

Tutorial 571

Chapter 571: One hour remains

My mana reserves are much lower now; that is how much it took to survive the island's 'landing', along with the explosions, especially the one caused by the black mana destabilizing.

Still, I'm grateful to the monster for showing me what I can survive, and I thank it for reminding me not to underestimate my opponents, no matter how capable I believe myself to be. As the hydra has proven, I should be assuming that everyone has a trick or two up their sleeve.

One of the heads bursts open under strain as the beast overloads its processing. The earth beneath it bulges and launches a barrage of stone javelins.

I don't even attempt to block it; instead, I teleport, appearing closer. Another head bulges as the hydra attempts to use that skill to disrupt my ability to teleport and hold me in place, but this time, I've come prepared.

The attempt washes over me and does succeed in restraining me, but I expand my [Mana Domain] and pull [Eclipse] tight against my skin, breaking through to teleport once again, reappearing right in front of the hydra.

Another head explodes, and it teleports again.

Three heads remain, but another one regenerates in the meantime.

I watch it; I estimate the regeneration speed and observe the order in which it happens. I also note that, for some reason, the Hydra does not want to let me get close. I follow it on foot, using Wraith Dance multiple times as I weave between the trees, attendees, and the attacks raining down on me.

Lightning, stone spears, ice, and flames. All are massively destructive, ripping the forest apart and killing anyone who gets too close, but the hydra keeps moving further away. It sacrifices multiple heads as it reaches the rough sea and begins to slither across the surface. Lightning from the storm cracks through the air nearby, and rain begins to fall, accompanied by hurricane force winds.

As we face each other, the hydra teleports again, deeper into the storm, and I follow. Lightning strikes my armor, the wind tries to hurl me through the air, and water crashes over me.

I can barely see the hydra through the shadow of the dark clouds covering the sky and the torrential downpour of rain that falls in their wake. But finally prepared, I charge using Pulser Stance, advancing in a series of small leaps as I evade the beast's attacks.

The hydra harnesses the lightning above and directs it at me, then compresses the water around it into laser-like streams to cut me apart.

I move unpredictably, stepping between attacks and extending the reach of [Redistribution] toward the storm. Everything within the spherical area of my influence grows still. The winds cease their rampage, the air growing dead still, while the surface of the sea settles, smooth as glass, serene as a mountain lake on a windless day. It becomes quiet, and the hydra roars.

Two of its heads twist and break apart as it tries to hold me in place again. But this time, I break through immediately, moving closer, taking a series of quick steps that don't so much as stir the water around us.

It tries to teleport, but I release a burst of kinetic energy I had been gathering from the storm's turbulence. This burst strikes the nearest head, which shows signs of being wounded, causing the teleportation to fail. I send two more bursts, detonating the second head with one while the beast fends off the other.

[Redistribution] surrounds the beast, and I amplify it with black mana. This time, I am the one holding it back, nullifying all of its movements.

Three heads remain, and I already know which one to target. Before it can react, [Empyrean Lance] pierces through another head.

My armor expands to match the size of the beast, and I release my grip on the storm. Rain starts falling again, and the wind howls as waves tear through the surface of the sea when I crash into it.

I grab one of the two remaining heads, my heart racing as it converts mana into kinetic energy. I squeeze tightly, crushing the head until it bursts like the other.

Then I grab the last head, but before I can do anything, it explodes on its own. Blood sprays over me, sizzling as it burns through my mana, even as the rain begins washing it away.

It reaches my body, searing my skin and disrupting my mana. My shoulder and back burn as the flesh melts away, exposing bone. It would have spread further, but I disrupt the mana within the blood and break down the structure of the skill. The blood returns to normal, reverting to a simple, if hot, red liquid.

I sense movement behind me and strengthen my armor.

Taking advantage of my distraction, a jet-like stream of water slashes diagonally across my armor, barely stopped by the final layer before it manages to cut me apart.

The regenerated hydra head bites into me, sending constant bursts of lightning through the armor. The storm fuels it, with bolts striking the hydra, surging through its body, and pouring into me.

Locking eyes with that piercing blue gaze, I reinforce my armor. I continue to knit and weave my mana, using Ley Lines to form new layers to redirect the lightning. More kinetic energy builds within me.

At that moment, my mind is clear and calm, leaving no room for anything but single minded focus on continuing the fight and managing my abilities.

As the tail strikes toward my breastplate, in an attempt to skewer my body, another arm grows from my back and catches it, holding it in place. My other two hands reach for the hydra's head, gripping it from both sides as I begin to squeeze.

The lightning intensifies, surging from the hydra's mouth as it blasts against my armor and reaches for my head. Layers crack and shatter one after another until only the final one remains, barely holding against the assault.

I don't even blink.

The beast's red blood continues to spray against my mana, eating into it and sizzling despite the fierce wind and heavy rain. The lightning intensifies, as the hydra strains in desperation, striking me again and again as I rebuild my defenses.

Control slips from the hydra, and lightning tears into its body. Desperate to escape, it tries to pull away, but I hold tight, squeezing even harder.

Its skull cracks, and the feedback of the kinetic vibrations it creates reaches me. One of its eyes bulges out and bursts open.

With one final push, I power up the armor and slam my hands together, the skull bursting open between my palms in an explosion of flesh, brain, and blood.

Even with its heavy demands on my concentration, I slightly lift the seal around the Ignition Heart, letting it beat a few times. Each heartbeat unleashes a surge of thermal energy, golden flames erupting around me. They fuel my healing passive, evaporate the water collecting on my skin, boiling the sea below me before finally crashing against the hydra's body, scorching the stumps of its seven severed heads, rolling off the creature's onyx scales time and again before finally breaking through.

The fourth special-grade beast has been defeated. The remaining special-grade beast has sensed the death of the other four. It will know who killed them and their locations at all times.

I teleport away in a short series of leaps, as the storm hits the beach and continues onto the mainland. Even the islands floating in the sky find themselves forced to move under the oppressive winds. I check the time and confirm the state of the countdown.

Then I take a break from hunting the other monsters. Instead, I fly to the top of one of the islands and, repeating my previous strategy, break into the vault containing one of those huge hearts. Once there, I anchor another Ley Line and make my way back outside, then I continue stretching it over to another island, at which point I make my way to a similar room.

The two Ley Lines connect, and I continue to stretch that line. I start teleporting between the two locations, setting up inscriptions made out of Ley Lines or threads of mana that I weave and knit if I need more flexibility. I even break apart parts of the room and melt the mana-conductive materials, using them to add to the web of inscriptions I'm assembling.

The narrative has been illicitly obtained; should you discover it on Amazon, report the violation.

Every few minutes, I check the timer until Lissandra releases the last beast, and at the right time, I create two javelins made of black mana, each of which pierces one of the hearts, only to start absorbing the mana once again.

My inscriptions temporarily prevent it from eating into the web I just made, and the black mana instead targets an easier source: the mana generated by the heart.

A bit over one hour remains, and I'm sitting inside one of these rooms, examining the process: taking notes on the way black mana absorbs other mana, the difference in how it affects me with Mana Wavelength Tyrant on vs. how it affects me when it's off, and the way black mana reacts with the current iteration of [Ley Line].

I examine the inscriptions making up the room as well: the ones around the heart, those around the hand, and the set empowering the hand to heal the heart. The two sorts of liquid pumped into the head, one pale blue and the other as red as blood, capture my attention.

There are plenty of materials I don't really know yet, and pathways carved in ways I never imagined. It's something I'm sure I could spend days, even weeks, examining and experimenting with.

At some point, I sense a familiar presence approaching, so I stay where I am. It doesn't rush, taking its time to reach me.

It enters the tunnels, passes through them, and sometimes stops for a minute or two to curiously examine something new it finds. There is even a point where it gets distracted and follows the beasts that appear, just to observe them.

After a while, it seems to get bored and turns to head right for me. When it gets close, I switch to my normal sight and watch Myrra enter through the hole I've made in the metal door.

"Hello, feral one!"

"Hello, Myrra."

"You don't seem to be having a good day."

"It could be worse. Are you here with a message, or are you just here to mess around?"

"Hehe, I would say it's more of the latter. Is it safe to come closer?" She gestures at the pillar with the heart and my spear piercing through it.

"If you stay close to me."

"Got it," she says, moving quickly in nimble, long steps, and sits on the ground next to me.

For the next five minutes, she stares at the pillar, the black spear, and the huge heart. Her yellow eyes are wide open, as her tail sways from side to side.

"You never asked me for my subclass, feral one."

"I've heard from a reliable source that it's super rude to ask that sort of question."

"But you are rude."

"... What is your subclass, Myrra?"

"It's greed. Maybe that's why she "likes" me, if you could call it that. You don't have to tell me yours; I already know." She flashes me a smile, placing her fangs on full display.

"Okay." I nod.

Her hand moves up, and with the tips of her fingers, she carefully touches the scar that runs horizontally across her nose and a small part of her face, something I'm sure she could have removed if she wanted to.

In the light down here, the surface of the scar glistens in stark contrast to the rest of her skin. The light making it appear deeper and redder.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Tess."

"I understand."

To my surprise, the response only seems to annoy her, the motions of her tail betraying her emotions.

"I hate it when you use that concentration skill." She stands up swiftly. "I will see you after the event, and, feral one... good luck."

After that, she forfeits the event and disappears to watch from the outside, possibly under Lissandra's instructions.

Her words feel off... as if I missed something important.

Three.

Two.

One.

One hour remains, and for the first time since the start of the event, I receive a notification from the system.

Congratulations! You have survived until the final hour of the event. One hour remains.

The following beasts have been defeated:

Onyxscale Hydra

Stormscale Basilisk

Emberhorn Behemoth

Nightshade Stalker

The special-grade beast Witherclaw has managed to survive and will now rapidly grow in strength in step with the event's settings!

Thirty minutes before the end of the event, its strength will grow rapidly. Ten minutes before the end of the event, it will attain the rank of Champion and beyond!

Current points awarded for defeating the Witherclaw: 15,000.

Points will increase by 500 per minute until the 30-minute mark, then by 1,000 per minute.

At the 10-minute mark, they will increase by 5,000 per minute.

At the 1-minute mark, they will increase by 10,000 per second.

At the 30-second mark, the point value of Witherclaw will increase by 100,000 per second.

I reread it a few times before I look at the other notification.

It is now possible to see the rankings of the second event!

Then the current rankings start to appear in the holographic window before me, listing placement after placement.

10th - 5,401 points - Brainiac

9th - 6,120 points - Grumpy

8th - 6,580 points - Tacita

7th - 6,751 points - Renji Hayakawa

Five more placements appear, including a few names I don't recognize. I know not all of the "Kings" are suited for hunting groups of opponents, but it's good to see a Beyonder in the rankings. It clearly means that the top dog of the round isn't fixed, after all, every round should have at least a few people competing for the top spot.

6th - 6,940 points - Maxim Sarov

That Russian boy with shadow creatures and void energy is interesting. I hadn't expected his abilities to be quite so effective against large numbers of opponents.

As more names appear, I find myself thinking of trivial things to distract myself.

5th - 7,050 points - Agni

Another new face.

4th - 7,888 points - CarrotCake

I expected him to be at least that high.

3rd - 16,300 points - Victoria

So it was probably 10,000 points for the special-grade beast, but then that would mean Victoria earned the rest from the normal beasts?

When the second place appears, I feel myself calm down.

2nd - 19,700 points - Yama

Good.

The last name spot appears. And next to it is a single-word name.

But it's not mine.

1st - 37,600 points - Hadwin

And one more. My placement

26,576th - 0 points - Noname

Chapter 572: Witherclaw

Staring at the window, I let a chuckle slip from my lips. Another follows, building until it turns into full-blown laughter. I keep laughing for a good ten seconds before finally stopping.

[Focus]

I open the notifications again and start doing calculations.

Thirty-eight minutes from now. Twenty-three minutes before the end of the event, the Witherclaw should be worth somewhere around 38 thousand points, enough for me to secure the first spot. Even though Lissandra said that 25 minutes before the end, the beast would become strong enough to kill anyone here.

That means it needs to survive for at least eight minutes from the moment she releases it until I can kill it.

I let out a long sigh and rest my back against the wall, tilting my head up to stare at the ceiling absentmindedly. Out of curiosity, I press the tips of my index and middle fingers against the contours of my neck, tracing a path along my windpipe to feel for my pulse. It's quick and erratic, mirroring my heartbeat.

Another chuckle escapes me as I lower my hand.

Then, I close my eyes and clear my thoughts.

When it's close to thirty minutes to the end of the event, I stand up and teleport outside, positioning myself on the cliff at the edge of the floating island. The strong wind immediately pushes against my body, and the view unfolds below me. The sea is nearly gone, obscured by dark clouds and a wall of rain and lightning that has already begun its bombardment of the trees in its path. Some of them catch fire only to be extinguished by the rain in the next instant.

With the storm comes a flood of stronger beasts. From behind it emerge, hawk-like creatures, their piercing screams cutting through the air, lightning trailing their wings. New beasts crawl from the water, floundering their way ashore and diving straight into battle with the attendees.

Yet the worst is still to come, waiting for the moment the timer reaches Lissandra's appointed moment.

As that time arrives, a powerful mana signature emerges from deep within the storm, and I activate my eyes, tracking it as it moves.

The Witherclaw runs like a wild animal, sometimes on two legs, sometimes on all fours. It pierces through the wall of rain, dodging lightning all the while, and then delves into the forest. Immediately, explosions go off and powerful bursts of mana trigger an array of defenses the attendees have set against the storm and beasts.

I strengthen the shield around me to avoid taking damage from the storm's lightning and continue to observe the beast's progression.

It exits the treeline, holding a man by his leg, and begins looking around and sniffing. The raindrops splash on its pale skin, making its thin, fragile looking body glisten in the air.

The man being held channels mana and launches a swift, cutting attack at the beast, but the Witherclaw just takes one more step, yanks the man back, and swings his body against a tree. Blood sprays from his mouth, and I am pretty sure his spine cracks, yet he still doesn't die.

The Witherclaw lets him go and moves closer, settling beside the man and staring at him with its empty black eyes as he lies there, dying. The attendee tries to speak, but only frothing blood escapes his mouth, until he finally remembers he can forfeit with his mind, dissolving into pale blue particles.

For a moment, the Witherclaw watches the spot where the man died. Then, it rises and turns directly to me, as if it could sense my eyes watching.

Its figure is not that much different from that of a human, though it looks very fragile, pale, and with thin, long limbs. It has a slightly larger head than its body would normally warrant, and its mouth isn't really all that big, but when it opens, I can see multiple rows of sharp teeth.

Yet its black eyes remain empty.

The beast senses movement nearby and, instead of hiding, charges at a group of ten attendees, a mix of people from Hell and Hard difficulty.

The Witherclaw moves quickly, switching between bipedal and quadrupedal strides. No stun, disruption, or hold type skill seems to work on it, and the special-grade beast is nimble and perceptive enough to avoid most attacks.

Its claws now glow pale red as it easily pierces through the barriers, items, and skin of the attendees. Even though it looks fragile, the beast is incredibly strong, and its strength and speed continue to increase.

With every fight, the beast learns, adapts, and modifies its movements.

And it likes to play with those it hunts. It almost never kills its opponents outright; rather, it cripples them, severs limbs, breaks bones, and leaves them lying in the dirt while it takes its time with the others. Then it watches as they twitch, struggling to fight back, or slowly die.

If someone seems like they might be able to stand, regenerate, or escape, the Witherclaw turns its attention back to them and breaks a few more bones, in a careful manner that seems almost gentle.

Sometimes, it even looks up at me while doing so or while taking a bite from attendees who hesitate to forfeit.

Seeing that behavior from the beast, many of the remaining attendees simply forfeit and vanish, causing the beast to pause.

It stands there looking almost sad. Then it opens that mouth full of sharp teeth and lets out a sound I have never heard. It is not a screech, nor does it fit with any other sound I recognize.

A low, guttural chuff rolls out, rough and dry, followed by a rapid series of sharp, clicking barks. The sound carries a strange, uneven rhythm like a broken pattern of short, exhaled forced through a narrow throat. A deep growl follows, vibrating low in its chest and rumbling just beneath the surface of the beast's flesh.

Then it emits another burst of chattering clicks, each one sharp and deliberate, almost like the controlled rasp of bone scraping against bone. The sound is aggressive and carries the edge of something predatory.

Only when Jean exits the forest does the beast stop.

Fittingly, Jean grins and slams a fist against his chest, the impact sending vibrations I can feel even from up here. The force scatters the raindrops around him, making the rain pause for a brief moment.

The Witherclaw moves faster than before, and both the beast and the man collide in a shockwave that uproots the surrounding trees. Another attack follows immediately after, and the beast goes flying, launched through the air, unable to withstand the incredible strength that Jean possesses.

It crashes through dozens of trees and quickly picks itself back up, shaking its head. But before it can do anything else, it's already being pulled through the air into Jean's huge hand as he grabs its neck and slams its entire body against the ground in another explosion.

Jean moves to do it again, but suddenly comes to a halt mid motion.

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The beast is no longer there. Instead, it lands a short distance away, damaged but still functional. Holding the ragged remains of Jean's hand, it looks at him and takes a slow, deliberate bite, tearing off one of the thick fingers and starting to chew.

Unsurprisingly, the huge man smiles brightly, the predatory gleam in his eyes almost rivaling that of the beast's. The pressure around him rises with an audible thump, sending a burst of powerful vibrations through the air.

He takes a step, and the earth explodes; from the air, he grabs stones and hurls them at the beast.

The Witherclaw drops the hand and moves, nimbly skirting the radius of the explosion. Even though its body remains unaffected as Jean strains to pull it, the beast charges at him all on its own.

They clash again, and this time, the Witherclaw comes away wounded as well. The beast is thrown aside with a dislocated arm, and in the process, it leaves a deep set of lacerations across Jean's face.

Fully ignoring his wounds, Jean charges the beast again, only to reach its position and not find it there. He looks around, confused and preparing for an ambush that never comes.

I track the Witherclaw, watching it retreat like a coward. It cradles its broken arm and lets out a series of short, sharp, distressed barks with a deep vibrating undertone.

At this point, I leap from the island, extending [Ley Line] below before teleporting, just in time to disrupt the dangerous strings of mana reaching toward the Witherclaw.

The beast notices the strings too late and would have fallen into the trap. With its empty eyes, it scans me, tenses its body, and prepares to charge, but then changes its mind. Instead, it bulldozes its way through the dozens of corpses of dead beasts that have risen and been forced to fight. Undead creatures, their eyes glowing with a mixture of blue and green light.

I disrupt another wave of dangerous threads not unlike my [Ley Line] and stand to face Yama, the 9th-round tournament winner.

"Incredible. So far, only two attendees have been able to see my strings, but neither could disrupt them with a simple glance," she says calmly as she steps out of the tree line.

Behind her, the corpse of Stormscale Basilisk moves with the same blue and green light in its eyes and huge, gaping, bloodless wounds marring its body. Even though it is weaker than when alive, it still feels impressive.

"Thank you, I have also noticed you observing my lines," I answer.

"I couldn't help but admire them. They're different from my own, and yet they're still impressive in their own way. Now I want to ask you, why have you stepped between me and that beast?"

"It's mine to kill," I say simply.

"It belongs to whoever kills it first," she counters.

"It's mine." Then, just as she does, I raise my mana.

Her strings swirl in a huge circle around us, each vibrating at a slightly different frequency, but I know that in the mere moment, I would still be able to disrupt them.

After glancing in the direction where the Witherclaw went, I turn to Yama, "Your group?"

"Yes, along with some friends I made. While I hold you here, they should..."

Instead of letting her finish, I disrupt all the strings reaching toward me, and rather than using the [Ley Line] that I'm sure she tampered with, I use Wraith Dance to reach her.

The undead basilisk and a few of the other corpses rise to attack me, but I maneuver around them and make my way over to the woman.

Her strings are even denser around her; she uses them to move her body, increasing her speed as she pulls and yanks. She does the same with the corpses, which, without the strings, would appear to be pulled by invisible leashes.

I hear the Witherclaw's screech and change direction again, targeting the source, deploying [Eclipse] for a moment to eliminate anything she might use to slow me down.

I blow away a few of the undead monsters jumping in my way and duck under the Chinese man swinging at me with a dagger in his hand. I continue to run as he follows behind me, tall and slim and sending the familiar vibration of kinetic energy rippling outward from his body.

I absorb my momentum and lean to the right, only to have it absorbed again. A burst of kinetic energy surges through my body, and I execute a movement that would normally twist my ankle but instead adds momentum as I absorb the recoil.

The man falters, confused by this series of movements, finding himself thoroughly unprepared as I approach him from his left instead of his right. Even so, he still raises his weapon and blocks the

incoming attack with his arm, but is too late to notice the Needle Point I use to break his kinetic barrier and the follow up that shatters his feet.

As he loses balance, I punch him, releasing more kinetic energy and sending him rolling through the forest.

Lightning from the undead Basilisk strikes my former position, and I use Wraith Dance three times in a row to reach a clearing with the Witherclaw standing trapped at its center. The beast is surrounded by half a dozen attendees, each one of them at least Beyonder or Hell difficulty. There is a cage made of pale white polished stone around it, further strengthened by the surrounding field.

The man using the stones wears a stone ring on his finger, the signature of which catches my attention.

Meanwhile, the Witherclaw tries to escape. Its left arm remains broken, but it uses its fangs to tear at the cage, which quickly regenerates before it can fully break free.

Three members of the group move to attack me, and at this point, I am sure they are all using something unseen to communicate.

Instead of fighting them, I raise my mana even further, flooding the air with its raw power. The sheer intensity overwhelms their senses, forcing the three men to step back in shock.

Then I form [Empyrean Lance] and shoot it through the cage, the lance tearing through it as if the stone were made of paper.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, the Witherclaw swings its claws once more at the damaged spot and breaks free.

Panic ensues, but before they can react, the swift beast, now free from the trap, leaps at the man with the stone ring, tears out his throat, and continues to gouge his face with its claws until the man disintegrates into a cloud of blue particles.

Without the trap, the men and women stand no chance against the Witherclaw as it tears through them. With nothing to slow it down, no one can match its speed or withstand the swipes of its claws.

Seeing Yama appear, the Witherclaw lets out those predatory noises again and lunges at her. Its speed surges, and with a single swing of its seemingly fragile body, it blows the basilisk's head clean off.

Before it reaches her, Yama attempts to teleport, but the Witherclaw uses its mana for the first time. A flare of energy erupts around its body as it reaches for Yama in the middle of her teleportation. The mana destabilizes her escape, snapping the threads she was trying to use.

She reappears from the failed teleport, her side twisted, torn, and shattered by the attempt.

At that moment, the Witherclaw fails to notice the string coiling several times around its neck. Even in her wounded state, Yama hides it well as she slowly starts pulling, trying to behead the beast.

And she would have succeeded if I wasn't there.

I disrupt her attempt and return her cold gaze.

The Witherclaw realizes what happened, but the emptiness in its eyes remains unchanged. Ignoring a few weaker mana-based attacks, it swings to kill the undead beasts charging at it, then grabs Yama's leg and leaps onto a branch of a nearby tree.

Even as Yama struggles, trying to strike or injure it in any way she can, the Witherclaw doesn't react. Its immense mana blocks most of her attacks. Still staring at me, it takes a bite of her leg. It reaches for another, but Yama vanishes into a spray of particles, likely having forfeited.

Jumping down from the branch, the Witherclaw steps toward me with the same predatory movement.

I hold my ground as it closes the distance. When it reaches arm's length, the usually hunched beast straightens, standing several heads taller than me, its lanky, fragile-looking body looming overhead. It opens its mouth, releasing a deep, grating snarl while pressing down on me with its mana.

In response, I unleash my own. It surges outward, crushing the air with its weight as it engulfs the area and slams into the Witherclaw's mana. My mana pushes against it, threatening to tear through and completely overwhelm it.

This time, I take a step forward, and instinctively, the Witherclaw steps back, ever so slightly hunching back down.

"Fuck. Off."

It hesitates for a few seconds before turning away and running toward more signatures.

I check the timer to confirm when I am allowed to kill it and follow behind.

Chapter 573: Hope it's worth it

I help the Witherclaw break free from another trap set by Leticia and Luna's group. As it charges forward, Monte shifts, growing to twice his height. Dark green scales spread across his body while his face stretches into a lizard-like shape, his movements turning sharp and predatory.

I disrupt their attempts to help their tournament winner as Monte clashes against the beast.

Leticia calls out to me in surprise, but I ignore her call and step aside as Luna, now the size of an elephant, snaps at me with her teeth. The huge golden retriever continues to attack me while Leticia supports her by spreading a web across the area and attacking from a distance.

During the fight, I tear down the web and deflect any projectiles aimed at me. The clash lasts barely thirty seconds. In that time, the Witherclaw grows noticeably stronger. Its mana expands and it begins using it much more naturally, at which point it begins disrupting skills, and applying pressure to the others, even as it strengthens its body with the excess.

Monte, in his current form, has strength nearly equal to Jean's. The green scales covering his body resist mana to an impressive degree, and I can even feel the ambient mana bouncing off of them. The forest ends up being reduced to a crumbling wreck in the wake of his battle with the Witherclaw. Trees are uprooted by the shockwaves, and huge craters mark the ground wherever they land. Both the shapeshifted man and the beast display remarkable physical strength.

In the end, it's the Witherclaw who wins. The beast grows stronger as its mana surrounds it, and it begins to move faster than before. With a sudden attack, it drives its claw through Monte's green scales, and his head falls to the ground.

Then the Witherclaw turns to the rest. It passes by me as it heads to attack Luna and Leticia. Its body remains fragile and its eyes are still empty, but its figure stands taller now, almost as if it had grown during the fight.

Leticia, Luna, and their group die soon after despite all their effort.

So do Baek and his group, and all through the fight, the Witherclaw learns increasingly better ways to control its mana and begins using it more in its fighting style.

A group of Beyonders try to attack with rifles and bows from a distance.

Hector, with his invisibility and arcane spear, gets in one powerful attack and even poisons it for a moment. But the beast uses its mana to expunge the poison and attacks the man with the same extreme cruelty as before.

Maxim, using void energy and creatures formed from shadow, cuts the beast off from its mana, forcing it to rely only on its physical abilities to track him as he teleports from shadow to shadow. In the end, the beast breaks through the disruption using a method I know I couldn't replicate, tracks him down, and, with a single blurred movement of its arm, removes him from the event.

Derick and the large group he has collected also fall to the now too powerful beast.

Every time I let the beast fight, only stepping in when necessary. During these last few minutes, the Witherclaw would have undoubtedly died multiple times without my help, that much is clear. But gradually, I find myself needing to intervene less and less. The beast adapts quickly. Its strength grows, its mana expands, and it uses everything it has far more efficiently.

Mere moments ago, the beast got scared during the fight with Baek and Klara and ran to me for help while letting out those creepy cries. Now it doesn't really bother, slowly realizing its potential and

learning to control the immense power it possesses. But at the same time, as the Witherclaw grows stronger, it becomes increasingly arrogant and more inclined to torture anyone weaker.

It likes to wound people and watch them die. It likes to bite into them while they are still alive.

We eventually run into Savant, who stands rooted in place, orange light radiating from his skin. The green dagger I saw Tacita use is still lodged in his side. Sweat beads on his forehead, and I wonder what kind of dagger it is and what effect it must be having on him.

But even seeing the state Savant's currently in, the Witherclaw hesitates upon seeing him. It sniffs the man surrounded by that orange light and growls.

Savant glances between me and the beast. Absent-mindedly, he reaches and touches the handle of the dagger in his side. His expression contorts in pain from that simple touch.

As if he just confirmed something, he straightens up and looks at me. "Unlike somebody here, I know when pushing back is useless," he says.

After that, he disappears into yet another cloud of pale blue particles.

Barely six minutes have passed since the beast emerged from the island where Lissandra held it. That means only two minutes remain until I can kill it.

Instead of hunting for more opponents, the Witherclaw stops and turns to me. It straightens its tall, lanky figure looming over me and opens its mouth, revealing rows of sharp teeth.

Has it already decided it's strong enough to kill me?

"So you haven't noticed her?" I ask calmly.

The beast tilts its head in confusion, and its pupils expand. It raises its arms in front of its chest just in time to block a dagger aimed straight at its beating heart.

Appearing out of nowhere, Tacita lets go of the dagger without hesitation and pulls out another. She jams it into the Witherclaw's leg and leaves it there, then she pulls out another dagger and circles the beast to stab it again.

After getting over the initial confusion, the Witherclaw reacts quickly and matches her speed. A pale red light glowing around its fangs as it clashes with her attacks.

Tacita's messy, blown hair turns her into a blur, but the beast matches her speed. While Tacita runs on wild instinct to maneuver her body at high speed, the beast brute forces it with mana.

They clash across the battlefield, each one gaining the upper hand for moments at a time before the other inevitably catches up.

But gradually it becomes clear that Tacita is reaching her limit while the beast only grows faster.

In the wake of one of their clashes, the mute woman suffers a deep wound. Quick to react, she cuts the Witherclaw's Achilles tendon before leaving. By the time the beast begins to regenerate, she's already gone.

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After regenerating the wound, the Witherclaw takes a step to follow her, just as I release my mana.

The beast halts mid-step, turning to me while letting out more of those unsettling noises, then drops to all fours and unleashes its mana. Even crouched, its head sits well above my own.

One last time, I scan the area. I locate Jean far away and sense no one else nearby. I'm also fairly sure that Tacita won't interfere once I start, and I make a mental note to repay her.

Then I tap into the Ley Lines connecting me to two of the remaining floating islands. The crown over my head turns black as I take over the black spears at their cores and absorb all the mana they've gathered into my crown. The inscriptions I've been etching into my skin over the time I've spent following the

Witherclaw activate. My entire body has been interwoven with them, and they etch themselves deep into my skin and flesh.

I watch in slow motion as the Witherclaw moves to attack me. It charges on all fours with mana blazing around its body.

A small part of me watches the timer tick down as I wait, holding out for as long as I can.

At this stage, the Witherclaw is not only stronger and faster than I, but it also has more mana. In a few more seconds, I may not even be able to kill it anymore. This is my only chance.

I don't do anything fancy, and I don't attempt to use my skills. I rely on my physique, my circuits, [Mana Manipulation], and all the experience I've gained in my two years of using Mana Cycling.

All that collected mana blazes through my body at once. No other attendee from Earth can channel this much. That, I know for certain. When it comes to channeling huge amounts of mana or any other energy, I am one of the best. That is my talent and my gift.

In a single burst, much like the ones Lissandra used to train me on the 5th floor, just with a vastly greater amount of mana, I unleash everything I have at the Witherclaw.

The blast rips forward, erasing everything in its path. The ground shatters, it ceases to exist, torn down to raw nothingness. The air distorts from the sheer force, rippling outward.

The Witherclaw vanishes in an instant, erased without resistance or struggle. It is unable to gather enough mana quickly enough to defend itself. One second, it's there. The next, it's gone, leaving nothing behind. The destruction doesn't stop with it. The blast carves a deep crater into the battlefield, like a raw wound stretching far beyond. Dust and debris fail to rise, having been consumed before they can even form.

Then there is silence.

All my internal and gathered mana are gone. Even the crown over my head cracks and disappears.

Before me lies a ruined wasteland. The ground is torn open, jagged, and uneven, laced with deep scars where the blast carved through. All that remains of the trees are blackened stumps and uprooted trunks scattered across the field of devastation.

The air is thick with the fading hum of spent mana.

As I stand there, a single thought occupies my mind. I glance at the rankings.

2nd - 37,600 points -Hadwin

And above that is a new placement

1st - 39,001 points - Noname

Standing there even [Focus] deactivates because of my nonexistent mana reserves. These reserves start slowly filling up, but I do not bother reactivating the skill. I don't even try to defend myself as the ever-present lightning strikes closer. One of these strikes hits me at some point and, as many of the other attendees have already experienced, turns me into a fine dusting of pale blue particles.

I find myself outside with these people in our common area, watching the huge screen showing the rest of the event. Not feeling like moving, even with my now restored mana reserves in both body and crown, I simply find a nearby bench and sit down.

"C-Congratulations," the man I sat next to whispers.

It surprises me. I lift my head to face him. "What?"

"You won... so congratulations. I am sorry if I said anything rude."

I do not speak the word aloud, silently mouthing it instead. Won. I guess I really did win, but that was always the point.

“Thanks.”

I take note of the way the simple answer calms him down and even makes him smile for a moment. He is just some guy I have never seen before. I choose not to use my mana senses or try to estimate his level through his movements, so he could just as easily be from Hell as he could be from Easy difficulty.

“That was cool as hell by the way! My son would probably call it something along the lines of 'absolute cinema' or whatever silly thing the kids are saying nowadays,” he laughs briefly, gesturing wildly. “It looked like you were going to steamroll the event, and then the rankings appear, and your alias is nowhere to be found! What even happened? How could that even be possible? I even asked around, but no one seemed to know who that Hadwin guy was. Did he steal your points or something?”

“Something like that,” I confirm.

“What a dick.”

“Indeed.”

“I don't know about you, but doesn't that make things so much more interesting? All these twists and people with their own goals.”

“Well, any other day I wouldn't mind it at all. But not during this specific tournament,” I shrug.

“It's a girl, right?” he asks out of nowhere with a surprisingly honest smile.

Everyone else around us is focused on the screen, watching the final groups of people trying to collect more points. Mainly Jean, who, as always, manages to put on an extremely impressive performance. Most of the others are so busy talking to each other that it feels almost like the two of us have been forgotten entirely.

“Girl?” I ask.

“People your age usually have one of two problems. Money and girls.”

“I don't think I'm that young. I believe most people have a whole different set of problems now,” I retort, gesturing at our surroundings. “The tutorial, the tournament, the floors, their new powers, pairings, skills, rules, and more.”

“So it's not a girl?”

“I mean...”

“I knew it! Now, how about some unsolicited advice from me?”

“Why the hell not? Go on.”

“Most things aren't nearly as serious as they feel in the moment.”

I exhale slowly, letting my head rest against the back of the bench. The guy says nothing for a while and just watches the event play out on the massive screen.

Then he chuckles. “Damn, I sound like an old man.”

“You do.”

He glances at me. There's something in his expression, perhaps curiosity... or perhaps something else. “I am guessing you're the kind of guy to take everything on himself, huh? Even when you don't have to.”

I do not answer, and I don't need to. He just nods.

“Well, good luck with that.” He grins and stands up, stretching. “Hope it's worth it.”

With that said, he leaves me with a quick goodbye and leaves to find his son, who apparently wandered off to bother some Hard difficulty guys he admires.

Chapter 574: Unofficial event

I watch the man leave. Once again, I feel the urge to probe for his level, but I stop myself and let it be. I turn back to the screen and continue watching the rest of the event with the others. Small groups have formed around the area, and a few players from hard difficulty move about, taking the last bets or paying out the finished ones.

A few minutes before the event ends, I stand and teleport over to the fourth round's zone. Victoria is still inside the event, but I decide to wait for her there.

When I arrive, a few guards notice me, but, realizing who I am, they let me pass. I then head toward her place. It is a flat area near the forest with a few small houses and a larger workshop in the center.

Victoria's group is there as well, with an incredible fifteen survivors out of the twenty-five who started in her Hell group. Most are women from the prison Victoria was being held in, but there are also a few men and at least two kids who were visiting their families when they were all pulled into the tutorial. Some are still participating in the event, while others have already gathered outside. I've seen some of them before, and Victoria even introduced me to a few, though many still watch curiously.

I can't help but feel a strong sense of admiration. Isn't my sister the best? Fifteen people in one group from Hell difficulty survived and made it to the eighth floor. There are even three Beyonders. Victoria, Gloria, and another girl with a weird name who apparently isn't here right now. There are also a few of those fancy nuclear warheads that Vic keeps stashed away somewhere, maybe under the mattress or in some obscure room hidden behind a bookshelf.

Part of me has to wonder what the women in her group must have done to end up in prison, but another part thinks it hardly matters when it comes down to it.

"Hello," Gloria says, stepping away from one of the gathered groups with an easygoing, if slightly bored air about her..

"Yo," I reply, noticing that she's no longer wearing the yellow shirt with a grumpy cat drinking coffee. Instead, she wears a gray one with a goose holding a knife in its beak.

"Are you staring at my tits?" she asks as I look back to her face.

Taken aback, she blinks a few times before clicking her tongue. "Cold. You really are her brother," she remarks.

I raise an eyebrow. "Because I insult people?"

"Because you don't bullshit them." She leans in with a smirk. "So what were you staring at then? My incredible fashion sense?"

I nod and gesture at her shirt. "The goose."

She looks at it and then back at me. "It represents chaos."

"Fitting."

"I thought you'd approve." She stretches her arms behind her head. "So what now? Are you just going to stand around looking impressed, or did you actually come over here for a reason?"

"I came to see Vic, but I have a question."

"Go ahead."

"You seem to have a lot of earth clothes. This is the fourth or fifth set I have seen you wearing. I want to buy some."

Gloria smiles again. "If you want my used clothes, all you have to do is ask nicely."

I roll my eyes. "I meant clothes in general, not yours specifically."

She chuckles while rocking back on her heels. "Yeah, I figured. Just messing with you. But I do have a stash. I bought a few from groups in the lower difficulties, and a few of my girls have more."

"I want to buy some," I say.

Gloria hums while crossing her arms. "I expect you'll be paying in items?"

"Yes."

She watches me for a moment, then gestures for me to follow. "Alright, come on."

I follow her toward the storage building. I pass by a few of Victoria's people; some glance at me, but most return to what they were doing. The place feels oddly relaxed despite everything.

Once inside, Gloria kicks open a crate and starts rummaging through it. "So what kind of look are you going for? Tactical badass? Mysterious wanderer? Luxury brands? Tank tops? Crocs? Sweatpants? Sweaters? Underwear? Socks? Fanny packs?"

I shrug. "Something comfortable. And... crocs, I'll take a pair of those too."

She smirks and pulls out a plain black hoodie, tossing it at me. "I knew it. Don't forget to put them into sport mode. Start with this hoodie. You want pants too?"

I glance down at the pants I got on the sixth floor. They aren't as stretchy as I would like. "Do you have sweatpants? Also, some shirts and more hoodies. Oh, and if you have a set of pajamas that would fit me, I'll throw in a little extra."

Gloria whistles. "Pajamas too? Fancy."

I shrug. "Might as well be comfortable."

She rummages through another crate and tosses a pair of black sweatpants my way. "These should fit. Got some shirts too. Pick whatever you want."

I glance at the pile she is making, a few simple t-shirts, a couple of hoodies, and a pair of pajama pants covered in images of a cartoon lizard.

I stare at them. "What is that?"

She grins. "It's a gecko."

"Why does it look so angry?"

She shrugs. "Maybe it didn't get enough sleep. Fitting for pajamas, don't you think?"

I consider it for a moment and nod. "Fine. Add it to the bill. I'll be taking all the shirts. Actually, you know what? I'll just take everything."

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"Didn't think you were the type to wear women's clothes," she teases.

"For my group," I reply.

"Sure. But I can't really sell you everything. This is my pile, so I'll be keeping my favorites, but I should be able to sell you whatever you need. One of our normal difficulty groups got teleported here with an entire mall, so they have a ton of stuff. If you want, I can hunt for more."

"Sounds good."

Gloria snickers and stacks everything together. "Alright, I'll take a few mid-epic items and one upper epic item for the whole lot."

"Tell me what kind of item you want and I'll commission something from one of the crafters in our round."

"Oh? How nice of you. I heard you guys have Tent Creep and Miwa, so I expect quality work."

"Of course."

"In that case, since it is personalized, I want one upper epic item and two mid-epic items, and I'll work on getting more clothes for group four. What do you think?"

"Works for me."

"This oughta do," she says as she tosses me the clothes. "Pleasure doing business."

I grab them and nod. "Yeah."

As I turn to leave, she calls out, "And hey, are you sure you really don't want my cloth..."

I ignore that last sentence and make my exit while radiating a bit of mana, which I shape into threads to tie the stacks of clothing together.

Indeed, I remain the most normal person here.

I leave an hour later, having enjoyed the short break, I allowed myself to spend a bit of time with my sister.

As before, all of my rewards from the second event have been added to the final tournament reward.

While walking back toward our zone, I reread the notification that appeared after the second event formally ended.

The third event, Chronicle of the Past, will start in 48 hours.

In the meantime, you have the option of participating in an unofficial event called Clash of the Disciples! Participating yields no rewards, and the event is limited to participants from Hell difficulty.

Hard, Normal, and Easy difficulties will have different unofficial events.

If you decide to participate in the Clash of the Disciples, which will start in 10 hours, your disciple will receive an invitation and may choose to accept or refuse.

The event will begin right after the disciples join the tournament floor and will last for a maximum of 14 hours. After the event ends, the disciples will remain for the next 24 hours, at the end of which the third event will begin, giving you time to pass on your teachings.

Do you wish to offer your disciple participation in the event?

Yes/No

When that notification appeared, I remember pressing Yes nearly immediately. Now that Biscuit isn't here, I need my Emotional Support Minion more than ever. Plus, seeing her bulldoze through other disciples, how could I miss that?

Returning to our spot, I find Group 4 scattered across the property. Maya is sparring with Lily while Sophie is engaged in some kind of experiment with Izzy in the workshop. I meet Min-Jae and the twins in the living room and drop all the clothes onto Noodle, who is already resting on the cushions.

The pile of clothes slowly moves and shifts as the pearl white head of the snake pokes up with green eyes full of betrayal.

I remember my angry gecko pajama pants and go through the clothes again, piling the ones I don't like on Noodle.

In the end, I find a set of pajamas, some sweatpants, two hoodies, and a few shirts that should fit me. I even take some comfy-looking socks for myself. And of course, I don't forget to separate out a pile for my minion.

"You can choose a few things for yourselves if you think they'll fit," I inform the boys.

Min-Jae eyes the pile skeptically and glances at the twins. "I'm not wearing anything with cartoon animals on it."

The twins, on the other hand, don't seem quite so picky. One of them starts rifling through the clothes and pulls out a hoodie with a faded logo. "Doesn't matter. I missed wearing Earth clothes, that feeling of stretchy plastic against your skin, turning yourself into a walking billboard for some random brand after paying them for the privilege. How could I not miss it?"

Noodle slithers his way out from under the pile of discarded clothes and flicks his tongue at me as if he were deeply offended.

Min-Jae sighs and finally picks up a plain black t-shirt, giving it a quick shake before nodding. "Fine."

I glance at the notification still floating in my vision. Eight hours until the event starts. Plenty of time to squeeze in some training with Whitey, who's honestly been acting uncharacteristically strange lately.

Once again, I find myself waiting in the common area. There are plenty of people from Hell difficulty waiting for the unofficial event to start. I notice some people are missing. Most are those who either decided to pass on having a disciple or those who lost theirs. Neither twin is here. Dennis' disciple died, and Aaron gave up on the disciple-master relationship in support.

Overall, there are 269 people from the various rounds of Hell difficulty participating in the tournament. That means there should be somewhere between 100 and 150 disciples. I lean towards the lower end

because I've heard there are still people in Hell who chose to remain on the 4th Floor after dealing with The Colony and live on as adventurers in Virelia.

There are also quite a few people from other difficulties waiting for the Hell difficulty unofficial event to start. Many are curious about the disciples they've heard of, while others have either lost interest in their own events or have already completed them.

Just as the timer counts down its final digits, huge screens appear across the common area showing a new environment. An empty city made up of beautiful towers and well-kept gardens. The city is nestled in the hollow of a mountain with a huge lake at its center, with a ship made of pearl white wood sailing its waters. The only sign of life is the disciples as they begin to appear. There are many humans, feyliths, and lynthari. Less common are vyssari, thylarin, and velnar. I also see a few less familiar races, and among them, demons seem to be on the rare end of the scale, featuring relatively few representatives.

All of the disciples seem to be around ten years of age, most are even younger. Children like Vega, saved from the brink of death by the system, offered disciple status and summoned to the 5th Floor of the tutorial.

Finally, I spot Vega. She appears near the lake and immediately moves to make herself a harder target to track while scanning the area. I really like that reaction and keep a close watch on her.

Then a notification interrupts me.

Your master has decided to participate in Clash of the Disciples!

Your location has been identified as the tournament floor, indicating your agreement to participate in the unofficial event.

You will now be transferred to the event area.

I feel a pull and suddenly disappear, reappearing in the city in the center of one of the gardens. Opposite me, a young lynthari boy freezes in place. He looks at me with wide eyes and a very, very bristly tail.

Looking at that scared little guy, a thought I often had when I was younger, back on Earth, flashes through my mind:

How many five-year-old kids would it take to beat an adult man?

Chapter 575: Uselessly handsome man

Staring intently at the young lynthari disciple, I lift my hand high with my palm open. Above my hand, a golden thermal orb forms from flames of thermal energy blazing across its surface.

Energy floods into it until it expands with an audible thump. It grows from the size of a golden ball to that of a baseball, a football, and finally, a beach ball.

Then it continues to grow even bigger.

It floats above me, scorching the air with its presence as it emits a faint cracking noise and enough heat to make the air shimmer.

In my most ominous voice, I say, "I'm sorry, little one."

I step forward.

The lynthari screams.

I declare, "I forfeit."

Before I disappear, I pull all the heat back into my body in case it lingers and ruins the event for the little one. Ignoring the commotion in the common area and the questions being thrown my way, I send out a pulse of mana to scan the area and succeed in locating her only because she allows it.

"You must be thinking that was so damn funny," I say as I stand beside her and turn back to watch the screen.

"Was it not?" she asks from the side.

I decide not to answer and focus instead on watching my minion's battle with one of the few other demon disciples. It's almost as if she did it on purpose; out of all the signatures near her, she chose to fight the other demons first. And damn if my little half-demon isn't kicking the poor guy's ass.

"Which one is yours?" Lissandra asks.

"Half-demon girl, red eyes, light brown hair. Primarily a user of kinetic energy and mana."

"Found her," she answers as she continues to watch with me.

After my minion defeats the guy and he dissolves into pale blue particles, appearing in the common area next to his master, I ask, "How did you get all my points during the event?"

"You really don't have any idea, or is it just that you don't want to believe it, little pup?"

"The latter? I mean, at first, I thought you tampered with my notifications because I didn't see any, but then I thought about it and dismissed that idea."

"What conclusion did you come to?"

"You can't tamper with the system directly. I don't even think the Rulers could. Besides, you are still considered partially fake and inside of the tutorial, which should make it even more impossible for you to pull something like that off. Any tiny nudges applied to the system around you are done by the Rulers. Some might be doing it for the sake of messing around, others may want to help, while some do it to hurt you."

"Correct."

"So the only option left is that, somehow, from that little island in the sea, you were able to kill-steal all the monsters before I killed them. All the special grade, all the small ones, and all those killed when the

island fell. You killed thousands of monsters in a single millisecond before my attacks could reach them, without me even noticing the movement of your mana."

"Correct," she repeats.

I look at her to see if she has anything else to say, but the distant smile on her lips tells me she will not elaborate on the subject.

Turning away from her, I can only think about what a monster this woman is, achieving that even in her diminished state.

Actually, at this point, is she really that weak? Isn't it possible she is using inability to die here for some kind of extreme training? Maybe she has already died thousands of times.

"How far away from Champion rank was that beast at the end?" I ask instead.

"Very far."

Hearing excited shouts from the common area, I look at the screen again, just in time to see Vega boost herself into the air and crash into a feylith floating above her. The feylith girl's hair and eyes turn blue as she struggles to stay aloft with Vega hanging on to her; both find themselves being pulled to the ground.

After landing, the feylith lets out a painful groan. My minion absorbs part of the impact and lands with a somersault to cushion the rest. But she doesn't stop there. The moment she comes to a stop, she charges the feylith.

Getting to her feet, the feylith raises her arms and fires a blast of flames at Vega. Instead of dodging, Vega steps into the fireball and stomps. A shockwave of kinetic energy ripples out from the epicenter and erupts, blasting away the weak, unfocused flames. Before her opponent can regain her footing, Vega rushes in, slams her fist into her face, and immediately drives a dagger into her chest, piercing through her defenses.

She shows no hesitation, and part of me wonders if she ever considered that she might be killing these disciples for real.

But I don't really want an answer to that.

"Little pup."

"What?"

"Soon after this tournament ends, little kitten and I will be leaving."

"What do you mean?"

"We will prepare and depart for Beyond, where I will have my only chance to leave the tutorial. There, I will either succeed or fail. So tell me, which outcome do you wish for?"

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"Isn't that obvious? I want you to succeed so that Myrra gets out, and so I can find you later to deal with you for all the things you've done. But why leave so early? Don't you want to get stronger? Use the system shop to regain some of the power you lost?"

"As frustrating as it is to accelerate my plans, I have no choice this time. Each time the little kitten and I pass through an instance of the tutorial, we risk being erased. I have also been warned that more Rulers are watching this instance than would be normal. At most, we have a few weeks."

"How poetic. You're being screwed over in the similar way you've been screwing me over."

"Amusing, isn't it?"

"Indeed," I agree.

As she looks at the screen, I glance at her profile, and thoughts race through my mind. Part of me wonders if she isn't pushing me so hard so that I can be her legacy in case she fails.

Shaking off that silly thought, I turn away from her and focus on the screens. In the end, it doesn't matter. Her reasons don't change the way I see her. She chose to be the villain standing in my path, and she succeeded.

I don't ask if she truly believes she can accomplish what the other versions of her in prior tutorials, likely numbering in the dozens, could not. I'm fairly certain those other versions had much the same thoughts she does now.

Lissandra carries herself with such certainty that failure is not even a concept she would acknowledge.

POV Miwa

Channeler, despite being weaker than me, is respected by everyone in Easy and Normal difficulty. Even those in Hard and some in Hell difficulty show him some degree of respect. The reason for that is simple.

What Channeler says often represents the words of Group 4.

What we once thought to be one of the strongest groups in our 5th round now seems to be one of the strongest groups in the entirety of Earth's tutorial. Group 4, sometimes also called Angry Kittens.

It wasn't long ago that I even heard someone whispering with respect, "He's one of the kittens." It was a guy from Hard difficulty talking about NotAaron. Or maybe it was NotDennis?

After my last question, Channeler sits quietly and continues to stare at the screen, sitting on the bench next to me. I take the moment to reflect further.

Group 4 has Grumpy, the strongest healer Earth currently has, as rumored after people visited zones from other rounds. She is someone I saw regrow the arm of a Hell difficulty man from the 2nd round in a

few seconds. The arm belonged to someone specialized in physical stats, which should make healing much more difficult, and he lost it back on Earth, so the tournament's healing aura didn't restore it.

There is also a rumor that she can cure illnesses once considered impossible to treat on Earth or destroy a crippled leg to regrow a perfect one before the healing aura of the tournament activates.

I have spoken to a healer from my group, and even she said such feats should be impossible at our current level, at least without risking harm to the patient or killing them outright.

That single person makes Group 4 extremely influential, and I can't help but wonder how many people on Earth would do anything to receive Grumpy's services, offering their entire fortunes just to cure their ailments or extend their lives.

But it doesn't stop with her. There's also StrongestOne; even with his silly name, he is someone who can fly, a feat that only a low percentage of even Hell difficulty can accomplish. Not to mention his [Telekinesis], with which he is able to lift entire buildings.

They've got Knight too, known for her speed and huge suit of mana based armor. There are even rumors that she's been recognized by Baek, the tournament winner of the 10th round. Soph, though she hasn't used her ability much lately, can manipulate people, an ability that easily earns its place among the most terrifying, it possibly even qualifies as the most terrifying. Then there's Izzy, with her flames that melt through mana and everything else in their path, and her frankly enormous snake.

The Twins can do something many people from the lower difficulties have generally considered to be impossible, namely, taking over your skill and using it against you while creating lifelike illusions that even those in Hell difficulty have trouble distinguishing them from reality. And of course, Sset, with her primordial lightning and the ability to kill people from miles away without you even realizing it. I spoke with her a few times during the first tournament and found her truly deserving of admiration.

So the question is: Should I accept Nname's offer and work with them? They are clearly one of the strongest groups, but they do not hesitate to use force against others, as Nname clearly demonstrated during the last event. In response to his actions, the other rounds will likely band together to oppose him.

Channeler finally answers as I remain lost in thought.

"I think you should join," he says.

"Can you give me a reason?"

"I can. As you said, Group 4 has a lot of conflicts, but who doesn't? Many groups keep their intentions hidden and wait for an opportunity, but Group 4 is, for the most part, transparent and fair."

Channeler lowers his voice, "And for the record, Miwa, I don't think that Noname even realizes how his actions affect other people most of the time, not to mention the way he tends to scare them."

He glances around before leaning in. "I talk to many people from all difficulties, and even those from Hell often do not understand some of the things he does. Barely anyone can fly, yet he does so with such ease and speed. I have heard of groups forming that try to devise ways to counter his mana disruption; they just cannot understand how he can pierce through natural barriers so easily and disrupt their skills. He can also teleport in a way that barely anyone can track or interfere with. And he combines it all with such powerful attacks."

I hesitate, carefully considering his words. "Shouldn't the other Hell attendees figure out how to do that as well, even if it does take them a while? Plus, he has a lot of mana, so it makes sense that he's powerful."

Channeler smiles, and for a moment, I wonder if he is laughing at me. But instead of feeling insulted, I remind myself that his amusement is more likely to be directed at the absurdity of the situation than at me.

"A lot of mana?" He asks, looking at me with a big smile. "Everyone knows that Noname is an Amplificator, but saying that he has a lot of mana doesn't even begin to cover it. The most talented people here that I have met usually go for one point of Constitution for every three or four points of Mana, even with the bonus they get from the Amplification upgrade. And no one knows how many stats Noname has pumped into mana."

"Please explain it to me. I rarely talk to Hell difficulty attendees, so I don't quite understand just how impressive that is."

"Sure. Simply put, he should be dead several times over. For your body to hold that much mana, you'd need to have a specialized trait, which the others already suspect Noname does have, but that alone would not be enough. You need the Constitution to support it; otherwise, you disrupt the balance, and the mana will constantly tear away at your body. The amount of mana Noname holds, according to most estimates, would only be possible above level 350, probably higher with the 'proper' stat allocations. There is no way he's even close to that level."

I pause, weighing his words carefully. "What are you? President of his fan club?" I ask, shaking my head. "I understand that he's powerful, and so is his group, but what worries me are his tendencies. As I said, I need to think about it a bit more."

"I'm glad to hear that," Channeler straightens up again and smiles.

"I would have thought you'd be happier if I agreed right away."

"That's a reasonable thought, but to be honest, Miwa, your careful consideration makes it clear that this decision is important to you and that you don't want to find yourself changing your mind in the future. Don't you think a person like that would be better to work with?"

For a moment, I look at him, and he remains unshaken, smiling.

I find myself recalling Noname's words that day when I observed his work. As he said, Channeler is, indeed, a uselessly handsome man.

Chapter 576: Clash of the disciples

The minion event, or rather the unofficial event, ramps up gradually. And even though some of the little guys have been ejected from the arena, there aren't many given the size of the event area.

Gradually, monsters start appearing too, and weather changes begin to influence the battlefield. Now the sunny day has been replaced by a blizzard that causes the lake's surface to freeze over, allowing a grand melee to break out across the ice.

Some disciples fight their way through the buildings while a smaller group has decided to band together to fight off the monsters and other participants. Yet slowly but surely, more and more disciples join groups to avoid being ganged up on or to hunt stronger monsters.

Vega isn't one of them, but her senses are among the best, so she does a good job avoiding the larger groups and doesn't seem to mind playing dirty or ambushing those she catches unaware.

I might be biased, but I would say that she's clearly one of the strongest.

Rooted in place, I continue to observe the event, even though Lissandra has already left. Watching the little guys give their all, pushing their abilities to the limit, and using their cute skills to cause minor damage to the buildings is exciting. I know I've said it before, but scenes like this make me understand how so many people become sports fans.

I find myself glued to the screens every time one of the favorites get into a clash, whenever someone takes on multiple opponents, or anytime a minion turns out to be a clever little shit.

These situations spark shouting throughout the common area. There's a rush of betting, and even fights starting to break out when people start taking offence on behalf of their favourites.

When only half of the disciples remain, the weather changes once more. The blizzard comes to an end, as if it never existed in the first place, only to be replaced with a sandstorm. The remaining snow melts, the ice cracks, and the city and its surrounding areas start filling with yellow sand, which gathers in massive drifts that lean against the buildings. The sun shining in the sky seems to grow larger, and droplets of sweat run down the little guys' foreheads. The previously wild fights begin to cool off, growing more stealth focused as most of the combatants start retreating to the refuge offered by the buildings.

Myrra joins me during one of the less eventful moments. She watches the screen, and when she realizes that it's still a parade of minions sneaking around and searching for opponents, she, to no great surprise, turns to antagonize me. Like a typical extroverted lynthari.

Maybe the true Hell difficulty is the extroverts we meet along the way.

"Feral one."

"Yes, that's me."

"Your performance during the last event was straight gas, it just hit different. Mad heat and high-key goated. On god, no cap, fr fr."

"Myrra."

"Yes?"

"What the fuck."

"Hehe."

"Twins?"

"Yes! And the red-headed boy they call Brainiac."

"I've said it before, I'll say it again, you're way too easily influenced by this kind of thing, you should really avoid those three."

"Wasn't it you who started it back on the 5th floor? I think you called yourself a cooked goat or something..."

"And there isn't a day I don't regret it. Sandra told me that you guys were planning to leave."

"Aww, do you miss me already, feral one?"

"It's sudden. And I was just getting used to your annoying face." I reply.

Mischief in her eyes, she leans closer instead of answering. Her fangs show every time she experiences a spike of emotion, and her tail sways. As always, it makes me want to grab and pull it.

One day for sure.

"It's fine. I've already reconciled myself with whatever will happen. Of course, I'd prefer if we were to succeed and Lady Lissandra and I make it out, but even if we fail, I'll understand. I've already gotten more time than I should have, and it's all thanks to you, you know."

"I see."

"Feral one, why are you looking away? Are you feeling shy? Show me those beautiful eyes of yours, let me try and read your emotions. If you want, I can try and force you. Let's fight, no mana or other bullshit, just our bodies like in the tunnels when we hunted the First One."

"Myrra."

"Yes?"

"Wait here a moment."

Checking the screen, I quickly teleport to my place and rummage through the pile of shirts until I find a black shirt with a particular print.

I teleport back and hand it to Myrra, "For you."

She glances down at it and then back to me, her ears constantly twitching. Then she ties up her white hair, all the while keeping her golden eyes on me, and throws the shirt on over the one she's already wearing.

Looking down at the drawing, she asks, "What kind of animal is this?"

"A possum. It's from Earth."

"It's screaming."

"Yes, it is."

"And the red text below?"

"It says 'Aaaaaaah.'"

"Are you hinting at something, feral one?"

"I wouldn't dare."

"You little shit, let's..."

She stops when I lift a finger and point to the screen. On the screen, Vega finally manages to sneak up on a group of three other minions: two vyssari, who are adorably tiny, and a velnar who towers over them both. The trio is unaware of her and have begun to argue so vehemently that it seems like a fight is about to break out.

Vega readies her dagger and uses more kinetic energy than she can handle. Instead of moving fluidly, her body crashes into one of the vyssari, and they both roll across the floor. My minion is the first to regain her bearings, and her dagger, coated in mana, comes down, stabbing her opponent until a cloud of shining blue particles burst forth.

She boosts herself again and crashes into one of the walls with a loud thump, but it allows her to avoid a lightning strike from the remaining vyssari.

Rising to her feet, the little half-demon smiles with her red eyes glowing dangerously in the darkness of the room as sand covers most of the windows. A little light filters through the dust and sand particles

start falling toward the floor. There's blood on the side of her head, but she doesn't seem to notice. A golden circle flashes around the pupil of one of her red eyes, and she charges.

Even though the remaining two put up more of a fight, she still defeats them both. She first takes down the remaining vyssari with a well-timed mana projectile and then defeats the velnar in a one on one physical fight, even though the velnar clearly should have higher physical stats.

While Myrra finds herself engrossed, shouting curses at my minion's opponents and praising the "devious little shit," when Lily appears by our side.

She tries to hide it, but the vibrations from her regenerating muscles tell me enough. Is this maniac trying to mimic my Wraith Dance using only raw physical power?

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Surprisingly, Myrra, despite her spicy language, doesn't so much as try to provoke Lily when she suddenly appears. I guess that's what a constant regime of getting your ass beat by little miss "Iwanttobeabuldozerwhenigrowup" does to you.

"Vega is doing super well!" Lily smiles at me. "And you did well too, Nat."

"Thank you. Which one is yours?"

"Pallius is the feylith in the black suit with the adorably serious expression. He's in a group with two thylarin."

"Found him."

As Lily said, the little guy has an arrogant, serious expression and, even after so many weather changes, his clothes remain nearly perfect. Only one of his small wings is slightly damaged, but it's healing, and currently, both his hair and eyes have taken on a pale shade of red as the trio walks on the stairs.

"Do you know if Victoria has a disciple?" Lily asks out of nowhere.

That interrupts my train of thought, and after a pause, I answer, "I never asked."

"What would you guess?"

"Knowing her, she surely does." I pause as I notice a few presences from group 4 moving closer. "Did you notify others of our location?"

Lily doesn't even try to hide it and nods swiftly, "So we can watch the event together."

With a sigh, I throw one of my Ley Lines into the distance and prepare to teleport away for some time alone.

Before I can leave, I feel a touch on my hand and look down to find Lily holding it.

"Please, stay with us," she asks softly, then lets go just as quickly, leaving the decision fully up to me.

I watch her for a moment longer. She meets my gaze without hesitation, without so much as a blush, and smiles.

Instead of leaving, I create a manabloc chair and sit in it. Only to find myself immediately being pestered by Myrra, so I create one for her too, and then it feels a bit wrong to leave Lily standing, so I make one for her as well.

Once I sit down, I glance to my right at Lily, who stares at the screen observing her disciple, and my thoughts begin to wander.

I can see why even her grumpy cat eventually warmed up to her.

Dennis and Aaron do not join a minion murdering event watch party, and Izzy stays with them to offer her support. The reason is obvious and unspoken.

There are friendly bets, bickering over whose disciple will win, and even some silly banter. Myrra seems to fit in with group 4 surprisingly well, and the others seem to treat her almost like one of our original members. Later, even Channeler and a few of his friends decide to join in. A group of useful men and women from all difficulty levels who seem happy to listen to him, each of whom I lovingly refer to as members of Channeler's harem.

It's still amusing to watch guys from Hard difficulty who could kill Channeler with the wave of their hand be so friendly with him, all the while clearly acknowledging him as a leader. And Channeler himself doesn't even seem to think of it that way; he's friendly with everyone and has a seemingly limitless social energy.

Must be some kind of trait or upper arcane passive.

It's also amusing to watch the expressions of the harem as group 4 starts betting some of the upper epic items they've collected through the floors. For Hard difficulty, even a low epic item is a highly treasured resource. Upper epic items are something very few of them possess. As for Normal and Easy difficulty, even rare items tend to be highly valued.

Situations like this always serve to remind me just how skewed our perspectives are, especially when Maya, with a sigh, gives a low epic protective pendant to a Normal difficulty woman after losing a bet. The woman spends a few minutes constantly asking if she can really take it and only stops when Channeler assures her that it's fine.

It's unexpectedly endearing to watch the 50-year-old woman wrap the pendant in cloth, her hands trembling as she hides it from view.

That scene reminds me of a similar situation from my childhood. After our first apartment burned, our father lost his job, and we had to move; my mom came home and called Victoria and me to happily give us our first laptop to share. It was something she bought second-hand with what little money she was able to save.

Back then, I didn't think much of it. That's just how children are. Sure, I was happy, and Victoria and I thanked her, but I hadn't realized the struggle. I might have overlooked the sadness on her face a few days later when she asked how we liked the laptop. Maybe she was hoping to bask in our excitement, to relive the joy her gift had brought.

Such a small detail I had overlooked, and surely just one of many.

It's for that reason that for the rest of the event, half of my focus is on the event while the rest observes the people Channeler brought here. I read their mana signatures, I examine their bodies, and the items they carry. Even the slightest movements of the mana in their bodies, the energy they emit, and the kinetic vibrations surrounding them are enough to suit my purpose.

It's easy for me to do, something I can manage even while observing the event. It costs me next to nothing.

Slowly, I tailor something useful for each of them. A training method, a bit of information, advice on development, things like that. I inscribe these ruminations onto a few mana stones, which I then hand to Channeler and inform him, through our communication link, that he should give it to them later.

All of this happens just as the unofficial event slowly comes to its end. The weather is calm now, and the sky is dark. A blue moon shines in the starless sky, and the remaining disciples stand at the bottom of what used to be a lake, the water having evaporated during one of the weather changes. The bottom of the lake having revealed itself to be covered in pale white mana crystals that emit a gentle light.

Five minions remain.

A demon, a half-demon, a thylarin with six arms, a lumoran girl, and a girl of the same race as Beatrice, the archon's daughter, back on the 6th floor, remain. The girl has pink hair and skin, white freckles, and eyes that are a mix of blue and green.

The half-demon is obviously my minion.

The thylarin and lumoran attack the demon boy together while Vega fights the pink-skinned girl.

Even now, tired and sluggish in her movements, Vega shows no hesitation. She moves with exactly the same aggression and hunger she showed at the start.

For someone so young, the pink-skinned girl shows an impressive degree of control over her mana, which she uses to launch a series of ranged attacks in the form of striking projectiles. But in the end, she cannot defend herself against Vega, who resorts to using her kinetic energy to get close and break through the defenses in her way. The fight is soon decided, and in that moment of victory, Vega indulges a bad habit she never quite managed to shake.

Overcome by the feeling of victory, she glances at the space the pink girl once occupied and, for a moment, stops checking her surroundings.

Her reward for the lapse is the young demon crashing into her and sending her flying, having already dealt with the thylarin and lumoran minions. He doesn't even bother to pursue the attack and stands there with a calm, calculating expression. He looks to be around 7 to 9 years old and, unlike Vega, his horns are longer and curl slightly, reaching toward the back of his head. Even though his hair is every bit as white as that of most of the demons I've seen, his eyes are of a different color. They're both purple with a white circle around the pupils.

The common area erupts in commotion as people start shouting. Some curse the guy while others cheer at the screen for Vega as she gets to her feet and wipes the blood from her face.

The demon charges her again, and Vega is sent flying through the air and crashes into the crystal nearby.

She stands up again, but before she can recover, her attack is being blocked, her guard is opened by a well-timed punch, and she finds herself being thrown back once more and left lying there with the wind knocked out of her.

Taking a few slow, deliberate steps, the young demon walks toward her, confident in his own victory, but for a moment, he hesitates as Vega climbs to her feet again.

She looks intensely focused now, staring him down as blood covers her lips and streams from her forehead into one of her eyes.

Instead of waiting, she charges at him. It's not the wobbly movements of the wounded and exhausted. No, she flies through the air like a rocket boosted by kinetic energy.

The demon barely has time to lift his arms in defense as both of them are sent rolling. Vega tries to stab him, but he disarms her and breaks her arm.

Vega screams and smashes her head down, breaking his nose with her forehead and causing the first wound he's accrued since the start of the event.

The entire common area roars in excitement, but the noise cuts off as Vega is blown away by the guy's impressive strength. She crashes onto a nearby glowing mana crystal, its surface covered with splashed blood.

An explosion erupts, but not at Vega. It comes from the demon on the ground, triggered by the orb of compressed kinetic energy she left on his body before being thrown away.

Rubble is sent flying as the blast tears through the ground, scattering blood in every direction. When the dust clears, the young demon remains, his body ravaged by deep, gruesome wounds. He staggers slightly, but his glaring expression is every bit as calm as it was before.

And he still hasn't been declared dead.

The blood dripping from his body stops and is pulled back instead, and his wounds start regenerating slowly, the more blood he absorbs. He even takes a step and touches Vega's blood where it's been scattered across the ground, and it seeps into his body and heals him further.

Finally having recovered, he turns to her. Rather than approaching, he calmly grabs a stone from the ground, weighing it in his hand as he prepares to throw it.

The first stone flies toward her head, but as it approaches, it slows down and gently brushes her forehead. The same happens with the next three stones, no matter how much energy he puts into the throws, each of the stones is directed at her head with cold calculation, but Vega stops them with her kinetic energy absorption.

Vega shouts something at him, making him pause. He answers and shakes his head.

Unable to move but having already gathered enough kinetic energy to break free, Vega boosts herself toward him.

This time, though, he expects it and steps aside before she can launch herself forward. Her body flies past him, and he simply watches, expecting her to crash somewhere in the direction she boosted herself.

But Vega absorbs her movement and stops midair as if she hit a brick wall, just an arm's reach from the demon. The mana dagger in her hand extends as she slashes at him.

Even then, his face betrays no sense of surprise. His hand moves, redirecting her force to deflect the attack. With a motion that feels both unnervingly slow and startlingly fast, he steps in and lands multiple strikes. The final blow shattering Vega into a cloud of blue particles.

Someone in the crowd curses loudly, while another bursts into excited laughter, and both are quickly drowned out by the continued chaos in the common area.

Chapter 577: Demon without heart

When Vega finally appears beside me, she looks up while I look down at her. Lily stands nearby with her disciple at her side, seeming hesitant. She and the others watched my minion lose in the finals, so she probably thinks Vega will be upset. Perhaps they expect me to say something to the disappointed little half-demon to ease the sting of her defeat.

None of them knows her as well as I do.

My minion shows no hesitation and doesn't even try to mask her expressions, not in front of me. She smiles brightly and lifts her arms, waiting for me to lift her.

It almost feels nostalgic as I do so, and she snuggles to rest against my chest.

"I will get that fucker the next time!" she declares right away. As she shifts, her tiny horns poke the bottom of my chin. Vega has grown slightly taller, so it is more difficult to hold her in her favorite pose.

"Language, minion; people who can't control their language or actions are no better than animals."

"But I'm a half-demon."

"No exc... huh... that's true," I pause for a moment and finally declare, "It still applies."

"Okay! Where did you read it, master?"

"No! I would never! It's just that Master clearly likes to curse a lot. Do you remember when you told me about that cowardly guy you fought? You cursed a lot then."

"Minion."

"Yes?" she asks innocently.

"Talk back to me when you're stronger than me."

"I will, and then you'll have to call me Master Vega!"

She closes her eyes and listens to my heartbeat, tapping my chest with her finger in sync with its rhythm. At some point, her eyes widen in surprise, and for a moment, I almost expect her to gasp in shock.

Vega closes her eyes again and starts tapping my chest with her finger. Then, she adds another finger, matching the rhythm of my second heart.

When she stops, she looks up and says, "I want a second one too!"

"Two hearts are for tournament winners only, minion."

"That's not fair. Master is an asshole, and I will beat the shit out of that guy next time."

"Yup, I'm an asshole. Also, language."

"I'll totally beat that guy next time! And Master is still an asshole!"

"Yup, I'm an asshole. It's still early for you, but one day, who knows, maybe we'll get you a fancy second heart. For now, will you eat with me, minion?"

"Gladly!"

I turn to the others, who give me a variety of looks, "We will join you later."

I glance at some of their disciples who have also arrived, suspecting that Vega might have killed one or two during the event. I'm curious about them, but my ESM takes priority.

After that, I teleport both of us over to one of the nicer spots I've found while looking for spaces to train. Once there, I put my minion down and jump up. Without using kinetic energy, I climb a tree to grab a basket with all the things I've prepared, mostly food I bought from the other attendees.

I jump down from the tree and move to a spot where the grass is shorter and all around more pleasant to sit on. Reaching into the basket, I pull out a clean square cloth and lay it on the ground before I start arranging the food.

Vega, excited and silent, sits down and crosses her legs. She watches patiently as I unwrap a chocolate bar. I open a can of soda and pour it into a wooden cup, then take out some smoked meat prepared by an ex-pit-master from Normal difficulty. I would rather not know which animal he used from the tutorial. Finally, I add in some fresh pastries made by another attendee, served alongside a jam-like spread.

In keeping with our custom, my minion waits and sniffs curiously. She even twitches a few times as she hears the bubbles sizzle in the cup.

Only when it's done do I gesture for her to take the first bite.

She grabs the cup right away, and, being the asshole that I am, I let her have a true first experience.

She takes a big gulp, and of course, the bubbles nearly sizzle up her nose, making her eyes water and sending her into a coughing fit. Even while coughing, she keeps the soda from spilling and eyes the cup suspiciously. She sniffs the soda, then leans in and listens to the bubbles fizz. After that, she takes a cautious sip, letting it sit on her tongue before going in for another.

"More?" I ask.

"Yes, please!"

I pour more soda into the cup, and she sips it again before carefully placing it next to her and starting to devour the food in front of her. I watch her wordlessly the entire time, not touching the food at all. I simply pour myself a soda of my own and sip it slowly. Only twice do I stop her so she doesn't try to eat the wrappings as well.

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When all the food is gone, Vega takes the cloth, carefully removes the crumbs, and folds it before placing it back into the basket with the other things.

She then moves closer and shamelessly rests her head on my legs, her face turned up toward me. She wears a big grin, so I reach down, pinch her nose, and tap the pointy part of her horns with the tip of my finger.

"Pizza was better, master."

"Liar."

"I'm not lying! We made the pizza together, so obviously it would be much better!"

"Sure."

"Hehe, did you see me fight? I used everything I've learned from the stone you left me."

"I watched the entire time. You did very well. There were some small mistakes, but we can talk about them later."

"Next time, I will do better."

"I'm sure of that. Do you have anything interesting to tell me?"

"Yes! A lot! Some red haired woman with yellow eyes keeps bothering me. She keeps talking about an envious guy and calls herself the greediest person who ever lived."

"Oh, does she now? Did she hurt you or anything?"

"Not at all. She just appears out of nowhere every once in a while. At first, I thought she might try to steal my food, but she never touches it."

"Biscuit... uh, I mean Minion, most people aren't as normal as I am, so be careful around her and don't trust her too much."

"Is master being careful too?"

"... sometimes?"

"So I will also be careful sometimes!"

I poke her horns a few times and pinch her nose, cutting off her breath. She doesn't even try to push my hand away. Instead, she holds her breath and looks at me with a clear challenge in her eyes.

Such a cute little maniac.

Defeated, I let go of her nose so she can take a deep breath and start absentmindedly tapping her horns while checking the time and planning her new schedule.

Looking into the tall grass in front of me, I ask, "Do you not have a disciple of your own?"

My minion looks up at me, confused, but quickly catches on and looks in the same direction.

Tacita, still sitting there, moves the grass in front of her to reveal herself and shakes her head. Her expression is hard to read, so I can't even guess what the reason might be.

Vega, who seems to remember the incident from the first time she met Tacita, stands up, awakening her inner self as the most powerful shin kicker.

Tacita makes a swishing movement with her hand that turns it into a blur, and all the tall grass around her falls down, cleanly cut apart. Standing there without even raising her guard, she stares down my minion, who obviously chooses to accept the challenge.

A dagger made of mana forms in her hand, and with a burst of kinetic energy, she charges at Tacita, who playfully moves to the side and smacks the back of my minion's head as she passes by.

Unable to control these bursts or properly absorb her inertia, my minion takes a few steps to slow down and attacks again, this time running.

They clash time and again, much the same as they did back in the previous tournament. With each failure, Tacita taps on my minion's horns or gently kicks her in the shin as revenge for their first meeting. Sometimes she even kicks my minion's butt when she makes a big mistake.

She treats all of this like a playful bout, occasionally showing my minion how to hold a dagger properly and how to move while wielding two. When Vega attacks from a bad angle or positions herself poorly, she shakes her head.

As before, Tacita lacks patience. I'm sure she wouldn't make a great teacher, given that even she doesn't fully understand how she does some things. It's her instinct and talent that let her move the way she does and read the fight.

So, just as a year ago, Tacita gets bored after around thirty minutes. She gently kicks Vega's shin, ruffles her hair, and taps her horn one last time before disappearing.

My minion and I eventually find Victoria and her disciple in the 4th round's zone. As expected, they've set up in the training area, and the little guy is just sitting there and carefully listening to her teachings.

"It's him," Vega hisses in my arms.

"Seems like it. Minion, but like I said, this is my sister, and he's her disciple, so don't make me hand you over to Myrra for the rest of your time here. I already saw the way she was looking at you. It wouldn't end well for you."

"Can I kill him if he's rude?"

"No killing."

"What if I just cripple him?"

"Minion."

"Punch him?"

"Only if he is rude, and minion don't try to be tricky with the definitions. I mean, rude from a normal point of view, which, for the record, is mine, not yours."

"I would never!"

"Sure, sure."

Noticing our approach, Victoria and her disciple stop and wait for us to arrive. Vega jumps down and walks by my side for the remaining distance.

It looks like the winner of the unofficial event is Victoria's disciple, a young demon with white hair and purple eyes, each featuring a white circle around the pupil.

Demons generally tend to be born with something that is later acknowledged as a trait when they join the system. It's often the heart, but as I've heard, some are born with special eyes, physiques, or similar attributes, usually something connected to primordial energies.

The young demon in front of me is a perfect example. He was born with eyes but, surprisingly, lacks a heart to generate one of the primordial energies. In a demon society, where hearts are highly valued, that alone would put him at a huge disadvantage.

It's amusing that I have a half-demon as my disciple while Victoria has a demon without a heart. From some point of view, it seems rather poetic and might actually say a lot about the two of us.

"Nathaniel, this is Velis. Velis, greet my brother. I want you to show him the same respect you show me."

"Yes, master," he nods toward her and then turns to me and bows quickly, "I greet my master's brother and his disciple. My name is Velis."

"Hello, my name is Nathaniel. This is Vega," I say as I tap her shoulder.

She flicks her eyes toward me, then back at them. "I'm Vega. A greeting for my master's sister, but not for this coward!"

And here we go.

Chapter 578: Half-Demon's Master

To my disciple's disappointment, Velis doesn't react to her provocations. Likely owing his poker face to a combination of natural inclination and the concentration-type skill he almost certainly possesses. Part of me wonders how rare concentration-type skills are in demons. So far, all the demons I've met have been on the more hotheaded side.

Vega tries to say something provocative again, but I halt the movement of her mouth by absorbing kinetic energy.

"Congratulations on the win," I tell Velis.

"Thank you very much," he says, bowing again. His tone is polite, but there's still a distance to it.

I glance at Victoria, who just shakes her head and turns to Vega as I let her go so she can talk.

"I really liked your determination during the event, Vega. It reminded me of Nathaniel. He was much the same when he was younger, though I suppose he hasn't changed much."

Glancing at me, then back to Vic, Vega nods excitedly with a smile. "That's just the start! One day, I'll be stronger than Master!"

"Oh, will you now?" Victoria's eyebrow arches up a bit. "What would you do if you became stronger?"

"Then I would force Master to call me Master Vega and have three meals a day with me! And I would make him carry me everywhere!"

At that moment, Vega looks shocked, as if the thought had never occurred to her. With a hint of panic, she glances at me, then at her hands, before looking back.

"What do you plan to do?" I ask Victoria, all the while letting my minion experience her moment of existential dread.

"I plan to train with Velis for a while longer before I hand him over to a few of my group members who will cover the areas I lack. Lastly, I might organize some sparring sessions against some of the other disciples or spar with him myself."

"So, the same as me. I would also try packing some items to send back with him. The system might block them from going with him, but it might not."

"I already thought of that," Victoria says as she looks between Velis and Vega. "I thought they could spar together, but your disciple seems too emotional to do it efficiently?"

"Master, did your sister insult me just now?"

"Minion, if I were to let you spar with Velis, how would you behave? Before you answer, you only have two options. Would you spar with the intention that both of you learn as much as possible, or would you spar with the intention of hurting him?"

"Both!"

I look back at Victoria. "I agree with your assessment. I'll do some training with her and then I'll probably take her to meet my group and their disciples."

"Understood, I'll see you soon, Nathaniel. It was nice meeting you, Vega."

"It was nice to meet you too, Master's sister!!"

A few goodbyes are exchanged, and I watch Velis as he turns to leave to follow Victoria. His purple eyes meet mine before he turns around with that emotionless expression that's so similar to Vic's.

I think a lot of people might be disturbed by that, but it is something I am very used to.

Looking at the half-demon by my side, I ask, "Minion?"

"Your sister was very pretty, Master! You two seem alike. It's unfortunate she got such a crappy disciple, he doesn't even seem to have a proper heart, so it probably makes sense that he is so weird and cowardly. He did have pretty eyes, but yours are prettier, especially now that one of mine is similar."

"Are you trying to act all cute in the hope of avoiding punishment for being a little jerk?"

"Master."

"Yes, minion?"

"Didn't you say that it was better to be an asshole rather than let people take advantage of you?"

"Did I really say that?"

"Ehm, something similar?"

I sigh and offer her my hand, which she quickly grabs, and I teleport us.

"Let's train for a while, then pick out some clothes for you before we meet the others," I say, reappearing at my favorite training spot deep in the forest.

"Do we have to meet with the others?"

"Minion, you would say I'm your master, right?"

"Yes..." she says carefully.

"The two of us share a bond, a very powerful one: the bond of master and disciple, which even the system seems to hold in high regard."

"Y-yes."

"So, minion, we laugh together, we spend time together, we eat together, but we also suffer together. Exactly as the system intended. In short, you're coming with me to draw some of the aggro away from me."

"Damn it."

Even though she complains, as we walk, Vega moves ahead of me, spinning once on her heel before bouncing back to my side. There's no tension in her, no frustration. If anything, she looks like she's enjoying herself.

"Master, I had a thought," she says suddenly.

"Lies. In fact, it's been scientifically proven that minions are incapable of independent thought."

This story originates from a different website. Ensure the author gets the support they deserve by reading it there.

She grins. "That's not true! And it was a good thought."

"We'll see about that."

Vega leans forward slightly as she walks, "I was thinking... if I tell people I'm your disciple, do you think they'll be more scared of me or less?"

I glance at her. "Why would they be scared?"

“Well, you're scary, aren't you? It's a good thing!” She tilts her head. “You don't smile a lot, you don't talk too much, and you make people nervous just by looking at them. So does that mean they'll be scared of me too if I do the same?”

I hum in thought. “Depends. Do you want them to be scared?”

Vega shrugs. “I don't care. But if they are, it'll make things easier.”

“Easier for what?”

She grins again. “For getting them to fight me, obviously.”

Of course.

I exhale through my nose. “Fear doesn't always make people fight. Some people avoid the things that scare them.”

Vega clicks her tongue. “That's annoying.”

“Poor little you, minion.”

She thinks for a moment, then brightens. “Then I'll just make them mad instead! If they're mad, they'll fight, right?”

I glance at her. “That's your strategy?”

“It works, doesn't it?” she smirks. “It worked on a few of those chicken wings when they were flying out of my reach.”

Am I to take this to mean that Vega's growing into a professional trash-talker? Though she's not entirely wrong.

"And if it doesn't work?" I ask.

"Then I'll just fight them normally," she says as if it were obvious. "I don't need tricks, Master. I just think they're fun."

I shake my head. "You're a menace."

Vega grins wider. "But I'm your menace."

She moves ahead again, bouncing on her feet a bit before turning back. "So where exactly are we going?"

"Nothing's changed, we're going to train and then we'll meet up with the others," I remind her.

She groans. "Fine. But if they're boring, I'm leaving."

"No, you're not."

She huffs but doesn't argue. Instead, she spins on her heel and continues walking.

"Master?" she calls after a moment.

"What now?"

"I bet I could make at least one of them mad enough to fight me."

I sigh. "Please don't."

POV Lily Chen

Nathaniel and his disciple arrive a few hours later near one of the tall trees where we've set up with our disciples, only the twins are absent.

For some reason, Nathaniel and Vega are wearing matching pajamas even though the fake sun on this tournament floor is still high in the sky. While Nathaniel doesn't seem pleased by it, Vega seems very, very happy, so it's easy to guess whose idea it was.

The pajamas are a set: a long-sleeved shirt embroidered with angry gecko faces, paired with loose, airy black pants patterned in red, gray, and white lines.

"Master, is that Nathaniel?" Pallius asks, standing by my side.

"Yes, why?"

Before I can stop him, he takes a few steps towards them and comes to a stop in front of Nathaniel and his disciple.

"I'm Pallius from Teryth! My father became Champion a few weeks ago and is one of the candidates due to become shadow to the Grand Healer, one whom even our Lord Absolute holds in high esteem. I have decided to let Master Lily become my shadow, and for that, I need you to let her go."

Nathaniel looks down at Pallius, then at me. His gaze lingers, and for a brief, irrational moment, I wish I looked a little more composed. I can only grimace apologetically.

"Lost your tongue? And do you have no shame? What are you wearing in the presence of my master? Are you not concerned about the way that will reflect on her when she associates with people like you? Even the youngest of children on my planet learn how to dress for events and..."

"I see," Nathaniel says as he waves Pallius off and then taps his disciple on the back of her head.

"Minion, take care of this. No fighting."

Without engaging him at all, he walks by Pallius, who tries to stop him, only to be shouted at by Vega, "You, chicken wings! I have killed hundreds of your race during the event, so how dare someone as weak as you try to steal one of my Master's future underlings, future minions who will one day serve under me?"

"Huh? There were barely two dozen feylith during the event." Pallius momentarily forgets about Nathaniel and asks, looking confused.

"Y-You counted them?"

"Obviously, I would, as much as I could. Each race has its strengths and preferences, so tracking their numbers allows for better optimization..." Pallius shakes his head. "Why am I even talking to you? I have to talk to that guy and stop him from using Master. She is too nice and innocent to see that she is being used."

Nathaniel reaches me, glancing at our disciples as they face each other, hurling insults. I hear Vega shouting something about my disciple having a chicken heart, a weak heart, and more besides, all the while Pallius grumbles about maniacal demons and brutes.

I should probably step in before this escalates, but for the moment, I stand by and watch. Nathaniel does the same, his expression giving nothing away.

"Is he still going on about the shadow thing?" Nathaniel asks.

"Yes, and he keeps getting pushier," I lower my voice. "I think he's become more determined since his father became Champion."

"Silver spoons."

"He's a good kid, he's just a bit... eccentric. Why are you wearing pajamas?"

"My minion is a tricky creature and doesn't have the least bit of respect for me. I had to make some sacrifices to secure her cooperation."

"It looks good on you," I say, unable to hold back a small smile.

Though his face gives nothing away, there's a slight stiffness in his movements. It's unexpectedly cute, even more so because he did it for his disciple.

"Sure," he snorts, "it's just for one day, so whatever. Lily, if anyone laughs, I want you to remember their faces and names. I will find them later."

"Of course," I answer. "Do you want to meet the other disciples?"

"I guess I might as well since I came here in the first place." He turns around and calls out, "Minion, don't think I haven't noticed you getting ready to punch him. Get over here."

Vega, who clearly looks ready to attack Pallius, immediately turns away and reaches Nathaniel in a short series of long jumps.

On her way, her eyes meet mine, and the joy and gentleness that she shows when looking at Nathaniel are gone. Instead, a pair of deep red eyes stare at me in a way that suggests she considers me nothing more than someone she endures, no matter how innocent she acts in front of her master.

When I asked Pallius about the other races, Pallius told me that this wasn't exactly unexpected behaviour for demons. They tend to be a race that values strength and the establishment of a clear hierarchy. Competitive by nature, they constantly fight for the position of strongest. However, once they acknowledge someone as superior, they become highly obedient and hold that person in great regard.

Of course, that only applies when they believe the person in question is stronger than them, but the moment they sense any hint of weakness, their attitude shifts.

That is also one of the reasons why their Champions and Absolutes are considered to be such menaces and amongst the most powerful within the system.

Chapter 579: An offer

POV Nathaniel

As Lily leads me towards the others, I notice Myrra start sneaking closer, her tall figure looming over the two unsuspecting disciples trailing behind us.

Well, it had to happen.

I hear Pallius shout at the catgirl to leave him alone while my minion starts kicking as Myrra squats in front of her and rubs her cheeks, calling her something silly like Minithaniel.

I think I'm starting to dislike the frequency with which my name is being twisted into random nicknames.

The first disciple I meet is someone I know, a young lynthari boy. And damn, I think I'd probably recognize that bristly tail anywhere.

"At least act like you're ashamed," Maya berates me, and, in support, she puts her hand on her disciple's shoulder.

"I did nothing wrong," I defend myself.

"You never do anything wrong. But, and sorry here, Enan, it was funny as fuck."

"Anyway, this is Enan. He is a bit shy, but he's a hardworking little guy, right?" Maya ruffles his black hair and scratches his color matched ears.

The lynthari's bristly tail sways from side to side as he lets out a grumble of protest, his face flushing.

Maya lets go, "He doesn't talk that much, though, such a silly guy. Now tell me, what's with the pajamas?"

"I lost a bet."

Instead of asking me again, Maya turns to Lily and raises her eyebrow in question.

“He did it for his disciple.”

I watch in real time as my hard-earned notoriety is destroyed piece by piece. But at least the pajamas are comfy.

Curious and thinking it might improve the look and help me regain some lost dignity, I reach through one of my Ley lines and summon my [Mana Crown] I had left floating in the living room

The instant giggle from my side tells me it didn’t work. But it's too late to take it back, and sending it away now would look even lamer, so I decide to keep it.

I lower myself, bringing my eyes level with Enan’s, and look at him with what I like to think of as a friendly face, reaching out my hand toward him. “My name is Nathaniel, and that’s something I only share with a few people, but you are a disciple of one of those people, so I may as well tell you as well. But try to keep it to yourself, okay?”

His gray eyes dart from side to side, seeking out Maya before responding, and only when she nods does he look back at me and nod as well. “I will. My name is Enan.”

He reaches his hand toward me, and I shake it. His voice is very gentle and soft, yet it has a nice firmness to it when he introduces himself.

I stand up again and call out, “Myrra, bring me my disciple, please.”

In the blink of an eye, she’s standing next to me, holding my minion in her arms. It almost looks like she’s forcing poor Vega to listen to her heart, probably because Vega called it weak when Myrra started bullying her.

“Minion, this is Enan, and he is Maya’s disciple,” I say.

“Master, that's too many names!” Vega complains without missing a beat, which makes Myrra giggle and snuggle her even more.

“Feral one, I'll buy your disciple from you. She's just way too cute. It's exactly the way I would have imagined you when you were young. A cute and devious little jerk.” Myrra offers.

“I won't be sold to someone with such a weak heart!” Vega calls.

“Minion, I fixed it for you: 'I won't be sold,'” I correct her.

“That's true. I won't be sold at all!”

“Suuuure,” Myrra says, ignoring the bursts of kinetic energy being thrown at her, either enduring them with her strong body or deflecting them with flashes of Aurora Glass, “And what is up with your clothes, feral one?”

“I'm going through a phase.”

“I see! How about I take Vega, Pallius, and Enan and make them talk things out? I'll make sure no one gets hurt,” she offers.

“That's very suspicious for you to offer that, but let's first get Izzy's, Sophie's, and Min-Jae's disciples, and let Izzy take some pictures...”

“Okay then, I'll be holding onto your disciple until then.”

“Master, help.”

“Sure, keep her until then,” I answer to Myrra.

Our weird group moves to the workshop, where we find Isabella and Sophie waiting with their disciples.

Izzy spots Vega and immediately grows curious, joining in. "Hello, I'm Izzy, in case you forgot since the last tournament. It's nice to see you again, Vega. By the way, Nathaniel talked about you a lot."

"He did?" Vega asks curiously, still trapped in Myrra's arms.

"Yes, he did. Would you eat with me later? I want to talk to you."

"E-eat with you?" Vega seems a bit confused, as if suspecting something bad might happen. "Should I do it, Master?"

"Why are you asking me? It's up to you. And, for your information, minion, I wouldn't bring you to people I thought would hurt you, got it?"

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Vega nods, and Izzy looks at me with a big smile. As always, she tries to connect with me to read my feelings, but I deflect her attempts. Even so, I know she can still sense them on a superficial level.

What an evil ability.

"This is Seneca, my disciple," Izzy introduces her disciple.

Seneca, though she's probably just around 10 years old, is still a bit taller than Izzy. I don't recognize her race, but as Izzy said before, Seneca has blue hair that reaches down to her shoulders. Well, it would. But instead of hanging down her back, her blue hair floats around her head in a movement reminiscent of a flame.

I feel no heat from them; they simply float without falling onto her face or blocking her view. Otherwise, Seneca is slim, her skin a warm, sun-baked shade of bronze. All of which is complemented by her pale eyes, which shine a strikingly beautiful shade of blue.

Seneca puts her arms around Izzy from behind and looks at us with those piercing blue eyes, "Thanks for taking care of Izzy."

Maya snorts, "Sometimes I have a feeling it's Izzy who's taking care of us."

That makes Seneca hug Izzy even tighter. It's an unusual sight, especially since Izzy is so much stronger than Seneca, and given that they're close in age.

"Are we introducing our disciples again?" Sophie asks, stepping in from the side while pushing her disciple forward. "This is Deva."

Her disciple is a thylarin with six arms, which brings a familiar question to mind.

I glance down as she uses one of them to tuck her black hair behind her ear, and this time I actually decide to ask, "Why do some thylarin have six arms while about 95% of the others only have four?"

Deva doesn't even wait for Sophie to respond. Instead, she speaks for herself, confident and completely unfazed. "It probably has something to do with an ancient Genetic Lineage, rumored to have been inherited from a long-forgotten ancestor."

"From before the system?"

"Possibly yes."

"How did that ancestor travel between planets before the system?"

"That is something even our greatest minds and historians have yet to uncover. But it's an intriguing question. One of our Champion researchers has plans to visit other planets and seek out older beings for answers. Meeting a Ruler is likely impossible, but there are others who might know. The Magi, The Last Elf, or perhaps even The Warden of the Parallax Eyes would be among the few with that knowledge."

"Oh, Kyralon? I wouldn't be surprised if he knew."

For the first time, Deva opens her orange eyes wide and takes a step towards me. All six of her arms grab my shirt, and I almost expect her to shake me.

"You know him?"

"Yeah, I met the guy. Velnar, locked away in a tower, all mysterious. Nice to talk to but also an asshole at the same time, you know the type."

"H-how! You're just a second or third year tutorial attendee."

"Beyond quest."

This time, she does try to shake me. And while my body isn't all that strong, there's just no way I would be swayed by this kid, so it doesn't move me at all. "There's no way the Warden of the Parallax Eyes would need something from you."

"Well, he did," I say, seeing how starstruck she is, and deciding to tease her a bit further, "He even poured me a drink and answered a few of my questions."

Once again, she tries to shake me. That pretentious control is completely gone, replaced by a childlike impatience. For a moment, she seems less like the composed figure she tries to be and more like an eager kid struggling to hold herself back.

"Do you realize that there are Absolutes willing to trade entire planets just to have one question answered by someone like The Warden of the Parallax Eyes!?"

"I also chose not to ask one of the questions I was allotted."

And she attempts to shake me again. At this point, I'm starting to wonder if it's not some sort of special attack or something.

Before the poor thylarin can do anything else, Sophie grabs her from behind and pulls her away with a firm grip. Deva flails in protest, blubbing something about me being completely insane, her six arms twitching like she's trying to argue her case. Meanwhile, Sophie keeps nodding, looking like she agrees with everything her disciple has to say.

At that same moment, my minion keeps shouting something at Myrra, telling her to let her go so she can punch that handsy blue halfwit.

Seneca giggles on the side, Enan watches in silence, and Pallius tells Lily to leave me alone. He insists that someone like me would never have a chance of meeting the Warden of the Parallax Eyes and that I shouldn't be trusted with my lies.

I let Sophie deal with her disciple, and while my minion keeps shouting for Myrra to let her go, I join Lily, "Will you take care of Vega? Just make sure Myrra doesn't bully her too much. I'll be back soon."

"Sure, no problem," Lily answers.

I stop in front of Pallius, whose dark blue hair and eyes momentarily lighten with a mix of yellow as he stares at me. "What does being a shadow mean? Is that something like a bond?"

He shakes his head slightly. "On my planet, the position of 'Shadow' is a formal title granted by members of powerful families. It's not a heavy chain like a bond; it's more like a chosen follower. It means you willingly walk by that person's side, learning and growing with them. If both allow it, it can become as strong as a bond, but at its core, it's about following, not guarding."

"So, it's not like a bodyguard?"

"No," he replies. "It's a role of trust and choice: a follower, not someone who hides in the background or simply protects."

"I see. Well, see you later." With these words, I teleport away and then use Wraith Dance to move further. There, at the edge of the forest, I find a man waiting for me who has recently made his presence known.

As always, Savant looks composed, judging by the way his green eyes watch the area. His now long black hair is tied at the back of his head and falling down. He doesn't seem like he even minds the waiting he had to do; he just patiently waited for me.

I also had the opportunity to take patience as my subclass, but I don't think I would've liked it. While I understand his behavior, it constantly irks me, and there are a lot of reasons behind that.

"What?" I ask.

"I came to make you an offer."

"I'm listening."

"There are three things I need help with. It's fine if you decide to help me with just one or more. For each, I'm willing to offer a trade, be it items, materials, knowledge, or something else."

"I have a question first."

"Do ask."

"Don't you have a disciple?"

"I do not, I have rejected it."

"I see. So what are these three things?"

"First, I need you to help me with the Sword of Aeons. There's something I've been wanting to do, and I'm currently incapable of doing it myself. Seeing the weapon at your waist, you or your group should be able to help me."

"Hmm, not gonna lie, I would've agreed even if all it got me was the chance to look at the sword."

“Still, as I said, I'm willing to pay. The second thing is this,” he lifts his right hand and shows it to me. It looks normal, though maybe the shade of the skin is a bit different. “It's the hand of a lumoran Champion that I absorbed, but I failed to complete the process, and now I'm having trouble with it. What I need is for either you or your healer to help.”

“And third?”

"Third, I have learned by observing you and by using my skill to absorb kinetic energy. You seem to be the most proficient among Earth's tutorial participants, so while I plan to do things my own way, I want to gather more information from you." He says this without a moment of hesitation, hinting at his skill and capabilities while also throwing it in my face.

“That’s quite a shameless request. It will cost you.”

"I'm confident that I can offer you a fair trade."

Chapter 580: Brave

After working out the details with Savant, I don't return immediately. Instead, I move to my room, where I sit down and enter my mental space.

Whitey waits there, as he always does. This time, he chooses one of these enormous salt mines we have on Earth. The air is thick with the sharp, dry scent of salt that clings to the throat with every breath. Massive pillars of untouched rock salt stretch toward a ceiling lost in darkness, supporting the vast, excavated chambers. The walls glisten in the dim artificial light. Their rough, uneven surfaces carved by years of work and the passage of machinery.

Distant machinery hums, alongside the steady grind of drills and conveyor belts echoing through the tunnels, even though I'm sure there's no one here, outside the two of us. And every now and then, a faint tremor runs through the ground.

The floor is uneven, coated in fine white dust that clings to our boots and drifts lazily through the air with each step.

Whitey is currently wearing a set of work gear. Stiff coveralls coated in salt dust, heavy boots crunching against the ground, and thick gloves that seem to make everything feel just a bit clumsier. A miner's helmet sits firm on his head, its built-in light casting a narrow beam into the darkness ahead.

And I still have the pajamas on, as for some unknown reason Whitey has decided that I won't have the same clothes as he does.

Asshole.

"You do know, I've never actually been in a salt mine before," I gesture around, "Yet this smells and sounds real."

"It's all from your memories and imagination. I wouldn't be surprised if it's fairly far off from reality," Whitey says as he sits on the ground.

"She is just a half-demon," he snorts, "but her ego is bigger than some of the demons I've known. Just like her master."

"Was that a compliment?"

"Compliment your face against the wall."

"After you."

"Her heart isn't all that strong, but it could certainly be worse. Supplementing her shortcomings with mana might help her, too."

"That's the goal. I don't think either of us will ever have a proper demonic kinetic heart capable of generating the output a proper demon could, but supplying it with mana should work. And what do you think of Velis?"

"How the fuck would I know? I've never met a truly powerful demon without a demon heart. He has demon eyes that are likely tied to one of the primordial energies out of the common five, but I have no idea what it is."

"That healing based on absorbing blood seemed nice."

"Your healer can already heal herself without needing to do something as convoluted as absorbing blood."

"That's true, but she might be a special case. I also suspect that Velis's eyes might not be his only trait; he might have some kind of rare physique as well."

"Without a proper heart, he needs to grow very strong, or no demon will ever accept him. Hell, I knew some who would kill him right away while calling him a cripple."

"Personal experience?"

Whitey smirks, "What do you think? Funnily enough, no one called me that more than once."

He stands up in one smooth movement, "By the way, that fossil came here and spoke to me while you were with her and watching the disciple event."

Starting to stand up, I freeze mid movement and look up at Whitey.

He sees that reaction and smiles even more brightly, "I also didn't think she could come here without you present. Want to hear what we spoke about?"

"A bit."

"You fucker, I can see the curiosity killing you. A bit," he snorts.

Taking a few steps back, he puts some distance between us. "She came here to antagonize me, trying to make me push you more while pretending she was after something else. That bitch might think she can hide it, but she can't escape my senses. I saw it in her movements. And I know she thinks I have no chance. To her, I'm just a tool, not a person."

Kinetic energy rises around Whitey, his crippled heart generating more as his damaged body channels it. He uses this energy to move at all times, compensating for his injuries. I know this. I've learned a lot from his memories, our conversations, and our sparring matches.

And even though he's not showing it, Whitey clearly dislikes the situation he's been put in. There are only two choices left to him. He can either attempt to kill me and take over while relying on Lissandra to help him survive, or he can just disappear.

Nothing more, nothing less.

But as many times before, I say nothing.

I let kinetic energy build within me, charge at him, and let the fight wipe these thoughts from our minds.

After the fight, I open my eyes and glance down at the pajamas I'm wearing.

I shake my head and stand up to check myself in the mirror. Leaning in closer, I observe the reflection of my eyes and move a strand of hair from my face. Then I take a moment to breathe deeply, before teleporting into our living room.

The screams and noises hit me immediately like some sort of sonic attack.

Trying not to stick out too much, I move to my corner and quickly sit down, masking my mana, thermal, and kinetic signatures as much as possible. There is a young human boy to my left who has also taken refuge in my secluded little corner. He looks almost startled and fixes me with big brown eyes. He is very thin and his curly brown hair is messy.

"I'm guessing that Min-Jae is your master?" I ask quietly.

He nods twice and keeps quiet, making no attempt to continue the conversation.

What a good boy.

Feeling more comfortable with a kindred soul, I cross my legs and observe the room.

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Myrra is at the epicenter of everything. She and Maya are currently organizing a vicious, illegal minion fight club. It's all done over the table in the middle of the room where the little guys are being forced to fight for the amusement of group 4 and the golden eyed catgirl.

The minions are currently being forced to arm-wrestle.

Curiously, it is Maya who explains the rules and makes sure the minions do it properly so as not to get their bones snapped. Sophie has even created and strengthened the wooden table, and Myrra is organizing it all and setting up the matches, all while hyping up the contenders. There is even a nurse in the form of Lily, ready to heal any wounds that might occur, while Izzy and Min-Jae mess around in the background.

I notice most of the group members are engaged in some form of training. Min-Jae is making his body heavier, Izzy is moving the flames of her Fragment of Eternal Fire through her veins, and Sophie is training with the mana orbs I taught her to use, which are floating nearby. It's something I also do and continue to do, even as the world around me turns black for that split second before the system heals my wounds.

During the illegal minion fighting matches there is an incident where Deva uses more than one arm and complains about rules being set against her race; a part where my minion kicks Enan's shin under the table to gain a quick advantage; or a part where my minion gets into it and trash talks so much that Sophie has to stop her; or the incident where my minion breaks her own arm as she gets into an unorthodox position; or the part where my minio...

Hah. Whatever.

Enan and Vega seem to be the favorites thus far, given that they have somewhat similar physical stats, and while Vega focuses more on dexterity, Enan prefers to lean a bit more into his strength. Even Deva sometimes surprises me with unexpectedly decent body strengthening based on mana.

As I watch the sparring, I create a mana arm that is nearly invisible, made from as little mana as I can, and use it to sneakily take some food off the table.

I start nibbling on the snack from the bowl and even offer some to Min-Jae's disciple, who carefully takes and slowly nibbles away beside me.

"I'm Nathaniel."

"Irwys."

I nod in acknowledgement, and the pleasant conversation ends there.

After the arm-wrestling tournament, Maya and Myrra organize a few more illegal events. They move outside for tug-of-war; they do bottle flipping, which Myrra really seems to like for some reason; and at one point, they even have a potato sack race.

At first, I find myself thinking it might be a waste of time, focusing on all of this instead of more training, but after seeing the disciples so competitive and happy, I decide to let it go. They slowly relax and stop acting as cold toward one another. Even Irwys joins in after they keep trying to pull him in.

And of course, Izzy's the one driving it all, and seems to have found a way to manipulate Myrra into doing her bidding. And it all hinges on a simple strategy: she just tells her about fun stuff, and Myrra, excited to try new things, does it without even seeming to think about it. But maybe, at least in part, Myrra does it for herself as well, to take her mind off things, the things bothering her.

As for Vega... well, even though she's still competitive, she stays more distant than the other disciples. She smiles, but never too much. Even so, she competes to the end and doesn't cheat. Well, not much at least.

Slowly, though, our allotted time comes to an end, and the start of the third event draws closer. One hour before Vega is forced to return to her planet and the event begins, a notification pops up.

The 3rd event, Chronicle of the Past, will start in 1 hour!

Everyone will have the opportunity to engage in a 1v1 combat challenge with one being from the database of the Earth's tutorial: beings such as natives from the already completed floors.

Every participant will be given 1 challenge, so choose wisely!

Challenged beings will be Avatars, possessing no memories other than those required for combat. They will not possess emotions or the ability to talk, and have no motivations other than defeating the challenger.

Vega is still being held by Myrra and forced to pose for photos, and she even coerces her into cycling through the many sets of clothes I've given her. Myrra even goes through the pile I got and tries to find a matching set for herself to stage her photos.

I myself have barely escaped and now sit far away to the side when Lissandra appears nearby.

"Little pup, during..." She halts her words, and I follow her eyes, looking at my angry gecko pajamas, "Little pup, I have the person you will challenge during the 3rd event."

"Who is it?"

"Absolute Candidate Ruby."

"I see. Wasn't she still under level 300 when I met her on the 2nd floor?" I ask.

I still remember her class and the text I saw back then over her head.

[Phase Warden - lvl ??]

"Yes, but do not let that mislead you. She spent years honing herself under my guidance. If you go easy on her, Avatar, you will not get the chance to correct your mistake."

She turns to leave when Vega, who apparently made her way over at some point, calls out, "Master, is this the person who's been bullying you?"

"Yup," I confirm.

Lissandra halts and lets Vega step closer until they're just an arm's reach apart. Vega, wearing a daring expression, looks up at the silver-haired woman.

Her tiny heart pounds in her chest, but she refuses to let it show. She stares defiantly at Lissandra, holding her gaze even as she begins to tremble. Her heartbeat is like that of a frightened little bird, and though her hands shake, she clenches her fists and lifts her chin higher. Droplets of cold sweat run down her forehead.

With a quiet surge, Lissandra expands her presence and mana, letting it spread throughout the space. The weight of it presses against Vega, causing her to stumble back with a strained breath. Yet, she clenches her fists, plants her feet, and meets Lissandra's gaze once more.

Her heart races as if it's about to explode, and tears well up in her eyes.

Then, after a few more seconds, Lissandra smiles and says, "Good."

With that, the pressure vanishes, and Lissandra along with it.

I catch Vega before she can collapse, then teleport us back to our training ground. Sitting down against a tree, I hold her trembling body as she starts sobbing, shaking from fear and the experience.

I don't say anything and just let her feel that I'm here.

It takes a long time, but eventually, she calms down. Sniffing, she wipes her snotty nose on the sleeve of my angry gecko pajamas. Just this once, I let it slide, watching with equal parts amusement and disgust.

"I'll get her next time," Vega whispers in an uncharacteristically quiet voice.

"You better hurry. I already called dibs on her."

"I will!" Vega grins at me and hugs me tighter, taking the opportunity to wipe her teary face on me again.

For the next few minutes, I give her some last-minute instructions and supplies I prepared. Nothing so powerful that it might slow her growth, but enough guidance and mana stones to help. Some of them might not be allowed to leave with her, but there's nothing I can do about that.

There's also plenty of clothes, Earth food, and other things I or Group 4 got through trading.

Finally, I extend a hand to her. "Now give me the things you stole."

Vega opens her mouth to protest, but, upon seeing my expression, gives up. There's not a hint of shame, just disappointment at getting caught.

She hands over a small upper epic dagger that Dennis found on the 6th floor and seemed to like because it looked cool, a few orbs made of some kind of mysterious metal Min-Jae uses to train, a bracelet Maya wears sometimes, a beanie with a cute teddy bear Izzy got for herself, and a few more items.

Only when I have them all do I let go and glance at the last few seconds remaining.

"Hopefully, I'll see you in a year, minion. So don't go dying to some loser or weak-ass monster."

"I won't! And if I do, it would be the coolest death ever!"

"I bet it would."

One last long hug, and I reach out, wiping away the last traces of tears from her face with the sleeve of my pajamas. "You were very brave."

"Yes!" she beams, opening her mouth to ask something.

But then she seems to realize something else and glances at me, then down to my pajamas, then at the sleeve I just used to wipe away her tears. Her eyes widen. "W-was... WAS THAT THE SLEEVE I—"

I interrupt, already feeling my lips twist in a smile. "Yes."

"Assho—" She doesn't get to finish before disappearing and finally returning to her world.