

Tutorial 561

Chapter 561: 10th Round's King

POV Nathaniel

The price to pay for getting rid of Derick is high. A projectile from Noelle pierces my side and burns a hole through me, eating away at the flesh around it. Another one hits the ground at my feet, generating a stunning field around me.

Even though I manage to escape even faster this time, there is enough time for that young Korean girl to reach me and deliver a blow to my head. Only my hastily constructed mana barrier saves me from instant death, but it shatters, and though the damage is reduced, I still take the hit.

It whips my head back and sends my body flying.

I absorb the momentum of my movement, and three lightning projectiles hit where I would have been if I had continued to roll. Then I boost myself to the side to avoid a heavy stomping attack from the young girl, which cracks the floor in the process.

For that short moment, silence ensues as I pull myself to my feet, my body swaying before I force myself to stand tall once more. I take a deep breath, then patch my body with mana as much as possible to stop the bleeding. I knit the wounds closed with mana threads or create patches of mana to keep the larger wounds sealed.

I'm missing an arm, the other is a hair's breadth from being broken. My skull is cracked, and a hole has been torn in my side. Not to mention the hole in my chest that damaged my lungs, among other things.

In that time, the [King] of the 10th round comes closer as well. Like the girl, he shows no visible damage from the blast of my thermal orb. He moves lazily, looks me up and down, then sits on a nearby pile of rubble.

"Kang Jiwon," he calls to the girl, "this is too much work; it was supposed to be a quick fight."

She calls to the man, "Master, please take this seriously. That man is dangerous. If you make a mistake, both of us are going to die."

The man just shrugs and rolls his shoulders, "I can't bring myself to care, Kang Jiwon. It's not like we can actually die here anyway."

"Please, master, don't make our round seem like a failure."

"Sure. Sure."

I don't interrupt and instead stay quiet, using the time to patch some of my internal wounds. It takes a bit of concentration to keep it all up, but it's better than just letting it be.

When I'm done, he turns to me and smiles, "Ready?"

Before he even finishes his question, he moves. The same dark blue armor with a metallic shine surrounds him as he appears in front of me using some form of teleportation. Only now do I notice the mark he managed to sneak into my space to allow for it.

Right under my nose, without me noticing.

I use [Eclipse], draining the colors from the area and modifying it against his armor, but this time it doesn't disappear. It resists, and the sword cuts diagonally at me, forcing me to use Wraith Dance to dodge.

The [King] follows behind me, each step of his armor tearing the ground under immense force. The constantly changing frequency of his armor resisting my attempts at disruption. The armor itself deflects my bursts of kinetic energy; even if they push him back, he comes charging at me again.

After dodging another strike, I let my mana seep out, forming a similar suit of armor which grows to match his before compressing even further. Then a sword forms as well, laced with my resonating mana.

We collide, and I get pushed back until I send more kinetic energy through my armor, powering it further and pushing him back.

He nimbly dodges my attack and slashes at my body hidden inside the armor. His sword expands in size and stops only against the arm of my armor. In an instant, his armor shrinks until it's skin-tight, and he leaps onto the chest of my armor and jams his sword into it.

I blink as that sword pierces through and stops only a palm's width away from my eyes.

His helmet disappears, and I can see him smile as he jumps back. The armor around him again expands to five times his height. The design stays the same, slim and deadly, but the sword is replaced by a hammer, which he swings at me.

A burst of kinetic energy slows the hammer, and I absorb the rest of the force, dispersing its impact as it crashes into me. At the same time, a few lightning projectiles embed themselves in my back.

That much should be enough.

I release more of my mana; it seeps out of me, swirls around me, fills my armor, and expands until it stands even taller than the other [King]'s.

While his armor is slim and deadly with a metallic shine, mine is thicker and affected by my pride; it is slightly ornamented, maintaining a pretty yet functional design.

I move quicker than he does, even though I'm still dealing with the greater mass of my armor. My kinetic mana heart beats quickly, converting mana into the kinetic energy I use for movement.

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My fist crashes against his head and sends him staggering back. Then my armor disappears, all that mana turning into projectiles that bombard the top of the tower where Noelle is. Dozens, even hundreds of them, tear the roof apart and follow her as she tries to dodge until one hits, and more of them smash into her.

Then the kill notification finally rings.

Floating there, I turn my attention back to the 10th round [King] and weave an [Empyrean Lance]

Right away, I sense that he is still alive, and I fly towards him, in my flight avoiding the Korean girl who jumps from the nearby wall in an attempt to stop me.

As I reach the [King], he is already on his feet, still undamaged. In his hand is a sword made of mana. Even though it is cracked, it still holds.

He moves quickly to get out of the field created by my lance centered around its impact crater, and I follow behind him. Only after a few steps does he stop and change direction to rush right at me. The girl does the same, and they attack me from different sides.

In the last few steps, the girl moves quicker than before, pushing her body over the limit and crashing into me at high speed.

As I'm absorbing the force of her attack, the [King] attacks from the other side.

I look towards him and allow my eyes to collect more information, straining my brain as I read his mana fluctuations.

Instead of falling back on [Eclipse], I send a disrupting wave at his mana sword, which disappears mere moments before it can cut into my neck. I twist my body and strike the girl with an open palm, releasing a concentrated burst of kinetic energy as I do.

As expected, she endures the first one, but two more follow in quick succession until they explode a chunk of her body, and she is thrown away. Before I can follow, my foot is cut off, making me fall to the ground. There, I roll to the side and avoid the stab of the sword into my chest before releasing another blast of kinetic energy at him.

He cuts through it with his sword, the same metallic shine surrounding it as his armor did before.

Then the girl is back and strikes against my chest.

I absorb all the kinetic energy from her attack and release it to move faster, stopping just in time to let a sword slash past me and drive my mana-formed hand into his leg. Before I can deal more damage, his sword shortens, and he takes another stab at my head, but I twist my body, and my shoulder takes the hit.

I reach through a mark I placed on his leg when I struck him before, and release a good amount of thermal energy, allowing it to envelop him.

The girl reaches me again, and I release a powerful burst of flames, impressive at a glance, but ultimately intended to blind her rather than deal damage. Aiming through the wall of flames, I fire off two mana javelins boosted by kinetic energy, and both of them pierce cleanly through her chest, impaling her against the wall.

Gazing at me and without hesitation, she pulls them out of her body, one after another, and breaks them in her hands. She takes a few steps towards me before coughing up blood and slowing down. She breathes heavily while watching me with that emotionless expression glued to her face.

The man is alive as well, stepping out of the fiery explosion, once more encased in armor, though it's much smaller this time, barely matching the size of his body.

"Are you alright, Kang Jiwon?" he asks.

"Yes. I can attack one more time, master," she answers.

That makes him laugh out loud, and he shakes his head, "You cannot. See you in the common area."

With that, I send a small tricolored orb through the mark I left on her.

The explosion sends both of us staggering, and the system chimes out a notification about the kill.

Finally, I fully break through that annoying field left behind by the item and throw a few Ley Lines around the area.

Surprisingly, he can see it, his eyes moving and gazing over the exact places where that shimmering pale blue line is.

"I'm Baek Kwaneok," he greets.

"Noname," I answer back.

"Haaa," he sighs. "Concentration types, all the same."

Still looking at me, he says, "I wasn't able to get rid of the mark you placed on me, and I have no intention of cutting off my own leg, so do what you have to do."

Even as he says that, he charges at me, and reaching through the mark I left on him, I send another tricolored orb, followed by a burst of thermal energy.

The two explosions surround him, but from inside of it he moves out. Four wings made of the same metallic, shining mana extend from his back, and his leg, where I left the mark, is clearly cut off.

I move to teleport, but I fail to activate it. In a last-ditch attempt, he takes over what remains of the field they created at the start of the fight with that item and reactivates it one more time. Both of his eyes bleed, and his heart skips a beat and sustains damage under the effort he needs to exert.

He crashes against me and attempts to stab his sword through me, but I let it stab my forearm instead and redirect it into the ground as we fall down.

"I lied," he laughs, and with a huge smirk, he moves to headbutt me, the last of his mana moving to create a sturdy barrier around his forehead.

Instead of targeting it, I release collected kinetic energy in front of me, detonating his body and sending him flying back before he can hit me.

Noname (Beyond, King) → Baek Kwanseok (King) +5,000 pts

After searching through the area and making sure no one else is present, I take a deep breath and just lie there for a second.

Just one.

Then I patch up what remains of my body and stand up.

I know I'm probably being watched through the screens in the common areas of the other rounds, so I show no hesitation, no weakness. Looking up to where I think the "camera" is, I release my mana, filling the area in a burst reminiscent of a blazing flame that surrounds me and reaches toward the sky.

I modify the way I radiate it and its fluctuation, and just that, combined with sheer pressure, breaks the barrier.

For that brief moment, I let all my mana blaze at full power to send a message. To her and everyone else.

Then I pull it back inside my body and contain it all.

It's my mana, and even after the fight, more than half of it still remains.

Chapter 562: A payment for a simple request

Victoria (Beyond, King) → Spacewolf (Beyond) +100 pts

Victoria (Beyond, King) → Maple (Hell) +20 pts

Victoria (Beyond, King) → CarrotCake (Beyond, King) +5,000 pts

These are some of the notifications I see in my feed. These probably came through a few minutes ago. As reliable as always, Victoria dealt with them and then went on to do her own thing.

Flying high into the air, I observe the battlefield. Now, without the Kings, it should be easy to clean up the rest.

The bulk of the fighting is taking place between the members of our round, the remaining forces that make up Derick's round, and the forces responsible for defending the fortress that my round is attacking.

Down there in our fortress, I can see constant flashes of orange light from Savant's [Dawn]. Our sole defender seems to be fighting someone. The skill, powerful enough at the higher levels to wipe out everyone on Lissandra's home world of Eladore, continues to obliterate a massive number of enemies, as confirmed by the stream of notifications from the kill feed.

On the other side of the battlefield, the strongest combatants are being ruthlessly hunted down by Tacita. Even now, barely anyone has any hope of detecting her, and even if they do, hardly anyone is able to react in time. Not caring about efficiency or collecting points, Tacita just hunts the strongest enemies she can find, swiftly switching between the hoard of daggers in her possession, each with a different effect.

I even notice Noodle, as thick as a small tree trunk and longer than an olympic swimming pool, slithering around the walls, devouring any barriers in his path, his scales burning with the green, blue, and purple flame of the Fragment of Eternal Fire. Sometimes, I even catch glimpses of Izzy, shooting the same flame from her palms.

It appears they kept an eye on the notifications and know the event is likely won, and I did my part to fulfill Lissandra's requirements. Instead of going all out and collecting a few more points, they seem to have decided to hide the true extent of their abilities. It's something we talked about previously, and they take it seriously.

Passing over that battlefield, I reach the fortress belonging to Jean's round. Unlike Jean, who seemingly agreed to participate in Derick's plan to take me down, they have chosen to take shelter inside. Even now, they work, stacking up their defenses and preparing any number of nasty traps; something to throw at anyone who manages to breach their walls.

And by nasty, I mean really nasty, something powerful enough to wipe out even Beyond attendees.

Their barrier is also two-sided, the front purposely weaker. Rather than being an integral part of the whole, it serves as a secondary barrier meant to be broken, allowing people to enter before the rest of the barrier reactivates to trap them. With certain poisons and collected energies activating, this could get interesting.

Floating overhead, I expand the Ley Lines in the area and twist them, creating a huge circle which I immediately begin filling with more and more Ley Lines. When I can no longer create more, I weave in dense threads of mana instead. Slowly, I start building up a giant inscription, using all the testing I did previously and the experience I gained with that Bloodroot Devourer on the 6th floor.

I separate part of my mind and, floating over the inscription, form an orb as big as a basketball before slightly opening a seal on the Sealed Ignition Heart. With each beat of my second heart, a small stream of that incredibly concentrated thermal energy flows into the orb, swirling inside it. When the orb looks ready to crack and break, I start spinning the thermal energy. It forms a whirlpool of golden flames inside, drawing in the flames I send to it at increasing speed.

All that mana within me, the thermal energy I now have to control, all with no passive protecting my mind. I push myself to the absolute limit, knowing exactly where it is from all the deaths during the tournament. I walk the edge, fully aware that a single mistake would trigger a backlash powerful enough to kill me instantly.

And that would mean failure of the task Lissandra has set for me.

But I do not fail.

I will not fail.

A high-pitched sound fills my head as mana seeps out of me, passing through the Ley Lines and threads of mana. It lights up and powers the inscription floating in the air above the fortress.

Then, silence falls, and the sense of pressure vanishes.

At that moment, I look down and see our round and Victoria's slowly making their way toward the fortress. They wait below like beasts ready to fight, while only small remnants of battle persist within our fortress, with a few smaller fights still going on against what's left of the other two rounds.

The moment passes, and my inscription flares to life for an instant before vanishing. It crumbles away, its threads unraveling into fine particles that drift into the air.

With it, the barrier surrounding the fortress shatters instantly. The disrupting wave from the inscription tears through, completely obliterating the barrier along with any traps or activate skills below.

My thermal orb falls like a meteor, its surface glowing in golden flames as all that energy tries to escape. It crashes in the middle of the fortress and bursts open like a bubble. From it, a massive wave of golden flames surges forward, crashing against the buildings and sweeping through the passages.

Over half of the remaining people from Round 1 die from that single attack.

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Then I reach down and pull all the remaining heat from the air back to my body, and, like another wave, Rounds 4 and 5 rush inside to deal with the rest. Turning away from it all, I fly to the side and reach the top of Derick's fortress. There I sit upon the broken roof that sways as if it is about to fall apart.

While waiting for it all to end, I allow myself to slip out of [Focus] and devote my full attention to the process of keeping my body alive and managing my mana.

I shudder as I feel as though I have returned to reality, and then I read the notifications.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 63 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 64]

[Focus - lvl 63 > Focus - lvl 64]

[Perception - lvl 59 > Perception - lvl 60]

[Eclipse - lvl 26 > Eclipse - lvl 27]

[Eclipse - lvl 27 > Eclipse - lvl 28]

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 17 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 18]

[Ley Line - lvl 49 > Ley Line - lvl 50]

[Knitting - lvl 29 > Knitting - lvl 30]

I thought I would get more, and while this is good, it's not enough to fully satisfy me. As of late, I've been seeing more and more evidence of diminishing returns. It's getting harder and harder to show the system that you have enough mastery for it to register another level up. And I have no reason to think it will be any different in the future.

The rumors that it may be impossible to reach the level of Champion within the tutorial, which I estimate to start around level 450, are seeming increasingly likely to be true. Maybe at least a decade is needed for it? Maybe two? Probably even longer if you want to become a "proper" Champion, at least by Sandra The Cockroach's standards.

Ten minutes later, I see the strongest flash of orange light yet and turn toward our fortress to see what's happening, only to witness it explode and disappear completely, leaving nothing behind.

What the hell?

I quickly open the notifications and scroll up a little, finding what I was looking for.

Hadwin (Beyond) → Savant (Beyond)

Savi, my unhealthily patient and cowardly not-a-friend, what could you have possibly done to piss off the Cockroach?

POV Kang Jiwon

As we agreed previously, both Master Baek and I enter the mountain of the 8th round. Expecting us, the guards let us pass, and one of them leads us toward the big house, a short distance away from the central area and near the edge of the forest.

We enter the same room as before, and while Master Baek takes his seat in one of the free chairs, I remain standing. Mister Kelley and his wife are already there, sitting next to each other on the sofa.

We spend the time in silence, waiting for Mister CarrotCake to join us, along with Mister Lucien.

"Greetings, my evil collaborators!" Mister CarrotCake exclaims with a big smile as he walks in, flopping down and crashing into the seat of the biggest armchair in the room, which still manages to groan under the strain of his weight.

"Jean," Mister Kelley greets him softly, "I didn't expect you to be so happy after your stunning defeat."

"It's fine, it's fine," he says with the same smile, waving it off. "It's all about the process. Just like in the gym, you need to damage your muscles for them to grow. It doesn't matter if I lose once or multiple times. You know what? I think that's what actually makes it more fun."

"That's an attitude I didn't expect from you, especially with your subclass. So, how was she? Were the rumors true?" Mister Kelley asks, his curiosity clear.

With his smile growing even bigger, Mister CarrotCake says, "Oh, they were. Like brother, like sister. Or maybe like sister, like brother? You bunch also got the shit beaten out of you, from what I have heard."

"That's too harsh, Jean, even if it is true. But did you know Noname was holding back?"

Miss Kelley chimes in for the first time, "He didn't even heal his body, and we saw his incredible healing during the Beyond expedition. Some of his passives also seemed to have deactivated, and he appeared to be handicapping himself and not using most of his mana."

The room quiets, and I look at Miss Kelley, who meets my gaze with a calm, gentle smile. Master has already warned me that she has exceptionally keen eyes.

Meanwhile, Mister Lucien looks disinterested, as if the only reason he was here was because someone dragged him along.

Mister CarrotCake slams his hand on the armrest of his chair, "Isn't that obvious? He was clearly sending a message, the same way we heard he did during the first part of the 1st event. It's a shame I didn't fight him one-on-one, but his sister was also fun."

"Did she live up to the rumors?" Miss Kelley asks.

"She could create clones, duplicates, or avatars of herself. Her physical stats are incredible, and I have no idea how you would even go about killing her. As long as she has a piece of her flesh, she can regrow from it, and I couldn't tell which one was the original. But for now, it seems like the longer these 'clones' stay alive, the weaker they become, as if they degrade over time. That might change with more levels. She also likely has some physique-related trait and probably an upgraded constitution attribute."

I decide to join the conversation, "It's highly likely that she possesses a concentration-type skill, like her brother."

Master Baek reacts for the first time and tilts his head to look at me.

I return his gaze, and he sighs, clearly annoyed.

Mister CarrotCake, unfazed, says, "So, the sister is an immortal, emotionless maniac who'll gladly rip your arm off and beat you to death with it, while the brother's constantly zipping around like some glitched out ghost, spewing mana all over the place and wrecking everything in sight. Got it. And Derrick, what happened to that silver haired chick? Did she tell you anything else?"

The reminder of her involvement pulls my thoughts back to that woman, the one with all-seeing eyes that never seemed to miss a thing, as if she could see everything all at once. Even the way she moved left an impression.

Not long ago, she contacted Derrick and offered techniques if he could reel in the other rounds and get them to cooperate.

The samples of techniques she left with Mister Kelley for each of the Kings were so incredible that they even caught my Master's interest.

"I would recommend that you never speak to her that way, Jean," Mister Kelley warns. "And as promised, she left a mana stone with techniques for each of you."

He carefully takes them from his wife and hands them to Mister CarrotCake and my master. Both accept them with care, immediately diving into the stone with impatience.

A payment for a simple request from that woman. For us to join forces against those siblings.

Chapter 563: Five Beasts

Another notification appears as I get outside, after the event ends. More information on the placement in the event. Another 1st place and a lot of shards. And my body is healed by the system in that incredible way it does, seemingly manifesting any missing limbs out of the air itself. As before, I postpone my reward to bolster my final reward for the tournament.

The next event is the Beast Hunt, and once again, we now have a 24-hour break before it starts, and we'll get more information in about 12 hours.

Someone tugs on my clothes, and I look to the side, where I find Lily standing next to me.

"What?" I ask.

"They focused on you directly. Why?"

"I have an idea or two about that, but you don't need to worry about it. Did you enjoy the event?"

"A little," she says, walking by my side as I make my way back to my workshop, "You and Victoria took care of the Kings, but there were still plenty of strong Beyonders and Hell attendees left over for us. The problem was that Tacita was hunting them down, and some of them decided to lead an attack on our fortress, so I had to be quick to get my share."

I notice Samuel moving in to speak with me, so I put my hand on Lily's shoulder, and she lowers her defenses so I can teleport both of us far enough away to continue our conversation.

Lily continues to talk as if nothing happened, "Sometimes it's scary how defenseless the people from Easy and Normal difficulty can be when there are no Hell attendees or Beyonders around to defend them."

"Is this what people call a humble bragging?" I ask.

"It's not!" she shouts, then quickly lowers her voice. "It just scares me sometimes. Will I even be able to be around normal people? Will I get to the point where I won't want to touch them, for fear of hurting them?"

I shrug, "You're overthinking things too much. To me, it's simple. If you want to do that, find a way to limit your stats or strength to a much lower level, and that's it. But that would probably make you vulnerable, so be careful."

My answer seems to give her a bit of pause, and she takes a moment to think for a bit, and when we finally come to a stop in front of the workshop, she chuckles softly.

"It's just like in those stories."

"What kind?" I ask.

"The ones where the gods have to turn mortal to be able to stay among humans."

With that last sentence, she waves me off and leaves, likely to train.

Ten hours later, I leave the workshop with another wave of items waiting in the auction, and Miwa on her way back to her own workshop. My plan of cooperating with another crafter is picking up steam. Soon, she'll reach a level where people will ask her for items instead of me, hopefully, so I won't have to deal with projects other than my own. Yes, it's all coming together now.

Sensing a familiar signature in our living room, I teleport there, finding Victoria sitting in the armchair and Lily opposite her. They are alone, and Lily looks as if she's in the process of being interrogated.

As Victoria turns her attention to me, Lily seizes the opportunity to escape, after saying a quick goodbye.

"Don't bully my group, Vic," I complain as I push her over so I can take a seat next to her.

She looks at me questioningly, "I would not do that, Natty. But never mind that, did things go well for you during the event?"

I confirm, "Yes. I mean, that person didn't come to complain, so that's a good sign at least."

"Do you want me to speak with her?"

"Please don't," I quickly respond. Just the thought makes me worry about the problems that would arise if their personalities clashed. I can already imagine what Vic would do.

"As you wish."

"How was your fight with Jean?"

"That man? He is likely the strongest out of the Kings we have met so far. It took a while to deal with him, but it was nothing I could not handle."

"I just thought of something, but can you duplicate items?"

"Yes, but only those of common rarity. I should be able to duplicate more powerful ones if I try, but I have decided not to spend time training it and instead, I am focusing on other priorities for now."

"It would be interesting if you could do it, Vic, but you have the right of it either way. Items can be taken away, but your power will stay with you."

"That is true. Use them, but do not rely on them, and be ready to throw them away."

"Is that why you have no armor or items, just these common clothes?"

Victoria nods, "Yes. It began to annoy me after a while, when I noticed people staring at me, so I learned to duplicate my clothes at the very least."

"Vic."

"Yes, Natty?"

"Don't tell me you've been fighting naked."

"Of course I did, I had to. At the lower levels, my skill would not allow me to duplicate, not even common clothes, and what is there to be shy about when it comes to a death or life situation?"

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"Who saw?"

"Most of the opponents who forced me to use my skill before I improved it are already dead."

“Name the remaining ones, Vic. Tell me right now, I will end them all.”

To that, she smacks the back of my head.

As expected, a few hours later, the notification finally comes.

The 2nd event, Beast Hunt, will start in 12 hours!

Everyone will be transferred to a randomly selected map; all difficulties will participate together. The terrain will be chosen at random from the system's database. You will be facing the environment and the beasts.

The 2nd event will take place over the course of the next 10 hours, and the placement will be decided according to total score.

You will gain points for hunting and killing beasts. The more powerful the beast, the more points you will be awarded.

Note: A hefty penalty will be incurred for killing another participant.

Note: All points for a given kill will be awarded to the person delivering the killing blow.

Five special grade beasts will be placed around the map, each within their own territory. Anyone who successfully takes down such a beast will be awarded a huge amount of points.

These five beasts are:

Stormscale Basilisk: A serpentine predator covered in shimmering, conductive scales that generate lightning with each movement. It is capable of releasing explosive electric bursts and paralyzing its prey with its gaze.

Emberhorn Behemoth: A towering, bovine creature with obsidian horns that channel the elemental fury of magma. Its hooves ignite the ground where it walks, and it can unleash devastating gouts of lava.

Nightshade Stalker: A feline predator shrouded in shifting shadows, capable of blending into the dark and attacking from multiple directions simultaneously. Its venomous claws may induce hallucinations.

Onyxscale Hydra: A multi-headed serpent capable of instant regeneration unless its heads are destroyed in a specific sequence. Each head controls a different element. Has a penchant for launching devastating attacks.

Witherclaw: A lanky, fragile creature with thin, splintered claws that break on impact. However, each failed strike and every wound it sustains forces it to regenerate, sharpening its claws and making its body stronger, harder, and deadlier with each battle and the passage of time.

The notification disappears, and another appears in its place.

It is now possible to visit the common areas of all the rounds.

Later, standing in the middle of the room, I patiently wait as Victoria fixes my hair and the collar of my shirt.

She takes a step back and nods, satisfied, "You always were handsome, Nathaniel. You always could pull off just about any outfit."

Before answering, I take a moment to calm down after another death. Victoria notices, so she waits patiently.

"I don't want to go," I tell her.

"And you think I do not know that?"

"See? You don't even need me there."

"First impressions are important. How many times do I have to keep telling you that? If not for yourself, can you do it for me?"

I sigh, "Of course."

"Good," she says, ruffling my hair and starts fixing it again, belatedly realizing what she's done.

At this point, the rest of group 4 are giving me looks that I will need to punish them for later. I still have plenty of conversations I've happened to overhear and little secrets I can throw around to cause them trouble.

"You do not have to worry about anything. I will take care of all the talking. But the two of us going there together will send a powerful message and make things easier in the future."

"Yes, I know," I admit, deflating as I do, "but I'm holding you to your word, Vic, only 30 minutes, after that I will fuck the hell off, even if I have to beat the shit out of all of them at once."

"Mind your language. Those who can not control their words or actions are no better than animals, and I would be very disappointed if my only brother were to stoop so low."

"You know why I'm in such..."

"No excuses."

"I... okay."

"Good. Shall we go then?"

This time, I don't bother checking the expressions of my fellow group 4 members and follow behind Victoria, who also seems to have chosen a bit more formal attire. Nothing too excessive. Where previously both of us wore the kind of clothes you would wear while rolling at home or taking out the

trash, we now wear clothes you might put on when going to the city. Well, a medieval age-ish version of that.

We're both wearing white button-up shirts and black pants. Nothing too different from the kind of thing I'd normally wear, though these clothes are made of a visibly superior material that looks nicer and comes with a price tag to match, yet somehow they're just as comfortable.

Victoria, on the other hand, has her hair brushed back and pulled into a simple ponytail, and where her sleeves hang at her wrists, I roll mine up to the elbow when she's not watching. Well, I'm sure she must have noticed but decided to let it go.

Neither of us carries any weapon as I activate [Ley Line], reaching out toward the 8th round's mountain and teleport us there among the trees. After a minute of walking, we enter a common area that isn't too dissimilar to ours. There are probably even more people from the 8th round than usual, hanging around to watch the people entering their "territory."

There are cars here as well, along with some modern tents. And is that a fucking tank I see, and what about that helicopter on the edge of the clearing? I also notice multiple drones flying high in the air.

Both of us walk along the clear path set out for us, and approach the edge of the common area where we find ourselves looking up at a huge white tent. I observe the inscriptions around it and identify them as those meant to block sound, wind, and something to clean the air? I quickly locate the item they are connected to: some bottle with liquid inside.

I activate my eyes and look at it more deeply. The inscriptions seem to be meant to dissolve whatever liquid is inside. Is it some kind of poison? Or a hallucinogen perhaps?

We enter, and the first thing I notice is the pleasant scent of lemons and freshly cut grass.

Oh.

It's a goddamn scent diffuser.

In the middle of the tent sits a single circular table, quite a large one at that. Ten chairs have been arranged around it, and there are already a few people settling in. They look up from the table, focusing on Vic and me as we make our entrance. Right off the bat, I spot Derick, Baek, and Jean, along with the redhead woman from the 2nd round.

Each spot at the table has a number from 1 to 10, arranged in a counterclockwise manner. I sit down beside my number, and Vic sits as well, on my left side.

Derick smiles at Vic and looks toward me, "I'm glad the two of you decided to attend."

"No problem. I've decided to give you a hand."

It takes him a second or two to catch on, and I make sure to remember the expression he makes afterward.

That's what you get.

Chapter 564: Ten Kings

It takes a few minutes longer, but gradually all of the 1st tournament winners begin to gather.

Instead of joining the conversation, I listen with one ear and let Vic handle the pleasantries while I observe them one after another.

First up is Jean. And there really isn't much more to say about the guy. With Vic complimenting him and me observing him even now, I consider him among the very top people in Earth's tutorial.

Tacita would probably have an easy time with him, but with whom wouldn't she? Her build is just that oppressive against human-sized opponents.

How about Jean versus Savant? I don't know, really. [Dawn] is pretty busted in its own right and could easily "poison" Jean beyond any hope of recovery.

Savant might be more talented and strategic, but Jean can be weirdly smart when it comes to combat, and with his incredible base, I'd still give him a slight edge over Savant. It's totally not because I like Jean's personality more. Nope.

Then there is the red-haired woman from the 2nd round. Her name is Klara Novak and, apparently, she's from the Czech Republic, having introduced herself without the least bit of concern for doxxing herself. While her avatar from our 1st tournament wore the armor of the Fallen hero, she's upgraded to a different, even more powerful set. On that armor, I recognize the techniques lumorans like to use, which leads me to think it came from the 7th floor.

She is young, probably somewhere around Vic's age, and has blue eyes that, like Jean's, flick from face to face, giving her a slightly bored look overall.

Then there's the boy from the third round, a child even younger than Isabella. He has short, wavy brown hair and incredibly piercing blue eyes. According to the information I've been able to gather, he combines some kind of shadow skill with primordial void energy. He is from Russia and his name is Maxim Sarov. Unlike most of the others, he sits attentively in his chair and listens to everything said. Even though he's a child, he stays focused without seeming to rely on concentration skill, in truth, it just seems to be part of his personality.

To my right sits the 6th round's King, a man who goes by the name Hector Valdez in the Community. He doesn't seem too happy to meet me, though he doesn't seem to take it personally or let his anger control him like some second rate villain.

I would never be able to do that. I'm sure I would've done some petty shit already if I were him, but this guy, it would appear, has a much better hold on his emotions.

The intel we've managed to collect says he's from some country in South America, and rumors claim he and his group are part of some kind of cartel or union of drug dealers. The wilder rumors even say they were smuggling drugs on some kind of homemade submarine.

I really want to ask if it's true.

The representative for the 7th round is a man who's about as tall as I, though his body is much wider. I wouldn't say he looks like he's overweight, just solid and strong. Not in a muscular way like Jean, but

strong in his own way. His skin is very tanned, and he has long, wavy hair and a light stubble of a beard, and introduces himself as Monte. All indications say he comes from Spain or one of its neighbors, and rumor has it that he's a shapeshifter.

Out of all of the people here, he appears to be the oldest, somewhere around 55 years old, but who knows, he could just as easily have been 70 before he found himself in the tutorial.

Speaking for the 8th round is the organizer of this meeting, Derick Kelley, rumored to be from Northern Ireland or the United Kingdom. He talks more than anyone else and tries to keep the conversation civil.

Poor guy.

Though in my opinion, extroverts like him deserve whatever comes their way.

The 9th King is a woman I'm meeting for the first time. She's Chinese, tall and slim, with a calculating demeanor. Her black hair flows neatly over her shoulders, and she wears a set of expensive-looking clothes with inscriptions woven throughout. She appears to be somewhere around 30 years old. Her real name is unknown, but she goes by the alias Yama. яаОβĚž

Curiously, even though she is a tournament winner, she doesn't claim a chair, opting instead to stand behind it like some sort of bodyguard. Rather, a Chinese girl, probably around 18 years old, has taken that place, sitting upright in a set of clean, well-fitted clothes.

She listens attentively, but she seems weak, her skill rating Normal to Hard difficulty at most, but even so, her bodyguard doesn't seem to mind and treats her with a great deal of respect.

And last but not least is the Korean guy I've already met. Baek currently appears to be sleeping, resting his head on his hand, as he slumps over the table. If Victoria wasn't here, I could probably sleep as well.

My observations made, I turn back to the conversation.

“Yes, we are willing to trade information as much as the system’s censorship will allow. Even though this tournament is competitive by design, I do not believe it is intended to turn us into enemies,” Victoria says.

Derick quickly agrees, “That’s true. We might fight and compete to show our strength, especially with the way this place prevents us from dying, but the true enemies we need to worry about are outside the tutorial. These 5 years are just the beginning of the centuries Earth will spend in the system.”

“If we won’t destroy ourselves before we get that far,” says the 11-year-old Russian boy, speaking for the first time. He seems to shy away for a moment as all eyes turn to him, but he tries to hide it nonetheless, and he does it well.

“That’s true,” Derick says, “We have already seen a number of scenarios that could come to pass, especially on the more powerful planets, those steeped in ambient mana far more dense than anything on our delicate Earth.”

“On Earth, there are currently multiple countries with atomic bombs far more powerful than anything used during either of the world wars, yet we are still here,” the Chinese lady acting as bodyguard says, her voice smooth and soothing as she speaks; almost as if she thought through each word with care before speaking.

“Ha!” Jean snorts but doesn’t say anything else. He returns her gaze easily as if challenging her to do something about it.

“It is very likely we will get to that point as the First Generation as well. But do not forget that humans can be highly emotional and illogical at the best of times. It is not unreasonable to expect that some of them may become irrational or begin to act like tyrants once they attain these powers,” Victoria answers with methodical slowness.

She and that Chinese woman exchange a glance, and the other woman nods in agreement.

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“Given what we’ve seen, it generally falls to the Absolute to ensure that such people do not cause too much damage. And further that such tasks should be handled by a powerful Champion until an Absolute can be appointed.” Yama says.

“And what if our future Absolute becomes one of these tyrants?” Derick asks.

Unbothered, Victoria answers, “Then we would have any number of options to consider, one of the simplest solutions being killing such an Absolute.”

Jean interrupts, “And what about you, are you saying you don’t want to become our Absolute?”

Once again, she answers without the slightest hesitation, “Currently, I see no need to become Absolute, but it is entirely possible that I may change my mind depending on future circumstances.”

“Decide to become one?”

“Yes.”

“Fucking crazy. Let’s go fight!”

“I apologize, but I cannot do that at the moment. You can send someone my way to ask again later. I do not mind the thought of dueling you once I have a bit more time. It should be possible sometime in the next day or two.”

“You, fight me.” Jean turns to me this time; he doesn’t shout, and he seems to be lacking energy in his voice. It must be hard to be constantly rejected.

Victoria answers on my behalf, “Mister Jean, for a certain reason, my brother is very busy during this tournament. If you really have to, we can spar right after this meeting, if you will have me instead of him.”

“I can live with that.”

“Thank you, but allow me to give you a warning. This time, I have decided to step back because of the promise my brother made and because I would prefer to have a good relationship with you. I consider you strong and someone who keeps his word, valuable to keep around. But there are limits that I have. If you decide to push this any further despite my warning, I will react appropriately.”

It takes a moment for Jean to process the threat. And the way Everyone around the table looks at Victoria makes me want to slam the palm of my hand against the table just to see if anyone jumps in fear.

“Please, let us keep this meeting civil,” Derick says. “Even though we all have our own goals. Some might just want to be left alone and enjoy the luxuries our abilities might afford us, while others might want to influence the trajectory of their country or have their names written in history. But in the end, we’re all in this together, especially if our planet finds itself caught up in a Pairing. And we’ve seen how dangerous that can be. The First Generation must be willing to work together.”

Klara asks, “From what we’ve seen, Pairings only seem to happen to planets with Absolutes and Champions. If early Champions appear five to twenty years after the tutorial and Absolutes take decades, shouldn’t that mean we have plenty of time?”

“It’s very likely,” Derick agrees. “But imagine if we all cooperate. Hell difficulty can take disciples from the lower difficulties or teach the most talented from Earth. Hard difficulty could train large numbers of people. We can create a system to strengthen our planet or even find a way to travel to others and join a Coalition to help us face our first Pairing.”

“Ask me again closer to the end of the tutorial. I’ll know then,” Klara replies. “For now, this is all too theoretical for me.”

“I will,” Derick promises, but it’s clear his words are meant for everyone.

Following this, the conversation moves.

It seems like it is the Hell difficulty attendees’ custom to remain mostly quiet to collect information before acting and to avoid accidentally insulting someone powerful. A skill you need to gain in the tutorial if you don’t want to end up splattered against the wall by someone strong.

Most of them are quiet. Yama, Monte, Baek, and even I are among the quietest of all. Most of the conversation is carried out by Derick, Victoria, Jean, and Klara.

So many new names, but I make sure to try to remember them all. These people should be among the strongest in the Earth's tutorial and future Champions, so it's worth it.

While they converse, I turn to Hector on my right and ask quietly, "What the hell was that spear of yours?"

He glances at me, leans closer, and lowers his voice, "I found it on the 6th floor."

"Low Arcane?"

"Yes, your sword?"

"Mid Arcane."

"Bullshit."

"I'm not lying. Where did you get the spear? Somewhere further north? Mind Mage City?"

"Mind Mage City? We didn't go anywhere near that cursed place, but yes, it was up north where the snow started appearing. There were ruins of an old castle, and we found a huge labyrinth beneath it."

"Damn, that sounds cool. I never went there."

"There are a bunch of places we missed out on. What was that skill that fucked up my mana control? It even disrupted my internal mana, it shouldn't be possible to do that easily."

"I brute forced it. I won't tell you the name, but it started as [Disruption] and went through a few evolutions and skill combinations. Look, man, I know it's a shitty feeling when someone disrupts and takes over your mana, so I recommend making a greater effort to defend against that sort of manipulation, even if you have to spend months working on it. It's worth it."

"I guess," Hector says, looking around as the conversation continues around us.

For a moment, I listen and then hear Derick speaking to the people around the table, "There is a goddamned lynthari moving between the camps and bothering people. She's even been taking a bunch of smaller Earth items from people in the lower difficulties. How is it even possible for a lynthari to be here?"

I filter it out and ask Hector, "And get rid of that invisibility bullshit.

"No." He replies, grinning and returning my gaze.

So, he has chosen death.

Klara from the 2nd round also raises her voice, "We also had an incredibly quick woman enter our camp. She stole a lot of blankets and a bunch of daggers. She even tried to take one right off my waist."

I noticed it before, but Klara's voice is energetic and has the tone of a great singer, a mixture of energetic liveliness, contained laughter, and confidence.

I ignore the content of her words and turn back to Hector, "Is it true you used to be a drug dealer and that you guys made your own homemade submarine?"

"What the fuck are you talking about? I ran an Import and Export Business," he says with a deadpan expression.

Someone shoves me from my left, and I turn to Vic, who is making no attempt to hide her actions. Looking up, all eyes are on us.

“Yes?” I ask her.

“Derick was asking what our plans are after the tutorial.”

“What did you say?”

“I said I cannot be sure at the moment, given all the ways things might change by the end of the tutorial. I also made it clear that I won’t go out of my way to interfere in geopolitics or spark major conflicts without a very strong reason.”

“Oh, I see,” I nod and address the rest, “I plan to take an island for myself. I don’t mind stealing it from some rich guy after threatening him. Maybe I’ll make a moon base or create a floating island or something. I fully intend to use my power and that of my group to get some nice things. If we decide we need to keep things “legal,” our healer could shave a few decades off a billionaire’s age for an easy hundred million or two, and we could live off that.”

The others sit in shocked silence, and it's Klara who laughs first, before asking with a big smile, “Do you really think things won’t change too much for it to be that easy?”

“You're probably right, but a man can dream.”

“If that moon base happens, count me in for a visit. I want to see the view.”

“No girls allowed in my secret base.”

She laughs again, and Derick takes over the conversation once more.

Chapter 565: A Matter of Control

Derick shakes his head and says, “We can assume there will be more tournaments if the system continues to follow the current schedule. It would be wise to wait until some of us have gotten a bit closer to level 400 to start making promises and laying out our rules for our return to Earth. The damage we can cause without even actively using skills is far too great to ignore. Even if you aren’t a mana-based build, just releasing your mana could easily hurt or even kill a normal human.”

Victoria listens, then leans forward slightly, resting her elbows on the table. "That depends on whether we actually agree on what the limits should be. Or if we decide we want them in the first place."

Jean scoffs, "Now you sound like some kind of greasy politician."

"I am being realistic," she replies. "You cannot expect groups of people thrown into the Hell tutorial, and forced to fight for five years, just to stay alive, to come back and simply follow a set of self-imposed rules because it would be nice." Her gaze sweeps across the table. "Whether we agree then or here and now, how many actually mean to honor it once they make their way back to Earth and realize how much weaker everyone is?"

Klara hums, "That's why nuclear treaties worked. It was mutually assured destruction. If one country used them, others would retaliate. The threat and possible consequences are what kept everyone in check."

"But we're not nations," the Chinese tournament winner, Yama, interjects. "No government can force us to disarm. Not the ones who survive the Hell difficulty tutorial, and certainly not the ones from Beyond. No military can keep us in check - at most, they get lucky and kill some of the more careless ones. Even if we wanted a treaty, who would enforce it?"

Derick exhales through his nose. "That's exactly the problem. There's no higher authority keeping us in line. If someone decides to wipe out a city because they got pissed off, who can stop them quickly enough to matter?"

"The Absolute," Yama speaks again, her voice composed as ever. "Or our first Champions, at least. The countries that get one first will be the ones to decide the direction our world takes. Of course, only if such people decide to uphold their nationalities and help their countries. If you don't seize control or make an effort to cooperate with those who have, then the control will be imposed on you by force. That's what history has proven over and over again."

The conversation is getting interesting, so I make sure to listen carefully. While she is saying that, her words seem inconsistent given that she is standing while someone much weaker than she sits in her chair.

"That's a nice way to describe 'tyranny'," Jean says as he leans forward in his creaking chair.

"A form of tyranny that ensures our survival. If you're not the one enforcing it, you risk having it imposed on you," she counters.

"This is all theoretical," Victoria says. "None of us knows exactly what kind of power levels we will be dealing with. Not to mention how many of us will walk out of here capable of, say, vaporizing entire cities by accident?"

Derick grimaces. "More than a few, I'd say. By the end of the tutorial? Could be dozens."

"It's not just about a few assholes. Even some of the so-called good people are dangerous. Some will be walking nuclear bombs, and unlike the current models, we don't need silos or launch codes." As she speaks, something about Klara's tone sounds almost amused.

For a moment, the table falls silent.

Then, Hector exhales and grins. "Regulations, restrictions... I don't like the sound of that at all."

His words also seem like a subtle threat. He doesn't seem like the kind of guy who would like being oppressed.

Jean tilts his head. "So what are you all suggesting? Some kind of mutually assured destruction pact? 'Break the rules, and everyone hunts you down?' That sounds fun."

Klara chuckles. "I'd rather not see Earth change too much. Things aren't perfect, but with what we have, we can still get a big piece of the pie and live more than comfortably. Going around fucking with countries, blowing up cities, that'd just turn everything into a mess and mess everything up. I'd rather keep my luxuries than have some asshole wreck everything and drag me into a war. And I don't know about you, but I'm not looking to inherit my country's bullshit or let them turn me into a pawn for their power grabs."

Baek lifts his head from the table and yawns, "Just don't come to Korea and I'm all good."

“Are we splitting kingdoms now?” Jean snorts. “Each of us gets our territory, and the others agree not to interfere? Though I could see myself in charge of Canada.”

“There is a lot of good we could do,” Derick says, “with our power, we will have a lot of influence, we could easily use our abilities to get the things we want, or use our healers to win favors.”

Yama looks at him in an amused manner, “That kind of thinking is incredibly naive. None of us has experience when it comes to politics or understanding the balance of power, trade, and geopolitics. And do you think you will be able to control all of the people from your round? The people from Hell and Beyond? What about the people from Easy and the other difficulties who return there before you?”

“She’s right,” Klara says. “I’ve already seen and heard plenty of people from my group planning some wild shit. And if a few strong Beyonders team up, they might still be able to take you down, ‘King’ or not.”

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“And what stops us from grouping up as well?” Derick asks.

“I don't want to,” Jean smiles at him.

Looking around the table, the Chinese King, Baek, the Russian boy, and Vic don't seem all that interested either.

Derick groans in annoyance and leans back in his chair.

“It’s perfectly simple,” I say when no one else is talking and they turn to me, “if you make yourself strong enough, they will listen, or they will be very dead.”

They still remain silent, so I stand up. “Thirty minutes and two seconds have passed. See you during the second event.”

I wave them off, and when Vic stands as well, she places her hand in mine, and I teleport us away.

The fancy scent diffuser someone put so much effort into vanishes too, all thanks to the [Ley Line] I quietly hooked to it.

The quiet hum of the workshop feels almost too still now that I've stopped. Half-finished projects sit untouched, tools lie scattered where I last dropped them, and the lingering heat from my skills fills the room.

I lean back, staring at the ceiling for a moment, letting my mind wander. Maybe there's still time to squeeze in a little more training, just a few more minutes to refine things, but I already know that's a lie.

With an annoyed sigh, I push myself up and start putting the last of my things away.

As the time ticks down to the start of the second event, I let out an annoyed groan and put an end to all my training, and put the last items away.

For a minute, I sit there and think, looking for excuses.

When I find none, I teleport through one of the Ley Lines I've stretched out into the first round's zone.

Locating Jean's signature, I make sure he's alone and send another line his way, carefully avoiding the defenses these guys have set up around their zone.

After teleporting, I find myself in the middle of a clearing where Jean sits and trains. Even though he is not visibly moving, his muscles seem to twitch and spasm. His skin stretches and tears under the strain, and I could just about swear I heard the snapping of bone.

He doesn't even notice me until I step within his quick strike range. At that point opens his eyes and tilts his head.

"The fuck do you want?" he asks.

In that moment, I almost change my mind, but I force myself to stay and sit on the grass right in front of him with my legs crossed beneath me.

I jump in before I can change my mind. "I broke my word. Well, technically not broke—more like I ignored it. Actually, it's not even my fault. A lot of things have been happening, and you can be annoying as fuck. I don't know, blame the system or something."

He laughs out loud with a confused expression, but doesn't say anything.

What an asshole. I bet he is doing it on purpose just to make this harder on me. I can't even be mad; I would totally do the same thing. That probably says something about me, but that's a thought for later.

"Simply said, I rejected your challenge when you came to our area and later during the event, even though I promised I would face you anytime."

"That's true," Jean stops training. "So, given that that's the case, I have to wonder if I should keep my own promise?"

"You have every right to do so."

"You are really bad at this."

"Yes."

Jean laughs, moves closer, and looks at me with curiosity, "Tell me what happened. Your group is missing that blonde of yours, and there are so many rumors making me curious."

"I don't want to."

"If you do, I won't hold your rejection against you, just this once."

For a while, I just stare at him while he returns my gaze, his smile growing ever bigger.

Asshole.

I would totally do the same.

“She has a mimic inside her, but I’ve been offered a way to save her. To do so, I have to do something I can’t really tell you about, given the way it might influence the outcome. So long story short, I’m busy and not exactly in a good mood at the moment.”

“I see. I have noticed. But enough of that, how many times have you died during our conversation?”

“Huh? Twice.”

“I died thrice,” Jean smirks victoriously.

“How many times since the start of the tournament?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Likely multiple dozens of times. I stopped counting.”

That surprises me. From what he says, he seems to be handling it pretty well, better than anyone from group 4, other than me.

He lifts his arms over his head and stretches with a long yawn, “Tell me a story about that girl. The first thing that comes to your mind. Don’t ask why.”

Surprised once again, I think for a second before I start talking, “We were both younger back then, on Earth, and met for the first time just a few days before. Back then, she didn’t really know how to ‘officially’ make friends. She had never made friends before and didn’t know how it worked, so she tried to force it with logic.”

That memory flashes before my eyes, “One day, she just handed me a list. A handwritten list of reasons why we should be friends. It had bullet points. Some of them were ridiculously formal, things like "Good compatibility score" and "Both have high intelligence, subjectively speaking". I kept that paper.”

Jean laughs out loud for a while, shaking his head, then stands up and gestures for me to do the same.

Reaching out with his huge hands, he claps them over my shoulders, almost crushing them in the process, a few times, “You aren't such a bad guy after all. Let's just say I can't kill that mind mage of yours here, so challenging you to get to her wouldn't make sense, right? No promises have been broken this time. Got it?”

“I do.” I think about it for a moment and add, "Thanks."

Chapter 566: Start of the 2nd Event

Coming back from a meeting with Jean, all of group 4 gathers in the living room. The two boxes with thermonuclear warheads are piled on top of each other and pushed into the corner. Someone even threw a blanket over them so that they could be used as seating, funnily enough.

I sit on the couch beside Dennis and Aaron and ask, “Are you still stealing stuff from the other rounds and collecting information?”

Dennis lowers his voice, “You bet.”

“You two seem to be doing a good job. Not many people seem to have noticed you. The only people they mentioned in the meeting were Myrra and Tacita.”

“Hehe, did you know Sophie’s been finding a number of spies from the other rounds, then pointing them out to Lily, so that she can hunt them down? It's fun to watch.”

“That does sound fun,” I confirm.

Looking around, I notice that the mood seems to have improved since the start of the tournament. For the moment at least, even though they’re still worried about Tess, they seem to trust me. That makes

me wonder how their mood would've changed if I had stumbled. That feeling of helplessness would suck ass, I'm sure.

"Did you change your mind, or are we sticking to the plan? We help you locate the boss monsters and then do our own thing?" Sophie asks, moving closer together with Izzy.

I nod, "Yes, as much as possible assuming the setting doesn't screw us up. You could also keep an eye on the other groups, just in case they decide to go after one of the boss monsters. I will attach a [Ley Line] to each of you, and we can all watch one of these monsters while hunting the weaker ones so you guys get some points too."

"To be honest, I don't know. If I asked her, I'm sure she would go around and hunt down everyone who could try to take a 'kill' from me and not mind the placements, but that could annoy Lissandra. So I didn't ask her for anything, and Victoria can decide what to do on her own."

"Speaking of, have you seen her lately?"

"Lissandra? Not really, she just moves around and does her stuff. Myrra said she is busy examining this floor and instance, and trying to grasp how it's made. It should help her escape. I also think she uses inability to die here to level up her skills."

"I don't think she likes me," Sophie says.

"Well, no surprise there. For some unknown reason, everyone seems to hate you."

She looks me in the eyes and, without a smile, says, "Haha."

"Haha," I reply.

"Whatever. Do you need help fixing Fracture? It doesn't seem to be in a very good state."

“Does it ever? And no. I don't think it will survive this tournament, and chances are, I only get one or two uses out of it at most, and another patch job won't help. Its base is too deteriorated.”

Aaron seems a bit dejected when he hears that, “A damn mid arcane weapon, soon to be gone just like that. You think you can sell it before it happens?”

“I would like to think yes and will try it for sure after I use it and before it fully breaks, but the system is cheap. I don't think it will be so easy to trick.”

Dennis also reaches and taps the sword still hanging at my waist, “We can make a better one later, right?”

“Yes,” I confirm.

“I already have a name in mind.”

“Why do I have a feeling I know where this is going?” Sophie asks, but despite her grousing, she waits.

Dennis smiles and looks at Aaron. I bet these two brainstormed the names together.

“Fracture-er,” he says.

“No,” I refuse right away.

“Re-Fracture.”

“Hell no.”

“Splinter Supreme.”

“What the fuck. No.”

“Fracture MK 2.”

“No.”

“The Throngler.”

“No... wait. Why?”

“I read it somewhere,” Dennis smirks. “Some dude said that you don't want to be on the wrong end of Dark King Grutmore's Edge of Eternal Torment, but you really don't want to be on the wrong end of something called The Throngler. And I really liked it.”

“I mean... it sounds weirdly logical,” I hesitate.

“See!” Dennis seems happy with my agreement. “But in the end, I really like Fracture, and the name was given because of the effect, right? If we do the same again, the name could be the same. Or you can just call it Fracture, the same way you plan to call your war armor Regalia.”

“I liked Ardenyx, Praxion, and Exoria as well,” Aaron says from the side.

“The troubles you three get into a few minutes before the event,” Sophie shakes her head and stands up, turning to me, “Good luck during the event.”

I nod.

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Aaron and Dennis continue to talk about items, war armors, and names while I think about Sophie's wish of good luck.

As the timer starts ticking down, I clear my mind and [Focus] once again to stabilize my emotions.

And even in [Focus], I come to the same conclusion I did before using [Focus].

Luck has nothing to do with this.

As always, we find ourselves being teleported to the event location.

A few notifications pop up in my view, but I only glance over them: the usual warnings and flood of unimportant information.

I send my senses into the area but fail to detect any presence nearby. No one from group 4 is anywhere near me. It seems everyone has been split up.

Continuing to use my senses, I redeploy my [Mana Crown] and start storing my excess mana as I walk through the trees.

Their bark is similar to that of birch trees, and the leaves seem normal, too. The only difference is that these trees are bigger, much bigger. Their crowns thoroughly obscuring the sky from view, leaving the space beneath them noticeably darker than their surroundings, only allowing the odd beam of light to pass through the gaps.

It's also quiet. There are no birds, no wind, no monsters or animals screeching. The air has a weird scent that I find hard to describe: a mix of the usual forest smells combined with the fresh sweetness of fruit. The scent hangs so thick in the air that it feels almost tangible.

I try to open my notifications, but there's nothing to see. No kill updates, no points, nothing.

But at least this time, there are no rules from Lissandra, at least for now.

I boost myself into the air and, through the branches, fly between the leaves and exit the forest, flying high into the air. A vast forest stretches below me, a sea a few miles in the distance, and the humongous floating islands grab my attention first.

The weather is currently sunny, but there seems to be a mass of dark clouds rolling in over the sea and, within them, constant lightning keeps flashing. That storm stretches miles and miles wide.

For the first time, I also detect signs of mana use and fighting in the forest below me, and I notice a few of the signatures flying toward me. I look in that direction to spot a pterodactyl-like monster with the wingspan of a small airplane, exiting the caves carved into the sides of these floating islands.

Three javelins weave next to me, and I shoot each of them with an added oomph of kinetic energy.

Each of the javelins hits and tears a hole through the head of a beast, causing their red blood to spurt into the air as the lifeless bodies start falling back into the forest.

There is no notification, which only worsens my mood.

I can't help but wonder if this setting is designed to put pressure on the participants.

I boost myself further until I reach one of the floating islands, which turns out to be farther than I estimated. Up close, it's even bigger than I expected. The Skyhold Bastion I saw on the fifth floor doesn't even compare in size. Each of these floating islands is large enough to host a city with populations in the hundreds of thousands and still have plenty of space left.

The vibrations of mana I sense from its "engine" send shivers down my skin. The sheer amount of energy needed just to keep it floating is hard to grasp. There's likely gravitational primordial energy involved, so I hope Min-Jae is taking notes.

Up close, I get a better view of the formations I spotted from a distance. Ancient-looking structures, now crumbling, cling to the bottom of the floating island. The island itself is shaped like a half-sphere, with a flat top. From what I saw, the flat top is covered in forest, not dissimilar to the one below that overgrows the ancient-looking buildings.

As for what keeps it afloat, I can see a single humongous purple crystal protruding from the bottom of the half sphere, along with the remains of these structures and similarly huge roots of some tree or plant.

A few more flying beasts notice me moving closer and fly toward me with the same murderous intent as their predecessors.

I kill them the same way, flying past their falling bodies as I reach one of the larger caves.

Something inside emits a series of screeching sounds, and I hear the sound of hard claws scraping the floor of the cave as they rush to get out.

After sending out a pulse of energy to scan for the presence of other attendees, I throw a compressed thermal orb inside and seal the exit with a barrier.

In the following seconds, dozens of notifications continue to ring. Yet there is no event kill feed, no placements.

I dislike it. I hate it, and even though I am in [Focus], I feel a wave of frustration trying to wash over me.

Shoving these thoughts away, I fly toward a similar opening and repeat the process a few more times. Only when I still sense life inside one of the caves after bombing it do I enter and reseal the exit with a barrier.

I do not use light to guide my way; instead, I use thermal, kinetic, and mana senses to navigate the huge, dark tunnel. The dark, oddly enough, doesn't make me nervous, rather, it feels calming. Gradually, I pick up speed until I'm running, adjusting as I grow accustomed to the feedback my mana provides, telling me about the structure and paths around me.

I sense an attack forming, a primitive but powerful mana structure of a skill activating and reaching a threshold of mana required to activate.

Quicker than the caster can process, I reach toward that structure, take over, and twist a part of it. Then I add my mana to the mix and activate it.

An explosion shakes the cave as the lightning attack the beast was trying to use, explodes in its throat.

The flapping of a huge set of wings fills the cavern, and I weave a javelin out of denser threads than before, making it bigger. Just big enough to handle the monster, whose tattoo-like symbols start glowing across the surface of its skin and lighting up the cave. In a flash, the pale blue javelin pierces the monster's chest and embeds itself deep in the wall behind it.

The beast takes a few more wobbly steps before the light of the tattoos begins to fade and the cave turns dark again.

The [Ley Line] tied to the javelin activates, and the javelin teleports itself back to my side. I shoot it again, but this time it fails to pierce the skin of the beast.

I dodge to the side, and laser-like bursts of lightning continue to track me, crackling and sizzling as they hit the walls and explode, sending chunks of rocky shrapnel flying through the air. I immediately sense the destructive power of the attack and know that it could easily cut me in half.

The javelin teleports back to me, and I use [Knitting] as well, making it even denser as I repair any damage the beast's tough skin may have caused.

For a second, I release a burst of thermal energy, lighting up the cave in its entirety with a brilliant flash of light.

The beast attacking me screeches, its lightning striking wildly as it jerks its head away from the sudden burst of light.

My javelin erupts into the air again, and a blast of kinetic energy pushes me back as the weapon pierces the beast through the chest and pins it to the wall behind it.

The beast thrashes a few times in an attempt to escape or launch a new attack, but it fails to do either.

With a Wraith Dance, I reach its corpse and examine the creature's skin. Even though I boosted the javelin and made it extremely durable, I notice the weapon has taken damage and still failed to completely skewer the beast.

What an incredibly durable skin and body for something that could fly.

I scan my surroundings again, but sensing no new signatures, I turn and head back outside.

Chapter 567: Frustration

I exit the cave and propel myself higher into the air, rising toward the top of the floating island before coming to a stop near its edge. Gathering a large amount of mana, I unleash a powerful pulse, sending it as far as possible in an attempt to detect any wayward beasts.

I detect them, along with several signatures of attendees, mostly from Hard and Normal difficulty, along with a few from Hell.

As for the beasts, I find thousands of them, tens of thousands, but most of the signatures feel weak.

Flying into the air again, I collect more mana. It swirls around me and compresses into the shape of an orb that quickly cycles through shades of pale blue, dark blue, and purple, before hovering on the edge of destabilization. I create a few more and compress them further, turning them bright white.

Each of them shoots ahead toward where I sense groups of monsters and no attendee signatures, and I boost myself toward another island with notifications about kills following me.

Even though this time I find stronger beasts, there are still no Special grade ones, so I repeat the process. Though at some point I grow tired of this, opting instead to raise myself high enough to look down over all of the floating islands, letting the humongous area of the second event stretch out below me.

I activate Mana Wavelength Iris and then compress my mana to the point it collapses into that oppressive, mana-devouring black. I use it to strengthen my body and power my trait.

The pressure becomes incredible, even with my mid arcane passive protecting my mind. I take in all the information my trait can provide, all those mana signatures, fluctuations, and movements.

I quickly activate [Focus] to filter the information, narrowing it down to mana signatures. My thoughts race at such incredible speed that the outside world feels sluggish. I locate Savant, then Myrra. I find Jean, and I pinpoint every member of Group 4. My eyes take it all in, and I track every one of them.

I gather all the black mana coursing through my body and force it out, shaping it into a javelin.

When I stop using kinetic energy to keep myself afloat, I begin freefalling through the air. The wind whistles past me, pressing against my body. I feel it in my hair, whipping against my face, and slipping between my fingers. Only when I'm close to the treetops do I boost myself forward, passing through them and into a space that barely qualifies as a clearing. The ground is broken, the trees are scorched, and pools of lava bubble across the landscape.

The air here is blistering, an effect of the heat radiating from the beast nestled in the crater, partially submerged in lava as its body melts the surrounding rock. It shifts, waves of heat rolling off its form. Its obsidian horns pulse, with the glowing veins of magma coursing through them. The ground beneath it cracks, molten rock clinging to its hide.

The Emberhorn Behemoth is a massive, bull-like creature with a thick, cracked, dark hide traced through with glowing veins of magma. Jagged obsidian plates run along its back, radiating intense heat. Its broad head sits low to the ground, crowned with two massive, curved horns pulsing with molten energy. Its deep set eyes glow dimly, and smoke rises from its nostrils.

Finally seeming to notice me, it shifts, dragging itself from the lava, its hooves sinking into the half melted ground. With each step, sending a spiderweb of smoldering cracks spreading in my direction as the ground buckles beneath its weight.

The heat distorts the air, making everything waver. Its horns pulse brighter.

I don't wait.

The black javelin I created streaks through the air and drives deep into the beast's neck. Compared to its massive size, it looks insignificant, but I know exactly how much mana I poured into it.

With astonishing speed, the javelin starts absorbing the beast's mana and breaks the structure of the skill it was already moving to use. My Mana Wavelength Iris allows me to see how normal mana reacts to it, revealing just how oppressive the black mana is.

Another projectile forms near me, this time forming an [Empyrean Lance] with its core of white and gold glowing brilliantly. Threads of luminous energy weave themselves together, layer upon layer, condensing into a single radiant lance that hums with the immensity of the compressed mana contained within. And just as before, the lance pulses with the heartbeat of a star.

It shoots forth, hot on the heels of the first, and the beast senses it. It stops trying to pull the black javelin out of its neck and instead turns to the new threat. A deep, loud roar vibrates the air, and the lava in the pools surrounding us begins to ripple.

The heat, already overwhelming, intensifies as a concentrated wave of energy crashes into the lance.

It sizzles against the surface of the lance; it burns the mana within and dims the glow of the lance. Even so, whether due to the oppressive nature of the skill or the black javelin lodged in its neck, the beast fails to destroy it completely. The lance pierces through its side, then tears through its entire body, exiting on the other side in a geyser of burning blood that quickly evaporates under the weight of the heat.

The wound scorches itself closed and shivers with the heat as the bleeding comes to a stop.

When its enormous eyes turn back to me, they are full of anger.

Then I teleport, reappearing just over the beast as I step through the [Ley Line] attached to my [Empyrean Lance].

Right away, the heat crashes against my body as the beast lunges, jaws snapping at me. Each movement cracks the ground, sending splashes of lava through the air. rÂÑøBEś

The heat radiating from its skin isn't thermal energy or even a fragment of eternal fire, rather, it's a purely mana based skill or trait pushed to the extreme. The beast intensifies it even further, causing the lava around it to rise and flow through the air toward us.

[Redistribution] works overtime as I absorb the heat around me and store it in an orb hovering nearby. Simply handling it, absorbing it, and taking control with [Redistribution] converts the heat into thermal energy instead.

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Half of my mental capacity focuses on just that to keep myself from being burned alive. The heat surges to an extreme as I ignore the pain of the beast's scorching skin as it sears the soles of my bare feet and move to grab the black javelin, yanking it free. The weapon having grown vastly stronger than the one I originally fired, having absorbed such vast quantities of mana.

I mold and reshape it, forcing it under my control with effort. Then I modify its structure to absorb more mana without destabilizing, and transform it into another orb.

Within a blink, all the heat reaching me vanishes, reverting to mana as the black orb absorbs it. Like a whirlpool, the orb pulls everything inside, breaking the skill's structure to restore it to its original form, mana, which it then devours.

The flames and heat from the beast's skill vanish, leaving only a few pathetic remnants behind. Despite its power, the beast is slow, relying on its durable body and the flames and heat it can create. Even the lava it tried to move crashes to the ground, unable to be controlled without mana.

I leave the black orb where it is and I teleport again, reappearing in front of an eye, which is easily twice my height.

Its pupil dilates as it turns toward me.

Then I grasp the golden orb of absorbed heat, freshly converted to thermal energy. I punch my hand through the eye's surface and release all the heat within the orb.

The pupil widens even further, its surface blistering and warping in an instant. A sharp hiss pierces the air as the eye sizzles, bubbles, and then bursts apart, spraying me with scalding liquid. The thick, red hot fluid clings to my skin, but I barely register the sensation before the true destruction unfolds.

The heat surges past the ruined eye, racing through the creature's skull and deep into its brain. Flesh sears, nerves rupture, and boiling fluids expand until the entire mass collapses inward, cooking the brain from the inside out.

The enormous body spasms violently, limbs jerking before locking in place. Then, with a final shudder, it topples, crashing into the crater with enough force to send molten rock spraying high into the air. It twitches once more, then goes still, steam rising from the smoldering corpse.

One of the special grade beasts has been defeated!

The remaining Special beasts have sensed the Emberhorn Behemoth's fall. Now more alert, they will grow increasingly aggressive toward any perceived threat!

And that's it.

There is no telling how many points I have gained at this point.

Even in my current state, I can't help but deeply resent it, as if another layer of control has been stripped from me.

Not once before now has the system done something like this. Even during previous events, the system has shown us notifications and point totals. And just now, it's decided it doesn't want to.

With anger, I teleport and surround the black orb with [Eclipse] and [Mana Domain]. Then I activate the Mana Wavelength Tyrant. The mana around me freezes in place, all of it, even the ambient mana in the air, along with the beast's lingering energy, and my own. It all stops and waits. The black mana resists more than the rest; the more it absorbs, the more difficult it is to control. But it hasn't reached that critical point yet.

I grab the black mana orb and change its shape, turning it into a spear longer than I am tall, and fly into the air, further boosting myself to increase my speed.

After landing on the floating island I visited first, I locate the remains of the ruins I saw with my eyes during the scan.

As I reach the area, some beasts rush at me immediately, but a concentrated pulse of kinetic energy blasts them away. Then I [Focus] once more and stomp, releasing waves of kinetic energy in a series of modified vibrations. It ripples through the surface. The ground splits open, and rocks push through the dirt to the surface. I repeat the process several times, releasing more and more.

I continue to do this until, in a moment of frustration, I release too much, causing the area around me to explode in a shower of debris and fragmented ruins.

Lighting up a single thermal orb, I jump down and blast away more of the bedrock, and enter a tunnel made out of stone. Its walls are covered in long dormant inscriptions, obscured by roots and an assortment of greenery.

There are beasts, all of which feel ethereal and spread an incredible chill as they move through the air.

Just a bit of the first seal peels away, and I don't bother trying to hold the thermal energy the Ignition Heart generates; instead, I let it immediately seep into the air, blazing through the tunnels and filling them with gouts of golden flame.

The beasts, incapable of resisting or escaping, die even as they rush to flee.

I send multiple pulses of mana through the ruins and locate what I was looking for, confirming what I saw before.

A [Ley Line] stretches out, rushing in the direction I want to head, and I teleport, only to reappear just a step away. The black mana spear I hold interferes with the teleport, disrupting it as the black mana eats into the skill. So I don't bother making another attempt.

Changing my direction, I run through the tunnel until I reach the metal door and blast it away; the metal is as thick as my torso, starts to creak and bend, groaning audibly until it finally gives in and splits, creating a long, ragged split in the once solid barrier.

I step through and release another wave of thermal energy, killing more beasts along the way.

A bit further ahead, I spot another door, much larger and thicker this time, but without mana powering the inscription, it lacks strength. They resist my blasts of kinetic energy, so instead, I grab hold of the thermal energy and release it in a thick stream, then narrow it until it forms a beam thinner than the width of my pinkie and focus it on a single spot.

The metal around the spot begins to melt and sizzle until, a few moments later, the stream of thermal energy pierces through. Then I move it, carving a circular hole halfway through. Then I stop and release a blast of kinetic energy, bending the half cut metal open like a can.

I enter the massive ruin and find a similarly huge pillar in the middle. It's crystal white and transparent, and inside of it, a heart is located, surrounded by incredibly intricate inscriptions. There are also circuits filled with a substance that resembles blood, sustaining it.

That heart inside is still beating and generating all this incredible amount of mana needed to keep this enormous island afloat.

There are inscriptions taking some of that mana and using it for healing in some twisted way, using pieces of flesh and a cut off hand, also in the pillar. Other inscriptions supplement the heart with something else, pale blue liquid contained in a nearby tank. There are even secondary inscriptions intended to kickstart the heart if it stops beating, and who knows what else.

That heart isn't even human. It is easily half the size of my entire body.

I glance over the room and take in everything that might be of use, all the inscriptions I can remember. Then I lift the spear made out of black mana and, with a burst of kinetic energy, drive it into the pillar.

The spear pierces through the crystal and stabs itself into the heart, immediately starting to hungrily absorb the immense amount of mana.

The mana that keeps the island afloat doesn't vanish immediately. Other failsafes and mana stores act as an emergency supply, preventing it from falling.

But not for long.

The system doesn't want to tell me how many points I have.

Fine. I'll collect so many that no one else can even come close to first place.

I wonder what an island's worth of beasts is worth.

Chapter 568: This could work

The black spear pierces the heart, drawing in its mana. Slowly and almost imperceptibly, the heartbeat weakens, but the heart survives, continuing to feed the spear. The heart produces more mana than even I can generate right now.

The spear pulls mana from farther and farther away, including the nearby mana batteries and the pillar on the opposite side of the room containing its own, smaller heart.

At this point, I'm sure I wouldn't be able to retake control even if I wanted to.

I watch the spear pulse with a grim rhythm, twisting the mana around the dying heart, and the thought of trying to wrest control from that makes my skin crawl. I stand there for a moment, taking in the ominous display, and realize that this mana was never meant for my hands. It is a sign of a power that exceeds my current understanding and something I never could have gained if so many things hadn't come together.

I clench my fists, steady my breathing, and decide to step away. I leave through the same door and hallways as before and reach the surface of the island.

Flying high into the air, I dedicate part of my mind to keeping track of all attendee signatures and then stretch Ley Lines into the area with the most of them. Following that, I tie one Line to a javelin that I launch down to the surface miles below us.

Then I teleport through the [Ley Line] and appear near a Normal difficulty attendee. He doesn't even notice me, fighting for his life against the beast before him.

I steal his kill and use Wrath Dance to reach him. I put my hand on his shoulder, and a pulse of mana breaks through his defenses before he even notices me, and I teleport him through the [Ley Line] I stretched down to the surface.

There is no need for me to collect negative points for killing the other attendees.

"I... I know you, you're that psy..." Before she can finish, I reach her and, with even more ease than before, send her to the surface.

The next one I reach is a man from Hard difficulty. He turns to me as he detects my presence, and as I take a step towards him, he steps back.

"Hey... what you... stop! Stop!" he shouts and swings his mace at me.

I let the mace hit me, and a small trickle of mana flows into my reservoir as my unique passive activates. As with the other two before, I disrupt his mana and teleport him away.

I repeat the process with 39 more people, taking only a few minutes to complete the process, during which I also kill any monster that enters the range of my detection. Even so, thousands of beasts remain—some of which are hidden deep inside the cave system, as well as those lurking in the ruins, and the ones sequestered in the caves at the bottom of the floating island or in the forest.

Before leaving the island, I look with Mana Wavelength Iris towards where I left the black mana spear.

The place seems like a whirlpool, pulling mana from an ever growing area. And the island is already starting to tilt.

I'm sure that when it falls from its place, hanging in the air, most of the beasts will die. When the black spear destabilizes itself later, it should cause an additional explosion. And I made sure to modify the spear in a way that should cause this sooner or later.

Flying through the air, I quickly check the timer. We have somewhere around 9 hours left of our 10 hour time limit.

I move towards the sea, and the storm on the horizon continues its advance: a dark wall of clouds and constant lightning. Passing over trees, blanketing the rocky plains, and overtaking a beach full of light red sand. And it's there that I find another special grade beast calmly waiting for me.

The Onyxscale Hydra sprawls across the pale red sand, its massive body shifting with slow, deliberate movements. Its deep black scales have a faint sheen, like volcanic glass, their jagged edges resembling sharpened stone. Thick muscles ripple beneath its armored hide, each movement sending a dull grinding sound through the air.

Seven heads rise from its body, each distinct yet eerily similar, their horns curving in different patterns. All of them share the same facial features, differing only in the color of their eyes.

Waves crash against its tail where the sand meets the sea. Lightning arcs through the water where it comes into contact with the beast. In the distance, a storm stretches for miles, its lightning splitting the sky. The Hydra remains still, its heads twisting in perfect sync, waiting for something or someone to challenge it.

Landing on the sand, I slow to a walk and reach a group of people standing at the edge of the forest, observing the beast from two miles away.

"Yo," Maya says, being the first to greet me.

"Hey," I reply.

"You're bleeding from the eyes," she mentions.

Stolen story; please report.

Rather than respond, I just wipe the blood with the sleeve of my shirt and ask, "Why are you guys just standing here watching?"

I gesture a greeting to the young Korean girl who fought alongside Baek, along with a few people from Hell difficulty, judging by their signature, and the presence of my old friend BenDover, who moved behind the trees the moment he detected me.

Maya shrugs, "The hydra knows about us, but the fucker is too lazy to attack. We came here just in time to see how it destroyed a group of 5 people from Hell difficulty, right, Kang Jiwon?"

Maya puts her hand on the head of the young Korean girl and ruffles her hair.

Kang Jiwon watches her with an emotionless expression but makes no attempt to escape.

"Miss Knight, please stop," she says.

That only makes Maya ruffle her hair more, and she turns to me, "Are you ok?"

"Yes, no problem."

"If you need any help..."

"I know. I will ask."

"Damn Na... Noname, you know how much I hate this situation, right?"

"I can imagine."

"Anyway, the woman in the yellow shirt is your sister's right hand," Maya says, pointing at the woman listening to us.

Her signature is one of the stronger ones here. Maybe a Beyonder as well? No, I pause. She's clearly a Beyonder, she's just hiding her mana really well.

Around 25 years old, she is short, just slightly taller than Lily. Her eyes are blue, her hair is raven black, and a thin choker rests around her pale neck. I recognize it as an enchanted item, and there are a few more similar items hanging on her wrists.

There is no weapon on her, and as Maya said, she's wearing a yellow shirt. And printed across the face of the shirt is a print of a black cat with a grumpy expression holding a cup of coffee.

It's safe to say that the shirt is from Earth.

"My name is Gloria," she greets me.

"Hello," I greet and turn back to Maya. "You should leave this one alone and collect as many points as you can instead. I've attached a [Ley Line]

"You aren't going to kill it now?"

I shake my head. "It's probably too strong for me to kill quickly, at least without making sacrifices. I'll return to it later after I check on the other beasts."

Before leaving, I take a mental note of the battlefield layout as I survey the group, then I lift off again after sending a small thermal orb in BenDover's direction.

A blast of golden flames erupts, and he immediately dashes deeper into the forest without stopping or looking back.

The Hydra is strong. Much stronger than the beast I just killed. The entire time, at least one head watched me, its eyes never leaving my form, not even for a moment. No one here other than Gloria has sensed it, but the Hydra has been constantly scanning us, watching our mana signatures, and estimating our power.

And I don't like the fact that it hasn't attacked yet, even though, according to the system message, it should be more aggressive now. I don't like that deep intelligence in its eyes.

While in the air, my eyes rise to a massive island suspended high above, different from the one I came from.

It is floating almost right over where the Hydra is.

I see.

This could work.

An hour later, I leave the ruins inside the floating island, using yet another black mana javelin to destroy the power source. As with the previous one, now it starts absorbing all the mana in the area and gradually destroying whatever mechanisms keep it afloat and their failsafes.

The first island I did this to is still in the air, but where it previously floated smoothly, it now rocks from side to side, and the enormous crystal point from its bottom has cracked.

I estimate that it should be another hour before it crashes. A few minutes before it does, I will need to clear the landing area of attendees as much as possible. The island isn't that high in the air, so the impact likely won't be too strong, but it should be enough to kill a lot of the tens of thousands of beasts living on it.

It's highly possible I won't get as many points as I would if I killed them myself. There's also a chance I won't get any points at all, though I doubt that. The system rewards people based on their performance, and it uses that exact phrase pretty often. It knows how to split the experience when multiple people work together to kill monsters. Even so, this isn't the tutorial floor. It's the tournament, so it might work differently, and it would be foolish to rely on that.

I blast away another beast, a long snake-like creature with a dozen pairs of legs, which seems to like phasing into the ground and attacking from below.

And whenever that king of beasts finally materializes once more, it takes a moment before its defenses reactivate. Creating a short but very fatal moment of weakness.

I reach the side of the floating island and jump off it, flying along the bottom and weaving my way through all the roots piercing the base, seeking out one of the huge crystals nearby. On that side, I form a thermal orb that I stabilize as much as I can and start filling it with thermal energy through just a slightly peeled off seal on the Ignition Heart. I embed that orb into the rock around it, which starts to melt, and knit a series of heat resistant threads to anchor it to the wall.

Then I start layering mana threads around it in the form of inscriptions, not dissimilar to the dissipation nodes I have on my palms, soles, and my back, the ones I made in case of extreme buildup of thermal energy inside my body because of the Champion's heart.

I make this inscription powerful enough to last at least a few hours and add some simple controls.

Lastly, I set up defenses around it and barriers to hide its signature, and for a few minutes, I continue to pump thermal energy into the thermal orb and then lock it, to top it off later.

I pause, observing what I've done. The setup is crude but effective, and after a few more checks, I look down at the ground far below, at the pale red sand, the sea with its growing waves, and the black hydra nestled there.

Then I lift off and head toward where I detected the third special grade beast.

Chapter 569: Hunt continues

The third beast I managed to detect is the Stormscale Basilisk. It is serpentine, as the name implies, and it's about the size of a building, and yet it's impressively fast despite its mass.

Its serpentine form carves through the forest, shimmering scales flashing with every movement. Each motion tears into the earth, splintering roots and crushing the undergrowth beneath its weight.

Trees bend and snap as its coiling body smashes through them, sending broken trunks to the ground. Lightning crackles along its hide, leaping outward to strike nearby branches in sharp, blinding arcs that always seem to reach farther than they ordinarily should. Leaves shrivel and blacken, with their edges curling from the raw force of the lightning surging through the air.

The ground trembles as if nature itself were being torn apart. And the beast is currently fighting.

Explosions of fire, mana projectiles, trees bending and trying to hold it, ground around it moving to grab it. There is also a huge golem made of earth in its path, and around that golem, black smoke surrounds it.

Sophie, Gareth, Savant, and Klara are there, fighting it, along with a bunch of guys I do not recognize, but judging by their mana signature, they must be Hell difficulty at the very least.

A burst of orange light suppresses the lightning and attempts to poison the beast. Sophie and Blackie controlling her golem. Gareth, with a silver crown over his head, enduring the incredible attacks of the beast. And Klara, clad in armor, lashes out at the beast with a big axe coated in sticky red light. Every time she cuts into the beast, some of that red light, smoke, or whatever it is, remains and lingers in the wound until the Basilisk envelopes itself in a burst of lightning to burn it away.

Sophie immediately reaches out to me through the link and shouts, (Don't look into its eyes!)

Just in time, I look away.

It attacks again with the same result, and the barrier refuses to budge an inch, though it doesn't seem to make sense. It should be torn from the ground and tossed aside with Gareth inside.

(It has some sort of mana based poison that spreads through its gaze, causing your own mana to paralyze you. And it can do the same thing with its domain to a lesser extent,) Sophie explains.

Klara approaches the beast from the side and leaps onto its back, swinging her ax as she does. All the lightning crackling there channels a path through her armor, and several arcs of lightning lance through the blade of the ax, heating its surface and causing the metal to glow red from the heat. The red-haired

woman swings it down, only to make the huge beast spring forward, crashing through a number of trees until it finally shakes her off.

Sophie's mana rises up, and the trees around us bend, extending their branches and trying to grab the beast or slow it down. Her golem shrinks, the dirt falling to the ground, as it abandons its rough humanoid shape into the form of a snake that slithers toward the Basilisk.

The golem coils around the Basilisk, which keeps moving, tearing up chunks of earth in its rage, as it opens its mouth to release a powerful, stream-like barrage of lightning that sets the surrounding trees on fire and carves chunks out of the ground.

Savant places himself in the beast's path, surrounding himself in the orange light of his domain, and lifts his sword. The broken blade glows with the same orange light as it extends, radiating increasing levels of mana. The light around Savant expands, forcing Klara, Gareth, and the others to move back as it collides with the beast's domain. Lightning crackles and fractures upon reaching deep into [Dawn].

I could join in and get the last attack. I could probably just hunt the other beasts in the meantime and let the others do all the work, just to killsteal this one later.

But at the same time, I know Lissandra is watching, and this is not what she had in mind. Even if I did take first place with that strategy, she would not accept it.

I know because, in this, our thinking is the same.

Just as I'm about to leave, I detect a presence.

Tacita appears out of thin air, standing within Savant's [Dawn].

She smiles widely, untouched by the orange mana radiation that once seemed to cause her so much trouble. Her modified field shields her, countering its effects.

Savant detects her and shifts his body, moving with incredible speed for a moment, just fast enough to counter.

But Tacita accelerates further, circling him with a playful grace that feels almost taunting. Her dagger flashes several times.

Savant loses one of his legs below the knee and is about to lose his arm at the shoulder, but he shifts, and her dagger sinks into his forearm, unable to pierce the bone. I'm sure that bone is not the same as other pieces of his body.

[Dawn] shrinks, and he changes frequency. Just a moment is enough for him to grasp Tacita's field, and with an incredible show of skill, he modifies his domain on the spot to counter her.

But Tacita knows it as well; as a final goodbye, she stabs her dagger with a green blade into his side and slaps him across the face before disappearing.

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The Stormscale Basilisk seizes the opportunity, and its lightning presses against the weakened [Dawn]

Gareth groans and rushes against the beast in tandem with Sophie's golem, which begins to grow in size as they charge.

I track the shifting air and glance to my left just in time as Tacita appears nearby.

Noticing that I'm looking exactly where she planned to appear, she falters briefly, then shakes her head and disappears.

Before leaving as well, I send a message to Sophie, (Jean is approaching from your right and will be here in a few minutes. On your left is the Chinese tournament winner, but she'll arrive after Jean.)

After delivering the message, I teleport away into the air and use kinetic energy to fly higher.

So that means that the Nightshade Stalker, Witherclaw, and Onyxscale Hydra, for which I have something prepared, remain. Killing two out of the five Special grade beasts should get me first place, combined with all the other kills. But there is also a chance someone will killsteal the Stormscale Basilisk and another beast and push for the 1st spot.

My decision not to killsteal the Basilisk only puts more pressure on me, but I'm sure I know how Lissandra would feel about that.

I boost myself to the ground where I estimate the first floating island will crash.

The first attendee I meet is some Hell difficulty guy; he turns his gun and points it at me. It reminds me of a sniper rifle, made out of materials I recognize as endurium and arcanadium. I also sense a bit of voidsteel, likely used for the bullets.

I wonder what he's using to replace gunpowder. Or, for that matter, if he even needs it? If he has telekinesis, he can make it bounce inside the rifle or store momentum to launch the bullet at speed. Maybe there is some inscription that handles the acceleration. Kinetic energy could work here, too, or even some kind of fire skill that would serve to create a small explosion.

I shake my head to put these thoughts away and say, "The floating island will fall soon. I would leave this area if I were you."

He follows my finger as I point at the island.

"It seems like it," he says. "I have noticed that fucked-up amount of mana up there. Someone pulled some crazy shit up there..."

Before he can finish, I teleport away.

Moving forward, I come across a pair who feel like they are from Easy difficulty. They don't even notice me before I teleport them away.

I dash further to the right between the trees and boost myself onto a branch. A Hell difficulty kid, around 15 years old, notices my movement as I pass through the leaves. He shoots lightning at me, and I swing my hand, deflecting the lightning with a barrier I quickly create around my hand, and make it hit the nearby tree.

Before he can do anything else, I punch him in the belly to break his concentration and then teleport him away.

I continue doing so for the next 10 minutes, cleaning the area of everyone I can, and only then do I lift back up into the air.

Just then, the first floating island plummets, not gradually, but instantly, like a dropped stone. Whatever kept it aloft is gone, taking all the support systems with it, including the fail safes and backup mechanisms.

Even from here, I can see the monstrous pull on the surrounding mana from the island's center, the black spear already on the brink of destabilization.

The sky rumbles with the weight of what's coming. The floating island, vast enough to hold a city, begins to fall in a sudden, violent plunge. The sheer pull distorts the wind, sending shockwaves outward and bending the clouds around it as if the sky itself were being torn open.

From below, it looks like the sky is collapsing.

The forest on top of the island writhes as the falling mass picks up speed. Trees sway violently, some are uprooted in their entirety, their massive trunks flung into the air like twigs caught in a storm. The ruins, weathered stone structures half-buried in moss, begin to fall apart, the force of the fall shaking them apart before they even reach the ground.

And then there are the beasts. Tens of thousands of them.

Some leap from the edges, trying to escape. Beasts of all kinds, including serpentine, winged, and phantom abominations, all desperately seek the sky. Others, either too stubborn or too oblivious, remain on the island, roaring, screeching, and howling.

As the island plummets closer, the pressure of the air around me changes, so intense that it feels as if the atmosphere itself is being crushed beneath its weight. The ground below begins to react, tremors rippling through the area even before the island reaches it.

Then there is the impact. The ground erupts on contact, in an explosion of dirt, stone, and raw energy blasting into the sky like a volcanic eruption. A shockwave filled with debris erupts outward, leveling everything near the impact.

Trees find themselves obliterated, their remains scattered into the wind in clouds of splinters, leaving a significant portion of the forest altered in an instant.

In addition to the beasts on top of the island, more on the ground find themselves caught in the destruction, reduced to nothing as the sheer force of the impact tears through them. Those lucky or unlucky enough to survive are thrown through the air, with their bodies broken and limbs twisted.

And at the center of it all, the remains of the floating island lie half buried in the ruined landscape, shrouded by a massive dust cloud.

It looks like it's all over, but deep within the shattered ruins, something stirs.

At the island's core, the black spear finally destabilizes.

For a brief moment, everything goes silent, even the screeches of the beasts around it are cut off.

Then it erupts. The blinding white light fills the ruins, followed by a massive mana disruption pulse tearing through the forest. Everything within a mile or more is affected. Magic flickers and dies. Inscriptions collapse.

Another shockwave hits, a violent blast rips outward, sending debris in every direction. The nearby beasts that survived the impact are flung like ragdolls. Chunks of rock the size of buildings are sent flying through the air, crashing into the trees of the forest and rolling still further. Some even fly through the air and fall into the sea, sending geysers of water erupting into the air.

The heatwave follows, a wave of searing air that scorches the land and ignites portions of the forest. The following implosion pulls everything into a vortex of crushing force. Dust, flames, even the very air twists and vanishes, pulled into the vacuum.

For a moment, there is again nothing but silence. Then comes the final release. A concussive blast that carves out a deep, empty crater where the ruins once stood.

And the hunt continues.

Chapter 570: Special grade beasts

My mana keeps regenerating, and plenty remains. After the first event, this abundance feels almost unusual.

Finally, I manage to locate another of the three remaining beasts, just as the Stormscale Basilisk dies, fallen at the hands of multiple Beyonders. Yet even there, no one can be sure who got the points in the end.

I'm sure I'm not the only one who deeply despises the lack of information.

Flying over the beach and out to sea, I eventually come to a small island. It's close to the wall of thunderstorms currently on course to buffet the mainland within the next hour or two.

I'm sure that when these lightning storms hit the mainland, the powerful wind and thunderbolts will wipe out most, if not all, Easy and Normal difficulty participants. And the storm isn't weakening either, on the contrary, it's growing stronger by the minute. At some point, given the system, I'm certain it will even be capable of killing a few of the people from Hell difficulty.

Here, on this small island, with the lightning already striking the sea around it, I find Lissandra.

While the wind churns the sea and tears at the foundation of the island beneath her, the area around her remains eerily calm. There is no barrier that I can sense, but when I land beside her, it feels as if the storm never existed. Sounds are muted, the tornado like wind outside fades into a gentle breeze, and no lightning even comes near.

Yet, I do not feel or see any mana. I absolutely cannot see how she does it.

In her usual calm manner, she makes no move to stop me and observes my reaction while she sits on a nearby boulder.

It shows a hint of aggression when I appear, but Lissandra makes a dissatisfied noise, and the Witherclaw immediately cowers, ending all resistance.

The beast is tall and thin; its body is frail and stretched, with pale, almost sickly skin clinging to its bones. Its arms are long, ending in sharp, splintered claws that look ready to snap at any moment. Its dark, hollow eyes stare ahead, empty and unreadable, though its tense body does give some hint of the emotions it might feel.

It is so weak in comparison to the other Special grade beasts I have met so far.

“So?” I ask Lissandra.

“I will be keeping this one for now, I’ll release it thirty minutes before the end of the event.”

“Why?”

“Because it is getting stronger the more time passes, little pup. One hour before the end of the event, it will be stronger than any other Special grade beast,” she says, with a bit of disdain, as if she considers that naming silly, “and thirty minutes before the end of the event, you will have five minutes to kill it before it becomes strong enough to kill everyone here.”

“And what happens if I don’t?”

“Well, ten minutes before the end of the event, it rises to Champion grade, and thirty seconds before the end, it will be Absolute grade. So, little pup, tell me, don’t you think this is a fun little setting the Rulers have prepared?”

“No restrictions for me this time?”

“None this time,” she confirms. “Do whatever it is you want to do, little pup. But save some energy for this one.”

She waves her hand, and my teleportation activates against my will; I find myself being sent through one of my Ley Lines as I appear back on the mainland.

As I rise into the air, even with [Focus]

Before the second floating island finally starts falling, I see Sophie die at the hands of one of the remaining Special grade beasts.

A black panther, that seems to have shadows instead of fur, steps out of one of the nearby shadows and bites into her neck, ripping out her throat and dispersing her into a cloud of fine particles. Then it disappears again, avoiding a barrage of attacks from Min-Jae and Maya, who immediately rush the beast.

Even I can't track it when it disappears, so I'm sure none of them can either. I hadn't even sensed it appear before it got to Sophie.

The Nightshade Stalker then starts picking off more and more of the people who've gathered to observe the hydra. It appears again and snaps at Gareth, piercing through his silver armor with ease, tearing into his leg and leaving deep scratches. Some of the people gathered use fire or light skills in an attempt to erase all the shadows in the area, and despite the bright lighting they produce, they can't fully prevent shadows from forming. There's always one or two that survive, and the beast is fast.

And once too many people gather to defend themselves, it vanishes.

For a few minutes, there is an almost eerie silence. Some of the people lower their defenses, thinking it must have moved somewhere else.

These die first when the beast returns.

With the second island beginning to fall, I don't really have time to try and stop it, and I already sense multiple Beyonders coming to the area, organized through the various communication links they've made.

Some manage to deploy barriers, fields, or arrays. Others try to mark the beast and hunt it down. There are even dexterity specialists who make an attempt to match its speed.

Vic is approaching the area as well.

It's the fight I would otherwise like to watch just to learn about the others' abilities, but I cannot.

I teleport into the air next to the island. As before, it starts plunging toward the hydra, but just as I expected, it's not quite close enough.

When I activate the inscriptions I placed on the side of the island, a huge burst of flame erupts from the thermal orb, narrowed into a cone reminiscent of the flames emitted by a jet engine.

Things break, and I start noticing imperfections or mistakes. The output also isn't ideal for what I intended.

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On the spot, I make the required change, straining my mind in the process and slightly lifting the seal on the Ignition Heart. The stream of flames shifts, growing more focused and extending further. As the island falls, it gives it just enough of a push to steer it over the beach.

After confirming that it's going in the right direction, I teleport back down and quickly use Wraith Dance multiple times in succession; my control during the series of quick deployments slipping ever so slightly, and the movements and kinetic energy itself damage my body.

The Onyxscale Hydra waits there, turning three of its heads toward me, while two turn to watch the attendees nearby, and the remaining heads observe the sky and island as well. The beast is annoyingly intelligent and seems to have noticed.

I use [Eclipse]. It expands into the area, crashes against the beast's own domain, and pulls the colors out of everything but the mana hanging in the air.

As the seconds tick down and the island looms ever larger in the sky, the beast remains unfazed, showing no sign of worry or hesitation.

Slowly, all seven heads turn toward me. Then one of them starts bleeding from the eyes, its skull twisting and bulging until it bursts apart. But the beast pushes through my [Eclipse]

Another head starts twisting, its eyes rupturing under the pressure as the beast strains to counter me. I push even harder, channeling a massive amount of mana through my body to fuel my skill and keep the beast from escaping.

[Eclipse - lvl 28 > Eclipse - lvl 29]

[Eclipse - lvl 29 > Eclipse - lvl 30]

And then another head follows; both of them explode in the process of countering [Eclipse]. The beast is pushing its brains to the extreme, overclocking itself just to counter my skill.

The falling island seems so close now that I can feel the pressure and heat generated by the falling mass of rock and dirt.

Just a few more seconds.

Then two more heads explode, and all my Ley Lines are torn apart.

I find myself glued to the spot and unable to move an inch, even as I deploy countermeasures and begin running through a number of methods to break away every second.

The sixth head of the Hydra bulges; both eyes explode, the neck cracks and twists, and the head bursts open.

Then the hydra teleports away.

Seeing a way out, I resonate with the beast's mana; I take over and try to follow the monster through the rift.

There, I meet its own countermeasure like a brick wall. A wall I cannot break with my current skill or pass around.

I glance at the island that is about to crash into me, and the entirety of my mana roars in a tricolored display as I start stacking barrier upon barrier around me.

Then the island falls on me.

POV Channeler

I barely throw myself to the side as a massive rock slams into the ground, as a second massive flying island crashes into the ground, and for a moment, I feel like the entire world is shaking apart beneath my feet.

The heat that follows is suffocating. It rolls over everything like a living thing, igniting the trees around us in an instant. The battlefield erupts into action.

Someone raises walls of earth to cover us. Izzy and her massive snake absorb the worst of the heat. Kim fires at the monsters without hesitation. Even Knight charges in, blade flashing.

Then the shockwave hits. It's like stepping off a cliff. Every skill I have vanishes in an instant, my passives flicker out, and my mana twists in a way that makes my stomach churn. My control is gone. And even when everything settles, a few seconds later, my mana control still feels sluggish.

And then I see it. The Onyxscale Hydra.

It wasn't there a second ago. Now it is, towering over the battlefield, its monstrous body writhing. Its remaining head standing tall as the remaining six begin to regenerate. The moment they return, it moves and starts teleporting around, each relocation causing one of its heads to turn into a bloody mess of flesh, scales, and bones.

It shoots fire, it shoots lightning, and it creates barriers around itself. Within just a few seconds, it kills dozens, and among them are a number of the Hell difficulty people I've come to know. The beast doesn't slow down either. Second after second, its skills grow stronger, with more of its heads rupturing and regenerating as attendees try to stop or kill it, only to be killed in turn.

At that point, the black shadow panther appears as well, and things devolve into one huge mess.

The panther is incredibly fast and impossible to detect.

The Hydra, between its teleportation, which bypasses all attempts to stop it, and its relentless attacks, begins pulling heat from the air. That alone kills any Easy or Normal difficulty targets in the area, almost regardless of distance.

But then I watch as Victoria appears. Out of nowhere, she stands there as if she had simply sprung up from the ground.

Something about her must have attracted the attention of the panther because it quickly appears beside her and bites into the left side of her body, tearing off her entire arm and most of her chest. More than just a gruesome sight, it sends shivers down my back that she just stands there and watches the panther tear her body apart.

The spooked beast vanishes into the shadows, only to reappear a moment later, crashing into the ground. With something moving inside its mouth. The severed pieces of Victoria's body begin to grow, forming a copy of her body right inside the beast's mouth.

Even so, it is not enough, and the beast's body is too strong, and it closes its mouth, crushing the little that had managed to grow there.

Then I see the most incredible sight. A hand claws its way out from inside the beast's mouth, followed by another. It tears off a finger and throws it deeper into the beast's throat. Then it tears off another finger, and another.

The panther thrashes, its claws still cutting down anyone who gets too close, but it's losing control. It tries to roar, but the sound is wrong. Wet, choked, bubbling with its own blood. It doesn't stop moving, but it's slowing down.

Yet it does not stop. I keep seeing more fingers torn off and thrown into the beast, where a new body attempts to grow from each one. Piece by piece, Victoria forces her way out.

Tears begin to form on the panther's neck, and its mouth stretches open so wide that its jaws dislocate. A sharp crack echoes out, and the beast goes still before collapsing.

Its body starts shifting, accompanied by the disgusting sound of tearing flesh as it continues twitching even after death, with the sort of lifeless movements that I am sure will stay with me forever.

Victoria climbs out, drenched in blood. She wipes her face, barely looks at the corpse, and moves on, vanishing from my sight before I can even register where she's going.

In the space where she once stood, the hydra crashes to the ground and rises with its six heads lifting into the air. It roars, bursting my eardrums, and I feel warm blood flowing from my ears.

Two heads move hungrily downward and start tearing the panther apart, devouring the body within seconds.

Then one of the heads turns to me, and its mouth opens, lightning crackling loudly as it advances.

Out of nowhere, that mouth snaps closed, and all of its heads turn in one direction: toward the fallen remains of the island in the distance, where the sea meets the pale red sand beach.

Something detonates, sending debris high into the air. Even from here, I can feel the massive surge of mana engulfing the area. In some ways, it feels even more dangerous than the seven headed beast.

A second later, he floats there, right where the hydra is looking. Clothes torn and burnt; wounds covering his body; and blood flowing from the side of his head. His crown floats above his head, and golden circles surround his pupils.

Victoria appears by my side, "You are Channeler, right? My brother mentioned you."

The way she talks so casually, even in this situation, makes me nervous.

"Y-yes."

"I am glad I remembered you correctly," she says, looks up, and calls to her brother, "Do you need any help?"

I already know what he will say; I know him too well to be surprised. And as expected, he answers with that same unreadable, infuriatingly calm expression, as if the world itself couldn't shake him.

"This one is mine."