

Tutorial 601

Chapter 601: Professor Elian

At least my office is awesome. It isn't all that big, but it is located in one of the Academy's towers and therefore has a pretty nice view. This tower is entirely reserved for professors or something. Which raises the question: how the hell do you teach people who might not even have the same kind of skills you do?

So I pause to think about it for a moment.

Oh, could it be that each of the professors has a high level in some valuable skill, prompting people and organizations to send students here to acquire desired skills and learn how to level them. Maybe professors are of a higher level, or maybe they only have a higher level in that skill, while young students have no skill at all. Combine that with knowledge about the skill, someone willing to teach and share that knowledge, and you can plan out your growth quite nicely.

You spend years learning a skill, then spend a few years with an assortment of personal tutors to learn different skills that could lead you to certain classes, after which you level up.

With the right application of knowledge, you could optimize your growth. Since there are only ten spots for skills, you could avoid picking useless ones. You could aim for a certain class whose requirements are known, just to get a particular active or passive skill.

The same idea could apply to traits, tempting people to attend the Academy to learn more about their quirks and applications.

Of course, something like that is probably extremely expensive, given the extreme value of such information. Students here must be well off, or from powerful families, perhaps including the descendants of surviving members of the first generation, scions of prominent clans, or people with connections to a Champion or other powerful individual.

Hmm, wouldn't a Champion have better resources than this? But as I think of it, even if your father is a Champion, wouldn't it still be worth sending you to such an academy to create contacts with rich kids of important people? Stronger people often live hundreds of years, and Absolutes go into the thousands, so a few years here isn't much. Plus, maybe there's a bored professor who has an especially fancy skill you might want to acquire.

Eventually, I cut those thoughts short and take another look around.

Everything is vibrant and beautiful, with things jutting out at angles that shouldn't be possible. A tower that defies the laws of physics, trees shaped in ways that don't make sense, massive windows that should lead to their buildings collapsing, and more.

Surprisingly, I don't see anyone flying around, nor do I sense many powerful mana signatures washing over the area. I suspect flight might even be banned in the vicinity, or it is considered rude, together with large-scale scans.

It is hard, but I restrain my instincts and instead rely on detecting vibrations sent through the air by the movements of people and objects around me.

Again, I cut off my thoughts and examine my office once more.

There's the main desk, then there's another one covered in inscriptions. There are a few cabinets and shelves in the corner covered in various items, all in that same grand style, leaving everything a step away from looking over the top, yet it's still nicely balanced. It looks expensive, but it's also kind of cozy and has a high quality appeal. The colors are nice, and the materials are as well.

I have already taken apart a few of the items from the shelves and, unable to put them back together, have hidden the broken pieces behind one of the cabinets.

Absently, I lean back in the chair and put my legs up on the boxes containing the thermonuclear warheads.

Then I finally choose my rewards. "I'll take the three active skills combination token and two 30 day Beyond stay tokens."

As I open my status I can only say that damn, my tokens and shard balance really does look nice right now:

Tokens:

Beyond 3-day stay token

Beyond 1-day stay token

Passive skill combination token (Upper Arcane)

Communication with your disciple for 10 minutes

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

Three active skills combination token

Beyond 30-day stay token

Beyond 30-day stay token

Shards: 1,039,631

Given where I am, it might be a bit irresponsible to combine my skills right away, not that I'm exactly the responsible type. But maybe I could gather some useful information first. It's not like I'm in any rush to use it.

There's also a bit of interesting information included with the active skills combination token.

This token allows you to combine three active skills into one. One skill is designated as the main skill, and the other two function as supportive skills. These are then combined into a new active skill.

Just that short explanation. It is almost unusual, and even though it's brief, it's better than nothing. But I guess when you have something that rare, the system gives out a bit more info.

As for the skills available for combinations, [Focus], [Redistribution], [Eclipse], and [Empyrean Lance] are missing. As annoying as it might be, it clearly shows these skills are a cut above the rest. Even though I wouldn't say that about Focus, it is missing as well. Mr. Focus has served me well ever since the first floor, and I'm sure the two of us will pull through until the end of the tutorial.

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As for the rest, [Perception]

Of course, that does leave the option of setting [Mana Crown] or [Mana Domain] as the main skill and combining it with [Mana Manipulation] and something else for support. Hell, even [Perception] could fit nicely as a supportive skill with certain combinations, maybe if I set [Mana Domain] as the main component.

There are just way too many options. It's just like going into a store with shelves and shelves of snacks and standing there looking for the perfect one you are in the mood for, until you notice the saleswoman watching you, as if she thinks you're going to steal something.

Then that leaves the dilemma of the passive skill combination token being upper arcane. I mean, I'm not complaining. I'm fairly rich, and that thing is very good. Maybe even too good.

The problem is that the cheapest upper-arcane passives start at around 2,000,000 shards, and the better ones trend even higher. So I bet that thing is going to sit there for quite a while if I even get an opportunity to use it before the end of the tutorial.

It's insane to give that to an attendee, and once again, I wonder. This is what I got when Lissandra was doing stuff - like killing an Absolute, and decimating record numbers of waves. Just how much would I have gotten if I were the one who'd somehow killed the Absolute? 10,000,000 shards instead of just the one? 100,000,000 shards? Damn, who knows.

Anyway, it's good stuff, I like it. Gimme more.

I then spend a few hours going through the pile of documents on the table. Most of them seem like lesson materials, all written in that pretentious mana science bullshit talk I dislike so much. Still, as I have many times before, I force myself to work through this glut of information, picking up things useful to me and taking notes along the way.

Then, remembering Professor Elian, I store some of the information in the back of my mind and practice a bit. The entire time, I find myself wondering how the hell I ended up as an assistant professor.

Lastly, there's another big change. The current number of Beyonders from the 5th round of Earth's tutorial now shows 8/10, instead of the 10/10 it was showing not that long ago.

I've been keeping an eye on it, and the number changed about 15 minutes after Lissandra and Myrra went to Beyond.

This could mean a few things. They might have succeeded and left the tutorial, or they both could have died. There's also the chance something else happened, but I don't have enough information to build a theory around that.

Still, I'm definitely hoping for one of these options over the others.

Following behind the blonde professor, I head toward the class hosting his lesson. Part of me is curious about how it might look. I'm also curious about the man himself. There must be a reason I was designated his assistant rather than someone else. Plus, we share the same eye trait, so maybe there's something I can learn from that.

The hallways are empty and our steps echo through them as we reach the class. Professor Elian enters without hesitation and the noise inside stops immediately.

I follow behind him to a small podium set in front of a huge blackboard. There are some unknown inscriptions diagrammed on its surface.

As for the students, there are around thirty of them seated at sloping tables. All of them wear the same white uniforms embroidered with golden ornamentation and black shirts or sweaters. None are carrying

weapons, and the students are mostly humans, thylarin, and that strange pink race. Though there are occasionally students from another race.

Some of the students sit to the side with guards standing beside them, wearing the same clothes Tess and Maya wore. These guards stand there, eyes scanning the surroundings. Though, as far as I'm concerned, it seems to be more of a way to flaunt one's status and maybe sneak in an attendant to annoy others than an actual defensive measure. Who knows how rich people think?

There are also a few familiar faces in the class. The twins are sitting with three other students, and they seem to have formed a band, having taken the opportunity to joke around just before we came in. I'm not surprised. Aaron and Dennis are cheerful, easygoing, and easy to like, so it makes sense that they would quickly find people to team up with.

As Professor Elian starts his lesson, he activates the blackboard. Thin strands of pale-blue mana crawl across the surface, forming clear diagrams with annotations.

"Today we'll continue with theory, focusing this time on layered feedback control in active states," he begins, speaking without looking at the students. "If you submitted your last assignment correctly, you should have already identified the stability breakpoints in the triple-loop model."

He pauses for a second, then draws three intersecting circles on the board. "For those of you who substituted direct feedback with modulated resistance, I hope you enjoyed your oscillation failures. If you are still experiencing overcorrection at phase shift two, consider recalibrating your buffer delay."

Has there ever been a man as confused as me at this moment?

Some of the students shift in their seats. A few proceed to nod like they understand. One guy near the back lets out a quiet sigh and flips to a blank page in his notebook.

"The purpose of this structure," Elian continues, tapping the diagram for emphasis, "is to allow simultaneous manipulation of flow density and shape modulation. Without them interfering. If your mana pool cannot segment cleanly under artificial compression, you are not ready for this."

He must be bullshitting, right?

The professor begins to demonstrate. His hand rises and a ribbon of mana appears midair, flat and pulsing evenly. He twists his fingers slightly and the ribbon splits, one part twisting into a helix while the other flattens out.

“If you cannot isolate three active commands in less than two seconds, stop wasting time and return to dynamic shaping.”

Everyone remains quiet.

Understandable.

Some students glance at each other. One girl starts shaping mana on her own, gets halfway through, and then lets it fall apart. No one comments on it. Elia doesn't even look at her.

I stand quietly off to the side, just observing. That's my only task for today. He doesn't call on me, doesn't ask me to assist.

Still these brave little souls pretend to understand all this bullshit. Notes are taken. Heads nod.

The twins are smart enough to hold back instead of trying to show off and stand out. We've talked about it, and right now, everyone in Group 4 is trying not to show much, at least for now.

The lesson continues and Elia teaches like the sort of man who assumes you already know most of the things he's talking about. He also really seems to like using all kinds of fancy words.

I still don't think I like this guy, but at least he doesn't pull some third rate villain stunt just to punish me or something. Like making me teach the lesson in his place. To be honest, I had expected something like that to happen.

When the lesson nears the end, he introduces me very briefly to the students, and then we leave. Something about the students' reaction to me and his introduction feels off, and as we walk the hallway, the professor turns to me.

"I hope you've learned your lesson. I don't want you causing trouble again, like showing up late, or I'll have to take away your chance to assist in class again," he says, as if it were the worst thing that could happen.

As he leaves, acting like he just punished me and taught me a lesson, I can't help but wonder.

What the fuck is this setting?

Chapter 602: Problem students

I make my way to the garden where we first appeared to meet the others at the scheduled time. Exactly a day has passed since we split, and I've already gathered a little bit of information. Well, most of it comes from stuff I've managed to overhear or notice on my own. It's not like I actually talked to anyone.

Tess appears first, holding Biscuit in her arms, apparently having decided to stay with her for a while. The corgi is probably protecting her while acting as emotional support. Even though he's only awake for one or two hours a day with the food coma he keeps falling into, she doesn't seem to mind.

"I only have ten minutes before I have to go guard that girl again," she says right away.

"Someone interesting?" I ask.

"Human girl, a bit older than Izzy. Extremely bratty. Descendant of a powerful family with ties to one of the Champions of this planet."

"That's all?"

"You don't think that's enough? Nat, there are currently 9 Champions on this planet, and an Absolute living somewhere in seclusion. Even having ties to a single Champion means a lot."

"Huh, I would've expected more from a planet at this stage of development. Didn't Eladore have more?"

"I think Eladore had somewhere around 20, even though the Mind Mage Emperor called his Champions Paragons instead. But I wouldn't use Eladore as my standard. Plus, sometime in the last 50 years, there were some wars that culled their numbers, so that's it."

"Fuck, I hate that girl. Can I smack her?" She groans, clearly complaining about her ward.

"Why not? Do it," I say.

"Absolutely not, don't do that," Tess answers at the same time.

Maya sighs again. "But I want to. That little brat keeps talking shit just because she has some rare trait and her fiancé happens to be a Champion's disciple who's supposedly next in line to become one himself."

"What trait?" I ask.

Maya looks me up and down. "Damn, these clothes really suit you. Why the hell do you dress so lazily most of the time? Such a waste. And it's some sort of powerful physique or something; that little shit keeps blabbering about it but never goes into the details. Also, I spoke to Sophie and she won't be able to join us. She said Izzy and Lily won't either, because they're in class."

"Heyoo," Dennis calls as he and Aaron come out from behind the fruit trees to join us. Even after just a day, their uniforms look messy as if they were only half-awake when they dressed themselves. They're both grinning like they don't have a care in the world. Which honestly makes me think those of us with student roles might be enjoying this place the most.

"Kim won't be coming, he's got class," Aaron adds before stopping.

Dennis shakes his head. "He seems like he's way too into this place. He started studying right away. What a nerd."

I interrupt before they can fully rant. "So, I guess no one managed to locate the Ruler Candidate."

“No way,” Dennis says right away. “We asked sneakily, but people just laughed at us, they even called us stupid for thinking something as ridiculous as a Ruler Candidate could even exist.”

“Kim said he was going to check out the library. But he also asked some old professor about random stuff, then started theorizing and sneaking in questions about the candidate thing. He asked if there was any chance of something like a Ruler candidate. That old guy nearly choked on his tongue and said that in his 400 years or so, he’d never once heard of a Ruler Candidate.”

“Well, that makes for a more interesting setting, doesn’t it? It’s even possible that the person we’re looking for is one of the current Rulers,” Tess muses.

Maya crosses her arms over her chest. “So in the real version of this world, someone else was acting as the Ruler candidate’s guardian and now that person has been removed so that we could step into the role?”

“Possibly.”

“It could at least tell us who the candidate is.”

“But the system is an asshole.”

“I know Nat, damn it.”

“Don’t forget.”

“I haven’t, and I won’t,” Maya promises. “So the candidate could be one of the students. Some of them are ten, while others are in their twenties, and no one even knows what the criteria are. Or... damn it, it could be one of the professors, or even some random animal.”

“They’ll probably be someone weaker than us,” Tess theorizes. “Most of us are over level 250, and we seem to be well above the average level of Hell difficulty attendees. So the average level of attendees coming to this floor could be level 230, meaning that the Ruler candidate is likely weaker than that.”

There's also the possibility that it's a "fake" Ruler Candidate, kind of like how Myrra was a "fake" Champion Candidate on the fourth floor."

"A weak Ruler Candidate," Dennis says with an amused tone. "Aren't the strongest Absolutes generally capable of destroying an entire planet, like complete destruction, not just whatever life happens to be on the surface? Wouldn't a Ruler be capable of more?"

"Not necessarily," Tess disagrees. "We know that the original Lissandra had a habit of killing Rulers, so the difference between a weak Ruler and a powerful Absolute probably isn't all that big."

"So you become Ruler just for a fancy title?" he asks.

I answer this time, "Chances are that the 4th stage of a subclass is reserved for a single person in the entire system. With it comes some access and the ability to slightly interfere with the system, tutorial, Beyond, and stuff. Maybe you get some fancy unique passive tied to that 4th stage as the only person in the universe, or maybe an active skill."

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"Or maybe you get your own kingdom. The system's declaring you a Ruler, isn't it? A Ruler needs something to rule over," Aaron interrupts.

For a moment I want to disagree, but as I think about it, it makes a bit of sense. Maybe instead of a kingdom, you get some sort of extremely powerful domain?

"Whatever it is, search carefully. Don't let your guard down. We know the start of the floors is usually the safest, but there's always the possibility that one of us dies in a stroke of bad luck, so keep that in mind and don't push too hard. It's okay for you to sit back and enjoy your school life a little," Tess warns him.

"You bet I will! Aaron and I already found a bunch of cool guys. I mean, they are a bit snobbish, but they're otherwise fun guys."

Seeming lost deep in thought, Aaron says, "It makes me wonder how things are going to look on Earth once some time passes. People here would proudly walk around, telling you that some Lord Champion passed a mile or two from them. So, how important will we be if Nat becomes an Absolute? You think my kids will be as snobby as these guys, talking about the time their dad was in the same group as the Mana Daddy Absolute?"

"First," I say, and they turn to me, "possibly yes, give it a few decades. Second, say Mana Daddy one more time and I will make sure to spill all the details about a certain 'Miss Tutorial' magazine you guys have been working on with Brainiac and Lootenant."

"Yo, yo, yo! Let's all just calm down," Dennis sputters, interrupting me as soon as he can, and pulling himself closer to me, with his hands on my suit, almost as if he intends to shake me. "It was just a joke, hehe. No need to be petty."

"He is the Ruler of Pettiness," Aaron whispers. "You shouldn't forget that."

"Oh, come on," Dennis smiles and looks up at me. "Me and Nat are buddies, right?"

I stay quiet, which seems to make him even more nervous.

Good.

Tess, from somewhere behind Dennis, says, "I've also heard some rumors about this planet's Absolute. Supposedly, before going into seclusion, he left behind a powerful weapon, and no one knows who has it now."

"What weapon?" I ask, ignoring Dennis.

"I don't know yet. But apparently, it's strong enough to kill even a Champion."

"Could the Ruler Candidate have it?" Maya joins the conversation.

I think for a moment. “Maybe? Assuming the Absolute knew about the candidate and left it for them. Or maybe it has nothing to do with that. I’ll try to ask about the weapon too, but I have to go now. I won’t be able to join you tomorrow, so we can meet the day after that.”

“Sure,” Tess agrees, and the others say their goodbyes.

Before leaving, I make sure to poke the sleeping Biscuit’s belly.

Of course, Professor Elian’s office is much nicer than mine. It has more windows, letting in more natural light. The defenses here are also likely to be better than those one could find in some fortresses. Part of me wonders if it is something he’s made himself or if it’s a product of the Academy.

Even though he lets me in, he ignores me for a few minutes and continues writing on a sheet of strange blue paper with a pen that leaves a tracery of white lines across the page. Every so often, he adds symbols and inscriptions. In the quiet of the room, the scratch of the pen on the paper actually sounds kind of nice.

Someone else would probably be annoyed by being treated this way, but I use this as an opportunity to examine the room, the professor, and the fancy items lying all around the place.

Only after around five minutes longer does he stop, carefully puts down the paper, and leans back in his chair.

“May I ask something of you, Assistant Professor Gwyn?”

“Sure, please do,” I reply, deciding to be polite until I learn more about this floor.

“There have been rumors about an Underground Dueling Network, so please, if you notice anything odd, make sure to investigate. We’ve also been having problems with certain classrooms taking ranking competitions a bit too seriously. I have been notified that some of the students have been planning to blackmail or even wound their competitors, and that is not something we want in the Academy.”

“I will keep my eyes open.”

“Thank you. Do so, and I’ll forget your breaches of protocol from your first day. Now, I’ve been assigned two students, but I don’t have time for them at the moment, so I’m asking you to supervise them. There may be more coming as well. One of the servants will bring you the documents so you can look them over later. And finally, on an administrative note: the head accountant asked me to find out if you have an account you want your salary sent to, or if you’d prefer to receive it in person on a weekly basis.”

“In person is okay.”

“Understood. You can go then.”

The sound of the pen scratching on the paper sounds again, and the door opens by itself and closes quietly as I leave.

An hour later, I get the documents and, giving them a once over, make my way to the classroom mentioned. I also finally find out that the main specialization of Professor Elian is, It’s his particular combination of the [Mana Manipulation] skill and his Mana Wavelength Iris. The man also seems to be a descendant of someone from the First Generation, so there’s apparently a lot of prestige that comes with that.

I even discreetly ask one of the servants about any rumors involving Professor Elian. Whether it’s just the kind of thing people normally speculate about or because of the authority I’ve been given, the servant tells me it’s been theorized that Professor Elian has [Mana Manipulation] at a really high level. Apparently, even a Champion was impressed, especially considering Professor Elian’s age.

From what I’ve heard, Champions usually have skills in the 80s, and Absolutes tend to sit somewhere in the 90s. So maybe mid-70s or higher? That would be quite high, especially since his current level feels somewhat similar to mine, around 300.

He might look like he's under 30, which is young, but he could easily be 100 or older.

Thinking of these things, I open the door and step into the small classroom.

It's a bit later in the day, and the weakening sunlight filters through the windows, casting a warm glow over a dozen tables and smaller blackboards. Even this room carries a certain air of luxury.

Inside the classroom, two students I assume are problem cases wait: a thylarin girl with six arms and a human boy with his guard, a young man standing quietly behind him.

The thylarin girl has the usual pale blue skin, orange eyes, and brown hair. She looks at me with curiosity in her gaze, but sits slightly apart from the boy. The boy, legs crossed, is clearly bored. He has curly brown hair and a noble-looking face.

His human guard stands behind him, dressed in the same gray uniform as Tess. He's unarmed, but one sleeve of his suit is completely missing, revealing a slim, muscular arm covered in tattooed inscriptions. His long red hair and blue eyes give him an odd presence.

Both the girl and the boy seem to be somewhere around 15 years old.

"Huh, where is Professor Elian?" the boy asks.

I wonder what the protocol is for this. Am I supposed to greet him? Should I be the one to speak first after entering? Was his manner of address rude?

Not knowing, I just shrug it off and move to the desk, sitting on top of it. "Professor Elian is busy and has asked me to take care of this."

"You?" the boy asks with clear disdain, looking me up and down. "My parents didn't pay a ridiculous amount of money for me to be taught by an assistant professor. Let's go, Melo. We're leaving," he says to his bodyguard.

It is so cliché, I almost want to laugh. Almost.

I say nothing as he passes by me, and I only speak when he is about to open the door.

"I bet noble ladies' pets have better [Mana Manipulation] than you."

Chapter 603: Kays and Ari

"What did you say?" The human boy seethes, coming to a stop and turning back to me.

"Look, I'm not the type to beat around the bush. Apparently, you're a problem student or something. I haven't read that far. I don't know if the professor sent me because he doesn't want to bother with you, or if he's just really busy. I could probably tell him you threatened me or something and left the lesson, and that I, as an assistant professor, didn't have the guts to stop you. So you can just leave if you want. Oh, and this isn't reverse psychology either. You can do whatever you want. Really, the only reason I mentioned the thing about the noble ladies' pets was because it seemed like a good opportunity."

He takes a few quick steps and opens his mouth, but I speak before he can. "Let me guess. Do you even know who I am? Or who do you think you are? Maybe, do you know who my dad is?!"

Even without saying anything, he closes his mouth and looks at his guard, who patiently waits nearby but does not interfere.

"Kays, just sit back down. I want to see if he is all talk or if he actually has some skill," the thylarin girl calls out, as she taps the table impatiently with an impish expression on her face.

She's barely moved since this all started and continues to watch, like a cat watches a mouse move across the room, considering whether to eat it or leave it alone, both options seem equally likely.

"Shut up, Ari. I do what I want," the boy, apparently called Kays, shouts at her before turning back to me.

As I watch him, I think: Would someone like him survive the Hell difficulty tutorial? I mean, he probably has some talent, but does he have the personality and instincts everyone in Hell seems to have, the ones where you bite, scratch, and grow accustomed to death and blood. I try to estimate his level and search for weak spots as I have gotten used to doing.

Something in my eyes probably disturbs the guard, who steps closer. When I look at him, he continues to stare at me as if prepared to fight.

Before anything can happen, Kays just moves past me and sits behind the table right in front of me. His guard watches me a bit longer, then slowly moves back to his usual position behind the boy.

“So, what now?” I ask.

“What the hell? Shouldn't you be doing the teaching?” Kays asks in disbelief.

“I'm new.”

“Are you kidding?” he asks.

Somewhere from the back row, Ari laughs briefly before standing up and moving to the table closer to me. “Assistant Professor, today we were supposed to study Interference and Disruption.”

“Oh, I see. So, basics.”

Kays groans again. “What the hell do you mean by 'basics'? It's one of the advanced techniques.”

“Huh? Really?”

Kays groans, something I notice he likes to do, and Ari laughs again. She seems to be having a lot of fun.

“Okay, okay, before we start: Why do some thylarin have six arms but most have four?” I ask her.

She doesn't show any surprise; the same amused smile dances on her face. “It is rumored to be a genetic inheritance from a powerful ancestor.”

Hmm, the same answer I got before. It seems my curiosity won't be sated that easily.

“Well, anyway, just create some mana orbs, and I will show you some disruption. Then you can try to mimic it,” I tell them.

“Mana orbs?” Kays asks.

“Yeah, like this.” A bit of my mana seeps out, and I shape it into a perfect orb. Almost absentmindedly, I create one of my training models, version 3.0, very distantly inspired by Liss’, whose variations once made me pass out every time I looked at it.

Seeing the wide eyes of the two students, I realize my mistake and quickly dissolve the orb into something akin to mana smoke. Then I spin the smoke to create another orb.

“C-crazy,” the boy whispers, and for the first time, even the girl is quiet.

“Look, as I said, I’m new. Ignore the previous orb and try making something like this,” I repeat.

“That’s not what I meant...”

“Sure, sure. Orb, now.”

Finally, the two of them each create an orb, similarly sized and pale blue, even though Ari’s seems a bit more stable.

Satisfied, I send a disrupting wave at it, and they both disappear, particles and all.

“Good. Now try to defend against my disruptions.”

“We did,” Kays says.

“What?” I ask.

“We’re expected to defend our creations against disruption during this kind of exercise and lesson, so we did try to defend against you.”

I almost say it out loud, but I stop myself at the last second to avoid depressing the poor kids. What I really wanted to say was, Why the hell was it so easy then?

“I see,” I say. “So you were in this class because you were lagging behind the rest of the class and ...”

“No,” Ari interrupts in the same mischievous manner. “Kays and I are both at the top of the class, and according to the other students, we’re even rumored to be Champion candidates. The rules of the Academy state that we were to be given separate extra lessons by the professor.”

She is smiling again, her orange eyes shining with amusement, while Kays looks as if he has never seen a dumber person than me.

Once again, I stop myself from saying something rude and think, Dennis, Aaron, Min-Jae, Izzy, and Lily will traumatize the fuck out of the students at this Academy if they’re not careful.

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“Okay, let’s try something else. I’ll make an orb, and you two will try to disrupt it so I can see what you can do.”

Saying that, I form a single orb and send it a bit closer to them, then wait.

And wait.

And wait.

“You can start,” I remind them.

Once again, Ari laughs, and Kays seems even more annoyed. He speaks again: "Aren't you too dumb to be a professor? Are you one of those meatheads who became a professor only thanks to combat ability, despite lacking the capacity to teach? We've been trying this whole time; your orbs are just difficult to disrupt."

Hearing that, I examine my orb closely, just in case they're making fun of me. But it's just as stable as before, and its structure isn't being influenced at all. I actually have to look for it to even notice their efforts to affect the construct. Waves are radiating from them toward my orb. Ari even syncs hers with Kays's, trying to make them stronger using some kind of fancy cascading technique.

So, is it their lack of skill, or have I just gone so overboard with my anti-disruption measures that they can barely touch it? Is there even such a thing as overkill when it comes to that? Maybe it's also the difference between kids raised in safety and those of us who've had to use everything we could just to survive.

Or maybe they're just holding back and phoning it in.

Watching them, I lower the integrity of my orb, and when nothing changes, I do it again. Then I do it again. And then once more.

Only then do I notice the edges start to fray and slight disruption at the surface.

At this point, both of them look to be in pain, their foreheads scrunched from all the effort.

"F-finally," Kays breathes out.

Both of them look at me as if expecting a reaction. Still surprised by my findings, I just mumble absentmindedly, "Good job."

"So, what level are you, Assistant Professor Gwyn?" Ari asks, leaning back in her chair.

"Isn't that a rude question?" I ask her.

“Some people like to show off, and others will lie about their level.”

I snort. “As if levels were that important. I’m just a bit over 300.”

“That isn’t that bad. How old are you, somewhere around fifty?”

“What the hell, you brat? I’m not even 24.”

For the first time, she shows genuine surprise. “Assistant Professor, are you from a powerful family, or something?”

“Do I look like I’ve got a silver spoon up my ass?”

“So you must have served in the army, or as a mercenary, guard, enforcer, cleaner, or exterminator. Or was it something else?”

“Something like that. Aren’t you nosy? And I’m an Assistant Professor, so show some respect.”

Kays, next to her, snorts. “Assistant Professor my ass. I bet I know more about the Academy and how it works than you.”

“Talk shit to me when your attempts at disruption get better than some noble lady’s pet.”

“What does that even mean!? And you’re in a prestigious academy. Even if you’re new or a fake Assistant, show some dignity!”

“I don’t give a fuck.”

“What the hell!”

"If any of you tells on me or I hear rumors, I'll fail you for the grade or something."

"Melo, do you see this?" he says in desperation, turning to his bodyguard, who remains quiet and bows slightly.

"Assistant Professor Gwyn is being rude, Sir Kays, but you are the one who started it and have been equally rude," his bodyguard says in a quiet, calm voice.

"At least be on my side for once!"

"I'm on your side, Sir Kays. I would even put my life on the line for you if it came to it, but I don't think lying to you would do you any favors in this situation."

Ari ignores both of them and asks me, "What is your highest skill level?"

"Not telling."

"Are you a candidate?"

"Not telling."

"What traits do you have?"

"Not telling."

"What was the highest-level monster you fought against?"

"A weakened Champion. I got my ass kicked." I decide not to mention Lissandra with her powers restricted.

"Bullshit!" Kays calls out before Ari can react.

I ignore such an outburst, "Anyway, I could probably be an ass and give you homework, but I won't do it. I won't even report you to Professor Elian."

I take a step away from the table and reach my hand out toward Kays. "Your hand."

Something in my tone makes him listen. He reaches out and places his hand in mine.

I don't even use my eyes; my senses are enough as I examine his mana flow and send my mana through his hand. Then I create a short disrupting pulse. He twitches from surprise and almost pulls his hand back, but I hold it. I expand my domain around his hand, rely a bit on the Mana Wavelength Tyrant passive, and use [Eclipse] to resonate with his mana and take control. I repeat the process, sending the same disruptive mana through his hand and, after examining his mana flow again, move his own mana to create a similar wave.

"Good, I got it. Don't use your eyes; use your senses and watch," I tell him as I create another mana orb, making sure to weaken it.

Then I force his mana to move again, sending a disruptive wave that makes the orb's surface flicker.

"Did you catch that?" I ask.

With his eyes wide open, he nods very slowly.

"Good. Try it on your own, okay? And continue until I tell you to stop."

He nods quietly and attempts it, the experience of me moving his mana seeming to make the process easier. It's something I have tried with the twins a few times. It is useful in certain situations despite being completely useless in others.

Kays continues to try to mimic the way I moved his mana, and I examine the parts he gets right and adjust my influence accordingly. When he improves in other areas, I weaken my influence there as well.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 66 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 67]

[Eclipse - lvl 37 > Eclipse - lvl 38]

It takes around ten minutes, but he succeeds and, under his own power, sends out a disruptive wave that barely makes the orb shake. It's much better than his previous attempts.

"See? It's easy. You just move your mana this way, then that way. No triple loop layered lattice recalibrated buffer delay flow density manipulation bullshit."

I move to Ari and say, "Hand."

The thylarin teenager smiles widely and places all six of her hands on mine.

"Damn, you've got all those fingers to count with, and you still suck at basic numbers. I said "hand", singular."

"I was surprised by your differently colored eyes, Assistant Professor. Is that a trait?"

"Yeah, it allows me to see through people's bullshit." I shake and pull five of her hands away, then repeat the same process I did with Kays.

In the end, she turns out to be a bit quicker than he is, but I think that's because she got to observe what we did. Both of them seem to have a similar level of talent. Well, at least from what they've shown me so far.

Satisfied with the lesson, I stand up. "That should be all. Don't forget to leave a good rating."

Before I leave, Ari calls through the door, “Assistant Professor Gwyn, you might want to be careful about showing these things to others. What you just demonstrated usually requires [Mana Manipulation] at least around level 60 or higher, and combined with your young age, it could attract a lot of attention. And I mean “A LOT” of attention,” she emphasizes.

One more time, I look at her, and amused flames dance in her orange eyes before I close the door.

Chapter 604: Walk around the Academy

These kids... it’s almost like dealing with Aaron and Dennis. Maybe I’m truly getting older and grumpier, but when I was younger, we knew how to show respect to a teacher, or we got slapped on the back of the head. I mean, for some reason it happened to me a lot, but that’s not important right now.

I would lament the fact that they can’t all be like Izzy, but that might not be fair. Izzy’s almost thirteen years old, and as she grows taller, she also changes a bit. I mean, she is still the main source of emotional support for group 4 and the primary therapist for our guys, as funny as it sounds. But as of late, she’s been more rebellious and stubborn at times.

Min-Jae has been acting strangely ever since the first event of the second tournament. Apparently, Lissandra had a talk with him, and whatever she said—or whatever conclusion he came to—has made him act... well, strange. It’s hard to describe.

Indeed, even after two years and seven floors, I remain the most normal person in this group, and if that isn’t worrying, I don’t know what is.

To add to my mood, I got lost again, and these damn rules stop me from doing wide range scans or floating into the air. Maybe my stubbornness adds to it as well, but it’s not like I have anywhere to be.

So I walk through the academy, which is huge. It’s like a mix of the Palace at Versailles, Hogwarts, some kind of expensive private university back in the US, and God knows what else.

In some ways, I like it, it looks new, nice, and it’s interesting to explore. The gardens, hallways, all these towers and buildings that should have fallen in on themselves, but manage to stand either because of the weird materials that make up their frames, or whatever inscriptions they have doing the heavy lifting. That also means there’s probably a Core somewhere, along with a control room, multiple mana batteries, countermeasures to people trying to locate it, and all that fun stuff. I wonder: could I get

through all that without anyone noticing? Is it merely rude, or is it actually illegal? If it's only rude, I could totally do it. It's not like I care about my reputation.

I step into another garden, this one filled with incredibly detailed animal statues that make me wonder if they were once real creatures that have been turned to stone. That's when I see Lily.

She and a few other girls and boys are seated on a blanket near the fountain and seem to be having lunch. Each student has a personal guard standing just a few steps away, alert and watchful. Nearby, servants move with practiced grace, refilling cups and handing out napkins as if these teenagers were royalty. There's an air of quiet luxury and control, like everything around them has been carefully choreographed to ensure maximum comfort.

Her neutral face brightens into a huge smile, and without any concern for how it might look, much less any other thought, she gets to her feet.

One of the boys says something, but she ignores him, so he reaches out to grab her hand, and she swats it away like an annoying fly. Even then, it's a surprising amount of force, and the boy, or young man, I should say, clutches his wrist, which seems to be broken.

Oh boy.

With a few smooth leaps that, even without using mana, show the strength of her body, she reaches me and stops just before crashing into me.

"Yo!" she says with that bright smile.

"Aren't they going to think it's weird that you came to greet the Assistant Professor out of nowhere?"

"It's fine. Tess said if that ever happens, I can just say you're a family friend or something, and leave it at that without explaining anything else about my background."

Damn, Tess, have you already predicted Lily would do that and come up with an excuse for her? How scary.

“Well, that’s fine then. Are these guys healers?”

“Kind of.”

“Kind of?”

“Yes. They’re better at healing others than themselves, and most of them are scared of getting hurt. They can’t even regenerate limbs quickly.”

“Well, aren’t healers supposed to be like nobles? Kept safely on the back lines to heal and extend the lives of important people and that kind of stuff?”

“That’s dumb,” she says.

“Yup,” I agree with her, “I mean, isn’t it an insane advantage to heal yourself during combat? I would expect most healers to go that way.”

“Me too! But they said healing skills tend to be very rare, so it’s not worth losing a healer in combat. There’s more value in saving multiple strong people of a similar level to the healer, rather than allowing the healer to fight at that level and risk dying.”

Once again I shake my head and lower my voice as I see one of the boys coming closer, the one whose wrist Lily broke. “So dumb,” I say.

Lily nods, and the boy, well, young man, honestly, joins us with his guard. He has eyes that smile on the outside but seem like they’re ready to stab you in the back at a moment’s notice. At least he can do some healing, given the way his wrist is already recovering.

“Lily, who is your friend?” he asks with that forced smile.

“Fuck off, Walric,” Lily answers without hesitation.

Both the man and his guard stop, surprise washing over their faces.

“E-excuse me, Lily?” he asks as if he doesn’t believe the words that have come from her mouth.

“You have five seconds, and then I’ll do the same thing to you as I did to Xara and Melori.” She faces him, and even though she’s a head and a half shorter than him, the man backs away.

As he leaves, he doesn’t forget to shoot me that cliché look that clearly blames me for his departure.

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When he’s far enough, I ask, “What happened to Xara and Melori?”

Lily shrugs. “We, the ones with student roles in our group, are kind of like transfer students, and they tried to pick on me because I’m new or something, so I... well...yes, I defended myself! Of course, nothing too extensive! They’re just kids after all!”

“Aren’t they the same age as you?”

“They feel like kids, Nat,” Lily says, deflating. “It’s so dumb how sheltered these people are. I know they’re here to learn and pick up some skills before being thrown into fights with monsters, but damn, it really gets annoying.”

“So it sucks? Dennis and Aaron seem to be having fun.”

“It’s not all bad. My room is huge, the bed is amazing, and I even have my own massive bath and training area. There are servants everywhere, ready to do anything I ask. And Nat, the food is so goddamn good. I can also eat so much of it without getting fat, I cannot believe it. Some of the students are nice, snobby, but still nice. So yeah, it’s fun, but I think I’ll be bored of it in a week or two.”

As she talks, I remember my small office and, even though it's nice, it sounds like hers is even better. Damn healers, they sure do have it nice.

"Sounds good so far. Aren't you worried about dear Walric?" I gesture toward the boy, who has awkwardly sat back down with the group.

Lily glances over and then back at me. "Not at all! His uncle is the disciple of a Champion or something, but that's all. I think I could easily beat his guard too if I wanted. He tries to act like he fell for me and makes all these weird faces, but in reality, he's sleazy and wants to 'charm me' just in case. All only because I let it slip that my healing skill is [Reconstruction] and it's apparently a very good skill."

"Well, just be careful."

"I will. See you later! And talk in Community sometimes, you're the only one who doesn't do that much."

"I will, I will. Later then."

She leaves to return to her group, and out of curiosity, I open the Community.

NotAaron (Hell, group 4) - nerd

StrongestOne (Hell, group 4) - I'm not a nerd! It's just that there is so much information in the library!

NotDennis (Hell, group 4) - neeeeerd

StrongestOne (Hell, group 4) - Do I have to give up and be dumb just to get you to leave me alone?

NotAaron (Hell, group 4) - NotDennis does it without trying.

NotDennis (Hell, group 4) - That's just natural talent. Can't teach it.

StrongestOne (Hell, group 4) - Incredible. Truly an inspiration.

NotAaron (Hell, group 4) - Don't hype him up, it only makes him stronger.

I close it again. Maybe I'll check again later.

But before the window closes for the millionth time, I start to wonder if NotDennis is actually Aaron and NotAaron is truly Dennis? Or maybe it's the opposite, after all, they must have known it would be our first thought? Or maybe they knew we would think it would be too simple and think the opposite? But what if they knew we would think that they knew we would think that, and did the obvious to seem unpredictable, knowing it would feel too obvious? Or maybe they went even further, thinking that if they did the obvious, people would think it's a fake-out of a fake-out, and so they'd come all the way back around to assuming the names are reversed, which means they're not?

The worst part is, I'm sure even if they tell us which it was, they'd just lie. Or maybe they'll tell the truth because we'll think they might lie. Or maybe they'll lie knowing we'll assume it's the truth because they expected us to think they might lie, but not actually expect them to lie about it.

These thoughts continue to go through my mind as I continue my walk. The longer I walk, the more surprised I am by the size of this Academy and its facilities. There's an auditorium big enough for thousands of people, each row filled with luxurious seating and enough space for servants to move about freely.

Then there are training halls with fancy sparring circles and training weapons, and some elaborate exercise machines.

There are swimming pools, wellness buildings offering saunas, massages, and whatever other magical wellness things they've decided to include.

Barbers, hairdressers, shops, tailors, restaurants.

Some buildings are well guarded, locked, and extremely mysterious too.

Overall, I'm sure a person could live here their entire life without wanting for anything.

Done with my examination, I turn and start walking back along the pathway between the buildings and the garden, which looks more like a forest. The sun is already setting, and some lamps on the side light up with a cozy glow. Well, not like they can compare to my thermal cubes or pyramids.

I walk for a while, and after a few turns, I notice a presence behind me.

Observing the waves and vibrations the person sends my way, and the length of their steps, I identify it as a woman, they seem to be just about as tall as Tess, but I estimate her strength stat is lower. Dexterity and constitution are hard to gauge just from the surface kinetic senses I'm using.

After a few more turns, that person is still walking behind me, and I detect another presence, much smaller and barely moving, sticking close to the woman in question.

I stop.

She stops as well.

I start walking.

She starts walking too.

This level of shamelessness is almost admirable.

Out of curiosity, I stop and stand in the middle of the pathway for a full five minutes.

She does the same, stopping in the middle of the path, not seeming to care how weird it must look.

And I still refuse to turn around or use more senses. It takes five more minutes before I finally reach my rooms, and the pathway splits. For the first time, my stalker heads in a different direction.

This time, I turn around and watch her, and our eyes meet.

The woman is wearing clothes that identify her as a Professor, and on top of her head sits a big, pointy hat with a wide brim, reminding me of every witch illustration I've ever seen. She also wears a long black robe over her clothes.

On her shoulder sits a tiny brown owl with huge eyes that seem to be watching me as well. Its body isn't moving at all, but its head turns like a human would twist their neck.

That tiny owl is very cute.

My stalker finally disappears from sight, and I decide to visit my office to grab a few things before heading to my room.

Even before I reach it, I know something is wrong. The locks I added in addition to the original ones are gone. Well, maybe "gone" isn't the right word. They are still there, they're just a tiny bit different, as if someone removed them and then attempted to replace exactly the same ones, which shouldn't really be all that difficult since I didn't put much effort into them, not having expected something like this in the least.

I unlock the room and enter, only to immediately notice the change.

One of the two big wooden boxes my sister gave me is missing.

Someone has stolen my thermonuclear warhead.

Chapter 605: Lessons and sandwiches

Sset (Hell, group 4) - Someone stole it?

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Yup, it's gone.

NotDennis (Hell, group 4) - Holy fuck. Should we bail from the Academy?

Noname (Hell, group 4) - It is fine. Vic said the previous owners spent a long time figuring out how to use them. Apparently, they're nearly impossible to detonate without a special mechanism, so they spent months trying to inscribe them.

Sset (Hell, group 4) - Previous owners...So you really think there's no one in the Academy who might recognize what it is, someone who's far more skilled in inscriptions than a bunch of Earthlings with barely two years of experience?

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Nah. There's definitely someone who could do it in days rather than months.

Knight (Hell, group 4) -

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Stop doxxing me, Knight.

Knight (Hell, group 4) - It was you who blabbered your full name for everyone to hear!

Noname (Hell, group 4) - All the marks are gone: the fake ones, the decoys, the hidden ones, and even the hidden hidden ones below the hidden ones.

StrongestOne (Hell, group 4) - Can't you ask the servants who was on your floor or near your office? They have systems for that.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - I already did. I even told the tower butler that something was stolen from me, and we checked the presence detector and the list of people who entered that floor. We found nothing. Well, anyway, it'll probably be fine. See you later.

With that, I close the Community and lie on my back.

Looks like someone wants to play. Fine, I'll give them a few days. If I don't catch them by then, I can use my secret weapon.

As much as I'd like to test myself against the thermonuclear warhead, I'm not willing to risk the others' lives as well.

But if I were alone...

"Assistant Professor Gwyn, may I ask for your assistance?" Professor Elian asks suddenly, turning away from the few dozen students in front of us to address me in the middle of his lesson.

This is the second lesson I've had with him, and it's the first time he's done that since the first lesson, when he punished me so terribly.

I answer and take a step closer toward him. "Of course. How can I help?"

"You're an Amplificator, if I'm not mistaken, correct?"

"Yes," I confirm, seeing no reason to lie.

His Mana Wavelength Iris flashes once as he observes me, the glow pulsing faintly before fading. Then he nods with an unreadable expression.

"That's perfect. What I want you to do now is start releasing your mana. Do it slowly and steadily. Raise the pressure bit by bit and let it spread through the room. I want the students to feel the shift for themselves, to understand what it means when someone like you stops suppressing their presence."

I nod once and begin to release my mana. I shift the flow of Mana Cycling carefully, keeping it steady as I lower the effect of Sneaky Mode, which I've been using the entire time. My mana starts pushing out from my body into the surrounding space.

“Now, listen carefully,” Professor Elian says, facing the students. “Assistant Professor Gwyn's Mana stat is probably extremely high. You can tell just from what we've seen so far. His presence alone makes that clear. There are signs I'm not going to explain just yet, but I'll ask you about them during our lesson three days from now. That should give you plenty of time to think it over.”

I increase the flow just a little. The pressure in the room responds accordingly.

“You're not feeling any sharpness. That would indicate a high Mana Potency upgrade. Amplification doesn't change the nature of the user's mana, only the amount the body contains. As we know, the first stage of Amplification doubles the mana stat. When someone with high amplification stops restricting their output, the environment usually saturates very quickly.”

More students begin reacting. Some shift, adjusting their posture. A few instinctively form minor reinforcement layers along their skin as my mana seeps into the room.

“Good. That's the expected response. When the ambient mana density increases faster than your body's buffer tolerance, your nervous system reacts before your conscious mind does. This is how we measure baseline sensitivity.”

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I release more, curious how long he expects me to push it.

“Notice that Assistant Professor Gwyn is not using any external technique, yet he releases his mana with a high degree of stability, even as the volume increases. This clearly demonstrates an impressive ability to manipulate large quantities of mana, something that most skilled Amplifiers learn. There is currently no shaping taking place, no direction, just an unstructured release. This is important. Amplification makes a difference even without manipulation. The effects you're feeling now are due to the rapid increase in the volume of raw mana around you.”

He pauses to let them sit with the discomfort for a moment. A few of the weaker students start to grow pale, appearing to be on the verge of vomiting. Others clench their teeth.

Some of the bodyguards look slightly confused, uncertain whether to interpret this as an attack. A few glance at Professor Elian, seemingly waiting for a signal.

Yet Professor Elian continues, completely unbothered.

“In technical terms, you’re experiencing localized mana compression. Ambient density is rising beyond your natural internal mana pressure, which creates an external-internal imbalance. Your natural barriers are being forced inward ever so slightly. Of course, it is possible to defend against this, it’s just that you lack the experience to do so. On top of that, Assistant Professor Gwyn appears to have an unusually large mana pool.”

I hold the pressure steady and controlled, and do not stop.

The whole time, I’m wondering how far he’s going to take it.

“If he had Potency instead,” Elian continues, “you wouldn’t feel this kind of field compression. You’d feel more of a piercing effect. That’s how mana with a Potency upgrade behaves. It interacts with the walls of your natural barrier and forces a reaction from your nerves, not your structure. Meanwhile, a restoration upgrade would feel more rhythmic. You’d feel pulses, and the local field would fluctuate instead of building steadily. Obviously, that’s only if you happened to be sensitive enough to observe that kind of change.”

I raise the output again.

“Now we’re entering what I like to call the threshold. Most of you should already feel some shortness of breath or tightening in the chest. That’s because your own flow is being passively throttled by the ambient saturation. Any more than that and the first among you will start to vomit and pass out. If I were to ask Assistant Professor Gwyn to push further and increase the speed of this process, the mere release of his mana would kill most of you sitting here with the raw pressure alone. And it wouldn’t even require the use of a skill, passive, or trait. As I have said, Assistant Professor Gwyn possesses an impressive amount of mana even for an Amplificator.”

Our eyes meet for a moment, and he observes me with his Mana Wavelength Iris, the golden circle glowing around his black pupils and inside his violet eyes. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him with the trait deactivated.

"That's enough, Assistant Professor Gwyn. Pull it back," he says calmly, unfazed by the dozens of students on the verge of passing out or the sudden flashes of mana as some of them make feeble attempts to defend themselves.

I cut the flow and draw it back into my body. The pressure vanishes almost instantly. Some students let out breaths they didn't realize they were holding.

"This is the simplest form of mana exposure training, and it makes for a good experience to prepare you so that it doesn't surprise you in the future. There are animals and monsters who can generate an even more impressive field of pressure, as they have more powerful bodies capable of storing more mana," Professor Elian says. "Understanding how different mana attributes behave in isolation is the first step on your path to mastery. Next time, we'll introduce controlled shaping and observe how attribute combinations affect natural barriers."

With that final demonstration, the lesson ends.

My current thief suspects are the pink witch with the pointy hat, and the adorable owl professor, of course, Professor Elian, and maybe Ari. Could she have used a servant or a guard, or perhaps someone from her family, to check my room?

It could be the butler as well, someone in charge of the tower and its wards, who could also delete all signs of someone visiting. Maybe that asshole healer that was hanging out with Lily wanted to take revenge after she broke his wrist?

Kays is also an option, but he didn't seem like the type. Sure, he complained a lot and threw a lot of insults my way, but nothing felt serious or mean spirited. Even while complaining, he listened and went along with the lesson, and didn't once seem truly angry.

I put my thoughts on hold and reach into the basket next to me to pull out a sandwich and take a bite.

So good.

I take another bite and sip some grape-like juice. The bottle is still chilled, marked with a few simple inscriptions. Out of boredom, I quickly think over no less than three ways to turn it into a bomb by altering the inscriptions and adding a bit more mana, then return to my sandwich.

It really does taste like a tuna sandwich.

Thankfully, I found a small garden that people seem to avoid, and now I'm enjoying the quiet, sitting on a bench and ignoring the people passing by. The weather is nice, and as I have many times before, I wish I could wear my Earth clothes. Thankfully, no one has stolen them. It might be weird, but I think I'd have been more angry if someone had stolen them than I am about the thermonuclear warhead.

Sure, it was a gift from my sister, but she would understand.

"Assistant Professor Gwyn!" I hear a familiar voice.

Still, I ignore it, don't look up, and continue to enjoy my sandwich.

That seems to make that damned impish thylarin even happier, and Ari giggles deviously. I can almost hear the expression I'm sure her face is making.

I hope my precious minion won't end up like her, and for the love of god, I hope Izzy doesn't either.

Ari stops in front of me, and a boy stands by her side. He also happens to be a thylarin, but this one only has three arms: two on the left and one on the right. This second thylarin is quiet and quickly avoids my gaze as I look up from my lunch. He has the normal brown hair and orange eyes that thylarin usually have.

"His name is Tyven. He's a bit shy, but very kind and intelligent. Come on, Tyven, greet Assistant Professor Gwyn," Ari says, introducing him.

"H-hello, Assistant Professor Gwyn," Tyven says quietly, his eyes meeting mine for only a moment.

He glances over at the location of my Kinetic Mana Heart, over which my Restrictive Training Emblem sits, then just as quickly to the other side of my chest where my Sealed Ignition Mana Heart is, and lastly not into my eyes, but at them. And just as quickly, he looks away.

Ari teases me briefly, reminding me that we have another lesson with Kays in the sensory deprivation tank in a few days. Then she pulls her friend along, and they rush off to their next class.

I finish my sandwich while sitting there and increase the difficulty level of my active Restrictive Training Emblem. It continuously damages my body, along with the waves of combusting thermal energy I generate in small amounts to heal myself passively, causing a constant stream of pain that I must constantly filter out.

Then I check my Sneaky Mode and Mana Cycling and conclude that it should be very difficult to notice any of what I'm hiding.

Chapter 606: Helping

Today is my sixth day in the Academy, and so far it's been uneventful. There is nothing on my schedule, and I don't even know what Assistant Professors generally do in their free time. I bet it is something like socializing.

Losers.

Anyway, locking myself in my room and checking the Community every so often turns out to be a fun way to pass the time. Even though I almost went to the library with Min-Jae, who's been spending his free time locked up there. I just hope he's not just reading some spicy novels instead of gathering knowledge that could be useful to him.

Well, it's not as if he's not old enough to do whatever he wants. He'll just have to deal with the consequences if Tess or I decide that he's gotten too weak. In that case, we'd have to put him through some extra training to get him caught up.

An interesting event is scheduled to occur on the seventh day, which is tomorrow. That is when one of this planet's Champions will visit the Academy to give a short lesson.

Apparently, he's an alumnus of this Academy, so he does it once in a while, whenever he feels like it. Normally, if you wanted to entice anyone even close to the rank of Champion, you'd actually have to be able to offer them something truly tempting. Cool items, knowledge, connections. So it's pretty strange for him to be doing this all for free.

So, of course, I intend to go tomorrow if only to check him out. His lesson is set to take place approximately six hours before my third session of helping Eliau with his lessons, so I should have plenty of free time.

Annoyingly enough, though, I don't think I'm the only one interested, and it is highly likely that most of the Academy will try to attend.

Damn, maybe getting personalized lessons from Sandra the Cockroach was actually pretty valuable. Just from hearing the other Assistant Professors talk, I bet they would sell their Mana Hearts just for a chance to talk with the Champion, "only" for a few minutes.

Or as Dennis has said in the Community, "They would sell their own balls just to be able to sniff the air in a room the Champion farted in."

Where did it go wrong with the twins, and why on earth did Izzy laugh so much at that? Has she reached the age where she appreciates lame jokes? Sophie should be worried enough to do something about that. I will observe the results of her attempts and take inspiration for how to deal with my minion when she reaches that age.

But as odd as it sounds, Dennis isn't really wrong. Champions here are treated as the highest grade celebrities, the best athletes, the richest people, and God knows what else, all combined into one to demonstrate the prestige of these titles.

Then there's the fact that they represent the greatest tactical weapons in each country's arsenal. A weapon that can, in hours, or even minutes, be anywhere on the planet and cause incredible damage, while even attempting to stop them will only cause more damage.

The others talk about it a lot in the Community, that if a weapon that is a Champion were to be used to its full potential, millions would die at the very least, either in the attempts to stop them or in some desperate act of revenge.

There's only one being on this planet capable of reigning them in: an Absolute, capable of shutting down any given Champion and punishing the nation they came from. There are rules that even Champions obey, and the Absolute is the undisputed top dog here.

Though I think a powerful Champion could cause plenty of damage in just a few seconds or minutes, even before the Absolute reacts. A powerful Champion might even cause some damage to the Absolute, but the current consensus is that this planet's Absolute is way too strong for any such attempt to be worth it.

I also wonder: what would happen if multiple Champions joined forces? What if a Champion challenged the Absolute for the spot? What advantage does having the title of Absolute give you? Tess has a few theories, based on the knowledge we've collected over the last six days, that the title of Absolute brings an assortment of benefits, but this information is not freely available. So, of course, we don't know what they may be.

Their overall strategy for avoiding a constant state of war seems to be focused on balancing power and culling any Champions who could pose a threat: those who are too maniacal or unwilling to follow the stated rules are therefore killed by the others to prevent greater trouble, sometimes even before they officially become Champions. Along with the constant displays of power, there's also no end of careful politicking, and saber rattling rather than open combat, with Champions as the primary deterrents.

It is fun to think about all these scenarios and imagine how I would react in different roles: as a chump from a country whose Champion nuked a neighboring city, as a Champion plotting to kill the Absolute, or as the Absolute trying to slack off while being annoyed by these pests.

There is also a bit more information about some kind of weapon the Absolute left behind for someone. Apparently, it could've easily fallen into the hands of a Champion, but it could just as easily have ended up with some random servant. Min-Jae, it would seem, discovered this in the library. Apparently, the weapon has been passed around for the past 100 years. There have apparently been several wars waged over it, and it's already killed two Champions: one 30 years ago and another 45 years ago.

Its description is nowhere to be found; just a rumor that there's a set of rules that must be followed when it comes to its use and that it's connected to some kind of web or array that the Absolute placed around the entire planet.

This planet's Absolute seems like a total weirdo, and we're still not sure how much we can trust the rumors circulating around the Academy. Teenagers are not exactly the most reliable source of information, in my opinion.

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

Sitting at my new spot, since Ari has found my previous one, and Izzy finds me anyway. I'll have to check again later how she's able to trace people by the "emotional wavelength" they give off, since I haven't sensed anything myself.

This spot is also in one of the smaller gardens, between a set of trees that emit a pleasant scent and have a kind of exotic look to them, not unlike the so-called dragon trees we have on Earth.

As Izzy sits next to me, and Noodle slithers out of her sleeve and moves towards me, expanding until he's about as thick as my arm, then politely waits. He even nods in greeting.

Biting into my sandwich again, which this time tastes like it has chicken meat, I create two mana orbs made of a mix I know Noodle enjoys and send them to him.

"Did you know that before being let into the Academy, you have to pass tests and prove you can control your powers enough not to kill students by mistake?" Izzy asks out of nowhere.

"First time hearing it."

"It's true. And we, the attendees, are the only people in the Academy who entered without those tests. Some attendees could easily end up there, kill a bunch of students by mistake, and spend the rest of the tutorial in prison on this floor or fail the quest to locate and protect the Candidate," she says seriously.

"If you're that bad at controlling your powers, you kind of deserve it."

Izzy seems to contemplate this and then nods once. "Maybe. By the way, my class will be getting a transfer student in a few days."

"Why are you telling me? Do you suspect it's going to be the Ruler Candidate?"

"I don't know. They say she's incredibly talented and that she's almost level 350 at only ten years old."

"That is surprising. Reaching such a high level... For us, it is possible because of the tutorial and everything, but for a random girl?"

"I know, right? I have noticed that some of my professors seem to be scared of her anytime she's mentioned. It's hard to explain; it wasn't even that they thought she might kill them, it's something else, perhaps her potential, or something about her background? The Professors might know more than we do, and Sophie's been looking into it."

"Sounds good. Found anything on Ari, Kays, or Tyven?"

"Not that much. Tess and Sophie did manage to dig up a bit, but Ari is possibly one of the best talents here at the moment, and no one knows what family she's from or how she got in here. Kays is from a family closely tied to a Champion and has a rare skill, and Tyven is also unknown but spends a lot of time in the library. Min-Jae says he's seen him around a few times and even talked to him. He seems like a quiet guy. Why didn't you ask the others in the Community and instead asked someone to meet you and share the information in person?"

"I barely have any time left for today and am almost out of my Community daily limit."

"Didn't our daily limit go up when we completed the 7th floor? What did you do?"

"What do you mean, what did I do? I, just out of curiosity, joined the Hard difficulty Community, and there are some guys also on their version of the 8th floor, so I spoke to them a bit."

"It's pretty unusual for you to talk to people. Let me check!" Izzy looks at the screen in front of her and takes a moment to, I assume, read through the Community. She does this for exactly one minute before she stops and turns to me.

"What?" I ask. "Why are you giving me that look?"

"Nat, did you spend most of your daily limit going over the history of conversation they had about their floor and their version of the Academy, picking apart what they wrote, and trashing their use of "mana sciency bullshit terms"?"

"Yup."

"But why?"

"I was helping."

Izzy looks at the screen and reads again, directly quoting what I wrote, "I've read cult manifestos that made more sense than what you just wrote."

She glances at me again, and I remain silent.

Izzy continues to quote me, "You wrote a 12-paragraph post to say 'I think magic goes boom and then it goes boom.'"

She gives me another look, and I keep silent.

"Just say you don't know how it works instead of inventing the 'Mana Thermal Rebound Loop.'"

This time I say, "That one was really egregious; even Elian wouldn't say such nonsense."

"If I had a mana point for every time someone used the word 'resonance' without knowing what it means, I'd be a Champion by now," she reads.

"It's true," I defend myself.

"I'm convinced some of you are just rearranging words until they sound magical." She gives me another look. "Wasn't that harsh?"

"I'm helping."

"Sure you are. So what is this: 'This isn't a mana hypothesis. It's fanfiction with equations.'"

"Okay, that one may have actually been rude, but I apologized and offered the guy some advice when we meet during the third tournament. He was very happy and even thanked me."

Izzy sighs, "And this one? 'Here's my feedback: Don't.'"

"Oh! Here, I strongly disagree with you! That crazy girl wanted to make a permanent modification to her mana flow after saying she thought I had done something similar. I saved her life."

Izzy eventually stops reading and just says with a big smile, "Just don't get banned," before heading off with Noodle after she gives me a quick hug.

I finish what's left of my sandwich and glance at the timer for a moment before closing the window.

The wind moves through the garden, and I close my eyes for a moment to enjoy the scents it carries.

Maybe tomorrow will offer something less idiotic than the "Mana Thermal Rebound Loop". Maybe not.

Chapter 607: When rules stop applying

Okay, maybe I underestimated the popularity of Champions, or at least the popularity of this specific Champion. Forget what I said about them being a mix of celebrity and god knows what else, and all that about high-level prestige. At this point, I am sure Dennis was right: these people would squander whole fortunes just to be in the same room the Champion farted in.

I'm not surprised by the excitement of the students; it is, after all, a good opportunity to take their minds off their studies for a moment. But the Assistant Professors? Some of them are acting like

grandmothers willing to slit your throat in the mall just to get their hands on the last discounted Cinnabon roll.

At least the professors act a bit more dignified, the others should consider taking notes. Some of the students' families are even in attendance. Overall, it turns out to be a huge event.

I hate it, and the fact that I am part of it.

We Assistant Professors are on the same floor as the professors, arranged on a huge, wide balcony overlooking an amphitheater below. There are a few higher floors above us, reserved for the more senior professors, and further above that, are an assortment of powerful families and academy leadership, mingling with senior professors and families.

(The fact that you're attending this event, combined with your continued dismissal of the fact that a thermonuclear warhead has gone missing, is making me nervous, Nat.) Sophie complains next to me, naturally having been stationed on the same floor, given that she's an Assistant Professor herself.

(Look, if there is no one capable of launching an attack of that magnitude and they need that warhead, they are incompetent and pose no threat.) I reply, looking down at the thousands of students and other attendees.

This place is huge and there are so many people.

I hate it.

(I have considered it and, possibly, I could. I would need materials and inscriptions to construct a similar bomb, or I could work out an array to collect and channel sufficient mana and thermal energy. But it is hard to say; I have not witnessed a thermonuclear explosion yet, so I have nothing to compare it to,) I answer.

(You just used a word that concerns me greatly.) She says.

(Is it 'yet'?) I ask.

(Yes,) She replies.

(I see.)

(Don't "I see" me, damn it.)

(This is an Academy, meaning this is a place of study – so maybe it's diligence?) I suggest.

(By that logic, it could be lust, because this place is full of horny teenagers.) Sophie counters with a snort.

(Well, never mind then. Have you found anyone suspicious?) I ask.

(There was that thylarin girl, Ari, who takes classes with the professor I assist. You mentioned her as well,) She says.

(Why her?) I ask, genuinely curious.

(She's shockingly perceptive and intelligent. Apparently, she attends so many classes that even the professors have taken notice, and she excels in all of them,) Sophie explains.

(She didn't really seem that good when I taught her.) I admit.

(Nat, you were almost declared an Absolute Candidate by one of the most powerful Absolutes to ever live. Sorry, but at this point, I do not trust your judgment,) She retorts.

(I understand, but if you suspect her as the Ruler Candidate, should she not have incredible talent?) I object.

(She does have incredible talent. Another factor to consider is that she might be hiding most of it. Another thing – your favourite “fake” Ruler Candidate theory could also explain it. Sophie muses.

(If you think that way, it could apply to almost any student.) I protest.

Sophie exhales. (Yes, and that is what annoys me. The problem is that it doesn’t even have to be a student. It could be one of the professors. It could be the Champion we’re waiting for, and who is already late by the way, but the people here would probably apologize to him before they even thought about complaining.)

(Well, it seems like you summoned him.) I say as the crowd falls silent.

No one speaks anymore as the lights go off and a single beam shines on the podium, where the pink-skinned, pink-haired, white-freckled man appears out of nowhere.

(What is even the name of that race, by the way?) I ask Sophie.

(Selari. You should know that by now,) She answers.

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

Then we watch as that selari Champion smiles brightly, taking in the applause. But after a few seconds, he lifts his arm, and silence ensues.

The selari Champion pauses for a moment, not for effect, but as if he were measuring his thoughts before speaking. As he speaks, his voice echoes throughout the hall, as if he were standing directly in front of me.

“Let us discuss something they will not teach you here,” he says, his tone light but distant. “Not because it is forbidden or dangerous, but because no one wants to admit how little control there really is once certain lines are crossed.”

He takes a breath, then continues, speaking deliberately.

“When two Champions fight, the entire world watches. But I have always wondered: what exactly are they watching for? The techniques? The scale? Maybe. But if you look too closely, you will see that it is not a fight but a collapse. It is the moment all the rules stop applying.”

He speaks as if he were explaining a concept he’s considered all too often.

“Even the strongest formations and arrays, even our reinforced cities, despite being designed to survive right on the edge of the battlefield, all of it becomes irrelevant once both sides stop holding back. The ambient mana alone begins to rewrite the terrain. Not intentionally, just as a byproduct of who we are.”

He glances upward briefly, then back ahead, glancing between a few people in the dead silent crowd.

“There is this idea that a fight between Champions is a contest of wills. It is not. In my opinion, it is a contest of consequences. It is a show of how much destruction one side is willing to tolerate for the sake of victory.”

He takes a few steps that seem to echo much like his voice.

“I used to think the danger was the violence itself: the cities falling, the land splitting, the disruptions to the weather, not to mention the permanent environmental changes, leaving entire continents uninhabitable. But as I’ve grown older, I’ve begun to think the real danger is how quickly everything breaks down once a Champion stops caring about the cost. Because the other one must match that disregard just to survive.”

Those last two sentences resonate in my mind. There is something about them I know I will remember for later reflection.

The selari man’s eyes narrow slightly, his expression thoughtful, though not unkind.

“You can prepare for the arrival of a Champion. You can build defenses. But what do you do when two of them treat the battlefield itself as expendable? When mana stops flowing around the world and starts carving paths through it?”

He lets that question hang without rushing to fill the silence.

“That is what they do not teach you here. It is not because it is too advanced, but because there is nothing you can do about it. There is no defense, you can only delay. There is no victory, only a lesser loss. At least, that is what I think, for whatever it is worth.”

He pauses, then finally adds, “So, if you ever hear that two Champions are fighting, do not think about watching. Do not analyze. Just ask yourself one question: how far are you from the epicenter?”

And with that, he falls silent, his expression unreadable, and very slowly, he smiles. It is a tired but somewhat gentle smile.

He then speaks further about his travels, interactions with other Champions, and similar topics, but none of it sticks in my mind like that beginning.

Barely a few hours after the visiting Champion departs, I find myself stand behind Professor Elian during our third lesson together.

Even as the professor instructs me to provide orbs for all thirty eight students present, my thoughts remain elsewhere. I observe Elian and wonder why he feels so similar to that Champion. Is it just a mask he wears, an aura cultivated by the scions of powerful families? Is it an arrogance rooted in his skills? Is he hiding something?

“Assistant Professor Gwyn, may I ask you to lower the difficulty of the orbs you’ve created for the students so that they can practice?” His voice scolds, bringing me back to the class.

I examine my orbs and observe the students. Although thirty eight orbs hover in the class, and all the students give their utmost effort, not a single orb wavers under their disruption attempts.

Apologizing, I lower the difficulty as requested and refocus on the lesson.

Later that day, as we talk in the Community, Izzy chatters away about the transfer student. As she mentioned before, the student is a ten-year-old human girl and, as rumored, she is strong, possibly approaching level 350.

All that without the help of the tutorial... I pause my thoughts. Or maybe not? What if she came from a different planet that just ended its tutorial, making her part of the First Generation? What a fascinating thought.

I mention my theory in the Community, and some of them seem to find it as fascinating as I do. Yet still, Izzy warns me not to rush into anything. As much as there are rules in the Academy, they are worth nothing if somebody breaks them and kills you before you manage to file a complaint.

So another person gets added to the mix. Tyven, Ari, that human girl, Elian, and god knows who else.

I also notice an unusual rush as a number of servants move through the Academy. They try to avoid notice, but something about them feels off, if only from their twitchy movements and erratic heartbeats.

When I mention it in the Community, Izzy confirms it as well. She doesn't probe too deeply, but something seems to have happened.

A bit later, despite the rules and possible breach of decorum, multiple powerful, large-area scans sweep across the entire Academy and likely reach much farther. In addition, I notice a few flying figures, resembling search helicopters, scanning the area around the Academy.

Observing them, I head to the offices to meet the head accountant, who doesn't make me wait long. Soon, I enter a very nice office, where I am offered something to drink and snacks as I sit in a very comfortable armchair and wait for just a few seconds while a short man with a well-kept beard goes through the documents.

"Here it is! Assistant Professor Nathaniel Gwyn. As per your instructions, your salary is to be paid weekly, in person, and as you have noted, it just happens to be payday."

"Seems like it," I confirm.

"Well, give me a moment then." He uses his mana to create a difficult, quickly changing mana pattern that unlocks a smaller safe behind him.

Reaching inside, he withdraws a small metal disc and hands it to me. "May I ask you to channel just a tiny bit of your mana into this?"

I do as I am told, and the thing lights up.

"Great, your identity has been confirmed. Now, as an Assistant Professor under Professor Elian, you are to be paid..." He quickly reads the document. "...exactly eight obsidian drachs per week."

He turns again, reaching into another safe that seems to be even more secure. From it, he draws a set of tiny, obsidian-black rods of metal. He counts eight of them, places them into a nice pouch, then closes it and sets it on a silver tray laid out on the table, and moves the tray over to me.

"May I ask if everything is in order with your salary, Assistant Professor Gwyn?"

"Yes, it is," I confirm and stand up.

Still extremely nice and polite, he follows by my side, not attempting small talk, and walks with me until we exit the offices, where he wishes me a nice day.

Not caring that much about how it might look, I pick one of the tiny black cylinders and examine it a bit before throwing it back inside the pouch.

Before I even reach my rooms, I find out the reason for the erratic mood the Academy seems to have fallen into.

The selari Champion has been found dead on Academy grounds.

Chapter 608: Inseparable

I must admit, this floor is growing increasingly intriguing. First, we have the missing thermonuclear warhead, which I still haven't located, the mystery of the Ruler Candidate, and now the Champion's died without even destroying the entire Academy or the continent in the process.

Just a few minutes ago, passing by one of the glass statues, I noticed my reflection in it, and my lips twisted into what almost looked like a wide grin. Most other people might miss the change, but I see my, as some would say, punchable, face often enough to recognize the difference.

The feel of wanting to fight, to level up, and battle monsters or people has been replaced by sheer curiosity and intrigue. Fuck the system and tutorial, but sometimes the floors can be very interesting. It makes me wonder if this is all we get or if there will be more twists to come.

Even the thought of heading to Beyond leaves my mind, and I decide to devote my full attention to this floor.

As I make my rounds through the Academy's halls, surreptitiously searching for the missing thermonuclear warhead, I observe an extremely erratic mood. It is something you can almost feel in the air and see in the movements of the people around me. The Champion is dead. He was one of nine Champions of this planet and likely one of the ten most powerful people to walk its surface.

Just like that, with no fanfare, only for his cold body to be found by the staff.

I still haven't managed to pick up any additional information. I am curious about his condition, what killed him, where he was found, and dozens of other questions. But the information has not been shared at all. It is impressive that news of his death even managed to leak at all; I would have expected them to keep it secret. That's what I would've done, given how massive the consequences of his death are likely to be.

One thing I know, and that surprises me, is that I would have expected them to lock down the Academy so no one could enter or exit. Instead, they locked the entire region, dozens of square miles, and everyone inside it.

There's already a huge barrier set up around the entire area, and it's been said that two Champions are standing guard just outside the barrier.

I'm also surprised the Champions aren't here, inside of the barrier, and searching for the killer. What could be the reason? Politics? Are they scared of whoever or whatever managed to kill the Champion so easily?

The whole thing brings to mind the rumored weapon the Absolute left behind, said to be capable of killing even a Champion. Could it be? If so, what kind of maniac is the Absolute to simply leave such a weapon behind for anyone to use?

This is way too much fun.

Heading back to my office, I meet an interesting man.

We've already collected information on some of the more famous professors, and the man I bump into turns out to be one of them. I've already forgotten his name, but I remember his appearance for a simple reason: he's a demon, one of the very few demons in the Academy and certainly the only demon professor.

His horns are black with that typical texture I've observed in Vega and Lioren. They also curve backwards, but in a manner entirely different from Lioren's.

He appears older, maybe around forty years old. He has the same white hair and red eyes that most demons have. His hair is on the shorter end and carefully styled into what is probably a fashionable hairstyle. I am not exactly an expert in style. Tess could probably tell, given how often she likes to change up her hairstyle.

Another detail that interests me, and the whole reason I remembered him, is that he is rumored to possess three primordial energies, with void being confirmed and the other two left as the subject of rumor. Even here, it's viewed as something exceedingly rare.

As I notice the beat of his heart, he becomes aware of mine, and we both stop and stare at each other. So void, and on top of that... definitely kinetic energy. I can tell right away from his pulse. I spent nearly a year with the best and coolest kinetic energy user to ever live. It would be weird for me not to notice.

But he can probably discern the same information from mine. He is a demon, after all, and these guys are attuned to hearts to such a high degree it's unhealthy.

He keeps looking at me, and I keep looking at him, both of us grasping the other's power just from these small signs, but not pushing further. For a moment, his red eyes seem to gain that shine, and I almost expect him to smile in that demonic, maniacal way and start talking trash about my heart or try to get into a fight.

Instead, he nods just once and then continues on his way in a very undemonic display of behavior.

I place back the seal on Ignition Heart that I partially lifted, and also stop generating kinetic energy, something I had almost not realized I was doing.

Back in my office, I sit in the chair and put my legs up on the remaining box containing the thermonuclear warhead. Then I open my status and choose a three skills combination token.

I could probably be more patient, but after nine days here, I feel like I've already gathered plenty of information, especially with the help of the others. Plus, I would've just ended up doing it my way anyway, so there's no real reason to wait any longer.

"I want to use my three skills combination token."

You have used an active skill combination token. Please pick three from the following to combine.

Warning: Combining three skills will reduce the level of the acquired skill.

A case of theft: this story is not rightfully on Amazon; if you spot it, report the violation.

Warning: A combination of incompatible skills may result in inferior skill.

Warning: After combining the skills, it will become extremely difficult to acquire the skills used for the combination.

Please select the main skill of the combination and two supportive skills.

List of available skills to combine:

Perception - Lvl 62

Mana Domain (Pride) - Lvl 61

Mana Crown - Lvl 55

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 67

Ley Line - Lvl 54

Knitting - Lvl 37

“[Ley Line] as the main skill, [Mana Manipulation] and [Mana Domain] as supportive.”

Congratulations, you have successfully combined [Ley Line], [Mana Domain], and [Mana Manipulation]!
A new skill has been created.

You have acquired [Ur Line]

[Ur Line - Level 0 > Ur Line - Level 9]

The active skill affected by the effect of your subclass (Pride) has been removed. Please choose an active skill to apply it to.

“Apply it to [Eclipse],” I say, and the effect is applied.

Lately, [Mana Domain] and [Eclipse] have started to feel really similar to me, the only difference seems to be that [Eclipse] is clearly a higher tier skill, so I’ve been wanting to get rid of [Mana Domain] for a while. It will be more difficult to handle my mana without it, but it’ll still be doable.

Before I examine my new skill, let’s try this.

I create a single evil orb 3.0, inspired by Lissandra’s, and then modify it to the point where I begin practicing mana shaping, which even now gives me trouble.

Let’s see how long this will-

Congratulations, you have acquired a new skill!

[Mana Manipulation]

[Mana Manipulation – Level 0 > Mana Manipulation – Level 61]

Welcome back, my precious. It seems like the two of us are inseparable. Nothing pleases me more than giving the middle finger to the system.

Difficult to relearn? Yeah, no. I call bullshit.

Even now, I remain unstoppable! I have experience with the skill, and soon I will catch up and level it back up. I just need to prove my mastery to the system.

Growing impatient, I use [Ur Line] for the first time, and the feeling isn’t much different from [Ley Line]. Externally, I observe it slightly without digging too deep, but for now, it’s hard to even perceive, and I am the one who created it.

It might be the effect of the skill, or it might still be low level, but it is my line, so it is there. Its color is not that pale blue shimmer as before, but something difficult to describe. I wouldn't exactly call it colorless, but I also can't say it has any color I know. It seems to shift, while at the same time, it doesn't quite feel like it's transitioning through any other colors.

Well, let's examine this baby. I activate my Mana Wavelength Iris to the maximum and look into the area occupied by the short line I've created.

Then I pass out.

I open my eyes, confused, staggered; it takes me a few seconds before I remember what happened.

What nonsense.

I activate my eyes to the maximum and raise the mana flowing through my body. I check just in case, and my passives are active, all of them. Then I look at the same place.

The world turns black.

Once again, I open my eyes, staggered and surprised.

Right away, I activate my Mana Wavelength Iris, and a bit of my mana compresses and turns black, just enough to support my body and mind.

Then I look at the line. And it is beautiful: a short line barely the length of my arm, wavering in the air, unseen and undetectable to anyone without a high degree of skill. The mana around it twists and weaves. Mana wavelengths and ambient mana react to it in such an erratic way that it seems almost impossible to understand or predict. The line itself feels unearthly. Colorless, yet beautifully enchanting. I am not a poet, so simply said, it is pretty and it looks cool.

Then I pass out again.

When I wake up this time, I keep my eyes deactivated and instead use only [Perception] to examine the line, and unsurprisingly, I do not pass out this time. My body does not shut down to protect me.

As expected, the problem turns out to be my Mana Wavelength Iris and the amount of information it can gather, and my inability to process it all. With my other weaker senses, it is fine.

The line is not as pretty, and I barely see the wavelengths. Seen this way, it looks almost like [Ley Line], to the point that it feels almost exactly the same.

Next comes some testing. I stretch it across longer and longer distances. I send mana through, teleport, and perform the basic functions I usually use it for. For now, I decide not to try materializing it. Everything I've seen thus far with my trait suggests that it would be a very, very bad idea.

After a few hours, I also conclude that [Ur Line] handles anything I throw at it like a champ. Even this lower level version can transmit almost the same amount of mana as before.

It could probably be used to stun any more perceptive types trying to observe me: just form it in front of me and then watch it overwhelm their senses. That could be fun.

I'll also have to do some testing with Sophie and the twins to see how well others can perceive it. It is fairly difficult, even for me to notice, so it's bound to be better hidden than [Ley Line] – if I decide to keep it that way. I already know how to make lines more noticeable to others if I so choose.

It seems like a straight upgrade of an already ridiculously powerful skill. There is also a feeling that there's something else the skill may be hiding, but I can't quite perceive it without passing out.

Anyway, I'll get around to it later. But my idea of surrounding the entire Earth with permanent lines to create my own personal teleportation network still stands.

Chapter 609: Eleventh day

It's our tenth day at the Academy, and I find it strange that the other Champions have yet to enter the area and investigate the cause of death. Min-Jae thinks they might be preoccupied with maintaining the barrier to contain the possible killer while acting as guards to prevent other Champions from entering. The current geopolitical situation is likely quite unstable.

Additionally, since the Academy doesn't belong to any nation, allowing Champions from one country to enter and threaten important individuals from other nations is probably out of the question. Or perhaps they're just afraid of whatever killed the selari Champion, at least that's what Maya and I think.

Although it could just be that this floor's settings, unlike the previous floors which encompassed entire worlds, has been limited to a specific region: the Academy, just one or two nearby cities, and a few villages.

Despite all of this, the studying continues. When these students have children of their own, they'll have every right to say, "You don't want to learn because there's a little snow between you and the school? When I was young, we studied even after the Champion died, leaving us under threat of world war!"

Or something of that nature. A trump card for the ages.

Of course, the search continues along with the Academy wide scans. Every so often, someone finds themselves being stopped by polite men in uniforms for a few questions and occasionally called in for further questioning. I'm also fairly certain that some of the rooms are being searched as well.

If they search mine, I just hope they don't find the thermonuclear warhead hidden under a blanket with a few pieces of clothing tossed on top.

However, the day is pleasant, and my mood has been greatly improved by the presence of the puppy sized Biscuit, whom I currently find myself carrying in my arms. He is still sleeping, still as cute and fuzzy as ever. Occasionally, he growls in his sleep, although it might simply be his stomach.

According to Tess, he only ever seems to wake for an hour per day before succumbing to his terrible food coma once more. Apparently, eating the special experimental Baby Progenitor Mimic created by the Progenitor Mimic has caused the same kind of trouble that eating the creepy, weakened deer Champion did.

What an asshole.

I would totally do exactly the same.

With Biscuit, I reach the building where I have a lesson with Ari and Kays. Both of them are already waiting, along with the redheaded guard, Melo.

"You're late," Kays complains immediately.

"I was stopped and questioned by the detectives," I reply.

"What? Really? They suspect you?"

"No, I lied, I just almost forgot we had a lesson."

"What the fuck!" Kays shouts in his usual manner.

"So, what is it today? After the last time, I realized I don't have to study for the lesson with you two, and now I only know it has something to do with a sensory deprivation tank."

"Melo, please tell me you're hearing this shit too."

"I do, Sir Kays."

"Should we report him?"

"If you do, I'll fail you for the grade or perhaps claim I saw you sneaking around the palace where the Champion died before he did, or something," I say, pulling Biscuit away from Ari, who reaches out for him with three of her six arms.

"I want to pet it!" she complains.

"And I want to triple my mana. So what?" I say, taking another step back and heading inside the huge building. The inside is shaped like a large black cube. There are no windows, and the walls appear to be composed of hundreds of thousands of tiny hexagonal tiles.

The three of them follow behind me, and as we enter, the door closes behind us. In that moment, it's almost as if the world outside does not exist. The ambient mana, the arrays placed all over the Academy, the mana seeping from people or inscriptions, all the sounds and smells: everything is gone.

I walk up to a man behind the counter within, as he glances at Biscuit before looking at me. Even as I hand him the document confirming our reservation, he continues to glance at Biscuit rather than at the paper.

Once everything is confirmed, he shows us the way, and I head to the room marked with the number 3. Unwilling to let go of the corgi or disrupt his sleep, I create arms from my mana and use them to open the door and enter.

Once all of us make our way inside and confirm that we're alone, I look around before moving toward the control panel in the middle of the room. The room itself has no furniture, just thousands of hexagonal patterns covering the walls, all in matte black.

I don't even ask what we should be doing, as I am too curious. I quickly find a multi-setting control on the panel and activate the first option. With that, the world blacks out. My sight, smell, sense of taste, and even hearing all disappear at once as I allow the effect to take hold.

Through my kinetic senses, I notice surprised twitches and movements from Ari and Kays, who look around with what feels like a moment of panic. Melo just continues to stand there, but I'm sure he's examining the area as his body continues to face me, even as I stride across the room.

It feels extremely strange to walk around without so much as the sensation of my feet touching the floor or the vibrations running through my body. Without my kinetic senses, I wouldn't even know that I was in motion.

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

Lastly, I observe Ari, for whom this should be the first time in a sensory deprivation tank. Her reaction is much the same as Kays's: initial confusion, followed by her senses probing the area. I cannot discern anything remarkable. There is no instantaneous display of extraordinary perception. However, one thing

does greatly bother me: her actions closely resemble those of Kays, as if she were limiting herself to his level or merely imitating him after some initial observation.

I take a few steps and stop in front of Kays, under the watchful eyes of his guard. It takes Kays a few seconds to sense me before he steps back. I reach out my hand toward him and tap the top of his head. He doesn't seem to sense anything, but this time he reacts faster and moves his hand toward mine, but too late.

Then I do the same with Ari, who detects me more quickly and even attempts to avoid me, but in the end, I still succeed in tapping the top of her head.

Taking a few more steps, I move and come to a stop beside Melo, whose head continues to follow me. From that distance, I create two fist sized mana orbs of not too high density and turn to him, in what I assume is a questioning manner.

Even though he cannot see or hear me, and I cannot feel his mana, he seems to understand, and I sense him nodding.

Then I shoot an orb at Ari and Kays, striking their legs with the same amount of force as if I threw a tennis ball. Of course, they cannot sense the pain, and I did not use much force, but I am certain that the more I strike them now, the more it will hurt when their senses return.

I mean, I would prefer something like an arrow to heighten their sense of danger to encourage a quicker rate of improvement. Maybe I can bring the twins here later, or something. I quite like this room, and I already feel the need to examine it further so I can construct something similar in the future.

After my orbs strike them a few more times, Kays and Ari seem to understand and do their best to dodge.

Each time they seem to have adapted, I make the orb more difficult to detect and continue my barrage. When they try to cheat by detecting my position, I create fake mana signatures of myself around the room. Something I picked up from the twins, though I'm not at their level, but they're certainly good enough to trick someone less perceptive.

At the same time, I train as well. I keep switching between sensing heat, kinetic energy, or mana, exploring their differences and advantages. I also make a number of attempts to pierce the shielding of the room and sense signatures outside, but it feels nearly impossible, and I don't even manage to get close.

I also tweak my Mana Cycling and attempt to use other skills. Without the ability to feel pain or my body at all, it is somewhat worrisome. I could have made a mistake while Mana Cycling, and my body might be suffering damage from mana spiraling out of control, and I wouldn't even notice due to the absence of pain and my other senses.

After a while, I become bored and touch the control panel again, causing our senses to return in an instant.

Ari and Kays groan in pain, holding the areas where I struck them multiple times when they weren't improving quickly enough. There is some talk of abuse, a few threats, and even the rare card called "I will tell my dad!" is mentioned.

So, to make them happy, the next round focuses on them trying to detect and attack me. I am about to make an offer, a reward if they manage to hit me at least once, but they do not hear it, too excited over the chance to harm me.

What vile creatures.

In the end, neither of them can hit me, and neither notices the smaller orb I use to continuously strike their backs at the same spot. After we end this prompts another round of complaints about rule breaking, despite the lack of clear rules, and allegations of student abuse.

They call this abuse?

With that, the lesson ends, and I head to meet the others, accompanied by the best doggo of the Academy.

On the eleventh day, we decide that none of us is going to join the trip being offered by the Academy. While it has its advantages, it also comes with responsibilities. Despite everything happening, some students choose to go, but we decide to stay here, just in case.

If the opportunity arises, though, I'll go along next time. There are two options: travel by magic train or magic airship, both of which are certainly intriguing. Perhaps I've simply found myself missing the Deathtrap. That old, rusty thing was cool too, wasn't it?

Lost in thought while walking through the hallway, I blink and suddenly find myself in a different place. I have not used teleportation, nor have I sensed anyone trying to move me, but out of nowhere, I find myself standing in the same room we appeared in at the start of the floor.

Every member of Group 4 is here as well, looking around in confusion.

"What just happened? Last I knew I was guarding that little shit," Maya asks, being the first to speak.

The others quickly exchange words while I keep quiet and begin scanning the area around us and the room for mana, arrays, and inscriptions. I activate my eyes and search for traces of forced teleport. I activate my Mana Wavelength Tyrant passive and so forth.

I even use black mana to boost my processing speed, but I find nothing. There is no sign I can pick up on, which leaves only two possibilities: either someone extremely powerful did this and moved us here for unknown reasons, or the system itself did.

But what purpose could moving us here serve? Could it just be for shits and giggles?

I glance around the room and the items around us. Then I check my status. Both leave me even more confused.

Leaving the others behind to talk, I allow Sophie to add me to her web and head outside despite their protests.

The room I exit leads to the same beautiful garden as before: fruit trees, flowers, fountains. Scattered around are small groups of students, each wearing the same attire as those in Group 4. They act as if they were unaffected by what just happened to us.

Everything appears normal. There is no threat I could sense, no wide-range scan going on.

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

I turn around and find myself looking at Professor Elian.

“Why do you look so confused? This is your first day, and yet you are already late and slacking off in the gardens,” he says.

He continues with a stream of intriguing, and at times subtly insulting, remarks, spoken just loud enough not to carry far and only after making sure no one is watching or listening. A weak barrier flickering around us.

As a group of students passes by, he lowers his voice further and greets them with a brilliant smile. A few girls in the group blush and start giggling, while one of the boys bows slightly, clearly admiring him.

That smile remains only until they have passed, and then he turns to me: “Do you not know how to speak?”

I answer, “I do. I apologize; I simply got lost.”

He shakes his head. “I will see you later. I hope you manage to be more punctual than you seem to be now.”

With that, he leaves.

Not bothering to examine further, I head back to the room. After inspecting our belongings again, I realize that all our items are here, just as they were when the floor began. Even both of my thermonuclear warheads.

Lastly, I open my status screen, confirming that my newest skill is gone and the token is back.

Otherwise, my stats are exactly as they were when the floor started.

Chapter 610: Many questions

“Have we been sent back in time?” Maya asks as we take a moment to regroup in the room that is now closed, locked, and reinforced with a few barriers for good measure.

“The timer hasn’t been reset, and it continues to tick down; whatever happened, it only seems to have reset the floor and our stats,” as he likes to do, Min-Jae is touching his lips while thinking. And all the while, he’s staring into the empty space in front of him.

I can almost hear his brain trying to process it all.

Meanwhile, I sit in my manabloc chair, which I turn into a rocking chair, and start to rock back and forth while holding Biscuit on my lap.

Maya looks around at us, “So outside of the tutorial, this original planet, Academy, whatever was turning back in time?”

“We don’t know if it’ll happen again; maybe this was the only reset, and the floor will continue normally now,” Min-Jae answers.

“Was it the Ruler Candidate that made it happen? The Absolute? A passing Ruler?” Aaron asks.

“I don’t think it’s actually possible to travel back in time, Aaron,” Tess says calmly, “I don’t think even the Rulers are capable of that. What do you think, Nat?”

“Yup, I agree.”

I scratch Biscuit behind the ears and turn to the bolder of the twins. "Why wouldn't it be possible? Back during the tournament, we were reset to our original state whenever we died. Granted, that original, healthy state only dated back to just before the event, but it still proves it can be done. And yes, our skill levels remained unchanged during the tournament, but that only shows it should be possible to do the modifications to allow for something similar."

"Okay," Dennis turns to me, "So let us say this happens again and our time 'resets' or whatever. Our stats revert back to their state at the start of the floor, but our knowledge will remain, and it will be easier to regain those skill levels. However, if we leveled up by killing monsters, we would need to kill them again."

"Possibly."

"Don't you think that's bullshit then?"

"Why?"

"I leveled up my skills during the time here, and now I need to do it again?"

I snort, "Don't be dumb. We'll figure out how it happened. Plus, you will regain them faster, but Dennis, my friend, my buddy, my man, aren't you hoping it'll happen again? Every one of you got one million shards after the last floor. So why not experiment? If the reset repeats, you can, with every reset, buy a different set of passives and experiment with them. Maybe you can combine different active skills if you still have an active skill combination token, as some of the others. Maybe you can buy a skill upgrade token, upgrade a skill, train the upgraded part, and then when it resets, you'll learn how to do it even without the upgrade if you're truly capable."

I feel my excitement grow as the thought of how much this could be abused if there are more resets. Who cares about having to level up skills again and similar things.

Looking at Dennis, I continue, "You could spend all the shards and then get them back again during the reset and spend them again to maximize your gains. Or, given that you now know what's going to happen over the next few days, do not tell me you cannot come up with a way to use it to your advantage, even if it's just for a bit of fun?"

That shuts the blonde boy up for a moment, and I can see him starting to turn things over in his head. And I see everyone else following suit the same.

But then Tess ruins it, “I would advise against being too rash, just in case it doesn’t happen again. Even if it repeats a few times, we cannot be sure it’s not going to just stop out of nowhere. So I would very, very strongly recommend always choosing an option that can be fixed later or that you won’t regret in the future.”

“We know the Champion’s going to die on the ninth day. Should we save him?” Min-Jae asks out of nowhere.

“That’s not that dumb, right? If we help him, it could earn us some really nice rewards.” Maya jumps in, seeming excited at the thought.

Tess ruins the mood again. “Do we really want to mess with someone who can kill a being incomparably stronger than us, especially when they did so without destroying half the continent in the process?”

Once again, everyone falls into a deep state of contemplation.

Then Sophie comes to a conclusion of her own. “Question: forget for now that we do not know what causes the reset, but if we reset, did the Ruler Candidate reset as well, or is it just us, with our status as attendees reset? Another question: is this a setting of the tutorial, and the reset depends on the floor quest of the 8th floor and was added because of the tutorial, or is it part of the original Academy, where someone seemingly reset time?”

At this point, some of the group seem pained by thinking. There are just too many options, with no information, only speculation. The main point of speculation being the reset. I like how quickly everyone jumps to the idea that it’ll continue to repeat. Maybe they’re just hoping it’ll happen again. Something like that just seems too good not to hope for. But at the same time, it could be dangerous.

Another question that I’ve found picking at my brain is the thing Sophie mentioned. If we are really resetting, and it might happen again, is the Candidate resetting as well? If so, is it just the Candidate and no one else? If so, what do we need to protect them from, if it is only the Candidate? If that’s the case, is

this a setting of the floor? If not, is it something an Absolute or Ruler managed to do outside the tutorial? How would something like this even be possible?

I filter out the others and think. Let us say it is not unlike how the tutorial can store and restore our bodies when we die during the tournament, except that here, the condition for triggering the reset is something other than death. If that were the case, I would say it'd have to be the work of a Ruler, after all, I don't think an Absolute would be capable of imitating or using the structure of something implemented by the system.

Especially when it involves something on the scale of an entire planet and... I stop my thoughts.

Is it the entire planet? I don't know how useful that information would be, but if it is the entire planet, I would have to suspect it's a mechanism implemented by the tutorial. If it were a smaller area, then that would make it possible that a Ruler did it in the first place using the original Academy, and that the system just copied their work to use it for this floor.

Someone else arrives at a similar conclusion, "How about this time we act as carefully as before and just intensify our attempts at locating the Candidate. I would also like some of us to examine the boundaries of the floor." Tess says.

"I'll do it," I say. "I can quit my job. Worst case, they fire me before I do. And I'm taking Biscuit with me."

"What about your nukes?" Maya asks.

"I don't know. Just let them steal them again or something."

"Sometimes the words that come from your mouth make me want to punch you, Nat."

If you spot this tale on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

"Sounds reasonable, why don't you try it."

“Nah, you’d just kick my ass. I ain’t doing that shit.”

“Understandable.”

“Yes,” she nods.

I stay a bit longer to listen to the others and their plans, and then head out to leave after sharing some of my ideas.

Taking a few things with me, I combine my skills the same way I did before, in case the “reset” does not happen again, regaining [Ur Line]. Then I head towards what I expect to be the professors’ headquarters, where, after explaining what I want, I meet with the Vice Director of the Academy.

Entering the huge round office at the top of the tower with floor to ceiling windows covering half the room and offering an incredible view, I stop and wait.

The Vice Director turns out to be someone I know, a selari woman dressed in a pointy hat, robe, with a cute owl on her shoulder.

Instead of greeting me, or saying anything else for that matter, she asks, “Can I pet your bond?”

Hoo, hoo!

The tiny owl shouts next to her and pecks the woman on her shoulder with its tiny, cute beak.

“No,” I reply.

“I see. Assistant Professor Gwyn, may I ask why you find yourself wanting to leave the Academy mere hours after stepping onto its grounds?”

“Professor Elan is a dick, I do not think I’ll be able to work with him.”

"Understandable. Are you aware of the penalty for breaking the contract you've signed with the Academy?"

"Not really."

"If I recall correctly, the fine measures out to one year's salary, coming out to a total of three ivory drachen and eighty three obsidian drachen in total."

"That sounds like a lot."

"It does, does it not? Have you changed your mind?"

"When do I have to pay it?"

"What an unusual question. As with all legal documents, you are required to pay your fine within thirty days of breach, after which it will increase by one hundred percent for every week until another month passes, and the authorities will be notified."

"Sounds good. I'm still quitting."

"Understood. Before you leave, though, I have to tell you that I am willing to pay fifty percent of your fine out of my pocket if you would be amenable to letting me hold and pet your bond for five minutes."

"No."

"Very well, it was nice meeting you, Mister Nathaniel Gwyn."

"Goodbye."

For the next seven days, I take my time traveling around the region. I go on foot, fly when possible, and occasionally make use of the trains or airships that serve as public transportation here.

Of course, I don't really have any of the local currency, so I always barter some item, or a technique I've inscribed, or some stuff I buy from the system shop.

Twice, I find myself having to refuse to sell Biscuit.

Biscuit, when he wakes up each day, refuses to fly around or move at all; instead, he makes me carry him and keeps asking for food.

This floor, at least as far as I can tell, suffers from a severe lack of high quality deer jerky, so I offer him some other meat I manage to buy or steal to sate his hunger. It is a cheap price to pay to keep him from devouring this world.

(Food?)

"No, that huge lizard pulling on the carriage is not food."

(Food!)

"Now that just doesn't make any sense. What do you mean by: why is it food shaped then? Where did you learn that? Have you been spending too much time with the twins, have they managed to ruin you?"

(Friend!)

"Yes, I know you've been with Tess. Good job, by the way. She told me about the promises she made to you, and I'll make sure to fulfill them all as soon as possible."

(Asshole.)

“Yes, I know you would have done it anyway, but are you going to refuse?”

The corgi seems to be seriously thinking about something, but the answer comes just as expected.

(Food!)

“I thought so. I like that approach. By the way, don’t think I don’t see you watching that huge lizard a bit too intently. I am serious, please do not eat it.”

To avoid answering, he starts blinking and yawns, and pretends to slowly fall into yet another food coma. As with many of the things I’ve encountered on this floor, even this is just a fake food coma.

And we continue to travel for another seven days.

During that time, we pass the eleventh day, when the reset happened before, and it does not occur again.

In that time, I move slowly to make sure to enjoy my travels. I visit several different places, spend a few days training, or simply walking through smaller villages. I spend several days on an airship and take some time to travel by a low-class train powered by something I still do not understand.

The area surrounding the Academy is pleasant, and the weather is so consistently good that I begin to wonder if some of the webs I’ve seen around the region aren’t simply there to maintain it. It should be possible to set up weather controlling arrays like that, create a few logic cores to set the parameters, like creating rain when they detect a need for rain, or blocking sunlight when things need to cool off, or remove the clouds for a nice sunny day.

I believe someone smart enough, given enough time, would even be able to create storms, violent winds, and all sorts of destructive weather if they really wanted to.

In the end, I also find out that the edges of the region form a near perfect circle around the border, which includes the Academy and its surroundings.

None of the natives seem to realize it, and none of the natives, as far as I can see, enter or leave the region surrounding the Academy.

That region is a few dozen miles wide. And the Academy sits right in the center, with a small city placed nearby and six villages spaced throughout the province.

But that's all.

There's already a barrier in place when I reach the border. It existed long before the selari Champion died again and the two incoming Champions supposedly created the barrier around the region.

A few times, I ask the natives about the places beyond this region, they talk about it and seem to have a lot of knowledge about the surrounding areas. But no matter who they are, they have no idea about the field I've perceived around the place.

I even offer five low arcane items I bought from the system shop to a smaller group of natives in an attempt to get them to leave. They agree, but when it comes to leaving, they just stand a few steps before the barrier starts and then return with these blank expressions and not remembering anything. That likely confirms my suspicion, and that the region affected by the "resets" is just the Academy and surroundings, and not the entire world.

That also more or less confirms that it has to be the work of the Ruler who made use of some system mechanism to create it and not "just" the setting of the floor.

It also makes me 90% sure the reset will happen again, even if it's a bit late this time.

With that comes a question, where did the selari Champion come from? If my theory is correct, he couldn't have come from outside, meaning he was in the region since the start of the "loop" and just didn't come to the Academy until the 9th day.

I think of exploring the barrier myself, but this barrier or "cutout" of the world is beyond anything I understand. It's clearly been set up by someone much more powerful than me.

Honestly, I think I'll just die if I try to pass through. No, I am almost sure of it. It's just that scary.

Over the next few days, I set up a camp near it, observing it and testing stuff. They turn out to be surprisingly nice and calm days, and I enjoy spending them with Biscuit very much.

While observing it one day, I blink, and find myself back in the room surrounded by the other members of group 4.

I glance outside, and the park I remembered earlier looks exactly the same. This time, I even see Professor Elian in the distance, speaking with another professor.

The second reset has finally happened.