“You never said I was wrong.”

“No, you’re not wrong. When you reach a certain age, it starts to get... harder to truly feel sympathy for another person. At least in my case. Now, let me ask: How did all that experience change how you see your parents?”

"I think my father really did love us and my mother at first, but he was very young. The 'best' years of his life passed away while he was forced to look after kids. He lost multiple jobs. His parents died. Our first apartment burned down. I think all of that broke him, leading him to seek relief in alcohol and someone to blame."

"And your mother?"

"I think she got stuck in the past. Like me or you she is also the main character of her own story, and in her story, she was deeply in love with my father. She... she's the kind of person who can't help but be faithful to anyone she's loved, even once, even when they change and hurt her. It was tough on her, too. Her mother disowned her and bad things just kept happening. I believe she wanted to live in the past and that led her to try and take everything on herself, if only to keep us safe."

"But she failed?"

"She did."

"Do you hate her?"

"No. I love her."

"Even after all that happened to you and your sister?"

"Yes."

"Don't you find it fascinating how, no matter the race, our thoughts and actions can so thoroughly lack logic?"

"I do. That was your hundredth question."

"It was. Please ask yours."

“Tell me about yourself.”

“That doesn’t even sound like a question, but I’ll humor you and answer. I was born a long, long time ago. It was so long ago that I wasn’t even an Absolute when Lissandra Hawthorne and her disciple Ruby raged through the system, killing Absolutes and Rulers in their path. I belong to a bloodline that carries the Parallax Eyes, and ever since I was young, it was expected that they’d awaken in me once my father died. I hated my father and that responsibility, but I also understood it. Sometime later, I even welcomed it. Now, after all these millennia, I’m thankful for that trait, though I had to survive so many attempts in my life. So many people eager to claim my Eyes for themselves: The Last Elf, the Magi himself, the Ruler of Envy, and more besides. I’ve had my fair share of adventures.”

“Do you like supplying me with answers that only make me want to ask more questions?”

“That itself could be considered a question, but I’ll let it pass. And yes, I find it satisfying to see that frustration and curiosity in people, the same curiosity I’ve dealt with my entire life.”

“On Earth, we call people like that assholes.”

“Please keep such thoughts in your mind unless you want to be thrown out of the tower.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“As for me... What else is there to say? I fought. I was betrayed. I made friends, and I lost them. I outlived the rest of my bloodline. I was hunted. I walked on planets you could only dream of. I fought wars that laid waste to entire worlds. I spoke with Rulers and beings older than even them. I witnessed artifacts I still can’t fully comprehend. I lived a beautiful life.”

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“That sounds... nice.”

“Indeed. So, once again, here we are at question number one out of the next set of hundred. Up to this point, you’ve only asked questions that would satisfy your base curiosity. Most of the attendees before

you didn't care, all they wanted were ways to improve their abilities and accumulate riches, things like that."

"I know that's probably what I should be asking for, but I can't help myself. Besides, I can get stronger even without your help."

"Ah, to see such pride in a mere Champion candidate. Did you ever come close to dying before finding yourself in the tutorial?"

"I don't think so. I almost got hit by a car a few times, and when I was younger I fell from a tree I'd climbed, that might have killed me if I'd hit my head."

"So how are you dealing with the constant threat of death inside the tutorial?"

"At first, I used a skill to help me handle it, to cut off my emotions so I could think more logically."

"You don't do that anymore?"

"No, I don't."

"Why not?"

"If I had stayed on that path, I would have never changed. But I want to grow, to keep moving forward. One day, I want to look back and see how far I've come."

"Do you dislike who you used to be?"

"No."

"Are your answers so brief to get me to ask more questions?"

"Yes."

"Smart. Do you have a problem with being asked so many questions?"

"They're all pretty simple, and it can be fun to think about the answers. So I wouldn't say I dislike it, but I do find it draining, and the more time goes on, the more I feel myself getting frustrated."

"I see. So, do you want to change because you dislike your past self? Please don't answer yes or no."

"Maybe."

"Haha. I guess I deserved that. So what is the real answer? I'll count it as two questions this time."

"I've done things that could make someone want to punish me or even kill me. But for now, I'll keep going as I am and face the consequences when they come."

"Wouldn't you rather avoid putting yourself in those circumstances?"

"Nothing is ever perfect, and there's always a price to pay. It's the struggles that make happiness meaningful."

"Did you come up with that yourself?"

"I read it somewhere."

"I see. What is your favorite color?"

"I'd say gray or black."

“If you could have spent a day doing anything you wanted before the tutorial, what would it have been?”

“I’d sleep in as long as I could, take a morning shower, and start the day with a good breakfast. Then I’d go for a run or get some exercise. After that, I’d take another shower, maybe stop to pet a few cute animals on the way home, then eat something good while watching a movie. I’d spend hours online, getting lost in an endless stream of fascinating but useless facts. Finally, I’d stay up late while everyone else is asleep, enjoying the quiet, and maybe even take a short walk through the sleeping city.”

“What would you do if you became an Absolute?”

“That’s pretty random.”

“Yes, it is.”

“I have no idea. I’m not even sure what the title really means. It’s probably different for everyone. I’ll need to learn and experience more before I can understand it.”

“Would you stop if you ever did reach that title?”

“I don’t know. Probably not.”

“Why?”

“On Earth, things don’t tend to be very fair. You can try your hardest and still watch someone else claim the reward. People with better looks often have advantages. Someone might be born with a stronger body, or into a wealthy family. Sometimes, no matter how hard you try, someone else beats you because they have better information or resources. Even the country or city you’re born into, or the color of your skin can affect your entire life.”

“That’s true.”

“But with the system, those things matter less.”

“The First Generation is getting a huge advantage, something no one else from Earth will ever experience.”

“Yes.”

“And it’s the same with skills. Some people are always going to be better at handling them, or they may even awaken more powerful variants.”

“That’s true. But I don’t think there will ever be a truly fair system. You’d need everyone to be identical.”

“There was an elf who said something very similar.”

“You’re making me curious again. Anyway, the point is that I don’t consider myself the most talented. I’ve seen plenty of people who need only a fraction of the time I do to learn something. And yeah, a person trained by Champions and Absolutes will have an advantage. Much like the system we have on Earth, but I still think that if you put in the effort, you will reap the rewards. You can see the results of that effort in your stats and skill levels. And the system is something nobody can truly control or exploit. Though, maybe the Rulers can influence it a bit... and I imagine there are others?”

“You can try to ask that next time you get to ask a question, but I won’t answer it. So what does all of that have to do with your choice to continue beyond the rank of Absolute?”

“Why would I stop halfway?”

“...”

“Don’t call me weird. Enough people have done that already.”

“I won’t, Nathaniel. Another question: What’s your favorite food?”

"Pizza."

"Oh, you mean the round flat bread with toppings. I see. Are there people you would die for?"

"Probably. I'd need to be in the situation to know for sure. You seem to enjoy switching between silly and serious questions."

"Do I? Does death scare you?"

"Dying itself doesn't bother me, but the thought of my life ending does. I feel sad knowing I won't get to live longer or experience everything the world has to offer. There's so much I still want to see."

"You said Earth has four seasons. Which is your favorite?"

"Either the end of summer or autumn."

"If you could steal my Spatial Cache storage and face no consequences for it—neither to you nor anyone you care about—would you do it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"You've treated me well thus far and haven't shown me any ill will. I have no reason to betray your trust."

"Do you dislike betrayal?"

"I think it's disgusting, probably one of the worst things you can do."

"Have you ever betrayed someone?"

"Yes."

"Do you hate betrayal because of the way you grew up, because of your father?"

"It's likely."

"If you were told you would die unless you betrayed someone, what would you do?"

"I see where you're going with this. I guess there are levels to it, and I'd only know in that situation."

"What if you had a strong bond with someone who had only ever shown you goodwill, and your only choices were to kill them, cause them terrible harm, or die?"

"I would die."

"Do you really hate the idea that much? Imagine all the things you would miss. All your friends and family would have to live without you."

"My answer doesn't change."

Chapter 532: In the middle of the ocean

"I have a skill called [Empyrean Lance]. Do you know anything about it?" I ask Kyralon while sitting on the ground with my legs crossed.

Fracture sets on my lap, resting in its cracked sheath, and its dangerous energy is beginning to leak through. I've wrapped it in my mana in an attempt to slow it down at least somewhat, but without the proper materials, I don't think I can fix it much.

Plus, my right arm isn't helping. Sure, it's happened plenty of times before, I can always surround it with a coating of woven mana and move it easily enough, but it still requires a bit of effort, and it's frustrating

how much time it takes to heal. I can't even blame my passive; the wounds inflicted by Fracture are always like that.

"Fascinating. Skills with 'Empyrean' in the name should be nearly impossible to learn naturally. You must have acquired it either by combining powerful skills or maybe through a Primary class upgrade."

"Primary class upgrade."

"Well then, your class must be something special. Though I've never heard of the exact skill, and I can't tell you about other skills or their owners, as silence binds me the same way it does with your answers."

"What can you tell me?"

"Anything with 'Empyrean' in the name is very old, from a time before any of the current Rulers were even born."

"Old doesn't mean strong or useful."

"An answer and then more questions, right?"

"That's how it goes." The huge velnar says, smiling at me. "Even though its function might appear limited by its name implying a lack of versatility, you should never underestimate a specialized skill like that, especially given the presence of 'Empyrean' in the name. I know my answer might be lacking because of my vows, so I will expand. I've met people who had skills that seemed limited by their meaning at first. For example, there was a man with a skill simply called [Sword]. He was one of the most terrifying individuals I've ever encountered."

"Absolute Kyralon."

"Yes?"

"I honestly love and hate the way you answer my questions, and I know you're doing it on purpose."

He seems surprised for a moment, but then only nods, his smile becoming a bit more genuine instead of sitting there as his facial muscles twist into a grin.

"I do enjoy it," he confirms.

Another hundred questions later, I ask again.

"What is the maximal skill level?"

Kyralon pauses from where he stands, near the black wood shelves full of mana stones, and scratches his beard. For a moment, his star filled black eyes, though they lack pupils, clearly turn toward me.

Still, without pupils, it's hard to say exactly where he's looking.

"I think I can answer that one. It's rumored to be level 100, though very few Rulers have even one level 99 skill, and the rest generally hang around level 98. Absolutes usually have skills around level 90. Champions start around level 80. After level 50, it becomes difficult to level them further. After level 60, it's even harder, and it continues in that manner."

"I had someone warn me not to level any skills to 99."

"On the first floor, or during Beyond trials?"

"Ehm, yes."

"Then it must have been the Ruler of Envy. He does like to do that."

"But why? If level 99 is comparable to being on the level of a Ruler why would he say that? The chance of any newcomer reaching that high in the first place is pretty low."

“That’s just how he is, but don’t underestimate the impact of words spoken by someone truly powerful, especially when spoken to someone new to the system. Even if you don’t notice it, they often leave a lasting effect. A scene like that tends to stay with you. Even the slightest hesitation could be enough to stop you from breaking through from level 98 to 99, simply because advancing is that difficult.”

“That’s stupid.”

“So, you don’t believe me?”

“I don’t think you’re lying or anything. I just can’t see it working.”

“That’s not all Envy does though. He builds on these moments. Whether you see him as pathetic or weak doesn’t matter. Never underestimate someone who’s risen to the title of Ruler. Anyone who’s reached that level has survived countless dangers and stands among the most powerful beings in the system. Now, show me that sword.”

That request catches me off guard a bit, but I don’t hesitate long and hand Fracture over to him. He takes it into his massive hands. To him, my short sword looks almost like a dagger, which is kind of comical. Kyralon examines it, and the longer he does so, the wider his smile grows. A few times, he even shakes his head, and I hear him snort.

After that, he returns it to me, and I inspect it.

Nothing has changed.

“What was that about? You didn’t even do anything,” I remark.

“I did not. I wanted to confirm something.”

“I swear everyone with some power likes to act so fucking mysterious all the time.”

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Once more he fails to reply letting a simple nod speak for him.

We stop mid-question, and I leave to go to my usual spot outside of the tower on the stairs, well, slightly lower now, so I have access to my mana. Only then do I allow myself to fall back into that special space in my mind.

This time, we're in the middle of the ocean, not a single island or patch of land in sight. The sky is clear, but the waves are dark and mercilessly rock the boat we're on. And it's not just a boat either, all around us there are dozens of aircraft carriers. The kind that takes six thousand people to operate, and one of them stands under my feet. Its deck lying empty, devoid of the jets that would normally take off from its surface, and Whitey is standing right in the middle wearing a simple olive-green camouflage uniform and heavy black boots.

"You really are enjoying this aren't you?" I note, coming to a stop in front of him.

I look down and find myself wearing clothes similar to his own, and it must be quite the combination: me with my mana crown floating over my head and Whitey with his white hair, red eyes, and horns.

"I got stuck in a shitty human's mind, so this is the best I can do to entertain myself," he says, his smile and tone slightly different from the day before. The mood around him feels more threatening.

It's not hard for me to understand why. By now, it's safe to say I might know Whitey better than he knows himself, and he knows me just as well. Other than certain memories we've elected to keep private, we can peek into almost everything.

I take a few steps back, remove the heavy black shoes, and kick them away, standing barefoot as I roll up the sleeves of my shirt.

Whitey does something similar, tearing one of his sleeves and using it to tie back his long white hair. There's something deliberate about the way he does it.

A breeze sweeps across the empty deck, carrying the scent of salt and steel. Beneath my feet, the aircraft carrier shifts slightly, moving with the waves, but all I feel is the steady rhythm of Whitey's heartbeat, a low, pulsing vibration, echoing through the metal beneath my feet.

I shift my weight, testing my footing on the deck. Whitey tightens the knot in his hair.

Then it starts.

Unlike before, I don't reach for my kinetic energy. No, this time I allow mana to flow through my body. I ensure all of my passives are active and make a slight adjustment to the settings on my Mana Regulator. Mana Wavelength Iris activates right away.

Whitey vanishes, and I use Wraith Dance to shift out of the way as the air itself trembles with the force of his attack.

A Barrier forms around me, one I'm sure can stop Needle Point.

I'm wrong.

Needle Point pierces it, driving through a point literally as thin as a needle, piercing through my chest, only to be followed by a dozen more such attacks, before I can move away with that unpredictable style of movement he drove into me.

[Ley Line] stretches away, then more threads appear. Mana weaves around me, forming armor, as I add a few Ley Lines to the mix.

Whitey reappears in front of me, his face nearly touching mine. His red eyes look big, unblinking, and wide open, and his mouth formed into a wild smile.

He punches me in the chest. The armor absorbs some of the blow, [Redistribution] handles more, and my passive reduces the impact as well. Even so, a wisp of kinetic energy reaches my heart, creating a tear in one of the walls.

My mana radiates from my body, pushing Whitey away.

[Empyrean Lance] weaves itself into existence, a stream of prismatic light trailing it as it flies after him with an incredible burst of speed, stabbing past Whitey's side. His attempt to hold it in place with kinetic energy fails.

The array I've been testing deploys, and my armor expands, growing until I'm three times my height, towering over the white-haired demon. All that mana floods through my body and the armor, making it more dense, as the threads weave themselves together. A different part of my mind takes over as the world fades to black, white and the unmistakable hue of mana.

I stomp toward Whitey, but he sidesteps, and I miss by a hair's breadth. Standing near my leg, he chuckles and punches it, channeling an insane amount of kinetic energy into the blow. It deals no damage, so I grab that energy, redirect it, and stomp again, releasing everything. The surface of the carrier's deck explodes.

Chunks of the runway freeze in midair as Whitey deploys his field, jumping up, locating my body, and punching the armor directly above it.

I feel my body shake, and he punches again, shifting his application of kinetic energy.

Using a huge amount of my mana, I boost my [Redistribution], and his body halts in midair.

My armor bursts open, transforming into dozens of limbs that I manipulate with my [Mana Domain]. All of them reach toward him while I create another [Empyrean Lance].

Even though he doesn't stop completely, he slows my mana-arms, just like he has in all our previous fights.

I move quickly as his Needle Point trails after me, piercing needle-thin holes through the carrier's surface.

Whitey breaks through my hold and moves again, dodging all my arms in a way that would be dizzying for anyone else. He lands on the surface and charges, each burst of speed using the bare minimum of kinetic energy.

We both switch to Breaker Style. Our palms meet, and an explosion of kinetic force hurls us apart. The aircraft carrier cracks and starts rocking in the sea more violently than the waves alone could ever account for.

As I pull my mana back to me, Whitey leaps into the air and then boosts himself, running across the surface of the sea. The area around him becomes as calm as a windless lake, leaving that immense kinetic energy to course through him instead of the waves.

I fly into the air, weaving dozens of mana javelins and hurling them with kinetic energy. Each one thunders through the air, belting out a sonic boom as they go, tracking him and piercing the water around him. Then I compress the remaining spears, converting them to their tricolored variants, and fire them off in much the same fashion. Now they explode, unleashing shockwaves, heat, and pressure, tearing apart the calm surface of the sea.

Yet he manages to boost himself out of the way each time, moving so quickly it's almost like teleportation. Whitey lands on the surface of another aircraft carrier that begins to shake as my tricolored javelins continue to rip it apart.

I fire off the [Empyrean Lance] I've been compressing, sending it off even faster than the javelins. It pierces the ship in front of him, slicing through the entire length of the carrier as if it were nothing, leaving little more than scraps of torn metal in its wake as it explodes beneath the carrier, then the flickering field it releases begins to seep into the air, the explosion alone rocks the aircraft carrier and sends a huge ripple through the sea.

Another javelin streaks past, trailing a [Ley Line] behind it. The moment it strikes the ship, I manipulate the javelin and force the [Ley Line] to materialize. A shimmering, pale-blue thread drops toward the water, cutting through the ship like a hot knife through butter, splitting the carrier in two.

Both halves of the vessel tilt and sink beneath the sea, sending a towering geyser of water into the air. The water halts midair, and I sense a shockwave rippling forth from the area.

My armor surrounds me once more, just in time for Whitey to reach me. Three consecutive strikes destroy my barrier and armor, and I barely manage to block the last strike. I open my hand and let a destabilized orb drop. It explodes immediately, and I teleport away, reappearing on the deck of one of the remaining ships.

A white blur rushes out of the explosion, and Whitey lands next to me without creating a single shockwave. There are only a few burns on his clothes, and his bound hair has begun to escape its restraints. His heart is pounding with excitement, and he doesn't bother trying to hide it.

Whitey's grin widens as he takes a series of slow, confident steps toward me, kinetic energy swirling around him in a clear challenge.

A short laugh escapes me.

Fine, if he wants to see more, I won't hold back.

The half-ruined deck beneath my feet groans in protest as I brace myself, mana crackling through my veins.

Chapter 533: Demon vs human

It's amusing how much of my arsenal doesn't work on him, as he doesn't even bother to use mana beyond what's absolutely necessary. Almost all of it is turned into kinetic energy.

I deploy my own field with Resonance Flow, and a large section of the sea's surface immediately settles, and Whitey's field and mine collide against each other as we fight for control.

He remains in Pulser Stance, while I launch mana projectiles at him and conjure exploding orbs, while creating lances that almost seem to scar the air itself, leaving fields of shimmering air in their wake. The surface of the aircraft carrier beneath us cracks more and more as we both direct kinetic energy into it.

This time though, I don't hold back. My mana surges through my body, to the point where Whitey goes pale, the sheer amount threatening to knock him unconscious.

But the demon holds up.

His red eyes shine, and the rhythm of his heart changes at an incredible speed. Needle Point, Pulser Stance, Wraith Dance, Resonance Flow, Steelroot, Counter Flow, Breaker Style. He uses all seven techniques in an incredible display of mastery over kinetic energy, employing them to their limits in an attempt to counter my own output, which keeps growing.

My attacks are explosive and even a partial hit would be enough to kill him. Yet he dodges, avoids them, and strikes back in turn.

A materialized [Ley Line] cuts the aircraft carrier apart again, but the ship doesn't split. Whitey holds it together with his kinetic energy, absorbing all of the massive ship's momentum. But I know he can't handle that for too long. He's not a brute like me, he just can't handle such a massive output. There's a reason for that.

He flings it at me, forcing me to block at the last second and sending me flying off the ship until I crash into the waters below.

I track his movements and detonate the floor under my feet, diving into the hangar below.

Whitey hurls a jet at me, boosting it with kinetic energy.

Armor forms around my body as the jet collides with me, erupting into a fireball. With a burst of kinetic energy, I fling the mangled remains aside, and the flames burn out as I absorb their heat, and send a laser thin stream of golden fire shooting forth, slicing into the metal above Whitey's head as he ducks. Molten metal drips from the edges of the cut, red-hot and glowing.

Whitey charges me again, and I opt to release a powerful surge of mana, no technique, no specific skill, just a colossal blast in one direction, something I've done before during the original challenge.

Unlike his Lurker self, Whitey reacts with incredible speed, using Wraith Dance to slip aside. The kinetic field around him shifts, his entire body vibrating, letting my attack pass through him as though he weren't even there.

“Well, that’s new.” I transform all of my mana into golden flames that blaze into the area around me, heating the surrounding metal to glowing white luminance and raising the temperature in the hangar.

Whitey blasts through a nearly molten wall with a surge of kinetic energy, sending droplets of molten metal flying, and I follow right behind him.

“I saw Specter doing something like this in your memories. It took me six months, but I found a way to do the same with kinetic energy,” he answers smugly.

My lance pierces the wall next to him, unleashing a dozen [Ley Lines] that materialize for a split second, slicing everything apart before another explosion of golden flames floods the corridor in Whitey’s wake. Wraith Dance propels me through the flames, then through the hole, until I land in the calm patch of the sea surrounding Whitey.

“Before you ask, I don’t think you’ll ever manage to pull it off. You’re more of a brute than the type to use more refined means of control,” he teases, stomping down.

Kinetic vibrations slam into a barrier I throw up in reaction.

At the same time, the destroyed carrier behind me collapses onto the sea, kicking up waves that freeze in midair, along with the ship itself. I reshape all that energy and release it through Needle Point. It’s thicker than a mere needle, nearly as large as a train, ripping the very air, churning the sea, and blasting past Whitey before piercing yet another carrier, which starts to shudder.

Both of us charge, my armor stretching around me as flames surge across my body.

Whitey strikes me, snuffing out the flames with a single powerful gust. He ducks beneath my follow-up attack, vibrating his body so that my arms of mana simply whiff past him. He slams a fist against my chest, but a thick layer of mana thwarts the blow again. He phases once more, passing through a stream of flames, absorbing the train-sized surge of Needle Point and compressing it into a single strike.

The world around me slows as I enter a deeper state of [Focus]. Barrier after barrier forms ahead of his attack, shattering and reforming, steadily slowing and weakening it until it finally collides with my armor, vibrating through its form and tearing into my heart a bit more.

He tries to phase again, but I deliberately reverberate the kinetic energy in a similar manner, not to mimic him, but to disrupt his phasing.

Whitey switches to Steelroot, and I halt the attack I was about to unleash, all that immense mana frozen mid-flow, as I grab his left hand instead.

Before he can attack or attempt another phase, I yank him closer, driving my knee into his chest and releasing a tremendous amount of kinetic energy which he's forced to absorb. Then a blast of mana follows, sending Whitey flying; leaving his ragged arm hanging in my grip.

I teleport to the anchor I placed on him and duck under his kick. He phases through my [Ley Line], and when he rushes me. I unleash a torrent of flames that boils the surface of the sea. Whitey punches, diverting the heat off to the side where it melts part of a nearby ship. He tries to land another blow, but I teleport again, reappearing behind him making use of the same mark as before.

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Before he can strike, I teleport once more.

Taking a short breather, I gather enough mana and teleport once more, deploying my [Mana Domain]. The sheer density of mana in the air becomes almost tangible, making him hesitate. Even so, a Needle Point bores a hole into my side and another into my leg, these ones thicker than before.

I teleport again, and he pursues me, passing through the field left behind by [Empyrean Lance]. Once inside, his heart stutters, his movements slow, and I see surprise flicker through his eyes as the remaining effect disrupts his primordial energy.

He drops onto his ass in his rush to avoid my javelin. But a tricolored orb is already there to meet him, glowing brilliantly all the while, Whitey quickly crawls out of the field on all three limbs. Right before the orb detonates, he curls into a ball. The explosion sends him flying, creating ripples across the rough sea as a shower of debris from the carrier rains down alongside the displaced water.

Once again, the surface grows still, debris and individual droplets of water suspended in midair, as Whitey breaks through to stand atop the water. Blood drips from his body, staining the surface red. He glances at his left arm which is now nearly entirely gone. His left arm, his left eye, a chunk of his chest, all broken and burned.

"Why is it always the left arm?" He smirks, though the expression is anything but friendly. It's dangerous, like a predator's grin.

"Tradition demands it," I say, as the mana surges through my body.

I feel a grin creep onto my face, not all that different from Whitey's, as I glance at the clear blue sky and take a deep breath. My heart is hammering so wildly, and it isn't just the kinetic energy. The tips of my fingers tingle, and my own mana threatens to tear me apart at the slightest misstep.

"I apologize for underestimating you. You're one tough motherfucking demon," I admit.

I'd thought I would beat him easily, even without using black mana. But this version of Whitey is nothing like the lurker. It's not even close. What had seemed like a slight difference between a mindless beast fighting on instinct and a living being who fights with purpose makes a huge difference. And beyond that... the damn demon has gotten better. He didn't show me exactly how, but he spent over six months in my mind, in this mind space, training every moment he wasn't sparring with me or teaching.

I turn my gaze on him, compressing a wisp of mana with [Focus]

That whirlpool surrounds me, trying to pull in any ambient mana, but there isn't much. Whitey's mana is nearly gone too, most of it having already been converted into kinetic energy stored in his body.

Of course, that wasn't my goal. I seize the crown, forcing it under my command to power my skills and fortify my body.

"Fucking humans, always cheating," Whitey says with a grin, unbuttoning his camouflage jacket one-handed. He shrugs it off and tosses it into the air, where it remains frozen like everything else. Standing there in a bloodied pale-green shirt and camo pants, even the blood seeping from his wound ceases to fall.

"I didn't realize demons were such complaining crybabies," I reply with a smile, building my mana more and more in preparation.

Whitey's heartbeat changes once again, adopting a rhythm I've never sensed before. Something entirely new. The vibrations it creates around his body send a cold sweat down my back and raise goosebumps on my arms.

Once again, I can't help feeling a deep admiration for him and the sheer control he has over his body and his heartbeat, especially given the condition of his body throughout his life.

If his circumstances had been different, Whitey might very well have been an Absolute candidate.

No more words are exchanged as black mana floods my body, completely replacing my normal mana. Whitey extends a domain I've never seen him use before, colliding with my [Mana Domain], demolishing it, and halting only when it strikes [Eclipse].

Both of us attack once more.

I open my eyes, finding myself back on the stairway outside the tower.

Even here, I feel the urge to move, to fight, and I have to take my time to gradually calm myself down.

Draw.

Standing up and climbing the stairs, I think of that word, replaying the fight in my mind, especially the ending. All the while examining my own feelings.

Frustration. Satisfaction.

I ascend a few steps.

Annoyance. Amusement.

A few more steps.

Thankfulness. Admiration. More frustration.

I reach the inside of the tower, where Kyralon already waits on the loggia, sitting in a chair.

After taking a seat opposite him, I say, "I want to ask a question now, and I'll answer the questions to pay for it, then a hundred more to earn another question."

"Please do so," Kyralon gestures.

"There's a presence in my mind. Someone I challenged, and I want to try placing them in a new body or something similar."

"Tell me more."

I explain in detail, providing as much information as possible so he can give a well-informed answer.

After a moment of contemplation, Kyralon shakes his head. "The wording of your challenge will not allow it, nor will the system. Across the long history of the tutorial, there have been many cases like this. Absolutes going rogue, corrupted challenges, and Rulers twisting the rules in unexpected ways. Never, not once, has a native of the tutorial escaped. Sometimes, the system was slow to act or waited until the attendees began their return to their homeworlds, but in the end, no native has ever broken free."

I study his manner, looking for any hint of deception.

There is none.

"The presence in your mind, those memories will almost certainly vanish the moment his lurker regenerates on the first Beyond floor. That is what I would expect from the system for a challenge like this, a challenge that should never have been approved. Even if he takes over your body or finds a new one, he will not be able to leave. So at most, he can kill you in revenge before the system erases him. That, perhaps, is what Envy is counting on. It will make no difference if you try to store the memories in an item or by some other means, the outcome remains the same."

"I see."

Kyralon observes me for a moment. "You don't seem surprised."

"I expected an answer like that."

"Have I answered your question?"

"Yes."

"Then allow me to continue with the questions you owe me."

Chapter 534: The last question

Not long after getting all his answers, Kyralon stops me, "This will be your last question and I won't be asking any more of you."

"This has come out of nowhere."

"Yes. I've changed my mind, and I would appreciate it if you didn't ask why. I won't ask anything of you either and you can spend the rest of your Beyond Quest here in the tower or seated in that spot you seem to like or on the stairs outside of the tower. Nowhere else."

There are plenty of questions I want to ask, especially why and what could have made him change his mind.

I replay my past answers and behavior, and I don't think I have done anything to offend him. But it's not like I can force an Absolute to do what I want, no matter how disappointed I feel.

Sure, I may have decided not to ask him anything about my training because I want to grow my own way, and the cockroach will probably be more of a help than he will. But there is only so much information I can gather by myself.

Pairings, Earth's awakening, the system, coalitions, what is black mana, questions about some of my other skills, eternal fragments. Questions about the different races and their origins after all I already know that the vyssari are rumored to have been created by one of the Rulers. Then there's the Last Elf he mentioned, the Magi he mentioned. Where I can get a Spatial Cache of my own, subclasses, and the influence they have. What causes pairing, the world-devouring wolf Biscuit's disciple mentioned, how to become a Champion or an Absolute, and more.

Many more.

There is no way he doesn't know that, and we're still just over a day into my five-day stay.

He knows I'm annoyed, but I'm not some toy he can just do whatever he wants with.

Fuck this guy.

"Thank you. I have no more questions for you."

These few words make him freeze for a moment, his eyes widening the tiniest bit in surprise before he regains control, wiping away that minuscule, barely noticeable break in his expression.

"I understand. You still have some time remaining, so you can ask later if..."

"There is no need."

"Are you su... I understand. I will be here then."

“Got it.”

After a moment of hesitation, he stands up and leaves.

Day after day, I sequester myself away in my own mental space, sitting on the stairs within their strange energy suppressing field. However, I also take moments to watch the night sky peeking through the fragments of the moon from the loggia. I follow the rules, never leaving the tower and avoiding prolonged looks at the items around me, knowing they would only fuel my curiosity, with no way to ask questions or inspect them.

Within my mind, I build my array and dedicate parts of my mind to keep them active while also working as much as possible to keep Fracture from simply breaking out.

There are no questions asked, no answers delivered. And when the day comes to leave, Kyralon, for the last time, opens his mouth to say something before he shakes his head and smiles at me, changing his mind.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, Nathaniel. Thank you for answering my questions.”

He’s clearly prodding me to ask my remaining question. But I do not ask.

“I understand. Thank you for answering mine. We might see each other after I leave the tutorial. One day.” I say.

“That... that would be an interesting meeting.” He smiles and reaches his huge hand toward me. He grabs mine while shaking it. “Is this not how you greet each other on Earth?”

“Yes, but don’t squeeze so hard; you broke something.”

“I apologize.”

“It’s fine. It will heal... slowly. See you then.”

“Farewell.”

Turning around, I open the door that appeared just moments ago, and pass through once again, reappearing in my handler’s office.

As always, she is sitting behind her desk and immediately asks, “Satisfied?”

“It could’ve been better.”

“Absolute Kyralon can be like that,” she smiles, “Since my allowance of information is nonexistent now, there is no need to hold you here any longer. Don’t die on me, attendee Nathaniel.”

I just give her a nod and keep looking at her, even as I feel the pull of the 7th floor. She watches me in return, amusement flickering across her face.

Then the cold, chilling wind and snow gnaws away at me once more.

POV Warden of the Parallax Eyes, Kyralon

Kyralon spends a moment staring at the spot where the young attendee once stood before letting out a long, frustrated sigh. It had been a long time since someone so much weaker than him had treated him that way, carefully skirting the line between reward and punishment.

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

He waits for a minute before heading toward the loggia where a young woman is already waiting, seated in one of the free chairs—long red hair, and yellow eyes, laced through with an array of strange patterns.

“Lady Greed,” Kyralon greets her carefully.

“Please sit,” she states, gesturing to him like she were in her own home rather than his.

The atmosphere hums with a slight tension as Kyralon pulls two glasses from his pouch, along with a transparent bottle of golden liquid that swirls like a living whirlpool. He pours a serving into both glasses, whereupon the liquid resumes its motion, and they drink in silence.

In the end, it’s Kyralon who breaks the silence first, “He left without asking the question he had every right to ask. It’s the first time that’s happened. He decided he’d rather annoy me than receive an answer to one of the many questions he must have had.”

The red-haired woman laughs shortly and sips, “The great all-knowing Kyralon, treated like an annoying grandpa. I’m glad I lived to experience it.”

“That human is petty beyond belief. He decided to waste a question for such a silly reason. From me, of all people—Warden of the Parallax Eyes, the last of my bloodline and one of the oldest Absolutes in the system! Who does that?!” His voice ramps up as he complains, putting his disbelief at the situation on full display.

“What could you have done to set him off like that?”

“I decided to end our game of questions prematurely.”

“Why would you do such a thing, dear Kyralon?”

The huge velnar settles into his chair and takes a long sip, watching the golden liquid swirl in his glass. “I didn’t want to stain him, to feed him all the answers, even if they would help him, or make him stronger... or keep him from making our mistakes.”

Taking the bottle and pouring herself another drink, the red-haired woman takes her seat once more, “And what do you think? Would he be able to serve as the weapon we need?”

“How can a human like him succeed where Master Lissandra has failed? That one who started in the Beyond would be a better choice, Lady Greed. Lyraen and Nyssa also show promise. Any of the three would make a better weapon if you absolutely insist on having someone from that particular tutorial. And that’s not even considering the many others already in the system or caught within their own tutorials. But the chances are slim to nonexistent for all of them. That man is too monstrous.”

“No mention of a certain Absolute going rogue?”

“No matter what Master’s imitation does, she won’t make it out of the tutorial. There were versions that made it further, those closer to the original, with more of her incredible power. Yet all of them failed.”

“I see, you’re the same as ever, letting your incredible sight blind you.” The red-haired woman nods, seemingly in agreement, despite the slight smile on her lips.

Right after, she stands up, “Thank you for indulging in this short discussion, dear Kyralon. We will see each other soon.”

She leaves as if she had never been there, and much like he did with his prior visitor, Kyralon watches the place where she disappeared.

POV Nathaniel

There are four “levels” of mimics on the 7th floor. The weakest are Lesser Mimics, then Mimic Spawns, Greater Mimics, and above that, Champion-grade Elder Mimics. Of course, there is one more level, the Absolute-grade Mimic, also called the Progenitor Mimic.

Lesser Mimics and Mimic Spawns are no problem at all. I could keep killing these guys for weeks. A Greater Mimic could cause a problem, especially the ones over level 350. In certain situations, or if more of them group up, things could become... interesting. Especially if they found a host that made them stronger and more intelligent.

Well, it’s not like I have to worry about it now. The place I’ve appeared is incredibly full of mana radiation and none seem to be around. There are enormous holes in the ground, already filled by the

never-ending falling snow. The floors or mountains that used to dot the landscape are gone. Kaput, evaporated.

On a whim, I delve into the area with the high mana radiation and rely on [Eclipse] and [Mana Domain] to keep me safe. The experience from the 5th floor certainly helps as well.

While doing so, I quickly exchange messages with Group 4, who don't seem to be in anything resembling a good state after five days of fleeing the 2nd front and the battle between Champions that apparently took place here.

The Exoria Deployment Outpost is gone, destroyed, along with most of the lumorans who hung back until the bitter end. Their Champion appeared only at the last moment and, according to Tess, utterly crushed two Mimic Champions, both with hosts.

Group 4, Hed's group, and a few more are currently hiding after a lot of near-death situations and some members of the expedition have been poisoned by something that apparently isn't quite as serious as whatever killed Ardenyx's pilot despite being remarkably similar. Among the poisoned are Dennis and Maya. And then Sophie's been unconscious for the past few days after controlling Ardenyx for an hour after the attack started, in an attempt to give everyone a chance to escape.

But those guys are scary in their own way, so I'm not really worried about them. Group 4 has survived worse dangers. What's grabbed my interest for the moment is just a whisper of mana wavelength I recognize. My Mana Wavelength Iris spots it even within all the mana radiation surrounding me and the messed-up aftermath of the war.

It's the signature of level 7 technician Leth.

So I head in that direction, avoiding any areas that seem too dangerous. For instance, there's an area where the snow just doesn't enter. A zone the size of a small city, and the snow swirls around it. Inside, patches of twisted, charred trees stand eerily still, and from their branches hang the corpses of lumorans and Mimics alike.

Another such area is a massive crater that melts any snow that falls within, there's a pool of glowing lava at the bottom. And around its edges, lie more corpses, items, and scraps of tents. I even recognize parts of war armor, though I can't tell which suits they came from.

To my enhanced eyes at least, these places look about as inviting as a presentation in a class full of extroverts.

Though, perhaps they are a bit more inviting, if only because at least they're interesting, and I can't help but feel a strong tinge of curiosity, but I refuse to let it blind me to the danger. Just the way mana moves and twists around them is enough to convince me to avoid them.

Gradually, I am forced to use more and more mana to fight back the radiation in the area, but my body is topped off with mana, as is my crown. Even the damage caused by Fracture, which messed up my mana pathways, and Fracture's own rebellion pose no threat to my mind, supported by the effects of my mid-arcane passive.

Soon, I catch up and finally lay eyes on Leth. He's wearing a suit of metal armor that covers the entirety of his body, likely to fight back the mana radiation that I doubt he could endure otherwise. He pushes against the wind, crawling through it at times, each of his steps slow and tired.

Very slowly, he approaches a pile of snow and starts digging. I extend one of my [Ley Lines] and tie it to him. Though it's more difficult than usual because of the state of the area, but with a bit more focus, I manage to do it.

Leth uncovers part of one of the white tents and enters, after which the snow he removed falls back, covering the entrance once more, hiding it from all my senses. To the point that I'm sure I'd never be able to locate it unless I stumbled on it by accident.

I teleport through the [Ley Line] and appear inside the mostly collapsed tent. The noises outside immediately grow quiet, but it's still very cold in here. I now stand in the remains of one of the larger tents, with a few parts of the workshop intact, along with a few sections of war armor I don't recognize scattered about all around us. They have a black coating, and scars on their surface reveal the silver metal underneath. A bit farther away lies the damaged war armor on its back, its cockpit open.

Right away, I identify it as Exoria. Unlike Ardenyx, it's ugly and it looks almost primitive. But the edges of my vision blur when I try to look too closely with my Mana Wavelength Iris.

Leth finally notices me and still wearing his armor, he turns around, pulling a dagger from his waist that immediately becomes covered in pale blue mana. His hand is shaking, and showing me just how weak he is.

Yet still he steps to the left, placing himself between me and the unconscious body behind him.

The body of Feroy, the lumoran Champion.

Chapter 535: A Simple Request

I take myself closer with Wraith Dance, coming to a stop standing over the body of the sleeping Champion. [Empyrean Lance] forms over my shoulder, and I fill it with as much mana as I can before pointing it at his head.

“No! Don’t!” Leth shouts desperately and tries to run, only to stagger and fall. Even then, he continues to crawl, his dagger already forgotten. “Please, don’t!”

After a glance at the Champion, I turn to Leth. “The moment he wakes up, he’ll probably try to kill me and I won’t be able to stop him.”

“He won’t!”

“Are you sure? You guys already tried to kill me once. I even killed the scout leader during my escape.”

“Please, don’t kill him, Nathaniel. I beg you.”

“He’s almost dead as it is,” I note.

“Please... don’t,” Leth stops crawling.

After scanning the tent a while longer, I take in the equipment, the lumoran corpses covered by bolts of cloth in the corner, the unconscious Champion and the level 7 technician slumped against the cracked stone floor, and dismiss my [Empyrean Lance].

"I'm sorry," he apologizes.

"It's not even your fault. Why are you apologizing?" I ask, helping him remove his metal armor until he stands there clad only in his white researchers uniform. And finally getting a look at his black skin and crystalline features I note that he seems fairly roughed up. He's covered in wounds, his mana is unstable, and he seems like he might pass out at any moment.

Grabbing him by his clothes, I guide him over to a pile of blankets laid out on the ground and help him collapse atop them. "Sleep. I will wake you up in a few hours. I promise not to kill the Champion."

"I..."

"Leth, you know me. I won't hesitate to shake you until you pass out anyway. Rest."

Still hesitating, he slowly closes his eyes and almost immediately falls asleep.

After checking the protective array around us, I confirm it's safe and form a few thermal pyramids, moving them around the space, placing a few over by Leth, one near me, and settling the others next to the Champion.

Only then do I take a few steps and sit down on the floor in front of the Champion, who seems to have been pretending to be unconscious, after all, he awakened the moment I formed the lance.

"Hello," I greet him.

He opens his golden eyes and slowly sits up straight on the bed, crossing his legs beneath him.

"Assistant Nathaniel?"

"Yes, that's me."

"It was wise of you not to attack. You would have died."

"Are you sure? I don't think you're in any state to use mana right now." I let my Mana Wavelength Iris flash, the golden circle appearing around my pupil before fading. "I can sense the state of your heart and mana."

He stays silent, and I don't push it. Instead, I glance around and ask, "Did everyone else die?"

"Everyone who decided to stay and fight alongside me."

"So, most of them, then?" I say. "I've seen and heard people talking in the camp. Most followed you with near-blind loyalty."

"I never deserved that kind of faith."

"Things like that are rarely up to you," I say with a shrug. "People can be irrational."

"Yes."

"Anything else I can do to help? We'll probably need you to get out of here. I'm not sure, but I think there are still a few powerful mimics hanging around nearby."

Leaning back against the bed, Champion Feroy replies, "For now, help the technician, Leth. He knows what to do. I'll do my best to save him at least and I promise to help you as well."

With these last tired words, he closes his eyes and falls asleep again. His heart, and the crystalline features that cover more of his body than any other lumoran I've seen, both acting erratically and I don't think it's just from the fight he just went through. There's something I don't know yet.

Observing him for a bit longer, I stand up and begin examining the defensive array, the equipment, and the materials and the components of the war armor Exoria while the lumorans sleep.

Leth is awake and feeding the lumoran Champion like a baby. The Champion seems accustomed to it, slowly taking the small cubes of food from Leth before chewing them and drinking water prepared from melted and filtered snow, hopefully not the yellow kind. For some reason, he makes sure not to touch Leth throughout the process.

Anyway, these cubes appear to be a special kind of food for high-level beings. I've encountered it before, though not in this form.

By now, I doubt normal food is enough to provide the level of nutrients someone so highly leveled needs. Our bodies can survive a week without food on their own, likely months at higher levels or in extreme conditions by consuming muscle or using mana as fuel.

Reading on Amazon or a pirate site? This novel is from Royal Road. Support the author by reading it there.

That's something Lily and I are still working on, trying to figure out how it all works. An average person should be able to live on around two thousand calories a day. Professional athletes and huge, muscular strongmen or powerlifters likely consume around six thousand a day. There are even viral videos of them eating ten thousand or more.

By now, I'm sure even I, with my feeble body, require far more than that. Thirty thousand? More? Perhaps on the level of a gram of uranium which, at least on the internet, is rumored to contain twenty billion calories? Will we see a bunch of the most powerful attendees die of hunger, finding themselves unable to consume enough calories, or will they spend twenty hours a day eating like some animals do?

Hell Difficulty attendee mukbang videos would be something else.

As for the Champion, the Absolute, and creatures like Biscuit, I have no idea how many calories they could need.

I pause as a thought flashes through my mind.

How many calories did that Champion deer Biscuit ate contain?

I make a few estimates, considering the Deer's size, its ability to regenerate, and its level. And though I lack proper data for an accurate calculation, the number still comes out terrifyingly high.

The good thing is that on worlds brimming with mana, even the plants seem more calorie-dense, not to mention the meat of monsters or animals, especially the higher-level ones.

That, of course, poses more problems. Logically, Earth should be filling up with ambient mana as well, from whatever source produces it, and thereby increase the caloric density of potatoes, fruit, grains, and vegetables. So, what would happen if a level 1 human were to eat a ten-thousand-calorie potato?

Some people are going to have a lot to think about and many problems to solve. Not me, though.

The lumorans here seem to have solved that problem, at least partially, and as weak as Champion Feroy seems, he probably needs some food so that his regeneration doesn't sap his mana which he seems to be using for something or consume his body itself. There are also plenty of questions: Why is he in this state? Why doesn't he regenerate properly? Are there some terrible hidden wounds causing it? Leth seems to suspect something, but for now, I decide not to ask.

At least I have free rein to spend most of my time around Exoria.

That thing is beautiful.

Rough, imperfect, patched-up, covered in misaligned parts, it's akin to fixing something with duct tape, or an ugly piece of code you wrote that worked but was too late to rewrite from scratch once you'd gained new knowledge. Instead, you add more code that fixes one thing, breaks another, rinse and repeat. In the end, you wind up with a monstrosity that only one person truly knows how to operate, and that person is likely more important than the CEO of the company relying on that code.

Exoria feels exactly like that kind of monstrosity, and I'm in love. It's like seeing the history of all the changes, improvements, and fixes made by every generation of lumoran technicians who worked on it. And damn, is this thing old, likely centuries old.

But I also notice another very interesting thing, and it answers questions, giving me something to ask the Champion about later.

So for now, I examine the open cockpit and survey the damage all over. There are smaller issues that I can fix. The safety mechanisms have been lifted likely by the Champion and meant to prevent foreign interference and spying. That's what allowed me to examine it so thoroughly, and as my thanks, I perform all the fixes I feel like I can. I have no illusions that my fixes are perfect or even that they will last very long, but it's better than nothing.

Seeing this crazy thing only increases my admiration for level 9 technician Ito, who oversaw it and is likely dead.

At some point, Leth joins me, and I continue working, this time following his lead. Where he has much more experience and knowledge, I have higher raw power and a more durable mind. I don't mind being his support and relying on him to guide me, I focus on helping him as much as possible and making things easier for him.

At first, he's a bit nervous, but we've worked like this before, and he eventually relaxes. Even he has trouble navigating the web of newer and older inscriptions and mismatched parts, but his instincts are good and his calm mind guides him.

We work on it for a long time and don't stop until two days have passed, which I notice upon checking the timer. While Leth crawls onto his bed and immediately falls asleep after eating and drinking a bit, I send a message in the Community and get an answer.

Sset (Hell, group 4) - Don't worry about us. You're in more danger than we are.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Has anything happened?

Sset (Hell, group 4) - I think some of the mercenaries with us are mimics. One of them attacked Izzy, probably because it sensed her [Empathy], and Noodle ate him. So we think she might be able to sense them if she levels up the skill. Sophie is finally awake and working on some kind of web that has the potential to strengthen and support Izzy's skill.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Is it safe?

Sset (Hell, group 4) - Ever since Sophie passed out and the web connecting us broke, I haven't slept. Alongside Lily, I kept watch over everyone at all times, even if they just needed to go to the toilet, Nat. I had them write in the Community and ran additional tests to make sure none of us were mimics. I'm certain we're in the clear. The mimic Noodle ate had taken over that technician's assistant from the thylarin group. The one with the Fragment of Eternal Fire, so there's a chance Noodle has it now, whatever that means.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - At least that's good news. Did you notice? The system didn't censor your messages. That probably means that there aren't any other groups on this floor other than ours.

Sset (Hell, group 4) - That's true. I don't think Tacita could have cleared the 6th floor all that quickly with her specialization and the way she behaves, but Savant? Maybe. We spent over six months there, so he could have been luckier than us, maybe he's already reached the 8th. I have to go. Take care.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -You too.

I close the Community and notice that the Champion has awoken once more, and he's watching me. He gestures weakly. "Assistant Nathaniel, I have a request for you."

"Please ask," I say.

The crystalline features, once filled with shimmering blue mana are almost empty now, taking on an almost sickly pale color, creating a stark contrast with his black skin. Even his golden eyes seem to have lost some of their vibrancy.

"Don't tell Technician Leth, but the next time I pilot Exoria, I will die. Though it's something I'm willing to do. Technician Leth doesn't know it, but within his body, I've stored something that needs to be delivered to our Absolute or to Champion Owain. No one else can be trusted right now."

"Does it have something to do with the thing the pilot of Ardenyx brought back? Is that why he died?"

"His name was Hephas. Please don't speak of him in such a cold way like he wasn't even a living being. He and Naeve were my disciples longer than you've been alive. They were kind people and the best disciples I could have asked for. I hope you never have to feel what I'm feeling right now."

"I... I apologize. Truly."

He offers a gentle expression in response. "It's not always easy to care about someone you don't know, and I understand that. I don't know what drives you, but I can promise this, if you do what I ask, you'll be rewarded handsomely. And I will stake what remains of my life on helping you both escape."

"Why?"

For a moment, he seems confused by my question, but then his expression clears, and he smiles, still with a hint of that gentleness. "Because I'm a Champion of my people."

"I will do it," I confirm and hold back my question.

After giving his thanks he goes back to sleep. No, he's not truly sleeping. It's more like meditation or something like that.

If I'm right, he's fighting the mimic trying to take over his body, a battle I don't think the weakened Champion can win.

That could also be why no mimics have attacked this place yet. They're minimizing their losses and waiting for the Elder Mimic to take over.

Chapter 536: Champion Feroy

The next few days turn into a race against time.

Can we make the damaged parts of Exoria functional enough before they locate us? Will we manage it before the mimic takes over his mind? Will he even be able to activate Exoria in his current state? Could we escape now and leave the Champion behind as he is?

Leth leads most of the work, and I follow him. Sometimes I try to locate whatever the Champion left inside his body, but I can't quite manage it. What a curious thing.

During the few times, Leth actually sleeps, one or two hours at a time. I keep the heating running. I patch up the degrading defensive array, which is slowly reaching a point where I won't be able to repair it. The small damage is okay, but it's too complex for me to deal with any larger issues that arise. But I learn a lot both from Exoria and the tent's defensive array.

And I talk to the Champion.

Just like he did in front of the other lumorans, he acts strong in front of Leth. It's something I think I should have noticed before, but I still consider this Champion silly. I believe all the lumorans saw through his attempts and loved him anyway.

But when Leth is asleep, Champion Feroy allows his mask to break. That's when I step in, to offer him a chance to talk about himself, his memories, or anything to keep him grounded in the fight raging in his mind. Slowly, he does so, and his face loses some of the tension that's grown so ingrained in his expression.

Champion Feroy is a gentle man. More than talking about himself or his achievements, he speaks of the people he's met, about all the kindness he's witnessed in his life, and about the unfairness that saddened him.

He talks about a time before the war, about his older sister, how she loved flowers, and how she loved to dance when they were young.

He talks about his younger brother, who died on the third front when a Champion grade Mimic made its first unexpected appearance.

He reminisces about his brother's brown eyes, rare amongst the golden eyed lumorans. A feature that seemed to make his brother very popular, especially combined with his easygoing demeanor and caring nature.

Champion Feroy tells me time and again, just how much love he had for both his siblings, seeming to forget the prior tellings each time.

Then he talks about the day he entered a competition, amongst dozens of other talented lumorans, for the right to become the next disciple of a Champion, an event that happened many times over the course of the war.

Much to his surprise, he was chosen. His and everyone else's.

Back then, he wasn't a Champion, he was just a lumoran called Feroy, a candidate born with a weak body that no healer could fix because his weaknesses were too deeply rooted. He was just a man who couldn't properly control his mana without tools to help him.

He talks about a day he visited a school full of orphans, how he spent the entirety of his monthly allowance from his master to buy them toys and sweets.

He talks about how he killed his mother and father, both overtaken by Mimics. At that moment, he almost gave up, but as always, he forced himself to keep going, determined to do better, to push forward.

"One more time," he said to himself again and again, each time he failed or lost yet another person close to him.

He talks about how his master came up with the idea for Exoria, back then it was just a simple suit of armor that would help Feroy channel his mana and cover for his weak body. A tool that for others would only be a crutch, slowing them down, despite how it would come to be so important to him.

Over the years though it evolved into what it is now, every addition and expansion tailored to support him as he grew stronger.

I listen, only stopping to ask the occasional question or two, especially when he seems lost in thought. When I offer to try and help him, he refuses, telling me he is containing the Mimic. He doesn't want to risk the Mimic affecting me through physical contact.

A part of me wants to risk it, to help him, perhaps out of curiosity. But I know he's right. So I listen to the story of his life. His struggles, his failures, and sometimes his achievements, which he mentions shyly and always briefly.

He talks even more about the time his disciples, Hephas and Naeve, caught some kind of small animal and dumped it in Exoria's cockpit. That scared little creature released a strong scent that filled the cabin for days, impossible to clean out during the training they were doing back then. It's something he seems to look back on with a certain kind of fondness.

His first meeting with Serabeth, who broke his nose after misunderstanding his compliment as a pushy pickup line. She did it even though she knew he was a Champion.

His first meeting with Level 9 Technician Ito, who was only Level 6 at the time, and the man who created the first pieces of the armor that would become Exoria. A man similar in age to Feroy, with whom he had shared many adventures.

Gradually, I piece together bits of information: the rare illness that makes his body weak and forces him to rely on tools to prop up his abilities; the talent that, despite everything, made him the second strongest Champion among the lumorans.

Exoria is a tool, a crutch, he needs it just to wield his power without killing himself, even if it holds him back.

When he was just a candidate, it made some people look down on him. Even so, he still had his followers, people like Serabeth, Technician Ito, and disciples who still decided to follow in his footsteps and use war armor they didn't need. These war armors were largely funded by Feroy, carried by his influence, even at the cost of postponing Exoria's own upgrades.

Dozens of lumorans followed this man, and each one had their own reasons: whether it was his gentle nature, his refusal to give up, or his strength. Most of these people are dead now because they chose to follow and help him with the dangerous mission he felt was so crucial to the survival of their people. Even when they had to rush to the battlefield without the proper preparations.

Even though the combination of Feroy's illness and the wounds from previous battles prevented him from using Exoria. Even though he couldn't use his mana anymore without his war armor—and despite knowing that the next time he activated Exoria would probably kill him.

The fact that he is alive now after everyone struggled to fix it and he activated it, is almost a miracle. Even before heading to the second front, he expected to die from the consequences of his prior fight, the unhealing wounds he suffered, and his worsening sickness. Maybe his survival is even the result of the Mimic slowly taking over him.

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“Once a Mimic enters your body, it can’t escape. It’ll either take over or try to kill you as it dies. The only thing that might change that is probably a Progenitor Mimic,” the Lumoran in front of me says out of nowhere.

Making sure I’m listening, he explains, “At first, it’s like you almost don’t notice. They do their best to remove your memory of their entry. Sometimes they fail, but most of the time they succeed. The next important step they take is to maximize your will to live, so you’ll avoid danger and be less likely to end your own life before losing your will to the Mimic.”

While speaking, he carefully touches the circular crystalline feature on his left wrist with his fingertips. “Then, if they’re not capable of taking over quickly, they try to weaken you, physically and mentally.”

He thinks for a while before smiling. “I believe a strong will and mental defenses are more important than your skills, traits, classes, or passives, judging by my ‘guest’s’ behavior.”

“Is it really not possible to remove it?”

“We’ve tried many times, even with the Lord Absolute’s help. Even the weakest Mimics cannot be removed by us without destroying the mind of their host.”

Probably because of all the time I’ve spent with Kyralon and his questions, I’ve started getting just as curious myself, so I ask, “Do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“I don’t mind. I’m grateful for your company and for how kind you’ve been to listen to my stories. Please, ask away.”

“You won’t tell me about your mission here or about the message you left with Leth, right?”

“I hope you understand why.”

“In that case, what keeps you going? Your disciples, your friends, the technicians you spent all those decades with, and the people who were willing to follow you here, even knowing none of you were likely to survive, are all dead. What else remains?”

He pulls his legs closer to his chest and draws the blanket around his body. Lit by my thermal pyramid, he thinks for a moment.

When he looks back up at me, his eyes are clear. “First, I want to tell you that I never expected it would end this way. If I had known, I wouldn’t have allowed any of the mercenaries to join this expedition. This is our planet’s problem, and I thought we would have more time, but things went terribly wrong.”

He doesn’t seem to be lying, from what I can tell, so I nod.

“As for what keeps me going,” he pauses before continuing, “it’s probably the feeling that it’s all about to end. I’ll die soon while helping you escape, and I’ll take down as many Mimics as I can, including the one currently worming its way into my mind. After that, there will be no more watching the people I care about die or seeing my fellow lumorans suffer. I’m so very tired, Assistant Nathaniel, so just this once, I will be selfish. But before that, I’ll push one more time and give it my best. So that when I meet those who’ve passed on before me, I can look into their faces with pride and say, ‘I did my best,’ and thank them.”

After that, Champion Feroy doesn’t speak anymore.

His once-gentle eyes grow colder as he sits and watches Leth and I fix up Exoria.

He doesn’t eat or drink.

And he doesn’t sleep or meditate.

A day passes like that, and finally, a presence appears in the surrounding area.

The Mimics buried in the snow stop hiding and stand up. Eager to welcome the latest powerful addition to their ranks.

Waiting for the second-strongest among the lumoran Champions to become one of the strongest Mimics in existence—immense talent and capabilities taken over, with the Mimic potentially fixing or replacing his body.

There is almost a kind of rhythm in the air, a vibration I can feel in my chest and a distant humming noise that gradually grows stronger, enough to pierce through the relentless blizzard. It feels almost like a ritual to welcome the new arrival.

Champion Feroy stands for the first time in a long while. His face is thin, dark circles under his eyes, and he moves slowly, almost mechanically.

Leth and I watch as he steps closer to us.

Almost in desperation, Leth calls out to him with the same love the now-dead Lumorans in this camp once felt.

The Champion touches the surface of the war armor, and the humming becomes almost ear-piercing.

He slowly climbs into the cockpit, then rests inside and closes his eyes.

The new rhythms quicken, and even the blizzard begins to subside for a moment.

His eyes open. They are clear and beautiful as he smiles gently.

“One more time,” he says.

The cockpit slams shut, and the rhythmic cries of the monsters are replaced by screams and waves of mana washing over the area, and multiple signatures rise to meet it, each rivaling the presence of a Champion.

Exoria stands in a single, energetic motion, piercing through the roof of the half-collapsed tent and sending piles of snow tumbling down on us.

When his domain expands from the war armor, I act, stretching a multitude of Ley Lines outward in every direction.

Even though there are multiple Champion grade Mimics, none can tear it apart, the lumoran Champion won't allow it. The mimics fail to put so much as a dent in the lumoran Champion's domain during his last stand.

I grab Leth and take us as far away as I can along one of the lines.

Immediately, multiple presences reach out, trying to track us, but Exoria takes a step, and the blizzard ceases with a single pulse rippling out from the impact.

The sky, ever clouded and filled with falling snow, turns a clear blue as the sunlight begins pouring down on the area, shining down on the tall, black suit of war armor. It almost seems like it's absorbing that light.

Only the scratches reveal the silver metal beneath. The war armor, like its pilot, is scarred, damaged, and barely holding itself together. And yet here it stands, ready to give its all, one last time.

Despite having no wings, it floats into the air, a tremor reverberating through the surroundings. And a huge halo forms over its head, seemingly woven from the essence of light itself.

I teleport us again and again, throwing Ley Lines as far as I can by tying them to my projectiles. Leth vomits a few times from all the rapid teleportation, but we need to put as much distance between us and them as possible.

Gradually, only a few stronger presences manage to keep pace. All the others being held at bay by Exoria and its pilot in a battle I can sense even at this distance.

There's a terrible screeching. Explosions of light. And earthquakes that reach us even here. The shockwaves send us rolling and vaporize the snow around us.

Even from miles away, an immense rumbling shakes the air, while flashes of light evaporate everything in their path.

That little black shape with its halo of light, remains, floating resolute against the pale blue sky, even extends some sort of temporary field around us that deflects the attacks of the Mimics still in pursuit. Some of the suit's attacks reach us even here, killing some of our pursuers while permanently scarring the area.

It continues like that hour after hour. And I can still feel the fight as we continue our flight.

Champion Feroy against three Mimic Champions, along with countless weaker ones.

Then it's one against two.

Then just one against one.

When only a single presence remains, the world feels peaceful for a fleeting moment, the gentle light holding steady against the blizzard of the second front.

One more radiant flash and even that last signature disappears.

Chapter 537: End of the Chase

[Greater Mimic - lvl ???]

[Greater Mimic - lvl ???]

The Mimics following us continue to match pace, even now, and they must be excellent trackers unless they've marked us in some undetectable way. It's hard to estimate their level, but what's annoying is that they seem to have a degree of control over some of the lesser mimics and mimic spawn in the area, causing them to awaken and attack us.

After a day of flying through the snowy region, unwilling to risk a prolonged fight with them in case more Mimics choose to join in, I even manage to pick up another level fighting off the weaker ones.

[Lvl 303 > Lvl 304]

Sometimes I also teleport us, but I don't do so quite as often, worried that it might seriously hurt Leth.

At least I know no Champion grade Mimics will come our way, and I know where to head, thanks to a small compass-like device pointing the way out of the Second Front and into Iumoran territory.

Speed is more important than my frustration with these two Greater Mimics following us. I'm sure I could deal with them if needed, but protecting Leth in the process might be tricky.

So we fly. I carry Leth like a princess, supporting him with a pair of extra limbs I create out of mana. Heat radiates from my body to keep us warm, and I surround us in a barrier, ready to deflect attacks and shield us from the wind. My mana is draining at a rapid pace, but it also regenerates fairly quickly. The result is that it still goes down between flying, heating, defending, and fighting off whatever Mimics I can kill quickly, but with my reserves, I'm not worried.

It makes me wonder if, given the speed I'm traveling at—even with the five days I spent with Kyralon—I might leave the Second Front faster than they will.

It's quite possible.

During one of our brief breaks, Leth is sitting in the snow as I expand my barrier to deflect and block the wind.

While I keep an eye on our surroundings and track the Greater Mimics, Leth sits there quietly. He's not crying anymore.

"He was like an older brother to all of us," he whispers. "His body was frail, and his illness weighed on him... but he never showed any weakness. He tried to hide it, he was ashamed to let us see, but we noticed. And the funny thing is, we admired him even more for his determination."

"From what I gathered talking to him, he seemed like a good man," I reply.

"Better than any other lumoran I knew. None of the lumoran Champions has... had such loyal people as him. But still... why, why would he..."

"All the answers should be with you."

"I know! You said that already! I... I just want to know if it was worth it."

"All we can do is wait and see."

A day later, the blizzard weakens, and far fewer lesser mimics and their spawn bother to attack us.

The Greater Mimics trailing us push hard and try to catch up, with what almost feels like a deep well of desperation. But there's no way they can manage it and there don't seem to be any Champion grade Mimics nearby, though it's entirely possible they simply haven't received the message. It seems the lumoran Champion took care of that.

Actually, how many Champion grade mimics and hosts could the mimic forces possibly have? Wouldn't Champion Feroy's killing of those last six be a huge loss?

One more day passes, and the snow gradually begins to disappear, and the terrain starts to shift, transitioning into a hilly tundra with short, hardy grass and stout, stunted trees. There are plenty of lakes in the area.

We've finally left the Second Front, yet our pursuers do not stop, continuing to trail us as we go.

Just a bit farther, and I'll get rid of these two.

As I'm reading through the Community, I learn the others are still in the snowy region, and that's when we receive a new notification:

Warning! The 2nd wave is now in progress.

As before, there is no immediate change where I am, but I don't let my guard down.

Leth stands beside me as I watch two Mimics gradually creep closer—two massive lumps of tentacles, mouths, teeth, and eyes. At some point, it's almost impressive they managed to track me for so long, but enough is enough.

I prepare for the fight and fire an [Empyrean Lance] I'd been charging, then deploy a simple web of Ley Lines over the area.

The lance reaches one of the Mimics in a fraction of a second.

Okay, let's follow up and finish...

[You have defeated Greater Mimic - lvl 375]

[Lvl 304 > Lvl 305]

Uh, what?

The other Mimic, a stadium's length to the right of the fallen one, stops. I could almost swear it seems to take a moment to look with all its eyes at the space where its buddy once stood. That one now lies dead, unmoving, the lance having torn a hole clear through its durable body with ease.

Well, if it works, why not try again?

Before the mimic moves, I form another lance and pump more into it to strengthen it. Since I'm doing it faster, it's not as heavily charged as the first one. It slowly spins on its axis, the golden-white core glowing from within.

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[Empyrean Lance - lvl 13 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 14]

The Mimic rushes at us, trying to evade the Ley Lines I materialize in an attempt to slice it or slow it down. Its movement tears chunks of rock and grass, and there's weight behind that charge, like a car traveling at high speed.

I know it'll try to dodge, so I bide my time, storing more and more kinetic energy.

"Nathaniel?"

Closer.

"Nathaniel!" Leth shouts.

Just a bit more.

The Mimic reaches the spot I want, and my domain expands. With it, [Redistribution] flares into activation, slowing the enemy. Even so, the Mimic retains most of its speed, and I can feel its monstrous strength and powerful body in the weight of its presence.

Maybe my first attack was just a fluke.

The Mimic changes direction and charges straight at us, dozens of tentacles swirling in front of its body to block any incoming attacks.

I get ready to teleport away and release the lance.

The shockwave of its lunge makes Leth stagger, but the Mimic itself staggers too. Halted by the hole, as wide as my torso, that's inexplicably been punched through its body.

[You have defeated Greater Mimic - lvl 378]

Its body keeps moving another second from the momentum, then comes to a stop.

A level 14 skill.

I let my usual mana projectiles weave themselves together over my shoulders. Then I compress them until they're dark blue, and launch them at the corpse with the same amount of kinetic force I used with the lance before.

Several shockwaves push Leth back while he curses, demanding to know what the hell I'm doing.

I move closer to the body and examine the damage. The projectiles I made have penetrated its hide and embedded themselves halfway into the corpse. I could probably make them pierce further with a bit more compression, which would somehow, don't ask me how make the mana heavier. In the best case, I could probably pierce all the way through a mimic's body.

I know how durable these creatures are from my prior observations, and that "dumb lance" just sliced them apart.

Curious, I examine the hole it tore through the beast and the field it left behind, watching the way it interacts with the Mimic. I know this field should dissipate over time, but I think it will last longer at higher levels.

It's something I really want to experiment with and maybe replicate for training. The thing disrupted Whitey's kinetic energy, so it fascinates me.

I spend a few minutes pulling several of the mimic's teeth, carefully avoiding its toxic saliva. Then I store them in a square of canvas, which I bind with thread made of mana, which should last a few days even without "restoring" it.

After checking the Community, I pick up Leth and continue in the direction indicated by the compass.

POV Myrra

"Beatrice! Get your ass over here!" I shout toward the tower. Almost immediately, that pink woman rushes outside, followed by her bodyguard.

"Lady Myrra! I'm so sorry for being so slow to respond," she apologizes right away.

"Sure, sure. My master said-"

"-Didn't she explicitly say that she wasn't your master-" Beatrice tries to interrupt.

I ignore her and continue, "My master said to tell your father to stop messing around. Apparently, his attempts to regain control of the Framework are annoying, mostly because they're so unrefined and he's not very sneaky. Yada yada, noble ladies' pets, a toddler could do better, you know the drill."

"I... I apologize. There must be some sort of misunderstanding, but I'll speak to my father right away, I promise."

"Good! Because I don't think there'll be a second warning."

Under different circumstances, I'd probably feel bad bullying someone like this, but these silly mind mages surely deserve it. Even now, I feel her trying to manipulate me.

I could probably tell Lissandra and let her handle it quickly, but what am I, a baby lynthari who can't deal with this weird pink human?

To push it further, I turn to Beatrice's bodyguard, the man who once had a crown over his head, rumored to contain enough energy to destroy this city ten times over if Beatrice died.

The crown that Lissandra snatched, leaving all these people floundering like fish out of water.

Surely one of my favorite memories.

"Little fishy," I call, turning to the bodyguard, "my master Lissandra is asking how long you spent filling your crown. A year?"

"I... a few decades."

I shake my head. "Tsk ts. So lacking. How were you guys even planning to break the spatial locks with such lackluster skills?"

Before Beatrice can speak, I interrupt her. "I have to go, you know. I have more important matters just waiting for my attention. Later then, little fishy—and pink bitch."

I wave them off, and no words follow. I could really get used to this. I almost feel a weight dropping off my shoulders after the months I've spent with that silver haired monster.

Continuing to juggle the multitude of orbs I'm training with, I hop onto a rooftop and then leap to another, sometimes even hopping across the towers, before reaching our own, temporary, home, somewhere around the exact center of the city. I think it used to belong to someone important, but Lady Lissandra took it for us.

There are no guards. Not even defensive arrays. She just has no need for them.

As before, I find her at the top of the tower, doing all kinds of things I can't comprehend, with dozens of mana stones around her, and the tower's surface carved and inscribed. The [Impact Crown] that once belonged to the bodyguard now floats nearby. It's almost amusing, considering what it's capable of, to see it tossed aside like a discarded toy.

"They should stop now," I tell her before taking my usual seat, resting my back against the wall.

"Little kitten," she says, "if they were at least doing something interesting like using their cheap ploy to hide their real plan. But no, these people have no idea what they're doing. They probably didn't even come up with this themselves—the prisoner trapped within the Spatial Locks probably had to feed it to them."

"Is it some kind of inscription master?"

"I wasn't curious enough to check. Let's test something: repeat what I said. 7th floor, 2nd tournament."

"7th floor, 2nd tournament."

"Good. The progress on status transfer is going well, and we should be done soon."

"There are so many things I want to ask."

"Take your time, little kitten. I'll tell you everything I know."

"As always," I growl, my tail twitching in frustration, "these brutes don't even have proper shampoo for me to use."

"I believe you'll survive."

"Lady Lissandra."

“What.” She pauses and looks at me, somehow managing to appear vaguely threatening and I know I only have time for one question.

“What were your two starting skills?”

"Such a question would be considered extremely rude in any civilized nation, little kitten," she says before turning back to her work.

“I’m curious. Plus, all these Rulers watching us probably already know, how cold I be any worse than them!”

“That’s a terrible leap of logic you’ve made. [Mana Manipulation] and [Control].”

“I’ve never heard of anyone with [Control]. Wouldn’t that be an insanely strong skill?”

"I thought you would have learned by now that it's rarely about the skill itself. I've met many people with powerful skills, little kitten, but most couldn't fully control them. They seemed destined for greatness, envied for their potential, yet they hit a limit they couldn't surpass. Like children wielding swords too heavy to swing."

“I see. Aren’t you going to ask me about my starting skills, Lady Lissandra?”

With a sigh, she turns to me again. “What were your starting skills, little kitten?”

I pretend to be shocked, covering my open mouth with my hand and widening my eyes. “H-how could you? Do you know how rud-”

Before I can finish, a pulse from the crown floating nearby pushes me right over the tower’s edge.

And as I fall through the air, I twist, reorienting myself, and landing on my feet.

Then I notice that in that one instant, the silver haired monster managed to modify the orbs I'm training with, increasing their difficulty immensely.

I plop down on my butt, unable to concentrate on standing while trying to keep them from bursting.

Chapter 538: Green, blue, and purple flame

Leth and I stop near one of the defensive lines. The web hanging in the sky becomes more dense, and the scans become more accurate. There's even an exceptionally tall wooden wall with inscriptions, and I'm sure there are scouts or guards nearby, ready to rush in at speeds rivaling racing cars.

"Can you make it back from here?" I ask him.

After days of traveling, he seems tired but happy to stand on his feet. "I can. I know the protocols, and after a quarantine, they should let me in. With all that's happened, they'll probably speak to me even sooner, even if they suspect I might be a mimic. Then they will probably want to ask me about what happened. I'll ask to see Champion Owain and talk only to him."

"Sounds good. Are you sure you aren't a mimic? That would suck after all of this."

"I... I don't think so? Are you?"

"Me? The last thing I'm worried about is another dickhead in my mind."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't sweat it. I'll be going now."

Before I can leave, he calls out to me, "Assistant Nathaniel."

"Thank you, truly. Once I've spoken to Champion Owain, I'll ask them to look for you... regarding your reward and... I hope your friends are fine."

“Sure. See you later, level 7 technician Leth.”

With that, I propel myself high into the air before arching back toward my starting point. My senses expand as far as possible, I forgo more detailed scans, prioritizing sheer range over precision.

Right away, I move faster than I did with Leth and enjoy the wind passing by me as I pierce the air. No matter how often I fly, I’ll always enjoy it.

POV Kim Min-Jae

I launch another projectile into the body of the lesser mimic and then pull it back, along with the hundreds more I’ve fired today. Each one boring new paths through the beast until the monster finally stops moving and the kill notification rings out in my mind.

Another one charges me, but I use [Telekinesis] to pull my body out of the way and expand the gravitational field around me.

The monster slows down, and my orbs slam through its body like the blast of a shotgun just before I pull them back to join the Hundreds continuing to orbit my body.

(Help Izzy,) Tess sends through the web.

After quickly locating her, I fly through the snow for a few moments and land next to her. A bit further away, Noodle has coiled himself around a mimic spawn—green, blue, and purple flame burning on his skin as he begins to eat the monster, despite how disgusting it looks.

At first, we were worried about him, given the way mimics tend to possess things, but anything that enters Noodle’s stomach doesn’t seem to be a cause for concern.

Izzy stands on a patch of dry land, having cleared an area the size of a football stadium around her, melting all the snow around her, and her new flames, combined into a single mass of green, blue, and purple, and flickering all around her.

When we fight, we almost always need to keep our distance from each other. That's just how some of our abilities work, needing huge amounts of space to be used at their highest levels.

At first, I don't realize what Izzy might need help with, but then I notice a Greater Mimic climbing out of the hole.

Fuck.

(Just hold it for a moment, Lily will be there soon! Biscuit should be somewhere nearby as well,) Tess sends as if reading my thoughts.

Given no other choice, I call to Izzy, (You tank and I snipe.)

(Sure!) she calls.

Her flames draw in tighter and intensify, taking the form of a massive snake that coils around her as if it were alive.

The Greater Mimic crashes against it, and I use my eyes to reach through the gravitational wavelengths I see, especially the ones closer to the monster. And then I grab them, giving them a pull, causing part of the monster's body implodes in on itself, taking a good chunk of my mana with it. The flame snake attacks, targeting the fresh wound while I redirect my field to slow the monster.

As burns start to show on its skin, the mimic continues to charge. It's incredibly tough and its body barely slows even as I hurl car-sized chunks of debris at it with all the force I can muster.

But even that brief moment of delay is enough to protect us until Lily finally comes soaring through the air and lands on it. And her giant axe flashes with gray mana as she cuts into the monster with ease, slicing through again and again, before it throws her away. A few tentacles reach toward her, but a gray mantle forms around her, and the tentacles disappear, disintegrating on contact.

(Yoo, the mana maniac is on his way. He caught one of the high-range mana frequencies we've been sending for him,) Dennis sends out of nowhere, speaking through the general link.

(Food!)

(Wanna bet he just asked if Nat was bringing us some food?) Maya says, sending a message of her own.

(Everyone focus! Sophie and Maya, finish off our Greater Mimic. Dennis and Aaron, help Lily, and Min-Jae and Izzy with theirs. Let's get things cleared up before he gets here.) Tess orders, and we get back to fighting.

This narrative has been purloined without the author's approval. Report any appearances on Amazon.

POV Nathaniel

By the time I land, the fight is over.

My grand entrance isn't happening now, but at the same time, it's always nice to see the corpses of Greater Mimics lying around. I'm sure they weren't as powerful as the ones I killed with such ease, but group 4 seems to be doing alright. And much to my satisfaction, Lily is already looting the bodies for parts.

In comparison to the others, who are wearing layers of thick protective clothes, I'm thinly dressed, stuck in the same shirt and pants I wore to my meeting with Kyralon. I do not feel cold, and while it does put a huge strain on my mana supply, it's only reasonable for this level of comfort.

For a moment, I examine these multicolored flames around Noodle and Izzy and head over to greet Tess, deciding to ask about the flames later.

Once Dennis adds me to the link I begin to speak, (I think we're going to want to fuck off as quickly as possible. I wouldn't be surprised if a few Champion grade mimics decided to show up out of nowhere, at least if they have any left. And we need to find some place to fix up Fracture, It's annoying having to keep it at bay all the time. I swear, any longer and I'll just sell it.)

(It's nice to see you too, Nat,) Tess sends back, and I can hear amusement in her voice. (You had us worried for a moment there.)

(Just for a moment? What if I've become a mimic?)

(You can still talk in the Community.)

(Would you really put it past the System to let a mimic imitate me so perfectly that it can use the Community on this floor? The System could just prevent the mimic from reaching the 8th floor. Or it could simply remove it once all the attendees are dead.)

(Fuck, you must have been really popular at parties, Nat.) Maya jeers, smirking nearby, holding her wounded arm out for Lily, who immediately gets to work healing it.

(I was never invited to any.)

(S-same here!) Lily is quick to add.

(With your healing abilities, people will be falling over each other to invite you to many, many parties. Don't worry, Lily.) Tess jokes, giving her a wink before turning to me. (How much longer till we're out of the second front?)

(Probably a day at your snail's pace? It'll get warmer soon and there will be less snow.)

(That's good. Our equipment and tents are being held together by wire and duct tape at this point and I don't want to waste a bunch of mana on keeping us warm while we fight mimics. Sophie, can you take Izzy and come with me to check on the rest of the group? Everyone else, please show Nathaniel around. We'll be heading out for the last push in thirty minutes.)

After that, she leaves, and I'm brought to one of the smaller tents we stole. There are three of them, the remaining two having been occupied by the other mercenaries, a few of whom are probably mimics.

(We aren't killing other mercenaries just to be sure no mimics try to get the jump on us?) I ask.

Min-Jae is the first to answer, (Sophie keeps track of them, and when one moves too far away from us, Tess usually just snipes him. Even in this storm, I saw her throw her javelin over two miles and still kill the Mimic Spawn in one blow!)

After sitting down on a manabloc chair, Dennis groans with satisfaction, (Tess wants the lumorans to clear them out or kill them when they start running away. Her goal is to keep the true mercenaries alive in hopes of getting ahold of some valuable information or further rewards.)

(She should have been Greed. It would fit her,) I note.

Lily giggles, (She was offered Greed, Chastity, and Temperance back then, so you aren't exactly far off.)

(Now that you mention it, what other options did you get, Lily?) I ask.

(Lust!)

(Shut up, Dennis! I got Wrath, Charity, and Sloth.)

(Min-Jae?)

(Envy, Humility, and Greed.)

(What about the twin dickheads?)

(Fuck you, Nat. Both Aaron and I got Diligence, Patience, and Humility.)

(That's three Blights and no Radiances. Good boys. And you, Maya?)

(Patience, Temperance, and Sloth.)

(All interesting. I got Pride, Greed, and Patience. By the way, what's up with these blue, green, and purple flames Noodle and Izzy seem to have?)

Maya shrugs, (Noodle ate a guy with a Fragment of Eternal Fire—whatever that means. Noodle is Izzy's bond, so they share some of their abilities. Izzy's blue flames evolved or something under the effect of that fragment, which is apparently also blue, green, and purple. Also, here.)

I grab the sword she is handing me, the damaged arcane item I got from Beyond, the claymore known as Bloodthirst.

(You already got a new skill you wanted?)

Maya smiles proudly, (Yup, [Compounding]. The effects seem to be similar to Bloodthirst, but I can apply it to any of my weapons, and it works nicely with [Boost].)

(These skill names are getting weirder and weirder,) I shake my head. (We have to test it later. It sounds cool. And take Bloodthirst back, it's nearly fixed and at arcane grade. After you get it to Arcane, I'll sell it in Beyond and give you a cut.)

(Sounds good!) There is no hesitation as she snatches it away.

"So, where is Biscuit?" I ask, pretending not to see the short tail wagging under one of the blankets nearby.

When I say his name, the speed of his wagging tail increases.

"Biscuit? Where are youuu?" I ask, still pretending not to see, ignoring the others as they roll their eyes.

I take a few steps and pass by the aforementioned blanket, only for it to be thrown aside as a corgi pup rushes out from underneath, biting into the cloth of my pants with his short, sharp teeth and starting to pull and jerk at the fabric to cause more damage.

“Oh my god. You got me! I was scared for a moment!”

(Food!)

“Yes, it’s terrifying!”

He finally lets go and barks, and I reach down to pick him up. Ever since he turned into a pup, he seems to act like one sometimes. But it’s cute, so he can do whatever he wants.

While giving him the pets he deserves, I turn to the others, (We need to hold on for...) I check the timer, (around three weeks, and then we’ll get our own personal, walking, hydrogen bomb. Plus, I can probably get us some nice rewards for this thing I helped with, so we can bail to a safer place and take normal missions for a while.)

(What’s your plan?) Lily asks, taking a seat next to me and reaching out to pet Biscuit. (Aren’t you worried about what Lissandra’s going to do?)

(A bit, but it’ll be fineee. I need to fix Fracture first. Then I want to see what Maya’s skill does. I want to see Noodle and Izzy’s Fragment of Eternal Fire and experiment some more. Once Lissandra arrives there won’t be much time left until the second tournament anyways. So, who here thinks we can set a new record for enduring the most waves?)

Chapter 539: Minion communication token

Hed, the huge velnar, turns out to still be alive, along with only about six more mercenaries. Of the technicians, only a thylarin and himself remain; the rest are combat-oriented mercenaries who didn’t seem to mind following Tess. One of the reasons might be that Group 4, with their combined powers, could easily beat them all up, even if these mercenaries are higher level.

If they’re mimics, I have no idea why they’ve stuck around, knowing where we’re heading. Maybe mimics are just dumb.

I keep expecting an Elder Mimic to come crawling out of the woodwork as we make our way out of the front, heading for the defensive wall, but nothing of that sort happens. The rest of our trip, following a few less than heated fights in the snowy area, settles into an uneventful hike. Only when we reach about halfway to the wall does a segment of the web covering the area activate. A phenomenon I can only call a “highway” leading somewhere deep into lumoran territory.

That “highway” is high in the sky, part of the web, and through it a figure is pulled at incredible speed.

Right away, I grab Sophie’s shoulder and give her a shake to draw her attention away from her sister, then point her towards it.

“Observe this with me. I want to know what it does,” I tell her.

At first, it seems like she wants to complain, but when she notices the Absolute’s web activating in preparation, her curiosity takes over.

If I’m right, that “highway” lets even those who can’t fly move through the sky at incredible speed. Only one person emerges, crashing into the ground a few miles ahead in an explosion of earth, grass, and shattered trees.

Right away, that presence begins moving in our direction, and within seconds the lumoran stops near us. Black skin, white crystalline features collaring his neck and dotting his forehead, forearms, and legs. While from his back, hangs a single slim sword that I can sense pulsing—like the rhythm of a beating heart.

I estimate him to be over level 400 for sure. Similar in level to Serabeth if not stronger.

Tess steps in front of us. “We—”

She pauses when the lumoran warrior lifts his hand.

“There is no need to talk until we confirm whether you are mimics or not. I’m here because my master sent me, and I’m only looking for one person. A human male with one gray and one brown eye.”

"Did you meet Leth? That human is probably me." I step ahead.

"I don't have the specifics. I simply follow my master's orders. It was Champion Owain who sent me here," he says, stepping closer and looking me up and down. "Eye color fits. And there's the punchable face my master mentioned, so it should be you."

Motherfucker.

Was it Leth, who told his master that?

"We will be leaving right away. If any of you raise your mana any higher than it is now, I will kill you. If you try to run away, I will kill you. If you don't cooperate, I will kill you. If you give me any reason to think you are a mimic, I will kill you. Understood?"

His presence is overbearing, and that slim, long blade on his back seems to pulse in time with his emotions.

So while everyone affirms their understanding, I, as I want to do, try to work out if I could fight him if it were necessary. The way he moves his body, the strength I feel from each movement confirmed by kinetic senses, the weight of his steps, that weapon as well.

The answer is probably no. For now.

Then, since he plans to lead us where we wanted to go anyway, we follow him without giving him trouble.

One week. That's how long we spend in quarantine after passing through the wall and then being teleported somewhere else, deep into lumoran territory, though we don't have much opportunity to see any of it. We're the only group is here so we have no idea what happened to the other mercenaries.

They don't even give us the usual tests; instead, we simply spend a week sitting in a huge cube that's lined all around the interior in a white metallic plating. There are no visible inscriptions, but a constant

stream of frequencies is being sent through the air. From what we've gathered, these frequencies hurt mimics or force them to reveal themselves, and the cube is something they've designed to reveal even an Elder Mimic.

All of this is being done under Champion Owain's authority, mostly delegated to his disciple Jareth—the lumoran who brought us all here with that fancy sword on his back.

There must be a reason they believe this method of mimic detection still works, even after whatever information Leth gave them. Well, it's mostly a Lumoran problem, but if they struggle to identify mimics, it'll make this floor more challenging for us. Though now that I think of it, shouldn't that make the rewards better?

"Nat," Min-Jae shouts, calling out to me, and so I exit my cubical, one of many placed inside the cube to give us some privacy.

"What?" I ask.

Using Sophie's and the twins' communication link seems to be impossible here, so we talk like... like Easy difficulty scrubs.

"Did you get the notification about the third wave?" he asks.

"Yup," I say, walking by his side and stretching.

"It would be nice if we could sit here as long as possible for the highest reward."

"Really? That would be boring. Plus, at some point, our inactivity will balance out our high wave count and reduce our rewards to shit."

"That's true." He stops at our usual spot, and we wait for Maya while stretching.

This place also actively disrupts all external mana, so after a week of only being able to do some training inside my body, I'm getting very frustrated. Sure, I can form an "evil pyramid" inside my stomach and do some training while working on other stuff, but there are too many other things I wanted to do. Yes, I leveled up a bit, but this "quarantine" really, really pisses me off.

They also made me get rid of my crown. For a moment it was nice to watch them panic as I simply removed it and let it destabilize before a few lumoran guards combined forces to disperse the mana safely. I think that more than anything made them suspect I'm a mimic more than the others are suspected. They also took Fracture, and damn, I hope that thing eats them alive.

"Sorry I'm late, I was busy," Maya comes running.

"Bullshit, there's nothing to do," I note.

Instead of responding, she turns to Min-Jae and asks. "Has he said anything about hoping Fracture would eat the lumorans?"

"Not yet," Min-Jae replies, shaking his head.

"Yes, yes," I wave it off.

Maya smirks gleefully before taking a stance. Min-Jae and I follow suit, dropping into the same stance and then slowly copying her movements. It's something she learned from a lynthari swordmaster on the 4th floor, and modified with techniques she learned from the people of the 6th floor during our six months of separation. She just seems to love picking up all manner of techniques.

I would say her fighting style is a mess, a Frankenstein's monster of styles she actively works to etch into her muscle memory while relying on her instincts to choose the "correct" moves in a fight.

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It seems to be something Maya really enjoys. Out of everyone in Group 4, she's the most technical, while most of us act like wild animals relying on our instincts, stats, and skills to pick up the slack.

Her way of moving isn't something I truly want to mimic, as I prefer to "freestyle," though I've learned a lot from Whitey too, but Whitey never had any formal teachings; most of his "style" is just pure aggression and instinct.

Still, I'm way too bored to do anything but follow her lead, slowly moving my body in time with her demonstration. Working on our footwork, taking smooth movements, and making feints. We even pick up the wooden sticks the lumorans gave us and swing them in sync with Maya's instructions, as if they were big swords like her claymore.

Min-Jae seems to enjoy it and he's clearly better at it than me, showing that he and Maya must have made quite the routine of this.

As I maintain the "evil pyramid" inside my body and mimic Maya's movements, I find my mind clearing.

Biscuit is probably the happiest member of Group 4 at the moment, even after the days we've spent here. We're getting plenty of food and water, and everyone's here. No one is leaving him, so he can pick any human he likes to play with at any time.

He runs all over the place, he sleeps, he nips at our ankles, and—unable to talk—he woofs and barks more often than he ever has before.

I watch as he pulls on Lily's hair while she laughs, lying on the ground and giggling, covering her face from his furious attacks.

After a while, I look at Izzy sitting next to me. "Fragment of Eternal Fire," I say.

"I still don't know."

"Izzy, it's been at least ten days since you got it; you must know something."

"I don't know! I didn't have time to test it!" she says almost happily.

With a groan, I point at Noodle. "You, come here."

As instructed, the white snake, about the size of an anaconda and currently unable to change its size, slithers closer and looks at me with its green eyes.

"What does that thing do?" I ask him as well.

He looks at me, otherwise unmoving.

I also lay back on the ground. What did I even expect?

As if sensing a moment of weakness, Biscuit comes rushing over and starts biting at my hair, pulling on it while growling in a terrifying display. Especially given how close to my face he is, I watch him do so and promptly notice the drool he's leaving in my hair.

I don't even have the energy to fight back so I just let it happen.

Feeling his tugging on my hair, I close my eyes and continue my new training, attempting to expand my [Mana Domain] beyond the borders of my body, even though the effects of this weird cube we're in seems to disrupt it.

"Use minion communication token."

Nothing happens.

I sigh. "Okay, okay, use "ten minute Disciple Communication token."

The token disappears from my status after I use it. I only have to wait a few minutes for Vega to accept. I expect to hear her voice, but instead, I find myself somewhere else, something like the mental space I share with Whitey. It seems like the dumbass cube can't quite block out the system. Well, obviously. Should I use a Beyond Stay Token to escape it, the consequences and anger of the system be damned?

The place I find myself in is entirely white; there isn't a single shape or other color, and even tapping my feet on the ground feels weird, as if I should be falling.

"Master?"

I turn around to face the voice.

A now likely seven-year-old half-demon girl stands there, her light brown hair still reaching her shoulders, with those short, pointy black horns peeking out from beneath it. Her blood-red eyes match Whitey's. She's wearing new entirely black clothes and they fit her well. So I wonder, where she stole them?

She looks a bit thin, so I ask, "Are you eating well, minion?"

The most powerful shin-kicker I know stands there for a moment, almost awkwardly, but slowly a smile blooms on her face as I open my arms. Laughing happily, she runs closer and stops in front of me, lifting her arms so I can lift her by the waist. She nestles in closer, pressing her head against my chest where my heart is. The familiar feeling of her pointy horns poking the bottom of my chin is there, too.

"Your heart grew stronger!" she says happily. "But it's still my Master's heart, calm and powerful, with a beautiful rhythm."

"I improved it a bit, minion, but this is nothing. By the time we meet again, it'll be even stronger, and there might be two of them."

"Two!?" she asks, shocked. "Is Master a genius!?"

Her voice sounds so excited, I can't help but smile. After all the logic is simple: what could be better than a single powerful heart?

Two powerful hearts, obviously.

I bet she's even cursing herself for not realizing it sooner. My minion is just that silly.

"I might be, minion. People don't always appreciate me as they should."

"That's cause they're dumb, weak, humans!"

"Agreed."

She presses her head against my chest more firmly, happily swinging her legs.

After listening for a minute, she looks up at me. "Are you really going to summon me for the second tournament?"

"I said I would, didn't I? But, minion, the System might not give me the option, so don't consider it a done deal. Okay?"

"Sure! When are we going to be killing the envious guy?"

"We?"

"We!" She shakes her head. "You are powerful but sometimes very silly! I chose you as my master and follow you because you are strong! And that means your enemies are mine."

"I see. Well, probably not anytime soon. Who told you about Envy?" Carefully, I put her on the ground and sit down, a gesture she returns.

"That's his name? That's so lame. I heard about him from that creepy human woman. She said she's protecting me from him."

"Greed?"

"I'm not sure what you mean! But she did say she was the greediest person ever."

"How did she look?"

"Red hair and weird yellow eyes. And she didn't have a heartbeat, either. I think it's the same sickness most of you humans seem to have."

"I told you, minion. Humans aren't generally born with Demonic Hearts."

"Yes, because they are sick! Do you know that woman?"

"Yup."

"You aren't surprised."

"Minion, your master is smart. He's suspected a lot of things for a while now."

"Oooh..." She opens her mouth wide, then quickly closes it once she realizes it, nodding energetically.

"How's your training going, minion?" I ask, changing the subject.

"Very well! I've also been working hard on unlocking the secrets of the stone you sent me!"

"Good. Very good. And how have you been fighting lately?"

She tugs at her hair, thinking for a moment. "I use kinetic energy to defend myself and move, and mana to create daggers and make them sharper. Sometimes, I try to disrupt my opponent's mana and create mana barriers."

"Projectiles?"

"That's too boring! Fighting up close is more fun. I liked the way that scrawny, quiet human fought."

"Tacita," I remind her with a nod. "Not a bad way to go about things. And what about your kinetic techniques?"

"Wraith Dance is fun, and there are a lot of monsters running away from me right now, so I use it the most to catch them."

"What a menace."

"Hehe," she grins and moves closer, her big red eyes gleaming as she looks at me.

I know she's trying to manipulate me, but I let it happen. She immediately moves even closer, nestling against my chest. She pouts when I tap the tips of her pointy horns with a finger but doesn't pull away. If she were a lynthari, I bet she'd be flicking her tail.

Checking the timer, we pass the rest of the time in quiet conversation, asking each other questions, most of them are silly, but neither of us seems to mind.

Before our time runs out, I take a moment to tell her once more, "Minion, if I'm able to summon you during the tournament, there's a high chance the other attendees will be able to summon their disciples as well. Wouldn't it be fun to spar with them?"

"I'll fuck them up!" she declares, her kind smile turning slightly demonic, still happy, but with that underlying aggression all demons seem to possess.

"That's my girl."

As the duration of the token ends, I reappear inside the damned cube.

Though my mood has improved after the moment distraction with my cute disciple, so I simply get back to training.

Chapter 540: Matter of national security

A week later another notification pops up.

Warning! The 4th wave is now in progress.

The only person remaining in the white cube is me. The rest of group 4 has already been let out, likely confirmed not to be mimics.

Well, this is getting kinda ridiculous, isn't it?

Entering my mental space, I join Whitey, who is now dressed in gray sweatpants and an oversized black hoodie. The kind of clothes you might wear to the gym.

And this time I recognize the area around us very well.

We're in a grassy field encircled by trees. At its center, within a circular patch of grass, stands a group of 24 demons, all looking visibly shocked and glancing around in bewilderment at their surroundings.

There's also the white-haired demon I couldn't fail to recognize. He's only a few years younger than the current Whitey. And just like before, he struggles to walk, and his heartbeat is irregular, broken, unlike the rest of the demons here.

But the younger Whitey calms down and fixes it as we watch. His heartbeat becomes more controlled and his movement smoother as he forces his body back under control.

This massive creature is tall enough that its eyes rest at the same height as mine.

It growls and takes a menacing step toward the group. A huge, car-sized wolf, with a strange line of text hovering above its head.

[Wolf - lvl 2]

I sit down to watch the memory, and Whitey sits next to me.

"How many of you survived the first floor?" I ask.

"Fifteen."

"Damn, that's more than us."

"You wouldn't expect a demon to be weaker than a human, would you?" He smirks as we watch a group of demons quickly organize and beat the shit out of the wolf, which then tries to escape after barely managing to kill one of them, and getting wounded by the others in the process.

They pile on top of it, using kinetic energy, thermal manipulation, even going so far as to use lightning, and gravitational manipulation to damage the poor beast.

As the wolf escapes into the forest, a few of the fastest demons follow it with wide grins on their faces.

Whitey laughs. "Oh, I almost forgot this part. Two out of the four following the wolf will die in the forest. For some reason, I can't help but find that hilarious."

"Very funny," I confirm. "I just find it annoying that the difficulty of the floors seems to stay the same no matter how powerful the races are before the tutorial."

Whitey shrugs. "So what. There are just a lot of weaker demons and members of the other races that survive this floor because they were stronger than humans before the tutorial. Humans just get culled more."

“Oh,” I say, grasping his logic, “so the average level of a human in Beyond or Hell difficulty will generally be higher than the average demon because all the weaker humans died on the 1st floor, while a bunch of sub-par demons survived?”

“I never said that. Humans are pathetic. If a demon loses to one of them, he was weak to begin with.”

“Sure, sure,” I deflect, waving him off.

For a while, we watch as the group organizes, and a few demons even take to fighting, apparently over who gets to be the leader. The 1st floor Whitey doesn’t join any of these fights, which draws a lot of disgust from the usually power-hungry demons who look down on him. But I know how he fights, I know it very well. Out of all the demons there, Whitey is probably the most bloodthirsty, but his condition has also made him patient.

“I think they must have cleared me of being a mimic for the most part, and now they’re just keeping me in the cube because of you or something like that,” I say.

“It would be fucking funny if they weren’t able to clear you of being a mimic because of me and killed you over it.” His red eyes shine with deep amusement as he watches his younger self.

I think it over and end up agreeing. I also think it would be funny—in a twisted, deeply unfortunate way, but funny nonetheless.

The 20th day inside the fuckallthelumoransgetmeoutofhere cube finally passes.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 62 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 63]

[Mana Domain - lvl 58 > Mana Domain - lvl 59]

[Focus - lvl 60 > Focus - lvl 61]

[Eclipse - lvl 18 > Eclipse - lvl 19]

[Perception - lvl 57 > Perception - lvl 58]

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[Bone Knitting - lvl 32 > Bone Knitting - lvl 33]

There were some level ups, all gained by using skills that can be used inside my body or otherwise directed inward. It is also the day I decide to use stay tokens to go to Beyond.

Fuck lumorans. Screw my handler's warning. I'd rather deal with the system's anger than wait this out any longer.

That also makes me wonder how the floor's natives would react to me disappearing like that and then appearing again in a day or two. Part of me thinks they'd notice and burn me at the stake all the while screaming, "Witch!" or in this case, "Mimic!"

Another part of me thinks the system would probably take care of it somehow. Though, if it did decide to punish me, it'd just let them do whatever they wanted. Yeah, that sounds like the system I hate.

As I lie on my back in the exact center of the cube, staring at the white metal ceiling, I watch the timer tick down over the next few hours.

That's when I finally hear a voice, an hour and forty-three minutes before I plan to leave for Beyond.

"Human mercenary Nathaniel. You will follow me now." Just those simple words spoken by Jareth, Champion Owain's disciple.

For a moment I think about ignoring him, but I stand up and head toward the place where the rest of group 4 exited. The door that had once made itself indistinguishable from the white wall now stands open, and the tall, slim lumoran stands in the opening.

“Hurry up. Because of you, we had to call in one of the Lord Absolute’s disciples to examine you and the Signature Isolation Cube. So don’t waste my time as well.”

“So I’m not a mimic?”

“Apparently not. Don’t ask me for the details; I don’t know any and didn’t ask for any. I only follow my master’s orders.”

Damn, that guy almost sounds like a reasonable person. Maybe I should be nicer to him. Anyone who avoids the responsibility of thinking as much as he does can’t be that bad.

“Good then.” Immediately after I step out, I create a [Mana Crown] over my head and start storing mana.

I also reactivate my Restriction Training Emblem, now free of the interference generated by the field, and form two evil pyramids to follow me.

I feel an immediate wave of relief.

He glances at my display and shakes his head. After a few more steps, he stops and turns to me, taking a more formal pose.

“Human mercenary Nathaniel Gwyn of the mercenary group Angry Kittens. Due to your achievements, you and your group will be placed deep within our territory for your safety. You are to be granted half a year’s furlough there. You shall receive a villa to live in comfortably. You will be given resources, within limits, which you may discuss with the lumoran technician to be assigned as your liaison with lumoran forces. You will also receive a monthly allowance at a level proportional to the services you have provided us.”

I let him talk. There is no one else around, just a few buildings and one tall tower in the distance. All of it is in a valley between two mountains.

Jareth continues, "For the time being you will not be permitted to leave our planet. Instead, we will reward you in whatever manner you find fair so long as we consider it appropriate, in light of your services. You are not allowed to discuss what happened. Any breach of secrecy will be dealt with severely, as befits matters of national security. You will not be given any more information about what happened, but know that you have rendered a great deal of aid to the entire lumoran race. Even though it won't be publicly celebrated and must remain secret, you have our Lord Absolute's thanks, Champion Owain's thanks, and my own as well. Thank you."

After that, he lowers his head in a formal bow. He does so without hesitation or shame but nevertheless maintains an air of dignity.

There is no fanfare, no one to thank me other than him, and honestly, I don't feel like I truly did all that much. Sure, Leth would never have survived escaping that place on his own. The cold, the abundant mimic spawn, or even the lesser mimics would have killed him, never mind the two Greater Mimics.

But hey, I'm not going to mention that.

"Sounds good. How many resources will I get?"

He starts walking, and I follow him.

"I assure you, the amount of resources will be adequate, given your substantial contributions. I won't say more because it's classified."

"I see, I see. And my sword?"

"That evil thing? We had a few of our technicians fix the sheath so the forces it contains wouldn't leak out or breakthrough. We've respected your ownership and did not touch the blade itself. If you have any complaints about the level of interference, please mention it to the head technician, and we will compensate you."

"It's fine. Just give me some materials."

“Please discuss that with the head technician or with the technician assigned as your liaison.”

“Sure,” I say, giving up and just following him through the seemingly empty base.

Part of me wonders if this half a year’s ‘holiday’ in their inner territory is just a way to keep us ‘locked down’ by giving us some luxuries. After everything that happened, I can’t believe they’re one hundred percent certain about their mimic-detection methods.

We reach a teleportation array inside one of the more highly defended buildings, passing through multiple insulative and protective layers. Even here, I don’t see any other lumorans, giving me the impression that they may have been sent away so that they wouldn’t see me. Only when we finally get to the array do we meet another lumoran, who activates it without a word. Connecting it to the Champion’s web with what I’m sure is an insanely intricate set of checks.

I grab Fracture and my belongings from the table nearby, then we step into the teleportation array.

This happens two more times, each array growing more and more fortified, as they send us deeper into lumoran territory. An entire castle is dedicated to this purpose alone. Part of me tries to gauge how far we’re traveling with each teleport, estimating mana requirements. Hundreds of miles? Thousands?

After the last teleport, we continue on foot, running at speeds rivaling race cars. Jareth even has to hold himself back a bit so I don’t lose sight of him, even with all the kinetic energy I’m using.

It’s not often I meet someone capable of that kind of speed. Hell, I’m sure he would still be faster if I flew while he remained on foot.

After a while, he stops and leaves me, but not before pointing out my destination and giving one final warning not to leave the area, which seems to be the size of a small country.

From what I can see, there’s no obvious spying infrastructure, so I’d guess they just have alarms set to alert them in the event that we cross a boundary. There’s also a high chance they put tracking marks on us, which would be more sensible and easier. But overall, I think we’ll have at least some privacy here. After our time in the cube, we definitely need it.

I pass between two towering mountains and step into the valley. Rising to the top of a hill, I take in the sights stretched out before me.

A massive waterfall thunders down into a wide, clear lake, with a river snaking its way out and carving a path through the valley below. The hills around me are covered in a dense mix of trees swaying gently in the breeze, colorful flowers blanket long stretches of ground, and the green grass shines with a vibrance that almost seems unreal.

One hill in particular catches my eye, at its peak lies a huge, polished stone circle, clearly reinforced for sparring.

Not far from the lake, a manor comes into view, tucked neatly between the hills. The buildings are simple and made of a sturdy sort of wood, yet the surrounding area only elevates their charm.

A number of gardens dot the landscape. The largest one, right at the center, is dominated by a towering tree. Its bark is smooth and white, and its leaves shimmer in shades of yellow and gold, as though the tree itself were bathed in perpetual sunlight.

It's a view straight out of a fairy tale.

I move closer to the cliff's edge, sit with my legs dangling, and wait.

Not long after a mana signature makes itself known to me and its owner appears before me, reaching me with a few nimble jumps, as her sharp canines stand out in her bright smile as she lands at the top of the cliff.

Her long white hair contrasts with her golden eyes, while her gray ears and tail add to the striking look. A deep but healed scar runs horizontally across her nose.

"Long time no see, feral one."