

Tutorial 551

Chapter 551: Events of the 2nd Tournament

(Nathaniel, I don't believe it's that easy to make an arcane item. By the way, I know you aren't good with names so you can continue calling me Channeler!)

(It's fine, I can make such an item. It won't be mid arcane, but low arcane should be doable with a bit of effort. For example, the sword on my waist is mid arcane and I made it with a bit... well a lot of help.)

His eyes slide to the sword as expected and then back to look at me, (You don't strike me as someone who really takes to fighting with swords. What does it do?)

(It is annoying and it sometimes destroys stuff while trying to kill me.)

(Is that some sort of hint that I shouldn't be asking too many questions?)

(What? No. What are you even talking about? Now back to the item. Do you still want to work with me?)

(Of course I do,) he confirms.

(Okay, so I'll make you an item. I'll also be giving you the names and locations of the family and friends of the members of group 4 so you can check on them. Carefully, of course. I don't think you'll be unkillable on Earth, even with the item. Tess wanted to speak with some of the people from Easy difficulty but since she's not here, Sophie and Maya will be going over it with you. They have some things in mind and they'll need to work them out with you.)

(Will do!)

(You... I know you may be strong, but can you actually pull that off?)

(Yes, don't worry about pointless things.)

POV Rafael Vaughn, aka Channeler

Noname, no, Nathaniel has changed since the last tournament. I noticed it right away, I remember his bearing, reactions, and all. He's colder now, more domineering, and he has this air of confidence about him.

Some of that I'm sure is a mask he's put on for the sake of his group. I can see it in their eyes. Something must have happened, something very bad, and they keep glancing at Nathaniel as if seeking confirmation that everything will be okay.

I think it has something to do with Tess, but she seems to be alive. Maybe she's gotten herself in some kind of trouble that kept her from joining the tournament? But couldn't she have escaped into the tournament? Maybe she can't?? Has she decided to do some kind of dangerous training instead? Did something stop her? A wound? A side quest? Is she in Beyond?

I know enough to say that it's probably better not to pry so I stay quiet.

As I walk at his side with the rest of group 4 trailing behind, he glances at me with his eyes having that golden circle around his pupils. He picks a mana stone from his pocket and after a few seconds, he hands it to me.

Examining it, I notice training instructions much like the ones he gave me before. The ones that made me the strongest member of my group. These new instructions seem to be even more impressive as if he could have assessed my growth by simply observing the movement of my mana.

(Thank you,) I answer simply.

I know he prefers this kind of simple thanks and feels awkward when people show too much thankfulness to him.

Before we reach the center of the Common area where I can already see Gareth, Swordmaster, Samuel, Adam, and others, I reach toward Nathaniel.

I tap on his shoulder to get his attention and feel goosebumps when he turns to me with his usual expression—the one that makes him look disinterested, arrogant, and cold to most people.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I notice little Izabella and she smiles at me and nods.

(I think you should let me talk instead of you,) I send to Nathaniel through the link they've recently included me in, (And, nothing against Sophie but people don't like her much and Maya isn't very good at things like this.)

I smile at Maya apologetically and then turn to Nathaniel, (You don't seem to be in a very patient mood now either so leaving things to me will probably be for the best.)

He stops to think of it for a moment and finally nods.

I feel a wave of relief as he does so. With the mood he's in, this could have ended very badly.

POV Nathaniel

Would you like to rent Oakheart Refuge and the accompanying facilities?

1000 shards/day

I confirm and the house with its facility becomes the new base of operations for our group. Much like the prior tournament, it turns out to be one of the more expensive ones.

It's basically a huge oak tree on the edge of the forest and the house itself almost seems to be growing out of the tree just as much as it surrounds it. The facilities are separate, built on the ground. The tree itself is taller than any tree on Earth and thicker. But it's one of these things you get used to here in the tutorial.

Leaving Channeler, Sophie, and Maya behind, the rest of us are here depositing our baggage.

I die again and for a moment I close my eyes, resetting the seal on my heart before making another attempt to loosen it.

“Dennis, Aaron, take all the materials we have out to the smithy outside. Once you’re done with that you can take Min-Jae and go out to check on Brainiac and Lootenant. I can already tell you want to.”

Stolen story; please report.

“Are you sure? We want to help. We care for Tess just as much as you do, Nat, and...”

I interrupt Dennis, “You’ll only be distractions here. If I need anything, I will make sure to ask.”

“Got it,” he confirms, as he takes Min-Jae, and his brother to start carrying the materials over to the workshop.

Entering the Oakheart Refuge I find the room on the highest floor. It’s been entirely formed from the inside of the tree with a huge balcony at the other end and a massive window to let in lots of natural light.

I turn to Izzy and Lily, especially to Izzy, “I might seem a bit colder for a while so please make sure the others understand.”

“Are you going to be using [Focus] to manage your emotions again?”

“Yes,” I confirm, “Not all the time, but I’ll need to if I don’t want to be distracted.”

As I talk I place a few Ley lines throughout my surroundings and tie a few of them to any members of group 4 that happen to be present. Maya and Sophie already have one.

Looking at a shimmering pale blue line that may as well be invisible to just about everyone else, I think, “Of course, I will be disabling [Focus] at times. I can use these emotions to push me, but I’m way too pissed off for that at the moment and I have a lot to do.”

“Lissandra?” Lily asks quietly.

I nod, “Anyway, I’m about to get started. So I’ll see you later.”

Sensing the trio of boys leaving the smithy, I teleport over.

The smithy is a smaller house made of a darker sort of wood than the main building, having an appearance almost like metal. The house is circular with a cupola-style roof with an anvil set in the center of the room, next to a fireplace and chimney creating a pillar in the middle pulling any resulting smoke up through the roof.

Kicking my bags aside to open them, I bend and start pulling out materials: voidsteel, endurium, arcanadium, voidcopper, and more besides. And in a separate part of my mind, I begin preparing the base for the item I’ll be making for Channeler.

For a moment I stop and redirect a greater portion of my mental bandwidth to dealing with my heart as a powerful heat wave washes over my body. I use [Redistribution] and push it out towards the fireplace rather than allowing it to simply scorch its way through the area around me. My golden flames immediately start burning along the prepared path, spreading their heat through the building.

Suppressing the heart, I redirect part of my mind to training with it—and set another to the task of training and maintaining the arrays in the back of my mind and split off a third part to work on the item whose base I will now be creating.

I won’t be able to complete it in one day, but if things go like they did before then the events shouldn’t be announced for the next 12 hours. Until then I can at least prepare a base for the item.

Taking off Fracture and tossing it into the corner, I grab the materials. Drawing a small amount of thermal energy from the heart, I begin hammering with kinetic energy.

At the expected time a notification pops up.

Events for the 2nd tournament of Earth tutorial have been decided. They are as follows:

1st event - Clash of Rounds

2nd event - Beast Hunt

3rd event - Chronicle of the Past

4th event - Avatar's Gauntlet

5th event - Tyrant's Arena

The first event will start in 12 hours. More information will be shared soon.

I pause my work and reach out through my Ley Line, pulling Fracture back into my hand and proceeding to tuck it into its home at my waist. After that, I leave the item lying there and exit the smithy while reading the notification again and thinking of the events.

So once again we have 5 events, leaving Chronicle of the Past as the sole returning event. There also don't seem to be duels this time but the last event sounds like it's replacing it.

The second event sounds like some kind of PvE challenge, maybe we'll be hunting beasts for points? It could be anything, a solo event, a team building exercise, a competition between the rounds, hell it might be a challenge for the tutorial as a whole. Who knows.

Avatar's Gauntlet could make for an interesting event as well but I can't really say for sure until we see how the avatars will be used.

As for the first event, the name mostly explains it. It will be either round against round or multiple rounds clashing all at once.

I allow myself to slide out of the [Focus] and for a moment I pause to examine my feelings.

Worry. Anxiety. Pressure, and worst of all doubt. The creeping doubt that I may not really be able to do the thing I've set out to do. It's just a whiff of a feeling. A constant threat lingering in the background and constantly trying to take hold of me.

But there's also anger. And prevalent at that. Part of it is directed at Lissandra. For the sheer fact, she would even think to mess with me this way. Using Tess's life to get what she wants out of me. The anger comes from the fact that she didn't do anything to stop it from happening.

But the larger portion of that anger is directed at myself. For not noticing. For not thinking it could happen. Lulled into complacency by that sense of safety in the valley and my single minded focus on training and the Champion's heart that now lies sealed in my chest.

What a fucking mess.

I teleport through [Ley Line] landing in the biggest room of Oakheart Refuge where I find the majority of group 4. Izzy, Noodle, and Sophie are the only ones absent, and going by the explosions I can feel going off outside, they are training, readily abusing the fact we cannot die in this place.

The others already seem like they've been through something similar and have seized the opportunity to take a break.

I know I handle deaths here better than most, but from the looks of it, there's no lack of determination. Directing a bigger part of my mind to training, I sit down and grab some snacks from the table nearby.

"Where's the cockroach?" I ask Myrra.

The white-haired lynthari shows her fangs in a smile, "She's probably examining this place, feral one. She said exiting the tutorial should be nearly impossible for her and me and that she needs more data. From the different floors, the tournament, and Beyond. She wants to examine every facet and come up with the best way possible."

“So does that mean you’re not participating?”

“I will do whatever she tells me to, feral one. Because without her I will die.”

"Did you know?" I ask, gauging her reaction.

Myrra stays quiet to that question.

With an annoyed groan, I grab a few more pieces of dried food.

I turn to the twins, “If you haven't already done it, add Channeler and maybe Miwa to our link. Make a secondary one for Gareth, his guild, and any others willing to cooperate.”

Standing up I turn to Lily, “We might need the others to cooperate at least somewhat as we currently don't know if we can handle the 1st event on our own. I won't let others put us in jeopardy with infighting over leadership or their petty ambitions. Group 4 will be taking the lead and if anyone complains, kick them around until they agree. I don't care if it's WhiteWing, TheGuild, IDK, Samuel, or anyone else. Can you do it?”

“Absolutely! I'm more than strong enough!” As expected Lily understands right away and agrees.

“Thanks, I need to make some money for a new passive so I’ll be in the workshop.”

I teleport away without waiting for a response, retreating into the workshop and opening a window.

To be able to sell the items in the tournament shop, register as a seller. Please, choose an alias.

It would seem that even this is the same.

Would you like to register as "Tent Creep"?

“Yes,” I confirm.

Congratulations, you have been registered as “Tent Creep”, you may now offer the items you’ve crafted items for sale.

I then open up the tutorial shop and start buying the necessary materials.

Chapter 552: [King]

What starting price do you wish to set for Manabound Javelin (Upper Epic)?

What starting price do you wish to set for Ironfang Warhammer (Mid Epic)?

What starting price do you wish to set for Bloodtide Cleaver (Mid Epic)?

What starting price do you wish to set for Shardspike Glaive (Mid Epic)?

What starting price do you wish to set for Tethered Bastard Sword (Upper Epic)?

What starting price do you wish to set for Ashenfang Dagger (Upper Epic)?

What starting price do you wish to set for Veinpiercer Spear (Mid Epic)?

Looking at all the items around me, I take a breather and check the timer. Not much time remains until the 1st event, and we should be getting more information on it soon. As for the items, even I find it amazing that I managed to craft three upper epic items.

I set the starting price at 10,999 shards for each upper epic. Then I set 6,969 for each mid epic. I set the duration of the auction at 2 days. I’ll probably get more shards than I asked for, but for now, I may as well lowball them to get as many people as possible to bid on them. If the shop is the same for all the rounds, there should be plenty of people placing bids, and I’ll always have the ability to check out the kinds of things the others are selling.

There's just so much to do. Again.

Before confirming the asking price, I look the items over one more time. Of course, my personal experience tells me that they aren't really all that... good looking, but at the very least I can vouch for their performance.

I teleport and arrive at the training circle beside the huge tree. Sophie is still there, with the Golem Heart hovering in the air, resembling a lump of shattered clay. Black smoke drifts around it.

"I'm trying to improve my connection to it through my bond. Blackie should be able to take control and act with a fair bit of independence if I use enough mana," she explains the moment she sees me.

"I see. Have you taken a look at the barrier around our hill?"

"Yes. We even got Lily to try and damage it, and as it turns out, she can't—and it doesn't seem like the other rounds fared any better. Currently, the system wants to keep the rounds separated."

"It'll probably come down on its own at some point. What happened while I was gone?"

"Well, Lily killed a lot of people. Some of them multiple times."

"Anyone important?"

"Samuel, five times, until the guy finally shut up. His guild tried to help, so some of them died too. Apparently, they thought enough people from Hard difficulty could just pile on and take her down together. Lily didn't even have to use her mana."

"That's what they get."

"I guess. Then she killed Adam, Brainiac, BenDover, and Bard. It didn't even look all that much more difficult to her than dealing with people from Hard difficulty, Nat. I think she would have done the same to Gareth if Maya and I hadn't stepped in."

"You should have let her."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"Nat, we are trying to cooperate with these people, not fight them." She puts whatever she's doing on hold and looks at me.

I return her gaze, "It's okay. Lily and I will be the bad guys while we make you, Maya, and Channeler look all the more level headed. Some of them probably forgot what we were capable of over the last year or perhaps they thought they just grew faster than we did."

"I know you don't care, but do you want them all to hate Lily?"

Just that much betrays something. I shake my head and grab Golem Heart from the air and put it into her hand, "It seems like I know Lily better than you."

The 1st event – Clash of Rounds will start soon!

In one hour, everyone will be transferred to the event area by round, all difficulties will be participating together. Terrain will be chosen at random from the system's database.

The 1st round of the Earth tutorial will face the 2nd, the 3rd will face the 4th, the 5th will face the 6th, the 7th will face the 8th, and the 9th will face the 10th.

You, being members of the 5th round, will face the members of the 6th.

The 1st event will take place over the course of the next 24 hours, and the contenders will be rewarded according to their performance, time to victory, and points.

All participants will be granted the same fortress to defend and 12 hours for preparation. The remaining 12 hours will be taken up by the battle.

Your objective is to collect more points than your opponents. The winner will be decided in one of three ways:

1st – Having more points than the opponent after 24 hours.

2nd – Fulfilling both requirements: taking over the opponent's Throne Room and eliminating their [King].

3rd – Eliminating all of the opponent's forces.

To seize your opponent's throne room you must occupy the space for 1 hour. This will net the conquering team 10,000 points.

All winners of their round's first tournaments will be classified as [King]. Defeating the [King] will award you 5,000 points. If the winner of a round's tournament is not present, the position of [King] will be passed to the next in line based on tournament placement.

Points will also be given for defeating your opponents as follows:

Easy difficulty attendee – 1 point

Normal difficulty attendee – 5 points

Hard difficulty attendee – 10 points

Hell difficulty attendee – 20 points

Beyond attendee – 100 points

After reading it over, I wave at Gareth, who seems to be watching me, then glance at Myrra as she moves among the guys from the lower difficulties. I wonder what he thinks about her being here. I'd be dying of curiosity—how is it possible that a native of the floors could be here?

Plenty of people recognize her as the Myrra from their 4th floor. There are also a lot of Easy difficulty attendees with phones who ask if she'll take a selfie with them. Myrra, curious, lets it happen and stares at the screen with wide eyes. She then even poses and makes grimaces to the sheer amusement of her fans.

The problems start when some middle-aged guy with a shirt featuring an anime character on it asks her to say, "Nya." But that I leave for others to resolve as I move toward the main group made up of our strongest members.

Tacita is sitting on a thick tree branch nearby, and even Savant seems like he's decided to attend, though he maintains his distance— quiet, as usual, with the same long black hair tied into a ponytail, green eyes, and mole in the corner of his left eye. But he feels different; it's hard to explain, and even as I look him over with my Mana Wavelength Iris, I find my scans. It's not in the same method Tacita uses, in fact, it seems to be something even more annoying.

Out of everyone here, he's the only one deflecting my probing so easily. Even so, I can tell that his body feels like a mess, the structure is incredibly chaotic, and even more than last time I find myself wondering just how much remains of his original self.

Lastly, his Sword of Aeons seems to be in better condition than before. Once known as the greatest mana battery in all of Eladore, the world where Lissandra ruled as Absolute, the blade is still broken with half of it missing, but the rest of the sword is in much better shape.

Surely at least low arcane, likely nearing mid arcane. My own Fracture is mid arcane, but a lot had to be sacrificed to reach that level, while Savant's Sword of Aeons seems to be progressing differently, taking a slower path. Patience subclass indeed.

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I refocus on the conversation just in time to hear Sophie say, “I think this event is here to reflect the pairing in a small way. The king is absolute and the throne room is likely Earth itself or some important place it might have now after awakening. The [King]/Absolute having a worth of so many points likely serves to show the importance of that title.”

It's an interesting thought, and I would say I agree with her. In any other situation, I would probably spend more time thinking about the intent behind the event, but I don't really feel the need at this point. Instead, I continue to make my preparations. Leaving a small part of me to listen and observe the meeting.

Sophie and Gareth try to take the lead for the most part, as our Hell groups have the most members. Whitewing has 7 and group 4 has 9—well, 8 since Tess isn't here, but 10 with Myrra and Liss. Though knowing that neither of them will be participating, we can scratch that number down to 8.

Even if we had the same number as Whitewing, I wouldn't worry about it. Group 4 is clearly stronger, with more Beyond attendees and Champion candidates. Out of theirs, only Gareth has been declared, and who knows by who.

There's Tacita and Savant, each from their own group. IDK, with 3 members, BenDover included. TheGuild has 5; Swordmaster and AnotherOneHere are the most notable. And of course, there's the mysterious missing group.

Then there's the fact that during the previous tournament, we couldn't challenge the avatars of the winner of the 6th tournament since the rounds weren't synced, leaving us with no idea of what to expect.

Obliterate everyone in your way. That's the price Lissandra's named for Tess's life.

And I plan to make that happen.

POV Min-Jae

We enter and find ourselves in what I can only describe as a throne room. It's massive, and as far as I can see, only the other members of Hell difficulty are here; the others were likely moved elsewhere.

The throne room is square with four huge pillars supporting it. Each of these pillars is delicately ornamented and inlaid with gold. There's even a thick red and gold carpet leading off toward the throne at one end of the room, while the floor itself is white marble with veins of light gray running through it.

While I look around, steps echo through the room as one of the others starts walking.

I turn and watch as Nathaniel walks across the marble floor, steps on the carpet, and heads towards the throne. He takes a step onto the elevated platform and sits on the throne, which, unlike the room, is very simple—a huge block of pitch-black stone that almost seems to absorb the light, with bits of gold and copper veins running through it.

There is a simple line of text floating above his head, a single golden word: [King].

Nat sits there as if it were natural, and his lance forms over his shoulder, just a single one. The one with a white and golden core, swirling with pale blue and violet hues. That lance seems almost alive, pulsating in sync with something unseen.

The crown that had vanished from his head when we entered reappears. And he just sits there. And no one complains or tries to talk to him.

(Kim, let's go, you will be coming with me; Maya, you can go with Gareth and make sure Samuel doesn't do something stupid, as usual. You can let Samuel lead—people from Hard and Normal difficulty seem to like him, but make sure he knows his place. Lily, you...)

(I'm sorry, Soph, but I'll be staying with Nat to help with the preparations. I will join you guys later.)

(Okay, do you guys need Dennis and Aaron?)

(Not this time.)

(Good, Dennis, Aaron, you two will be working with me to set up the defenses. Kim, please look around for anything you could throw later. Since we're missing Tess, you will be our sniper and I will be marking the targets for you.)

(Sure! I can do that,) I reply.

We head out, and the door just opposite the throne opens, a massive two-part door made from what looks like a single piece of dark brown wood, as thick as I am tall. Once outside, we move through the hallways for a while before exiting the building.

When I look back, I have a hard time taking in the scale of the massive building we just left—the majestic, towering stone building that seems like it could stand forever.

Passing through the courtyard, we see people from Hard and the other difficulties moving around, and some of us split off to help while I use [Telekinesis] and pull myself to the first of the elevated walkways. It's so tall, thick, and stretches so wide I don't think anything like it could even be possible on Earth.

Underneath, I see another courtyard that is also mostly empty, and looking down the hill we find ourselves on, I see another wall, even thicker and taller than the last. The area we are in is cloudy, and the sun rarely breaches the clouds, like an ugly day from a snowless winter.

I use mana to bolster my sight in a way Tess taught me and observe the exact same place mirroring ours that is a few miles away, also at the top of a hill that is exactly the same as ours.

In between us, there is that empty plain where, once in a while, leafless trees and boulders appear, as well as craters adorning the area. I fly higher and notice multiple expressions of envy from some attendees from Easy difficulty. It's almost to the point where I can feel it. Flying maybe longer than I should, I reach the highest place I can find and land there.

A ring of communications for private channels sounds to me, and I allow it to connect.

(Kim, Nat says he's going to make some mana projectiles for you. I'll be making some javelins from my bones, so I'll have some of those sent over as well.)

(Thank you, Lily.)

(No problem! They'll probably create a barrier to defend against our attacks, but he said he'll be breaking it, so I'll just have to make sure he doesn't die while doing so. You know him...)

(I'll see it done. If he needs anything...)

(It's okay. Lissandra's requirements are simple and direct, so it's mostly up to him. I already spoke to the others, but please don't be too offended by the way Nat acts during the tournament.)

I move closer to the edge of the wall and sit with my legs hanging over the edge much like Nathaniel likes to do when he finds a high place.

I ask Lily carefully, (Is... is he okay?)

(He is the angriest I have seen him in a long while,) Lily sends back.

(Sorry, I have to go,)

Next to me sits a beautiful woman with long silver hair and hazel-brown eyes. She lets her legs dangle over the edge as she gazes toward the second fort.

Lissandra remains quiet for a moment, her gaze steady, as if lost in thought. The wind tugs at strands of her silver hair, carrying with it the distant sounds of battle preparations. A faint smile plays across her lips—amusement or... perhaps something else, I can't quite tell.

Then, finally, she speaks, "Envy directed at a single person can be truly powerful, especially if that person is deserving of it. But at the same time, that envy will crumble the moment that person loses."

She reaches out and taps the tip of a finger against my forehead, observing me like a particularly interesting animal. "People with envy like that either become the best followers, worshipping the

subject of their envy until the end of their days or, given the opportunity, they become the worst of all traitors. I wonder which one you will be, little one.”

With that, she leaves as she likes to do.

I think of her words as I watch Sophie, with the help of the others, form the web. Maya, Gareth, and Samuel organize the others; they even make plans with the help of Savant and the rest of group 4.

The doors to the throne room open only once, and Channeler rushes in with a few people from Easy difficulty, and they start carrying out a vast multitude of items: swords, javelins, spears, orbs, arrows, and others. All made from mana and bone. Much of it is eventually brought to me as well.

While holding one of these orbs, I watch the last minutes tick down.

The world feels frozen, the wind barely stirring the dust along the ground. The sky remains an endless gray, the light dim and cold. Even time itself seems to hesitate, dragging out the final moments.

A barrier forms around the other fort. Dark blue mana coiling tightly, its surface covered in shifting inscriptions that pulse with power. It doesn't flicker or waver. It stands firm like a wall of pure will, likely fueled by the efforts of countless individuals. The sheer density of it makes it feel less like a shield and more like an unbreakable fortress.

While we hole up in our base, the other round sends a few thousand people our way. They now stand, spaced broadly apart, in the great plain surrounding our base. I count thousands, and there they seem likely to attack in one fell swoop.

They are led by two men. Neither one bears the title of [King] hanging over their head, but out of all the people there, they look the strongest. Even if only by the way the others react to their presence.

One of these two men has a [Mana Crown] over his head and a long staff with a big mana stone at the end.

And the other one has a different crown. This one is bigger, rougher, and it looks as if it's made of iron, but I don't think it has anything to do with metal. The crown feels... strong. That man is also wearing black armor with no contrasting color and he holds a helmet under his arm. He carries no weapons, but he clearly seems to be the strongest.

10 seconds remain when the door to the throne room opens once more.

I feel a change in gravitational waves and Nat lands next to me.

Simple clothes, a calm face, and that lance floating over his shoulder. Just the way the gravitational energy reacts to it sends a shiver down my back.

"Hey," he greets simply.

"Hey," I respond awkwardly.

Five seconds remain.

Nathaniel's face grows even calmer, his expression untouched by the tension in the air. Below, the two men glance up at him, their gazes sharp, questioning, but he barely acknowledges them. He just gives them a fleeting look before turning away, as if their presence were meaningless. As if they were nothing.

One second.

The system's barrier around our fortress vanishes, not shattered or overwhelmed, but simply gone, dismissed like an afterthought.

Nat fires a single orb toward the enemy fortress, likely stretching one of his Ley Lines along behind it. The moment it moves, they react. Shields flare, forces surge, and unseen defenses lock into place. The air bends as something fights back against him, a final line of resistance, but none of it matters.

None of it holds and he simply teleports through.

Over the enemy fortress, beyond the dark blue inscriptions pulsing with unbreakable power, light erupts in gold and white, streaked with violet and deep blue. It flashes only once, a single moment of perfect radiance.

And then, like glass struck at its weakest point, the unbreakable barrier shatters, its intricate inscriptions unraveling into nothing before the entire structure collapses, fading like it was never there.

A notification follows soon after.

Noname (Beyond, King) → Nova (Beyond) +100 pts

Noname (Beyond, King) → Rico (Hard) +10 pts

Noname (Beyond, King) → UltraAlpha (Hard) +10 pts

Noname (Beyond, King) → Baron (Beyond) +100 pts

Noname (Beyond, King) → DuskDuke (Hell) +20 pts

Noname (Beyond, King) → sahgtxcvdsa (Hell) +20 pts

Noname (Beyond, King) → CatHater (Hell) +20 pts

Noname (Beyond, King) → Hellfire (Hard) +10 pts

Noname (Beyond, King) → SupremeFurry (Hard) +10 pts

Noname (Beyond, King) → xxx_420_69_420_xxx (Hard) +10 pts

Noname (Beyond, King) → StormChaser (Hard) +10 pts

Chapter 553: 6th Round

POV Nathaniel

I deflect the attacks shooting toward me and expand [Eclipse], which continues to drain all color from the area.

One of the people in the throne room dodges my projectiles and continues to compress mana for an attack. I reach through [Eclipse], taking over his skill. My eyes feed me all the information I need—I read the movements of his mana—and find that I don't even need to understand it fully.

I just interrupt the process, seize partial control, and feed the skill with so much mana that the guy loses control and it explodes in his hands.

Noname (Beyond, King) → Chump (Hell) +20 pts

What a name.

I teleport again and then move once more through another [Ley Line].

Their [King] struggles in a vain attempt to suppress my [Eclipse] and picks up a spear sitting next to him. His mana fills the weapon, and a sickly yellow light rapidly envelopes the blade.

The winner of the 6th round's tournament is a man in his thirties, fit, cleanly shaved, with long black hair that flows freely. He is missing one of his eyes which has seemingly been replaced with a crystalline prosthesis, entirely covered in its own web of inscriptions.

Just before the last shimmering waves are gone I step into his reach using Wraith Dance. Ducking under the toxic looking glow of the spear's tip and release a burst of kinetic energy, causing him to stumble for a moment as he rushes to defend himself.

He regains his composure quickly though, and his spear begins to shrink and expand as he swings it at me, forcing me to dodge once again. He puts some distance between us and tries to make himself invisible again, but this time I read him quicker, and [Eclipse] disrupts the skill.

An arrow from one of his remaining goons rockets towards my head, and I snatch it from the air, even as the lightning around it burns the flesh of my hand.

Without taking my eyes off the King, I emit a burst of mana tracing the path of the offending projectile.

Noname (Beyond, King) → Oliver Newt (Hell) +20 pts

I form a sword made of mana in my hand and use kinetic energy to charge at the [King]. As expected, he matches my speed using his stats and mana-based reinforcement and swings his spear in an effort to block my sword.

I let the sword dissipate and instead absorb my own inertia, change direction, boost my movements, and slam my palm into his shoulder sending him stumbling once again.

Grabbing the arm holding the spear, I release another burst of kinetic energy, and send the guy flying, to crash into one of the white stone pillars. Defending against the attacks of the remaining people here, I finish them with projectiles and bursts of kinetic energy and then grab the spear to throw it at the guy.

Meanwhile, he rises to his feet, his eyes, both normal and crystalline, fixed on me. The flesh around one of the wounds on his arm sizzles with the same yellowish light as his spear, and his arm rapidly regenerates. Before I can react, the spear vanishes from my grip and returns to his hand.

"It won't be that easy," he says as he brushes the hair from his face with a bloodied hand.

A web of intricate tattoos begins to trace a set of glowing lines across his body, pulsing with pale blue light. The pressure radiating from him is immense, just a step below Jean's. And the yellow light surrounding his blade and spear is anything but reassuring, probably some kind of poison, perhaps even something that hinders healing.

"You won't be able to hold this place for the whole hour. My guys should already be on their way, all in all, I just need to hold you up for a while," he says while pointing his spear at me.

"I see," I nod and start walking toward him, "but you are wrong about one thing."

He takes steps toward me as well, ramping up the pressure around his body.

"I don't give a shit about the throne room. Once I'm done with you, I'll simply wipe out the rest of your round." I say.

Hearing me, he raises his mana even further, the tattoos even damaging his skin and muscles, and he charges me at incredible speed. He throws the spear, and I barely manage to dodge; only for it to reappear in his hand all over again just for him to throw it once again, forcing me to dodge a third time.

We crash into each other, and [Eclipse] condenses, focusing on the small area around us. And for a moment, the light of his tattoos dims, almost seeming to fade away.

Shock flashes across his face, but he pushes through, forcing the tattoos to reignite, as he strains to resist my [Eclipse]. But even that brief distraction turns out to be enough. I give his chest a tap, releasing a new burst of compressed kinetic energy, blasting him backward with a ragged hole in his chest.

Despite the pain he must be feeling, he twists in mid air as his body rapidly regenerates, evading my projectiles and deflecting any oncoming blasts of kinetic energy. Then his spear shoots past me, aimed with incredible precision, almost like a bullet. I dodge, but the blade, coated in yellow light, grazes my leg.

The effects of the poison hit instantly, a mix of mana disruption and searing pain that pushes through my [Focus].

I nearly stumble as I take another step to evade his next attack, the pain threatening to throw me off balance. Keeping my eyes locked on him, I release a wave of thermal energy through my body, forcing it into my leg, scorching my own flesh to fight back the poison.

For a moment, the yellow light resists my golden thermal energy until I push harder, increasing the output and compressing it further. The poison eventually burns away, along with a portion of my leg. Even then, the pain lingers, fading only gradually.

All this from just a scratch.

My mana spins in the crown and reaching a critical point it stops, releasing a disrupting wave I combine with [Eclipse] and reach him using Wraith Dance, each step I take sending pain through my body from where the scratch was.

I feint an attack, shift again, halt my inertia, redirect it, boost myself forward, then teleport through a [Ley Line], to finally appear at his side and unleash a concentrated burst of kinetic energy.

As two halves of his body fall to the ground, I watch his skill struggle to activate—the same sizzling flesh and yellow light trying to heal him. I even lower the effects of [Eclipse] to watch it happen, activating Mana Wavelength Iris to further observe the process and the effects of his tattoos.

The man heals in an instant. His tattoos begin to glow, trying to reactivate, but I've seen enough. This fight is over.

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Letting my brain process the information from my eyes, I adjust the frequency of [Eclipse] and shut it down before it can take effect.

He takes a deep breath, coughs out blood, and rushes to get back on his feet.

My kinetic energy blows apart his leg, and he collapses to the ground once again. His skill immediately starts healing him again, and he keeps his spear pointed at me, despite the awkward position.

I slowly walk over to him, pondering aloud as I do, “You know, I used to have so much trouble with people disrupting my mana. And as I’m sure you can see, it’s a really shitty feeling. You can have really strong skills, but what can you do if someone takes them from you?”

“You... you fucker, this shouldn’t be possible at our level.”

I send another pulse, and the hand holding the spear disintegrates into a fine spray of pink mist, preventing the activation of whatever skill he’d thought to use.

“Unfortunately for you, I’m quite proficient when it comes to dealing with mana. And it seems like I spend more effort making sure it cannot be taken away from me.”

As I speak he continues trying to activate as many skills as he can. A stronger version of healing, the invisibility he used before, whatever quality linked him to the spear, culminating in a domain of his own. He also skillfully modifies his frequencies, showing clear familiarity with this kind of clash.

But it’s all to no avail.

“Thank you. I think I may have actually learned something from you.”

“I will—”

I don’t let him finish, opting instead to increase the output of my Kinetic Mana Heart, blasting away the rest of his body and sending the debris littering the room flying.

Noname (Beyond, King) → Hector Valdez (Beyond, King) +5,000 pts

Congratulations, you have defeated the King.

You are in the throne room.

Time remaining to capture: 58 minutes 21 seconds

I fly up through the hole in the ceiling at the place where I broke the barrier and high into the air.

In the distance, the orange light of [Dawn] surrounds the area. That ever-so-familiar mana radiation stands between me and blocking the way that enemy people might use to return.

Landing near Savant within his domain, I walk and stop by his side. On the edge of the domain, corpses of people pile up—all fallen during [Dawn]. Well, not all; I also see flashes of Tacita hunting down those who try to move around the domain.

“They’re quite disorganized,” Savant notes as I stop by him. “They had a decent plan at the start and, according to Soph, even some interesting arrays used to combine the mana of bigger groups into a single powerful bombardment.”

“But?” I ask.

He shrugs, “They panicked after you broke their barrier that was supposed to be unbreakable and from where their [King] was supposed to snipe us and poison our defenses.”

Having said his piece, [Dawn] flickers and disappears, and Savant turns away, walking toward the base of the 6th round. I don’t spend time thinking about what he wants to do there; he must have an idea that capturing the throne room isn’t needed.

Turning away, I fly again, and mid-flight I stop using kinetic energy—the flight turning into a big leap, and inertia carrying me into the middle of the enemy’s backline. There are multiple barriers and defenses layered over their formation, but I can see through them all, resonate with them, and pass through easily, landing in the midst of them.

A scream erupts from the people around me after a brief moment of surprise, and a great multitude of people turn to attack me, firing off their skills in unison.

[Eclipse] reactivates and expands over a huge area, draining the colors out of it, and all these weaker, out-of-body skills flicker and deactivate. My mind splits into multiple parts as I identify the stronger ones, and my eyes observe the moment of their mana, adapting parts of [Eclipse] to strengthen the area around these people.

Hard difficulty or Hell difficulty—none manage to resist. Their skills explode, filled with my mana. They hit different areas, then change and turn on their casters.

And my heart beats, turning mana into kinetic energy as I charge them all, each of my punches killing someone. Wraith Dance carries me over the battlefield, Breaker Style destroys the stronger ones, and Pulser Stance confuses everyone trying to face me. I show no hesitation at all, and my mind slowly empties until there is only me and my opponents.

I jump back, and the earth implodes in front of me. I locate the Gravitational Primordial energy user, and [Empyrean Lance] breaks through the barriers of everyone protecting him and kills the guy in the process.

A notification.

A punch hits my side. My unique epic passive turns the impact into mana, and my body barely feels it. Using some of that energy, I boost my movements, and my punch explodes his head like a bursting watermelon.

Sensing large amounts of mana gathering nearby, I redirect more of my mind to the location, and take over the array, reaching out with a few Ley Lines, before expanding on the array and modifying it.

I lift the barrier in front of me, and the array bursts into a fiery explosion instead of a flame ball sent at me.

A dozen more notifications ring out.

Step to the side. Punch.

Notification.

Wraith Dance. An arm is torn free and tossed aside, and I finish the guy off with a javelin.

I teleport through [Ley Line] and deliver a stomp that destroys the attacks from below me. Three javelins break the barrier. A tricolored orb finishes the job.

Another Wraith Dance follows as explosions and screams erupt behind me and pieces of dirt and bodies start falling from the air.

All of a sudden, the movement halts, and I expand my field and start absorbing all the kinetic energy around me. It traps anyone from a difficulty below Hell, and even then not many of those manage to push through.

A few hundred people are held by my skill.

I release all the energy against the man charging me, and he is thrown away, an iron crown over his head and pitch-black armor around his body.

Then I see Lily tearing through the ranks, tracking the very same man who starts running away the moment he catches sight of her, only for Tacita to appear nearby and stab him in the leg—piercing clean through his black armor. Lily catches up to him. She grabs his arm, and despite her petite frame, she lifts his entire body and slams him back into the ground.

The other man with the [Mana Crown] floats lazily in the air and tries to push against my [Eclipse] with his domain. Our eyes meet, and he lifts the staff in his hand as the tricolored, dark blue, light blue, and purple light collects in it, strengthening his domain.

At the same time, he lifts the barrier and deflects projectiles shot by Min-Jae from far away and Sophie's attempts.

And that single moment of distraction is all I need to reach him.

As his eyes turn back to me, he teleports.

I resonate with the signature of his skill, taking over and following him through. As I reappear, I see him smiling, standing right in front of me. His staff is pointed at me, and projectiles swirl around him as well.

The remnants of his teleport around me twist, change, and attack me in a great effort to disrupt my mana, stop my teleport, and halt me—all at once. An incredible construct.

My [Mana Domain] expands further, extending beyond defending my body and blending with [Eclipse]. All the mana around me freezes, halts its movement, and turns against that man. I bend the whole of my [Focus] on the difficult task and succeed. Instead, his mana is disrupted and evaporates in a cloud of sparking blue particles. [Redistribution] then subdues the guy with ease, apparently his physical stats aren't all that great.

I take a step toward him and bury my hand in his chest, pulling it free along with his still-beating Mana Heart. Before the guy disappears, I take a moment to observe the heart as much as I can.

I sensed it immediately, but it's different from mine, and even if I hadn't modified mine to generate kinetic energy, it would still be different. It's likely a pure Mana Heart strengthened by a trait.

After a second, the man disappears along with his heart. People are already surrounding me. I lift off, breaking through defensive arrays and raising a barrier to block any incoming attacks.

Floating there, I start bombarding the rest of the 6th-round attendees. They try to resist, but it doesn't matter. Their formations collapse, their defenses break, and one by one, they fall.

It takes only a few minutes. Soon, they are almost all cleaned out by my and the other's efforts.

One remains, far away, barely visible. Realizing he's alone for some reason he simply decides to run.

I watch as a huge boulder flies through the air, nearly the size of a motorcycle, gaining speed with every second. The running man notices it at the last moment, hastily raising a barrier and reinforcing his body.

But it doesn't matter, the boulder doesn't slow at all. With an audible thump, it slams into him, crushing him instantly.

The notification rings out, informing me that we've won the first event.

Only then do I release the hold [Focus] has on my emotions and let the system teleport me out.

Chapter 554: Winner of the 4th Round's tournament

1st (7,530 pts) - Noname

2nd (1,031 pts) - Grumpy

3rd (922 pts) - Tacita

4th (799 pts) - Savant

5th (650 pts) - Soph

6th (600 pts) - StrongestOne

7th (498 pts) - Gareth

8th (497 pts) - Izzy

9th (450 pts) - Knight

Congratulations, you have placed 1st in the 1st event – Clash of the Rounds – and you have also achieved the high score for the event – 7,530 pts.

You can exchange your points for shards. 1 point = 5 shards = 37,650 shards

The reward for placing 1st overall is an additional 10,000 shards. You will receive an additional 5,000 shards for the fastest win in the first part of the event across all rounds. An additional 5,000 shards will be awarded for your performance.

You may either receive the shards and choose one of three rewards or forfeit them to choose from a selection of higher quality rewards once the tournament has concluded.

“I reject the reward, I want to put it all toward my final reward for the tournament,” I say, and with that, the window disappears.

Congratulations on reaching the 2nd round of the 1st event.

For the second half— the remaining 5 winning rounds — will be placed onto a single map with the same rules and a few slight modifications!

The second part of the event will start in 24 hours.

In one hour, the barrier around your area will be removed, and you will have a chance to visit the areas belonging to the other rounds still participating in the 1st event.

How interesting. So, a first round to reduce the number and get us used to the place, see all the entrapments there could be, and then throw us all in for the highest possible chaos?

The fact that we have the chance to visit the other rounds at this point probably means the second event is meant to incorporate an element of politics. Alliances, betrayals, and the like. But that also means a chance to meet Victoria. There’s no way her round didn’t make it.

The silence becomes more noticeable, and I look up from the notification window. Immediately, some people start avoiding my eyes, and there is also a clear path through the common area for me.

Poor, misguided souls—have they forgotten what this place is all about?

In an effort to avoid causing any more commotion, I ensure that I have my mana well under control and rejoin the rest of group 4. Meanwhile, I take the opportunity to go through the rest of my notifications.

[Empyrean Lance – lvl 14 > Empyrean Lance – lvl 15]

[Empyrean Lance – lvl 15 > Empyrean Lance – lvl 16]

[Empyrean Lance – lvl 16 > Empyrean Lance – lvl 17]

[Perception – lvl 58 > Perception – lvl 59]

[Eclipse – lvl 23 > Eclipse – lvl 24]

[Eclipse – lvl 24 > Eclipse – lvl 25]

[Eclipse – lvl 25 > Eclipse – lvl 26]

It's pretty decent, if I do say so myself.

I proceed to the cobbled area around the fountain, when the others finally make their approach. Samuel is there as well, with his signature greatsword on his back. His Hard difficulty group has the most surviving members out of all the Hard difficulty groups, and they're all dressed in the same style. Almost as if they had taken it upon themselves to create their own uniforms, and the chain of command is on clear display.

For a moment, I think he might come to me—I even see him taking a step while I tilt my head slightly and watch him, curious what he might want.

His eyes meet mine, and he hesitates mid-step. His pulse changes, and I notice a nervous twitch. As I scan through all the little things Whitey taught me to notice with kinetic energy.

In the end, Samuel averts his eyes and heads over to Sophie and Maya, who are already talking with Gareth.

Lily stops by my side, “If the start of each round removes all the healing marks I put on you, we’ll have to keep reapplying them whenever an event starts.”

“It also removed the mana from my [Mana Crown]. Surprisingly, it's all back now, so it clearly is just for the events.”

Lily sulks. “Taking away your arms is probably because it considered them similar to my healing marks, but it still sucks.”

I shrug, “That's the system for you. But that’s fine; if the rules apply the same way to everyone, I don't really mind so much. Good job out there by the way—were their Beyonders strong?”

“Somewhat,” Lily confirms, “but they underestimated me a lot, and I killed some. The one with [Mana Crown] and another one with black armor and that iron crown were actually pretty good.”

“Look at you, already beating the shit out of your fellow Beyonders. I still remember how you used to be such a crybaby.”

“Have you considered that I'm still that same old crybaby? Perhaps I’m just hiding it better,” Lily chirps, smiling brightly. “Was their tournament’s winner strong?”

“No idea. I didn't give him much of a chance to show off—probably yes, against anyone else. But I think you and Tess could take him. The others from our group? Probably not.”

Lily sighs in pretend disappointment, “If not for you, I might have been the winner of the 5th round’s tournament. So are we going to keep playing the role of bad cop while Sophie and Maya pretend to be reasonable ones?”

I nod. "For now. Tess would probably come up with something better, but the rest of us aren't smart enough for any of that."

"Do you think we will be able to form an alliance with the other rounds? Fighting all 4 at once could be difficult."

"That's up to others. But I know I can get Victoria and her round to join us."

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Lily looks at her feet for a moment before looking back up at me, "You'll get to see her in less than an hour. How... how do you feel about that? You seem to place a lot of trust in her."

"I'm not certain yet; I'll have to meet her to be sure."

Then I glance up at the branches of the tree hanging over our heads. Tacita lies there, clearly listening.

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Sure.

I just shoot a few orbs toward her, and she flings them away with her hand coated in a skin-tight mana barrier.

Then Lily notices her as well and shouts, “Taci!”

I could swear the messy brown hair of the silent assassin rises up in a way similar to goosebumps, and she rushes away with Lily following her.

Noticing Min-Jae looking at me, I wave at him and he waves back awkwardly before I teleport away, taking refuge in my workshop.

I died twice while speaking with Lily.

Thirty minutes after I start working on the item for Channeler, Miwa comes to visit. The same as when I met her the first time and waited for her to finish her work before talking, she also waits for me to finish mine.

I just sense her entering the area around our space, and proceed to the workshop I'm in. She does so quietly and takes a seat in one of the manabloc chairs I've made, which retains the design of plastic monobloc chairs.

Ten minutes later, I finish the next piece, pull back the heat I've filled the room with, and let the item cool.

Miwa is sitting there, smiling brightly. Her skin is red from the heat, and she's covered in sweat.

Oh, maybe I should have reduced the output when she entered.

"It's crazy to think that you can work with such high temperatures, Noname," she says, smiling, then stands and gives me a short bow, "It's nice to meet you again."

I return the gesture and nod toward the Fracture lying in the corner, "You can look at it."

There is no way I wouldn't notice her gaze locked on the mid-arcane item and the new piece I've been working on. Her smile broadens, and she gives a quick series of nods before rushing, barely hearing my warning not to draw Fracture from its scabbard.

She hasn't changed much. Even though she must be somewhere in her forties, she looks closer to her thirties with that typical youthful Asian face and slim figure. And it even seems like no one's stolen her right arm. Yet. The arm is made entirely out of metal with a pinkish shine and entirely covered in inscriptions. It even moves more naturally than before.

It also might just be me, but it feels almost stronger, as if Miwa had learned to harness more of its power. Maybe it's a sign that I should steal... borrow it for examination. I bet she wouldn't mind. I could let her hold Fracture for a few minutes in exchange.

In the next ten minutes, Miwa moves from Fracture to the unfinished arcane item and even takes a moment to examine some of the materials and items I've started preparing to sell.

"Why did you go with Tent Creep? I was shocked when I saw you on the ranking with that name!" she says, with great difficulty, as she puts the Fracture back in its place and turns to me.

With a shrug, I explain, "I just felt like it."

"You felt like it?"

"Yes."

"Why?" she asks, not seeming to understand.

"It is silly and lame, but I thought it would help my group feel better. Don't ask why."

"I...Alright. So what did you need me for?"

"Is Adam still trying to get you to work with him, and do you still have a problem with it?" I ask.

I remember from the previous tournament that Adam, a man in his sixties who generally prefers to wear a suit and serves as one of the members of WhiteWing, had a habit of pestering her. The man, apparently some kind of rich German guy, isn't used to being refused.

Miwa confirms, "Yes, he does, and I continue to refuse."

“Good. I want to give you the same offer, but slightly different. I want to learn more from you and, in exchange, I’m willing to show you all I know and help you as much as I can. I will notify you each time I go to work here so you can come and observe and help—if you want that is. I also want to extend an invitation for you to work with group 4. We would protect you against anyone too annoying, and in exchange... well, I don't know yet. You can talk to Channeler; we gave him the same offer. Soph and Knight will have more for you.”

The heat is still pretty high, and would likely be causing trouble even for most non-specialized Hell difficulty attendees, yet she handles it much better and carefully thinks over my words.

Her answer is simple, “I will think about it.”

I nod, and as she is leaving, I notice her glancing at Fracture in the corner.

POV Lily Chen

The barrier has been removed. The following rounds may now visit each other:

1st round

4th round

5th round

8th round

10th round

The second part of the 1st event will start in 23 hours.

Even though they won't be able to participate, the non-participating rounds will be able to observe the event from their respective common areas.

The barrier that even my [Disintegration] couldn't touch disappears.

(Teleporting) comes the message from Nat.

He does that when teleporting near me, only because I attacked him a few times when he appeared next to me out of nowhere.

Not like he can complain! Everyone would do that, and I even think some part of him is proud of me for that. I think so.

(Sure,) I send back, and he appears next to me.

There is still heat lingering around his body, and his mana is leaking slightly, and even that little is enough for some Easy difficulty people nearby to be affected.

They have such weak bodies. It constantly reminds me to be careful. Just a playful punch from me would probably be enough to kill a weaker one. But at least we from Hell difficulty seem to be much better at controlling our powers.

Nat notices it as well, and his heat, as well as his mana, disappears as we watch people jumping or flying from their hills and heading to the unlocked areas that will participate in the 2nd part of the event. These hills are even marked by a huge green orb that floats above us, while those that lost have a red orb floating over the hill. There are even some people heading our way.

Strengthening my sight, I see a figure jump high into the air over their hill, and from her, a few flashes appear—one heading even in our direction.

I prepare to defend in case something happens, but after seeing that Nathaniel doesn't react, I do nothing.

Then a finger plops onto the ground near the center of our common area; some Easy difficulty people there scream in shock and move away from it.

In a blink, a figure grows from that finger. It materializes with clothes on it as well.

It's a beautiful woman with a calm expression on her face, wearing simple clothes and not seeming to have any items at all. Even her clothes aren't enchanted at all, just simple gray pants and a black shirt with sleeves rolled up comfortably.

From there, I see how she turns to the people around her and calmly addresses them, "I would like to talk with your tournament winner if possible."

After a moment of surprise, some people around her start looking around, and some find Nat and stare his way.

She follows their stares, and the moment her eyes lock onto his, she freezes. Recognition flashes across her face, and I notice her fingers twitch at her sides as if resisting the urge to move.

Then she does.

A blur of motion, far faster than expected. In an instant, she stands before him, searching his face with wide, unreadable eyes.

Her hand lifts, hesitant at first, then steady as her fingers brush his skin—light, fleeting, as if confirming he is real.

The speed she moved at is far quicker than I remember from the first tournament. Much quicker. That image of her is still burned into my mind, along with the pain of being torn apart by her. Now, standing in front of Nathaniel, she watches him closely, just as he does her.

A stunning woman, slightly older than Nat, sharing his slim build and height. Her black hair is identical in color, and one of her brown eyes is a shade lighter than the other. Even their faces carry a little bit of similarity.

Nat, on the other side, has his gray and brown eyes and wears equally simple clothes, black pants, and a white shirt rolled up in the same manner.

As she touches his face and an incredibly gentle expression appears on her own. She whispers something I cannot hear, ending with a question.

Nat nods in answer. Then he smiles at her and whispers something as well.

Victoria Gwyn lets out a brief laugh, a beautiful, genuine sound of happiness.

Another laugh follows, softer, hesitant, and almost shy, as if unfamiliar with the act yet filled with joy.

Nathaniel opens his arms and pulls his sister into a hug, an act of closeness he rarely initiates on his own.

Chapter 555: Sister

"I'm here with my own body now," Victoria answers my question after she lowers her defenses, and I teleport us to the living room of Oakheart Refuge.

No one else, leaving us a free place to talk.

"What is your skill?" I ask curiously.

"[Duplication], it allows me to create duplicates of my body, but the mind is shared. After I met you, I canceled the ones I sent to the rest of the rounds so I can focus on you."

"That's a terrible mistake, Vic. You need to talk to these people and make alliances," I joke.

Victoria turns to me and smiles before looking away from me and exploring the room curiously, "I don't care about these people at all. I have my nosy, curious brother to spend time with."

She moves through the room and sits in the armchair opposite me. "You didn't seem as surprised as I was."

"During the 1st tournament, we challenged the winners of the 1st to 4th rounds, and I saw your avatar there."

Victoria tilts her head the way she does when she is amused, "You were always good at abusing the rules, Natty. What floor are you on?"

"8th, starting skills?"

"[Focus] and [Mana Manipulation]."

"[Duplication] and [Intent]. Natty, you seem different and... tense. Has something happened?"

I lean back in my armchair while Victoria waits patiently. She's always been really good at reading me.

"What do you mean by 'different'?" I ask first before answering the question myself, knowing she won't mind.

She pauses for a moment before saying, "You remind me of how you used to be when you were younger, just a little. Do you know what I mean?"

I nod, "A lot of things happened. You, on the other hand, don't seem to have changed much."

"Didn't you used to say I'm perfect just the way I am?" she says, her calm expression returning. "I'll tell you as much as you want. Don't worry."

Even though she isn't smiling, and no one else would notice a difference, to me, it feels like she's happy in a quiet way.

"Damn, Vic. It's so nice to see you here. But before we start, do you remember Tess?"

"Young Tess Hansen, smart and a little naive in an endearing way, pretty blonde? Of course I remember."

"Well, she is in my group and stayed on the 7th floor. Apparently, there is a mimic inside her. There is someone who can save her, but that person gave me a condition: I need to win all the events of this tournament and..."

"I got it. Don't worry about it."

"Thanks." I feel a wave of relief wash over me.

I knew she would react this way. I was absolutely sure, because I know her just as well as she knows me. But hearing her say it out loud...

Victoria is someone I trust completely and love unconditionally. She has always been my older sister who took care of me, always calm, even when she was young, and always taking on so much instead of me.

I owe her a huge debt, but at the same time, the weaker part of me is glad I can rely on my older sister, even if just a little. Even the thought of that brings comfort.

Damn, maybe I shouldn't tease Sophie so much for how much she loves Izzy.

Victoria gets up from her armchair and nudges me aside just enough to squeeze into my seat, wrapping an arm around me before resting her head against mine.

For a while, we stay just like that.

"Who was that pretty petite black haired girl, and why did she seem scared of me for a moment?"

"That's Lily, our healer who sometimes doubles as a bulldozer. She fought your avatar in the first tournament, and you tore her apart. Literally, Vic."

"I see. The way she looks at you..."

"Yeah, I know. It's just a crush because I saved her back on the 1st floor. She'll grow out of it."

"Natty, not to insult you, but you're not exactly the most knowledgeable about these things. How long has this crush lasted already?"

"Huh, about a year and a half, probably?"

"You're a disgrace to the family name, little brother."

"Vic, not to put myself down, I know I'm somewhat good-looking. I take after Mom and my beautiful sister. But I've rejected her a few times, and it's not like a crush can last that much longer."

"Did you ask her about that?"

"I... uhh."

She then proceeds to gently slap the back of my head.

Vic and I spend hours catching up. Some of the questions are silly, asked just so we can hear each other's voices. I even notice myself training less. For a little while, I let myself relax.

A few hours later, the living room fills with people. Naturally, the entire nosy Group 4 is here. Most of the time, everyone keeps stealing glances at Victoria, their eyes occasionally shifting between me and her.

Victoria listens to their questions politely and patiently. The smile she showed me before is gone, and she once again wears that controlled expression as she sits with her clothes fixed and her stance straightened up.

It feels surreal to see her there, sitting just as she did on Earth, so most of the time, I barely listen to the conversation. Instead, I focus on petting Noodle, whom I stole. I can feel his scales beneath my hand and the pulsating heat of the Fragment of Eternal Fire.

"So it will be just our rounds against the rest?" Sophie asks, surprised.

Victoria nods, "That's what we decided on. Me and Nathaniel will be enough."

"I don't think that's a good idea. How can you be so sure?"

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Waiting for Sophie to finish, Victoria then looks at our mindblender.

That moment stretches longer until I notice Sophie feeling uncomfortable, and after a bit longer, it's Sophie who breaks eye contact and looks away.

"He is my brother," Victoria says as if that explains everything. "My round will take care of one of the rounds. Your round will face the other two."

"Well, fuck, I don't even have to ask who came up with that idea," Maya says, looking over at me with a shake of her head.

I shrug and feed Noodle another mana orb.

Maya sounds even more annoyed. "Are you sure?" she asks me.

"Yes," I confirm.

"You know what is at stake here, right?"

"Trust me, Maya, I haven't forgotten."

"Damn it. Fuck that silver haired bitch. Fuck this situation. If you ever get stronger than her and beat the shit out of her, take a video of it for me."

"I'll try to. In 4K. How many times have you died so far, Maya?"

"Five or so? I'm doing that Mana Weaving you showed me and trying to channel and hold bigger amounts of mana. Do I want to know how many times you've died?"

"A few more. I stopped counting after 20."

"Monster..."

Sophie interrupts the conversation, "Okay, so it will be the 5th round and the 4th round against the 1st, 8th, and 10th. Jean, CarrotCake is from the 1st round, right? Leticia and Luna are from the 8th?"

"Nope," I shake my head, "Leticia and Luna are from the 7th; Derick and his primordial lightning wifey are from the 8th, but you haven't met them during our expedition."

"Derick is the tournament winner?"

I nod, "Red hair, tall and slim, has some very good tattoos. It is either a trait, item, or passive; no idea, to be honest. He is very good at close-range combat and disruption. Noelle uses a bow and primordial lightning, but she isn't as dangerous as Tess. Jean has a physique that rejects mana, and it's really difficult to damage him with mana. Even if you do, that physique absorbs a chunk of that mana and increases his regeneration. Plus, he has a skill that allows him to pull people or himself, likely all in his Strength stat."

"So we currently only don't know about the 10th round tournament winner."

Min-Jae jumps in, "We could pretend we're trying to form an alliance with them, observe their people in the process, and learn what to expect."

"Look, we all know Tacita is likely already moving around the other rounds' hills and stealing shit. Me and Aaron could do the same." Dennis slaps his fist against his leg and smiles brightly.

Victoria looks at him in a mildly confused manner, "Nathaniel described some people for me. Isn't Tacita the girl up there?"

She points at the ceiling, and all eyes follow her, finally noticing the girl they had overlooked.

Tacita is perched on a timber beam, where she has remained hidden since the meeting began. Now that all eyes are on her, she wears a look that makes me half expect her to hiss. Her gaze darts around, searching for an escape route.

I hear a creak, and all eyes shift to Min-Jae as he slowly opens the door. He shrugs under our stares, but when we glance back up, Tacita is gone. Without a word, he closes the door again.

For a few seconds, no one says anything.

"O-okay, Aaron and I will try to sneak in. Nat, can you put Ley Lines on us? If anything happens, you can teleport us away and come save us," Dennis offers.

"Sure," I confirm and make sure these Ley Lines are as undetectable and firm as possible before both of the twins leave outside. I notice they have the box with Lily's [Disintegration] orb with them.

They also cut off the connection to our web, as such telepathic communication links can be tracked more easily than my [Ley Line]. I'm sure they also recreate one just between them.

Then, the situation I was worried about happens. Myrra, who is also here, moves closer and sits on the armrest of the armchair Victoria occupies. The tall lynthari seems to enjoy that she is towering over her, even more so when she shows off her height in front of me.

Smiling brightly, Myrra pokes Victoria, "The look in your eyes pisses me off even more than the feral one's."

Myrra sniffs and shows her fangs, "Feral one hides a lot of emotion inside him and rarely shows it, and that makes it fun to try to get a reaction out of him. Meanwhile, you seem like you barely have any emotion."

"Thank you for telling me. I would also like to ask you to please stop touching me and sit somewhere else," Victoria answers calmly.

I lean back in my chair and observe what is about to happen.

I know Myrra will be pushed by such an answer, and I already know how Victoria will react. I think it also might be the right time for them to get to know each other as well.

"And if I don't?" Myrra asks, as expected.

Victoria glances at me, and I just raise an eyebrow. Then she looks back at Myrra. "I remember you from the 4th floor. Even then, you were acting the same way, and I ended up killing you. I'd rather not do it again, since you're part of my brother's group. So, even though I don't usually do this, I'll give you one more warning: please stop touching me. I really don't like it."

"I don't want to~"

Myrra barely finishes her sentence before Victoria grabs her hand. Even though she's expecting it, she can't resist. Victoria overpowers her, pulls her in close, and slams her forehead against Myrra's.

The lynthari stumbles back, and Victoria stands up.

Blood runs from Myrra's nose, the wound already starting to heal thanks to the tournament's no-death rule. Victoria pulls her in again and slams their heads together once more, sending the lynthari stumbling back.

Myrra's torn-off arm stays in Victoria's hand, and she throws it on the floor.

"You will have to pay if you break something," I interrupt as I notice Myrra raising her mana to answer with skills.

Myrra hisses at me, her fangs showing as her tail moves in an annoyed manner before she turns back to Victoria, who just moves and sits back in her armchair after fixing her clothes.

She intertwines her fingers, rests her hands on her crossed legs, and looks at Myrra. "As far as I know, I have shown you no ill will. In fact, I look at all of you favorably because of my brother. As his sister, I love seeing him surrounded by people he cares about."

As she continues to talk, it becomes clear that her words are not meant only for Myrra but for every other member of group 4.

"I assume we will be spending time around each other due to our shared connection with my brother. That is not an issue for me. Unlike my brother, I also do not mind speaking with people, so if the situation allows it and you would like to talk, I will listen. I do not find it bothersome. Whether we speak frequently or barely acknowledge each other, the outcome is the same for me. I leave it to you to decide how much interaction you prefer. Either way, I will adjust accordingly."

"Vic," I call to her.

"Yes?"

"There is no need to be so formal."

"Nathaniel, some things are better when people understand them properly, so I try to choose my words carefully."

"It makes you sound incredibly punchable, Vic. I know because people say the same to me all the time."

"In that case, I would defend myself, Nathaniel. I try not to go out of my way to provoke or attack people. I always try to treat them with reason and without prejudice. It is not too much for me to expect the same."

"I'm not saying Myrra isn't super punchable or didn't deserve it."

"I understand, can I continue?"

"Please," I answer.

Poor group 4 just sits there, confused, and Myrra, with dried-up blood on her face, still stands.

Victoria addresses them again, "This reminds me of something I read once."

She adjusts her posture slightly before continuing, "A study on repeated conflict. It suggested that people who engage in small, frequent disputes often build stronger long-term relationships than those who avoid conflict entirely. That tension, when controlled, forces a level of understanding that politeness alone does not achieve."

She exhales lightly. "It is why people who push against each other often end up working together more effectively than those who avoid confrontation."

Maya raises an eyebrow. "Are you saying you and Myrra will become best friends if you tear her arm off often enough?"

My precious Victoria takes it seriously, unaware it is a joke, while Maya looks too afraid to explain.

Victoria nods. "If repeated conflict strengthens relationships, then yes, it could apply here. Though I assume tearing off limbs would create a more lasting impression than most disagreements."

Watching that, I stay quiet and feed Noodle another mana orb.

Myrra sneaks closer and sits on the armrest of my chair. Leaning in, she whispers, "Feral one, your sister might be even crazier than you. I need to see her meet Lady Lissandra."

I feed Noodle another mana orb, pretending not to hear her.

Somehow, I get the feeling Myrra enjoys the chaos a little too much.

Chapter 556: Come again?

Out of nowhere Victoria says the last thing I ever thought I'd hear come from her lips, and as she does, never once does she deviate from her usual calm demeanor.

"Come again?" Sophie asks, gaping in disbelief, straining to process the words she just heard.

Myrra pokes me, "Feral one, what are thermonuclear warheads?"

I ignore Myrra and ask, "Where the hell did you get them?"

"One of our Hell difficulty groups consists of soldiers from a submarine. They got into the tutorial with a bunch of missiles that had warheads on them. Around 120 warheads in total, but they lost over 90% of them on the early floors."

"Holy fuck," Sophie mutters.

Victoria glances at her before turning back to me, "They used a few to level up, primarily on the 4th floor against the Colony. But during the tournament, when the system made it possible to die, one of them sacrificed himself and used one in an attempt to kill me. So, I took the remaining warheads from them. Currently, there are 9 in my possession."

"You mean to tell us you surv..."

"Feral one, what are thermonuclear warheads? Tell me!" Myrra shouts, interrupting Aaron.

"I cannot. They were several floors in before they found a way to use them. Apparently, the warheads disarm themselves when you remove them from the missiles. There is a built-in detonation system in the missile specialized to arm and trigger it, plus a safety system to prevent misfires. But they found a way around it with some kind of inscription or skill."

"Nat, do not..." Sophie starts.

I pay her no mind and ask, "Inscriptions, you said? Can you give me one?"

"I will send it to you once I return to my common area," Victoria confirms.

"As if you even need something like that," Sophie sighs in defeat, turning to my sister. "Victoria, you said they used one against you?"

"Yes. They didn't like the way I went about things and found themselves incapable of dealing with me any other way."

"How the hell did you survive that?"

"I apologize, but I see no reason to tell you. I hope you understand."

"...Got it."

"Thank you." With that, Victoria stands up and turns to me, "I will be heading back to the area for my round. Nathaniel, you can visit me anytime, but I understand you are a bit preoccupied at the moment, so I will be stopping by every now and then."

"I'll see you in the second part of the 1st event then, Vic." I stand up as well and open the door so she can exit; we then head downstairs.

"What kind of Hell difficulty groups did you get in your round?" I ask curiously.

"As I said, those soldiers. Then, we got a bunch of professional archers who got taken during their training, some were apparently preparing for the Olympics. A group of millionaires who were spending their weekend on a superyacht. Some of them even survived. And a few smaller groups that seem content to lag behind on the lower floors."

"About that warhead..." I start, lowering my voice when we are far enough.

Victoria nods, "Don't worry, I will send two."

"Love you, Vic."

She reaches and ruffles my hair and, for a short moment, smiles at me.

As we exit the tree, I see the guy I sensed entering our area. Jean, tall as always and probably even more muscular than before. And that little shit who called himself... Spacepup? Something like that. He's here as well.

The last time I saw Jean, he was pretty close to dying after I beat the shit out of him during our last Beyond expedition, just to make sure he'd have to go through me in the event that he decided to kill someone from my group. So, I'm curious how he's going to behave this time around, especially knowing he's following the path of Pride, the same as me.

"Noname!" he shouts happily, the loss he suffered seeming not to bother him. Though he's just as overbearing as before.

Immediately, I feel my energy start to drain away.

"Later then, Nathaniel," Victoria says, waving to me as she passes by Jean, who tracks her movements until she jumps with incredible force, almost seeming to fly into the air, as she heads back to her area.

Jean just shakes his head in the end and turns back to me, "I came to challenge you!"

"Yeah, no."

"I won't take that for an answer."

"You don't have a choice," I say as I start making my way to the workshop. After a moment of confusion, he rushes to my side and starts keeping pace.

"We made a deal, and I promised to hold up my end of it, and I intend to continue doing so. My requirement...."

"I know," I concede. "Trust me, beating the shit out of you could be fun and would distract me for a while, but I have much more important things to do now. Why don't you spar with Grumpy?"

"That tiny black-haired girl?"

I nod, "You lost against me, right? And I didn't even go all out, so you have to prove yourself worthy of challenging me. Defeat my underling, and I'll fight you."

I know this maniac won't miss an opportunity for another fight, so this should be plenty to distract him. And Lily herself said she was curious about how she would handle herself against him.

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"Okay!" Jean replies and starts heading toward the tree, calling out "the tiny girl with the huge ax."

Well, that was easier than expected.

Lucien watches his group member walking off, sighs, and then shudders. As he leaves, I see him shudder again and hear him muttering to himself as he takes a quick look around himself, "Fuck, why do I feel like I'm being watched?"

Having solved things, I send a message to Miwa inviting her to join me, and then I shut myself inside the workshop. For a moment, I sit down on the bench nearby and relax a bit. Doing so, I look at my hands. Both of them are shaking, and the tips of my fingers are twitching. My breathing grows haggard, and I feel like vomiting. That sense of fear, the thought of another death caused by my own training regimen, rises up inside me again.

I feel so tired, not physically but mentally.

Not even three days have passed, and I have already died more times than I did over the entire duration of the week long 1st tournament.

The heart, my black mana, Mana Circulation testing, orb training testing, splitting my mind into so many parts. Sometimes, even that kills me. Then there are the movements of kinetic energy I'm testing, so dangerous and volatile that they trash my insides. Testing my abilities while deactivating my mid-arcane passive, storing oversized mana structures in my mind, and more.

I test the limits of my body and mind over and over again. Outside, it would be dangerous, but here, I can do it while only risking temporary death.

And damn, some of my limits reach much further than I thought. I knew I had built an amazing base and that some of my abilities synchronize very well, but even I'm surprised at how far I can push myself before dying.

And that line is pushed further and further with each hour.

I know I handle dying here better than most of the others. Someone from Easy difficulty wouldn't even think of it. People from Normal might die once and stop, needing days to recover. Someone from Hard might push themselves multiple times during the entire duration of the tournament, and Hell difficulty might accumulate a dozen or so deaths.

But for me? A dozen deaths is something I sometimes go through in just an hour or two.

Sensing Miwa approaching, I take a deep breath in. A slow exhale follows.

My hands stop shaking, and I stand up and fix my clothes. Then I slide into [Focus] a bit and call for her to enter.

After hours of working on the item for Channeler and creating more mid-epic items to sell, I'm taking a short break.

Close to the end, Miwa started helping more actively, often giving me advice based on her experience as a smith on Earth and the things she learned back on the 2nd floor.

She is polite and puts effort into everything she does. She is also talented and hardworking. From what she told me, she had no problem finding teachers as she climbed the floors with her Hard difficulty group, often even using her metallic right arm as a conversation starter with the many blacksmiths she's met.

There's also something more interesting she's telling me.

"I can't believe you haven't heard of this. It's already been two years since the tutorial started!" As she talks, I feel like a student being cussed out by their teacher. "And no, I'm not making fun of you or lying. It's just like I said, if you create an item and sell it, or give it to someone and that person kills a monster with that item, you get a tiny share of experience from the kill."

"Look, I'm too tired to try to excuse myself. How tiny a part of the experience?"

"Very very tiny. But imagine you make thousands of items, and they get used in combat. Over the decades, it can net you a decent number of levels and might even level up your skills or give you passives or traits."

"Okay," I stop her, "imagine you live for 200 years. You make tens of thousands of items that are then used. Wouldn't that make it possible for you to level up quite a bit?"

“Possibly, but at a certain point it tends to taper off quite a bit. It's hard to imagine someone becoming a Champion this way. But you have to agree with me that it makes a lot of sense. Sure, a lot of crafters level up by buying live monsters from hunters and killing them themselves or hunting on their own, but it's nice that the other option exists, too.”

“Nothing for armor?”

“Nothing, as far as I know. Maybe it influences your passive offers, traits, or skills, but I don't think there's any leveling tied to it.”

While thinking about it, I move toward the table and start heating up the metals I had set out. “So, as always, it's all about killing.”

The molten metal moves through the air, manipulated by my mana radiating and the arms I form with it. “Unsurprisingly, the way of leveling you just mentioned probably doesn't work very well inside the tutorial. You can make a lot of weapons on one floor and sell them for use. But the moment you enter a different floor, that floor will vanish along with your weapons, taking your chance at leveling with them.”

“The alloy you are making isn't merging very well; try to cool that darker metal a bit more. It bonds better with the endurium at lower temperatures. And I agree with you, that's why I made a lot of weapons and brought them here.”

Miwa smiles and moves closer to observe the process, “They might not be as sought after as the ones the great Tent Creep made, but I will sell all of them, and our dear colleagues will help me gain levels.”

After Miwa leaves, I continue for a bit longer before I call it a day and put seven more items into the system shop. Who would have thought that being able to push myself literally to death to make items could shorten the production time so much?

While the workshop cools down from all the heat I generated, I close my eyes and enter my mental space.

This time, I find myself on top of the tallest of the Giza pyramids. Whitey and I are dressed like British adventurers from the turn of the last century. Light colored trousers, sturdy boots, and loose shirts tucked into belts weighed down by pouches. A vest and a wide brimmed hat complete the look, all kind of clothes once worn by those who looted artifacts for museums and personal collections.

"I don't have much time at the moment, so do you have any fancy tricks you could teach me?" I ask as I plop down next to Whitey.

"A few, but you will need to improve your mastery before I can even show them to you," he replies, his reaction as usual. "Your output is good; after all, you're a brute and can handle huge amounts of kinetic energy. But your fine control is still lacking, and your movements aren't natural and intuitive yet."

"I'm just a human, after all," I sigh.

"A thief, a cheater, and a maniacal little shit," Whitey confirms.

"Sounds just like me," I reply and stand up.

To prove my point, I redirect most of my mana toward generating kinetic energy.

The first heartbeat shakes the top of the pyramid we've found ourselves standing on.

The second one sends vibrations through the air, and the sand collecting on the stones rises up.

The third heartbeat makes the air around us vibrate, and Whitey stands up as well.

On the fourth, I actively channel more of my body's mana and reservoir through my heart, damaging it in the process, but it's not like I have anything to worry about here. This mind space and all the training with Whitey, all the deaths, might be one of the reasons why I can push myself so far during the tournament.

A few more heartbeats, and I feel like I can't handle even a drop more. The vast amount of kinetic energy flowing, bouncing inside of me, held at bay by effort alone.

"Fucking brute," Whitey sighs and jumps back. He doesn't even bother trying to counter it. He cannot handle that much kinetic energy.

I stomp, and the pyramid detonates.

Each stone fractures and shatters midair, flung outward like shrapnel from a bomb. The shockwave ripples through the desert, sending dunes rolling like waves, carving trenches into the sand as if an unseen hand were carving through the landscape.

The sky itself seems to ripple, dust and debris hanging suspended in the air. All that remains of the pyramid is a chaotic storm of stone and dust floating in the air, held in place by my will.

Then I charge Whitey.

Just a short clash before I return to the reality of the tournament.

Chapter 557: Enormous

Back in the living room, I find Dennis and Aaron sitting by themselves. They seem to be working on their training, but that's not what catches my eye. It's the two items on the floor that they've clearly taken pains to keep their distance from, as if they were worried that the slightest misstep might set them off.

A gift from my beautiful sister. Two thermonuclear warheads, each in its own wooden box, each standing around half my height and about the width of my arm.

Glancing at the twins who are carefully watching me, I move toward the box and then kick it.

Immediately, they shudder and leap to their feet.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Nat!" Dennis shouts in a tone I've never heard from him before.

So I kick it again, eliciting the same reaction.

A bit of my stress fades, soothed by seeing their reaction, but I also notice a different part of me, hoping it does explode. Vic said she survived one, right? Could I do the same? I've already thought of a few ways I might be able to face-tank them, but for now, they remain only theories.

"Don't worry. Vic said they weren't designed to be used without the missiles that carried them, and it took months for those Hell difficulty soldiers to come up with a way."

"Yup, that didn't help one bit." Aaron shakes his head.

"That muscular Baldie? Well, it ended up 1:1. Lily lost the first one but beat him in the second one. I think she would've won the third bout as well, but that little shit Lucien grabbed Baldie out of nowhere, and they left," Dennis explains.

Aaron nods, "Lily and Jean totally destroyed the sparring area. I think a dozen or so people from Easy and Normal died from the shockwaves, and they weren't even anywhere close."

"Did you record it?" I ask.

"Yup!" Dennis confirms. "We did as you asked and bought as many cameras, phones, and memory cards as we could. We even offered a bunch of upper-rare and low-epic items to any people from Easy who still had some, and I could just about swear their eyes almost dropped from their sockets, heh. There was a bit of a problem with Adam trying to do something similar, but Gareth made him stop before Lily could get to him."

"I'm just surprised they still have any." I finally get the box open, revealing a compact metallic case. It's made up of smooth, reinforced, thick plating and a lot of warning labels. I try to lift it up, and I can, but it's surprisingly heavy. Probably as heavy as Jean? I can use that man as a metric for weight, right?

I close the box again.

Aaron exhales in relief, "We think most people from Easy difficulty wanted to keep their phones and cameras, but the further we get into the tutorial, and the more they see of it and the abilities of the people from Hell and Beyond the more it seems like they're trying to create a good impression and join the stronger groups. At least Channeler said so."

"It makes sense," I agree. "Do you need more items to trade in?"

"Not for now. We already have plenty, and Channeler got his 'harem' to record everything so he can blackmail our beautiful country when he gets back. Something along the lines of: 'You see this shit? Kill me or mess with me, and this crazy guy will make a living hell out of your existence.'" Dennis giggles.

Aaron smirks as well, "I told him to just give it to the media if our country doesn't want to cooperate, and he said he might 'leak' some things here and there if he feels the need."

"Sounds good."

"Nat?" Dennis's voice becomes a bit more careful. "Is there even a need to hide our names anymore? People were recording stuff even during the first tournament, and sooner or later, especially once they get out, I'm sure they'll be able to match our faces to our names."

"I wouldn't be surprised if it already happened. But we don't really gain anything by going by our real names at the moment, and using aliases will just lower the chances that others find out. I think we should keep them hidden, at least until the end of this tournament, so Channeler and others can have a chance to return and protect our friends and families, and when the third tournament rolls around, you can do whatever you want."

"Sounds reasonable. By the way, do you want to use a warhead during the tournament?"

His trust in me, believing I can find a way to activate it in just a few days when it took the entire group months, warms my cold heart, but I still shake my head.

"Even if I could, I won't. These babies will be going back with us to the 7th floor for further examination." This time, I slam the top of the box with my palm, making both twins jump up once again.

While listening to their immediate string of curses and complaints, I can't help but revel in the sound.

The second half of the 1st event will start in 1 hour!

The rules will remain largely unchanged. All five rounds will take place on a single map, each with its own fortress to defend.

The event will span 24 hours, divided into 12 hours for preparation and 12 hours for the battle.

Your objective is to either eliminate all participants from the other rounds or accumulate the highest number of points.

The winner will be decided in two possible ways:

1st - Only one group remains standing with no other round member alive.

2nd - The group with the most points after 24 hours have passed.

Note: Any round that has its King killed and its throne room captured will be eliminated, and its members will be removed from the event.

To take over your opponent's throne room, you have to hold the space for 1 hour. Doing so will see you rewarded with 10,000 points.

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All winners of their round's first tournament will be classified as [King]. Defeating the King will award you 5,000 points. If the winner of the tournament isn't present, the position of [King] will be passed on to the next in line according to tournament placement.

Points will also be given for defeating your opponents as follows:

Easy difficulty attendee – 1 point

Normal difficulty attendee – 5 points

Hard difficulty attendee – 10 points

Hell difficulty attendee – 20 points

Beyond attendee – 100 points

Just in case, I reread the rules to see if there's anything I'm missing and head toward the center of our common area.

Just in time, a notification that the sale of my 1st wave of items has ended rings.

Congratulations, your items have been sold through the tournament shop! You have gained 93,264 shards. Ten percent will be taken by the system.

First, fuck the system and its 10% cut, and fuck the rule that only lets me use materials from the system shop to sell items.

Second, the next wave of items should bring in similar numbers, and after that, I can shorten the auction's duration.

There seem to be plenty of people interested in my items, and just from checking, there is no one pumping out even half as many of them as Tent Creep. Even Miwa is in 5th place at the moment.

I'm in first, but I'd say it's thanks to the sheer number of items I've produced; the second one is someone called Mateo, and last I checked, he only had four items in the shop, and each of them is upper epic. The last one was placed there, likely a few minutes ago. Unlike me, his auction duration is set for 1 week.

Curious strategy. I will do something similar with a few of my better-performing items.

“Noname,” Samuel prods, sliding closer to walk by my side, jarring me from my thoughts, “can we talk?”

I glance toward the center where the last meeting is currently taking place, then stop and turn to the former soldier guy.

“If you could be quick about it...” I gesture at him to continue.

“Thanks. I wanted to ask if you could talk to Grumpy. Ever since the start of the tournament, she’s been...”

It’s at this point that I decide to interrupt, “I know, I told her to do it.”

Samuel blinks a few times, “You... did?”

I nod, “Yup. If it were just up to me, she would be worse. But hey, you can’t have everything. Plus, it’s good for you as well. If it weren’t for her, it would be me.”

“You do realize we have to work together to beat the other rounds, right?”

“Look,” I wave at him and start walking again, “if Sset were here, she would be going about things differently, just like in the 1st tournament. I would scare people, and she would use me to threaten the others. But I’m not Sset, as you can see. As the twins would say, your wannabe coalition, other groups, and whoever else are all swinging their dicks around to see whose is bigger. But Samuel, group 4’s dick is fucking enormous.”

I stop walking. “OK, that might have sounded weird, but you get the gist of it. You probably have some info on me, and maybe you know a thing or two. But as long as you don’t provoke us, I’ll just do my own thing, but you should realize that in this tournament, I’m going to be real easy to provoke. It would be different if it were me who was in danger, but this time, it’s someone I care about.”

Samuel sighs, "We got it. Your group is pretty tight-lipped, but we figured something had to have happened to Sset."

"Who knows? Just enjoy your tournament and don't do anything to could cost us the event, and we'll all be good."

"Sure, we can drop this subject here. I also wanted to give you a warning. Some of my people checked in on the other rounds, and a few have some fairly skilled veterans. They even spotted a highly modified set of anti-materiel rifles, inscribed and made with altered metals, they've likely been enhanced with skills and special bullets as well. I expect that they'll tear through barriers with ease and move far faster than standard ammunition."

"Got it. Thanks for the info."

After that, he separates, and I reach group 4, who are slightly to the side, together with Brainiac and Lootenant. Both of them are noticeably stronger than before and even seem a bit older, even though not much time has passed. Especially Brainiac, who actually doesn't feel much weaker than Gareth at this point, likely sitting somewhere around Min-Jae's level.

"Is this the [King] in the flesh?!" Brainiac shouts excitedly, grinning brightly, "How the fuck did you break that barrier? They spent 10 hours on it and had dozens of people powering it!"

Acting like his handler, Lootenant pokes the young man, but Brainiac ignores it. Immediately, I can see why the twins, Min-Jae, and these two spend so much time together.

"Trade secret," I answer.

"Sure. By the way, you remember that thing where we were paying you to teach some of the others from our round, right? I think you wanted ten thousand shards to teach 10 people for an hour. Well, I think I could find plenty of people willing to pay now!"

Is he naive, or what? This world is cruel.

I answer, "That was back then. Now I would have to ask somewhere around..." I pause to calculate the value of my time based on the amount of trading and training I could do while giving lessons compared to crafting. Then, I also consider the mental damage I would take from said interactions, and the price jumps by a lot.

"Probably around 10 thousand shards per person per hour."

"What the fuck! That's 10 times more! Dennis and Aaron said they're getting lessons mostly for free."

"But you aren't Dennis or Aaron."

"Fuck. You know what's crazy? I think I still could find some people who'd go for it."

That makes me shake my head. Just who the hell would pay that much?

"Did you guys learn any info on the remaining tournament winners?" I ask, turning to Dennis and Aaron.

Dennis nods, "Yup! The 1st round is CarrotCake, obviously. By the way, did you know that even though CarrotCake may be the strongest, he's probably like 5th in rank when it comes to decision-making?"

Aaron giggles, "Even that little shit you call SpacePup has more say in his decisions, though CarrotCake doesn't seem to mind as long as he can find someone to fight. It seems like they have some smart people, or at least people more reasonable than CarrotCake, though that's not exactly a high bar."

"He and the 2nd [King], that redhead in armor with the giant ax, fought, but he won in the end. She apparently has fairly high strength, but seems to have some kind of strange skill. Sometimes it looks like fire, sometimes it's more like smoke or some kind of liquid. It's blood red and sticky, likely mana-based, and it corrodes everything it touches, and it seems fairly difficult to remove. She also has this extremely fancy suit of armor and collects a lot of equipment. Apparently, she was using axes, bows, swords, and daggers. We're still trying to find out more!"

For a moment, I feel a rush of pride for these two. They truly are good at this kind of thing.

“What about the other rounds?”

Dennis looks around and checks on the barrier I made to keep people from listening in. “Your sister threw one of her fingers into the enemy fortress, captured the throne room, and killed nearly all of their Beyonders and Hell difficulty fighters by herself. Meanwhile, the enemy [King] was taken down and killed while attacking her fortress, at the same time she attacked theirs. There were rumors about him being tricked or lured into a trap.”

Aaron waves to get my attention, and I turn to him. “It seems like the 3rd round [King], who went against her round, uses void energy, something to do with disruption. It's apparently much stronger than normal mana-based disruption and can even interfere with primordial energies.”

Yup, another thing I want to learn about is disruption that isn't mana-based and can affect primordial energies.

Count me in. I want to see that.

Chapter 558: Villain in your path

“What about the 8th round?” I ask them.

“Oh, that!” Dennis perks up. “You hadn't told us, but apparently that guy Derick is super strong. He barely uses mana for anything other than body strengthening, and has some kind of strange tattoos that disrupt mana, and they work super well. The guy we asked theorized that tattoos are either from a powerful passive or a trait. There are also rumors that Derrick recently acquired a Fragment or Primordial energy of some sort that isn't one of the common five.”

Aaron waits for his brother to finish. “They also said he's really good in close combat and very technical about it. He used to be a top-grade martial artist on Earth or something and he only continued to improve in the tutorial. He also seems to cooperate very well with his wife, who does nothing fancy, just primordial lightning projectiles and a bow, but at a high level.”

Dennis nods, and both of them fall silent. The mood sours a bit as if they don't want to talk about what comes next.

“10th round?” I ask.

Seeing Dennis not answer, Aaron sighs, “We weren’t able to get there; they only let tournament winners in, so Jean and Derick went there. Your sister didn’t go, and clearly, neither did you. We got killed two times when we tried to sneak in.”

“Happens,” I wave it off. “So Jean, along with the majority of the 1st round, are Canadian. 2nd round?”

“No idea, probably Europe or something.”

“3rd round tournament winner is that shadow-skill void energy boy, right?”

“The 4th is Victoria, and she said they have people from all over the world. Ours is mostly American. And the 6th seemed like South America.”

“Yes, Tess said she spoke with Leticia, and thought that the 7th round seemed to be from Western Europe, and that she thought Leticia might be from Spain, but she said there were also people from Britain and Africa.”

“Derrick is Irish, so his round could be mostly drawn from the UK?”

“Likely,” Dennis nods as he turns to look at Sophie.

Sophie, joining the conversation, shrugs. “Derrick and Noelle sound like Irish names, but I could be wrong. So it’s safe to expect that the 9th and 10th rounds are mostly centered around Australia, China, Japan, and Korea.”

I nod. “Probably, but you can look at our round. Gareth and Whitewing were flying over Europe, and they mostly came from Germany, Poland, and those areas.”

As we’re wrapping up the conversation with that interesting fact, I notice Channeler waving at me, so I create an opening in the barrier, allowing him to enter before I redeploy it.

He looks around a bit awkwardly, suddenly finding himself surrounded by group 4, but he quickly regains his composure and smiles.

"I found three people from Hard difficulty who have a heart-based trait that are willing to let you examine them later," he says, looking toward me.

Maya glances at me and then at the handsome man. "Really? You needed to tell it to him now, just 30 minutes before the event?"

Channeler does not seem bothered; he smiles playfully, and I notice Maya's heartbeat skips a beat as he does.

It sure must be nice to be so handsome.

So good for him.

Maybe I should send him out to fight an enemy King in the 1st wave?

"Nathaniel told me to tell him as soon as possible, so I thought I would do just that," Channeler explains.

"Did you explain them everything?" I ask.

Not skipping a beat, he confirms, "Yes. The examination might include opening up their chest and reopening the wound repeatedly so the system's effects don't out heal it. I also mentioned that we have a healer who can reduce the pain a bit. Of course, most of them refused outright, but when I mentioned you would buy items for them, made by Tent Creep, some of them actually changed their tune and agreed."

"I see."

“You know, Tent Creep is getting famous again,” Channeler says with the same playful expression as he watches me. “A lot of people have been saving up their shards in hopes of buying some of their items, but it looks like the other rounds were also quick to notice the items. Unfortunately, and I quote, they’re ugly as fuck, like a kid molded them from clay, but their properties are just too good.”

“You asshole, how long have you known?”

“Ever since the first tournament. I have a good memory, and sorry, it’s not like you did a very good job of hiding it. Plus, you mentioned making an arcane item for me, you know.”

“Oh, that’s true. Well, if this isn’t awkward.”

“Nat likes to play around with secret identities. He thinks it’s cool.” Dennis smirks.

“Secret identity crafter, and he may have mentioned a secret identity as a melee fighter called Noname in Beyond. There might be a pattern,” Aaron snarks, nodding seriously.

“Sure, sure,” I dismiss, waving them off as I create a manablock chair to sit in.

The conversation continues without me, and Channeler easily keeps it up. It seems so natural. Asshole.

Izzy moves closer and shyly taps on my shoulder. When I look at her, she smiles softly, pulls a dagger out of her clothes, and hands it to me, making sure the others can’t see.

“I made it,” she declares proudly.

The dagger is simple, and I see burn marks from her flames on the blade, which has melted in places. The rarity is mid-rare. I’ve noticed her trying to make stuff for a while now, but this is the first one she’s shown me, despite the many lesser attempts she must have made.

I can tell she’s very proud of it, and I can’t help but find it adorable as I see the shy expression on her face.

Izabella, despite being able to read others well and know their emotions with an eerie degree of accuracy, even without her skill, is terrible at hiding her own emotions.

"It's amazing," I say, as I take a moment to look it over. Each second I take makes her happier. When I finally slide it back into its sheath and hand it back to her, she immediately hides it in her clothes.

"I know it's terrible in comparison to what you've been making, but thanks!"

"It is?" I ask curiously. "I don't think there are many people in Hard difficulty who can make rare items like this, and some of them are super specialized for crafting."

Her mood improves markedly, to the point that if she were a lynthari, I bet her ears would be twitching.

"Liar," she snorts.

"Am I? Why don't you check my emotions to confirm?"

"Phe," she snorts again and leaves without doing so.

So silly.

After a while, I start feeling a bit awkward. I'm the only one sitting, but it's too late to dismiss the chair now, at this point it would just look lame, so I continue to sit there until the event starts.

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Then, a few seconds before we get pulled inside, I slide into [Focus].

Appearing inside, I take a deep breath of air, noting the hint of salt on the wind, along with the sound of the sea and waves crashing against the rocks nearby. The throne room is exactly the same as the previous one, aside from a number of large circular holes in the wall.

I lift up, fly, pass through one of them, and rise a bit higher.

Our fort isn't much different from the previous one; it's just smaller and has a huge wall around it. Inside that wall stands a single tall tower, with my throne room at its peak.

Flying a bit more, I land on the roof and look around. As far as I can see, there is only the sea, and in the distance, I can see more forts, each seemingly in the middle of the sea on a not-so-tall rock platform.

After a while, I notice that the waves aren't actually all that tall. Each wave only rising to about half my height, and I can see through the crystal clear water, down to the yellow sand underneath. The sea, if one could truly call it that, probably only rises up to my thighs. Even though this view isn't quite the unearthly vista I've come to expect, it is beautiful, the clear sea stretching on as far as the eye can see, contrasted against the calm sands below, and the clear blue sky above.

As planned, I shoot one of my thermal orbs high into the air and let it explode. In a similar way, a yellow orb explodes over another fort to our right.

So that's where Vic is.

Just as before, I form an [Empyrean Lance] over my shoulder and start feeding it my mana while reactivating [Mana Crown]. Even though no mana goes into my crown, having it activated helps me control my mana. Meanwhile, even though I want to create another lance, I cannot. Even the one requires the most of my concentration. It also might be a rule that only one can exist, or it might just be a lack of understanding regarding the skill. Another thing long since added to my to-do list.

I sit down on the roof, and most of my effort goes into the lance while I think.

So, Derick, Jean, and that mysterious mystery guy from the 10th round. I wish things were simple, and I could say each of them was stronger than the [King] they faced, but things just aren't that simple.

You can counter people, you can have your Beyonders help you, so even though they lost and can't participate, I don't think I should underestimate them or the 6th round [King] I beat.

Plus, there are also people like Tess, Lily, Savant, and Tacita. Each of them is likely strong enough to become a tournament winner if things went their way. And it's very possible the other rounds have [King]-level individuals of their own. Hell, there's always the possibility that the [King] in question hasn't improved very much in the past year, and there are plenty of people stronger than them.

So far, I haven't used black mana. I still haven't removed even one seal on the heart. Even my passive Mana Wavelength Tyrant is still deactivated, and it's been that way for months. That incredible mid-arcane passive I got with my primary class upgrade just sitting there unused, so it doesn't mess with my training and make everything too easy.

Not to forget the all-powerful [Knitting]. Then, I could also use Ley Lines to launch inscriptions in a similar way to how the Eye Champion of the 6th floor did.

It could be said even now, I'm still far from going all out. It's not even close. But at the same time, things feel like they're spiraling out of my control. There is nothing I can do about Tess, who's busy doing who knows what on the 7th floor. I have to rely on Lissandra to keep her word, and there's still the chance of her interfering with the tournament further.

To send away these useless thoughts, I say, "Status."

Name: Nathaniel Gwyn

Title: Champion Candidate

Difficulty: Hell

Floor: Tournament Floor

Time left until forced return: 2y 361d 23h 54m 1s

Traits (2/3): Mana Wavelength Iris 2/3, Mana Physique 0/3

Lvl 305

Strength: 240

Dexterity: 231

Constitution: 429

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1621 + 1621

Primary Class: Mana Weaver (Unique Arcane)

Sub-class: [Adept of Pride]

Active skills (10/10):

Focus - Lvl 63

Perception - Lvl 59

Redistribution - Lvl 59

Mana Domain (Pride) - Lvl 59

Mana Crown - Lvl 53

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 63

Ley Line - Lvl 49

Eclipse - Lvl 26

Empyrean Lance - Lvl 17

Knitting - Lvl 29

Constructs:

Reinforcement

Mana Regulator

Mana Sovereignty Mantle

Kinetic Mana Heart

Sealed Ignition Heart (Fully Sealed, 3/3)

Passive skills (5/5):

Phoenix Embrace (Mid Epic)

Mana-Kinetic Conversion Reservoir (Unique Epic)

Mana-Fortified Mind (Low Arcane)

Mental Attunement Loop (Mid Arcane)

Mana Wavelength Tyrant (Mid Arcane)

Tokens:

Beyond 3 day stay token

Beyond 3 day stay token

Beyond 1 day stay token

Beyond 1 day stay token

Shards: 384,133

I pull my knees closer to my chest and watch the fortresses over them, as each round starts building up their defenses. Some build things similar to Sophie's web, salting them with barriers and other structures made with the help of items. They really spend a lot of time pouring a lot of mana into all of it, and with the help of my Mana Wavelength Iris, I can see it all. The structure of the defenses, the movement of mana, the more glowing mana, the denser it becomes. I even start to see tiny particles of ambient mana floating around and reacting to their manipulation.

As always, the world I can see through my traits is so pretty and ever-changing. It is a constant stream of information, enough to fry my brain without a lot of help from my passive.

I look to my right and see Lissandra sitting there as well. Her eyes are on me. She feels like a natural disaster to me and always has. A disaster that can destroy an entire planet. But just like a natural disaster, Lissandra isn't cruel; she's just cold, uncaring when it comes to normal human struggles.

"I will kill you one day," I tell her.

"Have I stepped over the line, little pup?" she asks.

"I wouldn't say a single word if you were just messing with me, but now you're putting someone I care about at risk. I'm not angry because you didn't help, even though you could have. It was our fault and our lack of skill that led to this. What I hate about all of this is that you're holding it over us with every intent of using her as a tool."

She sits there and listens as the small waves continue moving outside in the wind.

"I do not care if it ends up well or if you did it all with the intention of helping Tess and me grow stronger. If you slip up even once, I will kill you."

Lissandra's smile lingers, calm and composed.

"Good," she says, standing while the wind stirs her silver hair around her.

Her tone grows softer, but the weight behind her words doesn't fade. "It's thanks to you that I am who I am. You pulled me out of that rotting stagnation and brought something back to life in me. And for that, I'm grateful. For that, I'll stand as the villain in your path. And for that, if you ever become strong enough, I'll gladly die by your hand."

As I stare at her, she simply says, "You are not allowed to use your passives during this event." Then, she turns and leaves.

Still watching the spot where she sat, I deactivate my passives one by one.

Phoenix Embrace (Mid Epic)

Mana-Kinetic Conversion Reservoir (Unique Epic)

Mana-Fortified Mind (Low Arcane)

Mental Attunement Loop (Mid Arcane)

All get turned off, adding to Mana Wavelength Tyrant, which I had turned off previously.

Then, I sit there, gazing into the distance at the other forts as they build up their defenses.

Ours is the only fortress that doesn't set up any defenses at all.

Chapter 559: I don't know to do it any other way

I use the following 12 hours to get a handle on my abilities. Without the Mental Attunement Loop, the amount of pressure my mind can handle is severely limited, restricting my use of [Focus] and making it more difficult to maintain Mana Cycling. The first thing I notice is that the mana I'm used to hiding begins to leak out as I redirect my brainpower to different tasks, leaving less available to manage the overflow.

My resistance to mental attacks also drops immediately. And I no longer have the benefits of a passive that absorbs blunt attacks to feed my reservoir with mana. In fact, even the reservoir is gone, limiting me to the mana in my body.

As I handle everything, I think about her reason for placing these restrictions.

When I limit my resources, I tend to push myself harder. I fight more desperately and with more cold cruelty. In these situations, my mind becomes sharper, having no choice but to compensate for the lack of extra resources I sometimes lazily rely on.

From that point of view, one could almost say I'm more dangerous when I've been stripped of resources and forced to use what I have more effectively.

That might be why.

So, as the hours tick by and I prepare, no one bothers me, and I don't connect to the link they made. Our plans have already been discussed and are being carried out by people far better and more reasonable than I am.

Finally, the timer reaches zero, and the 12-hour battle begins.

I boost myself into the air and exit the area surrounding our fort now that the barriers are gone. As I land on the water, I stand on the surface, mimicking the way of doing so that I already saw plenty of natives using. Each of my steps sends small ripples through the water, and the tops of the waves wash against my legs.

When something plops into the water in front of me, I reach out and snatch it before it can sink and put it in my pocket.

Our fort empties as well, with everyone splitting into two groups. One is being led by Gareth and Samuel while receiving support from Sophie, Izzy, and Maya. The other is a smaller group with Lily, the twins, and Tacita... probably, heading in the opposite direction. I have long since noticed the way Tacita seems to have attached herself to us. The reason is simple: Lily.

Even though Tacita seems frustrated with Lily's aggressive attempts at befriending her, she doesn't attack her. And damn, how she could. Instead, Tacita simply runs away.

I've seen her kill dozens of people during this tournament who got too close or tried to touch her. She doesn't do that to Lily, likely something to do with the way Lily saved her life after Tacita's duel with Savant nearly killed her, leaving her struggling to crawl back into her hideout with her last breath.

I would call it a silly strategy to befriend that catlike assassin girl. I even mentioned it to Lily.

Back then, Lily just smiled at me and said, "I know how it looks. Grumpy was just like Tacita, and I did the same thing then as I'm doing now. Back then, I was young, and my father told me I needed to give him space and that he would open up to me in his own time. But I didn't. I did it my own way, and I think Grumpy appreciated the effort. Even though he kept hissing, scratching and biting me, gradually, he accepted it and even seemed to enjoy my presence. I got hurt a lot by him, but I think he liked having someone who showed him that they wanted to be with him and was willing to go through so much effort."

She looked straight into my eyes. "I know there are people who would find me annoying. They'd call me childish, tell me to grow up, and say I bother others and do everything wrong. I tried to change, but I

don't know how to be any other way. This is me. Stupid, annoying, naive, and, as you like to say, bulldozer-like me. Me, Lily."

And I asked, "As far as I can see, Tacita isn't, in fact, a cat. It might not work on her."

Her smile changed with confidence shining through. "It will work."

I remember how those words gave me goosebumps back then, along with the way she looked at me. For a moment, you think you know people. Who they are and why they do what they do, and then they surprise you. Over and over again.

With that fascinating memory, I break into a sprint and head toward the fortress on the left while sliding deeper into [Focus]. To focus more, I filter out useless emotions and extraneous visual details like most colors and some sounds. Pushing deeper, I then suppress the sensation of pain and smell.

A lot of information that my upgraded, far more powerful, and sensitive body usually collects is removed to free up processing power for the fight.

In a flash, I spring to the right, dodging a barrage of flaming projectiles that were trailing me, each one piercing the air and heating everything around it. When they hit the water, they explode and sizzle, evaporating into an obscuring cloud of mist. A few domains expand and collide, their clashes seeming particularly wasteful as they act in opposition to each other, even though their main objective is simply to hit me.

I jump into the air, attracting even more projectiles. A water stream, an arrow, orbs, stone-like missiles, pure telekinesis. I boost myself again back toward the water. As I land, no ripples expand through the surface as I perfectly absorb the impact. Whitey would be proud.

More kinetic energy flows through my body, and I use Wraith Dance repeatedly to avoid more powerful attacks, each one sending a shockwave behind me that propels my body further ahead.

Finally, near the fortress, I shoot [Empyrean Lance].

The spherical barrier, composed of a multitude of hexagonal panels, each a slightly different shade of blue, is pierced, and the lance continues on through, striking several people in its path before crashing into the buildings behind them. It pierces through them as well and exits the barrier on the other side.

This barrier is different from the one in our first clash. A damaged segment disappears, the surrounding segments weaken slightly, and a new one forms in its place.

But before that can happen, my [Ley Line] passes through, and even though the barrier closes, I know I can still use it.

First, I send a tricolored orb through to let it form at the end of the line.

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Noname (Beyond, King) → llllllllllllll (Hard) +10 pts

Noname (Beyond, King) → DoorOfStoneWhen (Hard) +10 pts

Noname (Beyond, King) → Aidan(Normal) +5 pts

...

Then I teleport inside, appearing in the middle of the crater, surrounded by pools of molten stone formed by the explosion and a mass of compressed material created by the nearby implosion. Using Wraith Dance, I move to avoid an incoming attack and actively defend my mind against a series of stun attacks crashing into me. There are attempts to seize control of my mana, but they cannot.

It is, after all, my mana.

Two men standing on a nearby wall fire a series of projectiles at me. To avoid wasting mana, I don't defend against them, only dodge after tracking their trajectory.

Wraith Dance brings me to them.

They react too slowly, noticing me too late. One tries to flee while the other turns to attack, but with a quick strike from Needle Point, both vanish into clouds of fine blue particles.

Noname (Beyond, King) → NotGristletock (Hard) +10 pts

Noname (Beyond, King) → Monsieur (Hard) +10 pts

Ley Lines stretch through the area, where some of the people, likely Beyond attendees, seem to have sensed them. They attempt to tear the lines apart, but all to no avail. I detect the most impressive attempt and teleport through a closed [Ley Line], using Wraith Dance to cover the remaining distance.

I come upon a young woman surrounded by a barrier. Another man with a shield and sword stands beside her.

For a moment, I activate my eyes, adjust my frequency, and then pass through her barrier as if it wasn't there.

The man jumps into my path, slashing his sword at me, but I duck under and throw him off with my movement. Absorbing my inertia, I shift in an unexpected way and make my way over to the woman.

She is painfully slow, but she still has a remarkably powerful mana signature, one of the strongest I've felt from an Earthling thus far. Yet despite her talent at handling mana, her body's movements and instincts are still lacking.

I don't waste mana creating weapons; I simply slam my hand against her head, exploding it and turning her into blue particles.

Noname (Beyond, King) → Eliana Yankova (Beyond) +100 pts

Ducking under the sword, I teleport somewhere else, sensing too many signatures converging on my location.

A group of people appears, screaming as they turn to attack, and I teleport once more, leaving a tricolored orb behind.

Notifications ring.

A group of five rushes my way. I dodge an awkward attack from the first person to reach me and kick him in the chest, sending him crashing into the opposing wall.

Noname (Beyond, King) → Woojoe (Normal) +5 pts

I grab another one's axe, breaking his hand in the process, and swing it at him.

Noname (Beyond, King) → Ellimist (Hard) +10 pts

The woman charging at me screams, mana surging through her limbs as she vanishes and reappears mid stride. Her spear twists unnaturally, splitting into mirrored afterimages that strike from three angles.

I pivot around the thrusts, absorbing momentum into my stance, and lean just out of reach. I boost up and over, landing behind her. Before she can turn, I grip her spine and snap her forward into the ground with enough force to crater the surface.

Noname (Beyond, King) → Kirin (Hard) +10 pts

The last two nearby try to synchronize and attack me at once, but I dodge both. Each vanishes after a short burst of kinetic energy.

Noname (Beyond, King) → Jtscuba (Normal) +5 pts

Noname (Beyond, King) → Monkeh (Hard) +10 pts

Spotting another Beyond attendee, I head his way before more of them can muster to rush me. There are hundreds of people waiting when I finally arrive.

The Beyonder is a man standing atop the roof of a nearby tower, the same one I sat on while watching the other fortresses. He stands alone, with two daggers in his hands: one radiating a blood-red light and the other black with a hint of purple, infused with void primordial energy.

My senses narrow, with kinetic awareness dominating. I sense the vibrations from his steps and the beating of his heart; I even feel the air reacting as his body moves. Then I duck and sidestep, avoiding two thrusts aimed at me. And though a third comes from an invisible third arm, I dodge it as well.

His void energy pulses in an attempt at disrupting my skills, unlike anything I've sensed before, aimed at disturbing my mana and kinetic energy. It partially succeeds, making my energy more difficult to control.

He strikes out at me again. Once at my head, once slashing for my neck, and once aiming to pierce my heart, and I continue to evade. And all the while, he displays an incredible degree of speed; every movement is deadly.

But he just cannot compare to Tacita.

Instead of dodging the next attack, I let his void dagger pierce my palm and grab his hand, locking the dagger in place.

This disrupts my mana and kinetic energy, giving him an opening to move quickly and finish me off before I can counter. Then, I release the thermal energy I've been holding in reserve. It passes through his hand and into his body, with golden flames melting through everything in their path.

He reacts quickly, attempting to escape as his effort shifts from disrupting me to saving himself. As he does so, I use kinetic energy to keep pace and release a stronger burst of thermal energy.

Just a tiny bit, I open the seal on my Ignition Heart, and he crumbles into a fine ash even as he struggles to escape.

Noname (Beyond, King) → Georgiadis (Beyond) +100 pts

I pull the Ley Lines back to me and hurl them out again to avoid the traps they've already started setting.

Releasing kinetic energy through my bare feet, I stomp, breaking a hole through the roof and dropping through to land in the throne room.

Immediately, an arrow made of compressed red and white lightning crashes against the tricolored barrier I form, breaking it and slicing my cheek, drawing blood.

Someone tries to enter through the hole I just made, but I fire off a mana projectile that pierces his head and kills him instantly. When another attempts the same, I repeat the process.

Noname (Beyond, King) → Kiara (Hard) +10 pts

Noname (Beyond, King) → William Fairfax (Hard) +10 pts

Then, I turn back to my opponents.

"You are bleeding," says the 8th round's [King] from the throne.

I follow his gaze to my palm, the one that was pierced by the assassin's void dagger. Even now, it continues to bleed, healing more slowly than it should.

There are no healing marks on me this time; even my healing passive is deactivated.

For a short moment later, I watch a droplet of red blood flow down my palm, onto my finger and fingertip, before dropping onto the white marble floor.

"Just a flesh wound," I answer to Derick Kelley. His wife, Noelle, stands beside him, bow drawn, and its string of mana nocked with an arrow made of primordial lightning.

Then I charge them.

Chapter 560: Five Kings

Observing Noelle and tracing her aim, I predict the trajectory of the incoming arrow. Even so, I remain cautious, just in case she's capable of bending that trajectory.

And she does.

The arrow comes quickly, and follows it with a second one at a higher speed, ensuring that both will hit at the same time from different sides.

I release two short bursts of kinetic energy to change their paths just enough to allow me to dodge without having to use mana for defense. As the next three arrows reach me, I do the same.

Just a few steps away from the throne, five arrows reverse course and make their way back at me.

At that moment, Derick moves as well, his tattoos lighting up all across his body. I feel a powerful disrupting effect, especially centered around his fists, elbows, and shins. His mana glows vividly in my vision, separating itself from the stark black and white world I see.

He dodges my Needle Point and sends a burst of mana washing over his body to disrupt my attempt to halt his movements.

Next, his fist crashes into my left forearm as I move to intercept his strike, and cracks the bone. The disrupting effect on his fist shreds all mana based defenses in the small area of contact, sending out a powerful, brief vibration that further damages the bone beneath.

Even though it is cracked, I do not worry about it. With [Knitting] strengthening them, my bones will handle much more.

The lightning arrows reach us at the same time, and I teleport away as they pass through the spot where I had been standing, only to reappear in the same place.

I release the collected kinetic energy and take a smooth step toward Derick.

This time, the tattoos on his forearm light up as he projects energy in front of him, forming a shield-like barrier to block my attack.

I immediately switch tactics, grabbing his forearm. Boosting myself, I pull his forearms apart and unleash another quick burst of kinetic energy.

This time, though, he simply redirects it with a smaller shield wrapped around his free arm.

Thermal energy floods into my body as I move to pass it through his forearms, but he reacts quickly. In one incredible movement, he frees himself, takes a long, quick step around me to reach my side, kicks against my shin, and strikes my shoulder. This makes me stumble and nearly fall until I release another burst of kinetic energy to steady myself and throw another punch at him.

He ducks under, delivering two quick strikes to my chest, both landing just over my heart, and shoving me while kicking at my feet again to make me lose balance.

I stagger backward again, dropping the barrier that shielded my heart from an attack that would have surely damaged it. Dodging two lightning arrows from Noelle, I form and boost two javelins in return.

She moves in with quick, long strides even before I release the javelins, effortlessly avoiding both and firing more arrows at me. Each primordial lightning arrow forms in her hand before she latches it onto a string made of mana and releases it at incredible speed.

Derick closes in again to draw my attention while Noelle moves to flank me. He ducks, sidesteps, and leaps over my projectiles, deflecting one of my arms of mana with his glowing tattoos, disrupting a large portion of its structure before it can reach him.

So he prefers making strong attacks over a small area, I conclude.

I duck under his swing and use Steelroot to bolster my defenses as he kicks at my feet, trying to make me lose balance once more.

He clearly likes to use his opponent's inertia against them.

As he shoves me, I absorb my inertia, redirect it into another movement, and punch him as he moves to duck under the anticipated strike. When he takes a step back, Noelle attacks with two quick arrows, once more causing them to arrive at the same time.

I duck under one arrow and grab the second with my bleeding arm.

It also takes a short moment for his tattoos to power up; he clearly can't channel mana as quickly as I can.

I boost my body, redirect my movement, let him land a punch to my side, and swing to stab the arrow in his neck. Derick smiles as the lightning arrow vanishes from my hand, but his smile falters when a mana stake appears, hidden below the arrow until now.

At the last moment, he lifts his glowing forearm to block it. He expects his tattoos to disrupt the mana, but they do not.

My stake buries itself in his forearm, expands, glows, and pierces through the entirety of his arm, heading toward his neck until he kicks me, sending me backward while he also dodges the projectiles I shoot at him.

I have observed his tattoos and modified the frequency of my mana. Even though I am sure he can adjust the effect of his tattoos on the run, I can adapt faster.

The inertia of his kick carries me backward, and I let it happen, even adding to it, heading toward Noelle, whose mana surges in response, and her movements pick up an incredible amount of speed as she fires a dozen arrows within seconds. Not even bothering to avoid them, I teleport through a [Ley Line],

placing myself in a location closer to her, lowering my body to further increase my speed as I charge at her.

She drops her bow, and the arrow in her hand changes and twists into the shape of a saber made of primordial lightning.

Derick is close, though, following hot on my heels, threatening to intercept me at any moment.

My mana explodes and expands, creating a spherical barrier around the three of us and trapping us inside. I open my mouth and spit out an orb filled with a mix of thermal energy and mana.

Then I teleport myself out of the throne room.

I once again feel the sea breeze on my skin and smell the air as I wait, but there are no notifications. However, what I find outside is interesting in its own way: most of the people from Easy, Normal, and Hard difficulty are gone; only a few from Hell and Beyond remain.

And there is another surprise.

Two people have the word [King] over their heads.

When Derick finally exits the tower through the hole in the roof and lands on top, that makes it four of us.

Derick is wounded; burns mark his forearms and face, and in some places, bone shines through the holes in his flesh. Yet he still seems capable of fighting and even wears a lazy smile.

Jean is down there, too, smiling brightly as he shouts, "Noname! I challenge you to a duel!" The maniacal call surprises Derick and the last [King], who had probably made a different deal with him that didn't include a 1v1 fight.

They should have known better than to think he would act according to their plan and wouldn't just try to duel me. Though they probably don't have as much experience with him as I do.

The genuine version of this novel can be found on another site. Support the author by reading it there.

While the tension starts rising again, I observe the last [King], the 10th round's representative. He looks Asian, likely Korean, slim, and tall with black hair. He wears sleek black clothes, and even from here, I sense dozens of mana batteries embedded in them along with a web of inscriptions sewn into the fabric. The whole thing resembles one of the arrays I keep stored in the back of my mind.

One of the Beyonders from Derick's round is here, along with Lucien, and a woman from Jean's round, and two more Beyonders by the 10th round [King]'s side: a young Korean girl, barely 12 years old, and a Korean man in his 50s.

It seems like it's about time.

I reach into my pocket and pull out the object that splashed into the water as I left our fortress.

It is a finger. Specifically, a finger belonging to a woman.

As it hits the ground, a figure emerges from it. Black hair, brown eyes with one of which is a shade lighter than the other, and an expression that I believe fits her more than any human alive.

Victoria stands on a patch of ground near the 10th round's [King] and Jean, but she just glances at them and turns to look up at me.

She asks a single question, "Which one?"

"The bald guy over there, along with the rest of his group, please," I reply.

Victoria nods and disappears. In the next moment, she crashes into Jean, sending him crashing against the wall and then breaking through it with Jean's fellow Beyonders following close behind.

Before anyone else can react, I teleport over to the Korean [King] with mana oscillating around my hand, taking the opportunity to slash at his neck.

Instead of him reacting, the young Korean girl moves to block the attack. I sense no mana from her, almost as if she has none at all. Instead, she relies solely on her physical stats. As my hand cuts into her forearm, she doesn't even flinch. Her face remains expressionless, the look of someone utterly focused.

So, a concentration type skill?

The older Korean man moves as well, as the area around me begins to grow incredibly cold. Frost forms on my body, and the ground under my feet freezes. My breath puffs out in a cloud of mist.

Derick appears nearby, attacking from the opposite side of the girl. His tattoos glow even brighter with a stark white light, nearly blinding me through my trait as the intense mana attempts to overwhelm my vision.

I teleport away and launch a javelin toward the tower's roof, where it collides with a lightning projectile. I redirect it just enough that it manages to miss me completely. Noelle stands there, the left side of her body terribly burned, one of her eyes ruined, and her left arm charred. She has discarded her bow, and instead, a circle of lightning that spins on an orbit around her.

Derick moves to my left while the Korean [King] moves to my right. The girl takes the front, and behind me, another man with a powerful signature appears, betraying his status as a Beyonder, likely from Derick's round. The old man who had tried to freeze me stands nearby, ready to jump in.

Then the man behind me swings a staff he is holding, and it touches one of the invisible Ley Lines I've suspended in the air nearby. The staff absorbs a piece of that Ley Line and glows as he slams it against the ground. A field forms within the fortress barrier, and all the Ley Lines I have placed vanish.

Breathing heavily, the man falls to his knees.

I try to use [Ley Line] and find myself unable to. I attempt to radiate heat from my body, but it is actively suppressed by the old man, who already seems to be watching just for that.

"We have made preparations against you," Derick says as his tattoos shift their frequency again. They change constantly, several times per second, and I can see the strain it puts on him.

I return his gaze, "And you think this will be enough?"

POV Derick Kelley

Even surrounded by all of us, he shows no sign of nerves. His expression remains as calm as before, even colder than it was during our Beyond expedition. Back then, he gave me goosebumps, and that made my decision clear. Noname needs to be the first to go in this event.

We've collected as much information on him as possible. We paid off as many people from his round as we could to share what they knew, and we came prepared.

Without Jean, Kang Jiwon, and I are forced to serve as tanks, while Park Tae-sik is tasked with facing down Noname's fire abilities. Noelle provides support. By sacrificing a powerful item, we even managed to suppress his teleportation, which usually seems nearly impossible to stop.

Noname disappears in a movement that does not use mana and almost resembles teleportation. I follow him immediately, joined by the girl.

He reappears near Kendrick, who is still kneeling, expended after using the staff. Noname grabs the back of his head and smashes it against the ground, turning him into blue particles in an instant.

The girl reaches him sooner than I do, but I dodge to the side as she finds her body being flung past me by his kinetic energy. She still lacks experience, even though her talent is incredible.

I reach him, bracing myself for the impending attack, but it does not come. Noname moves again, and this time, I can follow him better. I observe his body, taking note of the feints he uses most often, and move almost simultaneously with him.

Trailing behind him, I grab his left arm and pull in an attempt to take him off balance and stop his charge, but to my surprise, his arm gives in and remains in my hand.

Did he cut it off? But why? Just to prevent me from stopping his attack?

That momentary hesitation allows him to reach the man shrouded in that intense chilly aura, so cold I would not even dare come near it. But Noname charges in, gold flames blazing around his skin, and expanding to fill the area.

I hear a heartbeat, just one.

At the same time, the arm I'm holding starts glowing bright white. I barely manage to raise a shield before it explodes, hurling me against the ground and bouncing me off the wall. As I pull myself back to my feet, I redirect the mana flowing through my tattoos into undamaged segments to keep them active. I strengthen my body, clear my mind, and rush back.

Noname stands where Park Tae-sik once did, and there is no sign of the man anywhere. The area around us is molten, the heat rising into the air, causing it to shimmer with motion. I notice a golden glow in his gray and brown eyes.

Baek, the 10th round's [King], finally moves. He sighs in his usual lazy manner and shakes his head. The black clothes he wears seem to move as if they were alive, adorned with blue mana stones that shine like stars as they expand.

A deep blue suit of armor forms around him, taking on an almost metallic sheen. Sleek and dangerously sharp in design, it solidifies around him. A sword materializes in his hand, made from the same dark blue mana, and gleaming with the same metallic luster.

Baek takes a stance and charges at Noname, swinging his sword just a step away from him.

A field radiates from Noname, draining all color from the area. Only his crown and small flickers of his golden flames remain, while everything else fades to black and white.

The armor around Baek and his sword vanish like a candle being blown out, and his inertia carries him to Noname, who catches him by the neck and smashes him against the ground.

A pale blue mana arm grows from Noname's severed limb, and he drives its fingers down, aiming to stab them into Baek's head.

But Noname stops mid-movement and instead lifts Baek, using him as a shield against the charging girl. As she collides with her [King], Noname releases a burst of kinetic energy, sending them both flying. Between them shines an orb filled with golden flames and pale blue mana.

Noname tilts his head to avoid Noelle's arrow. It hits the ground instead, sending a burst of lightning through it and striking Noname, stunning him for a moment.

As the golden orb attached to Baek explodes, I reach Noname and take advantage of the brief stun to bury my fingers into his chest, aiming for his heart, but I'm too slow with all my wounds, and in the last moment, he shifts his body, causing me to miss.

Up close, he turns to me, his expression unchanged even as blood seeps from his nose due to the strain and from his mouth because of the wound I've just caused.

Then he spits that blood into my eyes. Surprised and blinded, I feel a sharp pain, and I stagger back to gain time. I notice my arm missing, cut off at the elbow.

When I look up, Noname is nowhere to be seen, but a sudden thud in my chest sends me staggering back. As I look down, I see my own severed hand, its fingers piercing my heart. He must have used kinetic energy to boost the throw. The fact that it was my own arm, filled with my mana, likely made me lower my guard, even as I sensed it coming.

I try to move, but after a few steps, I see a haze of blue particles and find myself outside in our common area, fully healed and only now realizing how much damage those attacks caused me.

Looking around, I spot Kendrick and sit on the bench next to him, watching the event on screen with the others already waiting outside.