

Tutorial 541

Chapter 541: Playground

"Little kitten," I greet her.

Myrra sits beside me and shoulder-checks me, "Not you too, my feral angry kitten. I've had enough of that nickname. Are you looking for a fight? We can fight if you want. Let our fists do the talking."

"So uncivilized. Typical lynthari. Go fight Lily."

"That petite black-haired girl? Fuck no. I already had a match with her and she hurts herself more with those weird moves of hers than I ever could."

"That's our Lily," I nod. "You're early."

"That tends to happen when the person you're following nearly detonates an entire moon. Damn, who knows how many levels she gained from doing that. She just got me Attendee Status and didn't want to stay there, so we moved sooner."

"Sounds like a reasonable thing to do. Tutorial attendee, 7th floor, floor quest, crazy lynthari, side quest."

"I can hear it all now," she says, her tail flicking from side to side.

It would seem I still feel the urge to pull it. I'm a weak man, truly.

"Ohhh? Is that a hint of genuine emotion? Has the feral one grown accustomed to people? Should I start calling you 'the tamed one'?"

Yeah, typical lynthari.

Ignoring her question, I jump to my feet, and Myrra does the same. As usual, she enjoys being an entire head taller than me. Tsk.

“Are we gonna fight?” she asks, excitement clear in her voice. “Have I made you angry?”

“Not really,” I say, and jump off the cliff. And Myrra follows close behind.

We both start walking slowly along the forest’s edge. The golden light pierces the leaves and covers us in a shifting cloak of shadows as the branches sway.

“Does Lissandra know how hard it’s going to be to escape the tutorial?” I ask.

“Is there anything that woman doesn’t know?” Myrra snorts, plucking a leaf from one of the trees and sticking it in my hair where it remains.

I ignore the leaf and ask again, “So she has a plan?”

“Obviously.” Nodding, she places another leaf in my hair. “And obviously, she’s refusing to tell me. If I ask, she’ll probably make me guess for hours on end before leaving and calling me a fool.”

“I would do the same in her place.”

“Are you really picking a fight, feral one? Fight me if you’re not a coward. I’ll show you what I’ve learned.”

“Later. If you want to beat out your frustration from your months alone with Lissandra, look somewhere else.”

“Damn it,” she mutters, deflating. “Maybe you really have become the tamed one. The old you would already be going for my throat.”

“Sure he would. So, how did your round of the 6th floor end?”

She only answers after putting another leaf and two small branches in my hair. “We went into the Mana Desert. She tested the Champion there, and he died, so she complained that he was too weak. Then we made our way to a city full of creepy mind mages. She took over the Framework there and complained about how weak they were, same as usual. After that, she did something crazy and truly fucked up to the Framework. Something about an experimental form of mana destabilization, she mentioned forcing the Framework’s spatial locks open, triggering a cascading mana backlash through its core. Something about destabilizing the mana stores and the underlying psychic network, creating a runaway spiral feedback loop that fed on itself until everything ruptured, blah blah.”

At this, she waves her hand in a vaguely confused gesture.

“Anyway, then a creepy giant eyeball appeared so she killed it. Then something exploded and it started getting really cold when a lightning spear came out of nowhere and tried to kill us, but Lissandra caught it and threw it back. Then some kind of lightning dwarf woman appeared and tried to kill Lissandra. Portals started opening and the prison guards appeared as well. Feral one, it was a real shitshow. I almost died more times than I can remember. But it was fun all around.”

As I listen, I can only nod in agreement, it really does sound fun.

“So you left after that?” I ask.

“Yes. When we got here she noticed your group’s mana signature lingering in the air. Hell, maybe she can smell them or something, so we tracked them here and arrived two days ago. Then we waited for you. Someone told them the lumorans would let you go soon though I wouldn’t put it past her to have made that happen.”

“I bet you would have rushed to save me if you thought it was needed,” I say.

We exit the forest and continue walking next to the river, across a field full of lush green grass swaying in the wind.

There are no more leaves to put in my hair, so Myrra starts pulling up grass to place there instead.

“Are you sure? I think she’d probably say you needed to escape on your own or just stay there.”

I think about it for a while. It does sound like something she would do.

Almost out of space in my hair, Myrra starts putting stuff on the crown floating over my head. She plucks the longest blades of grass she can find, ties them together into rings, then hangs them on the pointy parts. Her tail swishing side to side the whole time, her ears perked up. I can see how much fun she’s having.

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Figuring I’ve let her drop her guard enough, and knowing she won’t be expecting it, I prepare.

When she bends to pick through another patch of grass, I blast her with kinetic energy, sending her flying into the river.

Water splashes as she twists in the air, landing on her hands and feet before she jumps up. I half expect her to hiss, with the way her tail bristles straight out.

Returning her glare, I slowly remove the leaves, branches, and grass from my hair and crown.

Then I straighten up and calmly say, “Nya.”

“You feral fuck!” she hisses and charges at me.

Before she even reaches me, I teleport away through a [Ley Line] I extended toward the villa while we walked, knowing she wouldn’t notice. And I know that escaping will only piss her off even more.

I arrive in one of the gardens, finding the twins sitting on the ground, as they watch Maya and Lily have a friendly spar.

“Hey,” I say, taking a seat next to them, careful not to interrupt the match.

Both Lily and Maya notice me but they keep going, too caught up to stop. Lily has an incredibly tough body, but with her [Compounding], Maya actually seems capable of hurting her. The more she draws blood with her mana weapons, the sharper they get, at least against Lily. It’s a sort of temporary buff, probably adjusting the frequency of her weapons to Lily’s wavelength or something.

Honestly, who knows how high-tier skills like that work? I will need to observe it a bit more, but it really seems strong.

“Hey, are you betting with us on who’ll win? And it’s nice to see you made it. Of course, we never expected anything different. After all, you’re a tough motherfucker to kill,” Denis says, smiling broadly.

Aaron nods. “Really hard to kill.”

“That’s true,” I confirm proudly. “I’m betting on Lily. Is Lissandra around?”

“Well, Maya would be sad to hear we all bet on Lily,” Denis smirks. “Some time ago, Min-Jae, Sophie, Tess, and Izzy tried to bet on Maya, but even they stopped after a while, hehe. That scary woman came here not that long ago with a sassy lynthari. She insulted everyone she could, left Myrra for us to deal with, and fucked off somewhere,” Denis says.

His brother is quick to correct him though, “She insulted everyone but Biscuit. She just stared at him for a minute and nodded once. What do you think that means, Nat?”

“Hell if I know. But damn if I’m not happy to be out of that fucking cube.”

Having finished her sparring match, Maya walks over, wiping the sweat from her brow. “Does your release mean the lumorans are going to step back and let us do our own thing?”

"I wouldn't say so," I shake my head. "I don't think they're entirely sure either; only mostly. So our prison got upgraded from a cube to this golden cage. We'll get rewards, materials, and more thanks to my achievements as long as we just sit here."

"That fucks up our floor performance," Maya grumbles as she sits on the ground. "We'll probably survive a lot of waves, but as long as we sit around doing nothing, the rewards just won't be all that good."

Lily waves at me happily and sits down beside her. "What happens if we try to escape?"

"Probably nothing good," I shrug. "But I wouldn't worry too much about the rewards. As the waves progress, things will get more dangerous. Eventually, the Lumorans will be forced to focus on their own tasks, leaving us free to act when the difficulty spikes. Plus, there's the tournament to look forward to."

They get into an excited conversation, and I find myself thinking about it as well. With the tournament so close, I don't care much about this floor overall. Sure, I'm curious about the floors of Hell difficulty. I can level up, learn, and gain a lot here and there, and they do tend to be truly dangerous. But after tasting Beyond and the outside world from the Beyond Quest, I find myself wanting newer and fancier stuff.

"If you'll excuse me, I have someone to talk to," I say, interrupting the conversation as I move to stand.

"Is she back?" Denis asks, looking around nervously.

"It would seem so," I confirm, leaving with a wave.

I make my way toward the waterfalls, crossing the river, the opposing bank, and a calm lake before reaching it. Boosting myself into the air, I make a few leaps and land at the top of the cliff where the water cascades down. And though the sound should be deafening, it's unusually quiet here.

Lissandra sits on a nearby stone, just like before when I met her on the 5th floor. She looks to be my age, her body built like it was designed for peak human performance.

Her hair shines silver, and her unremarkable brown eyes watch me with interest. She no longer carries the dagger made from the flesh and bones of the Saint Absolute, but she retains the pitch black one cast from my mana.

A single orb of mana floats next to her, apparently part of her training. Something about that orb is deeply wrong, just looking at it makes my brain ache, even with my mid-grade arcane passive, and I'm not even using the full extent of my senses.

She glances at the crown above my head, at the evil pyramids I use for training, and Fracture strapped to my waist. Even though I can't feel anything from her, and her eyes look so normal, I'm sure she can see right through me.

"You're early," I say, sitting down on a nearby boulder.

"Enter your mental space and speak with that guest of yours," she replies.

No greetings, no wasted time. That's just how she is.

I do as told and retreat into my mind.

This time I find myself in a children's playground, and Whitey is wearing casual clothes: a bleached-out black shirt and loose blue shorts. The playground is empty and surrounded by a small park. There's a merry-go-round in the center, a swing set, and a tunnel.

Whitey sits on that small wooden horse attached to a big spring.

"Yo," I greet him.

"Yoo," he says back. "What's that bitch doing here?" he asks, nodding towards Lissandra.

The silver-haired woman ignores his words and sits on a nearby bench. As with everything she does, there's an air of dignity about her. Even in this younger version, it suits her.

I don't hesitate for long and sit on the other wooden horse next to Whitey. It looks way too fun not to.

After rocking back and forth for a while, Whitey finally addresses her: "You can't do anything about me. I know it, you know it, and even that cheating mana-bitch-maniac here knows it."

Lissandra nods. "I thought maybe I could, but you are too different from Myrra. The only way for you to join Myrra and I would be to overwrite the little pup's memories. After that, I could make further modifications until you ended up like us."

"I told you," Whitey says, turning back to me while continuing to rock on the horse.

"Not even if we moved him to another attendee and let him take over?" I ask her.

"He came about as a result of your Challenge. In this specific case, he can't be 'moved' or separated from you."

"I see."

Whitey smiles brightly. "Damn. I guess I really do have to kill you if I want to live."

Chapter 542: Champion's heart

Whitey and I sit together on the playground merry-go-round—the kind with the disc in the center you spin to make it rotate. Moving slowly at first, then gradually picking up speed when Whitey decides to cheat, adding in his own kinetic energy to make it spin faster.

Lissandra is still on the bench nearby, watching us.

"Do you like this floor?" I ask her.

"Not quite, but it suffices well enough for simple training."

"Are you not interested in the floor quest, the mimics, and all that?"

"I've already spoken with the Mimic Progenitor and the lumoran Absolute. I swore an oath to refrain from acting against either side for the next three months, provided neither sets foot in this valley or the lands surrounding it."

I take a moment to process and then simply accept it. Of course, she did something like that.

"So that means you're already operating at the Absolute level?"

"People these days... content to name anyone they pass on the street an 'Absolute.' I am far from such a thing."

Lissandra taps on the bench's armrest. "From their perspective, which is incorrect, either one could, in theory, defeat me. Yet, should they act against me, I might align myself with the other side. But while they think they could end me, they still fear I'd bring down all their Champions before falling."

"Do they even have that many Champions left? The mimics just lost six of them, some even had hosts," I ask.

"Little pup, you've been here for a few weeks and still know nothing about the mimics?"

"Here we go," Whitey smirks using my distraction to leap off the wheel and move over to the swings.

I let the wheel keep spinning, regaining sight of Lissandra once each rotation.

"I was busy," I tell her.

"Of course you were." She leans back on the bench. "The Progenitor Mimic, as you surely know, cannot create an infinite number of mimics. It is also the only mimic incapable of taking a host, while it maintains a sort of hive-mind connection with all the others. The stronger these mimics are, the more powerful their connection to the Progenitor becomes."

"So where is it getting so many Champion grade mimics?"

"There are a few possibilities, but simply put: it can "raise" its mimics to that rank, but they must fight and level to achieve it. This Progenitor seems to be fairly old. It's likely that it's traversed a few worlds already, either laying them to ruin and moving on or fleeing them. Going by the strength of its mimics, however, it is not terribly ancient."

"So it travels from planet to planet, strengthening its kin and building up its numbers."

"Yes."

"But with all that bullshit, taking over hosts and staying hidden, that seems like it'd be really bad."

"Only if the defending Absolute falters, as the lumoran one did. Under his negligence, the Progenitor Mimic managed to infiltrate this place and construct a stable teleportation node."

"So you're saying that either the Progenitor Mimic found some Coordinates and broke through whatever planetary defenses this place had, then started summoning others, or it crashed here after hitching a ride on a meteor or something."

"Very likely."

The wheel finally stops spinning, and I turn it a bit further so that I wind up facing Lissandra. Off to my right, I hear the swing rocking and see Whitey's legs in my peripheral vision as he swings.

"With all these improvements and their ability to adapt to detection methods, how do you ensure you get rid of all the mimics once the war is over?" I ask.

"Once it reaches the stage it has here, it becomes near impossible. You would need either a specialized Absolute to confirm or, more likely, intervention by a Ruler to be entirely certain. Without either, the neighboring coalition of planets might very well decide to destroy yours outright as a precaution. That is likely what happened here in the first place."

"Kaboom," Whitey shouts happily.

"Yes, yes, kaboom," I reply. Then I jump off the wheel and sit back on my wooden horse, which is closer to Lissandra. "So that means the war between the Lumorans and the mimics will likely intensify."

"What makes you think so?" She watches me with interest.

"Well, after three months, they probably think you'll interfere, and they don't know which side you'll join, so they'll try to finish it before then."

For a fleeting moment, she smiles and nods. "Or they might bunker up, prepare, and try to get me on their side by any means possible."

"I don't think they will."

"Why?"

"You probably told them not to annoy you, or you'd join the other side."

"Sounds like something that silver haired cockroach would do, from what I've seen in your memories," Whitey laughs, swiftly skipping closer.

He meets Lissandra's gaze easily as he sits on the bench beside her. "What? Do you think I'm scared of you, human? I know about you from his memories and I don't give a shit; at worst you can--"

Unable to finish, he crumples onto the ground, mouth wide open, body twisted in a painful spasm. Yet he makes no sound, no screams escape his lips.

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Some people have to learn the hard way, I guess.

“Did you get that Champion’s heart from the pyramid for me?” I ask.

“What do you think?”

“Probably, but that leaves the question of whether you think I deserve it.”

"If you haven't improved, it will be of no use to you, so merely seeing whether you can use it will serve as a test in itself. You will find it after we finish here."

“We’ve spent a lot of time thinking about it, and we’re already prepared for the surgery. I’m sure something will go wrong, but I should be able to survive a few small screw-ups. We’ll need to place limiters on it though and remove them over time so it doesn’t fry me immediately.”

“Do whatever you want, little pup.” She stands and moves over to Whitey, prodding him with the toe of her shoe. “I’m very well acquainted with demons. I have faced your Absolutes many times and often had the misfortune of dealing with them.”

She drops into a squat so she can look into his eyes, grabbing his horns to force him to face her. “I recognize your talent and the effort you’ve put in, but I don’t appreciate the tone you’ve taken with me. And don’t mistake my silence for permission.”

After that, she lets go and disappears.

Only then does Whitey slowly begin to move, pulling himself up and onto the bench with a long, painful, sigh. For a minute he sits there with his eyes closed as I continue to sense the pulses of contractions rippling through his body.

“That bitch is crazy crazy,” he says simply.

Rocking forth and back on my wooden horse, I nod.

When I leave my mind space after fighting Whitey, LissLiss isn't anywhere to be seen. Instead, I awaken to find a human heart being chunked into the dirt at my feet.

It's the Heart of the Champion Laten from the 5th floor—a man who once had command over thermal energy and the capacity to convert the force of his planet's largest magma chamber into mana. What a legend.

If I recall correctly, people thought he might have had the potential to become the next Absolute of that planet. However, his planet ultimately fell to the Veil, a creation born from the tortured remains of the powerful beast they used as its core.

I pick up the heart and try to clean off the dirt, but the moment I touch it, it falls from my hand much to my surprise.

Why?

I glance at my hand—it's gone. Charred flesh marks the stump where it disappeared, and the burn continues to spread. I feel the intense heat and quickly cut off my arm at the elbow. The limb drops to the ground and burns.

Interesting. Why doesn't the ground around the heart burn?

I squat in front of it and create a stick of mana to poke at the heart. It instantly evaporates under the sheer force of the heart's heat.

So it reacts to mana? But doesn't that mean it should be reacting to the ambient mana in the air? Or is there some limit?

Over the next hour, I try picking it up with no success. The heart just lies there in the dirt, beating slowly.

I still remember the effect it had on that pool of molten metal and the pyramid as a whole, the heat waves it sent through everything. The fact it only reacts to my touch now probably means Lissandra did something to it, at least partially “sealing” it.

Well, this is going to take a while.

Myrra squawks and leaps into the air, her tail stiff recoiling from the burn on her hand, the one she got trying to poke the heart on the ground.

Sophie stares at her, almost in disbelief. “Didn’t she study under that woman she arrived with?”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” I say.

“Fuck off, feral one,” Myrra snarls before licking her hand and heading over to Lily. She pokes our healer and extends her burned palm.

Lily smiles and heals it. Myrra ruffles her hair in thanks, then rushes back to the heart, studying it more closely.

“Didn’t Lissandra show it to you?” I ask Myrra.

“She just stored it in some box and wouldn’t let me see what it was. She said if I wanted a look, I had to get into the box, but I couldn’t.”

Everyone in Group 4 is here. Sophie, Lily, and the twins are all standing over the heart with me. The rest have gathered as well, to do their own things nearby.

Tess and Maya are up on the cliff, breaking trees and building a large fire. They’re setting logs on the ground for us to sit on. Tonight there’s no manabloc furniture or thermal pyramids for lighting, just a good old-fashioned cookout with the food we’ve collected.

“We could probably move it if we just dug up the entire chunk of ground it’s lying on,” Sophie suggests.

I nod. "Wanna bet we'd burn the house down in the process? It's better to do it here; the weather is nice, after all."

Dennis asks, "Do you think we can finish it before the tournament? It doesn't look like it's going to be easy."

"It's fine. The heart is for me, so I'll do most of the prep. You can all continue with your own training. I looked it over, and Lissandra did create a base for me to build on. I can use that base to create a set of seals to lessen the heart's output, and they'll only improve once I connect them to the construct I intend to form inside my body."

"Couldn't that woman do it? It would save us a lot of time," Sophie says, backing away from the heart. She then manipulates a thread of water and splashes Izzy with it.

Myrra laughs at Sophie's question. It would seem that she knows Lissandra as well as I do.

"That's not how Lissandra thinks. She'd rather just chuck it into my chest and watch me either survive and get stronger in the process or die," I say.

Izzy, who just got splashed with cold water, flings Noodle at her sister. Surprised Noodle, currently about the length of my forearm, flies through the air before swelling up to the size of an anaconda and landing on Sophie.

Sophie falls down laughing, and Izzy charges in, splashing her with water of her own from a nearby stream. Biscuit is there too, nipping at Sophie's legs.

Myrra watches everything with her cat-like yellow eyes wide, the tips of her ears twitching.

Noodle slithers away from the scuffle and moves toward me. I give him permission, and he shrinks before worming his way into my shirt sleeve to hide.

"Do you want to start preparing the heart or work on fixing the Fracture first?" Dennis asks.

"Why not both? Besides, I'll need to modify my current Thermokinetic Mana Heart so that it only generates kinetic energy and mana. That alone should increase my kinetic output. I'll also have to consider what I'm going to do with the Vortex Core. Maybe I'll remove it entirely and try out some other ideas I've been mulling over."

"Yeah, because having a second heart that could incinerate you with a single beat isn't terrifying enough," Sophie remarks, gently nudging Biscuit aside.

"Sophie, this is important. Third Floor Nathaniel created a Kinetic Mana Heart, even though it almost blew him up in the end. I can't let myself fall behind."

I turn my attention back to the heart. It rests in the dirt, beating steadily. Even sealed as it is, it continues to radiate a heat that warns me against getting too close.

It's a cute, if dangerous little thing, quiet for now, but brimming with the potential to go horribly wrong.

And I'm all for it.

Chapter 543: Waves

Tess sits across from me with her legs crossed while I work on the logic core connected to Fracture. We're sitting on top of the hill near the Champion's heart, which still hasn't been moved, while the rest of the group goes about their own tasks somewhere in the valley.

Myrra is probably annoying everyone she can now that she has some freedom, while Lissandra is... somewhere.

My knowledge of the logic core has increased a lot, and Sophie's helped with that as well by performing her own experiments with some help from Blackie, and shared what she learned. Still, even though I'm sure I could do something pretty impressive right now, I'm not in a hurry.

I think the logic core can help a lot, hell, it could make a lot of things easier. But at the same time, it's just an item, a crutch. I would even call it a shortcut, so I'm cautious about applying or using it. Overrelying on it could slow my skill growth and stunt mastery over my abilities. There's a place for it, yes, but it needs to be used with care.

My ultimate goal is to build something similar to the logic core within my mind. The arrays and structures I'm storing in my head, ready to deploy, are the first step. If I can make them automatically react to stimuli after I deploy them, that would be perfect.

There's also the possibility of using mana threads to form inscriptions in the air and activating them that way, almost like some kind of rune magic. Ever since that creepy eye thing used it, I've been trying to figure out how to apply it quickly and expand on it. Right now I'm focused on activating that anti flight inscription faster and I'm eager to test out some theories later.

"How many Champions do you think the lumorans have?" Tess asks out of nowhere.

Separating part of my mind for conversation, I answer, "I always thought the planet would have around ten to twenty Champions, possibly more if it went through a few pairings or turned out to be on the older end of the scale."

"Or possibly fewer if some Champions died during pairing," Tess notes.

"I have a similar estimate," Tess says, "and I also have a theory about the waves. Want to hear it?"

"Tess, you know me. Of course, I do."

She smiles briefly and moves her blonde hair out of her face. "A Progenitor Mimic somehow got to the planet. It started building the portal without the lumoran Absolute noticing. It summoned a few Mimics, trying not to use too much mana, then sent them off to cause chaos. After that, it grew bolder, summoned a bigger wave, and the war began. Since the planet it destroyed last time served as its base or prison if you prefer, and for the moment it's holding back from the front, each activation consumes a significant amount of mana or energy and requires a recharge afterward. That's what the waves are: each one signifies more Mimics entering this planet."

"Lissandra basically told me as much, but you?"

"You got information from her and didn't tell me?"

“Look... I forgot. She gave me the heart and then I had to take some time to play with it.”

“Terrible,” she says, though she still has a smile still quirking at the corner of her lips. “Unlike you, I actually have to spend my time gathering information, after all, I don’t have The Ancient Monster feeding it to me.”

“You can ask her if you want. I’m sure she’ll answer ALL your questions. So, do you think that the waves will stop when we go to the tournament? Surviving them is the main objective of the floor.”

“Yes. Once we all leave, the system will probably just pause the floor.” Tess says, experimentally launching a small burst of red and white lightning at the heart, but even though it touches, nothing happens.

Warning! The 6th wave is now in progress.

“There goes another one,” Tess says, pulling her legs closer and covering her mouth as she yawns. “And here we are, sitting in this beautiful valley in a bubble of safety while the war rages all around us.”

“Just enjoy it, prepare for the tournament, and try to annoy Lissandra. If you’re ever training in front of her, make some mistakes. She’ll know what you’re trying to do but still get annoyed and give you a pointer or two.”

Hearing that, Tess nods and stands up in one smooth motion. Saying she promised to spar with Min-Jae she waves and jumps off the cliff, lightning trailing behind her as she decides to jump and run instead of simply flying.

Left to my own devices, I go back to working on the logic core and preparing the Fracture for the fixes we plan to implement in the coming days.

Some time ago, I thought I could use the logic core to help me control Fracture more easily.

But I’ve changed my mind.

I think I can use it to increase the sword's output. The difficulty of handling will increase, and so will the damage I take. But if you get hurt just holding your own weapon, imagine what it could do to anyone on the opposing side.

The following day, I find myself once again sitting next to the heart all on my own, when Lissandra appears at my side. She grabs the heart, examines a few of the small changes I made, then chucks it back into the dirt.

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I know it's the heart of a Champion, and even though he's long dead, the heart is still beating, so it has to be extremely durable. But I can't help twitching each time I see that.

"Which Empyrean skill have you acquired?" she asks.

Of course, she noticed. I wonder what kind of senses she's using to learn all this.

I look up from the Fracture. "[Empyrean Lance]."

She nods. "Try leveling it as much as possible and keep observing how it affects other skills and mana. Don't over-rely on it."

"As always."

"Good. Empyrean skills can be very useful in some situations, but there are others where they're almost useless because of their nature."

"Same as black mana," I say.

"...Do you really still call it black mana?"

"No one ever bothered to tell me its real name. I think you promised to once, but then forgot."

"It's not that important anyway."

"Sure it's not... You just like to annoy me. So what are you doing these days? We barely see you."

"I spent more than six months with that little kitten. I believe I've earned a measure of rest."

"Oh, so we're part of your nursery now? It seems like she got to you as well. But I can understand that."

"You cannot."

"Oh, the sheer horror. Do you know who Greed is?"

She tilts her head slightly. "Little pup, I've been aware of her identity since the moment you fled from me on the third floor, tail tucked between your legs."

"The good old days, when we could still push you around and maybe beat your ass if we really tried."

"Do not kid yourself, little pup."

"But I'm curious. How do you feel about Greed being her?"

She doesn't answer, just watches me with an impenetrable expression.

With no other choice, I turn back to the Fracture. Another part of me continues working on the construct, occasionally examining the heart and adapting my plans.

“Have you heard of the Parallax Eyes?” I ask instead after a while.

“A little, yes. I believe its Warden was some ancient velnar on the verge of death, if I remember correctly someone from his bloodline will inherit them. Of course, that likely occurred thousands of years ago. As you know, my information isn’t exactly up to date.”

“Yeah, do you have any idea what it does? I went on a Beyond quest and met a guy who has them, Kyralon.”

“It’s a thrice strengthened high-grade trait, further evolved as it was passed down through the bloodline. As for its function—layered perception taken to its absolute peak, likely paired with the ability to observe things across vast distances. Little pup, don’t trouble yourself with such trivialities. Traits, passives, classes, in the grand scheme, none of it truly matters.”

“I know, and I agree, but I’m curious. I have Mana Wavelength Iris and Mana Physique. Are they good traits?”

“Enough to make you a target ripe for kidnapping and use as a stud slave, should someone desire. After multiple strengthenings, even your eyes or lifeless body could become a prized asset for experimentation.”

“I would have thought people at that level could simply create constructs to mimic those traits.”

Lissandra, seemingly bored, creates another orb, one I can’t even stand to look at, and replies, “Traits can be inherited; constructs, almost never. While the system manages traits, adjusting them to your body as you grow stronger and acquire strengthenings or passives, constructs demand manual effort. Without a specialized skill set to ease the process, it’s rarely worth the effort. There are also many risks involved in doing so.”

I activate my eyes for a moment and look at one of her orbs.

The world reels in reverse, and I barely manage to raise my hand in front of me before I slam into the ground. Everything is spinning, and I notice bleeding in my brain before I activate one of Lily’s healing marks.

It takes five minutes before I find myself in a state where I can move again, and I sit back up. Lissandra is still across from me, observing the entire time.

“Overall, would you say traits are stronger than your man-made constructs?” I ask.

She answers calmly, her voice carrying the weight of experience. “It depends on the strength of your trait. Tampering with your own constructs invites errors, with a very real risk of upsetting the balance of your traits and other workings of the system. In the end, you may find yourself with a lesser trait, jeopardizing your future growth in exchange. Sometimes, the consequences are even more severe.”

“I see.”

I brace myself, activate my eyes to a lower degree, and glance at that orb again.

The same thing happens, but this time it takes ten minutes for me to recover because I looked at it for longer.

When I look back up, she’s gone, leaving the orb behind. I can tell it’s a modified version that won’t knock me out the moment I look at it, close, but not immediately.

It seems like the evil orb got its 2.0 upgrade. Let’s see if I can take it further and apply it to my pyramids.

The next day, our contact appears: a lumoran woman I quickly identify as a potential Champion. Unlike most Lumorans, she doesn’t have many crystalline features growing from her black skin, just a diamond-shaped white crystal in the middle of her forehead. However, her right arm and a large part of her shoulder are entirely made of the same crystal that most lumorans usually spread out. Purple mana swirls inside, bouncing and pausing as if it were a living thing.

I emerge from the manor just in time to hear Myrra listing off requests.

“So, as I said, shampoo and conditioner that a lynthari could use. I don’t want any of that stuff for animals. My tail and ears are all itchy from using it. Also, some clothes suitable for my height. Everything

I have right now is baggy and small, and don't forget to have them modified for my tail. And some decent food. Do you have fish or fish monsters? Not some year-old normal animals, their meat tastes like paste. Oh, and for the clothes, I prefer pale or pastel colors. No jewelry. And I need a bed, a taller one. A bathtub too. And..."

She continues for a while. The lumoran Champion, surprisingly, takes it all in stride, writing everything down and occasionally confirming details with Myrra.

I would have expected they'd send someone of a lower level, but it also makes sense to send a Champion, if only because of The Ancient Cockroach lurking somewhere in our midst.

I shamelessly ask for some materials too, figuring I can probably push my luck due to the Cockroach's presence. And everyone else puts in their own requests, so she gets quite the barrage.

Before leaving, the lumoran Champion smiles at us gently. "Please, pass this along to Lady Lissandra. There are no expectations tied to it, it's just a show of our goodwill."

She pulls a simple wooden box out of her bag and carefully hands it to Tess, who accepts it and promises to pass it on to Lissandra. After that, the lumoran departs, assuring us she'll return in a few days with the items we've requested.

Chapter 544: Just for a few hours

After hours of trying to open the box, I finally give up. Sophie takes her turn, but she gives up too. For now.

The twins keep at it, trying to figure out how to open this wooden box with nothing even resembling a keyhole. I head back to the terrace, the one set in the shade of that huge tree.

The moment I take my seat on the couch, Myrra jumps up next to me and lies down, resting her head in my lap.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

In response she just smiles brightly and settles in comfortably.

So I drop the mana stone in my hand, letting it fall on her head. She curses, moves away, then decides to lie down once more, lying her legs across mine as she complains. "I'm bored."

"Hello, bored. I'm Nathaniel."

"What?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Myrra, do you want to spar with me if you're so bored?" Lily asks her.

"Hell no!"

"I'll hold back, I promise."

"For some reason, I'm starting to think I'm the only person you don't hold back against."

"That's not true! I just like sparring with you."

I chime in, "Aren't you ashamed, Myrra? You trained under Lissandra for months and still can't beat Lily in melee combat."

"And can you, feral one? Ten out of ten times?"

"I choose to exercise my right to remain silent."

Myrra smiles victoriously and kicks me derisively. "I thought so. I could use my Aurora Glass and take things more seriously, but Lady Lissandra won't let me at the moment."

"Some kind of training?" I ask.

"Yes. She made an inscription for me, and I have to maintain concentration for the purpose of training with Aurora Glass. All the time."

"So she was the one who declared you a candidate?"

"You're curious, aren't you, feral one?" Myrra grins, showing her fangs. "I'm not a fake Champion candidate anymore, Lissandra gave me a true declaration, apparently because I'm 'good enough.'"

"I swear, it's like she thinks she'll lose a thousand points of mana any time she compliments someone."

"But she's massively powerful, right? Doesn't that make it seem a bit more reasonable?" Lily asks.

I shrug. "You can only say that because she seems to like you and your combination of skills. Did she give you any more pointers?"

"Yes! She had a few ideas for improving my footwork after she saw me trying to mimic yours. She's incredibly good at close-range combat, Nat."

"She didn't insult you, Lily?"

"She did, a lot!"

"Okay, I was worried for a second. So what are you working on these days? How's your ax and mantle?"

"Hmm, I'd say my ax is more or less done, and I'll just strengthen it as I grow. I'm also training with my mantle, so don't worry. But Sophie asked if it was possible to grow an entire body similar to mine, strength, durability, all of it. Though perhaps without the head."

“Let me guess: you don’t have the mental skills to control it the same way my sister’s Avatar did during the tournament, and it’d be for Sophie instead?”

“Yes! I’m terrible at that. But Sophie might be able to use it to defend herself, or maybe Blackie would. Sophie says my body is stupidly strong, which is why she asked me. I experimented with it a bit, but it’s difficult. Even if I cut parts off my body and reattach them, they degrade over time. The body weakens, and it still seems to count as mine, so it’s hard for Sophie to control. She can do it, but there’s resistance.”

“Feral one, you have a sister?” Myrra perks up, straightening her posture and poking me with her feet in an attempt to get my attention.

“Yes, I do. You’ll probably meet her during the tournament.”

“How is she?”

“She doesn’t like cats,” I reply and turn back to Lily. “Theoretically, you could create a body in your own image and then gradually adjust it to look like anyone you want, right? Make it gigantic, give it eight arms, or four legs. That kind of thing?”

“I could. Even now, I can change my height, facial features, figure—anything I want.” Lily responds, staring at me the whole time. I could swear she’s even blushing a little.

“That could be really useful for sneak attacks, to take the form of someone else. You would probably need a better handle on your mana to mimic their signature but in my opinion, it’s better than invisibility or that phantom bullshit.”

“Yes... yes, for that!”

Myrra lifts her legs and swings them over, leaping to her feet. “Wow, that’s just sad. I can’t watch this anymore. Feral one, where is Maya?”

“She asked me not to tell you if you came looking for her.”

"If you tell me, I'll leave you alone for the day."

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I quickly point out her direction, and Myrra excitedly wanders off to meet her new favorite sparring partner.

The moment she's gone, I check to make sure, then nod, and Lily smiles brightly.

"What was with the shy act and talk about changing your figure and body?" I ask.

Lily just keeps smiling and shakes her head. "Look, it worked, she left to annoy someone else. Myrra always gets super annoyed when I act that way. But I didn't lie: I really can change how I look."

"I know. You think I haven't noticed those small tweaks you've been making?"

"It's like a tiny bit of makeup! What woman wouldn't want to look pretty? Even Lissandra! She could make herself just a bit younger, but instead, she looks like she's in her twenties with the body of an Olympic athlete."

"It's that much?"

"She's super pretty! Obviously, you wouldn't notice. Maybe you would if she were made of mana or something."

I start to argue but stop. How would a body made entirely of mana work, anyway? Wouldn't my Mana Physique be the first step toward that?

Hmm, would I be pale blue like mana, or would I look like my current body? For example, we're made of around 60% water, But we're not clear like water. Would a body composed of 60% mana look similar?

“Are you sure we don’t need Sophie?” Lily asks, reaching out her hand.

I place my hand in hers, and she holds it.

“I don’t think we need her for this step. I’m just making preparations for the heart. I’ll probably mess up a lot, so thanks in advance for all the healing.”

“It’s fine! I still have a few of your arms with me, so I can [Sacrifice] them if I need to.”

“Good. Let’s start.”

A few days later, I’m watching as the twins and Min-Jae keep trying to open the box the lumoran Champion left for Lissandra. They’ve made multiple attempts without damaging it, and there’s even been some progress: like noticing a set of almost invisible grooves even Lily could only feel with her fingertips, weird barely perceptible shifts in weight Min-Jae picked up on, and a set of patterns that only appear at the right mana frequency.

Overall, it’s safe to say everyone’s curious about the thing and has tried opening it a few times.

Something occurs to me. “Weren’t we supposed to give that to Lissandra?”

Min-Jae looks up from the box, and Dennis takes the chance to snatch it from him, shaking it next to his ear.

“We did give it to her while you were knocked out after nearly blowing yourself up while preparing your chest for that new heart,” Min-Jae says.

“I’m sure it wasn’t that bad. So Lissandra didn’t want the box?”

“Lily said most of your torso exploded into exposed ribs and spine, the only other thing left was a barrier around your heart—the rest was just gone. Lissandra took the box, opened it, then closed it right away and tossed it aside, telling us to play with it.”

Dennis complains before I can react, “How the hell did she open it so fast? And I bet there’s something good inside. We might even be allowed to keep it, seeing how she just threw it away without taking it.”

“Are you sure it wasn't just a message, or that she didn't just take the contents first?” I ask.

All three boys freeze, looking at each other.

I glance around, making sure Lissandra isn't there, and gesture for Min-Jae and the twins to come closer. I whisper, “Lily told me that the girls were asking the lumoran Champion for swimsuits, even something for me and you guys?”

“Beach episode!” Aaron calls out with a grin, while his brother nods vigorously.

“What the... never mind.” I shake my head. “So she wasn't joking?”

Min-Jae's expression is solemn as he looks at me. “It was Maya's idea at first. Myrra got excited to do something new, and Izzy got Sophie to join in. Then they roped in everyone else and made plans to take a few hours off and sunbathe by the lake. Though Sophie has to reshape part of the bank into a sandy beach and create some kind of field to intensify the light.”

“Weirdos, all of them. Forget it. Min-Jae, you mentioned wanting to test some of the higher-density mana orbs I wove together, so I prepared five types for you. Each one has a slightly different density to help balance the weight, the resistance of my mana, and your control skills.”

“You can't eat that,” I tell Noodle, who's begun moving suspiciously close to the Champion's heart still lying up there at the top of the cliff.

The pearl-white snake looks at me with its green eyes and hisses. At the same moment, purple, green, and blue flames flicker across its scales.

"I was joking, I know you wouldn't eat it. And you're such a show-off. Come here." I gesture for him to approach.

He expands in size until his body is as thick as my leg, bringing his head level with mine.

"This is a new version I made based on the others you liked." I open my hand and let a golf ball-sized mana orb float out into the air.

Noodle opens his mouth and gulps it down. I see it moving inside him through the shifting of his scales and muscles. He takes a moment, then nods three times in quick succession.

"Oh? That tasty?" I reach out, and he nudges his head against my palm so I can pet him. His scales feel surprisingly smooth, cold, and extremely durable, but every so often I still feel a warm pulse running through them.

I turn to Izzy, who's apparently decided to visit me as well, yawning and blinking as though ready to fall asleep.

"Izzy, you must realize how my curiosity is killing me. Tell me more about your Fragment of Eternal Fire."

She slowly opens her eyes, yawning again, and I gesture for her to come closer. As she does, she leans against my side with a grateful sigh and closes her eyes.

"It's a fragment... of fire... that burns eternally," she says.

"So funny," I say, pulling on her ear. "And?"

"I tried to get more information from Lissandra, like you told me. I even acted all cute. But all she told me was that it's similar to the Primordial energies and that it existed long before the system."

“But what’s the ‘fragment’ part about? Did the eternal fire shatter into pieces a person could pick up? Does the flame burn and create sparks that become fragments? How, why, when?”

“Nat,” she whispers. As always, she’s connected to my emotions—at least the surface ones, which I allow.

“What?”

“It’s okay to take a break. Just turn your brain off for a few hours. Do nothing. Tease Myrra. Goof off with the boys. Talk to Tess or let Lily invite you out on a walk. Be as silly as you want,” she says, patting my forearm with her small hand. “Or just hang out in your room and stare at the ceiling.”

“Who put that idea in your head?”

“Tess. She really wants you to join us tomorrow at the lake, and she knows you’re probably planning to sneak off and train. But I’m worried too, you’ve felt really tense lately, especially with all the training you do. It’s like you think you need to keep running without ever taking a break. I can tell.”

"It's fine."

"I know it is. But it could be finer. It’s just a few hours, Dumbthaniel. The others struggle with watching you train all the time, so they try to keep the same pace, but I can see how much it weighs on them. So please, it’s just for a few hours."

"I will think about it."

"That's all I ask," Izzy says, her eyes still closed, smiling softly before nestling in closer and slowly drifting off to sleep.

Chapter 545: Beach Episode

I forcefully stop myself from training and let my mind rest. The orbs I was using for practice disappear, and I deactivate my Restrictive Training Emblem. I even reduce the effort I’ve been putting into Mana Cycling.

It all becomes so eerily still. So strangely quiet.

Once again, I check the clock on the wall and close my eyes, lying on my bed for a while longer. Only then do I stand up and change into a pair of black swimming trunks. They fit perfectly, ending just above my knees. They're very comfortable and fit so well that I'm almost afraid to ask where they got my measurements not to mention how.

Glancing at the mirror, I throw on a loose shirt before heading outside. The manor is already empty, and it's a nice, quiet day.

It isn't very hot, but I've overheard Sophie and the others making plans to create some kind of effect over the lake to intensify the light, making it stronger and warmer—almost like a true summer. They've even been discussing different ways they could add a slight breeze. Looking at the mana web over the lake and the way the light is interacting with it, it's safe to say they've succeeded.

It feels almost alien as I walk slowly to the lake about half a mile away. I don't use kinetic energy to fly, nor do I run or teleport. I just walk at the speed I once did back on Earth.

Inside the tutorial. Here, on the surface of a planet that is just as likely to be destroyed by the mimics, or those responsible for stopping them. A planet where war rages even at this moment. But there are no signs of war here. The sun's rays are warm; the breeze is calming and cool. The grass and the leaves sway in the wind.

The memory of Champion Feroy's recent death feels so distant now, almost unreal. It's so melancholic. He died, and yet there are countless people living here who never met him, never even knew he existed. Just over a month after his death, here we are, taking a day to sunbathe and blow off some steam. And he wasn't the only one. A lot of people died just the same as he did.

I don't even use my senses as I pass under the trees. I don't try to read mana or sense vibrations of kinetic energy or heat signatures.

I push those thoughts away as I begin to hear voices, leaving the patch of trees with a clear view of the lake. The temperature increases immediately. I wonder if they haven't made it hot enough to boil a normal human alive.

"I thought you were just going to keep training?" Tess greets me first, walking ahead. She's changed her hair again, as is her custom. This time she wears it tied back at the top of her head, and dressed herself in a light yellow bikini.

"I decided this would be good training for my mental resistance with so many people screaming all over the place."

"Oh, you did?" she smiles. "I'll be glad to help you then."

Together, we head toward the sandy bank only for Tess to take off running towards the water. Part of me wants to start picking apart the methods Sophie used to create all of this, but I stop those thoughts in their tracks.

Instead, I remove my shirt and lie back on the sand, and close my eyes against the bright sun. The warmth on my body is pleasant, and soon enough, I hear sniffing next to my ear. Then Biscuit licks my face before running off to do something else.

I can hear the twins and Maya talking about the best way to cook some meat they've managed to get hold of. Min-Jae asks Sophie if she can make the drinks any colder. Izzy uses her enhanced stats to leap as high as she can into the air before landing in the water with a huge splash, laughing in excitement each time.

"Feral one," I hear Myrra whisper, taking a seat next to me.

"What?" I ask without opening my eyes.

"There's a dangerous predator eyeing you," she continues quietly.

"I'm sure there are no monsters around."

"It's something worse."

I can hear the smile in her voice, and I feel sand on my body as she starts piling it on me.

“Don’t worry, I’ll hide you, feral one.” She continues covering my legs, chest, and shoulders with the sand.

“Are you having fun, Myrra?”

“A lot, feral one. Even Lady Lissandra’s taken a moment to slack off somewhere, so why shouldn’t I, just for a bit? That little human, Isabella, told me as much herself. She might be scarier than any of you—after Tess. Are all human girls like that?”

“Why Tess?”

“She’s always watching and looking right through people. She adapts her behavior to fit each person, but it never feels fake or like she’s putting on a mask. There’s a raw, untamed purity to her, reminiscent of the noble Champions and Absolutes from stories. A queen. A leader. Someone who judges, rewards, and punishes, a person totally unafraid to make the hard choices.”

“What about me?”

“You? You’re feral. At first, I thought you may have been tamed, that perhaps your group was making you weaker.”

“But?”

“But I was wrong. I think you’re far more feral than before. You just control it better, and that’s scarier.”

I give it some thought, but I can’t imagine being too scary when my head is the only thing poking out of the sand Myrra’s piled on top of me. I open my eyes to meet her gaze and see her typical fanged smile. Unsurprisingly, she’s also wearing a bikini of her own—black this time.

She notices me looking and strikes a pose, emphasizing her figure. “What do you think? My beauty was well-known in Virelia. Many would have fallen at my feet with the merest of glances.”

“As thanks for protecting me from a dangerous predator, I’ll say you look pretty.”

“That’s certainly more than I expected from you, feral one.” She chuckles, patting the sand on my chest before rushing off to browse the nearby table of food.

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I sit up, letting the sand slide off my chest slide, and watch as Min-Jae creates some sort of field around his part of the bank and the lake to help the others jump higher than normal. The field doesn’t extend very far though, so they still land at normal speed, plunging into the water with shouts of joy before swimming back to shore.

As I stand the twins rush over, one striding up on either side of me and pulling me over to the table. They’re wearing swim trunks like mine but theirs are blue.

I think the twins are around nineteen now, and I notice they’ve grown taller. Their bodies are slim, but like everyone here, there’s defined muscle. Unlike me though, their skin isn’t pale. With their blond hair, blue eyes, and facial features, they’re undeniably handsome—maybe not to the point where you want to punch them on sight, like Channeler, but still.

Min-Jae joins us soon, and they start taking an assortment of meat from the table, grilling them on some kind of contraption they’ve made. They’re using no skills, just charcoal. They don’t even use magic to light the grill.

“Help us, Nat,” Dennis pleads. “We said we’d prepare the meat, but we’ve either burned it all or left it raw inside.”

“Why ask me? I don’t know any more than you do.”

“You can’t be worse than we are, and you said you made the best pizza ever for your disciple.”

“That’s true,” I admit, looking at the pot they’ve rigged up with a grill. “Aren’t the coals supposed to turn white before you put anything on the grill?”

“We thought so too,” Aaron sighs, “but we burned everything.”

Min-Jae folds his arms across his chest and proceeds to flex his arms in a fashion that looks deeply uncomfortable. “I think the problem is that this is high level animal meat, and the coal isn’t normal. It needs to burn at a higher temperature to even affect the meat, so I don’t think Earth’s knowledge will help us.”

I look around, trying to figure out why he might be so tense. Nearby, I spot Sophie and Maya sitting with Izzy, eating some sort of chilled fruit. Maya’s wearing a white bikini, while Izzy and Sophie have dressed themselves in a set of modest pale green swimsuits.

Maya’s gaze sweeps over me dramatically, lingering as it moves from my stomach to my chest. She then winks at me and licks her lips, causing Izzy to giggle and Sophie to scold her, telling her to stop corrupting her younger sister.

I shake my head before facing the boys again, focusing on their conversation.

“Then why the fuck did you tell the girls we could do it?” Dennis demands.

Min-Jae hisses quietly, “Keep it down. Their hearing is sharper than it was on Earth.”

“Well, sorry for ruining your reputation. And why are you sticking your chest out like that? You aren’t a girl, no one’s staring at your tits!”

“Shut up, Dennis. They’re called pecs!”

“Yeah? They didn’t help you last time we sparred, you still got wrecked!”

"I only lost because we weren't going all out. I'd kill you otherwise!"

"You couldn't even locate my real body!"

I exchange a look with Aaron, who seems to be tuning them out as well, and we start sneaking away while they're distracted.

On my way, I pick up Biscuit and head toward the lake, sitting in the sand closer to the water.

(Food! Food!)

"You'll eat later. Have you gained weight again?"

(Sustenance! Food!)

"Don't give me that, I saw you gobbling up the meat they threw away."

Biscuit growls cutely, but I don't let go, holding him so his hind legs swing in the air, just the way he likes it, as confirmed by his wagging tail.

As I expected, Aaron sneaks away too and sits next to me. "You're not using any mana or sending out any scans at all," he notes.

"Yup," I confirm.

"lizzy?"

"lizzy," I nod.

"A twelve-year-old girl, by the way, and she's probably the least messed up of all of us."

I think about it for a moment and end up agreeing.

Aaron gazes at the lake with a faint smile. “Sometimes I wonder if this is all just a dream. Like maybe I’m in a coma, and my mind made it all up. Or maybe we actually died in the bus crash and this is our second chance.”

“If this is a dream, I never want to wake up.”

“Yes,” Aaron says, his smile broadening. “Yes.”

“So, is today’s menu charred meat of unknown origin?” Tess asks, emerging from the water. Drops roll off her body as she sits next to us.

“I prefer calling it a surprise meal,” Aaron replies.

I hear footsteps behind me, and something lands on my head. Looking up, I spot a large straw hat—the kind people wear to avoid heatstroke. Another hat is placed on Aaron’s head and then Tess’s, and then Lily takes her own seat between us.

I don’t really think we need the hats, but this almost feels like we’re roleplaying a beach holiday, so I don’t complain.

Reaching out, I adjust the straw hat on Lily’s head and follow her gaze to my left arm, which is still noticeably pale. Then I notice hers is just as pale. Still unchanged.

“What is this?” she asks, touching the emblem on my chest, right over my heart.

“Restrictive Training Emblem,” I explain. “A gift, or in some cases, a torture device from Lissandra.”

She pulls her hand back. “I see!”

Silence descends until Tess giggles. “Nat, I think Lily might be fishing for a compliment. She spent hours picking out what to wear.”

“S-shut up, Tess!” Lily snaps. “I did not! It was a few minutes at most!”

Tess ignores Lily’s anger and lies down on the sand. “I’ve never gone to the beach with friends. Actually, none of us have, except perhaps Maya and Min-Jae a long time ago.”

“Is this how you thought it’d be?” Lily asks once she’s calmed down.

“Nope,” Tess says, shaking her head. “But I don’t think that’s a bad thing. I just don’t think we’ll ever experience things like we would on Earth. Sometimes I wonder if I really want all this, or if I’d rather live like a normal human. Work in a cubicle, find someone to fall in love with, get married, have kids, grow old, and die.”

“You wouldn’t want that,” I say.

“I wouldn’t?” she asks.

“You wouldn’t,” I confirm.

Before she covers her face with the straw hat, I see her smiling.

After that, I stand up and look at Lily. “You look pretty today.”

I calmly hold her gaze. I know she’s changed since we left the first few floors, she’s built up some resistance. But I keep staring at her until the corners of her lips twitch, and she turns away.

Damage dealt.

I've been teased enough here, so I stop in front of her. "No compliment for me?" I ask.

"You also look good today!" she blurts out, turning her face further away.

From beneath her hat, Tess's muffled voice reaches me. "Nat, don't bully Lily."

"Fine, I'll just go for a swim instead."

"I thought you didn't know how to swim?" Tess calls from under her hat again.

"Yup, I don't."

Wading into the lake, I find myself determined not to use mana or kinetic energy, even if I do start to drown.

Chapter 546: One month later

I've learned quite a few interesting things during our first month here in the valley.

One of them is that swimming for the first time is surprisingly difficult. Even though I can hold my breath for a really long time, it's incredibly annoying to stay underwater. Water has a very specific density, and a normal human with normal strength can swim fairly easily. But that changes once your body starts growing heavier and more dense; you have to exert more effort just to stay afloat.

If your physical stats aren't high enough, or if you don't actually know how to swim, and if, because of your stubbornness, you refuse to use your skills or other abilities to get out, you might find yourself in an awkward situation. Like the time I cut off all telepathic communication, trying to figure out how to swim on my own, only to have a cute corgi pup dive into the lake and drag me out by my hair.

These things happen. Even to the best of us. Yup.

Being called "The Drowning One" by a literal catgirl might be one of the consequences of that kind of stubbornness. At least as much as hiring a pair of random twins with top-notch infiltration skills to swap out her luxurious catgirl shampoo for pink dye.

Stranger things have happened.

But I'd be lying if I said I haven't enjoyed my time here so far. It's not something I intend to dwell on, but I'm certain that some of the memories I've made here with the others will stick with me for the rest of my life.

Even though there's a war raging outside and we still sense the aftershock from the occasional attack somewhere beyond our "territory," we still feel safe. That might be because we know a certain person would absolutely destroy anyone who dared to break the deal she brokered. If I had to bet on her or one of the Absolutes, I wouldn't hesitate for a second.

Yet alongside that feeling of safety, there's also a sense of regret. Some of the more kind-hearted members of Group 4 feel bad for siphoning resources from the lumorans out there fighting for their lives. Even though they're still just natives of the tutorial doomed to disappear once we leave this floor, but I've noticed that we're starting to ask less and less from the lumoran Champion with the crystalline arm whenever she appears bearing gifts for Lissandra.

We talk about our favorite foods and argue about which dishes are better. We complain about the endings of movies we otherwise liked. We joke, we fight, we smile, and sometimes we just sit there quietly.

Of course, not everything is perfect, and this isn't some fairy tale. We still argue. Lily refuses to speak to Tess for a week after she takes a joke too far. Sophie starts insulting Myrra over the repeated interruptions to her training, even going so far as to use her [Manipulation] against her when Myrra pushes things too far. Only Min-Jae's quick intervention prevented a bigger fight, though they still suffer a number of wounds from the conflict. Since then, Myrra and Sophie mostly avoid each other.

Another time, Maya accidentally injures Aaron during training, badly enough that Lily had to intervene and heal him. Although the twins said they understood it was an accident, I still caught them quietly bad mouthing Maya for being careless when they thought no one else could hear.

There have been a few more minor conflicts, all of which are already forgotten.

Some of us are worried about being under-leveled, but nobody is anywhere near 300. Reaching that level would be nearly impossible right now, given the situation outside. Most of us, however, are already above 250, so at least we've gained that body upgrade.

Lissandra, who comes and goes at her pleasure, once overheard their complaints and decided to give one of her rare lessons. She gave them hell for their "flawed thinking," and called them all sorts of names, but she also emphasized the importance of skills, proper mastery, and a solid foundation. She ruthlessly pointed out about ten mistakes for each person. What they were doing wrong, where they were lacking, how suboptimal their training was, and so on.

She always seems to know an absurd amount, reminding me of the way she saw Whitey just once in my mind space and still understood so much about him. I can't help but wonder if she has some kind of special sense we don't know about. I'm sure she's capable of perceiving things I can't and she probably has little problem reading "low-level" individuals like an open book.

I asked her about it a few times, but her answer is always the same:

"If you're curious, improve your abilities and find out how I'm doing it."

Classic Sandra.

She barely teaches me anything directly, and most of that consists of updating my "evil orb" to make my training harder. I'm currently at version 3.0. I once thought I could make it even more challenging by changing the orbs' shape to pyramids.

Nope.

At this point, the basic spherical shape is already too much to keep up with. Their constantly shifting frequencies and changing speed make them unpredictable, forcing me to remain on guard. And there are dozens of smaller orbs inside the main one, layer upon layer, that sense when I get comfortable and then activate just to show me how lacking I truly am.

To top it off, the Cockroach herself is perfectly capable of using dozens of these orbs at once to train, while I have trouble dealing with even a single one. Other than that, Lissandra mostly just observes my progress on preparing the Champion's Heart, a process that, to my frustration, is going nowhere fast.

It's been over a month since I started, and I still haven't made the kind of progress I find satisfying. All three of my attempts have ended terribly.

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The first attempt failed before it really began. The seals I'd built over the base Lissandra left on the heart broke at the first touch of my mana, and the resulting backlash melted the top of the cliff, shifting the waterfall and the water flow along with it.

The second attempt ended similarly, though the explosion of heat was smaller at that time.

The third time, the constructs I prepared within my body connected to the heart and unleashed a terrible wave of backlash that tore through me, leaving me with an assortment of wounds that nearly killed me. It even caused a bit of damage to my Mana Heart. It was a pretty minor injury, but it still took a week of Lily's help to mend everything.

It would seem that while Lily can heal her own Mana Heart when it gets damaged, it gets significantly more difficult when it comes to others. None of us truly know anything about Mana Hearts, so I've begun to see them as a major weakness. It'll probably become even more pronounced the stronger someone gets, and the more "evolved" their heart becomes.

I know some bodily conditions can cause trouble for healers. For instance, Lily's [Disintegration] can slow the healing of wounds or make it nearly impossible if she truly applies herself. Then there was Champion Feroy's sickness, which made it hard for him to use mana without specialized tools. Apparently, even the strongest lumoran healers couldn't fix him, and you'd think a Champion would be worth the investment.

Whitey is another example. Yes, he likely never found healers as powerful as those Champion Feroy had access to, but he still couldn't get his heart or limbs restored in the tutorial or Beyond.

I won't lie, I'm a bit disheartened. Hehe, dis-heart-ened. Heh. Okay, never mind. After all the preparations, theorizing, and experiments Lily and I have been working on since Lissandra promised to bring me the heart, every attempt feels like a dead end. Each time I find one solution, it reveals even more problems, adding to the cycle of repeated failures over the past few weeks.

It's frustrating. It really is. So I do the one thing I was hoping to avoid: I scrap everything and start over. Alone, in my room, I put an end to all my usual training and pour the whole of my focus into this one task.

Two more weeks pass like that, and then it's time for one of our weekly meetups again.

The entire group gathers on the terrace of the manor where we're staying. And we can see the flashes of far off explosions against the backdrop of the night, the fighting is deep in lumoran territory now. Yellow and red bursts of light, arcs of lightning, mana constructs detonating in the air all alongside the activation of the Absolute's web. Then there are the counterattacks, humming vibrations we can feel even here, and the echo of explosions rolling over us many seconds after they happen.

Yet we remain safe here.

As usual, the terrace is lit by a number of mundane items, no one uses mana, no one trains, and no one talks about the chaos we can all see ravaging far off battlefields. It all feels so distant.

But, like always, I push all my problems aside and try to appreciate these two routine hours we have.

It's a nice compromise. I spend most of my time alone, doing whatever I want in the silence I oh so often enjoy. Then, for one night, I spend a few hours with the others, get my dose of socialization, and slink back into my cave, without leaving, unless of course, I feel like it.

"Nat, what's the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to you?" Tess asks.

I'm petting Biscuit, who's curled up in my lap. "Look, Tess, I know some of the others shared their stories, and I'll definitely use that information against them sometime in the future, but you can't seriously think I'm going to tell you mine."

“Glub glub glub!” Myrra prods, making drowning sounds from her seat at my right.

“That might actually be it,” I sigh. “Fuck you, Myrra.”

“Blub blub blub!”

“Motherfu...”

Tess waves to get my attention, smiling. “When I was around nine years old, I really wanted a group of friends like the Fellowship. So I wrote this ‘Friendship Contract’ with rules about loyalty, honesty, and even secret code words. I tried to make my classmates sign it during lunch one day.”

“Really?”

“Yep.”

“Damn it, Tess. That's... kind of sad.”

She just smiles at me and turns to Aaron. “Your turn.”

He hesitates for a moment, then shrugs, smiling brightly. His brother next to him already starts giggling, probably knowing what’s coming. “When I was around ten, I went to the school bathroom, and the stall I tried was locked. You’d think, oh, that means someone’s inside, right? Well, not me. My first thought was: ‘How the hell do you lock a bathroom stall behind you?’ That shouldn’t be possible.”

Oh boy.

Aaron giggles. “So, obviously, I tried to crawl under the stall... and yes, someone was in there. I think a part of me died that day.”

Myrra asks what a bathroom stall is, and a few others laugh. Some are understandably baffled as to why he'd do that.

Then Min-Jae joins in, unprompted. "I once walked in on my older brother watching porn on his PC. He panicked, froze for about five seconds, and then shut off the monitor. Then he spent the next two hours taking his entire PC apart, muttering that something must be wrong with it. He's a jerk, but to this day, I still cringe at that memory."

The laughter this time is even louder.

But then Myrra innocently asks, "What's porn?"

Everything goes silent, and Min-Jae blushes, looking around for help.

"Oh, that's right," Dennis says. "What is porn, Min-Jae?"

"Yeah, tell us what is porn?" Aaron joins in.

I mentally salute Min-Jae's poor brother for the horrors he's endured. That sort of thing can scar a person for life.

While they continue their conversation, I simply sit there, petting Biscuit until he drifts off to sleep.

Eventually, the evening comes to an end, and everyone goes their separate ways, mostly returning to training. Maya, Myrra, Lily, and Tess head to the stone circle we use for sparring outside. Sophie returns to her training with the twins and breaks that up by spending time working with Izzy and Noodle.

A few hours later, as I'm sitting on my bed, focusing on my own training, I get a notification.

Your skill [Bone Knitting] has evolved into [Knitting]

[Bone Knitting - lvl 39 > Knitting - lvl 24]

I reread the new name a few times, feeling utterly defeated, and then lie down and close my eyes.

Fuck.

Chapter 547: -New plan

No one will ever learn the name of my skill, I decide this immediately. I can already imagine their reaction. How the fuck do you even make it sound cool? For example, in combat, I jump in front of the enemy boss and say, "Say goodbye to this world. You cannot handle my [Knitting]!"

Hell nah.

More than anything, I would've expected the evolved version to be called [Weaving], which would be fitting, given my Primary Class, and my Mana Weaving technique. That technique allows me to weave mana threads into my creations to make them more durable and last longer. I even use it with Ley Lines.

But after taking a few days to do some testing, I think I at least somewhat understand the reasoning behind the name. I still hate it, but I get the logic behind it. In fact, I even went so far as to write it all out on the paper in front of me.

Theory of [Knitting] vs. Mana Weaving

- by Nathaniel Gwyn

[Knitting] uses a single continuous thread to create interconnected loops that reinforce each other, forming a tightly unified structure.

Key Strengths:

Unified Resilience: While it may seem better to use multiple threads (like weaving), given that a single break would carry the risk of destroying the entire structure, it's not. Unlike weaving, where each thread remains an independent structure within the whole, knitting's single-thread design means the entire

structure acts as a unified construct. It distributes stress evenly, eliminating weak points where disparate threads would otherwise intersect.

Durable Under Strain: While weaving may fray or snap under extreme stress due to the nature of interlocking threads, knitting's continuous structure flexes, providing added resistance to structural failure.

Mana Weaving - Mana Weaving interlaces a multitude of threads to form a rigid and layered structure with an overall improved lifespan.

Key Strengths:

Thread Redundancy: By using multiple threads one ensures that damage to one part of the weave doesn't immediately compromise the entire construct.

Increased Rigidity: Weaving's intersecting threads create a dense, immovable structure, ideal for static constructs like barriers and fortifications.

Why [Knitting] is NOT Weaker

Core Difference: Knitting sacrifices the thread redundancy of weaving in favor of a unified and adaptable structure that weaving cannot replicate. This allows Knitting to maintain performance under dynamic stress and high-strain conditions.

Example Applications:

Knitting is ideal for constructs, reinforcements, and tools that need to adapt to shifting conditions.

Weaving, by contrast, shines in fixed, unchanging applications like walls, weapons, and immovable fortifications.

I burn that paper the moment I finish to remove all mention of the word [Knitting]. At this point, all I can do is, as the twins say, cope.

In summary, Mana Weaving makes a large number of rigid threads, while [Knitting] uses a single, more flexible thread that I can make much thinner, and thus denser. If I play my cards right then sometime in the future it will likely be more durable than Mana Weaving could ever be.

Honestly It should work better with the construct for the Champion's heart I have in mind. With some modifications, I might even be able to refine it further, and part of my mind is already working on that while the rest of me still examines [Knitting]. Now that I think about it though, that implies that I should be able to make clothes out of mana if I feel like it. There are so many interesting possibilities. But that name. That goddamned name.

Opening the door of my room, I head outside. I use my kinetic senses to detect Sophie's heartbeat. Lately, I've grown to like that approach since it's so much harder for mana users to hide the kinetic signature of their presence compared to their mana signatures. Everyone's kinetic signature is different: their heartbeats are distinct, as are their steps, right down to the way air moves around them. With enough focus and experience, you can tell people apart by those differences alone.

Lifting myself into the air, I float toward the sparring circle, looking out into the dark green sky as it stretches out to meet the horizon in the distance. Flashes of white light streak through the air, followed by bursts of yellow. Signaling yet another clash between the forces of the Mimics and lumorans.

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I land at the edge and form a mana-block chair to sit in, waiting for Sophie to finish her match with Myrra as Tess sits watching nearby, as she normally does when they fight, since our mindblender and catgirl still seem to have quite a bit of bad blood between them.

Myrra stands tall and proud, with two long daggers in her hands. One is made of fire, the other of ice. Her Aurora Glass glimmers around her, filling the air with a crystalline material with reflective facets that constantly shift its hue depending on the way she uses the skill.

Touching a shard of glass near her, Myrra disappears, stepping out of another shard right above Sophie.

As Myrra falls, Sophie immediately senses her. A swarm of hundreds of bee-sized mana creations swirls around Sophie, flying toward Myrra and colliding with her flaming assault.

Sophie creates a barrier around herself, and her web activates trying to tie Myrra up. Myrra, with an aggressive groan, pushes through and tears the web apart with sheer strength alone.

Only Sophie's golem blocks the next attack. The creation is twice Sophie's height, made of dirt and stone, with black smoke seeping from it as her bond infuses it for greater control. After the first clash, the golem's limbs slim down, increasing its speed, and it crashes into Myrra multiple times as she jumps around, trying to flank Sophie.

Meanwhile, Sophie keeps attacking with everything she's got, her swarm, an array of mana projectiles, fire attacks, gusts of wind, and her web. Her arsenal is huge, and she uses all of it on Myrra, who keeps darting around the golem that constantly changes shape from agile to sturdy.

Aurora Glass glimmers as Myrra continues teleporting, moving like a wild beast driven by instinct only. Any scratches or even deeper wounds she gets are quickly healed by her powerful regeneration.

Myrra's fire and ice clash against Sophie's barriers and the golem, causing explosions of heat and cold to riot through the area. The daggers extend into two swords that would look massive, were only they held in human hands, though given her proportions they may as well be one-handed weapons.

The Aurora Glass shimmering around her changes color, flashing purple, white, and blue as it forms a beautiful suit of armor around Myrra. She lowers her stance, her yellow eyes gleaming dangerously, fangs bared.

Sophie returns that gaze calmly, her swarm circling around her while the golem starts radiating more black smoke as it becomes denser and more solid. No more roughly shaped stone and dirt, now it's something much more durable.

"All right, that's enough," Tess says simply from nearby.

But the others ignore her as Myrra charges and Sophie continues to pour out more mana.

Suddenly, a single javelin bursts through the air, piercing Sophie's stone golem like it's made of paper and sends it flying. Red and white lightning crackles around Tess as she moves with a speed rivaling even Myrra, placing herself directly in Myrra's path.

The agitated lynthari still swings, but Tess dodges with a quick sidestep and returns a single punch. Cracking lightning slams through Myrra, shattering the Aurora Glass and throwing Myrra into the distance.

A powerful burst of [Psychokinesis] then envelops the area, pressing down on both women for a moment, even through their natural and active defenses.

Tess's blonde hair floats around her head, short bursts of electricity crackling in a halo around her and flaring out around her crown. She calmly stares them down until they step back.

It's like our group leader is making sure everyone remembers the pecking order. Tess was the second person in our group to start her Beyond Trials. Her talent is undeniable, even if people do tend to overlook her when they see Lily's ridiculous skills.

Tess is one of those people who combines immense talent with incredible effort.

Even so, I'd love to see her go all out. I don't think it would be easy for her to fight Myrra or Sophie, especially Myrra, with her training from LissLiss. But as things stand now, I think Tess could even win in a 1v2 scenario against Sophie and Myrra.

To speed things up, I release a single disruptive wave of mana, and all of Sophie's constructs vanish along with Myrra's skills.

I notice that Aurora Glass and Sophie's golem, powered by Blackie, require more effort to dispel, and Tess's lightning remains, to no surprise. It's primordial energy after all, plus she took Chastity as her subclass, which only serves to make it purer, not to mention that she also went with Mana Potency.

I'll need to compare her lightning to my [Empyrean Lance] some time.

Reaching Sophie, I wave my hand in front of her face until she stops glaring at Myrra.

“What?” she asks.

“I got an idea, and I want you to go over it with me while we run our simulations.”

“Sure,” she groans.

The golem resting nearby crumbles; and the now-restored Arcane item known as the Golem Heart flies back into Sophie’s hand, as Blackie returns to her shadow.

I wave at Tess and Myrra as Sophie and I walk away, and as we walk I start explaining, “New plan. Adding a second heart obviously isn’t going to be simple, it’s not like I can just shove it in and hope it doesn’t burn me alive. My Kinetic Mana heart already takes up prime real estate in my chest. Introducing a second heart to generate thermal energy means I need to redesign a lot of my internal layout.”

“Didn’t we test that already?” she asks.

“Yes, but I’ve made some changes. I’m just talking it through out loud to confirm my plans. First, I kni... I weave a specialized cavity for the new heart, reinforcing it with heat-resistant, mana-woven threads to keep everything stable and insulated from the rest of my body. Without that, the thermal energy would burn through my insides like fire through paper. It’ll have to take some power from my Kinetic Mana Heart, but I’ll make sure I can cut the power feed easily enough and hope the thermal heart can maintain its own threads. It probably won’t work, but we’ll see.”

We reach the lake and continue walking across its surface—me using kinetic energy, and Sophie using her own brand of mumbo jumbo.

I continue, “The bigger challenge is going to be creating an entirely separate system for the thermal heart. My mana heart has its own pathways, so letting thermal energy leak into them would be catastrophic because my mana circuits aren’t built to handle extreme heat. We learned that the hard way. So I’ll need to weave a network of thermal pathways from scratch. We didn’t do that before because you said it was crazy and we tried using the existing pathways instead, but fuck it. We’ll layer

thermal pathways and mana pathways on top of each other. These pathways will be interwoven with dense, heat-resistant threads, and should act like insulated arteries to carry thermal energy wherever I need it without frying everything in its path. Hopefully. A little bit of damage might be okay since I can still use thermal energy to heal some of it. I'll also integrate heat-dissipation nodes, basically acting as exhaust ports, in a number of key places, maybe my palms and the soles of my feet to vent excess energy before it overwhelms me."

"How about shooting thermal energy out of your ass as a dissipation node?"

"Fuck you, Sophie. Now, the process of anchoring the heart itself will be just as critical. If it's not stable, the heat and stress from the thermal heart could cause a lot of damage or worse. Using my weaving skill, I'll reinforce it with threads to hold everything secure and allow a bit of movement without causing too much damage. Finally, I'll create a control hub near the heart, something like a Logic Core. It'll replace my Vortex Core and function as an interface so I can regulate the thermal flow and keep it from interfering with my mana. It probably won't work because nothing ever does, so I'll come up with a few ideas and we'll adapt as we go."

By the time we reach the waterfall, I propel myself up the cliff to where we've left the heart lodged in the rock, which has begun to melt around it. Sophie joins me with a few long leaps, and we both look at the heart.

While staring at it, I say, "This isn't going to be without risk. I've fucked up plenty. Collapsed constructs, overheated pathways, or energy feedback that almost killed me. It's frustrating, but each test brings me closer. And fuck me if I don't get this shitty heart in my chest before the tournament starts."

Chapter 548: My way

Warning! The 10th wave is now in progress.

The moment I get that notification, an aftershock rocks our area. A mushroom-like purple and white cloud blooms far in the distance. So far away, a part of me wonders how tall that mushroom cloud would have to be.

Most of the horizon quickly takes on that shimmering purple and white hue, just before the next explosion thunders through the surroundings. It almost looks as if someone drew a dark blue line to the ground from some point in the sky and connected it to the ground just before the mushroom formed. A high-pitched noise rings out, followed by three shockwaves in quick succession as three more blue lines are drawn in about the same area.

I look up from my place next to the heart, tracing the horizon with my gaze.

Lissandra hovers there, pale blue mana flickering around her feet and hands, looking toward the explosions.

She observes as more effects of the explosion expand towards our “territory,” only for them to be stopped by an enormous barrier. A rush job, set up by either the Lumorans or Mimics to prevent the attack from reaching this place.

Even so, I don’t think she is satisfied judging by the expression she is making.

She lifts her arm toward the sky, and her Mana Heart beats. A monstrous amount of mana floods from her, compressed and held tightly in her control, without so much as touching us or the surroundings. She grabs that mana, molds it, shifts it, controls it.

A single pulse expands out in all directions with her at its epicenter, traveling at an incredible speed that only increases the farther it goes. It passes through our territory without affecting it at all, and when it exits, the mountain range surrounding it crumbles.

And the shockwave continues.

The nearby forest.

Another mountain range.

The massive lake.

All crumbling, blown away.

Then Lissandra, in one quick movement, brings her arm down and it all stops, the expanding shockwave pulling itself back at even higher speeds with a loud thump and a feeling reminiscent of an implosion.

My ears ring, and my body tumbles, as the returning shockwave throws me off balance.

Lissandra isn't there anymore. It would seem her warning has been delivered.

I take my eyes off the sky and turn back to the heart, continuing to build on the base Lissandra left for me.

Just a few more days and I will be ready.

Back within my mental space, I find myself appearing in another place I recognize, the 4th floor.

This time Whitey is wearing the sort of clothes I've come to associate with the sort of person who'd shout "You can't arrest me, my dad is a lawyer".

The desert is covered in the bodies of bus-sized ants, and standing in the distance, is the First One, the pitch-black ant whose carapace almost seemed to absorb the light, duking it out with the Fallen Hero. The armor, powered by the damaged heart of the Champion, is in a stance that causes each of his strikes and punches to send shockwaves through the area. Dozens, hundreds of ant bodies litter the ground around him.

The First One, though, can receive vitality and strength from the Colony, and that allows it to face him.

Somewhere in the distance, another huge army of ants is surrounding a group of demons. Multiple hearts beating and generating the multitude of primordial energies some of them possess. And between them, stands a younger version of Whitey, who, unlike the version of him I saw on the 1st floor, stands tall, and his power surrounds him, even now clearly surpassing the remaining demons.

The monstrous bodies freeze mid-air around him, Needle Point snipes the ants attacking at range, and a seemingly undeveloped Wraith Dance takes him all across the battlefield where he proceeds to face the most dangerous ants.

“We made the First One fight the Fallen Hero.” Whitey, sitting next to me, smirks. “Fucking ant followed us to wipe us out before trying to head on to Virelia, he thought the Fallen Hero was still miles away. Try to guess how we did it.”

His red eyes gleam in dark satisfaction, and his clothes emphasize the darkness of his demonic soul further.

“Whatever, I already have a lot of things to deal with and no mental capacity for this. Let’s just fight.”

“Spoken like a true human: I swing stick. I punch. I bite. Ugh ugh.”

“Spoken like a true demon, better at shit-talking than fighting.”

The desert around us explodes as we charge each other.

The lumoran Champion with the crystal arm comes more often now seeming more desperate each time.

We already opened the box she brought previously, using brute force, and it was empty.

I should have expected that, but in the same way as I feel amused, I feel frustrated.

As for the Cockroach, she met with the lumoran Champion only once, all the while surrounding them with a field that made overhearing or seeing anything impossible. It took only a few seconds, but when the field disappeared, the Champion seemed to be in a better mood. Bowing to Lissandra, she then left. Something tells me that the Cockroach’s show of power, not so long ago, bumped her up to a higher threat level than they expected.

I want to ask what the meeting was about, but I don’t think I will get an answer, so I just curse her in my head. Quietly, in case she can listen somehow.

Warning! The 11th wave is now in progress.

Warning! The 12th wave is now in progress.

The waves don't have a schedule; sometimes there's more time between them. We think it's because a bigger group of Mimics is being brought in.

At this point, it's safe to say the war is in full swing. The lumorans still have the advantage thanks to being on their home planet and their Absolute still has defensive mechanisms he can use, but the Mimics have bigger forces now.

Part of me wonders if being the Absolute of your planet gives you some kind of advantage on your home planet. Maybe some kind of boost. Maybe even allowing you to enclose the whole planet in your domain through your connection to it as its Absolute.

It's one of the things we've taken to theorizing about between Sophie, the twins, and myself while we work on preparations for the heart, which, as it turns out, are nearing completion.

Myrra is somewhere else, doing something with Lily and Maya. Lissandra got bored, so she's taken to training them. I can tell it's not easy by how they look when they return to the house once every few days. As if the souls had been torn from their bodies. A tired expression that almost makes no sense considering how powerful their bodies are.

This book was originally published on Royal Road. Check it out there for the real experience.

I think it's safe to say everyone's sparred with everyone at this point. Izzy with Myrra, Sophie against Min-Jae, the twins against Maya, me against Tess, Tess against Izzy, Sophie against me. Etc. etc.

The improvements can be seen, as everyone gives feedback and learns to react to different types of attacks.

Lily cosplaying as a bulldozer.

Sophie's mental warfare.

The twins' illusions.

Maya's ever-changing battle style.

My aerial bombardment.

And no one holds back, so there's no shortage of injuries. Terrible ones and even death remains a distinct possibility—just a single mistake on either side would be fatal. But that's not something we shy away from. Tess pushes for the experience just as hard as I do.

I know I keep saying it, but group 4 is scary. Each and every single member. Even Izzy, who would be expected to be the weakest because of her age and [Empathy] skill.

But that same skill allows her to partially predict attacks of her opponents to the level where it is comparable to my kinetic senses that allow me to feel the slightest movements. Sometimes even better, given that my kinetic senses are honestly easier to trick than whatever it is she's doing.

And her purple, green, and blue flames are easily comparable to my golden thermal energy.

Then there is also Noodle, who counts as her bond. Noodle is very durable and can absorb mana from most attacks. He can expand in size or shrink. He also has an independent store of the mana he consumes, which he can share with Izzy. Plus, he possesses the same flames as her.

I could go on in a similar way about everyone in the group, but the point should be clear.

And just like that we enter our last days before the tournament, where the 10 rounds of Earth's tutorial will finally meet. All the people from Easy, Normal, Hard, and Hell difficulty. Not to mention the Beyonders.

Myrra is now one of our round's Beyonders. The 10th one, the last spot.

She refuses to type in the Community, to the point that I wonder what alias she inherited from that Easy difficulty murderer's status.

Later that night, the process starts. The preparations are done. We've rehearsed the process time and again and even planned for errors. There are only a few people around me. Lily, Dennis, Aaron, and Sophie. And I would bet that the Cockroach is probably watching from some hidden perch as well.

I plop down and slide deep into [Focus]. This time I power it with black mana. The smallest "whiff" I think might carry me through the procedure, but I don't think I'll be likely to have the freedom to do it again once we start. My mid-Arcane passive helps me to endure it, and there are probably a hundred of Lily's healing marks placed all over my body.

There are also about two dozen copies of my left arm laid out in a pile next to Lily. Enough to out heal an atomic bomb to the face.

Actually, now that I think about it, would it?

I quickly shake my head and focus on my part in all of this, putting together the finishing touches, connecting everything together, and kni...weaving the Ley Lines together.

My vortex core is gone. I removed the Thermal component of my Thermokinetic Mana heart the day before, leaving me with a simple Kinetic Mana Heart, again. But an improved one with greater output, obviously.

Minion will be happy.

I close my eyes and nod while reducing my defenses and turning off my passives.

Lily starts immediately, and a portion of my chest disappears, opening me up and revealing my raw, beating heart.

For that short moment, a thought flashes through my mind.

Just how easy it would be to kill me now or cripple my Mana Heart for years.

Then Lily gets to work.

The new heart will be placed laterally to the original one and to the right of it. For that, Lily is using space between the ribs and existing organs. It will also keep it separate from any critical structures. This heart won't be connected to my veins at all.

Of course, there isn't really much space, so Lily is compressing one of my lungs slightly. Apparently, it should be fine as they have an excess of capacity as it is, and probably even more now with all these stats. She also has to remove a portion of my spleen on the left or my liver on the right. I leave that up to her.

When she is halfway done, I get into deploying the structures I've prepared and stored in my mind. Using threads, I shield the area where my new heart is set to go. I use [Knitting] and Mana Weaving to create something strongly inspired by my Mana Circuits, this time for thermal energy.

This new system isn't even close to being anywhere as well integrated as my existing circuits. There is much less of it, which will make fine control a bit more difficult, but these pathways are strong and will allow for effective delivery of thermal energy. I also make sure they go through my body, head, limbs.

The rest will be upgraded later, based on anything this early version turns out to lack and according to my needs.

I make sure all of it is separated as much as possible from the previous systems. I also don't forget about dissipation nodes just in case I need to dump some stored energy. Despite Sophie's jibes, I do not make one near my ass and instead place them on the palms of my hands, soles of my feet, and one bigger one on my back.

Throughout this process, the twins continue to help me make sure everything is properly connected to my body, while Sophie continues to monitor my body's reaction to the process. She also points out any slight mistakes or ideas for improvement.

Obviously, my body is getting fucked up during all of this. Lily tries to suppress any flashes of pain as much as possible and any damage I can't deal with, she heals instead. She follows what I'm doing, fixing up the damage I leave in its wake, and staunches any bleeding.

Once in a while, she steps in to activate some of the healing marks to "revitalize" me.

With the surgery nearing completion, I extend more Ley Lines toward the heart on the ground, now thankfully cleaned. The threads connect to the heart, and I reactivate the structure that seals it up, built on the foundation Lissandra left for me.

The threads that touch the heart all burn, and I cut the thread before that heat can reach my body.

For a moment, I stare at it.

Then I try again.

It all burns once more.

And again.

We make modifications, but the process repeats.

When Sophie shares another idea, I cut off the conversation.

So that's how it is.

I tried to approach the problem intelligently and prepared thoroughly, yet it still refuses to work.

Fuck it and fuck you 3rd Floor Nathaniel.

More of my mana compresses turning black and seeping into my body, powering my mind and body. My thoughts go into overdrive and the world fades to black and white. Within this state, I find that the heart has just as vibrant a color as my mana. The color of an exploding volcano radiating around it with each heartbeat.

I reach out, grab the heart, and chuck it into my chest. Then I use three healing marks to close the wound immediately, leaving the heart inside. I also cut off the remains of my charred hand before the heat can spread any further.

Lily screams and reaches to open my chest to remove the heart. The twins also say something, but it all fades into distant noise.

All my passives reactivate, especially my newest one, Mana Wavelength Tyrant.

I teleport right over the lake and start dropping down, as the water around me immediately starts to sizzle and continues even as I reach the deep bottom of it and sit there.

My mind races and continues to deal with the damage. [Focus], [Redistribution], [Eclipse], [Mana Domain]

Even underwater, the rock underneath me starts cracking and melting. The sheer pressure evaporates the water around me, creating a bubble of air, and continues to evaporate any water that rushes in.

And I do it MY way.

I reconnect, I weave, I suppress, I build upon.

I fucking Knit.

All while healing mark after healing mark activates, and my body barely holding together, overheated and burned. My Mana Cycling stops too, and all my mana surrounds me, fighting the foreign energy as well.

Slowly, step by step, I adapt, fix my mistakes, and improve on the structure.

I suppress that goddamned heart. With my teeth clenched, ignoring the pain and scalding water, and even the molten rock around me.

It only takes a few minutes but it feels like hours.

When it all ends, the water of the lake is all gone. The bottom of it is covered in molten rock, and new water from the waterfall slowly starts filling it again.

I activate my last healing mark, perfectly calculated, and stand up.

Then I check my notifications.

[Focus - lvl 61 > Focus - lvl 62]

[Knitting - lvl 24 > Knitting - lvl 25]

[Knitting - lvl 25 > Knitting - lvl 26]

[Knitting - lvl 26 > Knitting - lvl 27]

[Knitting - lvl 27 > Knitting - lvl 28]

[Knitting - lvl 28 > Knitting - lvl 29]

[Redistribution - lvl 58 > Redistribution - lvl 59]

[Eclipse - lvl 19 > Eclipse - lvl 20]

[Eclipse - lvl 20 > Eclipse - lvl 21]

[Eclipse - lvl 21 > Eclipse - lvl 22]

[Eclipse - lvl 22 > Eclipse - lvl 23]

[Ley Line - lvl 47 > Ley Line - lvl 48]

Congratulations, you have created a new Construct. Well done!

You have acquired

Sealed Ignition Heart (Fully Sealed, 3/3) - The Ignition Heart is a furnace of raw Thermal energy, pulsating with a ferocity that threatens its host with every beat. Encased in a fortified cavity knitted with heat-resistant threads, its immense power is restrained by three intricately crafted seals. These seals greatly temper its destructive output, but their release will unlock a force capable of scorching anything in its path, including the body that wields it.

Chapter 549: What do you want?

My good mood from enduring this ordeal with a mere hundred or so healing marks quickly fades once Lily starts healing me. She points out the damage I still have and the damage that's continuing to worsen even now.

I think it's been a long time since I've seen her this worried. Her face settles into a focused expression and she continues to work on healing me, forced to resort to excising parts of my body to restore them properly where her marks have clearly failed.

"It's okay," I tell her.

"You always say that! How is it okay to injure yourself this much?"

"Lily."

“What!”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not...”

“It is. I can handle it.” I reach out and ruffle her hair. “I’m not used to people worrying about me, so tone it down. I feel awkward.”

“Humans are greedy creatures, aren’t they? What you’re doing right now is enough, and you’ll be able to do more in the future, so don’t worry about it.”

After a long moment of silence, I tweak her nose, pulling her head from side to side. After all, she deserves some teasing every now and then.

Just in case, I rely on her healing and don’t bother to check the state of my body again, using the reprieve to focus on keeping my new heart from burning me and fine tuning my adjustments. For now, I split off half my mind to manage the process.

And damn, that’s what it’s going to take, even with all the restrictions I’ve already placed on it.

“Yo, do a check on me,” I turn to Sophie. And unlike Lily, she just shrugs and does exactly that.

As with everything, it takes a while, and then we repeat the process with the twins.

Though the recently evaporated lake starts slowly filling out, so we evacuate the area.

I use one of my Beyond-stay tokens to return to the fishing village, ignoring monsters as much as possible.

There, I collect the shards Duncan left with one of the city leaders, my portion of the profits from selling the fish.

A full two hundred and five thousand shards, bringing my total to 309,939 shards.

For now, I resist upgrading my healing passive, deciding to wait for the tournament and see if I can use these shards as an investment instead.

Otherwise, my short Beyond visit is uneventful. I use the time until my Beyond token wears off to further stabilize my modifications. I don't meet anyone I recognize, and no one starts a fight with me.

Even as I'm leaving, my handler leaves me with a simple greeting and well wishes regarding my performance in the tournament and reminds me that a good showing will help ensure that I get better Beyond quests and attract offers from bigger guilds in Beyond.

As the timer ticks down, we all gather in one of the gardens. A few bags are sitting nearby, packed just in case the system allows us to bring them with us to the tournament. Lissandra and Myrra are there as well.

Everyone, other than Lissandra, is giddy and smiling, excited to meet the people from other groups and rounds.

All the training we went through here, all the effort we put in, is about to be tested against the rest of Earth's first generation. The generation that has Earth's future Absolute and Champions.

The most powerful people who, after the end of the tutorial, will change the rules of Earth. They might try to keep the current structure, they might try to make their own kingdoms, or they might try to leave the planet for adventure.

It's an exciting thought.

Sophie is holding Izzy close, and Noodle is coiled around her arm. The twins and Min-Jae are throwing insults at each other, boasting about how they'll beat each other up.

Maya talks with Tess, who to my surprise, is holding Biscuit. The now soon-to-be best doggo of the second tournament licks Tess, then looks at me, his expression taking on something resembling a gentle smile.

Lily patiently listens as Myrra tells her some story about her childhood in Virelia.

Congratulations on your 2nd year in the tutorial!

Tournament preparations have been concluded.

For the duration of the tournament, all Floor Quests will be put on hold. The tournament will have a 14-day duration, and each person may decide whether to participate or not.

More information will be forthcoming upon entrance to the tournament floor.

Would you like to participate in the second tournament of Earth's tutorial?

Yes / No

Please decide within the next 30 seconds.

Everyone's hand moves to press the button, and I don't even feel the effects of teleportation as I find myself in a different place.

The bright sun makes me squint. All around me, I hear small birds singing. The sky is beautifully blue, and a gentle breeze moves through the leaves of the trees all around. The air smells like summer.

This time, we're not separated, and everyone is looking around, curious.

Only then do I hear that single sentence from Maya.

“Where is Tess?”

A brief wave of panic washes over me as I expand my senses and scan my surroundings.

Tess isn’t here, and neither is Biscuit, even though I saw her pressing the button on the system window visible to her alone.

“Tess!” Lily calls, even though our senses have already scanned the area thoroughly.

The Community is also disabled here, so no one is able to send any messages.

"You, what's happening?" Maya steps forward and stops in front of Lissandra. "I talked to her. I saw her press the button. I know you're really smart or something. You must know something!"

For a moment, I think she might grab Lissandra and start shaking her, but thankfully she doesn’t.

“Isn’t that obvious?” Lissandra tilts her head. “The system wouldn’t allow someone with a mimic inside them to enter the tournament.”

In the silence that follows, Lissandra smiles. It’s the kind of smile you might make when explaining something to a child.

POV Earth

“General, I’ve got the breakdown on the power levels the returnees have reported, and we’ve decided to change our system from grades to categories and make further edits. So far, the highest levels are still hypothetical and based on what they’ve told us about their experiences on the tournament floors and encounters with Normal, Hard, and Hell participants. Then there are those who’ve been to what they call ‘Beyond.’ The categories are split into ten levels. This information comes from participants from the

Easiest difficulty, so we've increased the scales slightly, to account for the secondhand nature of the intel."

"Understood. Start with the weakest."

"Category One, sir. These are the baseline enhanced: they're generally faster, and stronger than the average person, but not by much. Think elite athletes and special forces soldiers. Dangerous to civilians but no real threat to us. They might demonstrate the odd supernatural ability like creating fire with their mind."

"Manageable. What about Category Two?"

"Augmented tier. Potentially dangerous under the right conditions, their physical strength is generally sufficient to punch through reinforced doors and flip cars. Still manageable with current equipment, but they'll take out regular squads if we're not careful."

"Noted. Category Three?"

"This is where things get serious. We expect them to be able to breach most walls, tank small-arms fire, and engage entire squads without effort. Still within reason for us to handle, but it's a bit of a stretch."

"Category Four?"

"Superhuman. Leaping buildings, tearing through vehicles, and taking heavy ordnance like it's nothing. If one goes rogue, even sending in heavy units might not be enough."

"We haven't seen any such returnees as of yet, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir. Everything is based on the returnees' accounts and our observations. We expect Category Four to start appearing with Normal and Hard difficulty. We expect Easy difficulty to place between categories one and three with few possessing the potential to reach that status. After that, the categories escalate fast."

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

"Then let's hear it. What's Category Five?"

"City-level threats. These individuals could heavily damage a small to midsize city. Flattening entire blocks, destroying infrastructure. We expect Hard difficulty returnees to be about that level."

"Category Six?"

"Regional devastation. Entire counties are at risk, think massive destruction spreading for miles. This matches the upper tier of Hell Difficulty elites. We've been considering the addition of three extra subcategories within each category, inspired by the system. For example, low Category Six, mid Category Six, and upper Category Six."

"And Seven?"

"Nation-level threats, General. These will be the strongest Hell and Beyond elites, we believe they will have the strength to topple nations. Their abilities and strategies are far beyond anything we've encountered thus far. We don't think many people will reach that category, if any."

"That's... concerning. Category Eight?"

"This one is purely theoretical. From what we heard from Easy difficulty returnees, we don't expect anyone to reach that rank. It would mean continental destruction, sir. At this level, they would be operating on a scale that makes our military capability seem irrelevant."

"I'm almost afraid to ask about Nine."

"Capable of planetary devastation. Wiping out all life on Earth."

"Should have known. And Category Ten?"

“Planet breakers. Capable of not just ending all life on the surface but destroying the planet itself. Our sources have heard legends about such beings, but we don’t consider it reliable information.”

“Understood. So Earth’s still in the lower tiers, but the infection is spreading and It’s only a matter of time before we see what’s next.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Continue collecting information. Now tell me about Project Moon Spider.”

“Yes! If you look at the document on your table, our army, in cooperation with NASA, has prepared the module, and in a few weeks we should be able to send it to the Moon.”

POV Earth

“I’m Colonel Jonathan Kane, and it’s my pleasure to meet you, miss. First, I’d like to ask you to state your full name for the record before we start our conversation.”

“You already know my name. Do you need it again because of the recorder you put on the table?”

“Yes. This is a very important matter, and we’re creating a system to address it. Recording these conversations will allow us to examine them accurately, provide feedback, and adjust our approach.”

“Very well, my name is Thalia Gwyn.”

“Thank you for your understanding. Are you the biological mother of Victoria Gwyn and Nathaniel Gwyn?”

“Yes.”

“Ever since their disappearance two years ago, you haven’t received any information regarding their whereabouts?”

“None at all. Same as I told the sergeant you sent before. So I wonder—why is a lofty colonel such as yourself speaking to me?”

“I’m afraid I cannot disclose that information at this time. I can only say that we’ve come into contact with someone who met your daughter Victoria around one year ago, and we have strong reason to believe your son, Nathaniel is in the same location.”

“I... I thank you for this information.”

“I’m glad I could help at least that much, Mrs. Gwyn. I have two daughters myself, and though I do not fully understand what you’re feeling, I can empathize.”

“Yes. So, what do you want from me?”

“We have strong reason to believe your daughter will be a very... important person in the future. Please don’t take this for granted, even we aren’t sure if she’ll survive, but it’s possible she will return in three years at the latest. Once again, I’d love to say everything will be fine, but it’s also possible she won’t...”

“I understand. It’s better than I could have expected.”

“You seem surprisingly calm about it.”

“Trust me, I’ve been through a lot over the last two years. And you could say I’ve taken after my kids in some ways.”

“I do not understand.”

“That’s fine. So once again, what do you want?”

"There are multiple things, but firstly, we'd be thankful for any information you could give us regarding your son and daughter: their personalities, how they react to different situations, their relationships with people, what they like and dislike. Anything we could use to build a psychological profile and..."

"I see. If that's what you want, then you can fuck right off."

"I apologize if I've offended you, but..."

"Oh, I know you weren't trying to be insulting. Nevertheless, my answer remains the same. If you, our country, or our army wants to use me against my kids, you. Can. Fuck. Off."

"That confuses me, Miss Gwyn. Our intel didn't suggest you had a very good relationship with your children. Your daughter was serving a ten-year sentence for the second-degree murder of your husband, Robert, her father. Something she did as a nineteen-year-old. Your then-sixteen-year-old son was also suspected of helping with the murder, but the charges were dropped based on your daughter's statements. After that, you haven't visited your daughter even once, and your son moved away."

"I am well aware. And?"

"Maybe we started on the wrong foot. Let me emphasize, the creation of psychological profiles regarding important personages isn't exactly uncommon. I'm sure my higher-ups have one on me that includes the details of my entire life. This is a sensitive matter, so we felt it would be appropriate to create profiles for your daughter and son as well. But I understand your hesitation, and we can drop it for now. On the other hand, I am authorized to offer you Diplomatic Compensation to the tune of one million dollars."

"Colonel, I don't know if you think I'm stupid, but you should stop."

"Allow me to explain, Miss Gwyn. We're well aware of your current employment history and the fact that you were forced to move into a smaller apartment just a few weeks ago. The 'Diplomatic Compensation' is, to be honest, a bribe. We expect nothing in return. Rather we simply hope your children will look more favorably upon us once they're back."

"You said there's a chance they won't come back."

"Yes. If you're thinking in that case the money we gave you would be a waste on our part, we're willing to take the loss."

"I see. Ten million then."

"I... what?"

"Look here, Mister Colonel" Jonas Kane, a man of your rank wouldn't be here if it wasn't very important, right? Ten million, or you can leave."

"It's Colonel Jonathan Kane, Miss Gwyn. You've already confirmed your lack of a stable relationship with your children."

"That's true. I guess you can just take the risk and leave. However, I might mention it to them. But our relationship isn't very good so it surely won't come back to bite you in the ass."

"Are you blackmailing me, Miss Gwyn?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's a first for me. An interesting experience all around. Understood. I can increase it to ten million. If you're willing, we can even relocate you to a safer location, as we have reason to suspect things might get dangerous around here. Of course, you'd be able to come and go as you please."

"I'll think about it. When you send the money, make sure it's all there, I don't want half of it disappearing because of taxes or some 'processing fee.'"

"I... I understand. We will make sure nothing like that happens."

"Thank you, Colonel Jonathan Dane. I'll make sure to remember your name and put in a good word for you."

"It's Colonel Jonathan Kane, Miss Gwyn."

"Sure."

POV Earth

"The cat-sized ants in Africa ate an entire village. Did you hear?" the friend asks another boy next to him.

"Yes! There were a bunch of leaked videos, but someone keeps taking them down. I also heard something about huge wolves, a massive white bear, and a pod of sharks as big as ships! Do you think it's some new species?"

"Probably. Maybe some kind of tunnel to the center of the earth opened, and released all these weird animals are coming from," he laughs.

"Heh, so you're saying Luna came from there too?"

"Luna?"

"The fucking spider on the moon."

"Oh, are they calling it Luna nowadays? Weren't they calling her The Moonster?"

"What the fuck, haha, I hadn't heard that one."

POV Earth

“Boss, we broke another diamond-coated drill on that damned rock,” a worker in a yellow hardhat says as he exits the tunnel.

He walks up to his boss standing near the entrance where the giant machine is digging away.

“These things are fucking expensive. Fuck. Did you at least get the results from the samples of rock that broke the drill heads?”

“They’ll come in today, but the lab guy told me he’s never seen rock like this in his life,” he whispers. “Don’t tell anyone, but he was saying that their lab is getting a lot of samples like that, new metals, new rocks, plants, and the like. Or old ones that are suddenly more durable. It’s insane.”

The boss takes his helmet off and wipes the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief. “I’d give a good amount of money to know what the fuck is going on.”

POV Earth

Standing at attention in a dimly lit room, a soldier in the uniform of an Asian country continues giving his report to his leader. There are no electronic devices present in an effort to ensure that nothing can be leaked.

“The Americans recently got at least one group of Easy Difficulty returnees two months ago. In that time, we’ve found no signs that any other country has received any additional returnees. According to the returnees in our employ, it may have something to do with the second tournament. After that, we should expect more groups.”

“Do we have any information on the higher-tier returnees?”

“So far, only Easy difficulty, but we still expect the earliest Normal difficulty participants to start appearing sometime in six months to a year.”

“Good. What do we know about that group of Easy difficulty that tried to take over Cyprus?”

“All eight of them were assassinated. Five of them by poisoning, and the remaining three were taken out with anti-materiel sniper rifles. We’ve collected some information, and it seems like all the shots went through the eye, they were probably worried the skull might deflect the bullet.”

“That poison must have been quite something.” The leader continues to tap on the table with his finger. “Do we know who did it?”

“We suspect China. All the bodies went missing as well, and we only have photo documentation. But we think there was a submarine nearby to support the operation.”

“Understood. You can leave.”

“Yes, sir!”

POV Nathaniel

“So you knew and didn’t say anything?” Maya shouts, continuing her tirade against Lissandra. After the bomb she just dropped, I’m sure Maya would be charging the woman if Lily and Sophie weren’t holding her back. And even they seem angry.

While Myrra stands by her side, Lissandra answers, “It would’ve been strange if I hadn’t noticed.”

That gets her another round of curses, but she seems inclined to show a bit of understanding and doesn’t retaliate. Instead, she catches my gaze, as if urging me to say something.

I know her well enough to sense there's more to this, but I’m deep in [Focus] now, trying to steady my emotions. Even so, my hand clenches. As the others continue hurling insults and questions at Lissandra, I take a step forward.

“What do you want?” I ask.

All the words cut off, and the remaining members of group four jump in between Lissandra and me.

Lissandra just looks at me, still smiling. "I can help that girl. I've been observing her. The mimic hasn't taken over; it hasn't even started. There's a reason for that. As for your bond, I don't know why he decided to stay with her, but he doesn't have a mimic."

"Good. So I ask again. What do you want?"

"It's simple, truly, little pup. If she survives these two weeks on the seventh floor until our return, I will remove that mimic. If necessary, I will even force the Progenitor Mimic to assist me—that much I can promise. I can also promise that if you fail to fulfill what I ask of you, I will let her die. Do not expect otherwise, not even for a moment."

Lissandra steps forward with purpose, her smile giving way to an unshakable calm, "I want you to win every event in this tournament, little pup. No, not just win, I want you to obliterate everyone in your way. Do that, and I will save your friend."

There is only one answer I can give from my place deep in my state of [Focus].

"Consider it done."

Chapter 550: Start of the 2nd Tournament

POV Kim Min-Jae

We've been told over and over that once a mimic gets inside you there's no getting it out. Even Tess kept reminding us like we didn't already know. I still remember those days when we were running from the 2nd Front. The cold biting at us, her eyes always watching, making sure none of us got infected. She never let her guard down, not even once. That's what I thought.

Even then, I noticed the toll it took on her.

I should have put it together. But I didn't. Not because I couldn't, but because it never even crossed my mind. Any of us could get infected, sure. But her? I thought she was too strong for that. Too smart. Too careful.

And now, I feel like I'm about to break. I don't know if I should cry or just sit down and stop thinking. It feels like the air's been sucked out of my lungs, and I can't do anything about it. I can't lose her. Not Tess. Not another friend.

I look at the others, but no one says anything. No one has to. It's all over their faces. Fear, doubt, that awful sinking feeling that we might already be too late. No one wants to say it, but I know they're thinking it. I'm thinking about it too.

I wonder if Tess knew. If, for even a second, she realized it before we did.

Then I hear Nathaniel talking to Lissandra, and she makes her offer. She says she can save Tess, even if it means going against the Mimic Absolute. She says it like it's nothing like it's already decided like she can bend the world to her will. Like she knows everything will go her way no matter what. And for a second, I believe her.

But there's a catch. Nathaniel has to win the tournament.

Against the winners of tournaments from the other rounds.

Against the Beyond attendees like him.

Against the future Champions and perhaps even Earth's future Absolute.

Against the best Earth's First Generation has to offer.

I try to picture it, him standing against all of them. The best fighters, monsters in human form, the ones who also went through the same dangers we did. Even knowing how strong he is, it seems impossible to be sure he can do it. He'll be up against people who've trained for this, people who've struggled through these last two years to reach the top.

People who won't hesitate, who won't care that someone's life is on the line. Because to them, this is just another fight.

I can't even imagine what that pressure must feel like. Knowing someone's life depends on you. It would bury me. It would tear me apart before I even stepped onto the battlefield.

And Nathaniel? He just answers without hesitation.

"Consider it done."

Same tone as always. Same calm expression. Like it's just another task to check off a never ending list.

Like he's never even considered losing.

Congratulations, you have fulfilled the requirements to raise the level of your subclass!

[Initiate of Envy] > [Adept of Envy]

He makes it look so easy. Like winning is just a matter of deciding to do it.

A shaky breath slips out, unnoticed until now. My fingers tremble, tightening into fists, but the shaking doesn't stop.

What am I even doing here?

Nathaniel moves forward without hesitation, already planning his next step, while everything feels stuck in place. Watching him, it's impossible to tell if it's admiration or resentment that drives me. Maybe it's both.

I can't even be sure which one it is anymore.

POV Nathaniel

I turn away from Lissandra and look back at group 4. Damn, these guys, they can be scary as fuck but what would they do without me? They were about to start flailing about like headless chickens, hell they might even have tried to attack Lissandra.

I mean, I would love to see it, but this isn't the time for that. Maybe later though.

"Sophie and Maya, you will act as stand ins for Tess and deal with the other groups and anything else that annoys me."

"I... Nat, Tess is..."

"Don't worry about it, Maya. I will take care of it, and Lissandra will keep her word—of that I'm sure."

Sophie steps ahead. "You realize how crazy her demands are, right? That's totally unreasonable! She could have told us something! Or just helped!"

"That's not how she works," I wave it off. "But don't worry. The moment I even get close to her level, I'll beat the shit out of her for everything. And extra."

"You are free to try anytime, little pup," Lissandra answers again with that air of absolute confidence, then taps Myrra on the shoulder.

After Myrra waves to us, they both leave, heading for the top of the huge hill we find ourselves on. There are already a lot of presences in the area farther away from us. Similarly to the first tournament, they also climb toward the top of the hill.

Looking around, I take note of a nearly invisible barrier surrounding the entire hill. It's clearly the system's work—I can tell right away—and it seems like it won't let anything pass through.

As it turns out there are several other huge hills way off in the distance, each rising to large flat areas at their peaks. Smaller hills sit atop that space, along with an array of forests and a vast multitude of houses. They almost seem like perfect copies of the first tournament's common area and our hill. It

seems that each round of the tutorial has its own hill, enclosed by a barrier that prevents us from mixing with other rounds for now.

As I start walking toward the top of the hill, the others follow me.

The tournament is a competitive base, but also an opportunity to meet other tutorial attendees from your planet.

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

The events will begin in one day; please wait in your common area until then.

There are no monsters or natives, this should allow tutorial attendees to greet each other and continue to build on their relationships.

Death is currently impossible on the tournament floor.

Enjoy your second tournament!

Even the notification is nearly the same as before. It would seem the system is being lazy as always. So, just like last time, I check the number of participants in this tournament.

Easy Difficulty - 13,961

Normal Difficulty - 7,021

Hard Difficulty -2,100

Hell Difficulty - 269

Beyond - 74

That allows for a good comparison to the other rounds, as our 5th round's stats look like this:

Easy Difficulty 1299/2000

Normal Difficulty 853/1000

Hard Difficulty 222/500

Hell Difficulty 36/250

Beyond 10/10

There are two numbers that interest me more than the others. One is the current overall number of people in Hell difficulty for Earth: 269, nice.

Each round started with 250 people in Hell difficulty, so overall Earth started with 2500. Out of that 2500, only 269 are still alive. Close to 90% of the people in Hell difficulty died. Probably closer to 80%, accounting for the people who might not have joined—just like our round is missing some people from Hell difficulty, that mysterious group or groups.

Our round, the 5th, has an above-average number of Hell difficulty survivors. If we had to split it evenly, each round should have 27 people at the moment, yet our round has 36.

There is also one more telling number: the amount of people in Beyond. I would have expected it to be around 85-90, given the hard limit of 10 in each round, but it's lower than that, leaving us at 74.

Myrra and Lissandra are likely counted as Beyond participants, even though they haven't completed their trials yet. That could be throwing the numbers off. But still, the 5th round having more than expected is hard to ignore.

Oh, then there's that guy who started in Beyond. The asshole hogging all the interest from the Rulers. I wonder if he ended up in this tournament if he even can, or if he's stuck sitting on his ass in Beyond.

Well, none of it matters that much now.

Knowing I cannot die here, I start doing things with Mana Cycling I've been avoiding until now, or waiting for Lily's help, and then I begin loosening the 1st seal of the Champion's heart to see the reaction and get used to the output.

It's a strange feeling, knowing there's a limit and intentionally pushing past it. My body screams in warning, but my mind is already set. The next step is clear.

I will remove at least one of the seals during this tournament.

Because of this, I die twice, before we even reach the common area.

Some of the people at the top of the hill are familiar to me. I see some memorable faces from Hell difficulty. I even notice Tacita sneaking around nearby. One of the signatures might be Savant, and another is definitely Gareth with his group. Some guys from Easy Difficulty still have those camping cars with solar panels and there are already some tents set up and even a decent amount of grilling going on.

Indeed, the true Easy difficulty experience.

I breathe in the fresh air and once again feel my heart beginning to race. I feel the need to use [Focus] to bring my emotions under control. Like a worm eating at me, that feeling of self-doubt continues to gnaw at my convictions. It whispers that I might fail this time. That it can't be that simple. That even back during the 1st tournament, I lost at least one event. So how could I win out now, against all of Earth's best? It whispers that even if I succeed Tess might still die over the next two weeks we spend here.

I don't let any of this show. Even with how inept I can be socially, I see the others are worried for Tess. So showing them my confident side should help them.

But I'm also getting looks with just the slightest bit of pity.

Do they pity the responsibility I carry now, I wonder?

Taking a few more steps, I find myself reuniting with Channeler. The man is as handsome as before—maybe even more so. He’s wearing a clean, fitted, stylish outfit and is smiling widely as if he were filling a role in a toothpaste commercial. There’s not really much wind, but his hair still seems to wave as if he were a model in a shampoo ad.

“Noname!” he shouts, greeting me with a smile and shaking my hand.

Almost as if he were remembering something, he immediately lowers his excited voice to a calmer pitch. After all, he’s always been like a chameleon, that guy.

I watch as he greets the others, immediately distributing compliments. He notices Min-Jae’s muscular figure. He mentions how the twins have gotten taller, which visibly makes them happy. He praises Lily, claiming that she’s even more beautiful than before, and does much the same with the others.

I’m curious to see if he will ask about Tess, but even though he must have noticed, he tactfully doesn’t bring her up. As expected of such a high-level extrovert.

When it’s all done, I gesture to the twins, and they tie him into our Connection.

(Oh, that’s new! No one in Easy can do this!) Channeler enthuses, wasting no time in chattering away excitedly in our minds.

(No one should be able to listen in on us like this,) I answer. (So, to start: Tess won’t be here this tournament. But don’t worry, she’s okay.)

(I... I’m glad to hear that, Noname. I won’t pry, but if you need anything, I’m here.)

(Thank you. And yes, I will be needing some things from you. But first, has Easy difficulty begun leaving the tutorial?)

He smiles and gestures for us to follow, and we head toward a few benches seated next to a fountain and take a seat. (Yes, a few months ago, as far as we can tell. The people who wanted to return to their families made groups and went ahead. Some were even talking about looting Earth before the higher difficulties could return.)

(That's dumb.)

(There are a lot of not-so-smart people,) Channeler answers more diplomatically. (I'm on the 13th floor at the moment, and we've confirmed that it's the last floor. But I made my group wait so I could speak to you during the tournament, Noname.)

For a while, I just look at him. This guy really knows how to handle things.

(It's good you did. But aren't you afraid you're rushing things too much? You could've spent more time in the tutorial, leveled up, and gotten stronger.)

(I did all that, but Easy difficulty doesn't offer as many opportunities as the higher ones might. And... with what we've learned here in the tutorial, Earth might go through some changes. I want to get back and make sure my family is safe.)

(Well, in the end, it's up to you. So to start with, my name is Nathaniel, though you should only call me that when speaking through this link.)

(I will do so! Thanks for trusting me, Nathaniel! My name is Rafael Vaughn.)

(Thanks for telling me, too. So it's simple: Sofie and Maya will be stepping in for Tess to deal with people during this tournament. We won't do much else, as I truly do not care about such things. We only have one objective for this tournament, and I don't think anyone in group 4 will disagree.)

As I scan their faces, I catch the small details. The way they shift slightly, the way their eyes focus. A few take measured breaths, steadying themselves. There is no nervous energy, no lingering doubt. Just preparation.

I turn back to Channeler and continue, (Before the tournament ends, I will make you an Arcane item that will make you the strongest person on Earth, at least until anyone from Normal difficulty returns. Though it's highly possible you will remain the strongest even after that, you might even be able to take on some from Hard difficulty.)

Rafael's expression flickers, just for a second. Then he laughs, shaking his head. (You really don't do things halfway, do you?)

(If it needs to be done, I may as well do it properly.)

I shift my stance, feeling my mana settle. The first event is coming in a day, but time already feels like it's moving too fast and not fast enough at the same time. There's too much to prepare, too much to account for.

But it doesn't matter.

Because the only outcome I'll accept is total victory.