

Tutorial 581

Chapter 581: Start of the third event

The third event is going on in the same way as during the 1st tournament.

Each common area has dozens of dedicated viewing spaces, each centered around its own huge screen. It's a bit chaotic, even more so than before, due to the many challenges happening all at once. And yet the influx of people gathering around the screens doesn't slow, as groups claim their own spaces at the tops of the surrounding hills, waiting for the more notable participants to take on their challenges.

Such attention is primarily reserved for individuals from Hell difficulty. Whenever one of them steps forward, groups gather round to watch like hawks. Often, it's simply curiosity and free entertainment. In other cases, it might also provide satisfaction, as individuals from Hell difficulty tend to challenge much stronger opponents in an attempts to learn something new. Watching them get severely beaten is something I find entertaining, and many from lower difficulties share this opinion.

For me, at least, it's fascinating. There are groups of people keeping track of the aliases of everyone from Hell difficulty. They even have something akin to cards with notes, and copies of these cards are made to be shared, often in exchange for items such as a common dagger or an uncommon cloak.

One of these cards even made its way to me, loaded with details on Swordmaster from the 8th group called TheGuild. According to the card, Swordmaster's level is estimated to be somewhere around 250, and his stat distribution is estimated to be something along the lines of 3 parts dexterity, 2.5 parts strength, 2 parts constitution, and 1-2 parts mana.

It's even been rumored that he possesses an upper epic sword and cloth armor. His attribute upgrade is estimated to be for mana potency, and there are even guesses about his skills, such as [Sword Manipulation], [Quick Step], and [Swish Swoosh].

It is clear that people from lower difficulties have been having some fun with it, but it also shows that when it comes to skills that they don't tend to have the same understanding of the system. Even in Hard difficulty, people tend to have skills like [Water Bullet] or [Fire Wall], while a person from Hell would have something more along the lines of [Water Manipulation] or [Pyrokinesis].

There are a few rare people from lower difficulties, the talented ones, who, through concerted effort, manage to acquire skills similar to Hell difficulty. But that's just another place where the difference in

capability becomes apparent. For them, these skills tend to be much more difficult to control and level. Their minds and bodies aren't quite as attuned to them, and they generally lack our intuitive use of these abilities.

It is something I am sure they could work on, given time. They can learn, study, develop their own theories, and vastly improve. Given enough time and resources, their abilities could develop even further. I am sure there will be theories to be discussed, knowledge traded, and disciples to expand upon them. They might even establish schools to exchange and share knowledge, fostering a deeper understanding of their skills.

People, especially from Hard difficulty, are busy forming theories on mana and other energies and the nature of their influence on reality, or thinking about the ways teleportation twists spacetime. Some have already proposed that subtle shifts in ambient mana density could alter fundamental physical laws, potentially allowing for entirely new interactions between mana and matter.

Meanwhile, we from Hell smash sticks and rocks together just to get a spark out of it.

Just as the system intended.

During the hours leading up to the event, I find myself being joined by Dennis and Aaron, who hand me a card that seems to contain a rough estimate of my abilities.

When I look at the two of them, they simply say, "Just read it. It's funny as hell."

And so I do as I'm told.

Community alias:Noname

Appearance:Slightly above average height, black hair, heterochromia – the right one is brown and the left one is gray. Heterochromia possibly existed before the tutorial, though it may still be some kind of fancy trait.

His eyes are rumored to sometimes have a golden circle around his pupils.

Note: Calm expression perhaps part of a concentration skill?

Attribute upgrade: Mana Amplificator.

Note: 100% for sure; the man literally shits out mana.

Note: Lol, yeah, maybe that's how he flies.

Estimated Stat allocation: 5 mana, 2 constitution, 1 strength, 1 dexterity? Very confusing; it could be more skewed towards mana, but his physical stats almost seem too strong. Trait? Skill? Passive? Possible transfer of mana into physical stats?

Note: No shot this is natural; he's definitely cooking.

Traits: Eye based trait, possibly indicated by a golden circle around the pupil – theorized to be related to mana.

Second trait: roughly theorized to be something to do with mana.

Note: No shit.

Active skills: rough guesses: [Mana Manipulation].

Note: No shit.

A concentration skill or a skill allowing for expanded mental capacity, and something enabling flight. He is rumored to possess primordial kinetic energy, which he uses to fly.

Note: two people from Hell difficulty shared their expert opinion, noting how “fucking hard” it would be to fly that way.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been unlawfully taken from Royal Road. Please report it.

Often uses “orbs of fucking destruction” – multiple varieties and strengths.

Sometimes uses fire skills. It is believed to be another primordial energy. Two guys from Hell difficulty were unable to confirm whether it is possible that Noname has two of them - very rare if true.

Teleportation over long distances – often even a mile or more.

Shown to have a moderate capacity for regeneration.

Note: prefers to replace his missing body parts with mana based prosthetics.

Note: wtf

Long-range mana projectiles observed – anyone below Hell difficulty is unable to block them.

Disruption confirmed – capable of piercing even the natural barriers of Hell difficulty attendees.

Black mana observed – absorbs all surrounding mana? Disruption based skill? No more information.

Passives: Highly likely to support body and mind. Something turning mana into physical stats?

Level: One of the highest in the earth tutorial, based on capabilities of large-scale destruction – possibly (while unlikely) over 300.

I look at the two of them and ask, "Who are these two guys from Hell difficulty who got asked these questions?"

"No idea!"

"I thought so," I say as I hand them the card back.

"There are a lot of people watching you, and even if these guys were just making these cards for fun, I'm sure people like Samuel and those from the other rounds have much more detailed information, especially after seeing you fight in the events."

"It could cause trouble during the 4th and 5th events," Aaron adds.

"Yes," I confirm, "I've already noticed a few people from the other rounds snooping around; they're probably collecting information."

"What, really?" Dennis asks, surprised.

"You dumbass," Aaron shakes his head, "Sophie's got a few guys doing the same thing for us."

"I wasn't surprised about that! It's just that I didn't even notice."

I point them out to the two, "The guy on the bench, in the yellow shorts and black beanie. The woman in the group of our Easy difficulty, wearing jeans and a white shirt, the boy under the trees eating a snack. And a few more."

"How do you know?"

"If I had to say, it's because they're trying too hard to suppress their mana, they're probably from Hell difficulty, but I don't recognize them as anyone from our round. There's probably more mixed in with the lower difficulties, not to mention the ones who aren't even bothering to hide their mana." I shrug, "Honestly, there's not much we can do about it."

"We could send Lily after the ones we find," Dennis observes, regarding the people I've just pointed out.

"You or Aaron could take them out yourselves if you really want. I'm also fairly confident that Sophie's detected a few more using the web she's woven around our zone, so go ahead and have fun if you want to."

"Will do," Aaron says, grabbing Dennis by the shoulders and pulling him away, "Later, Nat, and good luck; if you need anything..."

"I will ask, of course. See you later."

Left on my own, I observe more fights while refraining from training for now. At this point, I've thoroughly tested my limits. I know how far I can push myself before my heart bursts and/or my brain melts. I have tested it in so many ways and explored every possible application of nearly all my skills.

So, for the moment at least, I'm focused on coming up with new ways to push myself further, to drive myself past that limit. Perhaps a slightly different rhythm of my heartbeat, just a slight delay between pulses to prevent my body from burning. Maybe I could sacrifice a bit of efficiency and channel my mana through a more durable pathway to allow myself to channel it for longer, with much more force.

Where at the start I just did whatever came to mind, I've steadily grown more deliberate. A small part of my mind serves to take mental notes of all the things I've tested. And every few tests, I review those notes and either continue or change my objectives.

I'm not generally a fan of those methods, but it's going to be necessary to get as much as possible out of this tournament. Especially now that more and more people are getting to know my abilities and working to come up with ways to counter them.

From Victoria, I even got information that a few rounds are working together to take her and me down. Vic, Jean, and I are all considered wild cards. Jean, maybe to a lesser extent, given that he often listens to people from his round, who have shown themselves to be more reasonable.

Victoria has full control over her round, with it being entirely under her command through her power and the power of her group, which has the most members left out of any Hell group in the Earth tutorial. Each of these group members is someone capable of surviving 7 floors and is currently on the 8th. So it's no surprise her round is rated as very dangerous.

Our 5th round is also considered threatening. Tacita, for example, was given one of the highest threat ratings, and the same goes for Savant and Sophie. Tacita, Savant, and Lily are each considered to be at the level of kings, and Sophie, in certain situations, can be considered one of the most dangerous people in the tutorial.

There is just so much information being leaked or uncovered about the attendees, and I suspect this might be one of the system's intentions behind the tournament.

Considering that, I continue observing the Challenges. Savant goes in and challenges the same man he did during the first tournament, and just like before, Champion Tristan handles him effortlessly. The only difference is that Savant endures the attack for a fraction of a second longer.

Lily steps up against a Greater Mimic, immediately activating her mantle and blocking its attacks with her bone axe. The fight is impressive, and I watch as she takes damage, only to regenerate in an instant and continue facing down the powerful monster. She combines an incredibly durable body, near-instantaneous healing, and possibly the strongest offensive skill I've ever seen. Her disturbingly high potential is clear. Numerous paths are open to her, any of which could transform her into something extraordinary.

The rest of Group 4 steps in as well, and almost all of them choose to face a Greater Mimic. That makes me realize that they're using this as a training opportunity and preparing for our return to the seventh floor. Only Sophie faces a man who I assume is an Archon from the sixth floor, as he resembles Beatrice, while Maya challenges her lynthari teacher, just like in the previous tournament.

Each of these fights is carefully scrutinized, and I notice the dark expressions on the faces of some of the people from Hell when they see certain members of our group fight.

It grows especially interesting when some from the 5th round's Hell difficulty begin challenging the winner of their round's first tournament.

Myself.

All four who attempt it lose. My Avatar from a year ago tears through them. Injured or damaged, it continues to bite, spit, sacrifice parts of its body, and willingly tanks powerful attacks just to land another strike. The last two challengers are especially fun to watch. Both rely on mana, and they get obliterated almost instantly. However prepared as they might be, the power of my Avatar's disruption takes them by surprise, and when that isn't enough, the black mana it creates leaves them helpless.

And as the timer ticks down, I make my move.

Reaching one of the platforms, I look at the screen and declare, "I want to challenge Absolute Candidate Ruby."

Chapter 582: Absolute Candidate

Ruby is just as I remember her. She looks barely over twenty, with long red hair and yellow eyes marked by a strange sort of complex pattern. Her skin is slightly paler than the average person, and she wears clothing similar to the sort of things Absolute Lissandra of the 2nd floor used to wear, sleek, suit-like attire more suited to men than women. Like all the avatars I've seen, she shows no emotion. There's simply no life behind those eyes.

The moment both of us appear, my eyes flare into full activation, and I trigger all my passives and prepare my defenses against someone 50 levels lower than me.

Absolute Candidate Ruby moves first, even as I set up my defenses. She manipulates her mana with seemingly incredible ease, and her skill activates before I can grasp its structure, seemingly further powering the domain she's deployed. That domain presses in against me, greedily enveloping my mana and stealing it away.

It only stops when my own [Mana Domain] seeps past the borders of my skin and Mana Wavelength Tyrant activates, claiming the surrounding mana for myself. But the pull remains, ready to take my mana the moment my concentration slips.

My mana surges as an unseen attack hits my barrier, shattering it in an instant. It slices into the side of my neck, nearly severing my head.

Ruby herself vanishes from where she stood.

I track the leftover mana to locate her and succeed in following its trail. However, she isn't there. It's a fake signature meant to confuse me, and so are the other's she's created.

Without any warning, something hits me from the left, breaking through my layered barriers and sending me rolling across the ground.

I use Wraith Step a few times and try to rely on my mana senses again, but I quickly realize a field surrounds me, spreading a jamming effect meant to throw them off. It feels like trying to find a feather lost in a hurricane.

Ruby, standing a mile away at the top of a hill, creates a huge number of mana projectiles and sends them flying out in front of her. The air itself in front of them weaves and twists, and the projectiles teleport through and re-materialize about an arm's length in front of me.

[Eclipse] hums with the mana powering it, and I barely manage to tear through the swarm of projectiles. With great effort, I expand it as far as I can, finally breaking the field surrounding the area.

I boost myself high into the air and then further boost myself to fly toward where Ruby is.

She takes a step and disappears, reappearing two miles away.

I locate her immediately because she has a huge amount of mana gathering over a lifted hand. Flying in that direction, I observe the structure and prepare my countermeasures. Instead of Ley Lines, I create a set of marks on my mana projectiles and launch them in all directions.

But even now, I don't have enough time. Ruby finishes her attack at blinding speed and waves her hand.

And nothing happens for a few seconds.

During that pause, I reach her and she doesn't move away, likely to avoid overusing her skill and preventing me from understanding her methods.

I radiate more mana from my body as Mana Wavelength Tyrant presses against the area, bending the mana particles within to my will. My heart thumps, strengthening my body and gathering kinetic energy for a possible escape.

I weave an [Empyrean Lance] and shoot it ahead while deploying [Eclipse] in her direction.

Even so, she allows it to proceed.

Just before my lance would pierce her head, she activates her skill; the space in front of her wavers, and my lance appears at my back, flying at the same speed, nearly piercing me with my own attack.

I barely dodge it, and then the skill she used earlier reactivates. The remnants of her field in the distance change and implode in on themselves, creating an audible pop followed by an immense pull that uproots trees, destroys the nearby hill, and still manages to have an effect on the two of us from a mile away and warping our surroundings.

It creates a small dark center around which the space itself seems unstable.

With all my strength, I push against it and teleport away, but the process gets disrupted as the landing point is forced into the center of the collapsed field.

I force my mind into overdrive, and my mana bursts out. At the cost of damage to my heart and brain, I manage to shift the direction of the teleport mid-cast.

Even then, Ruby is already there, waiting for me.

Up close, a barrage of projectiles slams into my barrier, dissolving into mana particles as I disrupt them.

She gathers the particles and moves them like drifting sand caught in a storm, sending them crashing against my barrier in steady waves. They swirl and grind away at it until I release a powerful burst of kinetic energy to force them back.

I charge at her, but she teleports away again, and I track her more quickly than before, covering the remaining distance with Wraith Dance. I launch a barrage of projectiles in her direction along with two tricolored orbs, yet once again, the air in front of her wavers, and all of them reappear at my back. Even now, I cannot grasp the structure of the skill she's employed.

Protected by my barrier, I launch myself away from the explosion and soar high into the air. As I rise, I extend more Ley Lines throughout the area, firing projectiles marked for teleportation.

For a moment, I look toward the area where she collapsed her field. A mile wide patch of forest has been totally destroyed, with no tree left standing and no hill untouched.

Ruby gives me no time to rest, keeping up the pressure with skills that activate almost in an instant, paired with the constant, shifting flow of her mana. Her eyes study me just as I study her, and she counters with an ease that can only come from many thousands of hours of practice.

Her projectiles shatter my barrier, a wave of disruption hits me, and I am certain that without my passives and skills, she would have completely disrupted my mana or stolen it all away.

Each attack is fast, precise, and hits with force. No matter how much mana I pour into defense, she keeps pushing me back, causing serious problems, all while using only a fraction of what I'm spending.

I pull all my mana back into my body and send some of it through my heart to convert it into kinetic energy. At the same time, I allow the seal around the Ignition Heart to lift slightly, and golden flames begin to surround me. They crash out from my body, from the exhaust nodes on my palms, the soles of my feet, and the one on my back. These flames gather under my control, forming a circle of rotating fire behind me.

Help support creative writers by finding and reading their stories on the original site.

Ruby moves again to put distance between us, but I continue to track her even as she sets up fake signatures to misdirect me. She weaves them in a second, yet each of these signatures is more accurate than anything the twins together could hope to perform.

I catch up to her, launching a laser-thin stream of flames in her direction.

A single pale blue barrier forms in front of her, and the flame stream strains against it. I maintain the flame and continue to increase its output; the point of contact causes the barrier to heat up, taking the color from pale blue to light red as the heat spreads outward. Yet, the feeble looking barrier still holds.

I let the mana in my crown destabilize, and a disruptive attack explodes through the area, breaking the barrier as the stream of flames continues toward her head. But once the main force of the disruptive attack fades, she weaves another barrier that stops the flame in the same manner.

I repeat the process, and so does she. A few barriers finally break, even as she continues to refine them as I focus on my own disruption, until the flame lies stopped, just a hand's breadth away from the center of her forehead. Nevertheless, she continues building up another skill in the background, and so do I.

This time, though, I don't bother to disrupt the barrier. Instead, I release all the flames I had been collecting and move them around me as they pulse out in waves toward her, turning trees to ash and the ground to lava.

Ruby then disappears through her teleportation, but this time I'm successful in tracking it and look up, finding her standing high up in the air.

After all that preparation, a single mana projectile floats over the palm of her hand as she lifts it high. A transparent, pale blue lance shoots toward me. It glitters in the air as it heads down, gradually increasing in speed.

The mana I had gathered inside my body compresses and seeps out, touching my [Mana Crown], which turns black and immediately demands all my focus to maintain control. I shape more of that mana into a black orb and send it flying out ahead, along the path of the pale blue lance.

The world quiets, and the colors lose their vibrancy as the lance reaches the orb.

The lance cuts through it with ease at first. It nearly escapes the pull of the orb before the orb begins to tear apart. But the black mana left behind swirls and consumes. It spins, and its pull drags on the pale blue lance, slowing it down until it stops completely. Blue particles peel away, drawn into the orb until the lance breaks apart entirely.

The black orb expands, growing to the size of my fist, constantly compressing and expanding as if it were fighting to devour the mana around it.

Behind me, Ruby appears, and the palm of her hand moves to strike my back.

Tearing my muscles to move faster, I react by coating the palm of my hand with black mana to meet her blow. That black mana absorbs the deadly attack she hurls at me, but even so, the bones in my hand crack, and some of the attack pierces into my body.

She tries to teleport away, but I empower [Eclipse] with black mana, fully draining the colors from the area in an instant.

For the first time, her teleportation fails. Using kinetic energy, I launch an attack at a speed I'm sure would've even caught Tacita off guard.

But Ruby reacts in time and ducks with a swiftness I never thought she could possess. She uses her mana to strengthen her body with such precision that I start to wonder if facing her at close range was the more dangerous option. But I can see the cost, the tears in her skin, and the twitching of torn muscles.

Her red hair floats through the air as she dodges my series of attacks, only to be caught off guard by Needle Point piercing her foot and causing her to stagger.

Even though my [Eclipse], powered by black mana, disrupts all mana outside her body, that monster still manages to form a skin-tight barrier just in time. It holds against the full force of my golden flames and the blast of kinetic energy that rips through the forest like a living thing.

Trees are torn from the ground and flung aside like broken spears, their trunks split and scattered through the winds. The blast churns up the soil, carving deep gouges into the earth, sending shattered

roots and debris flying in every direction. The heat rolls out in waves, warping the air and reducing everything in its path to scorched ruin.

And still, at the heart of it, she stands untouched.

Her body isn't even damaged, nor has she been moved so much as an inch, and she moves with incredible speed once more, tearing more of her muscles in the process. She touches my hand before I can react, and a pulse travels through my body, disrupting my mana and deactivating all my skills for a moment.

She uses that moment to teleport away, leaving behind a tricolored orb on the verge of destabilization and ready to explode. And I note that she managed to recreate it after seeing me use it just once.

I know that if I let her escape now, things will only grow more dangerous. I am certain she will deploy countermeasures to prevent me from closing in again.

My Mana Wavelength Iris activates to the highest degree. One of my eyes almost popping like a squeezed grape as I read the remnants of her teleport and all the countermeasures or traps she left behind.

I resonate with it and pull as much mana into my body as I can. I break through some of the traps while ignoring others, trusting that I will survive their impact.

I follow through and appear on the other side, the black mana I sent ahead absorbing Ruby's attack. Still, a few projectiles slip through before the black mana can consume them, piercing my body as if my defenses, combined with Mana Wavelength Tyrant and disruption, weren't even there.

Regardless, I strengthen my body, even as blood spurts from my torn chest and back. I grab the black mana in front of me and form it into a dagger. With all my effort, I stop another attempt at teleportation. Even with a 50-level advantage, I have to use the full force of my mana to pull it off.

Then, I drive the black dagger into her arm.

Up close, the pattern in her yellow eyes glows as her face moves slightly closer to mine.

Feeling a sharp pain, I glance down and see her hand coated in pale blue mana piercing through my chest and exiting on the other side. In that same hand, she holds my Ignition Heart, its heat burning her hand until only the bones of her fingers remain.

But she sends a pulse of mana into the heart and squeezes. It destabilizes as the seals unravel beneath her mana, and a moment later, the heart explodes.

As if in slow motion, I watch the flames surge toward me. A roaring mass of heat and fury, intense enough to erase everything in its path. A force neither of us can survive.

She tries to teleport away, pushing against the black mana to some extent. She nearly activates her skill until I add disruption to the mix, barely managing to stop her.

I strengthen my body with that same black mana, lean back, and then swing forward to smash my forehead against hers, literally exploding her head.

I can only breathe out slowly, feeling my skull crack and blood flow down my forehead as I reach toward the flames erupting from the heart. Even though I know I don't have a single chance of stopping them, I attempt to do so. With my eyes wide open, I watch as parts of my body gradually vanish in the heat. It doesn't even burn; there are no ashes left in its wake. Anything it touches is simply gone.

The flames burn so intensely that they melt mana itself.

My [Focus] consolidates and nothing else matters with all my attention driven to that single task.

And for the briefest split of a second, I succeed. The heat and the flames slow down for the shortest moment, and notifications ring in my head just as they did during the fight. For that short, beautiful moment, I can think of nothing but that huge ball of thermal energy.

But then the moment is gone, and the flames surge to devour me.

"Stop." A single word sounds, and the flames halt.

A field forms around me, and the sensation of being completely cut off from the outside world sinks in. Then, in a blink, my body is fully restored. The sealed Ignition Heart is back in my chest, my mana returns, and the area around me repairs itself.

And yet I'm also cut off from the tournament floor, and I'm certain now that no one is watching my challenge anymore.

Ruby's avatar body, which should have disintegrated into particles the moment I defeated her, stands back up despite its headless state. Her head regenerates, just as my body did, and the avatar stands a few steps away.

And that same avatar, meant only to defeat me and never show emotion, smiles.

Then she says, "It's quite rude to headbutt a lady, Nathaniel."

Chapter 583: My master

I look at her for a while before asking, "Ruler of Greed?"

"I would prefer that you call me Ruby."

"The Ruby I knew died, you aren't her."

"That's true, but I like the relationship you two had. I want it too."

"So greedy."

"Exactly." She smiles at me. "Your disciple is cute, you know. I made a promise to your duplicate, so I'm making sure Envy doesn't hurt her. He even sent one of his vessels to kill her, but I dealt with him."

"Thank you for that. If possible, I will pay you back."

"There is no need, I'm doing it because of the promise I made and because I want to," she says as if remembering something, "oh, and Envy also sent one of his vessels to Earth."

My train of thought stops there. "What? Isn't Earth supposed to be protected while we're in the tutorial? Some of the lumorans also mentioned there's a non-attack phase for 10 years after the tutorial starts."

"I can only agree. And since I have you here, I may as well take the opportunity to ask you something."

"Please do so while we wait for her."

"Is there a way to transfer Whitey's memories out of my mind?"

She understands immediately but shakes her head, "The rules have already been twisted too much. There is no way to make that happen. As you've been told, the only way is for the remains of the lurker to take over your mind, only to end up the same way as her and that lynthari. But..."

"But?" I ask.

"I like to be honest sometimes, so I'll tell you something: even if there were a chance, I wouldn't do anything to help. Don't ever think of me as an altruist."

"I know."

"Good," she nods, still smiling.

"So we are waiting for her? Can she even get here?"

"Yes, I left a way in, so she should be able to make it. I'd be very disappointed if she didn't."

Just as she says this, a tear appears in the air. It is long, black, and jagged. From one end of it, the black blade of a dagger sticks out after cutting it open. And a nauseatingly huge amount of mana seeps from within, so dense that it begins to twist the air.

ŘǺŃÖĚŠ

Like some sort of monster, Lissandra forces her way inside, stretching the tear open. Her mana constantly fluctuates, surrounding her like a flame refusing to die in a blizzard. She steps through, and the hole vanishes with an audible thump, leaving the air charged, like a forest after a storm.

Lissandra looks at me, but then her eyes move over and stop at the Ruler of Greed.

“You are late, fake one.” The Ruler of Greed says, with the same smile plastered across her face as she addresses Lissandra.

“You’re calling me the fake one? Ruby once called me Master,” Lissandra states calmly, entirely unshaken by the situation.

And for the first time, the Ruler of Greed shows a negative emotion. The smile on her face cracks, and underneath it, anger appears, a deep, red-hot anger with a strong dose of hate.

“My master died millennia ago in the greatest battle this system has ever witnessed. She fell to the most powerful Ruler of Pride that ever lived, and no one else could’ve matched her at her peak,” she pauses, greater hatred radiating from her and twisting the space around, “but be sure I will kill that man, and I will do anything to make that happen. And you, fake one, you are nothing but an inferior imitation. A pathetic shadow of Master Lissandra's great self. So no, I won't call you my master.”

“Hoo?” Lissandra seems amused, and while the Ruler of Greed shows anger, she remains confidently calm, “Here I might agree with you. The disciple I knew is also dead. I ended her false life by my own hand rather than let her continue to live as a shadow.”

“All of you are just imitations,” the Ruler of Greed pauses, “yet, even master’s imitations used to be so powerful. Fake one, I remember well the day the other Rulers and I tore down the old tutorial floors and raised the new ones in their place. Even back then, Lady Lissandra’s imitations began to sense that something was wrong with this place and with themselves. They tended to slaughter all the attendees. In other cases, they broke free from their floors and tried to escape the tutorial itself. To prevent that, we’ve had to modify the second floor countless times.”

The Ruler of Greed smiles. She does so proudly, with memories flashing behind her yellow eyes.

“The others wanted to change Lady Lissandra's imitation, to modify it, strip away certain memories, and limit the abilities she possessed. After a few decades, I gave in and agreed, after she came close to breaking into the thirteenth floor. But you know what happened when we modified her imitation? Those altered imitations would simply sit and watch the attendees, and every time, they ended up destroying themselves while causing as much damage as they possibly could. We lost hundreds of tutorials that way.”

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

She lets out a short laugh, her smile twisting into something almost unsettling. “It took a lot of attempts to come up with a version that would be even somewhat cooperative. We even changed the second floor itself. We built a setting with gods she believed were real and blocked her knowledge of the Rulers, along with a few other restrictions. And yet, even after all that, she still goes on a rampage from time to time.”

The Ruler of Greed looks at Lissandra. “Back then, I truly wanted to see her again. Maybe I even hoped she would escape when I chose the setup for my floor. Did I hope to have her by my side, or did I want to see her fight and kill the man I still cannot defeat? Did I want to give her a second chance against him? I was so young and foolish back then. But the more I watched, the more I realized that my master is gone. My master, with whom I spent so many years. My master, with whom I traveled the system, fought wars, explored planets and our abilities, faced the most powerful Rulers and Absolutes, and caught glimpses of beings older than the system itself. So I was curious what I would feel, meeting you like this. But you are just another one of those pathetic imitations. All high and mighty, without the slightest understanding of your place. A disgusting worm wearing my beloved master's form.”

Lissandra nods and asks simply, “Do you know what subclass I’ve chosen?”

At that, the red-haired woman meets Lissandra’s gaze and nods. “Lady Lissandra used to be Pride, but yes, I know what you’ve chosen this time.”

Lissandra takes slow steps towards the red-haired woman, staring at her intently, “And do you know why?”

"Because you want to kill me, oh, fake one?" The Ruler of Greed spreads her arms wide in a slow, deliberate gesture of challenge. A hint of her true mana leaks into the air. The ground trembles beneath it, and the space around her strains, as if the very fabric of this place were on the verge of tearing apart under the weight of her presence.

"Yes," Lissandra nods, "I will kill a disciple of mine who is not truly a disciple of mine. I will punish her for what she has done and for allowing even an imitation of her master to be used this way."

That makes the red-haired woman burst into laughter, but even that doesn't make Lissandra hesitate. Her determination doesn't waver at all.

The entire time, I sit there ignored, exhausted from the event, and with the confirmation of my fears: the impossibility of helping Whitey.

Yet these two ignore me, facing each other down with animosity clear in their actions.

Lissandra, who took Tess's life hostage. The Ruler of Greed, whose smile I saw when she was talking about Vega. She knows how much I dislike the fact that Vega has been left at her mercy, and even if she did leave Vega alone, that would probably just allow Envy to kill her, and I see how much she enjoys that.

Just as Tess was taken hostage by Lissandra, Vega has been taken hostage by the Ruler of Greed.

The more they talk and bark at each other, the more I feel that anger well up inside me. An anger that's been there ever since the start of the tournament, ever since the 5th floor, where I had to endure all this.

And even now, with the Ruler of Greed merely using this as a chance to speak to Lissandra, something begins to snap as they hurl insults at each other.

"Do you ever stop?" I mutter, mostly to myself. But as they keep talking, I finally snap, my voice rising. "Can't you just shut the fuck up?!"

The conversation ends in a blink, and both of them turn to me with evident surprise as I continue, my voice rising with every word “I don't know how you guys or that huge, starry-eyed hikikomori asshole in his tower make oaths under the system, but this is mine. If you continue to threaten me or the people around me, I swear I'll dedicate my life to being a dick and doing the exact opposite of whatever either of you wants or hopes for. I don't give a single flying fuck about how I look right now, I don't care how childish I'm being, or how petty it might be. If anything happens to Vega, I swear I will make sure that Pride dickhead lives forever. You said you want to kill him, right? Yea, no fucking chance. I will dedicate my life to keeping his ass alive; hell, I will become his best fucking friend, I will learn his favorite colors, and I will call him on the weekends just to spite you. And you, fucking cockroach? Oh, we are not done yet. You have your word to keep, and I don't care how unfair it might be or whether it's your fault; if anything happens to Tess, I will make sure you pay. Because fuck you assholes.”

Breathe in, breathe out.

“Good? You understand? Great, fuck you. I'm tired of this bullshit. I'm done here. Bye and Fuck you.”

I destabilize my mana, and it runs rampant as I allow it to happen and even help until it blows off my head. Then I find myself back out in the common area, feeling no less angry about the whole thing.

“Feral one?” I hear a worried voice ask next to me. Myrra stands there, her Aurora Glass creating a barrier around both of us, glimmering.

Only then do I realize it's my mana seeping out into the air. The mana I raised to the extreme just to endure the pressure radiating off the two women, even as they simply stood there. Beyond Myrra's barrier are dozens of unconscious people and hundreds more dead and regenerated by the system. Even though I can't hear anything through the barrier, I see some of them crying, while others shake or writhe on the ground.

There would be more of them, and only the Aurora Glass barrier around us stops my mana from passing further, and even that barrier has begun to crack.

With a single thought, all that mana stops and freezes, taken back under my will. Then I pull it all back inside myself and start using Mana Cycling again to move it through my body, preventing it from passing beyond my skin.

"Your face too," Myrra says.

I reach out and touch it, feeling my twisted expression of anger.

This time, I don't bother using a skill to limit my emotions, refusing to take the easy path for this. I simply take a shallow breath in and force myself to calm down, shoving those emotions back beneath the surface.

Myrra smiles, and her barrier disappears, letting in the sound of people screaming, coughing, and crying, but she forces my attention back to her, "It's back to normal. Do you want to spar, feral one?"

"I do not. I will be working on some items." I hesitate and then ask her, "Want to watch?"

"Feral one, is this like when a human invites you in for a cup of coffee late at night?"

"What? No. Where are you even getting all these things from?"

"I'm fairly popular, you know, and people teach me a lot when I ask."

I lift my hand, and she places hers in mine. I teleport us away. The sounds of the crowd vanish behind us, but my bad mood lingers.

We start walking towards my workshop. Myrra doesn't ask any questions, she just follows me, with her tail slowly swaying from side to side and a gentle smile on her face.

"This place, these people, the system. All of them are very intent on fucking us over, aren't they, feral one?"

At that, I can only agree and nod.

Chapter 584: Roadtrip

Myrra stays with me throughout the entire twelve hours I spend creating items. She's curious, but also unusually understanding when I need to focus. A few hours in, I even start talking a bit more, at which point she responds with a barrage of questions.

She even burns her hands a few times while poking at some of the items I've been working with. To her surprise, even using mana to defend herself doesn't stop the burns.

Thankful for her presence, I repay her by creating an item to her specifications. It is a simple bracelet made out of a mix of endurium and voidsteel, and I even put effort into making it look as good as possible. Though I'm still not all that great with the details or working on the finer parts, such as the links I have to string together to make the chains, but I do my best, and Myrra seems to be happy with the result. The item is only low epic grade, but I don't think performance is what she cares about.

She leaves when I'm almost done with my work, and I find myself alone in the workshop, which now looks so big and empty.

I put the pieces of the arcane item for Channeler back into the box, which I lock up and secure with a set of heavy defenses.

Then I open the skill level up notifications.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 64 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 65]

[Perception - lvl 60 > Perception - lvl 61]

[Mana Domain - lvl 59 > Mana Domain - lvl 60]

[Ley Line - lvl 50 > Ley Line - lvl 51]

[Ley Line - lvl 51 > Ley Line - lvl 52]

[Eclipse - lvl 30 > Eclipse - lvl 31]

[Eclipse - lvl 31 > Eclipse - lvl 32]

[Eclipse - lvl 32 > Eclipse - lvl 33]

[Empyrean Lance - lvl 18 > Empyrean Lance - lvl 19]

[Knitting - lvl 30 > Knitting - lvl 31]

[Knitting - lvl 31 > Knitting - lvl 32]

Nearly all of my skills leveled up over the course of that short fight. It barely took a minute, and yet I had to use nearly everything I had—all against someone 50 levels lower than me, and that's with the possibility that she wasn't even at full power. Just as Whitey's lurker was weaker than his "true" self, I think the avatars are weaker as well.

Even with all that, I can't even say I defeated her properly. I just killed her a split second before I would have died anyway, but I guess that is an Absolute candidate for you. With Lissandra being the one behind that declaration, it is safe to say that among the Absolute candidates, Ruby was at the top. It is further proven by her now being the Ruler of Greed.

What a mess. Especially since Lissandra won't tell me if I've fulfilled her requirements. It just adds to my already shitty mood.

I add more items to the system shop and then withdraw all the shards I have made and check my current balance.

Shards: 499,663

Then I check the passive I want to buy, and confirming that not much remains, I close the window.

I watch the timer and, as expected, the notification for the 4th event appears, 12 hours before the event starts.

The 4th event - Avatar's Gauntlet will start in 12 hours.

Everyone participating will be moved to the Great Labyrinth of Xyphos.

All participants will be randomly placed throughout the Labyrinth, the paths will be littered with countless traps, each presenting a threat all its own. Each trap may be defused in a number of ways, giving each attendee a chance to bypass, destroy, or avoid it entirely.

At the same time, the Great Labyrinth of Xyphos will create an Avatar for every person who enters. These Avatars will also be placed randomly within the Labyrinth and will hunt the people invading it.

There are 3 ways to gain points:

- Escaping the Labyrinth - The first person to escape will gain 10,000 points, the second 9,000 points, the third 8,000 points, the fourth 7,000 points, the fifth 6,000 points, and the sixth 5,000 points. After that, the points will decrease by 100 for every subsequent escape.

- By finding the treasures randomly placed throughout the Labyrinth -Each treasure is an item that can be used over the duration of the event, points will be awarded upon acquisition. There are:

5 low arcane items - each worth 2,000 points

50 upper epic items - each worth 300 points

100 mid epic items - each worth 100 points

200 low epic items - each worth 50 points

Note: Points for acquiring an item are awarded only once and will not be awarded upon subsequent acquisition.

- By defeating the Avatars:

Beyond difficulty Avatar - 1,000 points

Hell difficulty Avatar - 500 points

Hard difficulty Avatar - 100 points

Normal difficulty Avatar - 50 points

Easy difficulty Avatar - 10 points

Note: You gain no points for defeating attendees.

Note: The duration of the event is set at 24 hours.

As always, I reread the notification a few times before moving to the corner of my workshop and settling in.

Then I close my eyes, concentrate, and find myself in my mental space. Whitey waits for me there, but for once he looks confused.

It is because this time our surroundings and clothes were chosen by me.

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

We're standing in the middle of a desert area. Nearby, there's an old asphalt road, a rundown gas station, and a rusty Toyota Camry that looks like it was made sometime around the year 2000. Cicadas scream in the background, a sound I remember Whitey somewhat enjoyed.

Both of us are wearing casual clothes: shirts and shorts with crocs. It is uncomfortably hot in the setting I've created, reducing our stats to those of normal humans. Both of us are already sweating, and the air is difficult to breathe.

Of course, this asshole still manages to look cool. With his long white hair tied up and a random red pattern on his shirt matching his eyes, he cuts an impressive figure.

I gesture for him to follow and enter the gas station.

I pull my wallet free of my pocket along with a few thick golden coins, mana crystals, and some billion-dollar bills. I toss them onto the table near the cash register, even though no one's there.

I reach the corner of the shop and open the fridge to grab some chilled sodas, tossing them all into a plastic bag that I also take. Then I throw in some snacks I used to enjoy, along with some other stuff. Whitey watches me and does the same, picking up anything that looks interesting.

Once we're done here, I head outside, open the car door, and get behind the wheel. I glance up, shrug, and open the sunroof. I pull down the sun visor, and sure enough, the keys drop out. I slide them into the ignition, and the engine roars to life.

I lower the window to look out and call to Whitey, "Get in, loser."

He stares at me intently, likely trying to read my memories to get some idea of what I might be planning, but he can't. I've blocked them all.

With a groan, he throws his bag into the car, and it smacks me in the head. In fact, it's surprisingly painful, sending a burning pulse through my eye.

After getting in, he slams the door closed and looks ahead, avoiding eye contact with me.

I shift into gear and drive us away from the gas station, pulling out onto a long stretch of empty road that disappears into the horizon. I reach to turn on the AC, but of course, it is not working, so I just lower both windows and turn on the radio, at which point some old-school road trip songs begin to pour from the speakers. When I try to focus and listen to the words, it always turns into random babble, probably because my mind doesn't remember the exact lyrics. But as long as I don't focus, the music just plays in the background. It's an extremely strange feeling.

It is only getting hotter outside, and the passing air only helps a little, forcing me to drive faster. It is just one of these disgustingly hot days.

Whitey, by my side, takes out one of the chilled bottles and presses it against his forehead for a while before trying to cut it open with kinetic energy.

But he is unable to do so, given that neither of us can use our primordial energies or mana at the moment.

"Motherfucker," he curses and throws the bottle out of the window.

Then, just a minute later, he curses again, takes out another bottle, opens it normally, and takes a long sip. I do the same as we ride toward a structure a few miles in the distance.

A space shuttle launch pad.

It squats there like an old beast forced out of retirement, all faded white with black scorch marks along the base. It is not one of the sleek, polished sci-fi ships; no chrome, no curves. This thing looks like it was built by a set of stubborn engineers who cared only about functionality.

The shuttle is a fat white hulk, with an orange fuel tank leaning against its side like it's started to rust into the ground, its paint is sun-faded and dull. The black nose points upward, and the windows are dusty and cracked. Burn marks streak down its body like someone tried to scorch it out of existence from orbit.

The name "Fuck the tutorial" is etched in peeling paint across the side, barely visible beneath a layer of grime and heat distortion. A set of rusted stairs leads up to the side hatch, swaying slightly in the wind.

Whitey squints at it. "You fucker, knowing you, you want to fly that thing."

"Yup," I say, then press the gas.

Dust kicks up behind us. The radio is playing something that sounds like "Country Roads, Take Me Home," so I increase the volume, which gets me another look from Whitey.

Knowing I hate it, he starts eating snacks and chewing loudly, scattering crumbs everywhere. He even wipes his oily fingers on the car's tape deck, leaving visible marks.

"You're eating chips? In my car?" I call out to him with disgust.

He lifts and licks the salt off his fingers and then, while looking at me, opens a soda and pours a little of it on the floor.

I slam the brake, and, not having a seatbelt on, he moves with the inertia and his head smacks loudly into the dashboard.

While I awkwardly shift gears and get the car running again, he slowly gets back up into a seated position, red eyes shining from beneath the white hair covering his face. There's also a small wound on his forehead, from which a droplet of blood slowly flows.

"You fucking son of a bitch," he says calmly.

"No, you."

"Motherfucker," he exclaims as he attacks me, punching me in the neck and driving a fist into the side of my chest right against my ribs.

Neither of us has any mana or kinetic energy available, so the fight is awkward as I defend myself while he attacks, all while the wheel swings and the car moves from the paved road to a side path made of dirt and dry grass.

"We're going to fucking die!" I shout.

"It's flat fucking ground, motherfucker! There's nothing to hit!" Whitey screams, punching me a few more times for effect before leaning back once more, his hair falling over his face.

With frustrated movements, he brushes the hair from his face, ties it up, and sits up straight, looking ahead at the road.

I almost let it go, but then he snorts, "Bitch."

So I slam on the brakes again, and he smacks his head against the dashboard once more.

The tires screech against the scorching asphalt as the Toyota Camry jerks to a halt, the entire car rocking from the sudden stop.

The moment the car stops moving, I release the wheel, raising my arms in defense. "I stopped because we're here now!"

Barely containing his anger, he looks out at the space shuttle that is still about half a mile away. I use that short opportunity to exit the vehicle, and a water bottle comes flying my way and hits me in the back of the head, sending me staggering forward, but I take it like a champ and continue walking.

Then the second bottle hits my head, making me let out a painful groan as I rub the spot it struck.

Whitey doesn't say anything. He just joins and walks up next to me, his crocs crunching over the dry grass and cracked dirt. The two of us move forward, side by side, following the faint trail that winds between patches of brittle weeds and sun-bleached rocks. Heat radiates off the ground in shimmering waves, and every breath feels like dragging in air from an open oven.

Even though I'd complained earlier about the car's lack of onboard cooling, and the way it was just blasting hot wind into our faces as we drove, I quickly come to realize just how much worse it is on foot. There's no shade. No breeze. Just the relentless sun beating down on our backs and the distant hum of cicadas buzzing in the silence. But I was the one who picked this "setting," so I act like nothing's wrong. This was exactly what I wanted. Not that it will do anything to trick Whitey, but it will at least allow me to retain some shred of dignity.

Whitey wipes the sweat from his brow and mutters something under his breath, but keeps walking. Neither of us has the energy to argue anymore.

When we finally reach the space shuttle, we see a woman standing in front of it, dressed like a pizza delivery driver. A scooter with a thermal box is parked on the road beside her. She's wearing a red shirt with a company logo, a matching cap, and black shorts.

She's something I created from my memories, and twisted to the extreme. I used my experience with Logic Core and my imagination to shape her exactly as I wanted. There is no mind or feeling, only a puppet reacting to its surroundings in the way I programmed. Within my mental space, at least with Whitey here, that much is possible, though it did take a lot of effort and preparation.

But it was worth it.

The woman has silver hair tied back in a ponytail, a red cap on her head, and brown eyes. Her expression, however, doesn't quite match. She looks shy and nervous.

The real Lissandra would never make a face like that.

"Y-your pizza, sir," she says while handing us two boxes of pizza and looking down at her feet.

I come closer, take both boxes, and open one of them, taking a sniff as I do.

"You call this pizza! I clearly said garlic crust! How could you mess this up!? Even a random Lady's pet would be able to remember that!" I shout at her.

"I-I'm sorry! I don't know how it happened!"

Taking a piece, I start eating it and offer the box to Whitey, who also takes one and bites into it.

I turn to the silver-haired delivery woman again, "You call that mana manipulation? I've seen kids with better control of their mana."

"What, sir? Excuse me, I do not understand," she says, sounding almost as if she is about to cry.

"Of course you don't. Something, something, you will never become an Absolute; something, something, your limit is Champion."

"I don't understand," she sobs, her voice cracking as tears stream down her cheeks. Her hands tremble at her sides, fingers curled slightly like she's trying to hold herself together.

"Blah blah."

She lets out a sob, followed by a shaky sniff.

I take a step closer, remove her cap, and place it on my own head, turning backwards as I do. "I ain't paying shit; that pizza is cold." I burn my finger as I take another piece of pizza and blow on it to cool it down before taking another bite.

Next to me, Whitey chews with his mouth open. He takes a step toward the scooter, opens the thermal box, and steals all of the boxes inside, holding them in one hand while using the other to feed himself more pizza.

After watching her for a moment, Whitey carefully places the pizza boxes on the ground. Then he grabs the open thermal container from the scooter, a bulky thing big enough to hold a full stack of pizzas, and sets it over her head. Drifting out from inside, we can still hear her muffled sobbing.

"There. Now you are thinking inside the box. That is more your level," Whitey says.

We leave NPCandra behind and head toward the shuttle.

Chapter 585: Dumb Human, Dumb Demon

As we walk up the metal stairs and head toward the elevator, Whitey lets out a little laugh. Just one, and then returns to stuffing his mouth with more pizza.

We reach the elevator and I press a single red button, which slowly brings us upward. The higher we go, the better a view we have of the shuttle and the nature of the land surrounding it. It's a dry, mostly reddish, dust covered, rocky area. And somehow it still has a rough beauty to it.

The elevator shakes, creaks, and finally comes to a stop, and the door opens to a metal mesh ramp. We walk across and make our way into the space shuttle. Even on the inside, everything looks a bit worn, made in a style others from Earth might call NASA punk.

There are a multitude of white, leathery, cushioned panels covering the walls, and numerous important-looking buttons and monitors with green screens displaying white text. There's also a barrage of chimes, beeps, and alerts, and the air is filled with a nostalgic smell.

I glance around, noticing scratches and faded stickers plastered randomly across the surfaces inside, some peeling at the edges. A few handwritten notes are stuck next to an array of buttons, containing warnings and hastily scribbled reminders.

Loose wires stick out from cracked panels at our feet and have been hastily taped over with silver tape. Some buttons are labeled with yellow sticky notes bearing words like "Don't press," "Maybe press," or simple question marks. This place feels chaotic but wonderfully alive.

I close the door and lock it just as I would lock the door to my house, with a key and everything. Surely, there had to be places where my imagination took the easy way out.

We continue to the cockpit and take our seats, lying horizontally in the pre-launch chairs, reclining in the chairs, and looking out through windows that are probably larger than anything a normal shuttle would have.

Neither of us bothers to buckle up, and then the countdown starts out of nowhere. Biscuit's voice counting down for us, emanating from the loudspeakers around us.

(Eight.)

(Nine.)

(Seven.)

(Four.)

(Six.)

(Five.)

(Three.)

(Three.)

(Two.)

(One.)

(Food!)

And I cant help but to say, "Damn, I miss that corgi."

The space shuttle shakes wildly as we start off, defying logic and physical laws. This is merely an imagination, glued together from memories of movies, random facts, and videos from the internet.

We launch, and our bodies press into the chairs as the shuttle gathers more and more speed. The vibrations seem to pound at us through the air, until I can almost feel my bones shaking as if everything around could break apart at any point.

Outside the windows, the sky quickly darkens, fading from a pale shade of blue to near-black, briefly streaked with fiery oranges and reds. Clouds vanish below us, replaced by the dizzying curve of the planet, creating an image that's both vast and impossibly small all at once. My grip tightens instinctively on the chair's armrests, my knuckles turn white, yet somehow I feel a thrill instead of fear as if my body had already accepted that this isn't quite real and has chosen instead to enjoy the chaos.

It should probably take longer, but in a mere 30 seconds, we're already in space, where the vibrations stop and the fuel tanks fall off, left to their scorching re-entry.

I get out of the chair as a feeling of weightlessness hits us, and we find ourselves floating in the cabin. The shuttle slowly drives itself toward the moon, which honestly seems much closer than it should be.

Hitting the wall, I push myself toward the boxes tied to one of the chairs, take one of the boxes, and start eating the still hot pizza. I toss one of the boxes over to Whitey, who catches it.

For a moment, I allow myself to float in place, fascinated by the surreal quietness broken only by soft hums and creaks echoing within the shuttle's metal bones. I turn slowly, spinning once, then twice, and taking in the messy and somehow comforting sight of boxes and crumbs floating alongside us, already forming a miniature solar system of pizza debris.

Whitey floats by one of the massive circular windows that shouldn't exist, staring out at the empty space and the Earth below us while taking slow bites.

After a few minutes, he says without looking in my direction, "My name is Lioren."

"Thank you for telling me, Lioren. My name is Nathaniel."

Looking ahead, the moon grows rapidly larger, and its surface details sharpen: craters, mountains, and mysterious shadows become visible even from here.

Then silence ensues until the moment we crash into the moon's surface. The front of the shuttle hits it, and the shuttle jolts upward, throwing us against the walls. Gravity, though not as strong as it would be on Earth, hits us again. The shuttle slides for another dozen seconds, hitting rocks, bouncing off bumps in the ground, and emitting a series of loud screeching noises until it comes to a stop.

Lioren steps out first as the door opens, and I follow, jumping down onto the surface of the moon. Neither of us even bothers to wear a spacesuit.

Once outside, we can see a flag firmly planted in the surface, an American flag, in fact. And not far from that is a lunar car and a lunar module.

Nearby, an astronaut is sitting on the edge of a small lunar cliff, legs dangling over the drop. I walk up and take a seat beside the figure.

The astronaut is dressed in one of those old-school Apollo suits, bulky, white, and covered in the lunar dust. The gold visor reflects the curve of Earth and the black void beyond. Tubes cross the chest, and gloved hands rest quietly in the lap.

"Do you know a good pizza spot?" I ask.

The astronaut doesn't answer, just slowly lifts their right arm to point off toward the horizon.

I follow the direction of the gloved finger. And of course, it's pointing straight at Earth, glowing like a marble against the blackness of space.

"Oh, you must think you're being funny, asshole," I mutter, smacking the back of the astronaut's helmet with the back of my hand.

"I'm sorry, sir," comes the muffled voice from inside the suit. It's NPCandra, and she begins sobbing quietly, her voice barely audible through the thick helmet.

I'm a bit disappointed to get the same reaction as before, but I guess it makes sense. It's not like I have the experience to "program" anything more elaborate. This is just an imitation, a looping clip of a scene from my imagination.

Lioren walks by without stopping, casually slapping the top of her helmet as well. Then he plops one of the empty pizza boxes on it and says, "You'll have to balance it here for ten minutes, or I'll cut off your air."

"N-no! I'm sorry!" she whimpers, her voice cracking as she tries to hold still. We keep walking, leaving her behind, arms stretched slightly for balance, the pizza box wobbling on top of her helmet as she sniffles and struggles to keep the box from falling.

Stolen content warning: this content belongs on Royal Road. Report any occurrences.

We walk away in silence, the moon's surface stretching endlessly around us. Each step feels slow and weightless, our bodies drifting slightly before settling back down, the low gravity turning every movement into a floaty sort of dance. The only sounds are the faint crunch of dust beneath our boots as the Earth hangs in the black sky, distant and quiet, as if it were watching over us.

After a while, Lioren begins to slow down. He stops beside a small slope, brushes some of the dust away with a boot, then lowers himself to the ground.

With a soft motion, he spreads a piece of white cloth over the moon's surface and looks up at me, "Would you eat with me?"

"Gladly," I say and sit down.

I patiently wait as he sets his feet on the ground. In front of us lies a pizza box, a few cans of soda, some sweets, and pieces of fruit that I recognize as the ones he liked as a young demon.

Above us, the Earth hangs bright, impossibly vivid with its swirling clouds and blue oceans, almost glowing in the darkness. It feels strangely comforting to see it from here, like finding something familiar in a dream. I glance at Lioren, noticing how calm he looks, watching me closely as if he were committing this strange picnic to memory.

Then, while he waits, I devour all the food.

When it's done, I look up and see Lioren smiling.

Then he kicks me out of our shared mental space, and I find myself back in my workshop on the tournament floor, knowing that if I leave things up to him, this will have been our goodbye.

In the last few hours leading up to the 4th event, I sit alone in my room and think. I think deeply and methodically, running through everything I know about Lissandra and her behavior. This time, even though it's not something I'm great at, I try to predict how she'll react to what I plan to do.

But in the end, I stand up, open the door, and walk downstairs to the living room where some Group 4 members are waiting, especially Izzy.

"Izzy, do you have a moment?" I ask her.

With her green eyes, she looks up at me from the laptop, where I know she is often editing the videos that she made with the others.

"Sure!" She agrees without hesitation, and as she always does whenever she speaks to someone, her senses reach out to me in an attempt to connect to my feelings.

It's something she does almost instinctively, and it's pretty hard to notice. There are probably only a few people in each round who would even be capable of doing so, and even fewer who can detect her surface scans. I'm not one of those people, even though I'm aware that that kind of thing even exists.

Izzy acts a bit surprised when I allow her to connect, but she follows me out of the house and into the garden.

I sit down with her and explain everything, then I ask about Lissandra. She listens closely, nodding a few times.

I then receive my answer and an unexpected hug.

"If you need help..."

"I know, I'll ask," I confirm. "It's fine."

The 4th event starts, and I'm moved into the Great Labyrinth of Xyphos along with thousands more. It appears to be underground, with a wall made of smooth red rock imbued with white crystals that emit light. The walls are made of a pure, and stunningly smooth gray stone, as is the floor.

Other than that, I find myself in a single huge room, big enough to easily fit the hundreds of attendees currently surrounding me, and the ceiling itself rises as high as a two or three-story building.

Then there's the door; there are no knobs or inscriptions, just a single huge slab of black wood. At its lowest point, within reach of a normal human, there's a glowing white handprint.

I ignore the people around me and shut my eyes, forcing my way into my mind space despite a number of attempts to stop me.

This time, it is dark and empty here, and Lioren stands opposite me in the same clothes his lurker once wore.

"Fuck off," he greets me.

I smile at him and sit down patiently.

He stares me down, "What the fuck are you planning?"

"I've known since the start of the tournament that you were planning to disappear at its end," I say.

"So what?" he shrugs and sits down. "It's my decision to make."

"Why only after the tournament, and why not try to take over my body?"

"It's up to me if I want to cut things short, not the tutorial. I've shown you everything I could. Your untalented ass will have to figure out the rest. And look, Nathaniel, you're a fucking mess right now. Disappearing in the middle of that would just be a dick move."

"I'm fine."

"Sure," he snorts, "the real question is, why the hell are you here?"

He avoids answering the second question, unsurprisingly.

"It seems I have to be the mature one here," I sigh. "So, to say, you could always take over my mind and do it at any time. It would be easy, and the other option for you is to die. And yet you never did. You thought about it, I saw those memories, but you never did it."

"I just didn't feel like it."

"I know," I smile, "but I'm a dumb human with a weak heart and a pathetic talent for kinetic energy."

"Sounds like you."

"So, in my human idiocy, I always took it as a token of friendship, the greatest you could've shown."

Lioren snorts, "Dumb human, indeed. You know I'm just a fake created by the tutorial."

"Where you came from doesn't matter to me. Now let me finish. You've got a few days left, but I'm an asshole, so I'm asking you to die today."

He watches me intently, "How cruel. Explain."

"As much as I dislike it, I know I can't change your mind or convince you to stay longer. I've seen enough of your memories to respect your decision. But to explain myself, compared to some things, my life doesn't mean all that much to me. So, Lioren, to show just how stupid I am for calling a random demon hallucination trapped in my head a friend, and to show just how much I actually trust you, I'm going to give you something I value even more than that."

I look straight at him. "I will put the life of my friend in your hands, and I will give you an opportunity to go wild one more time and crush the fourth event. I made some preparations, even as we speak, a part of my mind is deploying the arrays and inscriptions to modify my mana and kinetic flow.

"She won't like it."

"I'm aware. That'll be something for me to deal with. It will be fine."

"What was that human saying, famous last words?"

"Indeed. I'll be taking a step back, so please, one last time, show me the proper way to use kinetic energy. You have my permission to break my body in the process."

"Craziest fucking human I have ever met."

"I hear that a lot."

POV Brainiac

The huge room with hundreds of attendees is full of sound as they party up, plan out things, and examine the area around us.

Not many notice the white palm on the massive wooden door, but I think it might be the key to opening it, possibly leading to another room or the labyrinth proper.

It is not something I worry about too much. Most of my attention is on Noname.

He stands in the middle of the room, eyes closed, mana seeping from his body. I can follow it much better now than I could during the first tournament, and it's not like he's trying to hide it, but damn, if it isn't wild.

The asshole moves his mana around himself, carving inscriptions into his own body, tracing them over his chest, across his hands and arms. The crown on his head flickers until it vanishes. The pressure of his mana builds, and he starts making even crazier changes I can barely follow. Since he's not hiding it, though, I can see more now. The way he moves his mana is chaotic, but there's a clear purpose in it.

It flashes, it beats, it moves, pulling into threads, and the space around him begins to feel oppressive. It flares up only to die off and send pulses of weaker mana through the area-

I don't think I'm that bad at handling mana, but the guy in front of me is batshit crazy. A single slip-up, a single mistake, and the amount of mana he's using would tear him apart. On top of that, he's even suppressing the waves around him so he doesn't kill anybody who might be below Hell difficulty.

Then his heart starts beating audibly, and more of his mana seeps into the area, forcing those from the lower difficulties to move away from him. That mana fills the room and bounces off the walls before returning to him.

His mana gradually fades as the dense inscriptions across his chest glow briefly before vanishing. I've never seen anything like them, not even on low arcane weapons.

All of his mana vanishes, followed by an audible thump. Then another, and another, until I realize it's his heartbeat. But that heart doesn't generate mana anymore; it generates something else, using all the mana to do so.

His black hair, drifting around his head in rhythm with his heartbeat, begins turning white at the roots until it's completely bright white. Noname opens his eyes as their color shifts from gray and brown to a vivid shade of red.

To my surprise, Noname smiles brightly and hops in place. He moves his arms and legs like he's testing them, then a satisfied expression spreads across his face. He taps his chest over his heart and nods, smiling even more.

"Such a ridiculously insane output," he says. "Fucking dumb human brute."

Chapter 586: Not Noname

POV Brainiac

He is gone in a blink, and I couldn't even hope to track him. There's no movement of mana, no vibrations flowing through the air. Something I've even started to notice with Tacita at times is not even slightly present here.

I hear shouts and look back to see Noname now standing in front of the door with his hand on the white palm symbol. The door starts shaking, dust and dirt falling off the edges as it opens to reveal a similar room. Inside, a single person stands on a small island surrounded by glowing, pale blue water. The huge, square room has the same gray walls, but this time, there are three massive black doors marked with identical white palms.

Symbols cover the area, painted in subtly different shades of black, along with other markings that probably hint at which door to open next.

The person standing on the island floats into the air, and translucent, bird-like wings glow behind her. Her skin is slightly grayish, the same as all of the avatars, and her face holds that empty expression. I recognize her as a Beyonder—one of the top three from the second round.

Noname and the woman disappear from my sight again, only for both of them to crash against the ceiling. The wings on the avatar's back change and turn into dozens of long arms that reach toward Noname, who pins her against the ceiling, neither of them falling, as if unaffected by gravity. All of those arms freeze mid-air, and the woman's head bursts open before she disappears into a shower of blue particles.

I can barely keep up as Noname suddenly reappears on the ground, right by the first door. He opens it without a single damn concern for any traps there might be or whether it's even the right one. Then the mana obsessed buffoon with, why the fuck not, white hair, does the same to the remaining two doors, and all of them start to open at once.

One of the doors reveals a cluster of fifty attendees, all trapped within the blazing ring of a firewall. The others swing open to reveal rooms packed with avatars, easily a hundred in each.

From where I stand, I can already feel the pressure radiating from Noname like a tidal wave. Then he moves. No hesitation. No pause. He charges straight in, ripping through them like paper, completely unfazed by the other members of Hell difficulty or their numbers.

The room is massive, enclosed by the same four gray walls as the last one, but this time we're standing on a vast grassy field. Towering pillars, each as thick as a sequoia, stretch upward, nearly touching the ceiling.

Two avatars face us, walking toward us at a steady pace. CarrotCake and Klara, both of them winners of their first tournaments.

All five Hell difficulty fighters on our side are already down, and the rest of us can only watch and wait for it to be over. The two avatars, on the other hand, remain completely untouched.

Then a huge door to the right opens slowly, and a single figure steps through the massive entrance.

The white hair and red eyes are the first things I notice. Then comes the expression, strange enough to throw me off, just long enough for the realization to hit me too late.

I know this person.

Nathaniel Gwyn does not wear his usual calm, distant expression. Instead, he is smiling with a strange, eager intensity. Even his movements are different. Every shift of his body sends a warning straight to the primitive core of my brain. There's a predatory energy in the way he moves, something sharp and unnatural. It feels wrong, almost like no one should be able to move the way he does.

There is no crown, no mana, no projectiles, no orbs, no golden flames. Nathaniel simply steps into the room without deploying any of his usual countermeasures, even though he must know he's up against two of the best physical fighters in Earth's tutorial.

And he attacks first.

I do not see any movement, but out of nowhere, he's standing in front of me, and CarrotCake is gone. Then Klara disappears as well. A split second later, two of the pillars explode as their bodies crash against them.

"Damn, I knew his output was high, but what is this shit?" Nathaniel says.

The voice is the same, but the tone, pronunciation, and rhythm are very different. When he turns to me and I see those red eyes, it's all I need to confirm that this is not Nathaniel, it has to be someone else.

"I know he keeps comparing us, but I'm more handsome than you," he says after examining my face.

A pair of shockwaves ripple out from where the ruined pillars are, and both Klara and CarrotCake appear in the air in front of him, stopped mid strike as if they were being held there by an invisible force. CarrotCake is frozen mid-punch, and Klara is swinging the gladius in her hand.

Nathaniel moves with a speed I can't even begin to follow. One moment he's there, the next he's already confronting the two Beyonders, striking before they can react. The moment they clash, all of them burst into motion, and the space around them erupts with force.

The two avatars and Nathaniel vanish without warning, only to reappear seconds later in a blur of motion, then they vanish again before anyone can react. Their battle rages across the entire field, too fast to follow, too violent to contain. Pillars as thick as trees are shattered like glass in their wake. The ground is torn apart, rent asunder by their stray blows.

Even the attendees caught near their clashes don't stand a chance, some are killed outright, reduced to nothing just for being too close.

It all happens in a matter of seconds. Then Nathaniel is standing beside me, the gladius Klara once held now resting casually on his shoulder. She's gone with no trace of her to be seen.

Only CarrotCake's avatar emerges from the smoke. One arm is missing, his body has been torn through, leaving him riddled with ragged, bloody holes, and half his face has been reduced to little more than blood and ruin. But he still strides forward without hesitation, each step heavy enough to make the air around him hum.

"Do you like it, you asshole?! It's not fun when your opponents don't use mana, right?" Nathaniel shouts at the avatar. Then he vanishes again, leaving only an echo behind.

For a split second, I catch sight of Nathaniel standing right in front of CarrotCake. In one smooth, brutal motion, he slams the flat side of Klara's gladius against CarrotCake's chest, unleashing a shockwave that sends even me tumbling until I crash into a tree.

Enjoying this book? Seek out the original to ensure the author gets credit.

I lift my head with the taste of blood thick in my mouth. Nathaniel is already gone, leaving no trace. CarrotCake's avatar remains standing for a moment longer, chest ripped open and heart completely destroyed. Then he collapses. His form unravels and dissolves into streams of pale blue particles, rising into the air before scattering like fading embers.

POV Samuel

The room we're in is filled with motion-activated traps. Even the slightest movement causes mana to gather around the crystal floating high above, and a crystalline projectile shoots out almost instantly. I saw one pierce straight through the barrier of a Hell difficulty attendee from the first round, and another break through the shield of a Beyonder from the eighth round, even though it was an upper epic shield.

Even talking sets it off. Fortunately, a few of the remaining Hell difficulty attendees, like me, have noticed the inscriptions etched into the stone floor and have begun channeling their mana into them.

As in the previous rooms, this one must also have a solution; we just need to proceed carefully. But I have a strong suspicion that if you find a solution, it will only apply to you and exclude you from movement tracking. I suspect this because even the avatars here with us stand unmoving, working through the same process.

At this point, it is a race to see who regains the ability to move first.

This does not mean there are no fights. The avatars and attendees can still use their primordial energies or rely on skills that don't require movement to pepper each other with attacks. Both sides are defending and attacking at all times.

That's when Noname appears in the middle of the room, caught between two fighting factions. For some reason, his hair is white, and his eyes have turned a dark shade of red.

"Damn, what a bunch of losers," he says simply.

Three crystal projectiles shoot at him, only to freeze mid-movement before they can pierce his body. He tilts his head with curiosity, and three more shoot his way, all of them stopping in the same fashion, just an arm's reach away from his body.

He moves and touches the tip of one of the crystal projectiles, and each movement causes more and more projectiles to rush his way as dozens of them start collecting around him.

Taking one of these crystals into his hand, he twists his body and throws it. The crystal projectile disappears from my sight, leaving just a blur in its wake.

One of the avatars crashes against the wall, a crystal stabbed through its chest. Even that movement causes a few more projectiles to form and hit him on the ground, turning him into a mist of fine particles.

Around Noname, there are already dozens of crystal projectiles, and he snickers deviously, taking them out of the air and throwing them at the avatars. Beyonders, Hell difficulty, even Easy difficulty, he doesn't leave anyone unscathed, and quickly clears the room.

He disappears, and the rain of projectiles trails in his wake, slamming against the ground, but they're still too slow to catch up. The next time I see him, he puts his hand on the white glowing palm on the huge wooden door, which immediately begins to open.

Before he leaves, he turns back, and I can feel his red eyes locked on me. Around him, a hundred crystal projectiles hang frozen in the air, with more forming every time he moves. He mouths something I can't hear, and an invisible force pushes against me just enough to make me stumble.

The last thing I see is a dozen crystals speeding toward me from the crystal floating high above. A moment later, I find myself outside, in the common area.

I glance over the area at the crowds already outside the event, watching the screens. Some of my men are already here as planned, the ones who gave up on the event early just to record the fourth event using the cameras we set up.

"How's it going?" I ask as I step up to one of them.

"It's a mess. We haven't been able to locate that silver-haired woman yet, but Noname is on a rampage. He's already hunted down dozens of Hell difficulty avatars and several of the avatars of the tournament winners. We also tried to track Victoria, but just like during the previous event, she's been holding back. It's tough to properly estimate her abilities."

"Continue then," I tell him, and move to my spot to watch the screens.

On them, I see Noname tearing through another room, jumping off the walls to dodge attacks and tanking close-range hits from another physically powerful avatar.

I remember the time his mana destabilized in the common area and wiped out hundreds of attendees. And I wonder if someone like him should even be allowed to set foot on Earth.

But at this point, I have to ask myself if there is anyone who can stop him.

POV Sophie Martinez

I've seen Nathaniel fight time and time again, and over time, I've come to agree with something he himself admits, though many of the others would say the same. Nathaniel is not among the most talented people here; he is not a genius like Savant, Tess, or Tacita.

Still, out of everyone I've met, out of every attendee, he's the one I want to mess with the least. That guy is harder to kill than a cockroach, and his mana output only seems to increase as a given fight progresses rather than running out.

There is just too much bullshit he can throw around. The last fight against Absolute Candidate Ruby was proof of that. That red-haired woman was one of those rare, talented fighters and beat the shit out of him for most of the fight, but in the end, he still technically won by managing to die just a split second later.

I saw the expressions of people in the common area during that fight, as well as the reactions of spies from other rounds, and it is obvious that the countermeasures they've been preparing against him will only increase in number.

To put it simply, Nathaniel is someone I absolutely do not want to fight or have as an enemy.

Yet here I am, standing against his avatar.

Our group of a hundred attendees is positioned across the massive square room. It has the same gray walls and red ceiling lit by the same white crystals as the other rooms. The rest of the enormous space is filled with buildings reminiscent of the ones the lynthari on the fourth floor seemed to like. There's even a fountain in the center, and the area is large enough to host a small city.

There are four beyonders I know: Kang Jiwon from the 10th round, some girl from Victoria's round, Leticia, Luna, and one more guy from Jean's round. Then we have 10 Hell difficulty attendees, and I don't even bother to count the lower difficulties.

It could be said that the collection of people here is impressive.

Still, Leticia, standing by my side, whispers, "Should we run?"

Luna, beside us, growls, now at the largest size I've ever seen this golden retriever reach. Her fur stands on end, and her massive teeth are bared.

I look in the direction Leticia has been looking.

Nathaniel's avatar hovers in mid-air. A pale blue crown floats above his head, and the gray tones of his form make the crown's glow and the golden circles around his pupils stand out even more.

Leticia grabs my arm. "Why isn't he moving?"

He really isn't. Nathaniel's avatar just floats there, dead center of the battlefield, with no attacks, no skill activations, nothing. And yet everyone feels it; the air thickens, and the ground trembles under our feet despite the lack of movement.

I swear I saw Kang Jiwon take half a step back. Just half. Enough to mean something.

His crown pulses once, and mana rises up around him. Someone shouts, and defenses fire up and activate. Left with no other choice, I activate what I have prepared and stack it up around us, and prepare to fight.

My attempt to pierce into his mind is deflected as if I were slamming my head into a steel wall.

Again, pressure around him increases.

Ten people disappear. No screams, no impact, just gone, vaporized, or maybe something worse.

Luna lunges forward before I can react. She vanishes.

Leticia shouts and attacks. And all I can do is reach for my mana and hope the next attack doesn't come for me.

Chapter 587: Two monsters

POV Isabella Martinez

One of the doors stands wide open, but the other hasn't moved at all. The floor's clear like glass, and whenever we step on it, mana underneath swirls and ripples, almost like water. Surrounding the open door is a barrier that only lets people in. Once you walk through, you're stuck. You can't leave. At the moment, there are about 50 of us in the room.

Some people are still looking around, trying to understand the situation. A few sit in the corners, clearly exhausted or hurt, whispering to each other. One guy with a broken arm keeps glancing at the barrier like he's debating whether or not to continue his attempts to break through.

A few of the others are walking around the edge of the room, checking the walls and looking for clues or hidden triggers, even though it's obvious that nothing's going to work unless we solve the mana part. Some are just standing still, watching Yama's group with the kind of focus you'd expect from the sort of people with no backup plan of their own.

I spot one girl slowly etching lines into the floor with her dagger, probably some kind of inscription, but judging by her expression, she doesn't really know what she's doing.

There's tension everywhere. Not the loud kind. The quiet, crawling kind that builds with every minute that nothing happens.

No one else from group 4 is present, but Yama has already grouped up with some of the attendees from her and gotten to work on opening the locked door by deciphering the movements of mana under the floor and trying to manipulate them to unlock it.

I don't feel movement. It's more like a strong emotion. Whoever's controlling Nathaniel's body stops next to me and looks down, and I look up at him. That's when what Nathaniel asked me to do suddenly makes sense. I can feel the emotions from the thing inside him, and I remember what he told us earlier about the lurker in his mind.

"What is your name?" I ask, not wanting to call him Whitey.

I can only sense a kind of smug satisfaction from him over the lame joke, and I think I understand why Nathaniel would accept someone like him. Even though I can sense a lot of dark emotions radiating from him, the prevailing emotions for the moment are beautiful and pure.

Excitement radiates from him in waves.

Along with a heavy responsibility that he is happy to bear.

Slight annoyance blended with amusement.

The bravery of walking toward his death, mixed with something so beautiful that it nearly brings me to tears.

"He hates it when people twist his name like that," I tell him.

"Yes," he admits, smiling even more.

That expression is so unusual on Nathaniel's face it takes me aback.

"Are you having fun?" I ask while sitting down, and he sits next to me.

"You already know that, and I won't even try to hide my emotions from you. Did you know that you scare Nathaniel sometimes?"

"Yes, I do."

"Do you wanna hear some of his deepest secrets?"

"Yes! I mean, no! That would be rude."

"Are you sure?"

"I...n-yes! Don't tell me anything."

"I can hear your heart and feel your blood and muscles move. So why bother lying, you nosy little thing? But fine, have it your way. Why aren't they unlocking the door?"

"It's very difficult, and they're having trouble deciphering mana locks or something."

Nothaniel stands up and stretches, enjoying each of these movements. At the same time, Yama finally takes notice of him as she looks away from the inscription that she and her group have drawn on the floor.

He gives her a wave, which leads her to furrow her brow.

"Thank you," I shout to him before he can leave.

It causes him to stop, and he looks at me with those beautiful eyes, "What for, human?"

"For being his friend and refusing to turn on him. He still doesn't know how to ask for help, and he keeps trying to carry everything on his own."

"He's a mess, I know, but that doesn't mean he needs anyone fixing him. Don't underestimate him," he says with a nod, then freezes as I grab his hand.

It's a warm and strong hand, and he looks at me with a flash of awkwardness quickly replaced by surprise and annoyance.

"What?" he asks impatiently.

"I'm sorry he couldn't help you, and that the rest of us never got the chance to know you."

He snorts and pulls his hand away from mine.

Then he gently taps on the floor with his foot. The mana swirling underneath gets pushed aside as if his foot were causing an invisible explosion. He repeats it, but where there was a single shockwave before, now there are five, each one entirely different from the others.

The mana under the surface crashes against itself, battered by the shockwaves and swirling in beautiful patterns until it stops entirely. Then the formerly closed door slowly creaks open.

The author's content has been appropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

I look away from them and back to him, but he's already gone, and now standing in front of Yama. She teleports away, only for him to appear in front of her again, wearing that same smile and just staring.

Her strings spiral, move, attack, form defenses, or swing, but he avoids them all with the slightest movements of his body. Every time she teleports, he's already there, within arm's reach, just watching her with that smile. He tracks her constantly, even as she sets up fakes.

The attacks she sends his way stop mid-air, explosions frozen as if time itself had paused, flames refusing to burn and simply hanging there.

None of the people from her group can move. Ever since the beginning, they've just stood there, unmoving.

In the end, even Yama ends up the same. She's frozen in place, not a single strand of her hair moves.

Her annoyance, which flared into anger and surprise, now barely masks her unease and growing tension.

Nothaniel steps closer and taps her forehead with that devilish smile of his.

"Know your place," he says.

Then he's gone, and she just stands there, staring at the spot where he vanished. Her face remains calm and composed as always, but I notice the faintest blush on her cheeks and feel her confused emotions.

POV Dennis Dalton

This room is the size of a small city. It has the same cube shape, gray walls, and red ceiling, but the floor is covered in ankle-deep water. In addition, there are floating droplets of water, thousands of them all throughout the room. Each of these droplets explodes on contact, with a force capable of killing even a Hell attendee.

And they are impossible to perceive with any sense other than sight.

For the last five hours, the event has gone pretty well. Aaron and I were following Derick and Hector, the 6th and 8th round tournament winners, having been lucky enough to have been thrown into the same starting room.

So, obviously, we decided to stick to them. Who wouldn't?

Together, they dealt with the Korean King's avatar and a few of the Beyonder avatars. Sometimes it's hard to see because Nat's always beating the shit out of these people, but they are pretty strong in their own rights.

Of course, we still do our part. We even created a few illusions to confuse avatars so that the invisible Hector could snipe them down with his poisonous, self-guided spear. We also created a communication link between the strongest members of our group.

That got us a surprised look, and I think it's because we did it so easily without any need for an anchor, and because the connection is so stable. It's something that group 4 considers normal at this point. We even have countermeasures against people using a similar connection to take advantage of them in combat, and secondary connections hidden below the main one to ensure that the enemy thinks they got rid of everything.

It would be funny to mention to them that between us and Nat, we're probably a few years away from the possibility of sharing mana through that connection and a decade or two from sharing vitality or something similar.

So yes, we did well, things went well, and we've already cleared a few rooms.

Some of them weren't easy. One room had shifting gravity and reflective surfaces that kept bouncing our attacks back at us. Another was filled with some kind of thick fog that messed with sound and made it impossible to judge distances.

We worked well together. It hasn't been perfect, of course, but we aren't just some random group anymore. We were starting to feel like a real team. Maybe even the best team. Friends for life. Angry Kitten Slayers!

Then Tacita's avatar appeared, and Derick and Hector died within seconds, both of them.

For the first time, I understood why Nat is scared of her and why he kept telling us that when it comes to fighting attendees, Tacita is likely the most dangerous person in Earth's tutorial.

Holding a dagger with a gray blade in one hand and one coated in blue mana in the other, she calmly steps toward us. Pale blue particles still shimmer around her, the last remnants of the two Kings. There are a few dozen of our illusions, but her eyes never leave the spot where Aaron and I are.

I use [Haste] and she disappears. I can't even follow her movement, but the moment she is gone, I exchange places with one of my illusions through [Connection].

When I start looking for her, she isn't there, and in a panic, I do it again, and so does Aaron. Every time, just for a faint moment, I see an attack slash through the place we once stood, but she's quick to catch up, and already we've been reduced to a handful of illusions.

After a quick message, we both prepare, relying on our [Connection], which is much stronger than anything we can create alone, especially in combination with Aaron's dexterity. It's not perfectly efficient, so some of it gets wasted, but in that moment, my speed increases dramatically, and I use [Haste] on my mind.

Aaron disappears, exchanging locations with the illusion we left far behind, and only now do I barely see Tacita's avatar.

Every surviving attendee moves in slow motion, but she still moves incredibly quickly. The water under her feet barely splashes, and she's already far away from that spot.

I barely lift my dagger to block a single attack, and I swing my short sword at her, only to watch my severed arm go flying through the air.

Then I realize she hasn't even been going all out against me and Aaron until now.

What a freak.

Her dagger aims at my heart, but then she freezes, the blade just barely touching my chest.

And behind her, stands Nathaniel, just an arm's reach away. He is smiling demonically. Only then do I see his red eyes and white hair.

He mouths something, but the air around Tacita's avatar flickers, and she turns around and swings at his head. She doesn't even bother finishing or attacking me, fully focused on him.

Nathaniel dodges her attack with these erratic, impossible movements that look even more confusing than usual, and Tacita keeps avoiding attacks I cannot see that send shockwaves through the water or cause the water behind her to explode into geysers.

They move all over the place, slipping between the attendees without so much as disturbing the surface of the water. Even with all the effort I've put into overclocking my perception, I can barely track them.

But I notice that even as quick as Nathaniel is right now, he can barely match her. She even seems to be faster than he.

At first, it seems to annoy him, but the annoyance is quickly replaced by a vivid grin.

In a burst of motion, he sends her flying backward, and she slides across the water's surface before coming to a stop.

She tosses aside both of her broken daggers and pulls a new one from her clothes. It's dark red, its glowing tip leaving a trail in the air with every movement. She takes a stance.

Nathaniel mirrors her, taking a stance unlike any I've seen from him before. A deep thud erupts from his body, shaking the massive room and causing all the floating water droplets to explode. Several bursts near Tacita forcing her to dodge.

He appears at her side. Despite moving at incredible speed, he stops so abruptly that the deceleration alone would've killed any normal person. The red dagger slices through the air, its glowing tip carving a line that just barely misses him. Then he regains momentum and crashes into Tacita with the same force he had before stopping.

Chapter 588: Lioren

POV Lioren

I'll never understand humans. They're strange and tend to be weak, but every now and then, one turns out to be crazy enough to surprise even a demon.

Adrian used to be like that. He had his own rules, rules I could never understand. Following them, he broke through Beyond floors at a speed that left even the handlers speechless. Nathaniel is similar. He also has that spark that makes me want to destroy him, but even more so, I want to fan it further just to see how brightly it will burn before dying out.

Sometimes, I saw his disciple telling him something, but Nathaniel didn't seem to understand. Especially when that little girl acted more like a demon than many full demons I once knew, and every time it happened, he just seemed confused.

Perhaps he just thought of it as a funny quirk, a simple eccentricity on the part of his disciple, but just as I do not fully understand him, he does not fully understand us demons. But out of all the humans whose minds I could've ended up trapped in, this petty little shit was not that bad.

There's one thing I'll never tell him or let him see in my memories, but sometimes I think he could be more terrifying than any demon I've ever known. And yet, there are moments when he's so soft it makes me want to punch him.

But isn't that why little Vega and I didn't mind becoming his friends? What drew us to the light he keeps hidden inside?

Demons like us aren't used to that. We hate those kinds of feelings. But like everything else among us, strength decides everything. And if he's going to be the strongest, then no demon would ever speak against his rules or behavior, no matter how soft they might seem.

Because the strongest have that right.

My body is healthy and moves the way I want without requiring constant infusions of kinetic energy. And I don't have to worry about my heart breaking apart every time I channel a bit more kinetic energy.

His physical stats are not as high as mine used to be. His strength, dexterity, and constitution are pathetically low, and I have to rely on kinetic energy to enhance them. Even a single hit could be dangerous to me if I were to let it pass. If it were anyone else in this situation, they'd be in trouble.

But not me.

I'm someone who became a Champion candidate barely a few months into the tutorial, even with my fucked-up body. I'm someone multiple Champions said could have become an Absolute candidate, were it not for my broken body.

Using kinetic energy is something I can do very well. And his body helps too; it almost instinctively channels these huge amounts of kinetic energy without breaking. Every time I reach for more, I do it with hesitation in the back of my mind. I expect something to break or tear. But it does not happen.

I ask for more kinetic energy, I channel it, and I get it. My skill, along with the instinct of this body developed over two years of stopping his insane level of mana from breaking it apart, makes that possible.

He always says there are geniuses he could've never matched without discipline and effort, and he genuinely believes that. But he also believes that if he puts in the work, he can achieve whatever he sets his mind to.

Until now, I've been fighting that mute, nimble girl using only what I'd be capable of even without Nathaniel. But the longer we clash, the more I watch her move, the faster my heart beats. She pushes her speed until I can no longer track her with my eyes, yet another monster from this tutorial.

So I stop relying on sight. I don't even try to follow her movements. I focus on the space around me, on the vibrations and their absence in the areas she passes through with her field.

I move to the side, I dance around her blade, I slow her movement with a spike of restrictive force, and attack in turn.

She ducks, she jumps, she spins. Her perception turns out to be exactly what you'd expect from someone so new to the system. It's still lacking, and she barely manages to predict my attacks. But she has something else. Instinct. A kind of pulse that tells her to move before her mind can catch up. It's hard to pull off, but she's one of the rare people who can.

I trail her movement and follow behind her, weaving paths between the gathered attendees. Waves of kinetic energy explode out from me, detonating the droplets in her path to direct her movements, and I use even more of that immense kinetic energy currently being channeled through my body.

And that body handles it.

So I use more. And more.

I catch up to her. I dodge under her attacks. My needlepoint pierces where her head was mere moments ago.

More.

I appear in front of her. She seems so slow that, for the first time in my life, my body and my kinetic energy move quickly enough to match my senses, one of my best qualities.

I grab her left arm and tear it off. Something to amuse that guy, I'm sure, is watching.

Her avatar swings at the same time I do. I catch her hand before my other one strikes, punching a hole through where her heart should be. Even then, she rips herself away, leaving her right arm behind in my grasp. Armless, she drops low and charges with incredible speed, nearly headbutting me before I switch to Breaker Style and completely destroy her avatar's body.

I expand my senses and move again. My body pushes me forward, craving more of this feeling.

Taken from Royal Road, this narrative should be reported if found on Amazon.

Rooms flash in front of my eyes as I pass by them. I ignore the attendees, destroy avatars, and make my way deeper into the labyrinth. Each room is different, some are bigger, others are smaller, and each has its own traps. The rooms are indestructible, even to someone of Champion rank. The Labyrinth of Xyphos is a real place that exists outside of the tutorial, something I heard about in Beyond.

Then I reach a simple room. No traps, no avatars, just a hundred attendees trapped inside by a barrier that allows entry but not exit. The temperature in the room keeps increasing while they do everything they can to destroy the door that is slightly different from the previous ones. The "test" here is to destroy the door.

Landing nearby, I slow to a walk. As if knowing my intentions, the heart beating inside this body increases its output. Each heartbeat sends a huge surge of kinetic energy through me and shakes the air. It's audible. It is raw and makes the tips of my fingers tingle.

I wait.

More and more energy courses through me, an amount I have never held in my life, an amount he handles so casually and wastefully at all times.

Then more of it. I grab it, I move it, I feel it.

It's something I feel an urge to do slowly, making sure the guy whose body I currently possess can feel every part of it. So that with his own body, he can remember the proper way to move kinetic energy.

Then I release it toward the door.

There's no shockwave. No side effects to hurt the others in the room. All of it is perfectly directed ahead, not a speck wasted. The wooden door explodes outward, turning into a shower of huge shards, spraying into the room beyond.

I move in, eager as I sense another presence, but then I halt my movement.

A silver-haired woman stands there; the wooden shrapnel from the door is deflected by a short burst of mana. And for the first time, I am thankful it's not an avatar.

She looks at me with that typical expression, but she does not say anything until I reach the door in front of her.

Only then she calls, "I wouldn't open that. My avatar is in there."

I stop moving, and when I turn back to her, she's smiling. "Run, little demon. You unfortunate Absolute Candidate, born only to never reach the true height of your potential. You have three seconds."

The moment the words leave her mouth, everything shifts. My body reacts before I can think. I turn and explode forward. Air tears around me. Rooms whip past in a blur. Walls stretch and smear like streaks of paint. My feet hit the ground faster than my eyes can process. I feel the pressure building in my limbs, the force of my speed pushing against my bones. My senses struggle to keep up, and I move on pure instinct, catching only fragments of the things around me.

In the first second, I pass by four rooms.

In the next second, I pass by seven more rooms.

In the final second, I pass by twelve more rooms.

And even there, the mana radiation still reaches me. The labyrinth, impossible to be damaged by any Champion, shakes and cracks. A thousand avatars and attendees are wiped out in a split second as the two monsters begin their fight. The sheer pressure blows dozens of doors open. The otherwise impenetrable barriers vanish, and the rooms themselves break.

I move away from that place for the next few hours, never stopping for too long, and collecting as many points as possible.

I find a low arcane greatsword that I use for a while before throwing it away. I test the avatars of the other Beyonders. And I move my body and use kinetic energy as much as possible. I revel in that feeling, and I teach the owner of this body by letting him experience it all.

Then, finally, I find him, an avatar with gray and brown eyes and a crown floating above his head, guarding the labyrinth's exit.

So we fight.

During that fight, I show him every weakness I have noticed he possesses, as well as those mirrored by his avatar. Some are caused by a lack of experience, and some are due to the bad habits he's built over time and will need to change.

His avatar is the toughest fight yet, even more difficult than that girl. He can fly, he's difficult to catch, does not seem to tire, and only grows stronger the longer the fight lasts. His eyes and mind analyze the opponent, creating countermeasures using the multitude of specializations at his disposal to face me.

But at the same time, it's just so easy. So fucking easy.

I unleash the full output of this body and channel it with every trick I know. The mana around me freezes as I bring it to a stop. It doesn't matter how much the avatar releases, I shut it all down.

His crown turns black, but even that is useless against me, because I do not rely on mana. His speed increases, his reactions increase, and his damage increases. And I go all out; I match his output, and even here I show Nathaniel what it feels like to fight against him. He is, at times, a smart human; he will notice even things I might have missed.

In a final spiteful, petty move, the avatar does something Nathaniel had not done until now and fully lifts one of the seals on its Ignition Heart, and the amount of thermal energy he releases matches the amount of mana he currently possesses.

The heat fills the room; the air dries up and cracks as if it were about to shatter. The avatar moves that heat and these golden flames around, manipulating them as if they were water. They are reminiscent of waves, seeping out, crashing, devouring everything in their path, including his body.

I'm sure that if it were not an avatar but Nathaniel, he would be smiling. I can feel the same smile on my face.

I phase through the flames; I even halt their movement for a brief moment, something I did not even think I would be capable of.

Then I defeat him completely, leaving no doubt about who is stronger.

When I stand there, breathing heavily, I unleash that heart once more. Each heartbeat fills me with more and more kinetic energy. It builds up to the point that even this ridiculous body fails to channel it all, but I am cruel, so I push further.

The body finally starts breaking; tears appear on the heart, and the construct etched into it begins evaporating.

And all of that kinetic energy moves around me in a way I have been in love with ever since I was a child. It's this energy that saved my life, that allowed me to live normally even with all the disabilities I was born with, and I have never once stopped being thankful for it.

"Beautiful," I whisper as I observe that ever so chaotic movement one last time.

And in that moment, understanding comes, clearer than ever. With newfound confidence, I reach for it, and as naturally as breathing, I grasp all that kinetic energy like it's the easiest thing in the world.

Then it all unravels. That vast power collapses in on itself, vanishing in a cascading chain of motion, like a castle of sand washed away by the sea.

I think of one last thing I could say to that guy, but only cheap words come to mind, nothing satisfactory. So I just stay quiet and leave behind the memory of a feeling.

My memories and my being start to dissipate as I let go, but I don't hesitate. Without fear, I step toward the door and exit the labyrinth.

This past year... was fun.

Chapter 589: Gray kitten

I open my eyes back in the common area. After glancing over the notifications, I close them all and move the rewards from winning the 4th event towards the final reward.

Only one event remains.

My body is restored to its previous state, and all the changes I made to it at the start of the 4th event are gone. Only a series of memories remains, along with many things I should improve on.

There is also the name of a person I will never forget, safely stored in my mind.

Sensing someone trying to get my attention, I turn to see Victoria standing at the edge of the common area.

With a single use of Wraith Dance, I reach her and meet her gaze. In front of her, I don't try to hide anything or pretend. Just like when we were younger, she reaches out, pinches my nose, and ruffles my hair.

Coming from her, it makes for an incredibly warm gesture.

"I'm going to cook something for you, so come to the 4th zone later today," she says.

"Vic, you can't cook to save your life, and neither can I."

"And I would prefer eating them over a Michelin-star meal."

"So, as I said, come to the 4th round zone later."

"I will, Vic."

"Good. See you later, Natty," she says as she leaves.

I watch her figure disappear into the forest before she uses more strength and moves in a way a superhuman from comics would, something I would consider impossible on Earth. Then a thought hits me: what superhero would someone from Hell difficulty be able to defeat?

As I muse over the list, I head towards Savant's signature, and seeing me approach, he waits for me. There, I create a manabloc chair and take a seat next to the bench he is sitting on, and look at him. He returns my gaze as well.

"What do you want to start with?" I ask him simply.

He simply answers, "We could start with kinetic energy. Your performance in the last event piqued my curiosity, and I think the process of talking through it will help you understand what you experienced."

I look at him, thinking about all he would seem to know, but decide not to dwell on it.

"What skill are you using to absorb kinetic energy?" I ask.

"Is it required for you to know in order to help me?"

"Not really, but I'm curious. And it's not like I don't have a general idea, do you agree? One of my skills' names in exchange for yours?"

"I could do that," he confirms.

"That's surprising."

"Why?"

"I thought you would be more tight-lipped, given how much of a lone wolf you are."

"As you said, it's something you likely already suspect. And you might think I consider you all enemies, but that's not the case. I try to maintain a neutral position with everyone here; I harbor neither ill nor good feelings for any of you. In the future, we might even need to cooperate in some limited capacity."

"So you're building up good relationships?"

"I wouldn't call it that. Things like that require time and effort; all around, it's a hassle I'm not interested in. As for my skill, it's called [Absorption]. As you've likely guessed, it allows me to absorb attacks to release them later or to examine, if I'm capable of doing so. A few weeks ago, I managed to absorb a tiny bit of kinetic energy, and ever since the 1st floor, I've been able to absorb body parts as well."

"As you said, our group already had it all more or less figured out. So you have some lumoran Champion's hand, the forearm bone of some kind of tough monster or person, one of your legs also seems to have been replaced, and possibly some of your inner organs? Grumpy also theorizes that one of your eyes, or at least part of it, has been absorbed."

"I won't answer that."

"That's understandable. Mine is [Redistribution]. As you probably have guessed, it allows me to absorb kinetic and thermal energy from the area around me. I can't quite use it to turn that energy into mana yet, but I also have a way to transfer my mana into kinetic energy."

"And that second heart of yours."

"Just silly rumors."

"Want to hear more silly rumors?"

"Why not."

Enjoying the story? Show your support by reading it on the official site.

"Two hearts, kinetic and thermal, an eye trait connected to mana, likely a wavelength type, an Amplificator, a concentration type skill, and an array of self-made constructs etched into your body," he pauses for a moment, "a stupid thing to do if I have to say so. The mana stone I left with your healer should've confirmed just how risky body modifications can be."

"Very silly rumors indeed, and I know."

"Then there's that black mana of yours. Do you know that during our duel in the last tournament, I absorbed a tiny piece of it and examined it?"

That makes my curiosity spike, and I observe him more closely: his heartbeat and the tiniest movements of his body as I try to grasp what he is thinking.

He continues, "I suspect that it's an extremely dense form of mana, the kind of thing you were only able to create because of your high grade concentration skill, talent in [Mana Manipulation], or some higher grade version of the skill, and your ability to channel huge amounts of mana so quickly. But that probably isn't all; that would just be too easy. At first, I thought it was primordial void energy, but I've since met users of that primordial energy, and it's not that. Then I theorized it was a different sort of primordial energy, something beyond the common five, and it still seems to be the closest guess I have.

It could also be just a rare variation of mana you were able to gain thanks to a series of fortuitous events."

"I bought it in a system shop sale."

As before, he doesn't seem amused, so we continue as per our deal, and I teach him some of the basics of kinetic energy. Some concepts I came up with on my own, and some that I got from Lioren.

I don't try to hide things from him, and I don't worry about the possibility of "giving him a weapon that could be used against me."

Everything I show him, he understands quickly. I watch as he catches on, comes to his own conclusions, and attempts to apply them. Sometimes, he even seems to ignore what I'm saying and continues pushing through his failures as he tries to perform the movement or exercise. It never takes him too many attempts. With his sharp, near-clinical sense, he breaks down everything I've shown him and demonstrates his talent.

I've heard people making fun of his Community alias, calling himself Savant and all. They said he's arrogant, edgy, and all manner of other things. But not once have I heard anyone say that he was wrong. Everyone who meets this guy and sees his understanding and the speed at which he learns and absorbs the abilities shown to him finds it nothing less than impressive.

Of course, it won't stop me from calling him a coward. He might say he's playing the long game and being patient, but I disagree.

After the lesson, I leave so that he can have some time to train on his own for a bit, and I enter the 7th round's zone. People recognize me as I enter their common area, and the barrier they set puts a mark on me that at least some of the people hanging around can track.

Surprisingly, the first one to talk to me isn't human.

"Brother, over here," the childlike voice calls to me.

I stop and look down at my feet.

"Brother, may I have some food?" asks the little chubby kitten at my feet. It's light gray and perfectly round, covered in soft, fuzzy fur. It looks like a fluffy ball with a chubby face and pale blue eyes that hardly seem to blink.

"What?"

"Have I spoken wrong?" the kitten replies, its mouth moving a beat too late like it's trying to remember that mouths are supposed to move when speaking.

"Why do you talk like that?" I ask.

The gray kitten tilts its head. "There was a young human who taught me these words, brother. He and others always laughed when I said them and always gave me food. Even now, people do that."

I squat down. It's hard to tell how strong it is, just like with Noodle. But there's a kind of weight to the kitten, like something heavy is trying to hiding inside something small.

It keeps speaking, unprompted, still staring up with those emotionless eyes. "That boy died on the 4th floor. The Black Ant took his insides, brother."

Now I notice that no one tries to move closer. In fact, they seem to actively avoid the little kitten. I even sense a hint of fear in the people around me.

Wordlessly, I look into those eyes, and as they look into mine, I'm overcome with a disturbing feeling, as if they're trying to pull me in.

"Brother, where is the one who marked you?" the kitten asks, and for the first time, its expression changes. It looks eager, but I can't guess the intention behind it, it lacks any hint of friendliness. Instead, tiny sharp teeth make themselves visible for longer than they perhaps should be.

"Get away from him!" someone shouts, and I recognize the voice as Luna's.

The golden retriever stands nearby, currently making herself bigger than a horse. She is growling, and her fur is raised as she stares threateningly at the little kitten.

Even then, she doesn't dare to come closer.

That gray kitten returns her gaze without so much as being taken aback and instead stands up to slowly walk away. It glances backward at me once and licks its lips before making its way into the forest.

Finally, Luna steps closer, "Avoid him, crazy human, that thing is no good."

She shrinks back to her normal size and nudges my side until I pet the top of her head.

"Is it really a little kitten?" I ask.

"No one knows for sure; it's the only one surviving in its Hell difficulty group. But enough of that creepy thing. What do you want here? Have you come to apologize? Did you know your avatar killed me during the last event? How will you repay me for that?"

"You should have killed him before he could."

"I cannot fly, unlike your cowardly avatar. How was I supposed to bite him, then?"

"That's true." I pet her again to get another tail wag out of her. "I came to see Leticia."

Luna looks at me and squints her eyes before snorting and starting to walk away, and I follow at her side.

"You know what they call you?" she asks out of nowhere as we enter the forest.

"Excuse me?"

"The people from the different zones, I mean. They call you Manahead, Flashbang, The Detonator, Mana Junkie, The Glitch Mage, Mana Daddy..."

"Okay, okay, let's stop there."

"Sure. Simply put, there is a lot of talk, crazy human. I heard there was even a small group declaring you a messiah, another one was collecting videos and photos of you, and some of them are planning to kill you, saying that you're just too dangerous to be allowed on Earth."

Luna pauses and a dry laugh escapes her, "They all used to talk that way about their own tournament winners, but during this tournament, you've attracted a lot of that negative attention to yourself. I even heard some of the other rounds are joining forces to take you down in the final event."

"Is the 7th round one of them?" I ask.

She laughs again, "Who knows."

Chapter 590: Facade

"I came to discuss our next Beyond Expedition. You're the most sociable person in our little group, so you shouldn't have too much trouble planning everything out with the others. Soph and Grumpy can help, too, if you're willing to talk to them. CarrotCake joining could work as well, but I know if I try to speak with him personally, he'll only want to fight me. I would appreciate it if you organised everything and helped us set a schedule," I tell Leticia after Luna brings me to her.

The young woman sighs, "And I thought you came to catch up and chat."

"I'm busy."

"You keep dying, even as we speak."

"Why is it that everyone can tell?" I complain.

"Not everyone. I'm just that skilled," Leticia smiles. "But I don't mind organizing things. It is a request from one of Earth's most powerful, so why not, if only to maintain good relationships."

"Sounds good to me. I'll make sure to pay you back for all the trouble."

"Well, first, maybe be a bit nicer to us during the events. Luna and I might get traumatized," Leticia says, looking at the golden retriever who immediately starts nodding in agreement, before looking back at me. "It's just a joke before you decide to take it too seriously."

"Got it."

"It's not something I want to talk about."

Something in my tone seems to startle Luna. She whimpers softly and, with lowered ears, pokes my side, forcing me to look down at her. She nudges me repeatedly until, with a sigh, I pet her.

Luna said she used to be a guide dog for Leticia, who was blind before the tutorial. Still, isn't she a perceptive little thing?

"Well, I won't press you for information then. Just a warning though: there are already other rounds conspiring against you, and..."

"It doesn't matter," I say as I get up from the chair. "Thank you for the warning, but I don't even care if they come at me all at once. I'll see you later."

I wave them off and teleport away, finding myself back in my workshop, where I take a moment to think about what I've just been told.

Yes, I don't mind even if the other rounds gang up against me. In fact, in my current state, I would probably welcome it.

Lily, Sophie, the twins, Savant, and I are all sitting in our living room with the Sword of Aeons laid out on the table.

The most cowardly guy in the world is acting like everything's perfectly normal, but he still looks completely out of place sitting here. I've barely interacted with him, and from what the others have said, he rarely speaks to anyone else. Every now and then, he shows up to make a trade, always offering some obscure bit of knowledge or some item he's picked up on the floors.

He never gives anything away for free. He never helps out or throws in anything extra, always sticking exactly to what was agreed. I can't say I mind that. A purely transactional relationship works fine for me.

I still have two more two-hour-long lessons in kinetic energy with him, according to our deal. In exchange, I get mana stones with various bits of knowledge, mainly related to inscribing items and the usage of thermal energy he got from who knows where.

And we're still helping him with the Sword of Aeons as well. He wants us to fix some of the melted inscriptions on the blade. As far as I'm concerned, just having the opportunity to work on the best mana battery on Eladore is enough to be worth the effort. Not that I'm going to tell him that.

Lastly, and this part is mostly for Lily, he needs help with his hand, the one that once belonged to a lumoran Champion. I doubt he absorbed it just for the Champion grade bones and whatever else came with it. From the way he spoke, I have a strong feeling that he did it to make handling the Sword of Aeons easier, though I still don't understand how. I'm relying on Lily to figure that out.

At first, I thought it might be dumb to rely so heavily on an item, but the more we work and talk, the stronger my suspicion grows. This maniac of a cowardly man seems determined to repair the Sword of Aeons as much as possible for one reason.

To absorb it later.

What a brilliant idea coming from someone so cowardly.

Of course, I'm sure there are things he wants to gain by working with us, beyond the services he's commissioned. The asshole is very, very intently observing everything that happens, and I'm even sure he's planning to absorb bits of Lily's healing to examine later, the same way he did with that tiny piece of black mana.

He's very shrewd, so I observe everything that happens carefully and maintain communication with the others through our link. I have to keep Lily, Sophie, and the twins from giving him too much after all. If he wants more, he'll have to pay more.

At the same time, I also try to gain as much as possible from him. I keep my eyes active at all times, paying special attention to every time he uses [Absorption] or some other skill.

As for the reward for helping with his hand, I'll leave that to Lily to decide since she'll be the one dealing with it. I just need to make sure our silly terminator doesn't get scammed or choose something that'll end up being a gift for me later. She is very capable in that regard.

If you come across this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from Royal Road. Please report it.

Days pass like this. It's the biggest break yet leading up to the last event, and everyone is training or preparing as much as possible.

Lissandra hasn't contacted me since the start of the 4th event. It makes me nervous, but also more determined at the same time. While I'm sure that Izzy and I understand her properly and she won't call me out for the way I dealt with the 4th event, but at the same time, both I and our empath are fairly certain that she'll punish me for the offense by making the last event that much more difficult for me.

Victoria visits often now that both of us have a bit more time. It still feels strange seeing her here, but not in a bad way. I can tell she's holding herself back a lot. She and her group should be able to do so much more during the events.

Other than that, Myrra is spending a lot of time here as well. She trains and spars frequently, revealing more and more of her real strength. She's stronger than Maya; she can beat Sophie, the twins, and Min-Jae quite easily. Only Lily causes her trouble.

One day, Jean even comes by, but not to challenge me. He warns me that a bunch of people from his group have asked him to join forces with them to take down group 4, but he rejected it and decided to do whatever he wants. After saying that, he notices Myrra and challenges her to a fight.

Even though it is close, Myrra loses three times in a row because of his ridiculous strength and that physique of his that counters mana users.

Surprisingly, they actually seem to hit it off because of their similar personalities, and despite being surrounded by others, they continue to shout their lame jokes and laugh at the dumbest things they can think of.

The arcane item I've been making for Channeler is nearly finished, and as promised, I've invited Miwa to observe whenever she wants. She's already committed to working exclusively with group 4, and Channeler simply acts as if it were the obvious outcome.

Channeler and Maya are the ones who deal with people most of the time, now that Tess isn't here. They both turn out to be really good at it, and Maya's taken to calling herself my knight and claiming that she has the ability to summon me.

It isn't even entirely wrong, thanks to the Ley Lines, I've connected to everyone.

Meanwhile, the other attendees avoid Sophie as much as they can, even most of those in Hell difficulty. She doesn't seem to mind and seems just fine being with her sister and the rest of our group.

Tent Creep is still ranked first among crafters, with some guy named Mateo in a close second. Miwa is now in 8th place, probably dropping from 5th because she spends so much time observing my work. But she doesn't seem to regret it in the least.

A few times, I try to reach the 7th round zone to find that gray kitten, but I can't find it. It's gone, and no one seems to know where it went. I come across a few more animals in other zones: a horse, a hawk, some more cats and dogs, a few rats, and others. Some of them can talk, others can't, and their strengths vary a lot. A few are on the same level as Luna, but none are as strong as Biscuit or as unsettling as the gray kitten.

I also find out from Lily and Izzy that Tacita will likely be cooperating with the other rounds during the final event.

It seems she wasn't too happy about us working with Savant.

POV Myrra

The feral one's sister sits there in her usual fashion, perfectly straight, with her clothes neatly arranged and her hands resting in her lap as if she were posing for a portrait or simply pretending to sit like a normal human without really knowing how to pull it off.

While we wait for the feral one to return from his workshop, the rest of his group seems to be handling her with a sort of awkward tension. They try to make conversation, and she follows along effortlessly. She answers questions, asks her own, always with perfectly measured politeness. Not once does she seem annoyed, upset, or bothered by any awkward silence.

I hate it. I hate it so much. It's a facade I can see right through, even if it manages to fool some of group 4's members. She's always polite and pleasant, always knowing exactly what to say or ask.

Then, as if it were planned, she shifts the direction of the conversation. "There is something I felt the need to say if you do not mind."

"Sure, you don't have to ask," says the mindblender girl, as the feral one likes to call her, smiling.

"Thank you, Sophie. It is a bit more serious than our normal conversation." Victoria looks around, as if making sure that everyone's listening, then nods. "This tournament is coming to an end, and I won't be able to see you anymore, so I want to make sure that things are clear. If I come off as offensive, I would only ask that you not take it as a sign of hostility. I just want to make my stance obvious, and you are free to ask me as many questions as you want to confirm it."

She looks around the room again, and the atmosphere grows colder.

"While I do respect my brother's decision to befriend you all, it is not the sort of thing I think will be ideal or optimal for him, but it is his decision to make. Even though I am personally against it, I still like to see him having fun. To me, he is like a child discovering new things, but unlike him, I do not think this," she gestures around, "will work out. Not in this place and not in this tutorial. But it is his mistake to make and his lesson to learn, so I will be there for him when it all breaks down in the end."

Victoria adjusts her already perfect clothes, always so composed and logical.

"Please do not take this to mean that I bear any ill will toward you in particular. While I think some of you may be using my brother for your own safety and would otherwise be dead without him, I also believe you that you are offering him something he thinks he wants in return. Rather than acting as simple parasites, you are living in symbiosis with him. Even though I still think you may be taking more than you give, my brother seems to believe the opposite, so I can accept that."

No one else speaks as she looks around the room. "I do understand that it might come off as insulting and offensive and that your emotions might lead you to dislike me because of it, but I believe it's something that needs to be said. Simply put, I want my brother to be happy, even if only for a few weeks or months, and I want him to experience the kind of things he missed out on as a child. But I also want to give you a warning: do not abuse my brother's nature."

She doesn't say what will happen if that were to occur, but the implications are more than clear.

Some of the others look at her as if they're seeing her for the first time. Others glance around nervously as if waiting for someone to say it's a joke. One or two, though, seem like they were expecting this.

I then remember her interaction with Lissandra when they met just a few hours ago. Even then, Victoria didn't seem to hesitate, not even in the face of that woman, going so far as to say, "No, I refuse to do what you ask me to when it comes to my brother. You might think I stand against you so easily because I cannot die within the tournament, but I can assure you I would say exactly the same thing even if real death were possible."

Lissandra said, "I can see that you aren't lying."

"I am not. While I do not wish to die yet, I am not afraid of it. Do not think I have not seen what you have done to my brother. I have overlooked it to a point because I believe it will help him to grow

stronger and because he has not asked for my help, but at the same time, I cannot help but deeply dislike you, Lady Lissandra."

"I thought of you as a more logical person."

"But I believe this is entirely logical. My brother is a person I love deeply. So, is it not reasonable that I would see things differently when he is involved?"

"This is something I can somewhat agree with," Lissandra said as if dissecting a theory. "Protecting someone often requires more than words. I am curious. How far does your logic take you when it comes to removing others? How many deaths would you accept to ensure his safety?"

And back then, with the same calm tone she's always used, Victoria replied, "I do not count things like that. It suggests there is a limit."

She said this so casually that it took a moment for me to realize what she'd actually said.