

Tutorial 591

Chapter 591: Start of the 5th event

5th event: Tyrant's Arena will start in one hour! The event will take place in an area selected by the system, tailored specifically for Earth's tutorial attendees.

The event will last one hour.

There will only be one winner for this event - the last person standing at the end. Everyone else will have lost.

Note: It is possible to forfeit the event by simply thinking or saying "I forfeit."

Note: At forty-five, thirty, fifteen, and five minutes remaining before the end, the barrier surrounding the event area will shrink rapidly.

This event will mark the end of the second Earth tournament. Attendees will then have 24 hours on the tournament floor before returning to their respective floors, where the Floor Quests will continue.

Good luck!

I close the window, get out of the bath, and dry myself by channeling thermal energy through my body. I teleport back to my room, wondering, as I do, whether or not this is making me a bit too lazy. Still, I create an arm made of mana to grab a set of clothes from the bed and bring them to me. After putting them on, I use kinetic energy to float over to the mirror and use another mana arm to turn it toward me.

Looking into my reflection, I see myself wearing an extremely comfortable set of black sweatpants and a similarly comfortable pair of running shoes that I'm sure will explode the moment I perform a particularly quick movement. Or maybe not? Perhaps I could use kinetic energy to prevent that from happening? Seems like it could work.

Another mana arm reaches out to open the door, and I continue to float just slightly above the floor as I make my way out of the room.

Near the stairs, I run into Maya, who stops in surprise, shakes her head in disbelief, and says something about a friggin ghost.

As we have many times before, we all gather in the living room. Everyone goes through their last-minute checks and takes the opportunity to go over our plans and countermeasures one last time.

As the time grows close, I feel a growing sense of relief. Soon, it will all be over.

Even the passive I bought yesterday, the moment I finally gathered enough shards, seems to have mostly taken effect. It cost 580 thousand shards, more than my Mental Attunement Loop, so it better be worth it.

Once again, I reread the description.

Subdermal Combustion Weave (Mid Arcane) -Beneath the surface, the user's body directs thermal energy into precise micro-combustion patterns. These patterns purge infections, neutralize toxins, and repair tissue through focused heat. Powered by primordial thermal energy, the passive grows stronger the more primordial energy it draws. Harmful substances are broken down before they can spread, and injuries are healed cleanly, leaving no lingering damage. Only total destruction can stop the weave.

Ever since the event was announced, I've had a role planned for this passive, and it should play a major part in the final stage. It works especially well with Ignition Heart. Of course, nothing comes for free, and there is a drawback to this passive, but it's something I'm willing to endure.

As the final minute ticks down, I stand up. A memory of Lioren that stayed with me flashes through my mind, along with the determination he showed as he walked toward his end without a hint of hesitation.

I would like to think I would be the same, faced with my death, and I take a moment to wonder if that's not how my Duplicate felt back on the 5th floor when he challenged the Gaiathra.

With that feeling coursing through my body, I look at the other members of group 4 and say, "I know my sister and I'm sure she said some wild shit."

Their expressions confirm that, even without words. Victoria was always like that.

“I only have one thing to say to that: if I didn't want to be here, I wouldn't be here. As simple as that. Take it as you will,” I tell them.

I check the timer once again, the last seconds ticking down, and say, “But for now, let's kick some ass.”

“All the asses!” Dennis cheers, leading his brother and Min-Jae to join in.

Maya shouts something that sounds suspiciously like, “Fuck Victoria, I ain't no parasite.”

There are a few more shouts, and then we disappear, pulled into the event.

I expect all of us to be separated again, but this time we stay together. We find ourselves surrounded by empty streets and cars, with skyscrapers rising on all sides. The final event seems to have taken inspiration from a city on Earth, or maybe it took features from several of them and created the Tyrant's Arena zone from scratch.

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Feeling the connection to my mind, I let it in and accept it, connecting to the web that the twins set. At the same time, I start working on the things I've planned and begin surrounding my Ignition Heart with a series of pre-prepared arrays made of Ley Lines. I redirect a bit of my mana and most of my [Focus] to managing that while keeping some reserved for detection arrays and defenses.

The rest of the group prepares as well. I share some presences through the link, and Min-Jae floats into the air, tearing off some road signs and pieces of the buildings with [Telekinesis] to kill these people right away.

Dennis, Aaron, and Sophie get to work on the web. Noodle expands in size until his body is twice as long as a bus, and slithers into one of the skyscrapers, where he crashes into more people. Izzy, Maya, and Lily stay nearby, ready to defend the others.

I continue with my preparations, and once we've cleared the surroundings and had a quick conversation, I teleport all of us to the top of a nearby skyscraper, then move us to the tallest one I can find.

There's nothing else to see, just buildings upon buildings, stretching onward, toward the barrier miles away. Roads, parks, shopping malls, cars, and more fill the space. It looks like a city on Earth, eerily empty and slightly distorted. There are too many skyscrapers, the layout stretches out too far across an unnaturally flat landscape, and something about it all feels off.

Of course, the fights are in full swing with smoke rising between the buildings and multiple skyscrapers already crashing down. Lightning, fire, mana projectiles, and poisonous smoke fill the air.

(Lily, Beyonder, on your eight o'clock; physical stats focused. Maya, two Hell difficulty and five Hard difficulty on your six, mage types. Izzy, down on the street, a group of a dozen Hard difficulty enemies; Kim, there's a group, about a mile away, setting up to observe us.) Sophie continues sharing information.

Each target is quickly dealt with, and once that's done, my companions settle in to wait for more. Soon, the twins complete their part of Sophie's web, so they start working on their own with the help of [Sensory Deception] and then join in on the hunt as well.

During this time, I work on peeling away the seal on my Ignition Heart. The thermal energy inside me keeps combusting, passive activated by the wounds I inflict on myself and the heat seeping into my body in a truly twisted cycle. As I lift the seal further, more thermal energy floods in and harms me, but that also strengthens my healing, allowing the cycle to continue.

The only problem is that it hurts. It hurts like hell. I don't know if it's because my [Focus] isn't high enough to handle this kind of damage, or if it's because the energy is purer now that I'm lifting the seal to this degree. It might also just be how the passive works, a price to pay for tapping into primordial energy at this level, for embracing a form of power that existed before the system.

Of course, it's something I can endure, even as the pain threatens to cloud my mind. I keep going, and more thermal energy gathers inside my body.

Meanwhile, most of my mana is being saved. One reason it hurts so much, and why the thermal energy is causing this much damage, is because I'm holding back as much mana as possible.

(They've found us,)

At the top of another skyscraper, quite far away, stands a group of people.

Derick, Maxim, Klara, and Hector. In total, four of the tournament winners. Each is accompanied by at least three people, likely powerful Hell difficulty attendees, most of them probably from Beyond.

(You got them?) I ask.

(Sure, just focus on your stuff.) Sophie answers absentmindedly and continues to give orders.

So I do just that while keeping a small part of my mind focused on the things happening around me.

Sophie's shadow seeps into the area as she deploys her arrays and Logic Cores while activating the Golem Heart. Pieces of the skyscraper we've placed ourselves on twist and bend; metal, glass, and concrete forming into the shape of a huge spider with long legs. Blackie seeps into it and then jumps onto the roof of the building next to us.

Min-Jae floats into the air and leaves with both of the twins, who combine their efforts to hide him.

(Maxim has the weakest mental defenses, so I'll try to get to him before he can use his void energy. If that can be used to defend against my attacks, I'll switch to Hector.) Sophie quickly sends, (Don't hold back, Lily; you will have to handle at least two of the Kings. Maya, focus on defending; Izzy and Noodle will help you. Meanwhile, the boys are going to do some sneaking around.)

Just as we make our preparations, the other side does the same. Not many more people arrive, but even though their group numbers around 20, they're likely the best they have to offer, each one coming equipped with information detailing our capabilities and strategies.

But we also came prepared, and their problem is that they're likely well prepared for me, but not Group 4 as a whole.

Sophie attacks first with a cruelty she hasn't shown since this tournament began.

The 11-year-old Maxim hesitates for a moment and then lifts his arm. From his side, a huge, shadowy wolf steps out and then bursts open before anyone can react. An impressive disruptive wave washes over the group, and a whiff of it even reaches us where we are, carrying the weird feeling of primordial void energy.

Some of their preparations fall apart, and Maxim raises his hand, drives his fingers into his neck, and tears out a large chunk of flesh in a spray of blood.

Hector shouts something, likely a curse, and slides into a pose to throw the spear in his hands at Sophie. But at the last moment, the anger on his face disappears, and his expression falls blank. He twists and instead launches his spear at Derick at incredible speed.

Derick dodges smoothly, and the spear shoots through several buildings in an instant before slamming into the ground. He then avoids Hector's follow-up attack and grabs him in a chokehold, his forearms glowing brightly for a moment before Hector's expression returns to normal.

As he dies, Maxim lifts his arm one last time, and a dark serpent coils its way from his shadow, slipping past defenses and disrupting mana in its wake. It kills three Beyonders who can barely fight back without their mana, focusing especially on the two trying to heal him.

A few projectiles reach us. Segments of the Web Sophie set up ignite with bursts of light as they intercept the attacks, while a swirling flame barrier of green, blue, and purple flares up, burning the rest mid-air.

Then, like a meteor crashing from the heavens, a firetruck plummets toward Derick and the others. Threads of mana lash out, wrapping around it mid-air before slicing it cleanly apart. The shattered pieces rain down, flung aside by a force that feels a lot like telekinesis.

Another truck follows, but it's redirected in an instant. The attackers adjust, shifting their focus to a distant zone where I'm sure the twins have scattered decoys to hide Min-Jae.

A quiet moment stretches. The wind shifts slightly, carrying dust across the rooftop.

I let some of my thermal energy seep out of my body, shaping it into a thick, rotating halo of fire that settles into the air above me. It turns slowly at first, pulling in more heat as it moves, the motion steady and controlled. With each rotation, the pressure builds, and the space around it starts to warp from the heat.

There's no urgency, just a lingering sense that things are starting to fall into place.

Chapter 592: Gwyn siblings

Half of the approaching group splits off and starts heading directly for us. Five of them stay behind to pelt us with ranged attacks while their companions maneuver to flank us from behind.

Just before their vanguards can close in, gray mana blossoms into existence on the roof where the ranged attackers have posted themselves. It seems that the twins used the [Disintegration] orb stored in the box, they follow up with attacks of their own. Min-Jae joins them too, effectively cutting off their sniping.

Led by Derick and Klara, the melee attackers finally get in close. While Group 4 continues exchanging messages, Blackie, now in a spider golem body made of glass, concrete, and metal, jumps off the roof and crashes into an unfortunate woman. As they fall, his eight legs tear her apart.

Pieces of him explode, and a few legs break, but the golem spider rolls upon falling onto the ground, crashing into another building, which it breaks, collecting more material to repair itself with. Then the huge monstrosity pierces its legs through the glass and into the skyscraper to start climbing up the side at an impressive speed.

Maya surrounds herself with mana, and a huge suit of armor grows around her. Its color darkens as she uses her [Boost], and a shield grows on one of the huge arms she uses to block attacks. Even a few arrows made of primordial lightning shot by Noelle.

Lily, with [Disintegration Mantle] floating around her, jumps off the roof to another one, and her huge bone axe smashes against one of the men attacking, who tries to block it with his shield. Gray mana swirls around the blade of the axe, and it pierces through easily, and then through the man as well.

A barrage of attacks strikes out at her, but her mantle swirls around her body defensively, disintegrating them all. Lily disappears with a movement reminiscent of Wraith Dance, and Klara dodges an attack from her. There are tears opening up on Lily's body from the impact of her own movement, but they're already beginning to visibly heal. And she isn't even using her skill; that's just her natural regeneration.

Lily disappears again and swings her axe, while Klara ducks under and, in an impressive display of agility, runs Lily through with her short spear as that red, fluid, smoke-like substance blazes around the tip. Lily, however, simply increases her speed and ignores the wound while continues to attack.

Vines pierce through the roof, trying to slow her down, but she just tears them apart with the strength of her body. Flames surround her, burning her, but her body restores itself almost instantly.

More Beyonders join in to assault Noodle, and even Derick's wife Noelle begins to form a huge arrow out of primordial lightning to shoot at him. But at the last moment, she finds herself forced to move, and an explosion of flames the same color as Noodle's proceeds to melt a huge part of the building around the place she'd been standing, causing it to begin tilting and falling.

Izzy stands there with flames blazing around her. She holds a bow made of the same flames, with a cloud of arrows floating around her. She grabs them from the air and begins firing them at the woman.

A constant barrage of attacks hits our building, but Sophie and Maya manage to redirect or destroy the most dangerous ones before they can land. Sophie even finds time to get into the mind of another Beyonder whose projectile made of light pierces the roof where Lily, Derick, and Klara are fighting. Sophie redirects the attack into their melee without any hesitation, and after the explosion, Derick and Klara step out, singed and facing the direction from which the greatest force of the attack came.

Lily steps out with her body wounded and burned, but she still regenerates incredibly quickly. Her hair shortens, and she disappears again, smashing her axe into the ground where her opponents once stood, and the entirety of the building's windows explode from the resulting shockwave.

Noodle coils around it, the flames surrounding him melting the falling glass into liquid. At times, he consumes the mana-based attacks that hit him while continuing to fight off those who come at him.

I hear a telepathic message exchanged between Min-Jae and Lily, and she nods. Her body cracks further as she slams into Klara. Even at the cost of having her neck pierced by the gladius, the redheaded woman holds. Lily grabs her, and blood bursts from her mouth as Derick dodges her mantle and hits her in the side, likely turning her insides into liquid.

Lily moves her arm in a way that shouldn't be possible. It twists, elongates, and gains more joints as it grabs Derick and holds him still. Her mantle flickers around, forcing her opponents to strain to avoid it.

Some attacks come out of nowhere, likely from a free Beyonder, and slash through the air, cutting off Lily's head. A third arm grows from her back, grabs the head, shoving it back onto her neck, giving it a moment to quickly reattach.

Then the air starts shaking, and everyone looks up. An entire building is floating there, with chunks of debris raining down. Then the building implodes, compressing into itself, forming a dense ball that starts falling down right at where Lily and the two others are.

Their attempts to free themselves escalate, as do Lily's attempts to kill them. But neither side is able to act quickly enough.

Klara's red liquid smoke surrounds all of them, and Derick shouts in pain as the redheaded woman goes all out in the attempt. But Lily holds on, and the huge ball crashes into them.

It doesn't stop at the roof. The impact rips through the structure, obliterating the top floors in seconds. Concrete, steel, and glass are torn apart as it drives downward. Floor after floor gives way, collapsing under the pressure. The sound is deafening, a deep, grinding roar that rolls across the city.

The compressed sphere punches through the base of the building and crashes into the street below, carving a straight path through everything in its way. The road cracks and caves in. Cars flip. Pavement peels back. Water and steam burst from broken pipes, filling the air with steam and heat. The shockwave spreads out from the point of impact, shaking the nearby buildings.

A number of the Beyonders on the rooftops in the area look down, only to lift their heads and see Lily standing there with her axe and a gray mantle surrounding her. They curse immediately and begin to reposition, but the twins step out from behind a chimney and strike. They both choose to attack the same man, moving fast, stabbing him repeatedly before cutting off his head. Without pausing, they shift their focus to the next target.

When attacks reach them, they disappear, exchanging places with another set of their illusions, and the illusion of Lily they created disappears. Izzy's flames hit the buildings, and Maya herself jumps through without fear as they momentarily part in her wake.

Maya lands with a crash, her armor snapping into place as dark blue mana armor forms around her body. Her weapon shifts in her hand, cycling from glaive to dagger to greatsword in moments. Flames from Izzy swirl around her, only to be caught up and redirected by her movements.

A barrage of radiant spikes shoots toward her from the left. She raises her arm, and the armor thickens, absorbing the impact with a burst of heat. A chain of metal flies down from above, trying to bind her limbs, but she slices through mid-spin, her weapon stretching into a multi-hued spear.

The spear contains three different colors of mana: dark blue, blue, and wisps of purple circling inside. It cuts easily through another barrier. It extends to three times its length and stabs into a woman nearby.

It then shifts into a shield. A concentrated flame crashes against it, dark blue with a white core, roaring as it tears through the air but failing to pierce the tricolored shield.

Gravity shifts beneath her feet, mana pressing down to hold her in place. She surges forward instead, slamming her shield into the nearest attacker and crushing them into the opposing wall. Another steps in, black mist coiling around their blade. Maya pivots, deflecting the strike and driving her shield, turned sword, through his chest.

A whip of molten steel snaps at her neck. She ducks, parries, and counters in one motion. Her expression stays focused. Calm. The same one I've seen in the mirror. And the enemies, trying to surround him, start taking steps back.

Then she dies, her head separating from her body, as Tacita stands over it. That fragile-looking and thin figure with messy brown hair.

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Izzy's flames rage around to attack her, but the air itself seems to flicker around Tacita because of her field, she takes no damage. She moves again, and one of the twins' illusions disappears, and Min-Jae sends a barrage of attacks at the spot where she stood, only for her to reappear next to him.

He pulls himself high into the air with his own [Telekinesis] and then even higher as he attempts to escape her reach, but Tacita's hand turns into a blur, and a dagger lodges itself in his chest. Right after, Tacita ducks under Dennis's attack, only for him to disappear as he exchanges places with one of his illusions.

The ground shakes, and a huge suit of mana armor walks out from between the buildings. It is much taller than anything Maya can make, but its owner does not seem to be having the least bit of trouble with it. Each step damages the road, and its motions carve a trail of damage into the buildings it passes by.

Baek then looks in our direction and then toward Tacita. A sword made of metallic, shining blue mana grows in his hands, and the speed of his armor increases as he swings it at the roof that Tacita is currently standing on. Half of the building explodes as the blade cleaves it neatly in two and starts collapsing.

A huge fireball hits Baek, shot from a distance by some random hell difficulty attendee, and a flash of light and heat expands into the area, but when it is gone, the armor remains undamaged, and he moves again.

Kang Jiwon, the 12-year-old girl with a concentration skill, crash-lands on a different building, facing Tacita. As before, there's no mana leaking into the air around her, but she moves calmly with incredible speed, destroying buildings as she jumps across their roofs, all the while barely avoiding Tacita's attacks, which almost seem to be toying with her.

Down on the ground, Min-Jae's projectile, the one that killed two kings, finally cracks, and Lily climbs out. She's missing one of her arms, and her entire body is mangled and damaged. The third arm she formed from her back disappears in sacrifice, and she regenerates almost immediately. Lily retrieves her axe from the debris and jumps up onto the roof.

Tacita locates her and kicks Kang Jiwon away before shamelessly jumping onto Baek's huge suit of armor, running across the surface, and charging at Lily, who throws her axe with incredible force. Tacita dodges, and the axe lodges itself into Baek's armor and makes the huge suit stumble and crash into the building beneath it.

Then a single bone dagger forms in Lily's hand, and she charges Tacita.

It's complete chaos, with people fighting all over the place while I just sit there and do my thing. But I keep at it without a hint of shame. I can guess what Vic must have told them, even if they're too embarrassed to tell me directly. It works out well for them, too, since I'm sure Victoria is watching from somewhere.

Group 4 goes all in, every single one of them, only falling when they encounter another monster like Tacita.

At some point, constant explosions shake the arena in the distance, and a familiar orange field of light begins to spread across a small part of the city. It looks like Savant and Jean are clashing, too, judging by the number of buildings crumbling to dust, the falling skyscrapers, and the surge of intense mana radiation.

Tacita disappears and heads in that direction, with Lily and the twins following close behind. Only Izzy, Sophie, and Noodle stay back, handling the people drawn in by the heat I'm generating.

By now, it's getting hot enough to melt through Sophie's web. The top of the skyscraper collapses into pools of lava, spilling down into the rooms below. I use kinetic energy to stay afloat, since there's nothing left to stand on, and the heat around me continues to spread.

With each beat of my partially unsealed Ignition Heart, more of it spreads into the area. It feels like a ticking bomb, a countdown leading toward something yet unknown, and the barrier around the arena has already shrunk by more than half.

A constant combustion heats the burns inside my body, fueled by the heart, only to burn me once again, feeding into itself in a twisted loop. The first seal on the heart is temporarily but completely lifted, and I begin to open the second one.

Just a little.

Even that much puts the whole thing on a completely different level than the first. The difference can't be compared. The amount of thermal energy seeping out of me now is like nothing I've experienced before, piling onto the huge amount I've already gathered.

The massive, blazing, gold halo above me expands even further. Constructs made of specially modified, heat-resistant Ley Lines barely hold themselves together as I continue to reinforce them and replace the damaged sections. Only [Focus] allows my mind to endure the pain of the flames combusting beneath my skin.

Sophie and the others have already moved away, and even the few powerful attacks that do penetrate their defensive lines melt and vanish before they can reach me, consumed by the sheer heat.

More golden flames continue to flow into the spinning halo above. I fight to keep them there, spinning, burning, to stop them from expanding further as I strain to estimate just how much I'll need.

I ease the second seal open just a little more, and for a moment, everything goes dark. Control nearly slips through my fingers, but I manage to hold it together, just barely.

Then my preparations are complete.

(Done.) I send.

(Well, good luck then), Sophie says and then follows up with, (I forfeit.)

(Good luck, Nat! I forfeit!) Izzy says as well.

(I will be watching! I forfeit!) Lily shouts in the middle of her fight and disappears after forfeiting.

Then Aaron and Noodle disappear as well.

Tacita reappears on the roof, looking at me with confusion. Savant is still locked in battle with Jean.

The city is being torn apart, piece by piece, as the attendees continue to fight. Entire buildings are sliced in half by wide arcs of mana, the upper sections crashing down on the streets below and flattening everything in their path. Others are vaporized outright, disintegrating into clouds of dust and fire as piercing beams punch through and keep going, carving deep swaths of destruction into the skyline.

Massive impacts shatter rooftops as fighters slam into each other in mid-air, sending shockwaves rippling outward to shatter the windows in buildings several blocks away. One skyscraper detonates from within, its core ruptured by a delayed explosion, sending burning debris raining down on the surrounding structures and igniting them instantly.

Chunks of pavement are ripped from the ground as shockwaves slam into the streets, tossing cars aside like toys. A swirling mass of elemental energy collides with a defensive barrier and obliterates an entire intersection, cratering the area and snapping support beams in the nearby towers.

High above, unstable magic detonates in waves, turning rooftops into craters. Flames race over the sides of buildings and burst from broken windows.

The arena is collapsing under the pressure. Too much force, too many skills, too many people fighting without restraint. In a short amount of time, the level of destruction is unreal. Everyone is still far from reaching the level of a Champion, yet the buildings are coming apart like they're made of paper.

I glance at Tacita, challenging her, and she looks like she's actually considering it. The field around her rises, and the air begins to vibrate, almost glitching with the unstable pressure she radiates.

But in the end, she doesn't act on the impulse and disappears again, rushing in the direction of Savant and Jean's fight.

Something hits my chest and I grab it before it can fall: just a tiny piece of a finger bone, all that's left after passing through the heat around me.

I smile. Damn it. Fine.

Then I release all the heat I've stored, and the spinning halo shatters with a sharp crack. Flames erupt in a golden tornado, tearing through the rooftops around me and surging outward in waves. Buildings in its path evaporate instantly, reduced to glowing dust before it can disperse.

The fire spreads fast, rushing between structures and down streets. Concrete melts, glass vaporizes, and mana barriers crack and fail. The flames slam into the orange light, held back for the merest of instants. Then they melt through, crashing against that orange light only to extinguish it. For a moment, they are blown back by a shockwave rippling out from Jean. And for a moment almost looks like he might endure. But the pressure keeps building, and after a couple of setbacks, they wash even over him. The golden fire rolls over the battlefield, devouring everything.

Entire blocks vanish. Skyscrapers fall, their frames glowing red before disintegrating, and the air becomes impossible to breathe as it grows thick with heat.

The few remaining presences try to resist but are overwhelmed, each one disappearing in violent bursts of force coming from high in the sky to join the flames. What's left of the city collapses inward, twisted steel and stone breaking apart as the last of the fire passes through.

Amid that destruction, a figure takes shape high above the ruins.

Lissandra descends from the sky into the burning chaos, untouched by the heat, her silver hair drifting weightlessly around her face.

I toss the fingerbone to the ground, and in the blink of an eye, Victoria rises from it. She wears those same formal yet comfortable clothes, carrying the same steady, reliable presence.

My feet hit the burning rooftop, and she moves to stand beside me as we face Lissandra.

The crown over my head turns entirely black, and I pull Fracture from its scabbard, knowing the weapon will break this time. It immediately attacks my flesh, starting to disintegrate and devour it as the unstable forces within it fight to kill me. The effect is even stronger than before, with all the knowledge I've gained from the Logic core used to make it more deadly rather than improving stability.

Lissandra glances between me and Victoria, nodding. "I shall allow it."

A loud thud erupts from her, like an implosion, and her pressure diminishes incredibly as she limits herself.

"Come then, Gwyn siblings."

Chapter 593: 2v1

There are no words exchanged between us. Vic charges first, only for her body to explode into pieces the moment she gets closer. Each of these pieces grows into another person, and five Victorias charge Lissandra at once.

She kicks one of the Victorias away, the broken body passing by me as it sails through the air. Another two explode into quivering piles of flesh. One of the remaining ones grabs Lissandra's arm, and the last one tears off a finger to throw at Lissandra.

I use Wraith Dance to jump down and lash out at Lissandra with Fracture.

Lissandra ducks under the blade, and a cascading mana attack flows from her hand. Victoria, holding onto her arm, bursts like a bubble.

I catch Victoria's finger midair, pulling it close to protect it as a burst of heat pours from my partially unsealed heart. It scorches everything in the area, leaving the air flickering behind it.

Out of the golden flames, Lissandra emerges undamaged with a pale blue barrier flickering across her skin. My kinetic energy's hold on her is broken through a sheer burst of force, and a sword made of mana forms in her hand, which she slashes at me.

It meets with Fracture, which, incredibly, does not cut through it immediately. The two blades clash. While her sword remains firm and stable, Fracture is beginning to crack, releasing bursts of black and gray smoke.

I send a disruptive wave at her, something that would've easily overwhelmed anyone from Earth's tutorial, but she remains unaffected. Instead, she pushes me back, using her mana to reinforce her body.

Circles of flame burst from the exhaust node on my back, tearing through my hoodie. The flames surround me, swirl around my form, and lash out at Lissandra.

The finger I've hidden within these flames behind her begins to expand, and Victoria regrows from it, only to be kicked away by Lissandra, who doesn't even turn around. Still, Victoria endures and grabs Lissandra's leg, twisting in an attempt to break it.

I seize the opportunity and boost my body to its limit, slashing at her with Fracture once more and finally shattering the sword she's created.

For a moment, that familiar pale blue mana flickers across her palm as she deflects the blade by striking the flat. Lissandra breaks free from Victoria's grip and kicks her again. Then she vanishes, reappearing atop another broken building.

I use the mark I left on her to send a tricolored orb through and then teleport behind her using the same mark. But the explosion I expected never happens. Lissandra stands completely untouched. With a viper-like motion, she reacts as if she'd seen it coming and grabs me by the neck. She raises her arm to block Fracture, only to realize with slight surprise that it's not there.

Victoria reaches us, holding the sword in both of her hands, which are already more damaged than mine, and slashes at Lissandra, who moves to dodge. I use that brief opportunity to create a nail made of black mana and jam it into her shoulder as she deflects Victoria's strike with Fracture.

I release a burst of kinetic energy at her, and she lets go of my neck to quickly draw a glowing inscription in the air that absorbs all of that kinetic energy and deflects it back at me, forcing me to absorb it in turn.

Lissandra vanishes, even with the black mana nail piercing her, even with the pull of the black mana crown and my attempts at disruption. Her control is so precise that she ignores it all, and I focus on observing how she does it as closely as I can.

I grab Fracture as Victoria throws it to me. Meanwhile, Victoria bites off her tongue, spits it out, and grows another duplicate, with arms undamaged by the strain of holding Fracture.

Both of us jump over the buildings and follow Lissandra, who continues to put up distance by creating shields and shooting projectiles at us that, though weak in appearance, totally obliterate anything in their path.

We chase her across the rooftops as the first projectile lands behind us. The building it touches caves in without a sound, sucked inward before collapsing in a slow, unnatural slumping motion. Windows melt and flow like wax, then burst into steam.

Another shot cuts through the street below. The asphalt warps, buckles, then craters inward. Cars roll over and crumple as if they were made of tin foil, their frames folding into each other before they burst into flames.

One glowing orange spark flies past my face, and the heat alone singes my cheek, leaving a glowing line tracing across the hood of my hoodie. Behind me, it touches the building and explodes into a fiery vortex. Victoria ducks under another, her hair catching fire briefly before she can snuff it out.

Another attack strikes a parked car. It just folds the car inward until it forms a perfect sphere, glowing faintly, then sinks through the cracked pavement like a stone falling through water.

All while Vic seems unkillable. She is quick, she is durable, and no matter how much she gets destroyed, a new version of her always pops up. It seems like these versions are becoming tougher with every attack Lissandra sends her way, likely due to some sort of adaptive resistance, passive, or trait she's acquired.

Lissandra, even though limited, is far stronger than Ruby's avatar. Not because of any difference in levels, in terms of skills or stats, but because of her sheer experience and the level of decisiveness she demonstrates. She knows most of my skills and quickly adapts to Vic's.

Even while holding back and fighting so simply, her style feels like that of someone who had to learn on their own, gathering abilities from different sources and relying entirely on her own personal understanding.

The fight slows down as she retreats to the streets, giving us a few seconds to regroup.

Victoria joins me at my side, throwing down a few pieces of herself that grow into new duplicates. They start walking in from the side and surround Lissandra, who lets it happen without so much as turning to watch them. Fracture vibrates in my arm, breaking, cracking.

No cheesy one-liners are spoken, and I attack. Reaching through a stretched Ley Line, I teleport, only to appear somewhere entirely different, I wanted, coming out somewhere high in the air.

I send a pulse of detection and fly in that direction, altering my course and heading straight for Lissandra, who is locked in battle against Victoria's duplicates.

I crash down like a meteor, with Fracture slicing past Lissandra, mere inches from her body, as she twists out of the way. Immediately, I boost myself with black mana, both in body and mind. The barrier around Lissandra's body flickers as my black crown starts absorbing it, and Victoria moves faster than before and grabs her from behind, locking her in a chokehold as she jams one of her fingers into Lissandra's eyes.

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

My Mana Wavelength Iris observes Lissandra and the mana moving around her body, and she easily returns that gaze with her one remaining eye. Everything feels slowed down, and I move as if wading through mud, my body struggling to keep up with my perception.

Lissandra increases her speed to match mine. The fading mana around her skin flickers, and she deflects Fracture by striking the flat of the blade with her hand and directing it into the ground. In one smooth movement, she throws Victoria off her, by breaking and twisting my sister's arms.

I boost myself further. I recall the way Lioren moved, and even though I lack his grace, I try to recapture a portion of it, if only for a moment, moving faster, raising Fracture, and thrusting it toward Lissandra.

In response, she slams her palms together, catching the blade between them. Fracture halts just a palm's width from her chest. Even then, it releases bursts of gray and black smoke, tearing into her

hands and leaving a series of gaping wounds across her chest. The same force hits me as well, and I'm forced to redirect my mana to avoid damage to my circuits.

Lissandra moves to twist the blade out of my hands, but Victoria's punch hits her blind side and sends her flying through the air, rolling across the asphalt and finally coming to a stop against the side of a bus. Victoria doesn't stop there, though, and charges her, sending the bus rolling across the road as she slams into it with her shoulder, but Lissandra is not there anymore.

Feeling a movement behind me, I release a burst of mana in that direction, a portion of the huge amount I've collected over the course of the fight.

Lissandra, standing there, slashes her arm through the air, and the burst of energy parts, passing by her sides and tearing into the street and buildings behind her. She walks forward, her gaze locking with mine. Mana spirals across her body in a pattern far too complex to be random. My currently activated Mana Wavelength Iris catches it for a moment, then falters. Pain surges through me, and my grip on my mana breaks from the overload of the information.

Even then, I force myself to make an attempt to absorb the kinetic energy of her punch, but I fail and am sent flying back, crashing through the glass window of a small shop nearby.

I boost myself back up only to see Lissandra holding my black crown, which she must have grabbed when she kicked me away. She smiles and throws it far into the distance, only to take another punch from Victoria, who appears nearby. The hit lands, but Victoria's body instantly detonates under the force, torn into flying chunks of flesh and blood.

Another Victoria grows from one of the scattered pieces. She moves the same way, landing a second hit before her body disintegrates mid-strike from the strain. For a brief moment, she's as fast as Tacita and nearly as strong as Jean. The impact sends Lissandra crashing through buildings, and the shockwaves push debris and vehicles down the street.

Once again, from the pieces, a new Victoria appears, charging at Lissandra with her shoulder and sending her into another building that collapses as well. The structure groans under the impact, walls cracking and supports giving way. Before it can fully collapse, however, it erupts in a violent explosion, launching debris in every direction.

Lissandra steps out, with pale mana flickering around her and remaining nearly undamaged.

Victoria charges again in the same reckless fashion, and I try to read her trajectory, predicting where her punch will send Lissandra. I move to intercept, ready to swing my sword as she comes flying toward me.

I move, positioning myself before Lissandra's body reaches me, but a spear of mana forms in her hand. She drives it into the road, slowing her momentum and causing me to miss. She then immediately moves and stabs at my neck, chest, and leg before I break the weapon with Fracture and slash it across her legs, wounding her in the process.

Thermal energy combusts beneath my skin, healing these wounds nearly immediately, and I throw Fracture aside, where Victoria grabs it.

I start channeling more kinetic energy through my body, using mana to strengthen it at the same time, all as much as I can with the entirety of my [Focus]. Thermal energy continues combusting inside me, sending waves of pain through my body while healing the damage I cause to myself. Using my rapidly healing body, I let go of efficiency and devote the entirety of my focus on quickly channeling kinetic energy through myself to match up to my sister and Lissandra.

Victoria unleashes short bursts of strength and speed that tears her body apart with each movement. My own body holds together only because it's constantly burning itself to heal. Lissandra uses some form of overclocking, combined with incredible mana-based reinforcement.

What began as a clash of skills and tricks shifts into a pure, brutal melee as we attack Lissandra together. In terms of stats, she's likely only as strong as one of us alone, and yet somehow she's matching both of us combined.

Lissandra takes wounds and blows, without bothering to heal herself, and continues to fight despite them. Even with just the physical capabilities we possess, she matches us one-on-two, redirecting our attacks, positioning herself better, or exploiting our lack of experience when it comes to fighting as a pair.

We move at speeds that turn my side view into a blur, crashing through skyscrapers and reducing them to rubble. Every step sends cracks racing through the pavement, every missed strike shatters concrete

and twists metal. Windows burst from the pressure of our strikes alone, and the ground quakes beneath our feet.

An elbow strike from Victoria sends Lissandra flying through a high-rise, her body carving a jagged path through steel beams and office walls. She crashes out the other side, landing in the middle of a street that's already been cratered by our earlier impacts. I follow close behind, my landing punch splitting the asphalt like dry earth.

The force of my kinetic impact throws parked cars into the air. Streetlights are ripped from their foundations, traffic signs bend and melt under stray mana discharges.

A single redirected kick from Vic blows out an entire building's facade, raining glass and debris over several blocks.

And yet Lissandra remains unshaken. She meets Victoria's raw power with ruthless timing, slipping past her charges with narrow sidesteps, punishing overextension. And when she faces me, she reads the smallest shift in my stance and parries with perfect counter-movement, redirecting force instead of resisting it. Her body, though wounded, moves without regard for the injuries.

Mana radiates off her like a pulse. Shields flicker and reform between blows. Skills shape and reshape in her hands in fractions of a second. She sends Victoria crashing through an office building, then spins to block Fracture with a blade made of mana. The clash sends both of us skidding backward, tearing up the street in long, burning trails.

Fracture devours the air, cuts through the barriers Lissandra forms, and obliterates the mana weapons she creates. But she knows my plan. She locks eyes with me and changes direction to guide me away from the place she's thrown my black crown, a move I had hoped to counter.

"Give me 2 seconds," I shout to Vic as I bury my feet into the broken asphalt and throw her Fracture.

I release a blast of kinetic energy and shoot to the side to avoid Lissandra, bulldozing through the building. She tries to head my way, but Victoria jumps in front of her, only to immediately fall back as her head explodes.

Lissandra tries to pass by, but that body moves, and a hand grabs her, and a piece on the other side regrows as a newly formed duplicate decides to attack her as well.

In that brief movement, I reach the crown lodged deep in the side of the building, and it floats over my head, granting me access to the immense amount of mana it's absorbed from me and stored all this time.

Fracture comes flying, seemingly out of nowhere, and pierces through my leg, pinning me against a nearby wall. Victoria's body crashes next to me, only for her to stand up immediately and turn to face Lissandra, who slowly walks out from between the buildings. She's still missing one of her eyes, her face is bruised, and there are wounds on her body caused by either me or Vic, and even a few caused by Fracture.

Still, against all logic, this Absolute does not heal herself. She didn't even put much effort into dodging; instead, she drags herself down to our level. An Absolute, bruised and wounded by two mere Champion candidates, remains uncaring about image or pride. In fact, she almost seems to be enjoying it.

"Is that all?" she asks, as her mana rises up around her.

Against my will, I let out a short snort. Grabbing Fracture, I pull it out of my leg, redirecting more thermal energy to the wound and nearly entirely burning it, to regenerate it at the expense of great pain. Even then, the damage caused by this weapon remains, and I change the way I channel mana within my body to account for these wounds.

Ding, the notification rings. Something as useless as a notice that death is now possible.

I wave it off, then the second round begins.

Chapter 594: Recognized

Victoria jumps in front of me, only to burst into a shower of flesh, and part of me wonders how much longer she can keep going. The attack that was meant to kill me is diminished somewhat, but it still throws me to the side. With cold, detached curiosity, I watch as the next one carves deep holes into the building next to me.

I could feel no mana, neither in the attack itself nor in the burst of energy when Lissandra used it.

I boost myself into the air and take black mana from the crown and use it to form a barrier in front of me, only for its surface to wobble as it absorbs another invisible attack.

Victoria slowly walks towards Lissandra. She rips off her finger and throws it to the ground, where it quickly grows into an identical copy of herself. Keeping an eye on Lissandra, she plunges her hand into the duplicate's back and yanks it out in a spray of blood, sending the body collapsing to the ground. In her hand, she holds a pearl-white short sword with a very wide blade, made entirely from bone.

She lifts it in front of her, the surface cracking but blocking the attack from Lissandra. Her slow walk turns into a run, and then her speed increases further, each step tearing the asphalt under her feet.

I lift another black shield to block the attack and slip the seals back into place over my Ignition Heart. The incredible healing I had until now is reduced to a fragment, but my mental capacity increases greatly by not having to deal with it. The pain also disappears, making me feel almost lightheaded.

Then, it's back to using only mana.

A javelin made of black mana shoots ahead, and it pierces through Lissandra's shield and crashes into the ground next to her, devouring all the mana in the area almost in an instant.

Even then, the monster takes a step and disappears. The space in front of her shrinks and waves in the same way it used to when Ruby used her skill.

Three, five, ten attacks slam into the shield with tremendous force. Then one gets through—a thin, needle-like mana projectile, no thicker than a nail, piercing a hole about the same size right over my heart.

With my heightened perception, I watch as another similar projectile flies toward my head. I barely tilt it to the side, then block another one with Fracture before it can reach my heart.

Fracture bursts open, releasing all the forces it held: glass made of white sand, [Disintegration], and black mana.

All of it surges toward me, and I know I'll die if any of it hits. Even so, I watch with fascination. Part of my mind registers how many shards I just lost. Another part is amused by the fact. A third focuses on amplifying the effect of my eyes to observe the process.

The most reasonable part of me moves black mana around my body, shielding me from the parts of the explosion I can still block.

As if in slow motion, I shoot my hand into the explosion. I twist it, take the damage I can endure, and snatch the largest fragment of the shattered blade from the air. I boost myself, crash against the road, then use Wraith Dance two times, three times, five times, ten times.

Behind me, the blast zone spreads into something unholy, an eruption that disintegrates everything in its path. White sand grows more charged and pierces through everything in its path, clashing with black mana over the mana in the surrounding air.

I stop using kinetic energy and rely on mana to reinforce my body, trying to mimic the way Lissandra's been using it. Each movement is faster than the last. I don't think much about it; I just let my body lead, drawing inspiration and trying to combine it with the feeling I had when the coolest person I'd ever known had control of my body.

Victoria flies towards me, with one of her arms missing, having been severed by the mana disc now floating over Lissandra's head.

I reach toward her as she passes by, grab her hand, spin around, and hurl Victoria back toward Lissandra. Victoria uses the momentum, lands hard, and keeps running. She reaches into the wound where her arm used to be and pulls out a bone dagger, still slick with blood and strips of flesh.

There are no more duplicates.

The [Empyrean Lance] I've formed shoots forward as Lissandra moves her disc to block it. Both vanish on impact. She slips away again to avoid Victoria, but I track her with my eyes, letting more mana flood into my body as I close the distance.

Another [Empyrean Lance] fires at her just as I focus harder on disrupting her mana. I pour everything I have into it, narrowing my will to a single point and reaching into the flow of her magic. The effort burns through me. It's like trying to stop a river with my bare hands. I claw at the threads of her mana, pulling them out of sync, twisting them against each other. For a brief second, I feel her falter, something stutters in her casting, but it's not enough.

She exhales, quiet and steady, and her body moves with impossible precision. One arm snatches the lance from the air, and it detonates in her grasp, but a barrier flares to life, sealing the blast. Both the lance and her arm vanish in the blast.

She raises her mana, and I respond in kind. [Eclipse] activates, draining the color from the world around us as we clash.

I give everything I have to smother her power. I force my mana into the space around her, try to unravel her focus, try to overwhelm her with raw interference. I scream inwardly with the strain, feeling my own flow begin to fray.

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She pushes back. Calm, steady, unshaken.

And she wins.

Despite everything I do, she cuts through my interference. I grit my teeth and cross my arms in front of my chest, stacking barrier after barrier to brace for the impact.

All of the barriers break at once, cutting into my flesh. The attack breaks through and throws me against a nearby light pole, breaking it, and then into the side of the car behind.

Victoria reaches Lissandra, who throws up a barrier in front of her. It shatters instantly under a punch so forceful that Victoria's hand explodes on impact. She doesn't stop. Even with blood trailing behind her, she charges forward.

Lissandra slips to the side and delivers a precise kick to Victoria's leg. I hear the crack as the bone gives way.

Without missing a beat, Lissandra tilts her head just enough to dodge my next projectile, then disrupts another before I can even release it. The mana I had gathered twists in the air, hijacked by her will. It swells with her mana and detonates beside me, the blast lifting me off my feet and slamming me through the air and down the road.

Before I can get back on my feet, Lissandra is already in front of me. She kicks with brutal precision, breaking both of my hands and shattering the barrier I had just raised while I push myself up on one knee.

This time, I don't get thrown. For a brief moment, I switch back to kinetic energy, absorbing the impact and holding my ground. Standing so close to her, I release everything I have, every bit of mana I've gathered, firing it at her in tightly packed, concentrated bursts.

The air between us ripples and swells as the attack pushes forward, but before it can reach her, it halts. It twists, spins, and reshapes itself into a swirling orb which she catches between her fingers. All that power is now contained in that single, small object.

She moves to return it to me, but I reach out to it as well, fighting against her with all my might.

While we both hold the orb, her strength floods into it. I don't try to overpower her. Instead, I shape my will around her force. I add no extra energy; I focus on changing its structure. I build pressure lines, create absorption paths, and form layered mana anchors, using everything I can manage in the short time we have to fight over it.

She notices. I can tell by the way her grip shifts. She moves to cut off my influence, but I already left my mark.

I destabilize it. Not with simple force, but by undermining it from within.

The orb flickers, folding in on itself.

Her head tilts, and she smiles like she's enjoying the surprise. Not in mockery, but in interest. She laughs and moves to teleport away. While further damaging my broken arm, I move it and stab the remaining shard of Fracture into her collarbone before she can disappear.

This destabilizes her teleportation enough to allow me to latch onto it, and the two of us barely manage to teleport away before the orb explodes.

The destabilized teleportation, straining to carry more passengers than either of us intended, twists, tears, and damages our bodies. Even the direction is messed up, and we end up in the middle of the road, lying on top of each other.

I move my head down to slam it against hers, but she twists and moves, causing me to miss and smash it against the asphalt. With her remaining hand, she punches my chest and releases bursts of mana she quickly collected to throw me into the air.

Before she can do anything else, Victoria is there, armless, with a broken leg, and yet she savagely kicks Lissandra in the head, sending her crashing into what once was the wall of a building.

The wall that was already hanging on by a thread crashes down, and the bricks pelt her prone form, burying her beneath them.

I fan the thermal flames under my skin, the healing fixing some of the damage, but I can barely keep it up. I feel like I could pass out at any moment, and when I try to lift one of the seals, the flames almost burn me without restraint as they flow through me.

A mana projectile comes flying out of the mass of fallen bricks and pierces through my shoulder, sending me staggering back before I can try more. It sends a wave of disrupting mana through my body, deactivating nearly all of my active skills.

I barely manage to pull it out and throw it to the ground. Of course, it destabilizes as I do and explodes, throwing me back once more.

A laugh escapes my lips as I climb to my feet and walk over to Victoria's side. Her leg has partially healed, though she's still missing an arm. She flicks her head to clear the hair from her eyes and straightens her posture, standing there like this is all just part of another ordinary day.

Out of the rubble, Lissandra also climbs. Terribly wounded and damaged, she's still refusing to heal herself. Even the shard of Fracture remains, lodged in her shoulder; the gray smoke and black mana are surely causing her a tremendous amount of trouble.

One of her eyes is gone, her arm is gone, and there are tears all over her body, but she bears the same confidence as always.

With a voice that sounds just the same as it always does, she says, "This reminds me of a time before I became a candidate. Back then, I was even younger than that empath of yours."

She dusts off her clothes and smiles, "I miss those days. There was so much to learn, so many mistakes to make, and so many dangers that seemed insurmountable."

"Let's stop here before I get carried away," Lissandra says, glancing between us with a faint smile that doesn't reach her eyes. "This path requires more than just strength or talent. Out of everyone I've seen in this tutorial, you two have come the closest to understanding that."

Her presence increases once again, and her wounds heal as she removes the limiters she's placed on herself.

I feel the tingling of the power she radiates prickles across my skin, along with a sensation as if the system itself were listening to her words.

"It's not just the outcome of this fight either, it's everything I've seen leading up to it. I cannot say whether either of you will reach the end of this path, but there is one thing I can state with certainty."

That pressure on my skin increases; it feels the same way it did when she declared me a candidate.

So I interrupt her.

"I refuse."

Lissandra stares at me, her mouth slightly open, before she calmly closes it. The faint disbelief in her eyes makes it clear she hadn't expected anyone to refuse her. For a moment, she pauses, as if unsure of what to say.

"I don't need you to declare me. I don't need anyone to. By myself, I'll make the system recognize me as an Absolute Candidate, whether it wants to or not." I speak the words, knowing the others can hear.

And sore loser that she is, Lissandra disappears. She forfeits the event, but doesn't say it out loud; it remains only in her mind.

Before I turn to my right, I hear Victoria say, "I forfeit," and she disappears as well.

Standing there alone, it seems that the winner of the last event has been decided.

Chapter 595: End of the 2nd tournament

So what do you say to tens of thousands of attendees watching you as you stand alone in the ruined area of the last event? You only have a few seconds before the system teleports you back into the common area after your sister forfeited.

Well, obviously, in a burst of pride and with adrenaline still rushing through your body, you shout your real name out loud and follow it with a threat. You tell them how terribly you will fuck them up if anyone ever tries to touch someone belonging to you, whether it is your family, the other members of your group, or anyone who might be working with you. You tell them that what they just witnessed was nothing, and that it'll be child's play compared to what you will be capable of in the next three years.

So go on. Try to act smart, have fun playing around on Earth, and hope I die before I can make my return. Maybe I really will die, maybe you have nothing to worry about, and someone as maniacal as I am will crash against the wall that kills me.

But what if that's not the case?

Say you get the clever idea and try to find out more about my background. You already know what I look like; you might even have photos and videos. Some of you could probably figure out who I am even before I gave you my full name. But now that you have both my name and my sister's, there can't be many siblings named Nathaniel and Victoria Gwyn. It should be easy.

So, maybe you think it'll be a good idea to locate members of my family, hide them somewhere, and blackmail me once I get out.

To that, I say: I have Earth's most powerful healer, and I promise I can keep healing and killing you for years. I can come up with ways to cause you as much pain as possible. I'm petty enough to spend months, even years, making it happen. So I ask you again.

Would it be worth it?

And I say this: try me. Go ahead, if you're really that confident.

Before I can finish that sentence, I find myself outside. Unlike last time, my mana locks itself back under my control immediately, and not a whiff seeps into the area around me.

It might be because my broken body is healed, but it feels lighter as if some sort of weight has fallen away. Even now, I am still strongly convinced I am the most normal one in Group 4; I mean, we've all seen Lily elongate her arms and grow new ones from her back, so there is no debate about that.

Maybe I've always been meant to be a little bit of an asshole. Fitting into that place where I "respect" others and "their opinions" just seems silly at times.

Once I locate the presence I've been searching for, I teleport there and place my hand on Channeler's shoulder. For a moment, I consider using his name, but it doesn't quite come to me. Was it Rafael, Raphael, or Ralph? Saying the wrong thing would be awkward.

"My man," I say.

He shudders with surprise at the unexpected touch but regains control and looks back at me.

"Yes?"

"I have your arcane item."

We gather under the tree in our area, everyone in Group 4, along with Myrra, and Channeler's harem, who watch as he puts on the armor I've made for him. I'm much better with swords and weapons, so this one was very difficult. Unsurprisingly, Miwa's advice helped a lot, as did some of the things I learned as a lumoran technician, well, assistant technician.

The armor covers his entire body, and it isn't even that bulky. Looking at it, you might even expect it to be kind of flimsy. Wrong. The materials I used are top-notch. I used an assortment of metals, alloys, mana stones for the plating, and lined the inside with leather so the raw metal wouldn't chafe and more besides.

The chest plate is a deep matte grey, layered with faint lines that pulse dimly when he moves. Those are the mana inscriptions, woven through the armor like veins. It reacts to his movement, strengthens under pressure, and even has the ability to deflect weaker skills without him so much as having to lift a finger.

And then there are the mana stones. They're embedded deep, locked into the framework of the armor to act like batteries. Each one is charged and connected through its own series of insulated channels. The armor draws power from them constantly; it uses that mana to strengthen the joints, support his muscles, and prevent the weight from slowing him down. It not only makes him faster and stronger, but it also helps him maintain his speed and protects him from exhaustion.

In theory.

The chestplate is layered with inner supports. Beneath that is a thin core linked to the stones that serves to distribute mana across the suit. It's not really smart tech or anything fancy, it is just built to last and work. The gauntlets and boots are reinforced. He can block with his arms without feeling the shock, and he can land hard without twisting anything. There are no energy channels, nor is there an accompanying glow, just pressure resistance and weight support.

The only problem is getting in and out of the armor. It takes a few minutes, and he needs several people to help him, so that might be a slight issue. The armor is also quite heavy, and another big problem is going to be charging it. With his reserves, it would take weeks to charge the armor enough to use 100% of its capabilities even for a few minutes at a time.

But I've already thought of that. I may be an asshole, but at least I'm a rich and smart asshole. I went out and bought several extremely high-quality mana stones. Ten of them. And I've been filling each one with as much mana as possible over the course of the tournament, inscribing them so they can be slotted into the armor and exchanged for a filled one.

Each of these mana stones should be able to power the armor for hours. At maximum output, probably for two or three hours, during which time he should be able to wipe the floor with the average Hard difficulty attendee.

In theory.

With rumors that Hard difficulty will probably reach the 13th floor some time in the next year or two, Channeler should have plenty of time to become Earth's apex predator, assuming someone doesn't kill him when he's not wearing the armor, though he seems pretty smart.

In theory.

As for the description:

Manabound Frame (Low Arcane) -Forged from reinforced arcane alloys and lined with mana-reactive channels, this armor consumes vast amounts of energy just to remain active. In return, it grants the wearer unstoppable momentum and an immense resistance to both physical and magical assault. Built to function under extreme strain, it demands constant mana input to maintain full capacity. Without it, the armor becomes dead weight; however, when fully powered, it turns the wearer into an unstoppable frontline force.

After putting on the helmet, Channeler takes a few steps toward me and comes to a stop. For a moment, he loses his balance, but the output is currently set below 5 percent, just enough to allow him to move as he normally would without feeling heavy while keeping some of the defenses active.

"Nathaniel," he says, his muffled voice drifting out from under the helmet.

"Yes?"

"How much would something like this go for in the system shop?"

"That? Hmm, probably around 200,000 to buy and around 100,000 to sell."

"Shards?"

"No, pieces of deer jerky. Of course, shards."

"You're giving me something worth 100,000 shards?"

"It's probably worth a bit more. It has a nice base, and if I could make it so that it didn't rely on mana batteries and change some things that I had to tweak for someone of your power level, I could probably turn it into a mid-arcane item with a bit of help."

"You're giving me something worth more than 100,000 shards?"

"I would like to say I'm lending it to you so that I could take it back once the tutorial ends, but by then, something like this won't be valuable enough for me to bother with. So yeah, you could say it is a gift. Not for free, of course, you still have to do all the things we talked about and find all the people we mentioned."

"Of course, I'll keep my word, Nathaniel. I promise."

"There's no need to be so serious. Also, sorry about the design; I know it's a bit rough."

"It's ugly as fuck," Myrra shares her unprofessional opinion from the side.

No one from Group 4 raises their voice to defend me, and I make sure to remember that.

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I continue, "But the performance is good. I have prepared a manual as well, so you can get some training in for the few weeks before you return to Earth. I'll even try to charge some training mana stones so you can train and save the ten I gave you. Do you still plan to clear the 13th floor and head back to Earth in the next few weeks?"

"Yes, I've already made deals with a few of the smaller groups, and we'll be coordinating our returns and make an attempt to organize back on Earth. Samuel was pretty helpful too; he told us a lot about how the army functions and gave us some contacts, so we'll make an attempt to discuss things with them."

He removes the helmet, revealing his uselessly handsome face, though determination is etched on it.

"I have a lot of data I can share with them. There are too many people with videos and information on you, so I won't try to hide your capabilities. I think it would be counterproductive. Not to mention that I'm expecting you to grow a lot in the few years we'll have before you return. In the meantime, I'll be using your name a lot, and people from Easy difficulty are very eager to communicate."

"Don't take in everyone you meet," I reply.

"Of course, there will be standards and requirements. By the way, NotAaron said that when we started building our organization back on Earth, we should give it a cool name and mentioned that you would want it to be Angry Kittens."

Multiple heads slowly turn to look at the twins. It's likely that only Izzy truly knows which one is Dennis and which one is Aaron, but they show no shame and continue to smile in mirrored fashion.

Channeler nods, guessing my answer from the looks we give the twins, "I thought as much; I've collected a few ideas, and if you—"

"Angry Kittens will be fine," I say.

Just as before, heads turn toward me, one of them with cat ears and a tail swaying from side to side.

"Okay," Channeler agrees immediately without further questions.

After that, I give him some weapons I made from my mana using Mana Weaving and [Knitting]. Each one should match the level of epic items in terms of sharpness and durability. They don't have any special effects. They're just my mana, compressed, woven, and knitted together, and all around made to last as long as possible. It's similar to my manabloc material and the manabloc chairs. I'm confident most of them will hold their shape for years before the mana inside starts to unravel. I'm also sure they're tough and sharp enough to handle real combat.

There are enough for Channeler and his harem to use, with a few extras left over for trading. And Tess also made some plans for Easy difficulty to get in touch with some scientists once they returned to Earth. They'd be given items, mana, and other materials to examine and otherwise experiment with.

That should bring in a lot of money, either through selling the items or attracting investments. It could help build the foundation of our so-called "organization" or whatever we decide to call it. I've never cared much about that sort of thing, but I'm sure Sophie and Maya have done their best to make sure it's all being handled.

As for me, I start explaining the armor's hidden mechanics to Channeler. It puts pressure on his body, similar to a restrictive training emblem or burden enhancement inscriptions. The idea is to let him train while wearing the armor, without using up too much mana from the batteries.

It might cause a bit of pain, but I've tuned it properly. Still, I don't like the expression he makes. I was expecting more excitement for such a useful training method, especially one I put so much effort into modifying for him.

I point that out, and he quickly shakes his head, telling me I've misunderstood. So I ask if he's okay with me improving the inscriptions and making a few last-minute changes to increase the training effect.

He gives me one of those brilliant smiles, the kind that looks like it belongs in a photoshoot, and nods in a way that almost seems like he'd rather be shaking his head.

Even though only 24 hours remain, a lot happens in the meantime.

My sister is declared the Absolute candidate by Lissandra, who seems to respect her more than me. Unsurprisingly, there is no big fanfare about it since not even Vic wants to make a big issue out of it; she just accepts it in her pragmatic way.

Rumor has it that Lucien, also known as Spacepup, even got kidnapped for a few hours by a silver-haired woman who wanted to study a skill he possesses. This incident may have worsened the PTSD the little jerk already had.

So sad. Poor guy. I just hope that the woman didn't find him only because someone talked to Myrra and told her to ask the silver-haired woman to check on him. He seemed to be trying pretty hard to stay under the radar.

Some people come to visit me, but I don't accept any of them. Derick is one of the more notable ones, along with Yama, who, despite being one of the "kings," follows that young Chinese girl, almost like she's her personal guard or servant.

Sophie and Maya speak to them briefly before they leave.

The deal with Savant is wrapped up as well. The most cowardly, or perhaps the most patient, man in the world leaves, seemingly satisfied with our agreement. This time, I am too. Examining the Sword of Aeons gave me a lot of ideas for improving my future items.

After he leaves, Tacita stops by, but only to stand next to Lily and observe her. When Lily shows no signs of resentment or harm from being attacked by Tacita during the last event, the mute woman looks pleased, if only for a moment.

Out of everyone here, she seems to like Lily the most. It's the kind of gratitude an injured animal might show to the human who treated its wounds and fed it while it was weak. That sort of thing. Even though

she attacked Lily during the last event, I'm fairly sure that if Lily had been in any real danger of dying, Tacita wouldn't have gone through with it. And I'm just as sure her mercy would only apply to Lily.

After confirming whatever she needed, Tacita vanishes again, but not before drawing an emoji into the air with the tip of a finger glowing with mana.

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As time runs out, people spend more of it finishing up some last-minute trades and saying their goodbyes. I spend some of that time with Victoria, and we say our farewells away from everyone else. We share a few more pieces of information, advice, and some plans, hoping that we get the chance to meet again in Beyond. I also visit a few other people to make plans for an expedition to Beyond.

Neither of us is good at this kind of thing, so we keep it brief and part ways with a promise to see each other in the next tournament, which will probably happen in a year.

All that needed to be addressed is taken care of just like that, and the tournament finally ends, and we get our final notifications.

Congratulations on completing your 2nd tournament!

The third tournament will occur three years from the start of your tutorial. All rounds from Earth's tutorial will compete together against another planet undergoing its own tutorial.

Congratulations, you have placed first overall in the 2nd tournament of Earth's tutorial. Your rewards have been improved.

Congratulations, you have placed first in the overall crafter rankings of Earth's tutorial. Your rewards have been improved.

You have rejected all event rewards in order to increase your final rewards. Your rewards have been greatly improved.

Please choose 2 out of 5 possible rewards:

Three active skills combination token

Passive skill combination tokens (up to mid-arcane rarity) x2

Passive skill (mid arcane)

500,000 shards

30-day beyond-stay tokens x2

Flashback Tess Hansen

Everyone except the little puppy in my arms is gone. And a single sentence hangs in the air before me:

Participation in the tournament is not possible in your current state.

With a sigh, I sit down on the ground and look at Biscuit. "There can only be one reason I was forced to stay behind, right? Did you know?"

The speed of his wagging tail increases, and he licks my face before squirming out of my hands. After that, his size increases until he grows into his "adult" form... obviously, he can do that now. In fact, he probably could have done it before, too, he probably decided to remain a little pup because he enjoyed the attention and had an easier time begging for food.

As he settles into his adult form, his fur ripples along the sides of his head, and a tiny set of budding, baby deer antlers begin to grow.

(Knew. One of us. Help.) He says.

"Aren't you the cutest little thing?"

He wags his tail even faster and moves closer, nuzzling my hand until I pet him.

"I'm probably not a mimic, or it's so fucked up that I am one without even realizing it. I think I could probably use [Declaration] to ensure I die the moment the mimic takes over, but if I do that and I'm not a mimic, it might decide to kill me, knowing I have no way to win."

(Friend. Still.)

"Oh? So you're saying I'm not a mimic yet?"

(One of us!)

"Your speech is better now. Is it because of these things?" I ask, reaching out to tap his antlers. In response, he woofs at me.

"I see. I'm glad to hear that. I promise I'll tell Nat to feed you a lot and pet you a bit more frequently."

He barks twice.

"Can you promise me something? I don't want to use [Declaration] because I'm afraid it'll provoke the mimic, but if it does take over, can you kill me?"

(Not one of us. Food.)

For that brief moment, Biscuit seems terrifying.

"Thank you. Lissandra must have known, and knowing her, she'll use it to bully Nathaniel. But Biscuit, who does that woman think I am? Some damsel who'll just sit here and wait for her ex to save her?"

(Damsel? Food?)

"No, a 'damsel' isn't food. It's the word you use to describe a weak woman who would rather rely on others than focus on saving herself."

I lift him up from the ground. He's a bit heavier now, but he quickly shrinks back to his puppy form, and the antlers shrink dramatically, further adding to the remarkable cuteness of the little corgi.

"I think I have a plan, but I might have to do some bad things. I don't mind, though, and I'll gladly pay the price with my conscience if it means I can see our friends again. And if I fail and die, so be it, as long as it's just me, and only me. Will you help me?"

(One of us.) He says, as a cheeky smile spreads across his puppy face. (Help. Friend.)

"Thank you. Now, let's head to the second front and find some mimics to talk with."

Chapter 596: Not a damsel

POV Nathaniel

We reappear on the 7th floor, in the same place we've spent these months training, preparing, and relaxing at our "beach."

And here it sits, entirely destroyed. A crater scars the ground where the lake and the building used to be. The nearby cliff is marred, with a single, enormous, building sized glass projectile piercing through it. There are also bodies of lumorans and mimics scattered all around the place.

Tess and Biscuit are nowhere to be seen, and neither of them has responded in the Community.

Lissandra stands there with Myrra by her side, surveying the damage with eyes that seem to perceive far more than any of us.

Then anger flashes across her face, the kind that only comes from wounded pride and betrayal. The mimics and lumorans had promised no forces would enter her territory, yet everything now lies in ruins.

She rises and flies toward the sky, sending a single pulse of mana from her. It is nearly audible and produces a physical reaction in the area. All the clouds disappear, and the sky turns bright white. All the temporary mana webs covering the area are torn and obliterated, and a wave expands outward with a speed and force that makes it seem as though it could encompass the entire planet.

Her head turns; she looks into the distance for a moment before disappearing in that direction with an audible sonic boom.

Warning! The 13th wave is now in progress.

Even though I've seen it before, I check the number of people in the Community again, confirming that Tess is still there. But she was still there when she first got infected by the mimic inside her. So what the hell has happened?

What have you done, you silly blonde? Damn, I hope you're safe.

Flashback Tess Hansen

Two days. That's how long it takes me to encounter a powerful Elder Mimic in the body of a lynthari; either a mercenary who came here to offer their assistance or one of those who was taken over on another planet that had been taken over by a Progenitor Mimic.

It doesn't seem like it took me very long to find one, and I guess having Biscuit with me helps. I also have a strong suspicion that Lissandra left a mark on me. I know I would do something like that if I were her. Having the mimic inside me likely didn't hurt my chances either.

Facing the body of the lynthari Champion taken over by the mimic, I say, "I want to make a deal with you."

He looks at me in the same way while glancing toward Biscuit and then back at me. "Return to your territory, human. I won't violate the terms of the deal we made with that woman, but do not push it."

A smile appears on his face, slightly unnatural, as if his true identity were showing despite the mimic's perfect memory and its ability to copy the body it took over. It almost seems to be hinting at the mimic inside me as if it were telling me to enjoy the time I have left.

"I think I can get you to whatever the lumorans stole from your territory on the 2nd front. I also think I know why the mimic inside me seems so special and can hide from the lumorans' frameworks."

I dangle the bait like I've rehearsed. The item, the one it hungers for. I don't know what it is exactly, but I know one thing: it wants it more than it wants me. That gives me leverage.

And that gets his attention.

"I have an offer for you," I say.

I already know what I'm going to do. I'll lead it to what it wants, not because I want to help it, but because I refuse to die with this thing inside me. If it's desperate enough, it will jump to someone else. And I'll make sure it does.

Days later, back in lumoran territory, I finally get a meeting with Technician Leth, but only after multiple checks, some even performed by a lumoran Champion. They run me through purification arrays that burn through my mana reserves, forcing me to stand still as pulse after pulse of detection magic washes over me. Inscriptions crawl over my skin, searing slightly as they scan for mimic residue. My internal mana flow is disrupted and reset again and again, leaving me dizzy and unbalanced.

By the end, I'm drained and shaking, barely keeping myself upright. I rely entirely on my connection to that silver-haired Absolute, the one who appeared from nowhere. That status is the only reason they let me through in the first place.

"It's nice to see you, Tess, but where are the others? Everyone is nervous because that human woman disappeared as well. It just shouldn't be possible after the oath she made," Leth tells me.

He's not alone in the room either; Jareth is there too, Champion Owain's disciple, and even Champion Safie, one of the stronger Champions the lumorans have. It could be said that they are interrogating me.

I pet Biscuit to keep him from trying anything hotheaded. There are still those tiny antlers on his head, but he is quiet.

"She killed Nathaniel and the others, then chose to cooperate with the mimics," I say.

It is something I have practiced saying for days. I repeated the lie so often, with such practiced grief, that it became part of my truth. Even the mimic inside me has begun to echo those feelings back to me, almost as if it couldn't be sure what was real anymore.

My subclass, my skill, made it happen.

I've already cried over the deaths of my friends more times than I can count. There was an hour when I just sat there, sobbing, remembering those perfect days we spent together. They were the kind of friends I had always dreamed of, people who accepted me despite all my flaws. Each of them had their own imperfections, but somehow that only made them more beautiful to me. As if every flaw only made them shine brighter.

And now they're dead because Lissandra saw them as dead weight, nothing left to gain from keeping them alive. Cooperating with the mimic Absolute will only give her a new chance, a way to improve her odds of escaping the tutorial.

I know these things happened as surely as I know my name.

When I speak to the lumorans, I put my whole self into the words. I say it with unwavering confidence and intent.

And they believe me.

Hidden from them, something inside me shudders in a way that almost feels like a laugh.

POV Nathaniel

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

Hours have passed, and Lissandra still hasn't returned.

Warning! The 14th wave is now in progress.

Warning! The 15th wave is now in progress.

Within that short time, two more waves appear and mimics begin flooding in the area, mainly greater mimics, some in lumoran bodies. They attack us without hesitation, and we fight them in the same way, all the while glancing at the sky in search of Lissandra, who still hasn't returned.

During one of the fights, I wonder what Tess could have done and silently scold myself for not thinking of it sooner. I know her better than this; I should have realized she wouldn't simply sit and wait for us to return.

Tess can be extremely stubborn when she wants to be.

Flashback Tess Hansen

It takes several more days. The lumorans panic, and they move me multiple times, each time they check over my mind and body for any sign of mimic infection. Yet they find none. The mimic inside me is just too different; it's the spawn of a Progenitor Mimic who used to be hidden deep in the frozen area of the second front, protected by a large number of elder mimics.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about it, and the feelings I get from it confirm that. It explains why it couldn't be found despite all the effort the lumorans put into the process.

I'm still not sure about the item with chaotic mana that the Ardenyx pilot found and took, but it seems to be important to it. I can feel how much it wants the item as if it were the most important thing in the world.

It's desperate to have it.

Maybe it is something that will allow it to grow stronger, a sort of sustenance that enables it to reach its full potential. Or maybe it is simply something they can't allow to fall into lumoran hands for any reason.

Since I realized that the mimic was inside me, it's begun to show its presence more, and I wonder if it was being raised to be implanted into the lumoran Absolute, only for Champion Feroy and his group to ruin it all, albeit at the cost of their lives.

I also know the war has started again. With Lissandra joining the mimics and disappearing without a trace, they have no other choice. Especially if she's strong enough to fake her oath, deceive the lumoran Absolute, and leave the area she said she wouldn't leave.

But part of me also wonders what's left to live for when all my friends are gone. After that question, only one answer remains.

Revenge at all costs. But first, I need to get rid of the mimic.

While talking to me, Leth gestures broadly and says, "Sorry, I can't tell you what that item was for, or what Champion Feroy left in me. I barely know anything myself, and it's considered highly classified information."

As always, when he speaks to me, Champion Owain's disciple is here, keeping an eye on me with that sword resting on his back. That sword seems almost alive.

I force a weak smile, looking tired but thankful, and say, "It's okay. I was just curious. I'm thankful you guys haven't decided to kill me."

“We wouldn’t do that!” Leth exclaims immediately and falls silent when he realizes he shouted. “It’s not your fault. That woman is just too strong.”

After a silence meant to create the proper impact, I say, “Leth, I think you should destroy whatever you brought from the second front. They might be after it.”

Something inside me swirls in panic, and a sharp spike runs through my head.

Through the haze, I hear something and turn to the side. Biscuit is sitting there, staring at me with glowing purple eyes. His low growl rumbles through the air, heavy enough to make the ground feel unsteady.

Only then does the pressure in my head begin to fade.

The deal I made with the mimics is simple. The mimic inside me can stay hidden only as long as it hasn't taken control, it's special enough that it shouldn't be a problem. So I will behave in a way that either helps it obtain the item it wants or gives it a chance to go after Champion Owain or the lumoran Absolute. If it finds a host as powerful as one of them, it will leave my body without killing me.

I think the fact that I knew about it surprised them since the mimic is undetectable even by the lumoran frameworks. Maybe they planned for it to jump from me to a high-ranking lumoran once it got the opportunity. Maybe they were crazy enough to hope it could take over Lissandra through some sheer, incredible stroke of luck. Or maybe it was just supposed to stay inside me, gather information on the lumorans, or try to retrieve the item they stole from the Second Front.

Now I’m being held by the lumorans, and I don’t know how many days I’ve been sitting in the room they’ve locked me in. It is so blindingly bright white that it hurts my eyes and mind. The mana in here constantly probes my body, making it impossible to use my skills.

Something is even blocking my primordial energy.

They have separated Biscuit from me and keep asking me questions. Multiple people, different each time, all powerful enough to kill me with a single swing of their arm, keep probing my mind.

But my story doesn't change. They see what I have seen: an image of Lissandra killing my friends and leaving me alive as a messenger. They also sense my emotions, the sadness I felt when they died, and the rage I feel towards that woman.

Their frameworks scanned me, psychic traces were analyzed, mana flow patterns checked. And all of it aligned with the grief of a girl who lost everything. Even the Champions who doubted me hesitated when they saw no flicker of a lie.

Then, I am moved for the last time.

A few hours later, I receive an immediate execution order as I sit, held in a cell hidden in a base that seems to serve as their headquarters. The order comes directly from Champion Owain, who has been stationed here to guard the item they took from the mimics.

And that item is close. I can feel it; the presence inside me grows more and more desperate as Biscuit and I sit alone in the small room, waiting for the end. It has already sent a special signal that can only be detected by the mimics, but it will take a while for them to get here. The only things keeping it from taking over my mind are its fear of being discovered, the oath I made, and its hope that I will do everything I can to stay alive.

Biscuit remains quiet, even with those cute antlers on his head, and continues to keep an eye on me. His eyes grow darker by the second, and with that, their friendliness slowly disappears.

Leth comes to visit as well, slipping in alone despite the rules of my containment, just a few minutes before my executioner is supposed to arrive. I can see how much it weighs on him. For a moment, he says nothing.

I think I've played my part well, no matter how disgusting it felt. I took the fondness he had for Nathaniel and the others and used it. I built the image of a broken, unfortunate girl in his mind.

I tapped into the grief he still carries from losing Champion Feroy, the one he followed, and the friends he fought beside. In his eyes, I've suffered the same loss.

But now his mana signature is thin, frayed. I make note of how tired he looks, how little resistance he must have. A weak link, maybe. Just maybe.

He says, "I'm sorry, Tess, I know it's cruel for them to kill you, but the order came from the Absolute himself. It is to avoid risk and simply remove you, they're worried about the things that woman could have done with you. I'm truly sorry."

"It's fine, Leth, it's not your fault," I say with a weak smile, feigning bravery to mask my sorrow.

Slowly, I get to my feet and hold out my hand to Leth for a handshake, saying, "Thank you for everything."

He hesitates, "They told me not to..."

I pull my hand back with a saddened expression, "Oh, I get it, I'm sorry." I quickly apologize and take a step, only to let myself fall, seemingly tangled in the chains on my feet and hands.

Leth almost instinctively moves in and grabs my hand to help me stand. "Are you..." His words cut off.

"I'm sorry. Truly," I whisper.

The mimic inside me moves from my body into his and takes over the moment it does so. It destroys the lumoran technician's mind in a blink, and with it, the oath I made to the mimics disappears, its requirements fulfilled.

The baby progenitor mimic looks at me with Leth's face and expressions, yet somehow it's different, as it begins settling inside him and trying to hide its presence, which should be much harder, if not impossible, now that it has taken over Leth's mind. It can likely still jump into another lumoran, but I don't think it can hide anymore the way it hid inside me, not against serious attempts.

"Useless human," Leth says. "You couldn't even get me close to the Champion. But as per our deal, no mimic will touch you. The others will be here soon, but I wonder if they'll arrive quickly enough to save you from your lumoran executioner."

He doesn't even smile, but I can see the strange cruelty in Leth's eyes. Then he turns to leave, before the executioner arrives and before its presence triggers any of the defensive arrays.

"A moment," I call out.

He stops and turns around when I say, "Biscuit, not a friend."

Then I close my eyes.

That pressure returns, along with that eerie sensation. I hear a scream I never imagined Leth or any mimic could make, followed by a series of loud crunches, and then silence.

When I open my eyes, Biscuit is sitting there, looking at me.

He burps and says in my mind, (Friend.)

When the lumorans rush in, I pretend to panic and shout about a mimic that had been hidden inside Leth. I warn them about the incoming mimic attack he told me about, and urge them to check the detection arrays.

Chapter 597: Reigning dumbass of the 7th floor

POV Nathaniel

The reward for this floor's reigning dumbass goes to Tess, who remains unconscious even with all the work Sophie and Izzy have done for her.

All we know is that Lissandra found her and Biscuit, then knocked Tess unconscious because the blonde kept trying to kill her, screaming all the while. Lissandra also confirmed that there weren't any mimics inside Tess anymore and that she found her deep in underground escape tunnels leading out from a nearby lumoran secret base that had been destroyed.

It seems the blonde somehow got rid of the mimic on her own, and that's definitely going to be a story. After I confirm that she's safe and everyone else does the same, we find ourselves being pushed out the door by an annoyed trio composed of Lily, Sophie, and Izzy so that they can finish examining her. They don't tell us anything, but it seems like Tess may have really done something that was probably pretty dumb, even by my standards.

That also puts the deal I made with Lissandra in a strange situation. All the effort I put into the tournament feels like it was for nothing since Tess handled everything on her own, with a little help from the best corgi of the 7th floor.

The award for best doggo and protector of the dumbest person on the 7th floor, of course, goes to Giga Biscuit.

Once again, Biscuit seems to have eaten something again, just like last time when he decided to nom on that creepy deer; however, unlike before when it shrank him, this time it's made him as big as a horse.

Yup, a corgi as big as a horse.

He is still sleeping, and like the dumbest person of the 7th floor, he hasn't woken up yet. Occasionally, he even burps in his sleep and twitches as if he's managed to upset his stomach.

Another cute thing is that even though he's gotten so big, he's returned to his "adult form" and has the same proportions as a normal corgi. And though those proportions at this size should be unsettling, it just comes across as extremely cute. Taking the opportunity, I lean against his belly, which moves gently in time with each breath as he sleeps. Even the other members of Group 4 seem content to climb over him, like they just cannot get enough of this silly corgiant.

Everyone is worried about Tess, but after talking to Lissandra and Sophie, I think it'll be okay.

Sophie probably knows what happened, though she seems to be waiting for Tess to wake up before discussing it further. She also believes that whatever Tess did, she did it in a way that can be reversed by Tess herself, possibly through some sort of double self-hypnosis, or if not by the simple passage of time.

In the end, it seems increasingly likely that Tess didn't need any help at all, and that's created some mixed feelings inside of me.

So, although Tess should be fine on her own in a few weeks or months, Sophie and even Lissandra are working hard to shorten that to days. Much of the work is being done by Sophie, while Lissandra helps as much as she can. It is hard to tell since Lissandra keeps her emotions so tightly in check, but I bet it's been just as infuriating for her. She made such grand promises, and now everything's gone to shit because of whatever this dumbass girl did.

Like everyone else, I can only wait for her to wake up. At least I don't break down crying and hugging her unconscious body like Maya did, or clinging to her like a baby koala like Izzy.

Having processed all that, I take the opportunity to clear my mind and check my status for what feels like the first time in a long while.

Name: Nathaniel Gwyn

Title: Champion Candidate

Difficulty: Hell

Floor: 7 - Battlefield

Time left until forced return: 2y 350d 23h 45m 6s

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

Lvl 307

Strength: 240

Dexterity: 231

Constitution: 429

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1627 + 1627

Primary Class: Mana Weaver (Unique Arcane)

Sub-class: [Adept of Pride]

Active skills (10/10):

Focus - Lvl 65

Perception - Lvl 62

Redistribution - Lvl 63

Mana Domain (Pride) - Lvl 61

Mana Crown - Lvl 55

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 66

Ley Line - Lvl 54

Eclipse - Lvl 37

Empyrean Lance - Lvl 22

Knitting - Lvl 37

Constructs:

Reinforcement

Mana Regulator

Mana Sovereignty Mantle

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Kinetic Mana Heart

Sealed Ignition Heart (Fully Sealed, 3/3)

Passive skills (5/5):

Mana Kinetic Conversion Reservoir (Unique Epic)

Mana Fortified Mind (Low Arcane)

Mental Attunement Loop (Mid Arcane)

Mana Wavelength Tyrant (Mid Arcane)

Subdermal Combustion Weave (Mid Arcane)

Tokens:

Beyond 3 day stay token

Beyond 1 day stay token

Shards: 39,631

I'm especially happy with [Focus] and [Mana Manipulation]. Even though it's been so much harder to level them recently, I still managed to push myself during the tournament. The memory of the numerous deaths still lingers. It's almost like a scar, except the mark has been left on my mind. Every time I think of these deaths, I cannot help but shudder a little. But at the same time, I know I would do it again in a heartbeat.

[Eclipse] also gained several levels, especially from the last event. [Redistribution] leveled up, too, thanks to the sheer amount of thermal energy I had to channel back there. I believe I leveled it about three times in a row, which is quite incredible considering the high level of the skill.

Of course, [Knitting] leveled up as well, given all the weapons I made for Channeler and the others. But we do not talk about skills with such names. We do not even think of them, because it might normalize the idea, causing me to slip up and say the name aloud. And we certainly can't have that.

Regarding my passive skills, on the other hand, I've been gathering quite a fancy collection: three mid-arcane skills, one low-arcane, and one unique passive. And damn if I don't appreciate that. After all, going by everything I've learned, I don't think there's more than a few people in the entirety of Earth's tutorial who can say they even have one mid-arcane passive, and that's if they're lucky.

Which brings to mind the passive skill combination token the system offered me, which would allow me to combine two mid-arcane passives. Using it for anything lower would be a waste.

I look them over again and consider the potential combinations, and no matter how I combine them, none of the results seem particularly good. If I chose this reward, I would probably need to purchase another mid-arcane passive specifically for the combination. That would require saving up another 500 thousand shards, and that could take a while. Therefore, I rule out this reward.

Next, there are some new passive skill options: one mid-arcane reward passive, valued at somewhere around 500 thousand shards, and another, which is simply 500 thousand shards. Both options are appealing, but they don't really interest me all that much. I don't think I'll be needing the shards at the moment. If I had to pick one, I would probably just take the new passive skill instead. A passive skill reward would probably offer three or five passives to choose from, some of which could be valued closer to 600 thousand shards and would have a fair chance of being tailored to me. However, I already have several new passives to manage and training to consider, which might change the direction of my build.

Lastly, we come to the two rewards I'm most interested in: the two 30-day beyond stay tokens worth 600 thousand shards. Admittedly, there are significant disadvantages. It would mean being stuck in Beyond for a long time, especially since I doubt anyone from our "expedition party" could afford to stay that long. There's also a significant risk that I'd wind up wasting part of the token and not being able to do anything while I'm there, which would be a huge waste of time.

Nonetheless, it attracts me greatly. I've been wanting to go and spend some time more or less alone for a while, so I am more or less leaning toward choosing this one, but I'll have to give it a few more days for further thought. I might even wait until the end of the floor and see what rewards it brings before deciding.

Lastly, we have what's clearly the most insane and probably the best reward I've seen yet: a token that would allow me to combine three of my active skills into one.

Ever since I saw it, I've been thinking and theorizing, and my mind remains full of ideas. However, like the previous option, it carries a few big risks. Combining three skills means there is a much higher chance of incompatibility. Worst of all, some of my skills may not be available for combination, which would only result in an inefficient outcome, a wasted token, or possibly forcing me to wait years for another opportunity to combine them. But if it works, the resulting skill could be extraordinary.

It also makes me wonder just how rare this kind of reward is. I haven't seen it anywhere so far, so it might be incredibly valuable. I am quite likely the first person from Earth to get it, while the average Hell enjoyer might never see it. Still, I am a gambler at heart, so I think I'm going to risk it.

I lean back and bury my head in Biscuit's fur, enjoying the feeling of his rising belly. After glancing to my left and watching Group 4 fuss over an unconscious Tess, I look away and start thinking again, this time about the way I rejected Lissandra's declaration.

My logic is fairly simple.

There must be a way to become an Absolute without a declaration, possibly even a candidate. Why though? Well, the first generation of each planet can only be declared over the course of the tutorial, and I think it would be foolish to rely on that alone.

There might be higher floors where such declarations grow more likely, but I also can't quite imagine a planet going without an Absolute simply because they were unlucky enough not to be declared over the course of the tutorial.

To be declared an Absolute candidate, you need to be vouched for by someone capable of such judgment, and meeting Absolutes and surviving the experience seems to be extremely rare. So I'm absolutely sure there has to be a way.

Another thing, I got a good chance to watch the others during the tournament. Even though I went in with a good bit of hesitation, now that it's over, I can say with confidence that I am strong. Really strong. I was better than any of them, and I've earned that title. Even Lissandra was ready to declare it herself.

But I can also say that was unusual for her, especially after all that talk about me only being able to become Champion at best and her declaration that she'd be the villain standing in my way. I think she must have lowered her standards just to declare me, since she'll be leaving soon, and given that she'll either die or escape the tutorial.

This is not something I can accept. Some time ago, I would have welcomed the handout, just like when I accepted the Champion Candidate declaration. But now I've seen what I'm capable of compared to others. So why not push myself just that little bit further and do it on my own?

That also ties into the last part of my thinking: the rewards.

If I can become an Absolute Candidate on my own, before my next primary class upgrade or even before I get my third trait, it could turn out to be something truly special. I've known for a long time that the system takes a variety of factors, including my past performance, into account. I also know the next primary class upgrade probably won't happen until I've reached level 450 and the tutorial ends. But for now, I can channel my inner Savant and just be patient.

And once everything clicks into place, it will all be worth it.

Chapter 598: Nothing I couldn't deal with

After a few days, Biscuit starts shrinking from his giga form. It's sad to watch, and I wish he would wake up before he regresses completely, so he could carry me instead of the other way around. But there's nothing I can do. It seems like he ate something and pushed himself too hard trying to avoid slipping into another food coma, which he ended up in anyway, the moment Lissandra found him with Tess.

Part of me suspects he's actually trying really hard to shrink back to his normal size just so he can be carried around again.

Tess, and yes, I mean the dumbest human on the 7th floor, is also awake. She's still adjusting and spending her days with Izzy and sometimes Sophie, in a house that Sophie grew from one of the local trees. There are others too, housing our individual rooms.

My curiosity is killing me, and I want to pry all the information I can out of Tess, but I get over it and spend time hunting down the mimics that have been appearing in the area.

Currently, it seems Lissandra is letting the weaker ones pass on purpose, not to mention that she disappears every once in a while and does crazy things. Most of the time, I don't even know what it is, but judging from the wavelengths of mana around her and the structure of the skill she activates in the process, it is some scary, scary stuff. Just trying to decipher it makes me pass out for hours at a time.

I think she's still trying to find what exactly happened and searching for the Progenitor Mimic in the process, which is doing its best to hide while throwing everything it can against Lissandra in hopes of distracting her or slowing her down. The waves keep getting stronger, and they're happening more frequently. But I think it's only a matter of time, and knowing Lissandra, she's already cut off any means the mimic had of leaving this planet.

Even if she's not as powerful as she was in her prime, I don't think there's any Absolute out there who could overpower her. Like us, she's been using the regenerative aura of the tournament floor to train and experiment. So while her passives, stats, and traits aren't as impressive as they used to be, I think her active skills are close to the level they were back when she was hunting down Rulers.

One day, she comes across me while I'm training with my Ignition heart and observing my passive. The way she stands there feels almost awkward, but her words aren't.

"I've already spoken to the blonde," she says.

"Yes, but she was much more controlled about it. She's perceptive and understood the situation right away when she and your bond stayed behind. Waiting was an option, but she chose otherwise. Her decision was deliberate, driven by a simple reason: her refusal to be a burden. Meant to be a statement that she doesn't need to be saved or protected, and that she won't be used as leverage against her group, even if it means bearing the full weight of the consequences."

I nod, "I should have known that."

"Would that have made you behave differently during the tournament?"

"Likely not. So what will you do now? We made a deal, and now I've gotten almost nothing out of it."

Not even for a moment does she seem taken aback. "I have already spoken to the blonde and shared some information with her, including a technique that will be helpful to her. Even though much like you, she doesn't seem to like me, I don't think she's dumb enough to throw it away. As for you, I agree that I still owe you. I'm sure you've already thought about it and have something in mind for what you want."

"Yes, it's simple: Save Myrra too."

"Little pup, that's something I have already--"

At this, I interrupt her, "I know you would throw her away if you thought it improved your chances. I saw you kill your disciple, so I don't have much reason to trust you. I want you to save her, even if it hurts you, no matter the cost. I don't care if it cripples you, or makes things extremely difficult or lowers your chances."

Lissandra looks at me for a while in silence, with a thought flashing behind her eyes.

"Very well, I promise," she says in the end.

At that moment, she looks as if she is tasting these words and examining the effect of that decision. In the end, she tilts her head and smiles as if amused by it all.

"Do you know the state you're in?" she asks out of nowhere.

I nod, "Yup. I'm... well, my body is dying. It'll continue unless I increase my Constitution or stop creating new constructs and making modifications to my body. I know it. I've learned enough about body modification to recognize the signs and understand what I'm doing."

"Yes, but it's something that can be corrected with enough focused effort. Your constructs and the modifications you've made to your body are functional, but they're still far too unstable compared to the system-generated equivalents. If you continue developing along your current path with the same kind of enhancements, I'd estimate ten to twenty years before the structural strain and mana flow inconsistencies either cripple you permanently or trigger cascading side effects beyond your control. That outcome could be fatal. And that's already accounting for your current rate of progress, your healer's improvements, and any external support."

"I know," I repeat.

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"You won't change the way you go about things?"

"Nope."

She shakes her head, and I catch the faintest smile on her face. "Little pup, when you make it out of the tutorial, find a way to survive all this. Then, when you're ready, come find me on Eladore."

"Only if you succeed where every version of you has failed, along with everyone else," I say.

"Such a useless thought," she says, with her posture straightening, and as her mana dances across her skin.

A few days later, Lissandra leaves to eliminate the Progenitor Mimic she finally managed to locate. The potentially massive pile of eyes, mouths, and tentacles has probably set traps for her, so the extermination could take some time. It might even end with the planet being destroyed, considering the current state it's in.

Put simply, the situation here is not good. Mimics are everywhere, lumorans are few, and the arrays that connect to the other planets have been destroyed, cutting off any chance of mercenary support.

Part of me wonders how I would handle these mimics if I were an Absolute. Another part thinks that to reach a certain level of power, you need to be as confident and bold as Lissandra. One part of me keeps training, another scans the area, and the last one watches Myrra as she says her goodbyes. She and Liss will leave as soon as the Progenitor Mimic is dealt with. If all goes well, that will mark a successful end to our floor quest.

This floor has been interesting... it's a huge mess, and whatever the system wanted to tell us probably went over our heads because of this walking catastrophe that joined us. That also reminds me that I do now have those thermonuclear warheads my sister gave me. Some brothers might get a pocket knife as a gift, but whose sister gives them a weapon of mass destruction?

"Nat?" a young voice says, pulling me out of my thoughts, and I follow it to look at Izzy.

"Yes?"

"Tess wants to talk with you."

"Got it," I say as I move past her and head toward the house where Tess is still recovering. There are no signatures aside from her own.

I move in, and for the first time in a while, I look straight at her—this time she's not unconscious. This time, she's standing proud with her crown floating over her head and already storing primordial lightning, just in case.

I could probably say something about how it's not really the best idea to train right away, but something tells me that would just be hypocritical.

Otherwise, she's wearing Earth clothes, from the pile I bought from Gloria, which the girls immediately seized and must've shared with her. She's wearing a set of gray shorts and an oversized white shirt with short sleeves, as if she just got back from the gym. There's even some sweat beginning to bead on her forehead as she welcomes me with a smile. And her blonde hair has been cut once more, styled such that it barely reaches her shoulders, hanging in gentle waves of gold to frame her face.

"Tess, have you been training?"

"Yup. I got rid of Maya and Soph and did a bit of training in secret. I bribed Izzy to keep quiet about it."

I nod and create a manabloc chair, and take a seat facing her.

My reaction must have amused her, as her smile broadens and she takes a step over to me, reaching out to me as she does so.

I grab her hand, and she pulls me up from the chair I just sat in, then, without any warning, pulls me into a hug. With her superior physical stats, she squeezes me quite tightly, and I hesitate for a moment before hugging her back.

After a while, I feel like that's enough and tap her back, giving the universal signal to let go, but she doesn't. Instead, she continues to hold me tighter.

She isn't crying, and her body isn't shaking; my kinetic senses don't detect anything like that. So I just sigh and keep holding her until she starts acting giddy and begins swaying gently from side to side.

Remembering that it is something she likes to do, I match her movement for a while until she lets go of me, steals the manabloc chair from behind me, and pulls it under her to sit in. Instead of fighting her, I make a new one and sit opposite her.

"I leveled up my subclass to Adept, along with a bunch of other skills. By a lot," she says proudly.

"Congratulations."

"Thank you. I have heard a lot about the tournament. Sounds like you had it pretty rough."

"Nothing I couldn't deal with. I heard you had it pretty rough yourself."

"Nothing I couldn't deal with," she smiles at me, but doesn't expand any further.

I take it all as a signal that she doesn't want to talk about it, so I decide to let it be.

"I also heard you got to see your sister," she says.

"Yes, Victoria is just as lovely as always; the Cockroach even declared her an Absolute Candidate."

"I always thought she would manage that. I hoped I could meet her, but I guess we'll have another opportunity during the third tournament."

"She still remembers you and even called you a cutely naive blonde."

"Well, I used to be that way back then. Did she bully the others?"

"You know her; there is no chance she didn't say some 'don't take it personally but you suck' kind of things to them."

"That's true, but it might also make them push a little harder. Maybe that was her real intent all along."

"Nah, she doesn't care about them. I love my sister, but I have no illusions about how she sees others."

Tess nods in response, and for a while, we both stay quiet. The whole time, she keeps glancing at me: my face, my neck, my hands, my clothes. I do the same, studying her in return.

The silence stretches on, and I can't help but feel a bit amused by how strange it feels to face her again after these weeks apart and everything we've both been through.

"Welcome back, Tess," I say in the end.

"You'll need a lot more than that to get rid of me," Tess says with a smile.

Chapter 599: Freedom

All of us sit around one of my trademarked thermal cubes that, with the help of kinetic energy channeled through fine tuned internal spaces, emits a faint crackling noise, not unlike a campfire. The heat also fluctuates, radiating outward in waves similar to a real, crackling fire, rather than being a stable source of heat.

Tess lifts her eyes from the cards she is holding, "They really made collector cards for the higher ranked attendees."

"Yup!" Dennis nods excitedly. "Aaron and I have probably the best collection out of Earth's tutorial. We even have a shiny Noname!"

I lift my eyes off the orb I'm training with. Shiny what?

Dennis shows Tess the card, which features a drawn sketch of my face, which, for some reason, looks extremely punchable. The artist clearly has a talent for caricatures, since I'm pretty sure my face doesn't actually look like that.

Aside from that, beneath the face is a dense field of text, the same text I saw on my card earlier, with some new additions.

Even the alias "Noname" has been scratched out and replaced with the name Nathaniel Gwyn. The card itself is of much higher quality than the previous version. It's been made from some sort of extremely light metal with edges and a back that shines with a golden, metallic finish.

I hate it.

Meanwhile, Dennis continues to blabber, "The creator apparently only had enough time to make five shiny Noname cards, so it's super rare! Besides that, I also got a Shiny Tacita and a Shiny Derick. Apart from that, I have all the normal ones for all the kings."

"What?"

"Please never change. Anyway, I already heard a few things from the girls, but I will look over the cards, given that they seem to contain useful information. But... calling him a "Mana Daddy" might have been taking things a bit too far," she giggles, "and what kind of "Note" is: can be lazy as fuck, likes to stay behind, charge his attacks, and then kill steal?"

"That one is very accurate!" Aaron quips, joining the conversation, "I heard the creator discussing it with a pair of experts from Hell difficulty."

I turn away from the group and watch as Myrra begins to walk away from the group. She already said goodbye to everyone except one person, and now she's just waiting for Lissandra to return and for this floor to end.

The sky is dark, but high up there, a pale blue color fluctuates through the sky, almost like polar lights. Once in a while, earthquakes tear through the ground, seeming to shake the planet to its core. There seems to be some sort of field protecting us, judging by the way entire mountains crumble and vegetation disappears under the influence of mana radiation mere miles from our position.

Holding Biscuit in my arms, I stand up and head towards Myrra.

As I walk, the corgi in my arms suddenly twitches and opens his eyes. Surprised by the unfamiliar surroundings, he startles and starts squirming to get out of my grip. Then he sniffs the arm I'm using to

hold him. Almost instantly, he freezes, and I can practically see him processing the things he's smelling. After a moment, he closes his eyes again and goes still.

His breathing is different now, clearly showing he is awake and just pretending to sleep.

Damn it, Biscuit.

I don't say anything out loud and instead pull him closer to my chest, continuing to hold him while walking toward Myrra.

"Is this my goodbye gift?" she asks, glancing at Biscuit.

"Was the bag of deer jerky not enough?" I ask, and the two of us closely observe the corgi in my arms.

He twitches once, twice, and even his eyelids move as if he were about to open his eyes, and I sense the faintest attempt at telepathic communication, likely to call me an asshole or something worse. But in the end, he continues to pretend to be asleep.

While I watch her curiously swaying tail, I ask, "Listen, Myrra, among lynthari, what kind of gesture is pulling someone's tail, if you were to compare it to human customs?"

I don't tell her, but every time I see it, I get the feeling I need to pull on it. I think that's normal, totally normal. I just can't imagine anyone having a pet and not trying to pull its tail at least once. I pause my thoughts. Not that I think of Myrra as my pet, of course.

The tall lynthari tilts her head and smiles, "I think for a human it would be a gesture similar to this."

She takes a step around me and then slaps my butt. It is a perfect slap that sends the sound throughout the area. For the briefest second, she leaves her hand on it and even gives it a squeeze before letting go and stepping back out in front of me.

There is no shame in her golden eyes.

"Did you just sexually harass me, Myrra?"

"Did I? Well, don't think I haven't noticed the way you look at my tail. But since we won't be seeing each other for a few years, you can pull on it. I'll allow it this time."

"I've changed my mind."

"It's for free."

"I'm not interested anymore."

"Come on, feral one."

"I'm getting scared, please stop."

She laughs in her typical way, and I can tell she's in a good mood by the way her fangs make themselves known in her smile.

But then a notification pops up to interrupt us.

Alert: Narrative irregularity confirmed. Progression has deviated from the floor's designated parameters. Escalation exceeds acceptable thresholds.

The current scenario is no longer compatible with the floor's intended structure. Recorded wave completions have surpassed all historical data. The competition rate exceeds statistical maximums. The floor has been cleared with total efficiency, exceeding the expected range of outcomes.

All Rulers assigned to this cycle of the tutorials have been notified.

Unregistered influence has been identified. Identity does not correspond to any system-approved entity. No matching designations found across current or archived cycles. Origin point obscured. Interference traces persistent across multiple sectors. Behavioral pattern inconsistent with allowable roles.

Primary reward output has been adjusted and significantly reduced.

Additional interference detected. Initiating further reward reduction sequence.

Unauthorized entity presence is confirmed. Trace patterns do not match any known or permitted variables.

Administrative Rulers have been notified.

Automatic response protocols have been initiated. A containment model is being generated. Observation priority elevated. System integrity remains intact. The current result has introduced instability into the cycle's progression metrics. An internal audit has been scheduled.

All further actions subject to direct Ruler oversight.

Notice: Despite irregularities, the main quest objectives for Floor 7 have been fulfilled. Completion is officially recognized.

Even more notifications appear after that, all in the same manner, which shows how crazy and unexpected it would be for an attendee to kill an Absolute. More checks run, and afterwards, even more appear. As if the tutorial system itself were confused by Lissandra. That also clearly confirms the things she's told me before. It really does seem that her time is ticking away.

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Part of me wonders why she even bothered, knowing what would happen, but as I glance at the rewards, I think I understand.

The rewards are incredible. Even after all those reductions, they're still way too good. It's probably her idea of a parting gift, maybe even a kind of apology. It's strange because I'm sure she would still have killed anyone from group 4 if she thought she had to. I'm sure she would have let Tess die, just like she clearly told me before.

Maybe this is just how people work.

Another notification pops up.

Congratulations! You've successfully completed the 7th floor's main quest. An entrance to the eighth floor has been created.

The entrance appears, and behind it lies a grand room, lit by soft, diffused light reflecting off polished marble floors and high, mirrored ceilings. Every surface is covered in detail, the walls are lined with velvet drapes, and carved columns are lined in gold, and chandeliers hang from the ceiling, heavy with crystal.

Inscriptions run across the many surfaces in the space. The walls, the windows. The furniture itself is oversized and sculpted, lacquered and cushioned in rich fabrics. Tables hold decorative pieces with no clear function: vases, jeweled relics, and small statues carved from gemstone. Each item is expensive if only for the sake of being expensive.

"I have to go now, feral one," Myrra says to me, and I follow her gaze to where Lissandra has appeared and is standing, waiting.

Before Myrra can walk away, I call, "It would suck if you just died now."

She stops for a moment and looks at me, "See you later, Nathaniel."

I nod, "See you later."

I then sense Biscuit connecting with her and also sending a message, which makes her chuckle for a moment. With a few nimble steps, she reaches Lissandra and puts her hand on the silver-haired woman's shoulder.

The Absolute doesn't even look my way anymore, and both of them disappear, entering Beyond.

I turn away to group 4, who are already beginning to stand. The barrier Lissandra has put around the area starts crumbling, and the mana radiation that fills the continent, or perhaps even the rest of the planet, begins seeping through.

Looking at me, Tess nods, and together with everyone else, she steps through the portal. Then I do the same and find myself in the same room I observed through it.

Just before I take a moment to reread the notification.

Welcome to the 8th floor: The Academy

For completing the 7th floor, you have acquired:

Passive skill combination token (up to upper arcane)

1,000,000 shards

Communication with your disciple for 10 minutes

Send a single item to your disciple (up to epic rarity)

What incredibly ridiculous rewards. I wonder what they would've been like if we had managed to kill an Absolute on our own and the rewards hadn't been reduced.

After confirming that everyone's here and that we're currently alone in the room, I open up the new floor quest. I'm eager to see what this floor, called The Academy, contains.

Floor Quest:

Locate and protect the Ruler Candidate

Rewards:

???

Two 14 Day Beyond stay tokens

100,000 shards

Trait strengthening token (up to 2nd stage)

POV Warden of the Parallax Eyes, Kyralon

One of the oldest velnar in the system straightens without warning. His black eyes, shimmering with starlight, drift across unseen paths as he rises from the low table. Passing by, he selects a single oval-shaped mana stone from the countless others arranged on the shelves and walks toward the balcony.

There, he sits in his chair, as the mana stone in his hand unfolds, expanding into the shape of a transparent blue book. He reaches into a hidden pouch with the faint symbol of a black palm on its side, and draws out a wooden pen that otherwise looks entirely mundane.

If any knowledgeable Absolute were to see it, they would recognize it instantly. They would realize that it's been made from wood of a remarkable tree that no longer exists. The pen itself holds enough value to be traded for a smaller planet.

Kyralon comes to a halt. A layered field unfolds around him, enhancing the precision of his trait. His gaze remains fixed on the sky above.

Then he begins to write.

10:03 – A rogue imitation of one of the most powerful combat specialized Absolutes to ever live, Lissandra Hawthorne, entered Beyond alongside a fake Champion candidate from the 4th floor, Myrra. The handlers and Rulers overseeing this cycle were informed of their presence immediately.

10:04 – Ten handlers, all ranked Absolute, joined forces to prevent the two intruders from reaching the 1st floor and deployed spatial locks to contain them on the surface.

The imitation of Lissandra Hawthorne broke through the spatial locks and, along with the Fake Champion Candidate Myrra, reached the Entrance Floor before proceeding directly to the First Floor of Beyond. She then used [Spatial Leap] to appear at the center of the floor. Drawing on her mana, she created an array that covered the entirety of the First Floor. Its sole purpose was to threaten the lives of all attendees present, numbering in the tens of thousands.

10:06 – All attempts by the Handlers to contact or restrain the imitation of Lissandra Hawthorne were halted. Additional Rulers were informed of the situation. The Rulers assigned to this cycle of the tutorial have convened: the Ruler of Diligence, the Ruler of Envy, the Ruler of Greed, the Ruler of Kindness, and the Ruler of Wrath.

10:07 –

10:18 – While remaining on the First Floor, the imitation expanded the killing array into the Second Floor. By breaking additional spatial locks and combining [Control] with [Spatial Leap], she reconstructed the same array below, increasing the number of hostages and beginning to push into the territory of the Third Floor.

Further discussion and voting took place among the Rulers present. Only the Ruler of Greed and the Ruler of Kindness opposed direct action. In conclusion, the Ruler of Envy was dispatched to eliminate the imitation, with authorization to use the main defensive array of Beyond to aid him.

At that moment, Kyralon pauses. The pen nearly slips from his fingers. A flicker of shock crosses his face. His eyes remain wide as they stare into what to everyone else would only be a starry sky.

Then he begins to write again.

10:18 – The imitation of Absolute Lissandra Hawthorne issued a challenge to the Ruler of Envy. The terms were clear: she and a lynthari would be granted freedom, with all present Rulers being required to intervene to ensure the terms were upheld. In return, she wagered her complete understanding of the skill [Control], along with the safety of the Beyond attendees and the structural integrity of Beyond itself.

For only the fifth time in recorded history, the system judged an individual capable of directly transferring their understanding of an Active Skill. The Ruler of Wrath and the Ruler of Greed accepted the terms of the challenge. The Ruler of Kindness and the Ruler of Diligence cast their votes in opposition.

Kyralon looks to the sky once more. The anger surfaces. For a moment, it seems like he may stop writing entirely, but in the end, he continues with a clenched hand.

10:18 – The Ruler of Envy initially intended to reject the challenge and deploy Beyond's defensive array against the imitation. However, another Ruler intervened. The Ruler of Pride appeared briefly, issued a single instruction to the Ruler of Envy, and then departed without further involvement.

After a slight modification to its terms, the challenge was accepted, and both the Ruler of Envy and the imitation of Lissandra Hawthorne were transferred to the Eleventh Floor of Beyond, where the battle commenced. In accordance with the Ruler of Pride's instruction, the defensive array was not employed by the Ruler of Envy during the confrontation.

10:21 – The Ruler of Envy has died.

10:22 – The Ruler of Patience, the Ruler of Chastity, the Ruler of Temperance, the Ruler of Humility, the Ruler of Lust, and the Ruler of Gluttony entered Beyond. Their vote was unanimous: the imitations of Lissandra Hawthorne and the Fake Champion Candidate Myrra were not to be permitted to leave.

To avoid violating the previous vow, it was decided that, through a loophole, Myrra would be killed, while the imitation of Lissandra Hawthorne would be granted "freedom" by being relocated to the 12th Floor of Beyond, a floor that even the Rulers have yet to clear.

The imitation of Lissandra Hawthorne requested that Myrra not be executed, but instead be permitted to join her. A coalition of Rulers agreed, on one condition: Lissandra must cripple her own mana heart and relinquish the dagger she carried.

Without hesitation and without protest, the imitation of Lissandra Hawthorne destroyed her mana heart and surrendered the dagger, solely to allow the Fake Champion Candidate Myrra to survive.

10:23 – Spatial locks were applied to the 12th, 11th and 10th floor to prevent further movement between those floors. The imitation of Lissandra Hawthorne and her now-disciple, Fake Champion Candidate Myrra, remain confined to the 12th floor of Beyond.

Chapter 600: Ultimate goal

Your performance up until now has been judged, and your role for the 8th floor has been assigned.

You have been assigned as Assistant Professor to Professor Elian.

And that's it. The notification disappears, and there is no more information. No goddamn map, no more details or anything. The only thing that changes is my clothes, which go from a comfy white shirt and sweatpants to a black suit with a black shirt, jacket, and pants, paired with a light blue tie.

Before I start complaining, I decide to take a quick look around. Everyone else is wearing different clothes as well and seems to be taking a moment to reread the message, scan the area, and simply get used to the feel of the new uniform.

"Assistant professor as well?" Sophie asks, coming to a stop by my side.

She's wearing the same style of black clothes, with a pale blue sweater instead of a tie. Understanding her logic, I look around, and it seems like only the two of us are wearing this particular combination of colors.

As we start sharing information, it becomes more obvious.

Sophie and I as assistant professors.

Tess and Maya are due to serve as guards for some of the more important noble students visiting the academy, and have therefore been dressed in a simpler set of clothes than Sophie and I. Their attire is similar in style, though it's less luxurious overall, and gray seems to be the prevailing color.

And I ask myself: What the hell kind of setting is this?

After an hour of planning, we finally leave the room, bringing all of our stuff with us, yes, even the thermonuclear warheads. There's probably a joke to be made about bringing weapons to school, but I'm already too exhausted just thinking about this setting.

As we exit the room, the space opens up into a huge, beautiful garden. There are fruit trees, beautiful flowers, and a number of fountains that I am sure took more time to create than some skyscrapers on earth. The artwork and the inscriptions that guide the water flow are simply dizzying.

All around us are small groups of students, all wearing the same clothes as the students in group 4. Most of them are humans, but I do see some thylarin, as well as a few representatives of whatever race Beatrice and her father, the Archon, used to be, pink hair, pink skin, white freckles, and eyes containing an odd mix of greens and blues.

Upon seeing them, we also notice a significant difference to the previous floors: No one has that text above their head indicating their level or class.

We've decided to let go of our constant wide range scans, which almost everyone in our group has some version of. There would seem to be a high possibility that, much like our experience on the 2nd floor, something like that could be taken as an insult in a "civilized" nation. So everyone sticks to surface observations.

As we look around, I try to compare it to the 2nd floor, Lissandra's Eladore. The level seems somewhat similar in terms of inscriptions, but back when we were still on the 2nd floor, none of us got the chance to visit any of the capitals for a better comparison. Still, currently, I go with the idea that they are

somewhat similar, especially after recalling the current Floor quest. Just how can something as ridiculous as a Ruler Candidate need protection, much less exist?

Slowly, everyone separates and heads off in their own directions, keeping an eye on the countdown timer to meet again at the scheduled time later. There is no connection between us currently, as in an advanced area, it should be easily detectable by someone and could raise questions. It is a weird feeling after months of being so used to it.

I look down at the two huge boxes containing the gift from my sister and some of my other stuff, and I sigh, what now?

Then a voice calls from behind me, "Assistant Professor Gwyn, may I ask you where you have been all this time?"

I turn around and immediately know I will hate this guy.

He is slightly taller than I, with hair an even more vibrant shade of blonde than Tess's, while also managing to be longer than her current style. His eyes are violet, and a golden circle shines around his pupils, a clear sign of Mana Wavelength Iris, the same trait I possess.

The man is wearing a suit in a style not dissimilar to mine. Unlike my all black attire with a pale blue tie, he has gray pants and a vest, and there is a round golden pin on his jacket.

"This is your first day, and yet you've already managed to be late by slacking somewhere in the gardens. And may I ask you what all this garbage is?"

After gesturing at my stuff, he continues to let out a stream of very interesting and sometimes indirectly insulting words, and I take notice of the way he does so just loud enough to keep his voice from carrying too far, and only after making sure no one happens to be around to see or hear him. There is even a weak barrier that's currently flickering around us.

He lowers his voice further as a group of students passes by, and he greets them with a brilliant smile. A few girls in the group blush and start giggling, and a boy bows slightly, looking at him with clear admiration.

That smile remains only until they are gone, then he turns to me, "Do you not know how to talk?"

I simply shake my head and reply. "I apologize, I got lost."

He shakes his head in turn and snaps his fingers, creating a fluctuation of very low frequency mana that quickly spreads throughout the area. And just a few seconds later, a man appears, bowing and barely lifting his head from the ground.

The man is clearly a servant and asks politely, "What can I help you with, Professor Elian?"

"Pick up all this stuff and bring it into Assistant Professor Gwyn's office. And you," he says, turning back to me, "I will see you later."

With that, he leaves.

I allow myself to observe the servants that appear next to the first one as they efficiently collect my baggage to bring to the office I apparently have.

And I ask myself again: What the hell is going on with this setting?

POV Earth

A man in an airtight suit enters the glass room. At the center of which sits a sterilized stainless steel table holding the corpse of an animal. An unusually large brown wolf.

"So, what do you have so far?" the man asks.

The other two men in the room stop what they're doing and look up. Next to them is another table cluttered with various tools: broken scalpels, saws, knives, and an electric cutting saw.

"Yeah, we broke almost every saw, knife, and tool we had. The skin is far more durable than it has any right to be, and the bones are incredible. The muscle tissue is much denser than anything I've ever seen, and the organs are like nothing I've seen before," one of them says.

"Do you have the results from the scans we did earlier?"

"Not yet. But I have to ask, sir, how the hell did someone manage to kill this thing?"

"That? They poisoned the corpse of an elk and left it nearby for the wolf to eat. Apparently, they used enough poison to kill an elephant, maybe more, and it still took hours. But never mind that. We have another one slated for you tomorrow."

"Oh? What is it this time?"

"One of those huge ants that have started spreading across Africa."

"Well, I won't complain, sir, but I'll need a bigger budget, better equipment, and more staff."

"You'll get whatever you need. Don't worry about the budget."

POV Earth

"Have you seen? Out of nowhere, the Moonster started curling up and twitching like it was dying."

"I don't think there's anyone who hasn't seen it; there are live-stream telescopes focused on that spider 24/7. Didn't it have those spasms for days?"

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"Yup, poor little girl."

“Hehe, sure, so what did you want to say? What conspiracy are they passing around this time?”

“Nothing! I got a notification just a few hours ago, and it seems like she’s okay now and has started wrapping herself in some sort of web.”

“She?”

“Well, Luna, now the Moonster, everyone calls her a 'she'.”

“Damn it, man. By the way, have you seen all those crazy AI CG videos? People flying around, shooting flames from their hands, and throwing lightning and stuff?”

“Yeah, but they keep taking them down. And aren't these guys saying everything in the videos is real?”

“They are. And some of the clips are wild.”

“...Man, I just wanted to watch cat videos.”

“Same. Now I’m out here questioning reality because some guy lit up like a lightbulb and started floating up into the sky.”

“And no one’s talking about it on the news.”

“Of course not. They’re still busy covering that senator that got caught cheating on his wife and that huge sinkhole that opened up in Texas.”

“Priorities, man.”

POV Earth

A group of boys sits around a table in a friend's house. The mood is light as they get caught up in all their joking around, just a bunch of friends with a common sense of humor and interests.

One of them coughs and straightens, taking on a more serious tone. The others follow suit, putting on their most serious faces.

"My fellow men of developed taste, it is my pleasure to say that we have come one step closer to one of the ultimate goals of the human race," he says with complete sincerity.

One of the boys almost breaks, his eyebrow twitching, as he nearly bursts into laughter, but he holds it back, and the other boy continues.

"After decades of hardship and a life void of all meaning, we are now one step closer to that ultimate goal."

He pauses dramatically, and the silence stretches on far too long, and breaking that silence, he speaks in a deep voice with fanatical light shining in his eyes.

"Catgirls. Yes, my friends, you heard that right. It might not just be a distant dream, not something for our descendants to experience, but something we might live to see ourselves."

Someone lets out a laugh but quickly falls silent as the others look at him. The first boy takes his tablet from the table and unlocks it to open a URL he has saved. That done, a video starts playing.

A young woman in the video smiles brightly, recording herself in selfie style as she walks through the city. The architecture around her is vastly different from anything on Earth and looks far too realistic to be cheap CGI."

She says, "So, this is my favourite floor so far for sure! Virelia is so beautiful, and look!" She turns the camera, and a tall woman passes by, several heads taller than the girl recording, with black hair, matching cat ears, and a long tail.

The tall woman with cat ears even stops and looks at the girl. "What are you holding, human?" she asks, voice full of curiosity.

The human woman smiles brightly and stretches her arm farther so they both fit into the frame. "It's a smartphone! Smile for my friend; I want to show them everything I've been recording!"

The tall woman with cat ears just shrugs and smiles in an easygoing manner.

"F-Fangs, even!" one of the boys blurts out, unable to hold it in.

The video ends, and another begins to play, all of the boys watching as the one holding the tablet grins widely.

POV Earth, Rafael Vaughn, aka Channeler

It has already been two days since I returned to Earth, and since then, I've kept the armor Nathaniel gave me. Part of me wants to worry about the guns being carried by the soldiers around us, but at the same time, I also know the armor is capable of resisting them. Even so, I expect much more hidden weaponry.

So far, I have no reason to act with aggression, so I continue to follow their protocols.

When my group of 10 returned, there were already soldiers waiting, connected to a higher-ranking soldier who flew here by helicopter and arrived at our location in no less than thirty minutes. We found ourselves in a small field on the outskirts of a small city where we were recording scenes for a TV series, most of us were extras or lesser-known actors or cameramen, and the like.

Of course, they tried to lowball us, immediately hoping to bring us under their control, and I am sure they put a lot of work into creating protocols for that purpose. Honestly, it would have been strange if, after encountering those who returned before us, they hadn't thought to search for places where large groups of people disappeared and wait for them to show up.

To make sure someone higher up talks to us, I shared some information. I gave them one of the USB drives we brought. It contains a number of videos we collected back in the tutorial, including footage of the destruction that took place during the tournament, recordings from the different floors, and messages from people confirming their support. Nathaniel's message in particular should carry the most weight.

The recordings of his performance include him melting the city and wiping out thousands of attendees, surviving a floating island falling on his head, and his movements that time his hair turned white, in particular the way he maneuvered at speeds the cameras could barely follow, not to mention the way he faced down all those powerful monsters. I even asked an attendee who used to be a professional editor to put together a proper cut for us.

After that comes the video Izzy recorded. I still remember being there when she did.

In it, Nathaniel turns to the camera and says, "What? You want a message from me for the people from Earth?"

"Yes! For the soldiers, maybe even the president!" Izzy's young voice says from behind the camera in her hands.

Nathaniel shrugs and looks right at the camera, "Channeler, the dude in the fancy armor with a uselessly handsome face, is with me, he represents me and, to a lesser extent, my sister."

"That's all?" Izzy asks in surprise.

"What else is there to say? Assuming they aren't all dumb fucks, they'll understand the implications."

"Oh, that's true, you mean bombing them and stuff," she calls happily.

"Why would I cause myself trouble by hurting innocent people? I'll just find whoever gave the order and kill that guy. I don't think anyone can stop me, even if it does turn out to be the president or something."

The way he said it wasn't even meant as a threat, and he likely didn't even realize it. But these words, in the video that Izzy recorded from her height and spoken in his calm voice, bear more than a terrifying implication.

"That seems smart!" Izzy says with her youthful voice, her agreement adding to the meaning.

So I remain confident and wait, refusing every offer they throw our way. I ignore emotional blackmail, hints that we could be heroes to our country, our responsibility, and everything that comes with it.

Then, just a bit later, a new helicopter appears; all black and very quiet. It looks almost like something from a sci-fi movie. A man in uniform steps out and heads toward us with confident strides, and after exchanging a few words with the leader of the group of soldiers, he moves closer.

He shows no worry, and his face remains calm.

"It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Jonathan Kane, US Army Colonel, and I have been authorized to enter negotiations. I have carefully reviewed the videos and read the files you shared with us, and the soldiers stationed here have shared your requirements with me."

He speaks smoothly, and unlike almost every soldier here, he doesn't seem to be nervous, either he hides it well, or he has an overwhelming confidence that we won't be starting anything too erratic.

"As a show of our goodwill in these negotiations, we're willing to share information about the locations of the individuals you mentioned. I want to make it completely clear, and I want to strongly emphasize this, that we will not use them in any way to influence, pressure, or manipulate the situation."

"Sir, how..." the soldier next to him calls, but the colonel simply lifts his hand, and the soldier falls silent.

"Sergeant, please don't interrupt the negotiations. Am I speaking with Mr. Rafael Vaughn?"

"Yes, it's nice to meet you, Colonel Jonathan Kane," I say, "so what are the terms on your side?"

"I would prefer for it to be our side, at least for now. As you surely realize, the following years will be anything but simple. For now, we honestly can't say and have yet to decide how we will be dealing with this situation. We're creating new protocols as we go. So far, we've been resorting to the tactic of throwing money at returnees like you, or offering them something of similar value."

"I can imagine that works pretty well."

"Most of the time."

"What happens when it doesn't work?"

"I'm sorry, I cannot share that information with a civilian."

"I understand. I will take your show of goodwill and would like to contact all the people on my list to inform them of their family's status and ensure that they remain safe. After that, we are willing to negotiate."

The colonel smiles, "Negotiate is quite an amusing word. The current situation is that you will get almost anything you ask for, to be honest."

"Very well. The first name on the list is Thalia Gwyn. You've seen the files on Nathaniel Gwyn and Victoria Gwyn, and I want to confirm that she is safe. Her son also told me to ask you to send her, and I quote him: 'Send my mom at least 50 million dollars to her account or something, and tell her not to buy stocks or any bullshit like that. Oh, and make sure she doesn't get taxed on it or anything like that. She should spend it quickly before the economy goes to shit. Maybe she could build a bunker. Min-Jae, how much do you think a really kickass bunker would cost? Actually, scratch that. Channeler, tell them to make it at least 100 mil and help her get a bunker somewhere on an island with nice weather'."

I stop myself and look at the colonel.

"I... I am already acquainted with Miss Thalia Gwyn," he says.

"Good, then there's a cat called Grumpy; it's very important-"

I continue to give them our people's names and even share estimated locations. I recite all of it from memory, and the Colonel listens patiently the whole time, while a man next to him writes everything down. It's all going very smoothly, and they seem quite reasonable at the moment, which is more or less in line with what I expected. The desperation will come later, when the stronger ones start to appear.

POV ???

"We've succeeded in learning more about the planet we've been paired with, my Lord. It appears that the earliest attendees are already beginning to return, and the awakening process is underway. I will share more detailed information with you later. As you ordered, we've also been trying to determine how such a young planet could have been paired with us, despite being in its non-attack phase. So far, we haven't found an explanation. As far as we know, such a Pairing should not be possible. I've consulted our historians, and the idea of a planet without an Absolute being selected is beyond the pale. It almost seems to go against the very design of the system. More interestingly, we've confirmed that one of the Ruler of Envy's vessels has been stationed on the moon orbiting the planet."

"Does that mean it's under his protection?"

"We cannot say for certain yet, but the vessel placed there is Champion grade on its own."

"Interesting. First, the Ruler of Greed interferes with Pairings, and now the Ruler of Envy is showing interest in a newly added planet. There are even rumors that the Ruler of Pride has emerged from his seclusion and begun to interfere. This is deeply concerning. Go to the Palace. Tell them to uncover as much as possible, even if it means calling in our favors."

"I will see to it immediately, my Lord."