

Tutorial 611

Chapter 611: Even more questions

"So, the 1st reset happened on the 11th day. The 2nd reset happened on the 15th day. Does this mean the length of the..."

"Loops!" Dennis shouts, interrupting Tess.

She looks at him and then shrugs, "...length of the loops is either increasing or they're random, it's also possible they're being triggered by an event we don't know about. The important question is if the Ruler Candidate is in the loops with us. If yes, another question is how they would react to that. Would they try to kill us or contact us? If they're in here with us, it's highly possible that they've already realized we're "looping" with them, it's even possible that they noticed during our 1st loop."

Sophie joins in, "But we still have to protect the Candidate. Wouldn't that imply that they're caught in the loop as well and should have realized what's going on? Or will we keep getting looped until we protect the candidate? And what do we need to protect them from?"

"Assassins?" Dennis replies, drawing more attention to himself. "Maybe they're after the candidate? So perhaps that means the candidate is hiding?"

(Food?!)

"No, he wasn't talking about hiding food," I inform Biscuit.

"Unfortunately, our shards have been reset as well," Min-Jae says from the side, "otherwise that would allow Nat to track down all the best materials, sell an item, then in the next loop find the same materials and sell the same item again, but quicker. But with the way our shards keep resetting, it's not possible"

"Shame, isn't it?" I complain.

"Did you mention my name by mistake, Tess?"

“Did I?”

“Anyway, you already have all the info I collected outside, so I’m going to go get insulted by that douche Elian.”

With that, I leave, and the others follow soon after. It might be me, but some of them seem way too excited for all of this.

After hearing the same words again from Elian and watching servants carry my things to the office, I sit there, putting my legs up on the two boxes.

Looking at them, I wonder if I should try a more thorough method of securing them or simply wait for the thief. Though maybe I should ignore them entirely. Maybe I could sell them for information because it looks like knowledge is the most valuable thing we’ll be able to get here. Of course, with all of this, we cannot forget the Ruler Candidate, whoever it might be.

I grab a piece of paper from the table and start writing down all the important events I know will happen.

day 1 - Professor Elian dissing me

day 2 - free day, meeting Maya, Tess, and the twins, while the others are busy - if we decide to follow the 1st loop’s schedule

day 3 - 1st lesson with Elian - getting “punished”, Meeting Lily and other healers during her picnic, if I walk around again, and if she goes on a picnic again

day 4 - Ari, Kays lesson 1 on basics, thermonuclear warhead stolen, meeting the Vice Director if I follow the schedule

day 5 - 2nd Lesson with Elian - mana releasing stuff, meeting Tyven and Ari if I eat at the same place

day 6 - Min-Jae mentioning meeting Tyven in the library - possibly going as well if I want to check on the guy

day 7 - selari Champion visiting and having a talk, 3rd lesson with Elia - a bunch of students trying to disrupt my orbs

day 8 - Transfer student in Izzy's class, claiming my salary - 8 obsidian drachen

day 9 - Meeting the primordial energy demon Professor, if I follow the schedule, selari Champion found dead in the Academy

day 10 - sensory deprivation tank - Ari, Keys lesson 2

day 11 - train or airship trip

Of course, that's not all. I also did some other things for fun, like exploring the facilities around the Academy. But these are the things I feel are the most important. The question is how much I should follow this. What would be the best way to abuse this mechanism this time?

Of course, I already have a pretty good idea.

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

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

Warning! A combination of incompatible skills may result in a worse skill.

Warning! After combining the skills, it will become extremely difficult to acquire the skills used in 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

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Ley Line - Lvl 54

Knitting - Lvl 37

“[Knitting] as the main one, and [Mana Manipulation] and [Mana Domain] as supportive ones.

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

You have acquired [Framework]

[Framework - lvl 0 > Framework - lvl 8]

Okay, next step.

I create a mana orb, concentrate on it and-

Congratulations, you have acquired a new skill!

[Mana Manipulation]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 0 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 61]

Suck it, system. I will never get tired of this shit.

Now I have almost two days before my 1st lesson with Elian on the 3rd day. Out of curiosity, I give [Framework] a once over and to be honest, I like the name a bit more than [Ur Line]. Having a bit of a sense of how the system names stuff and after seeing those lines with my trait, I still think [Ur Line] will probably turn out to be the rarer skill. Buuuut, and just maybe, it will be a worthy sacrifice to get rid of [Knitting], plus I will try more combinations later and will pick the one I like the most.

So far, [Framework] seems to retain the effects of [Knitting], it allows me to knit threads of mana together while maintaining flexibility. It's something I can still apply to [Ley Line] as well as my javelins, shields, and basically all of my creations. As I've come to learn, doing it this way makes them much more durable and resistant to disruption. Currently, I can even do it nearly reflexively without thinking too much.

[Framework] takes that even further. The connections between threads are stronger and denser. At some point, it even seems like they're being pulled toward each other, and whenever they take damage, a bit of mana seeps into them from the surrounding threads to fix them.

I get the feeling that I can use the skill on my body as well, and not just to create stronger armor, but as something to build on, like some sort of base or frame to tie my creations to, or almost inscribe new pathways into said frame. I suspect at higher levels, it may be possible to maintain such frames indefinitely or at least on a semi-permanent basis. It seems to synchronize exceptionally well with my way of storing arrays, inscriptions, and information in the back of my mind.

It is fascinating and somewhat elusive, but I like it a lot.

Damn, deciding which skill to pick will truly be difficult.

Next, I go to the system store and, spending a total of 900 thousand shards, I buy two mid arcane items. One defensive amulet and a bow. Of course, first, I carefully observe them. I even use them and activate my eyes to learn as much as possible for my future crafting.

Then I head to the head accountant's office and enter. In this loop, he hasn't met me yet, but he acts in the same polite manner, likely already knowing who I am.

I put the two mid arcane items on the table in front of him.

"I want to sell these to the Academy."

He blinks, looks at me, and then back at the weapons.

"May I request the registration documents for these items? As you are undoubtedly aware, all weapons of epic rank and above, particularly those classified as arcane or higher, must be properly registered prior to being brought onto Academy grounds. I will also require a proof of ownership certificate."

"I don't have it, I just made them today."

"Assistant Professor Gwyn."

"Yes, that's me."

"If I am correct, it is your first day at the Academy, and you say you've already created two mid arcane items?"

"Yes."

"If I consult the head of the Crafting Zone, will they be able to confirm that you were present there and that you produced these items on-site?"

"No, I made them in my office."

"So, if I submit an inquiry to the Tower Butler regarding your recorded movements, will the log indicate that you were already present in your office at that time?"

"I meant that I made the items in one of the gardens."

"I see. Can you wait a minute before I contact Professor Elian so we can continue this conversation?"

Well, fuck.

"I don't know if you are aware, Assistant Professor Gwyn, but you just said that out loud."

"What I meant to say was, sure, call him."

He politely agrees but he's probably hitting the panic button as we speak, and I sense the powerful signature of a set of guards approaching as defenses rise in response, ready to activate at a moment's notice. It is all done politely, but I notice.

Five minutes later, I'm sent to wait outside the room, as Professor Elian passes by. His violet eyes staring at me, pupils surrounded by a golden circle as he closes the door behind him.

Meanwhile, I sit on the chair nearby and think of how unaccustomed I am to this kind of formality. Is this normal on the "civilized" floors? I mean, mid arcane items are powerful, likely very, very enticing even to a person sitting somewhere around level 350-380-390? And even though the ones I bought were cheaper, they could easily be considered heirloom grade items that would be passed down in some families.

Well, in the next loop, I will do better.

Barely two minutes after entering, Professor Elian exits holding only a defensive amulet. The bow is gone. Before handing the amulet to me, he looks at me for confirmation that I understand.

It seems the price for overlooking this is a mid-arcane item, which is an absolutely insane cost. Maybe I should hold off a bit longer before I start selling thermonuclear warheads.

I nod, and only then does he hand me the amulet.

"I am very disappointed in your lack of forethought," he says, then leaves without another word.

As he walks downstairs, I knock on the door again and open it, where the head accountant looks at me in a confused manner.

"You don't want to buy the amulet?" I ask before he can react.

Five minutes later, I leave with a pouch full to the brim with ivory white drachen and even a few gold drachen, all likely worth as much as decades of my salary here.

Before I leave, I ask the head accountant for rules and for a list of items that are allowed and not allowed to be brought to the Academy without registration or proof of ownership. Then I ask him for estimation of prices, sliding a few obsidian drachen to him as a courtesy.

As he talks and explains, I go through the system shop to pick the best options to sell next time.

Lastly, I ask him about Professors willing to hire themselves out for private lessons, and unsurprisingly, it turns out to be fairly common. Powerful families, as it happens, tend to hire tutors or pay professors to give a bit of extra attention to their family members in the Academy.

Some professors offer multiple lessons for a set price, while others only provide small-group sessions. A few demand more drachen than I will likely ever possess. The most expensive professors likely set their rates not only based on lesson quality but also as an informal bribe to foster connections with them.

Those charging the highest fees are typically professors at or near level 400, with decades or even centuries of experience. Fewer than five of them are currently living at the Academy.

With Champions likely starting at around 450-500, it might not seem that far off Champion rank, but there is a HUGE difference when it comes to having an extra 50-100 levels once you reach the 400s.

Not because of extra stats, but because of time. Leveling once you hit levels 300-400 slows down a lot; at that point, a person needs to fight exceedingly powerful monsters, not to mention the difficulty in finding them in the first place. Even then, it takes a long time, so by that point, you're likely to be fairly experienced and powerful, with multiple skills over level 75.

As I walk to my office, I also think about whether or not I should reveal my black mana to the professor I hire, and which professor I should choose for lessons.

Chapter 612: Fellow enthusiast

The more I play around with [Framework], the more I like it. It helps me with the structure of mana creations, including arrays and inscriptions. It also has a mental component that allows me to store frameworks for said arrays more effectively in my mind.

It will be difficult to decide between keeping it and [Ur Line], and probably a few more skills I might explore later, but that is a problem for future me. Screw that guy.

As for the drachen I've earned, they're all gone, kaput. The head accountant, after taking a cut of course, was able to secure lessons for me from one of the five people in the Academy rumored to be somewhere around level 400 if not just over that threshold.

It all happens surprisingly quickly, but when I hear who agreed, I understand why, having dealt with them in my previous loop. The requirement they impose to hold these lessons also explains a lot. It's simple, but it still reveals much.

Bring your bond to the lesson.

All the money buys me three lessons. Just three for a mid-arcane item. I mean, how crazy is that? It makes for an extremely poor financial decision on my part. I know that logically, even if the person in question is pretty highly leveled, items like that have enormous value. But overall, I just don't care all

that much. I'll have the shards back by the next loop. And let us not consider the option that this is the last loop.

Hehe.

Please don't be the last loop.

All things said, I find myself meeting up with the Vice Director on the second day of the loop, in one of the private training grounds, the ones they keep the servants out of. There are five of these high-tier training grounds in the Academy, each one very different from the last.

But that's not the one I'm heading to now. My destination is a hemispheric cupola on the surface, its walls covered in small black hexagonal pieces similar to those in the sensory deprivation tank. It's also quite large, on top of the additions they've made to keep it from being an eyesore. A few splashes of color, a huge tree nearby whose branches have clearly been shaped to lean over the cupola, and a dozen similar details beside. In the end, it makes for quite a pleasant view.

There is no guard at the entrance; instead, I place my hand on a nearby panel and send my mana through allowing it to verify my signature. Only once my reservation is confirmed am I allowed inside.

Biscuit, in a rare burst of energy, decides to leave my arms and float like the tiny burrito shaped airship he is. Lately, he seems to have been staying in his puppy form most of the time, and part of me strongly suspects it is because he receives more food and pets this way.

A part of me also hopes he doesn't ever realize that in his giga form, he would probably be able to eat even more. But who knows. Even in puppy form, we have yet to find a limit to his hunger.

The interior of the training ground is quite pretty all on its own. The flooring is made of simple white stone, and the walls of the sphere are lined with a display seemingly created through some form of illusion or projection, showing clouds and a bright blue sky from the point of view of someone flying through them.

The Vice Director stands there, rocking her big, tall, and pointy, wide brimmed hat like something out of an old fairy tale, and a robe. Her tiny owl sits on her shoulder, glancing between me and the floating Biscuit. For some reason, it even hoots and pecks the selari woman's cheek a few times.

As I saw before, the vice director lets it happen without even trying to defend herself.

“Greetings, Assistant Professor Gwyn.”

“Greetings, Vice Director.”

“Greetings, great bond.” She chirps, greeting Biscuit with markedly more enthusiasm than she had for me.

The corgi quickly tilts his head in a confused manner, causing his ears to flop to the side.

Tuu-tu!

The tiny owl shouts, pecking the selari woman three times in response.

“Assistant Professor Gwyn,” the vice director says.

“No,” I answer.

(Food?) Biscuit says, floating over to me and booping my cheek three times with his nose as if he were mimicking the owl bond's pecks.

“Vice Director, may I ask what your specialization is?” I ask holding Biscuit to prevent him from escaping, as I boop/peck his cheek three times in response with my own nose.

In a terrible arc of revenge, he starts wagging his tail, floats higher, bites into the hair near my temple, and starts pulling on it, leaving saliva on it and pulling some out.

Kwit! Kwit!

The tiny owl pecks the Vice Director five times.

Only then does the selari woman answer: "It is rare for people to spend so much on lessons from a person whose specialization they don't even know. Very well. I rarely teach, but before I joined the Academy, my specialization was in Continental Infrastructure Destruction and Large-Scale Containment Operations."

"You served in the army?"

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"I used to lead a unit that operated directly under one of our Champions, Angar. Our work was, as I mentioned, focused on independent operations and the creation of protocols and arrays to be used on a mass scale with additional personnel or individual Champions."

"Sounds important. Is Champion Angar the one coming to speak at the Academy in the next couple of days?"

"Champion Angar is dead. He was the leading candidate to become the Absolute, but in the end, he died at the hands of the man who became our current Absolute. We, as his subordinates, were given the option to serve or die."

"And that's how you ended up in the Academy?"

"Correct. Now, Assistant Professor Gwyn, may I ask what your specialization is so we can proceed?"

"It is hard to say. I would say it revolves around large-scale attacks that might require some preparation. Also channeling large amounts of mana. I am also decent at mana disruption. There is primordial energy I have and..."

“Two energies. There is no need to lie to me. So it seems like your skills are built around Grand-Scale Destructive Assaults, judging by your mana levels, then High-Capacity Mana Channeling and Wide-Area Mana Interference.”

“Does everything need to have such fancy names?”

“I apologize, but I’ve grown accustomed to the protocols and jargon we used in the military. As for the lesson, I’ve generally found that what helps my students the most is pointing out the mistakes in their approach and the ways I would counter them. It’s something I’m quite good at, as shown by my experience leading a unit directly under a Champion. How about I ask you for a small sample of your capabilities, and I’ll point out how I’d go about countering them in combat so that you can work on those areas?”

“That sounds good.”

“Very well,” she turns her head to the side to look directly at the tiny owl and whispers in a very gentle voice, “Lulu, can you stop limiting my mana, please?”

Hoo!

There is no change I can see, but immediately I can feel it. The pressure surrounding the selari woman increases multiple times, to the point where the mana radiating around her forms huge pulses that flow rhythmically into the area.

“Now then, Assistant Professor Gwyn, as a fellow Amplificator, there is a lot I can show you. Unlike you, I was never great at handling the sheer quantity of mana I possess and so I’ve always had to rely on my bond and other methods. Therefore, I ask you: please be very careful and try not to die in the event that I find myself lashing out against you by reflex. Please start with mana interference.”

Glancing at her, I activate my eyes and at the same moment deactivate them, taking notice of the instant reaction from her mana and the way it starts to fluctuate.

She just tried to make me pass out from information overload the moment she noticed my eyes. She must either know about the trait or suspect it.

How annoying; that means it could happen in the future. Liss already used it against me during the fifth event, my new skill, now her. I'll need to do something about that.

I also move my mana and raise it. The surroundings start shifting their colors as I activate [Eclipse] and gradually strengthen it.

Then she does something interesting. The best way I can describe it is that she starts creating "sacrificial" structures that she modifies and places in my skill's path. None of them contains all that much mana, but each manages to be complex and present enough for my skill to target them first. These structures are deployed multiple times per second with minimal quantities of mana and very little effort. Even though she puts herself down, she demonstrates an impressive degree of control over her mana.

As I raise my mana, she raises hers as well, and for the first time in a while, I've encountered someone with a larger mana pool than mine, outside of those at Champion level or higher.

She's probably a "mere" seventy to ninety levels higher than I, but her mana completely overwhelms mine, something I wouldn't have thought possible unless she'd been investing in it in a manner similar to mine.

While I deal with my mana through my talent in mana channeling, containment, and using Mana Cycling, she has her bond to help her, along with a number of other things I can't quite perceive yet.

We face each other, raising our mana to the utmost degree.

The shift is subtle at first. The air grows thicker, not from pressure, but from the sheer saturation of our mana leaking into the environment. Colors dim. Sounds grow muffled as if we were underwater. Dust on the floor begins to tremble and rise into the air. My mana slides against hers, the edges clashing in overlapping frequencies just barely out of sync.

Gradually, it reaches the point where I have to devote my entire [Focus] to handling it and sending it crashing into hers.

As if we agreed on it, I drop [Eclipse], and she stops bothering with sacrificial structures; her bond is the only thing helping her handle all that mana.

At this point, both of us forget about everything else, and it turns into a mana measuring contest.

For the first time, she begins to smile ever so slightly as her robes and pointy hat flicker around her from the sheer pressure of her mana.

Indeed, an Amplificator and fellow mana enthusiast.

Then she forgets to hold herself back; the mana around me is instantly overpowered by hers, and I find myself being thrown against one of the walls, fracturing most of the bones in my body.

Her pressure disappears, and a look of sudden concern flashes across her face, making it clear that this was not done by intent.

As I slide down the wall, the blood trail stays behind, and I activate multiple healing marks Lily left on me, healing myself and realizing for a moment how close I was to dying.

Then my mana rises again. I channel it much quicker than she can raise hers again. She herself told me she cannot channel as swiftly as I.

My mana collides with hers and sends her crashing to the ground, causing her to slide until she crashes against the opposing wall. Her hat falls off, and her bond lifts up, circles once in the air, then lands back on her shoulder.

Even during all of that, her mana pressure continues to rise, less instant and more gradual than mine, but she overwhelms me entirely and sends me stumbling back until I cannot move, pinned against the wall, as her mana constantly disrupts my attempts to overcome the effect.

The Vice Director stands, picks up her hat, dusting it off as she does, and slowly sets it on her head before turning back to me.

She's wearing a wide grin.

Then I start feeling a tightness in my chest; I grow light-headed and feel as if I am about to vomit. Funnily enough, it reminds me of the lesson I gave that class of students with Elian. But I refuse to give up. I fight back as long as possible, trying my best, using all the mana I can gather and channel. At this point, there's already so much filling the room.

I use Mana Wavelength Tyrant, I rely on my Mana Physique, I use my reservoir, and weaken my constructs just to bring the entirety of my mana to bear. And all the while I push my mental passives to their limit.

But the gap in skill, levels, and mana capacity is far too wide.

In the end, I throw up, and just before the world goes black, I feel my head slam against the floor.

What a great training session, I think with satisfaction.

Chapter 613: Murder bird

I wake up lying on my back, pulled away from the mess I made. I still feel a tightness in my chest, and as my sight clears, I realise it's just Biscuit lying on my chest, protectively facing the Vice Director.

The woman is holding one of her hands, which seems to be bleeding for some reason, and she keeps staring at Biscuit.

Checking the timer, I confirm that I've only been passed out for a few minutes, yet it still feels awkward. Lately, this seems to have been happening quite a lot, even with my powerful mental passives. I wouldn't even say it's the passives' fault, or that they're lacking rarity; it seems more likely that I keep jumping into situations where they can't really do much to help. A normal Hell difficulty or even Beyond attendee probably doesn't do this kind of thing very often.

Cowards.

"Who's a good boy?" I ask. Without turning around or breaking eye contact with the selari woman, Biscuit's tiny tail begins to swing wildly.

Then he woofs.

"Yes, you are!"

The speed of his tail wagging increases even further, to the point that I begin to worry he might lift off like a helicopter.

As I move to stand, he floats into the air, maintaining a position where his front legs rest on my shoulder.

"One more time, and afterward, I'll provide feedback," she agrees.

Our mana rises again, and I have difficulty not compressing mine to the point that it turns black. Maybe next time, but first I need to learn more about her.

After passing out once more, I wake to find the Vice Director once again holding a bleeding hand, this time marked with tiny bite marks from a sharp set of teeth.

After that, I receive detailed, well organized feedback along with a list of potential mistakes she thinks I may be making.

I consider all that feedback valuable, as she even tells me about methods she and her unit would use if forced to face a Champion with capabilities similar to mine, if on a much grander scale. It's all very fascinating: the arrays she mentions, inscriptions, items, materials, special metals to be used for shielding, and so on.

Just by listening, I can tell the depth of experience she has when it comes to facing much stronger opponents and the methods she had to develop just to be able to contest them. At first, I also thought she might have a concentration type skill, but in the end, I concluded that it's probably just part of her

personality—laid back and only rarely showing interest. Years on the battlefield, never knowing when a Champion could appear and wipe them out, could cause that.

Of course, one thing raises my opinion of her more than anything else: she probably invested every possible point into mana, to such an extent that when she was still somewhere around my level, she probably had only slightly less mana than I do now.

There is a slight difference, too. While I do it mostly out of fascination, stubbornness, and future planning, I think for her it was more logical and calculated. It was probably a decision she came to after bonding with Lulu, who seems to be helping her limit and control that mana of hers, and likely provides additional abilities the tiny owl has yet to reveal.

Such a cute, silent murder birb.

Back in my room, I wash up and change into a clean set of clothes. It is still a suit because apparently, Assistant Professors are expected to wear one at all times, for some supposedly important reason involving prestige and representation.

Biscuit climbs onto my lap without waiting for permission, and I let him.

My body still feels off. Not weak, just out of sync. Like some part of me is lagging behind, still stuck in that moment when her mana spiked and mine tried to match it.

I look at the floor for a while, steadying my breathing, and think about what she showed me. About the things I failed to notice until it was too late. Her movements were not fast, but they were modified to interrupt mine, to force me into a series of knee jerk reactions instead of a state of control. I made her job easier by relying too much on my "scripted" frequencies.

That much is fine. I can adjust.

I should also test a few new interaction types between my support passives and focus on how my mana behaves at different stages. There is one twist to Mana Cycling I've been ignoring for a while because it messes with my sensory balance, but maybe I should give it another try. If I start slowly, I can manage the side effects and get used to the change.

"What do you think?" I ask the corgi.

Biscuit makes a soft growling sound, which I take as a sign of agreement.

We stand up together and leave the room without speaking. I head to the garden, where I meet up with Maya, Tess, and the twins, just like we did on the second day of our first loop.

So far, everyone is more or less keeping to the schedule we had during our 1st loop.

Even before we start talking, I notice something about Maya. It is quite a big change to her mana, and I am sure she's chosen not to hide it on purpose, just to show off in front of me.

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"What did you buy?" I ask, already knowing what she wants to hear.

"I am testing a passive that makes my mana creations stronger and passively compresses them, and then another that does something similar. I want to see how they stack up."

"Rarities?" I ask.

"Both mid arcane. All my shards are gone."

"Damn, I see you've gone all in with testing."

"You bet. And I have about ten more passives I want to test during the next few loops. You have to meet up with all of us sometime. We've been holding these special dark brotherhood style meetings where we sit around candles and theorize about the best ways to use our shards."

"Are human sacrifices involved?"

"We sometimes kick Dennis when he gets too annoying."

"Sounds good, I'll try to join the next one."

Tess, seeing that we're done talking, asks, "So how was the Vice Director?"

"Quite strong. I think she could have beaten all of us at once in direct combat, but assuming we had time to prepare, I believe we could take her down. Then again, if she also had time to prepare, it would only make things more dangerous."

"That strong?"

"Yup, and she's still hiding most of it, but I noticed some strange fluctuations in her mana. I'll share the details later, but I don't think she is a Candidate, nor do I think that she's the one who stole the thermonuclear warhead. But she could be involved in the Champion's death, or at least she will be, since it hasn't happened yet for this round. You know what I mean."

Tess smiles. "No need to explain. But it surprises me, from what I heard, she seems fairly loyal to the current power structure."

"Probably, but she could be pretending. Apparently, she worked directly under a Champion who was fighting for the title of Absolute, and when he died, she was given the option of serving here or dying herself. There could be a bit of ill will there."

Raising her eyebrow, Tess says, "It's been almost two hundred years since Champion Angar died. If she kept her mask on for that long and continued to plan, I would be very impressed."

Maya shoves Tess playfully. "Are you sure she isn't one of those spiteful ones?"

"I also know a few women like that," Aaron mumbles quietly at my side.

Before any of the girls can react, his brother says quickly, "We found one of the richest students in the school and made a plan to steal all his stuff, along with some things belonging to a few other people."

Oh boy.

"Did you think it through?" Tess asks.

"Sure. Worst case, we get thrown in prison until the next reset, right? Before we end this floor, we plan to steal all we can, make a pile, and then leave with it after we figure out the Floor Quest and stuff with the loops. There are mid arcane items, materials, information, and much more. We can sacrifice a few loops, practice, and even pin it on someone else if we try hard."

Ever the bad role model, Maya says, "Grab something nice for me as well."

"Of course! We thought about selling it to the system shop to get rid of the evidence if we needed to, but we don't know when the system will judge that we've taken 'ownership' of an item. Maybe it'll take a week, or perhaps we'll need to bring it to the next floor or remove it from the Academy. Plus the system shop only gives us between ten and twenty percent of the value, damn it."

"Be sure to think it through and decide whether it'll be worth it in the end," Tess warns him again.

"No worry," Dennis says. "If we find no low to mid arcane items, we'll drop it, it just wouldn't be worth it. Besides, it's probably a better plan than Min-Jae's, he wants to steal the whole library."

That's when I join in. "Tell me more."

This time, Aaron answers. "He wants to be in the library at the end of the floor, possibly in one of the sections we're not allowed to enter. Then he will adjust gravity so all the books fall through the entrance to the ninth floor and use [Telekinesis] to help it along. He also said something about asking you to help with breaking the library's defensive arrays. Unlike Dennis, I respect it. Just imagine yanking an entire library belonging to the top Academy in the world."

"Aren't the defenses too good?" I ask.

"Yup, but he's planning to rely on the fact that every time a floor ends, everything goes to hell and the likelihood that there's going to be some huge fight or some other catastrophe, forcing people to ignore the library. Nat, I think part of the reason he's counting on that is because he knows you and because he saw how little you cared about thermonuclear warheads being stolen."

Rather than reacting to his accusations, I decide to stay quiet.

After giving me a funny look I do not deserve, Tess turns to the boys and reminds all of us, "Please consider the possibility that if we fail this floor quest, we might be stuck in this loop until the end of the tutorial. While that might sound ideal, think about how limiting it could be for our growth."

As she speaks, I immediately think of the opportunities it would provide first. Three years here would allow for so much exploitation, especially with the occasional trip to Beyond. But what would happen if I went to Beyond, leveled up, then returned? Would my stats reset with the loop? And if they reset, would they reset to the new version or the "original" version from the start of this floor?

An unsettling option comes to mind. Would fully exploiting the opportunities here be more valuable than advancing through the remaining floors? After thinking it through, I reach the same conclusion Tess likely has.

I don't think it would.

Maybe I should take this floor quest a bit more seriously, which seems to be exactly what Tess wants. Rather than constantly lecturing us, she's been nudging us just enough to reach the conclusion she wants us to reach.

I meet her eyes and see tiny sparks dancing in her grey irises.

Not much later, I sit in my office, still thinking over it all. The conclusion remains the same, and so I speak.

"I want to use a one day Beyond Stay token."

A notification pops up.

Impossible to enter Beyond at the current time.

That settles it. The system is still an asshole, and Tess is right. This floor, for all the opportunities it offers, is just as unforgiving as the others. You can grow here, sure, but the tradeoff would be huge, especially when it means missing out on Beyond and the other floors entirely.

I am not even factoring in the mental strain. Spending three years here, stuck in the same ten day cycle, give or take, would probably wear down the majority of people eventually.

At least the tournament still seems accessible, since Victoria told me she was on the 8th floor before entering. I'll have to ask her how the system handled her absence when I see her again. Two weeks is a long gap.

I close the notification window and start reassessing my priorities. The floor quest is back on the menu. Not the top concern for now, but close. I should also check the Academy's secondary facilities. I ignored most of them last time because they seemed unimportant, but there might be something interesting to find.

Min-Jae will probably want to talk soon, and I should check on Dennis and Aaron before they drag us into another problem.

As always, there's still plenty to do.

Chapter 614: Fake AF

It's the fourth day, and in an effort to keep things running smoothly on this floor, I follow my schedule. That means I do as Professor Elia asks and head to the lesson with Ari and Kays.

Fixing up my clothes, I arrive just in time, and my entrance causes all conversation to stop. Ari, Kays, and Melo all turn to look at me as I move to stand behind the desk at the front. I stop there and face them.

“My name is Nathaniel Gwyn, Assistant Professor under the tutelage of Professor Elian. A pleasure, I suppose,” I say, mirroring the formal introduction I once observed from that insufferably self assured blonde Professor.

I continue, “Today’s lesson concerns basi... advanced topics.”

My suit is immaculate, as is my hair, which I had styled earlier. My tone is calm, though I make a deliberate effort to sound authoritative. And I deliberately let a bit of mana seep into the room, just enough to show off.

I take a few steps and come to a stop in front of Kays. “Your name, if you would.”

“K-Kays,” he stammers.

“Good. Now then, Kays, you suck.”

“What?!” he shouts, then quickly lowers his voice, “What?”

Whatever complaints he had vanish. I pause dramatically, taking a moment to come up with more nonsense to amuse myself, all the while remembering the way Kays treated me in the first loop.

For the next twenty minutes, I make him try to detect the methods I’m using to disrupt his mana until he starts sweating. The whole time, I find myself surprised by how different his behavior is from the first loop. The only thing I can think of to explain it is my grand entrance and faked confidence.

I guess first impressions really do matter.

When I leave him, he sits down, breathless and clearly relieved to be left alone.

I stop in front of Ari, who’s been watching me with an expression of interest flickering behind her eyes, “Your eyes are pretty, Assistant Professor Gwyn. Is it a trait?” she asks, smiling even more.

"Yes. It allows me to see through other people's nonsense," I reply in the same authoritative voice I've been using from the start.

Then, for another twenty minutes, I do the same to her as I did to Kays. I use it as a chance to form a better evaluation of the overall power level and talent among the students.

I also try to make her slip, just in case she happens to be looping too. Unfortunately, I notice nothing. Either she isn't looping, or her mask is flawless.

When the lesson ends, both of them leave ahead of me. I stay seated behind the table, looking out the window, thinking and planning. The thermonuclear warhead should be on track to be stolen today. And I'll let it happen, I won't even watch, or try to stop it. I've already made that decision.

Tomorrow is the lesson where Elian is going to ask me to release my mana. I might release a bit more or play around with it to see how he responds and test the students' reactions. The day after that, I might go to the library to meet Min-Jae, and possibly Tyven, who Min-Jae said should be there.

Then the day after that, the Champion will visit. I need to decide what to do about that.

Done thinking, I get up and head outside. I've already sensed her signature, so I'm not surprised to find Ari waiting by the door, leaning against the wall.

"Assistant Professor Gwyn, isn't it rude to make a young lady wait this long?"

I slide back into Professor Mode and give her my best annoyed-professor look, "How may I assist you?"

She giggles, covering her mouth with two of her six hands. The whole time, joyful flames flicker in her eyes.

When she lowers her hands, she's grinning. "I liked you more during your first loop."

In a second, dozens of thoughts flash through my mind.

Maybe I should pretend not to know. Maybe I should play dumb, like some of the natives do when anyone brings up system-related stuff. Maybe I should act like a grumpy professor.

None of those fit me.

"Let's talk somewhere else," I say.

"I can't," she says, shaking her head with a hint of a smile. "But I bet you're curious, Assistant Professor Gwyn. I'll answer one of your questions for free, so go ahead and ask."

"How many loops?" I ask.

That question appears to amuse her, and she imitates my manner of speech, "That reveals quite a bit about you. You choose to indulge your curiosity before anything else. You must be an exceptionally inquisitive individual."

She nods seriously, but at the same time, it looks playful. Then she answers in a quieter voice, "Over one hundred."

Oh boy.

"Surprised, are you? We can speak more later. For now, I must take my leave. After our next lesson, we shall continue this conversation." She continues in the same style.

"You said that again. Why do you have to go?"

She turns to leave, and that impish expression returns to her face. I can tell she is about to drop something big.

"If I break my schedule, the others will find me." She locks eyes with me. "I hope you didn't think I was the only one looping."

Then she's gone, and I'm left with even more questions spinning wildly in my mind. At this point, I don't even know what the hell is happening.

I fucking love this floor.

When I try to share the information I just acquired in the Community, most of it gets censored. That hasn't happened since we started the floor, and there can only be one reason it has now. Someone else from the fifth round must have cleared the seventh floor and entered the eighth.

Good things never last.

I toss a few insults in the Community, mostly aimed at Savant, who I expect to have made it through. Of course, he stays silent. Then I leave my room so the thermonuclear warhead can be stolen without interference.

Along the way, I run into the twins. I fill them in so that they can pass the information on to the others, along with my theories, and many questions. I also ask them to quietly involve others in tracking Ari's schedule, but I emphasize that they must avoid bringing too much attention to themselves or Ari. I repeat that until I can be sure they'll be extremely careful.

Later, as night settles, I break whatever rule of the Academy bar flight and lift myself to the top of one of the tallest towers in the Academy.

Its roof is open and clearly serves as an observatory, having been set up with an array of tools for watching the night sky. I climb onto the wall, let my legs hang over the edge, and watch as soft lights slowly switch on all around the Academy, illuminating the paths and any rooms that happen to still be in use.

It's peaceful, unlike my mind and all the thoughts running through it.

Accompanied by one of the evil orbs, I sit there and continue to take in the view as the night progresses and lights take over the role once held by the sun. Even now, there are people walking around, those

who, like me, don't tend to sleep much. But almost as if they had some particular respect for the night, they remain quiet, with a solemnity that's clearly absent during the day.

Out of boredom, I quickly attempt to estimate the length of time Ari could've been looping. Assuming each loop averages ten days, my rough calculation puts it at around three years.

There's a lot I want to ask her.

As always, there's much to be done in the following days. Lessons to attend, floor mechanics to exploit, shards to spend, skill combinations to explore, mysteries to uncover.

A demon professor to challenge to a fight. A library to explore. The Crafting Zone to check out.

A fellow mana Amplificator, and her pet with the ridiculously adorable name Lulu. At this point, are we not best friends? Two brilliant minds who clearly think alike?

I lean back, gaze straight up, and use mana to enhance my sight as Tess taught me, observing the night sky. It's almost funny to see it that way, especially knowing that it is fake and that just a few miles above, there's probably a barrier marking the edge of the floor.

It's fascinating that someone managed to create this. I don't care if they are a Ruler or used some kind of limited system access to hijack parts of its mechanisms. It is still incredible. The sheer amount of energy, mana or not, required to sustain it must be astonishing.

Royal Road is the home of this novel. Visit there to read the original and support the author.

And then there's the system itself, with a tutorial that incorporates entire planets and beings such as Absolutes. At some point, we have to admit that these powers are truly godlike.

I want them. I want to be able to do this sort of thing as well.

And one day, I will.

POV Earth

A few shouts ring through the bar, and conversations end as most of the patrons turn towards the TV, and the barman raises the volume.

Displayed on the screen is a live broadcast. A female reporter, seated inside a helicopter, speaks directly into the camera. The wind buffets the aircraft, and her voice comes through slightly shaken.

"We are currently flying over what used to be a remote stretch of savannah in northern Kenya," she says. The camera shifts to the window beside her. Below, the plains seem to stretch on endlessly, dotted with massive structures.

The ground is peppered with anthills.

Not the small, dirt covered mounds one might normally see. These ones tower as high as trees, some of them reaching two or three stories tall. Their surfaces are hardened with a texture reminiscent of ancient clay, and riddled with twisting entrances.

Giant ants move across the savannah in endless trails. Each one the size of a small dog or large housecat, their carapaces gleam dark brown with a chitinous sheen under the sun. Thousands march together in long, flowing lines, moving with a coordination that looks almost unnatural.

A zebra tries to run across an open space, already wounded, and the camera zooms in just as a group of ants take notice of its passage. In seconds, they break formation and chase her. The zebra's efforts are pitiful, and the ants catch up to her, surrounding her in seconds and start crawling over her body, burying the beast in a mass of shifting legs and biting mandibles.

The zebra screams one last time, and then there is only the rustle of clicking insect limbs.

The reporter's voice returns, strained now. "I have to admit... I am not feeling well. I've had no issues with food or water, but something is wrong with me. Since I came here, I've been seeing things. Screens appear in front of me, almost like video game pop-ups. It's been happening to our entire crew."

Her hands are visibly trembling. She presses her fingers against her temples.

She pauses to take a breath. The camera briefly pans over to the pilot, his expression cold and focused as he controls the helicopter. Light spills into the cabin before the cameraman turns back to the reporter.

“We’re seeing more movement to the south,” she continues. “Another mound is opening up. More of them are coming out. At this point, we estimate there to be upwards of thousands of ants, and they just keep expanding. There are no signs of them stopping, and rumors of planned bombardments are already circulating. The borders of the region have been heavily militarized, lethal force has been authorized to prevent any spread. Unconfirmed reports suggest that several allied major powers are providing satellite support, using their military assets to track the movement of the Colony.”

Her voice drops. “I don’t think this is a local phenomenon anymore. There are reports coming in from all over the world about strange animals. A moose the size of a small house was seen near the Yukon, wolves in the Carpathians are being reported at twice the normal size, along with crocodiles in the Nile dragging entire boats under. Elephant herds in central India have started to act with military coordination. Something is changing, and I don’t even need to talk about all the new kinds of metal or incredible trees we’ve been discovering just these last few weeks, and...”

Her voice cracks on the last word. The broadcast lingers on her face for a second longer than it should, then cuts back to the studio. After a moment, the network shifts to a still image of the African plains with a brief message at the bottom:

Coverage will resume shortly.

Back in the bar, no one speaks for a while. A glass clinks against the counter. Someone clears their throat.

Then the sound returns. Conversations resume, if a little quieter than before.

POV Earth

"Colonel Jonathan Kane, we have completed our testing, and I've brought you the report."

"Stand at ease," the Colonel says, taking the thick file. It's heavy with printed documentation, mostly photos, thermal scans, sensor data, graphs, and hastily written analysis. He begins flipping through the pages without looking up. "What conclusions did you come to? Talk freely and briefly."

"The individual code named Channeler demonstrated impressive capabilities. Surprisingly, he did not object to any part of the testing process."

The Colonel raises an eyebrow. "Of course he didn't. He knows exactly what he represents. The more we see, the more impressed we are, and that works in his favor. He's shrewd, no doubt about it."

"I agree, sir. He makes a very strong candidate for controlled exposure to the public, if we decide to distance the army from everything that's been happening."

Kane closes the folder and taps a finger on the cover. "Unfortunately, I suspect he's already taken. Now tell me, how does he compare to the returnees we've profiled so far?"

The officer straightens his posture slightly before answering.

"He's far beyond anything we've seen so far. His armor is fully powered by mana and integrates seamlessly with his body. We haven't encountered any other returnee with equipment this purpose built or stable. In terms of speed, strength, and defense, he outperforms every known returnee by so much it's not even funny. At this rate, we expect his advantage to hold for at least a year, possibly two."

He pauses briefly.

"He was clocked running at sixty miles per hour on flat ground without strain, and it didn't even seem to be close to his limit. He flipped over a ten ton transport vehicle as part of a stress test. Our scientific observers suspect that the armor's performance adjusts itself automatically depending on the user's intent."

Colonel Kane remains silent for a few moments, absorbing the information.

"And his weaknesses?"

"None that we could confirm, at least not physical ones and certainly not while he was wearing the armor."

Kane leans back in his chair and sets the report down, murmuring to himself, "To create a suit of armor like that after only two years in a tutorial that's meant to take five..."

"Sir?"

"Never mind. You're dismissed. And, check on Miss Thalia Gwyn. Make sure she's..." He pauses, then shakes his head. "Forget it. I'd rather handle it personally."

POV Channeler

"Rafael, are you sure about this? The Army might not like it." Anna asks, turning to me with that worried expression she always makes.

I smile at her in a way I know will calm her down. "It's fine. I've thought it through. There are already too many reports coming out of the other countries. It's becoming impossible for anyone to hide this anymore. We should start now. It will make things easier later."

She nods. "If you think so." Then she picks up her laptop and leaves to upload another set of videos across a multitude of platforms. Most get taken down, of course, but we've hired people to help manage that. Friends, family members of the group, and a few more useful contacts are helping on the side.

I stand up, grab a drink from the fridge, and head over to the living room. I drop onto the couch and set my laptop up on my lap.

In the corner of the room, my armor rests on its rack. I stare at it for a while.

Couldn't he have made it just a little better-looking?

I sigh, unlock the laptop, and one of Isabella's short videos starts playing. It is one of her best. I doubt the others have noticed yet, but she has this hidden, devious streak. I could tell how much fun she was having just from the subtle shifts in her expression while she edited the videos.

The video starts with a young man, a pale blue crown floating over his head, two differently colored eyes glowing faintly. There's a confident, arrogant presence in the way he stands. He has that confident, arrogant air around him, and his every movement radiates with it.

In the first cut, he glances at the camera like he's staring into your soul. The shot zooms in as golden rings form around his pupils. The screen glitches, then starts to shake, and one of those bass heavy, hype songs kicks in.

With each beat drop, the screen flickers and shifts to a new scene. In the next wide shot, he lands hard on a scorched patch of ground, golden flames flickering around him, scorching the air with every step. Another cut shows him rising into the sky in that unnervingly stable way that makes it look less like he's flying and more like the world is shifting around him. Behind him, a barrage of blue projectiles takes form and launches itself forward, each bolt sending out a shockwave to ruffle his hair.

Afterwards, a few more quick cuts follow. Some are wide-angle closeups, some have been taken from a distance, showing the scale of the damage he leaves in his wake, others zoom in on him or the monsters he faces.

It then ends on the final shot.

He stands perfectly still, eyes closed. His hair slowly fades to white, and the music continues to build. At the crescendo, his eyes snap open, but this time they're blood red, and for the first time in the video, he smiles. Then the video ends.

I hit replay. Probably for the tenth time today.

Nathaniel's going to hate it. And even more so, he'll hate the comments this video has already picked up:

@maddiek47: This is CGI, right? No way this is real

@burner_acc99: I don't care if it's fake, he's hot

@realist2345: weird flex but ok. also fake

@sm1le4mepls: THAT SMILE AT THE END??? I'm dead

@himbo_spotted:

@jadedpilot22: lol this is fake af, nice editing tho

@bloodcrow: remind me to never piss off a guy with two eye colors

@thirst_trap_division: I volunteer. For whatever. Anything.

@hisoka: y'all simping for a war crime waiting to happen

@true_returnee69: Noname's gonna lose his shit over this lmao, RIP whoever did this

@pixelforgeFX: High budget fan film? The VFX is clean but nah

@brickenthusiast94: fake, cringe, overedited trash

@reel_truth_now: You sheeple still think this is CGI? Open your eyes.

@ufowatcher666: Saw some weird stuff in Brazil last week. I'm telling you it's happening

@hotnconfused: idc if he's fake or not. he could ruin my life, and I'd thank him

@bunkersoonpls: government is definitely hiding something

@catgirlcentral: i can fix him

@staticdancer: this isn't cgi. I work in cgi. this is something else.

@burnallphantoms: tell me why this has more plot than half of Netflix

@midnight404: not fake. my cousin came back home after two years and told me so. she won't talk about it now.

He'll hate it so much.

I take another sip of my drink, glance at the armor in the corner, then back at the screen. I read a few more comments and then close the laptop and lean back.

Let the chaos begin.

Chapter 615: Under the Surface

POV Lily Chen

I am awakened by the quiet sound of birds singing in the garden behind my window, which opens automatically each morning.

For a moment longer, I lie there with my eyes closed and listen before jumping out of bed.

Just a few steps take me to the room dedicated entirely to my personal bath, where a small pool steams gently. Thankfully, there are no servants around this time after I told them not to come here.

I take off my pajamas, submerge myself in the hot water, and breathe in the lightly scented steam. For that moment, I almost feel like I'm melting. I walk toward one edge of the pool. With most of my body submerged, I rest my crossed arms on the edge and look out through the one way window, through which I see little more than the small garden built on the terrace of my room and the blue sky, with several beautiful towers looming in the background.

Absentmindedly, I watch my hand and concentrate slightly. A piece of skin tears, and a sliver of bone slowly grows from the opening. Nerves, tendons, flesh, then skin follow. A few faint hairs appear as well, and the nail forms shortly after, mirroring the others.

I open and close my fingers into a fist. Even though it feels awkward to move, everything functions perfectly.

With a sigh, I snap off the finger and let it disintegrate in my hand. The wound heals almost instantly, even without conscious effort.

Stepping out of the water, I come to a stop in front of the fogged over mirror and wipe away a small section so that I can see my face.

First, I attempt a more serious look by mimicking her bewitching smile, the one I've always found so beautiful. To support it, my hair turns blonde, shorter, and wavy, and my eyes shift to the same gray as hers.

The mirror mist again, and I wipe it up once more.

My expression switches to a blank stare, hiding so much emotion below the surface. My hair turns black. My left eye turns a shade of gray, and the right one turns brown.

I smile again, amused by how silly this all is, then head to my dresser and begin mentally preparing for today's lessons even though I know I will likely once again be better at healing than the Professor.

As cocky as it might seem, I don't think there's anyone in the Academy who could compare to me when it comes to healing.

POV Maya Jones

"Maya! I order you, kill that boy!"

"I'm sorry, Lady Gabele. So long as we are within the premises of the Academy, I cannot do that."

"You are useless!"

"I'm sorry."

"Phe," the little fourteen year old "Lady" chuffs, making the sound she has been fond of lately.

I start counting to ten, trying to erase my urge to punch her, while slipping into a shallow state of [Focus].

She yells a few more things, then slams the door to her room. She's probably going to use the crystal ball to talk to another boy.

Teenagers.

I sit down near the door, and doing as he taught me, I use [Focus] to split my mind into two parts. The smaller one keeps watch over my surroundings and the girl I'm supposed to be protecting, even if only ceremonially. The larger part of my mind creates an orb over my palm. I expand it into the form of a dagger. Using [Focus] and [Boost], I begin compressing it. I even add [Compounding], which I've enjoyed experimenting with recently.

The dagger turns dark blue. Then it becomes dark blue with light blue streaks.

I push further, giving it my full attention, while keeping it under strict control.

The dagger shifts again and finally takes on a dark blue base, with light blue and purple streams swirling inside.

Immediately, I watch it closely as I know that if the balance were to break, it would flash white and, as that little half demon liked to say, go KABOOM.

Very satisfied with the result, I dissolve the dagger and start over. I try not to think about the fact that that freak was capable of this on the 3rd floor.

POV Tess Hansen

It is early in the morning, and I sit on the rooftop of the house where the student I am primarily, and mostly symbolically, guarding is still asleep.

I know I should have another hour of rest, but lately, sleep has been difficult. I could probably ask Sophie to help with the nightmares and anxiety attacks, but I made that decision long ago. I will not. However, I would not refuse Biscuit's company. His tiny, warm body and steady presence are strangely calming after what I experienced back on the seventh floor.

For a while, I watch my shaking hand. It trembles heavily, and my chest feels tight, which makes breathing difficult. These memories, which I know are fake and were created by me and my [Declaration], continue to haunt me.

I let the feeling fill me, then wait for it to fade. Eventually, my hand stops shaking.

In the end, it's my decision to face it alone, and I know I can manage. This is something I need to handle by myself.

There is movement at the window I am watching. It opens into one of the taller towers, half a mile away, but I see it every bit as clearly as if it were just a few steps in front of me.

A pillow hits the window from inside. Watching it, I can only shake my head and smile.

So dumb.

POV Sophie Martinez

This early morning, the hallways of the Academy are mostly empty, and the echo of my steps feels like I'm striking the silence itself. The air is cold and fresh. I enjoy the absence of people.

Lately, as my [Manipulation] continues to level, their minds feel more and more defenseless. Almost every single one of them shines like a beacon, calling out for me to reach in and make them obey.

Even though I try not to use that part of my ability, it keeps reminding me that it's there. It's the easiest part to use, always waiting and ready. A constant reminder of where my talents truly lie, no matter how much I improve in other areas or how much I resist using it. And using it even makes it level faster than anything else.

It's a disgusting ability, and I've learned a lot about it since arriving on this floor, and I continue doing my best to hide it. At this point, I'm much better at it, not like that time when Jean detected it instantly, or when others have noticed my influence.

During the tournament, I even went so far as to beg that silver haired monster for lessons. Whether out of amusement or some other motive, she agreed to help.

Still, I have no illusions about it. If anyone powerful finds out, my life will be at risk, along with the lives of anyone connected to me.

My sister. My friends.

But still. Even now. Why? Why can I not give it up? Why are there already five assistant professors under my control just three days into the loop? Why do I keep pushing?

Maybe I do it to punish myself. Because I know there is no happy ending waiting for me.

Not after Earth. Not after what I almost did to Izzy back then.

I am not a good person.

POV Kim Min-Jae

The library is quiet when I enter. Morning light filters through the tall windows, casting streaks of gold across the room. The sun has just risen high enough to reach the upper shelves, and the air still holds the chill of the night. The scent of special parchment fills the space, mixing with aged leather and mana conductive ink. The stone walls give off a subtle mineral smell.

I follow my usual path, walking past rows of shelves filled with heavy tomes and categorized scrolls. Between them, older forms of knowledge are stored. Mana stones rest on protected shelves, glowing softly. Some are permanently embedded in reinforced frames for direct reading through touch or mental attunement. Others are sealed behind glass. Others simply lie exposed.

My usual seat is on the left side of the main floor, near one of the large tables set beneath the windows. From here, I can see most of the central chamber, the spiral stairs leading to dozens of upper levels, and the doors that open into the restricted sections.

I set down my bag, open it, and begin arranging my tools. One mana reactive slate to help with locating and searching the books or mana stones I want. A pair of reading gloves to prevent accidental absorption of stored information from some of the older mana stones, which can be rather rough.

There is no sound beyond the occasional scratching of a pen on paper somewhere deeper inside the library.

Picking up the mana stone I noticed yesterday, I read for nearly ten minutes before I sense Tyven approaching. His steps are cautious, just like he is, but steady. As always, he hides his right side, where he has only one arm instead of the normal two. He mostly relies on the two remaining arms on his left.

The narrative has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the infringement.

I do not greet him. I simply shift my materials to make space for him.

If his behavior is the same as before, he will speak to me after a while. Until then, I keep reading and stick to the same schedule I had before.

At least until he learns more from that thylarin girl.

POV Dennis Dalton

As Aaron's eyes go blurry, I know right away he's reading the Community again. I grab a piece of bread and throw it at him while we wait for the servant to bring us the breakfast we've ordered.

(What,) He sends.

(I was asking if you think the student council could be behind all of this. The candidate might be involved with them as well.)

He perks up. (Oh, that's true. It's always the student council.)

(You remember that guy... I forgot his name. That cocky thylarin with six arms.)

(Oh, that one. What about him?)

(I think he's on the student council, and I noticed him eyeing Lily. We could ask her for help getting to him.)

(She will murder him.)

(We just need him alive long enough to get us into the council.)

(Let's try it without Lily first. By the way, how's that new passive you bought?)

(No good. It doesn't stack well with [Connection]

(Low arcane or mid arcane version?)

(Aaron, my boy. We are ballers. Of course, I'm going for mid arcane. How's your Mana Sculptor?)

(Not much good either, but I'll try the mid arcane version before I give it up.)

(Sounds good. Now that you're satisfied, we should stop playing around and actually deal with "important stuff." Let's get back to talking about the student council...)

POV Aaron Dalton

I partially tune out Dennis and his theories about the student council controlling the world, and possibly the Rulers. I keep nodding and tossing in the occasional "Yeah" or "Makes sense," just enough to keep him from realizing that I'm barely listening.

I take a bite of the croissant-like thing. Then I dip it into the hot chocolate-like drink and take another bite. I could get used to this. Our effort to find the food most similar to Earth's was worth it.

Trying not to alert Dennis, I keep reading through the Community and reply to some of the guys I met during the tournament. I just hope Brainiac and Lootenant are safe. They seemed to have run into some trouble on their seventh floor. Only being able to talk to people on the same floor is really annoying, especially since we're probably the fastest climbing group in our round.

Angry Kittens, go! Go!

I glance up at Dennis. He has that smug look again.

One of our special mana orbs floats on the table between us. Both of us are silently wrestling for control of the orb while acting like we're focused on other things. It's one part training, one part rivalry, and one part boredom management.

Just like him, I push harder. Eventually, I start feeling lightheaded, and Dennis gets a nosebleed.

He thinks he's winning. I can feel the smug pulses in his feelings, practically broadcasting his confidence.

Just like always, I push back. My grip on the mana tightens. It takes more effort than I want to admit, and after a few seconds, I start feeling the strain. My head swims for a second.

Across from me, Dennis wipes blood from his upper lip, tending to his bleeding nose.

Neither of us lets go.

The orb jitters once more, caught in the push and pull, then hovers, eerily still.

We sit in silence, both pretending not to care who breaks first.

POV Isabella Martinez

Lately, I don't like being around too many people. Their emotions can be overwhelming to me, but at the same time, I dislike not being able to use [Empathy]. It's something I've grown used to having, even just to detect presences nearby. Being in a small group like ours is the best. I love it, and I love the people in it.

I know stuff about them they don't even know I know. Not in a creepy way, just... feelings that leak out. I deliberately hide that fact, though, because I know how much it would worry them. If they found out I could feel the worst parts of them, they'd probably stop talking to me. Or stare at the floor a lot.

The envy Min-Jae sometimes feels toward others in our group, the fact that Sophie sometimes finds herself thinking about manipulating people who disagree with her, Tess's willingness to watch someone suffer if it means our bond will grow stronger, even though she loves everyone so deeply she would die for them.

The others have similar feelings as well. They can be ugly, very ugly, and at first, they were difficult to deal with. I didn't always get it. But after everything we've been through on the floors and in the tournaments, I've kind of learned that everyone's messed up sometimes.

Everyone has those weird, ugly feelings they try to pretend don't exist. What matters is stopping yourself before you actually do something bad. That's what makes me love them. Not the perfect stuff, the part where they try to be better, even when it's hard, or at least when it comes to their idea of what a better person is.

There's one person, though, who hides almost nothing from me. He only hides his shyness when he does something kind or something he thinks might upset me. Out of everyone, he's the one I know best. Probably even better than I know my sister.

It's simply the way he is. He carries all his scars with pride, knows them well, and carefully chooses the bits he wants to change. Then he follows through with his effort.

He's also noticed the way I avoid large groups of people. Tess noticed too, but only he said something about it. He teased me and welcomed me to the ranks of the introverts. He said it with that usual expression of his, but I could feel the almost childish levels of cheekiness behind it. It's become one of my favorite memories.

I also know he's going to hate the videos I made of him and gave to the Channeler. But I'm also sure part of him will find them extremely funny. He'll probably pretend to be angry, stay quiet, and I'll get to feel that perfect mix of annoyance and amusement that only he has.

I shift, and Noodle shifts too, resting his head in front of mine. His head is currently much bigger than mine. He almost fills the room.

Curious.

I sense his question. It is not the way Biscuit communicates. It is just a feeling we communicate.

"I'm being evil, Noodle, and causing trouble for my friends just so I can laugh at them."

Guilty?

"Nope, I don't feel guilty at all."

Embarrassed.

"You don't have to be embarrassed for me! I'm generally pretty tame. Dennis says, I'm just at that age where I turn into a 'little shit.' So I think I already hold myself back quite a bit!"

Mournful.

"Sure, I used to be cute, but I can't stay a child forever, right? I'll be thirteen soon."

Wary.

"Don't worry. I will love you forever, no matter how much I grow up."

Pleased.

He slowly moves and flicks his tongue just in front of me. I lean back and wrap my arms around his body as much as I can.

Happy. I send back.

POV Nathaniel

I wake up to warm rays of the sun landing on my face and the sound of Biscuit's growling stomach instead of an alarm.

With an annoyed groan, I grab the pillow from under my head and throw it at the window, aiming at the sun, which I have officially decided to declare my enemy for the day.

Still half-asleep, I reach out and tap the belly of his puppy form. Biscuit lets out a cute little noise. Then I turn to the other side of the bed and curl into a ball with the blanket over my head.

My body feels slightly cold, and I feel the early morning weakness that comes with lingering sleep. Even my mind wavers between full awareness and the urge to fall back asleep. I hope one of the future body upgrades does not reduce the need for sleep any further. I get that not needing sleep or only needing a few hours per week could be efficient, but it would also strip me of one of the best feelings in existence.

As I continue hiding under the blanket, the beast awakens. I hear Biscuit walking around and sniffing. Then he starts jumping on my body, now hidden under the blanket, while I force myself to stop falling asleep and begin thinking.

It's the fifth day of the loop, which means the thermonuclear warhead should have disappeared from my office once again, and I just let it happen again. If what Ari said is true and there are others, it is very likely the work of one of those "others." That intentionally vague, annoyingly mysterious wording she used strongly hints at who they might be, but I'll learn more from her on the tenth day.

Waiting that long is annoying, but I've decided to endure it. Until then, I will not stray from my schedule any more than necessary. Surely I can do it. And I've advised the others to do the same.

That means today, fairly soon, I have to attend Professor Elian's lesson. After that, I need to eat in the section where I usually run into Ari and Tyven.

What a life.

I let out an exaggerated groan, a pained noise, then poke my head out from under the blanket and play dead.

Biscuit barks and charges toward me, bouncing on my head and pressing against it with his front paws. Through my slightly open eyes, I see his tail wagging like crazy.

Not long ago, he shared another glimpse of his memories with me. Sounds, images, and confused emotions from his time before the tutorial, when he was with that cruel owner of his. I know that all his playfulness and his almost desperate fear of going without food comes from that time, when he lacked both care and food. One of the reasons he's so much smaller than he should be is because of that lack of nutrition while he was growing.

So, would I, a near Absolute Candidate, really lower myself to something that someone clueless might consider beneath them, just to entertain this burrito shaped corgi?

Absolutely.

You bet I would.

And honestly, I wouldn't hesitate to do it even if an Absolute were standing in the room judging me.

In fact, this tutorial is probably being observed by some of the Rulers, and they could be watching me right now. Screw them too.

Out of nowhere, I move like a viper and grab the attacking corgi, lifting him into the air by wrapping my hands around his sides, just under his front legs, leaving his hind legs dangling below him.

For a moment, he squirms, trying to escape my evil grasp, but slowly he gives up and stares at me with his tongue hanging out.

"I have something I want to ask you," I say.

(Food?)

“No, I don’t want the food you’ve hidden under my bed.”

(Food!)

“Thank you for offering to share, but don't you think one percent is a bit low as an offer?”

(Food?)

“Just two percent?”

(Sustenance.)

“I am pretty sure that you aren’t dying of hunger. But I want to ask you something. Do you remember what you were doing during the first loop? The first eleven days on this floor?”

(Food?)

“What do you mean “a few pieces of deer jerky could refresh your memory”? Are you blackmailing me?”

He barks.

“Okay,” I sigh. “I will try. But for now, I want you to follow the same schedule. Try to act exactly the same, be with the same members of the group four and everything. I’ve already talked to them, and they should understand.”

I feel a sense of confirmation from him, so I let go. He immediately moves under the bed, either to guard his treasure or to eat it before I change my mind and claim my two percent.

With a few hours to spare, I close my eyes and activate [Framework], starting another round of testing.

Chapter 616: Four Challenges

During the lesson with Professor Elian, I act exactly the same as before, the only difference being that I closely observe the Professor. Otherwise, none of the students seem particularly interesting, and from what I can see, no one behaves any differently than they did before.

It proceeds the same, ends the same, and I find myself once again in the park, eating the same sandwiches as before. As silly as it is, I even make sure that just as much remains as the first time I met the boy.

Upon seeing me, Ari comes to a stop in front of me, and he stands beside her. A thylarin with three arms, two on the left and one on the right.

“Assistant Professor Gwyn!” I hear her voice.

Still, I ignore it, do not look up, and continue biting into my sandwich. As before, that seems to make the damned impish thylarin even happier, and Ari giggles deviously.

When I glance up from my food at the boy, she introduces him.

“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 at my hearts and my eyes. I can’t see even the slightest hint of any change.

Even the kinetic energy emanated by the twitching of his body is identical.

Ari behaves similarly, too, without any variation. She says the exact same words and gives the same teasing remarks before leaving, after reminding me that we have another lesson with Kays in the sensory deprivation tank in a few days.

I finish my sandwich while sitting there.

Then, I head to the place the students call the "Sweatbox."

I didn't think much of it before; it was barely worth mentioning. Now, with a bit more information, I am curious and eager to do some testing.

As is typical of Academy buildings, even this one is grand, and dozens of students are coming and going. It's shaped like a pyramid made out of white wood, with platforms where trees grow. Even these trees have been carefully shaped to achieve an optimal, pleasant appearance.

At first, I thought all the shapes, parks, and styles of buildings would make the Academy look chaotic, but everything appears to have been carefully planned and arranged, however unlikely that may seem.

"Greetings, Assistant Professor," a servant behind the table greets me. "What room would you like to use?"

To skip having the same conversation, I reply, "Nothing specific at the moment."

"Understood. Please enjoy your stay."

He touches the panel in front of him, then nods for me to proceed.

One of these days, I swear I'm going to grab someone by the neck just so I can ask to observe some of the things they do. Curiosity is killing me.

After walking through a hallway lined on both sides with painted carvings depicting, as I have come to learn, great battles from their myths and legends, I reach the main room. The largest room in the pyramid, located exactly at its center.

The space is a large cube, with large screens on each wall displaying a series of rankings and points. These four large screens represent the standings for four popular challenges, exercises, events, sports, or whatever they might be calling them.

In the center is a seating area, complete with trees, statues, and waterfalls. Some students are seated behind the tables, eating desserts and drinking various beverages.

Groups of students fill the room, buzzing with laughter and competition. From time to time, one or two students leave for the side rooms, and when they return, everyone turns to the screens, waiting for the scores to update so they can either congratulate them or mock them.

Some students move through the room accompanied by guards, acting as if they stand well above the others. Yet when they return from the side rooms, they watch the screens just like everyone else.

The activities at the center of their competition are Target Gauntlet, Breakline, Run, and Current.

So far, I have only tested Run. It takes place on a cyclical track dug beneath the pyramid in a tunnel. The objective is... well... to run. You avoid the attacks being thrown your way and jump over obstacles while you do so. Gravity even shifts from time to time with the purpose of disorienting and confusing the participants. The longer you go, the more difficult it becomes. There are no lights either, forcing you to rely solely on your senses, which are then actively disrupted in various ways.

It's enjoyable, but without any sense of danger, it lacks true excitement. I didn't even bother to check my score in the previous loop.

"Assistant Professor!" a group of girls calls out, snapping me out of my thoughts. They giggle among themselves, followed by boys and girls trailing behind. They move together like a pack on a hunt.

I begin to suspect my schedule may be wrong, since I didn't see them the last time. Maybe I spent too much time standing around and watching the score screens.

"How can I help you?" I ask.

"What's your alias on the board? I wanted to check your score," the one who seems to be their leader asks, and some of the girls in the group giggle.

Their giggling continues, though the reason behind it remains a mystery.

"It's my first time here," I answer.

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"Want us to show you around? Merielle's on the leaderboard for Breakline, so you could try it first," a girl who appears to be their second in command says, pointing at Merielle, who lifts her head proudly.

"Why not. So, what's Breakline about?" I ask.

Merielle takes over the conversation, leading the small group toward one of the screens.

"There are five tiers of difficulty for each challenge. First is the lowest, and fifth is the highest. The lowest is for new students. Two and three are usually for advanced students. Fourth is for guards and Assistant Professors. Fifth is for professors and powerful guests. If you get 1st spot in any Challenge in your tier, the next time you do a Challenge, you'll be moved to a higher tier."

"I see," I nod. "So you're at the top of tier two with the highest score there," I say, taking note of her name on the boards.

Then her hypeman jumps in with what feels like a well rehearsed routine, showering her with praise, listing off achievements and qualities with practiced enthusiasm. Most of it blends into the background noise as I filter it out without much thought.

When he finally stops, I ask, "I noticed a name in third place on tier three, Grumpy. Why is there a star next to that name?"

The mood sours immediately.

One of the girls answers while Merielle clenches her teeth.

“That’s a new girl the healers brought here a few days ago. She’s just a brute. On the first day, she reached first place in tier one, the second day in tier two, and third day placed in tier three. She didn’t mind publishing it and allowed the personnel to share records of her challenges, so we saw it all. The star next to her name marks people who climb unusually fast,” explains the hype man.

Merielle snorts. “Just a brute, as he said. She doesn’t even act like a healer should. Breakline is about skill and knowledge, not just punching barriers until they break.”

“Quiet, Merielle. Don’t badmouth the healers,” one of the boys whispers, visibly nervous. The others nod, which only makes Merielle snort again and turn away, but she stays quiet.

“So it really is just about breaking barriers?” I ask.

“Yes. The barriers get progressively tougher, and you have to break through as many as you can in five minutes. Any method works.”

“I see. I’ll give it a try then.”

Even though some of them look disappointed, I leave them behind and enter one of the rooms below the Breakline screen.

The door seals tightly behind me. A panel appears next to me in the dim room, lit only by two yellow lights at my sides. The rest of the room ahead is heavily reinforced, equipped with powerful defensive arrays.

I send some mana into the panel, which lights up as I start skimming through the options. Before I can tap on anything, it automatically selects Tier 4 for me. I guess it used my mana signature to recognize me as an Assistant Professor and sorted me in without asking.

The room’s defenses increase immediately. I can sense mana flowing through the building, reinforcing inscriptions and strengthening the barriers.

“Please select your alias.”

The text appears, and I type my alias in.

“Your alias has been confirmed as ‘Noname.’ The challenge will start in 10 seconds.”

That reminds me, I probably should have read the rules. I’m pretty sure there was an option for that on the panel. But I shrug it off, raise my mana, and wait.

A barrier appears, and the mana javelin I create pierces through it.

Another one forms and meets the same end. In quick succession, five more barriers break.

The eighth barrier deflects the javelin, but a line I attached to it lets me pull it back and launch it again, now boosted with kinetic energy and additional compressed mana.

Multiple barriers break in much the same fashion after that, and soon, stronger ones start appearing that I cannot pierce with mana constructs, no matter how much I condense them or increase their force.

It impresses me.

[Empyrean Lance] breaks through one such barrier. Then another. And another.

The lance, with a core of white light pulsing like a star’s heartbeat, continues to obliterate them. It even leaves behind a field that disrupts and weakens them as they are generated.

As I get bored with using the same methods, I switch to my eyes. Reading the frequencies of the barrier, I modify my output and deploy [Eclipse], whose oscillations cause the barriers to shatter.

Gradually, I find myself being forced to use more mana, collect more information, and deal with increasingly intricate defenses.

I quite enjoy it. I even gather a number of useful insights and inspirations from analyzing the barriers, so I often delay breaking them just to observe more.

The last barrier I reach during my allotted time appears to be made of water, pale blue with glowing white droplets suspended within. It's beautiful. When I hit it with the full force of [Eclipse]

Impressed, I reach deeper into my mana, modify my frequency, and prepare to hit it again.

Then the timer runs out, and the barrier vanishes. Following, the lights in the room brighten.

Text appears on the panel:

"Your score is 867 points. Congratulations!"

With no reference for how good that is, I simply shrug and read the next message:

"Would you like to use your current alias to register the score?"

And another:

"Would you like to set a delay in registering your score?"

I keep the alias and set a five hour delay. Just in case. It seems to be a surprisingly considerate system.

When I exit the room, the same group of students, apparently with nothing better to do, is still there, now focused on the screen with excitement. I take the opportunity to slip into the crowd and disappear from their view.

Before leaving, I glance back at the screen for Breakline, focusing especially on Tier 4.

1st, 561 pts - Screw you Quentin

2nd, 550 pts - Quentin van Deleric

3rd, 440 pts - Future Champion

Not bad at all.

Out of curiosity, I glance over the remaining screens, searching for familiar names.

I find one in Target Gauntlet.

1st, 1507 pts - Sset

That score is recorded in Tier 4, which includes the Assistant Professors. The second-place score is under 1000 points.

There are other members of Group 4 placed in different challenges as well. It seems they must've found this place too and started ruining the fun for the locals.

Min-Jae is 1st in Tier 3 of Target Gauntlet. The twins have high scores in Run, with their aliases just a few points apart. Sophie is already in Tier 5 of Breakline, which means she must have taken 1st place in Tier 4 at least a day ago.

The fact that they barely mentioned this place in the Community makes me think they were worried I might try to outcompete them.

I would never do such a thing. How ridiculous.

Chapter 617: The Second Lesson

By the time I leave the Sweatbox, I notice several new names in the challenge rankings, particularly in Tier 4, where it appears a few competitors have made a strong push.

In first place of Tier 4 in the Run challenge, there is a new participant named NotNoname. An interesting coincidence.

The same goes for Target Gauntlet, where a new participant is listed. Unfortunately, that person is in second place, just behind Sset, who holds first. Their alias is Emanon.

Finally, in the Current challenge, a new competitor has completely dominated the second-place score, doubling it with ease. The difference is so large it hardly seems fair.

This individual uses the ominous name: You should have told me.

I'm facing off against the Vice Director again, in the same training hall she reserved before. It is the second out of the three lessons I've paid for.

"Where is your bond?" she asks and ignores the peck from her owl.

"Probably walking around the Academy. Do we need him?"

"Yes, call him here, please."

Hoo, hoo! Lulu calls as she does.

"I guess that means we don't actually need him," I note.

She returns my gaze and refuses to answer. Instead, she begins raising her mana, and I raise mine to match her level.

"It is fascinating how quickly you can channel your mana for someone at your level. You are still somewhere around level 310, right?"

She asks, walking around me, as her huge, wide brimmed, pointy hat covers most of her face.

“You probably have a trait to help with that, possibly some passives as well, which, I suspect, are arcane.” Her mana clashes against mine for a second, and she nods, “Possibly two, but it’s all a wild guess without your confirmation.”

“Who knows,” I reply.

“That’s true, who knows?” Her mana surrounds me again, as if it were attempting to choke out my own, and I continue to fight it back.

As if deep in thought, she continues, “Most of your ability to channel it quickly and relatively safely comes from your talent. It’s simply one of those things you’re naturally good at. The way you move your mana feels ancient, almost as if it belongs to a much older era. Very curious.”

I shoot back at her, “What’s the difference between Potency, Restoration, and Amplification mana upgrades?”

“That’s something you should already know very well as an Assistant Professor.”

“I want to hear your thoughts on the matter.”

“I see,” she nods and then turns to her bond, “Lulu, can you stop limiting my mana?”

Same as before, the owl hoots and waves its tiny wings, and the Vice Director’s mana flares drastically. I sense her trying to compete with me this time. She’s raising and channeling mana as quickly as possible, to the point it begins to place significant strain on her faculties. But I match her speed with ease. At times, I even surpass her, but only until I reach the bottom of my mana, and her larger pool begins to make itself known. And she continues far beyond that point.

As before, it’s a weird feeling to release mana so freely without needing to worry about killing someone. But it’s not really a bad feeling, in fact, it’s exactly the opposite.

"I can tell you chose your attribute upgrade well, Amplification suits you best," the Vice Director says, and her mana continues to clash against mine. She doesn't explain anything about how I should be moving my mana, seeming to prefer more or less to let me come to my own conclusions, while she directs me toward them.

She deploys multiple measures as we continue. She even uses items, a variety techniques, and her skills, things meant to show me how someone who was particularly skilled would go about countering an Amplificator. Some of the things she uses are things I hadn't even thought of.

"You would probably have done well with both Restoration and Potency," she pauses, "but I think Potency would suit you more than Restoration. Amplification, however, is your true match. You rarely find a talent capable of handling that much mana without destroying their body."

"It seems like it."

The Vice Director nods, "Potency is more refined. Instead of increasing quantity, it boosts effects. Same mana, more impact. Think of it like sharpening a blade instead of swinging a heavier one. A skill used under the effects of Potency strikes harder, pierces deeper, and lasts longer. But the cost is that it's much harder to control. Even a slight miscalculation gets amplified, and the margin of error narrows. It rewards precision and punishes recklessness."

Then she deploys a five pointed array, and mana starts bouncing between them at a strange frequency. With each bounce, the frequency changes and sends out ripples. When these ripples crash into each other, the frequency changes again.

It has an incredibly irritating feeling as it does, and it clashes with my mana, disrupting it. It doesn't even seem to use much mana, and it doesn't really seem to affect me all that much, but for some reason, I find it incredibly irritating, that's just the best way I can describe it.

Just as if someone were to keep throwing small rocks at a soldier in heavy armor for hours on end.

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The Vice Director notices my reaction, and out of all the disruption methods she shows me, this one seems to have the most effect. I notice a flash of satisfaction make its way across her face.

"Restoration?" I ask.

"Restoration doesn't make your attacks stronger or give you more to spend. It just ensures that you're never running on empty for long. Think of it as having an endless number of projectiles. You'll never match the raw force of an Amplifier or the sharp edge of Potency, but you'll still be casting long after they've burned themselves out. It rewards patience and resourcefulness, while punishing waste."

"I see. So, Amplification for quantity, Potency for quality, and Restoration for recovery. Of course, only if you go about it optimally and pick the right one for you."

She nods. "Exactly. And each suits a different kind of person. Amplificators are engines, brute force that overwhelms finesse. Potents are surgeons, precise, elegant, ruthless. Restorers can't burn out because they don't stop burning."

"Sounds boring and too 'wordy'. Which one do you think is best?"

Seeming annoyed by something I don't understand, she doubles up on that disgusting method of disruption. I continue to defend against it while watching for any other attempts she might be trying to sneak by me.

All her attempts are very practiced, almost as if she were following a set of pre-made protocols she's picked out. She tests me, then deploys two or three methods while keeping some in reserve. She watches my reactions and adjusts accordingly, testing me again. It all feels like it's been designed for the purpose of facing down stronger opponents as well, something that seems deeply ingrained in her psyche.

After whispering something to Lulu, the tiny owl lifts up and starts circling around the two of us. I can't quite detect the specifics yet, but as she does, something starts building up around us.

The Vice Director turns to me again and says, "None are 'the best'. If you're asking what's more common, it would be difficult to say with confidence. People lacking in knowledge usually go for Potency

since it sounds like the best out of the three. Restoration is the most common for people who like to fight melee and need a steady upkeep of mana to activate their skills. Amplificators are... not as common. Even the ones who generally rely on large scale attacks early on tend to pick Potency. Plenty of them pay for that, as the increased need for precision causes them trouble."

"That sounds unforgiving. A single wrong choice that can ruin you entirely."

"That's just how the system works."

"Have you heard anything about mana that is black in color?" I ask.

Her eyebrow lifts at the question, and she thinks for a moment. "Never. Are you sure you haven't mistaken it for Primordial void energy or one of the Fragments?"

"It's possible," I nod. "What primordial energies do you know outside the common five, and what of the Fragments?"

Still circling around me, Lulu hoots and then perches back on the Vice Director's shoulder. The field they've been constructing activates fully, pressing in around me.

Instantly, the flow of my mana grows sluggish, as if it were moving through thick mud. My control weakens, and every attempt to manipulate it feels delayed and strained, like a weight dragging against my will.

Relying on my control over my mana, I start pushing against it, trying to grasp how it's happening.

A notification dings as my [Perception] levels up. But that skill shouldn't worry, I'll make sure to use it in skill combinations as well.

"Assistant Professor Gwyn, before I answer, may I ask you a question or two?"

"Sure."

“You have no formal education, be it from the Academy, be it continental, family based, guild-based, or knowledge passed to you by a master, correct?”

I notice a pattern in the way this field is slowing down my mana and observe how it clashes against my Mana Wavelength Tyrant, the passive I use to take control of the surrounding mana and increase my own. Even now, the Vice Director is failing to come up with a proper way to counter its effects other than overpowering it completely. I understand her stubbornness and desire to find another method. But it almost feels like she looks down on the idea that she should have to overpower the passive and has been trying instead to find some more “skillful way.”

There’s nothing wrong with crushing something head-on if it solves the problem.

I think about my answer before telling her, “I mostly learned on my own and came to my own conclusions. Though I’m not shameless enough to claim it was all me, of course. I did have a lot of help as well, but I never tried to listen too closely and instead picked the things I liked and wanted to understand better.”

“So there has been no one you used as a goalpost, measured yourself against, or tried to follow their way of doing things?”

“I probably did subconsciously sometimes, but consciously I would say no.”

“May I be so shameless as to ask you why?”

“Why not? Because I can do better than any of them.”

Finally, I grasp what she’s been doing and expand my mana outward, fluctuating it in the exact way needed to counter her field. It doesn’t break what she is doing, instead, it counters it by using channels her field isn’t covering, then expands through them.

Satisfied with the result, I look back at the Vice Director. “Why would I copy someone who, in the end, failed to reach the same goals I have?”

“Thank you for answering. As for the primordial energies, I assume you already know the common five: lightning, kinetic, void, gravitational, and thermal. Otherwise, I know about two more, stellar wind and binding primordial energy.”

“Interesting. Does primordial stellar wind energy not sound strange?”

“It does.”

“I see. And fragments?”

“I know of Fragment of Eternal Fire, Fragment of Eternal Wind, Fragment of Endless Night, Fragment of Eternal Ice, Fragment of Everlasting Wound, Fragment of Eternal Hunger, Fragment of the first Sun.”

“I wasn’t expecting the last three.”

“People usually have that reaction. There are only likely only a dozen or so primordial energies, but dozens of fragments. A lot of them are incredibly weak and nearly useless, while others can be incredibly powerful.”

“What are the fragments actually?”

“I would recommend you ask Professor Eliau about that. As far as I know, there are a lot of theories, but none have ever been confirmed to be correct.”

"Never mind then."

"Yes." With that single word, her mana begins to withdraw.

When the last of it fades, I check the time. She’s kept to the exact duration we agreed on, down to the second.

And I thought I might get a freebie from a fellow mana enjoyer.

She leaves first. I stay behind, sliding down against the wall to sit on the floor. My mana rises again, and I move it as she did, almost absentmindedly, while thinking through faster ways to counter her approach.

In the end, the conclusion is simple. The only difference between us is time. Given a bit more of it, I should be able to face her pretty comfortably. She's a lot like me in some ways. She's at her strongest when she has time to prepare. But I'm more combat oriented, while her strengths lie in suppression and support.

When the room starts beeping and forces me out, I leave reluctantly and continue thinking through what I learned, especially about the primordial energies and fragments.

Chapter 618: Sting

I was never the kind to exactly follow a schedule. I see myself as more of a free-spirited person, the sort who doesn't want to be tied down by anything.

What? Me, the guy who's always trying to wake up at the same time, eat at the same time, and even go to sleep at the same time? That clearly doesn't count.

It just doesn't. It's my free spirit that's caused me to promptly abandon the schedule of this loop. It is not like I want to put a target on my back to make this floor more... fun.

That is why I'm not at the lesson the soon-to-be-deceased Champion is giving and am now sitting in the library for some reason. I would've expected it to be empty, with most of the Academy looking for an opportunity to glance upon the glory that is the Champion and maybe even shake his hand, so they could have an excuse to never wash that hand again.

Well, I'm not alone.

The three-armed thylarin is there as well. Tyven, one of my suspects for the candidate, sits there in the corner. Now, after I got information from Ari that there are "others," I suspect him even more. At the same time, Ari's probably spent much more time with him, so it's something she should know or suspect

herself. Of course, I'm not naive to that point. Ari could easily be lying, and she could be the only candidate. Or maybe both of them are, and are in on it together.

That would be at least somewhat smart. What would not be smart is simply telling me she is looping. I am sure she's planning something at the moment, but I don't really know what.

As much as I enjoy the mystery, I also hate problems that can't be solved by blowing things up.

Well, I do not think either of them is powerful enough to cause me any trouble. Even if they tried to kill me in my sleep, I could wipe them off the face of the world with ease.

I keep a small part of my mind on Tyven and let the rest go into overdrive as I think and sketch on a piece of paper I grabbed from a nearby table. I have found that even my outright confusing lines and ugly drawings help me focus my mind. I'm currently trying to think up another technique to make my own.

Of course, I'm just calling it that. I am sure I could find out what officially qualifies as a technique if I bothered to look. This is the Academy, after all. But why should I limit myself to what others think?

Currently, there are two techniques I have and actively use. Mana Cycling, which came to me from the greatest of all cockroaches, Sandra. Even now, it is the major thing keeping me alive and preventing my mana from going wild. It could be said I love that technique quite a lot. With the constant changes I've been making to it, the improvements Lissandra taught me, and my ever-increasing mastery, it's begun to grow into something truly special.

I categorize it as a cyclist destroyer kind of technique, and will continue to do so. I'm still too proud of the metaphor, despite how long it's been since I came up with it, to change it.

Anyway, the second is Mana Weaving. Something I am sure exists on its own in the world, and others seem to have come up with their own versions as well, but I don't want to hear about it. This one is mine, and I've even shown parts of it to the others from Group 4, to great success with some. Much the same way I steal ideas from them, I let them steal from me.

This technique is one of my main anti-disruption measures. It can be used outside the body for constructs such as armor, projectiles, or weapons, and to make mana itself denser. If I continue to develop it, I believe that one day my projectiles, with an added boost of kinetic energy, will be able to rival [Empyrean Lance] in piercing power.

Lastly, the third technique is something I am thinking of. This one will likely be very different.

On the paper, I have sketched four shapes, all suggested by Min-Jae and Tess.

Escher's Cube, Penrose Triangle, Klein Bottle, and Möbius Strip

Just looking at the sketches hurts my brain, my eyes, and my feelings. These shapes are extremely confusing. They shouldn't work, and yet they exist, like some sort of monstrosity. I keep my eyes on them anyway.

The first one is Escher's Cube. It pretends to be a cube. It clearly is not. The edges start out normal, solid. Then, somewhere around the second glance, they fold in ways that cubes clearly do not. One corner climbs when it should fall. The whole thing looks complete, but the more you stare, the more it stops making sense. I already hate it. Min-Jae picked that one, of course.

Penrose Triangle is more honest, I can at least tell that it should not work. Three beams, sharp angles, clean turns. Everything looks like it fits, until you follow the path fully. Then the triangle turns into a loop that should've never been able to close. My brain tries to fix it, but it cannot.

Klein Bottle is worse in a different way. I can't even find a place to start. It folds through itself. The surface loops but does not complete. There is no clear boundary, it just keeps turning in a direction that does not exist. I cannot separate the front from the back or the outside from the inside.

A Möbius strip has only one surface and one edge. If I concentrate on it, it holds, but its orientation flips halfway through. Repeating thought loops remain intact but do not return in the same state. It differs from the other shapes because it brings three dimensions into a two-dimensional world, while the others are attempts at bringing four dimensions into three. At least, that is what Tess and Min-Jae told me.

I stare at them, and the shapes do not change. But my thoughts do. The more I look, the more I feel the weight in the center of my forehead build. Like something in my brain is trying to unfold in the wrong direction.

Maybe I should burn these papers. Pictures should not be able to deal this kind of mental damage.

But I think of them as a training base that could evolve into a new technique at a later point. Something to help me use [Focus] more effectively. Something that will work in addition to my mental passives and protect my mind from shutting down from information overload. In that way, it could help me use my eyes to a greater extent.

I have a few more ideas too, but they're just bases that could change.

Maybe I could split my mind into one hundred parts, and focus each on observing different aspects of my opponent and look for a way to deal with their mana and the best way to disrupt everything.

Maybe I could form a double mind, and let the other take over when one shuts down from overload, while a smaller third helps the original reboot, and then cycle again.

All kinds of fun things. Maybe I am truly turning myself into a computer with all the practice I put into Logic Core, this mental technique concept, storing arrays, splitting my mind, and so on. Could I literally just download more RAM?

Anyway, my goal is to use my own mind to handle the sorts of things that would normally take an entire unit of people. Channeling, calculations, and other tasks. I want to do it all on my own, without relying on Logic Cores, items, or inscriptions. Just the raw power of my mind.

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It might be weird, but I am also looking at my mind as a muscle, so of course, I have to put pressure on it for it to grow stronger.

All of this is just a concept for now, but I am sure that somewhere along the way, I'll find something I can use, even if I am just throwing things at the wall right now to see what sticks.

After working through all of that and exploring some rough shapes in my mind, I stand up and walk around the library a bit. I examine the library's arrays and weaknesses, all the defenses, and a number of other things to help Min-Jae steal it later. I locate the deeper levels and even find some hidden chambers thanks to differences in temperature and the way vibrations of my steps reflect off the walls and floor.

The entire time, Tyven says nothing, only giving me a glance when I stand up and when I pass by the shelves.

I still participate in my third lesson with Elian. I do not do it to follow the schedule, but more as a means to observe the Professor. Even now, he's difficult for me to grasp. With Mana Wavelength Iris constantly activated, he must have an impressive degree of resilience. His [Mana Manipulation] should also be high, but I rarely see him doing anything impressive, so he could just as well be pretending, and this could all be a mask.

I think it is safe to say that at least the students have a decent amount of respect for him. The Professor is young, handsome, a descendant of someone from the First Generation, impressive traits, and all that other stuff. His personality is uptight and uncaring, but when he smiles, the girls in the class almost seem to squeak.

In my eyes, he could be level 200 as easily as he could be level 400. I truly have no idea, and as with many things, it annoys me.

As the day ends, I exchange some information in the Community and head to my room, where I do not sleep. Instead, I work on those impossible shapes, modifying my mana orb into them and attempting to move it in that same impossible way. I do it until morning without taking a break, or so much as moving from the edge of the bed I've been sitting on.

Only when the sun shines into the room do I move and head off to take a shower.

I've been curious about her ever since I heard about her from Izzy. A ten-year-old human girl, rumored to be level 350. A monster, even by the standards of some among the Assistant Professors. From Izzy, I know when she will be leaving her class, since they share one, so I stand nearby under a tree and wait.

When the first group of students exits in their white uniforms with black sweaters or shirts, I know she is not among them. There's not even the slightest hint of danger coming from them. That feeling appears only when Izzy exits, two girls laughing and joking by her side. Like a true Hell Difficulty attendee, she notices me immediately but does not react.

The girl I'm waiting for exits last. She walks alone, and everyone else avoids her by a wide margin. I detect at least three items on her body that work to suppress her stats and mana, items which would seem to demonstrate a lack of ability when it comes to holding herself back, and were likely given by her mentor or the Academy.

Even so, she notices me immediately, just as Izzy did. Her eyes find me without searching, pinpointing my exact location.

She's ten years old and looks fairly ordinary. Long brown hair, average height for her age, the same uniform as the others. Only three items restraining her are hidden somewhere on her body.

Upon spotting me, one of these items breaks.

She stares at me longer. Her brown eyes begin to lighten until they turn white, and her brown hair lifts around her as if stirred by an unseen wind.

The second item breaks, and her mana seeps into the area. The box of study materials in her hand fractures and falls apart as she clenches her fist.

Her eyes remain fixed on me the entire time, not shifting even slightly.

Before anything else can happen, a professor appears at her side through some form of teleportation, and from what I can sense, it was triggered by a mark that's been placed on the girl. The professor immediately activates arrays to suppress her, and only then does the girl calm down.

When that Professor looks up to see where the girl is looking, I am gone.

Hours later, thinking this might've been enough fun for today, I find that I was wrong.

During one of the training sessions I've been using my office for, I feel a sting in my neck. Something that pierces through the barrier I reflexively create as I sense the projectile entering my reach. Even my kinetic energy fails to hold it back.

At the same time, I launch a projectile in the direction I figure the sting came from. My projectile breaks the glass of the window in the same place the tiny barb penetrated and follows that trajectory outside. I raise up my mana and stand up, deploying my barriers and unleashing my mana to follow the attacker when the changes inside my body make me stop.

At dizzying speed, some sort of toxin spreads from the tiny wound on my neck. It ignores my defenses, my barriers, and my mana as I try to push it away. The speed with which it spreads is incredible, and it's already started to affect me.

My mana grows sluggish, warmth drains from my limbs, and pulses of pain make my muscles spasm. It actively tries to force me into unconsciousness while inflicting severe wounds that will kill me if I allow it to proceed.

I allow it to continue for a few more seconds and observe the toxin with fascination. Then I flood my body with thermal energy to activate my Subdermal Combustion Weave passive. Immediately, the pain intensifies as the thermal energy powers the mid-tier arcane passive, causing combustion beneath my skin.

I plan to move to follow the attacker, but something stops me again. The toxin is not getting burned out or destroyed at all. Instead, it spreads further, feeding on my mana, blood, and flesh, and mutating in front of my eyes. The damage and pain it causes increases further.

What a vile thing. What an incredible thing.

This time, I reach toward my Ignition Heart and fully lift the first seal, and let that concentrated thermal energy flood me and increase the efficiency of my passive. I have no thought of following the attacker anymore and instead sit down to deal with the pain my own passive and the toxin have created.

Then the toxin mutates again, reacting even faster to my countermeasures. My limbs begin to lose color, and my veins turn sickly black, visible even through the skin. I clench my teeth from the pain this inflicts.

The toxin finds the healing marks Lily gave me and eats them, which hastens the mutation. Even as I try to activate some of those marks myself, they do nothing.

As it starts to reach the barriers I've set around my hearts and brain, I decide it's not the time to hesitate anymore.

I start lifting another seal on the Ignition Heart, and more thermal energy floods me. It damages me even more than the toxin, but it starts healing me that much quicker.

Even now, it's not enough.

I push the seal further open, halfway to fully lifting the second seal, and only then does the spread begin to slow as the two forces collide.

Only my will keeps me from passing out, but I begin to lose control. Heat surges from my body, seeping into the room. The furniture catches fire, and the walls glow red before melting into shining drops of lava. The amount of thermal energy I'm currently generating eats into the walls, revealing the outdoors and the sky while tearing apart some of the Academy's arrays.

Pissed off, I force the seal open wider, drawing a painful groan as the toxin and pieces of my body evaporate. I watch my bones and organs be destroyed and rebuilt, my flesh burning and sizzling, burning them away with the toxin.

I continue until I am absolutely certain that all of it is gone, replacing most of my body in the process and barely managing to reseal the Ignition Heart in the final push.

Even when that's all done, I still feel a remnant of that pain and slide into a deep state of [Focus].

I look around. The room is gone, along with a few of its neighbors. A massive chunk of the tower has melted away, opening everything to the elements outside. The constant sound of the array's alarm is ringing in my head, and I already sense a few of the Professors moving closer.

With a sigh, I stand up and come to a stop when I look down.

Let's find some pants first.

Chapter 619: Professor Feran

I look around what used to be my room. All the furniture, all my belongings, even some of my more personal items, are gone. Before I can start to miss them, I remind myself that they should be back once everything resets, and shrug it off.

A variation of alarm rings, the molten rock glows orange, and heat fills one of the holes bored into the tower. Impressively, some of the arrays have been totally destroyed, even those I would have thought would be more durable.

I let a good part of my mind examine it while a small remainder pulls the remaining heat in as I search for some serviceable clothes.

There's nothing left of my room, but I notice a hole opening into my neighbor's room further down. I step through it, break the already scorched cabinet, and find two somewhat unburned pieces of clothing: light brown pants and a long-sleeved black shirt, which I put on. They fit me well enough and, thankfully, do not appear to be women's clothing.

I check my reflection in the cracked mirror nearby, wipe my face with my sleeve, and brush my hair back.

Keeping my mana calm and hidden under the surface as much as possible, I enter my room again and step out into the hallway with my hands in the air.

Three guards stand there, joined by two Professors, and I can feel the pressure of the main array of the Academy, fully activated and ready. Each of these people feels at a level similar to mine.

Without struggle, I follow them as they lead me away.

An hour later, I find myself in the training hall, said to be able to withstand anyone below Champion level. As rumored, it lies deep underground and stretches at least half a mile in every direction. The inner walls are perfectly smooth and white. There are no arrays or inscriptions, and I can't even see the entrance anymore.

Her mana is partially released, and arrays are quickly built around us, most of which I've never even seen before. I cannot even examine them because of the bracelets on my arms and the metal loop placed on my head like a crown. Both are made of light gray metal and do an excellent job of suppressing me.

Other than the Vice Director, there is the Primordial Energies professor, that demon with short white hair and unusually calm mannerisms. The next one is, I guess, the main security officer, both standing behind the Vice Director.

Sitting there, she adjusts her wide-brimmed, pointy hat and says, "So, you were poisoned, cursed, or some such thing, and the only way you could keep yourself alive was by using your passive along with, as you put it, 'a shitload of thermal energy,' which caused all the damage to Academy property."

"Yes," I confirm.

"Feran, what do you think?" she asks, turning to the demon.

The man takes a moment to answer, and I sense him examining me before he responds in the same clear, calm manner.

"I noticed remnants of thermal energy at the site. I have also been observing him since we arrived, and I do not believe him to be lying."

“Understood.” The Vice Director looks at me again and seems to think deeply before deciding. “I am inclined to believe you, Assistant Professor Gwyn, but at the same time, you have caused a lot of damage to the Academy’s property and its arrays, not to mention how much risk the students and employees in the area were exposed to.”

I try to say something, but she gestures for me to stay quiet. “Yes, I understand that your reaction was only natural given the risk to your life, and the kind of attack you were subjected to forced you to deploy extensive measures. But as unfair as it might seem, I cannot allow you to stay in the Academy at the moment, even if only for the optics.”

“So, I’m fired?”

She nods. “You could say that. However, I’ll need to ask you to stay here for seven more days while we conduct deeper examinations and possibly present you with further questions.”

“Ask me? So I get to refuse?”

“Yes. But if you refuse, we will do it by force.”

“Sounds good. I’ll stay.”

“Thank you for your understanding.”

After that, all three of them leave through a door that opens on one side of the smooth surface. Before passing through, the demon professor looks at me one more time.

Then the door closes, and I am left alone.

The first day, I start exercising out of sheer boredom, jogging around my cell, doing pushups, bodyweight squats, and such. It is funny how, in just a few hours, I’ve gotten so bored, all because I can’t train the way I usually do.

With the thing on top of my head as if it had been glued to it and the bracelets on my arms, my physical stats are restricted, and so is my mana flow, even my primordial energies have been restrained for the most part.

All three of these items are works of art. They're beautifully made, and that beauty is beaten only by the intricate ways they've been set to deal with me. Some sort of disruption, likely somewhat based on void energy and mana interference. I guess that because it is the only thing I currently estimate capable of disrupting mana and primordial energies, but it doesn't really feel all that powerful. Maybe it relies more on mana-based disruption, and the storage of void energy only supports it?

No one comes to visit me, and I only send a few messages in the Community. Out of boredom, I switch over to the Easy difficulty's chat. Largely out of frustration and boredom, I use all of my time there talking to the Easy difficulty guys who are also on the 8th floor.

Funnily enough, they're also in the Academy, but they are all students. Their floor quest is simple: pass an exam that proves they are ready to graduate.

This story has been taken without authorization. Report any sightings.

While some from the Easy difficulty who trained and leveled properly on the previous floors could pass it on the first day, others chose to spend weeks or even months in the Academy, especially the younger attendees.

Potato (Easy, Royals) -Noname, should I continue to call you Noname, or can we use your real name?

Noname (Hell, Group 4) -Your nickname sounds familiar. You must have annoyed me somehow if I remember it. What did you do?

Potato (Easy, Royals) -You'll burn me to a crisp or drop an island on me if I tell you.

Noname (Hell, Group 4) - How would I even go about that? You'll probably be done with the tutorial before the third tournament starts.

Potato (Easy, Royals) -They say your first priority after returning to Earth won't be rebuilding your life so much as settling old grudges.

Catsarebetterthandogs(Easy, The Guardians) -

Catsarebetterthandogs(Easy, The Guardians) - Noname, just beat him up, this guy is a dick. Use that skill of yours to pull a meteor down on his head, please.

Noname (Hell, Group 4) -You, be silent, I don't like your name. And you, Potato, just tell me, damn it.

Potato (Easy, Royals) - I asked you if you knew what ligma was the first time you came to the Community here.

Noname (Hell, Group 4) -That's not even that bad. What kind of monster do you guys take me for?

Potato (Easy, Royals) - I do not want to say.

Noname (Hell, Group 4) -Okay. Let's forget about that for now, but from now on, you have to start every sentence while I am in the Community with "I'm sorry." I can also tell you some tricks for mana.

Potato (Easy, Royals) -I'm sorry! Thank you, that would be great!

I can be quite nice when I want to be.

On the second day, I am finally able to partially move the mana inside my body, just a tiny bit. I also continue doing my mental exercises with the impossible shapes, choosing the Möbius strip as a starting point.

I modify them slightly so that they can be used to train mana control, like I've been doing with the mana orbs. The difference is that I will never be able to materialize them. The other three shapes simply cannot exist in the material world. I think. They'll always remain a simulation in my mind, created to torture me and force my brain to work in ways it probably shouldn't.

No one visits me today either.

I've been giving it some thought, and I don't think it's very likely that whatever tried to kill me would be the same thing that killed the Champion. There's just no way. As normal as Champions might seem when they're just walking around with their powers restricted, each one is a monster in their own way.

All of my Community's daily limit went into arguing with the twins, who came up with a modification to one of my weaker evil orbs, to allow them to do some sort of tandem training.

We can't bring ourselves to agree on some parts of it, and later, even Sophie and Min-Jae join in, turning the conversation into a long, drawn out argument.

On the third day, I finally get a feel for it.

Something clacks, and one of the bracelets falls off.

On the fourth day, I pull the metal loop thing from my head. On the same day, I create [Mana Crown] over my head and start storing mana there while breaking the bracelets and the metal crown to examine them more closely.

I wait.

On the fifth day, I get a visitor. It is the thirteenth day of the loop when the demon Professor enters alone and closes the door behind him. He shows no surprise upon seeing me sitting in the exact middle of the huge training hall, looking over the broken pieces of the restriction items.

He walks casually for nearly ten minutes before getting close enough for me to hear without raising his voice or using other means of voice amplification. He doesn't hurry at all.

"I would like to extend an apology for leaving you here without any communication. Just a day after you were put here, Champion Dion was found dead on the Academy grounds," Primordial Energies Professor, Feran, says.

"I am surprised the Academy still stands," I note, not even lifting my head from the broken pieces.

He takes a step closer, the sound barely echoing in the huge room.

"It's not the sort of thing we understand either," he confirms. As always, when I hear him, he uses that soothing, controlled, and very undemon-like voice. "Champion Dion was considered to be one of the five strongest Champions on the planet, and he was close to being fully combat-oriented. He was very perceptive as well. Him dying like this should be impossible, even if the Absolute himself was involved."

"I heard rumors about a weapon the Absolute had left to someone, something capable of killing even a Champion," I say, listening to his steps and following their vibrations.

"Weapons like that are mere rumors. Students like to spread it to entertain themselves. No such thing could ever exist."

"There were some texts in the library, and I overheard some of the Assistant Professors talking about it," I mention, remembering the information Tess and others dug up.

A few more steps and he's standing a mere few steps away.

"Oh, please don't misunderstand. I'm sure there are powerful weapons in circulation that were made by our Absolute. Some people think of him as a bit of a nut or a weirdo, but even for him, to create something like that should be impossible."

"I see," I say, and look up from the pieces for the first time, and make eye contact with the Professor.

He meets my gaze and looks at me.

Finally, I stand up, brush off my pants, kick the pieces away, and take a few steps closer. There are only three steps between us now.

"The others don't know you're here?" I ask.

"They do not," he confirms.

"I see," I say, slowly rolling up the sleeves of my black shirt to my elbows. Then I partially lift the seal on Ignition Heart, and thermal energy floods my body. I adjust the setting on my Kinetic Mana Heart, and most of my mana shifts into kinetic energy.

Ever since he entered the room, I've been sensing his heartbeat and intent. I sensed it too when he left with the head of security and the Vice Director. Maybe I even sensed it the first time I met him back in the first loop.

And finally, he decides to drop that annoying mask.

He takes off his jacket, leaving himself standing there in a long-sleeved shirt and vest. His red eyes shine brighter than ever as he runs his fingers through his hair, brushing it away from his face and forehead.

The way he looks at me reveals the expression I've been waiting for since the beginning.

"If you wanted to fight, you should've just fucking said so, stupid demon."

Chapter 620: Four primordial energies

From the first time I saw him, I knew he was just like every other demon I've met: a maniac like the rest, only better at hiding it.

That is what confused me. His heart, the look in his eyes, both told me he was ready to attack at any moment. To fight with that typical joy and aggression only demons seem to match. Yet his face and outward behavior are calm, perfectly controlled.

I can't even blame it on some kind of concentration skill. Personally, I think those tend to be rare for demons because of what they are. This guy just controls himself.

But ever since he came into the room, the one so often used for duels, alone and out of sight of everyone else? Damn, I could feel the bloodthirst in his heartbeat.

We get thrown apart by a burst of kinetic energy exploding between us, but I absorb more of it and move quicker, reaching him before he can regain his composure. I release more of it directly at him, but instead of absorbing it, he redirects it and uses his own to attack me.

He's skilled and clearly used to manipulating kinetic energy, but after a year with Lioren, I don't think I'll ever find anyone as talented as he was. This professor's use of kinetic energy, though skilled, lacks the natural ease that only Lioren had. With him, it just felt like another part of who he was, carrying that same overwhelming sense of oppression.

I deflect the Professor's attack and launch my own while shifting my body to avoid him.

He realizes as quickly as I do that he will not be able to face me with kinetic energy, but he's stubborn, like all demons. So he continues to try.

His output is strong, but unlike me, he focuses on defense when it comes to kinetic energy. While I prefer using it for movement and flight, he uses it like a tank, deflecting attacks and layering barriers over his skin to endure the attacks.

Every three heartbeats, I release another, synced perfectly to that rhythm, each containing my entire mana output converted into kinetic energy using my heart as a medium and [Redistribution] as a support.

I know he's waiting for me to tire myself out. I see it in his eyes, that gleeful look, waiting for an opening to jump on me and tear me apart limb by limb.

Still, I do not stop. And the look on his face changes when he starts realizing that he might be the first to tire out. In the end, unlike the Vice Director, he's not much higher level than I. I estimate him to be around 350.

I've dealt with worse.

When he changes his mind, he does not show frustration or disappointment. Instead, his excitement grows. That calm mask he wore is long gone.

Void energy surrounds him, a swirling mix of gray darkening toward black, with hints of purple. A single stream seeps from his left forearm as he pulls it free, spreading and circling around him to form a vast halo.

When my kinetic energy crashes into it, it dissolves, like tossing a ball of sand into water and watching it crumble into tiny particles.

That circle of void energy spins and sends out a pulse that crashes into me. My control over kinetic energy and mana slips instantly, even the bit that's shielded by my natural barrier, and the portion contained within my body.

It fascinates me so much that I let it hit me again, even as he closes the distance using kinetic energy. I rely on my passive to absorb the impact, knowing it will hurt, but I focus only on observing the behavior of his void energy.

As rumored, it is not just mana disruption. Void energy affects primordial energies, too, and part of me wonders how much of an effect it would have on Fragments.

After the attack hits me, my reservoir floods with kinetic energy from the impact, already turning into mana. Even so, I slide across the floor with my limbs twisted and broken. Another pulse of void energy comes at me, followed by a kinetic attack. Before they land, with just one working leg, I use Wraith Dance to escape, breaking my leg in the process.

I lift the first seal on my Ignition Heart entirely, letting an immense surge of thermal energy flood my body. It combusts under my skin and starts healing me. Limbs twist and snap back into place. Ribs restore themselves. Torn flesh regrows. All of it followed by the incredible pain that always comes when funneling such pure thermal energy to heal through my passive.

I let it continue to combust under my skin and move again, but this time I'm even more reckless. Kinetic and thermal energy clash inside me. Kinetic energy breaks my body as I move too fast for it to keep up. Thermal energy heals me just as quickly.

When I appear by his side, he moves to attack with another pulse, but I disappear again, snapping both my ankles in the process. Golden flames start seeping out of my skin as I reappear on the opposite side, raising the flames around me until they crash into his void energy. While they clash, I bury my now healed feet into the ground, twist my body, and, channeling kinetic energy through myself, deliver a blow to his right shoulder.

I watch his skin and clothes ripple under my touch. His skin tears open, and his flesh and bones explode. His entire shoulder and right arm vanish into a pink, bloody mist as he staggers back.

I give him a second to regain his composure.

He looks up at me, clutching his left arm against the remains of his shoulder. And he's smiling like he's having the time of his life.

"Very well," he says in the same calm tone he always uses, which still doesn't match the maniacal grin on his face.

The third primordial energy seeps out of him. A blue mark appears on his forehead, and a circle of primordial lightning forms behind his back. The same red and white lightning that Tess herself has. It moves, turning into dozens of finger-sized projectiles that surround him like a sea of stars.

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So he uses kinetic for defense, void to support his attacks, and lightning for ranged attacks. Not a bad combination at all, and I'm not the least bit surprised by the amount of respect people have given him. So far, even after seven floors and starting my third year in the tutorial, I have yet to see anyone else with three primordial energies.

His void energy pulses again, but this time, I am ready, and I move before it reaches me. High in the air, I absorb my inertia, and dozens of lightning projectiles pass where I was headed. When I move again, more of them pass through where I was.

Like a minigun firing only tracer rounds by the thousands per minute, his attacks bombard the place. That red and white lightning screams like it's tearing the air apart.

I land back on the ground and use Wraith Dance a few times. Then, to spice things up, I form a thermal orb, compress it, and fire off a golden laser-thin stream that cuts through the space and forces him to dodge. The place he dodges into ripples, and another thermal orb passes through my [Ley line]

Kinetic energy bursts from him, pushing against the flames. A few loud thumps follow, but even so, parts of his clothes still catch fire from the heat. He doesn't seem to care, even as they scorch the surface of his skin.

Even without eyes on me, the lightning projectiles continue to track me, and this time, every hundredth attack is an orb that explodes, releasing a strange sort of electrical field around it.

Void energy is slower, and at least in his case, he seems to need closer range to actually hit me, but now he uses it to make the lines I have stretched through the area unstable.

After I use Wraith Dance to reach him, his projectiles disappear. Instead, all the lightning pulls into his body, forming a new arm to replace the one I blew apart. Within that crackling limb, an axe made of lightning energy forms.

His pulse of void energy crashes into a sacrificial wave of mana I send his way, and I reach his body.

I duck under his swing, mana flashes around me again as another wave of void energy crashes into it. The entire time until now, he's been pretending to have a longer "cooldown" on his void energy than was truly necessary.

Shifting to Pulser Stance, I move to his side and drive the palm of my hand into his chest. My frequency of kinetic energy wobbles in a triple-cascading effect and ignores the barrier he's created.

When he stumbles and coughs up blood, I move closer and deliver a kick that sends him rolling across the floor, easily covering the distance of a football field.

Even while rolling, he finds time to dissolve his lightning arm and axe into projectiles that crash against one of my barriers. The surface of said barrier wobbles like a water bubble about to burst, but it snaps back and holds while the lightning discharges around me.

Already getting back on his feet, he wipes the blood from his lips and stares at me with that same bloodthirsty smirk.

And once again, I fully lift the first seal on my Ignition Heart.

Thermal energy seeps out of me, and I let it. At first, golden flames flicker across my body, red-hot and burning, but causing no harm. Then they spread further. They climb higher and wider, blazing behind me as I slowly walk toward him.

He still faces me, his heart pumping out even more kinetic energy. The void halo spins around him, and the mark on his forehead begins to glow.

Then I lift the second seal.

Thermal energy floods the room, wild and unchecked. I make sure that only my body remains untouched as it surges through me. The flames climb high, nearly licking the ceiling and stretching toward the distant walls of the massive cube-shaped chamber. Pure golden fire, burning as one indomitable flame, and at the center of it all, stands my small figure. Just a small dot engulfed by the blaze.

Finally, he hesitates. The pulses of void energy stop, useless now, no better than pouring a glass of water onto a burning house.

His eyes lock onto mine, but I do not stop, even as blisters bubble up across the surface of his skin.

Then he nods, the smile fading from his face. His heartbeat stops. All the kinetic energy vanishes, the mark on his forehead dims, and the halo of void energy flickers out.

He is the first to look away.

Only then do the burning flames freeze in place. I draw them back into my body within seconds. My Ignition Heart becomes a whirlpool, pulling them all in, and I seal it shut once more.

Relief crashes over me at once, sharp and searing, as the leftover thermal energy inside my body combusts and repairs the parts at risk of tearing apart. I show nothing and keep walking toward the guy.

"Professor Feran," I greet him.

"Assistant Professor Gwyn," he nods slightly.

"Tell me more about primordial void energy."

"I apologize, but I think I will need to seek out some healing first. Otherwise, I will be dead in a few minutes."

"Oh."

"Regretfully, it seems so. But I have to say, I admire the way you handle kinetic energy. I don't think I've ever seen it used as beautifully as you just did."

"Thanks, I guess. I had a good teacher. I'll see you later, then?"

"Of course. It's rare to find someone for a proper fight in these parts of the world. May I ask if there's a demon among your ancestors?"

"There is not."

"Amazing," he rubs his chin.

"Why are you still here? Are you not dying?"

"I think I still have a few minutes left. The Head Healer owes me, so he'll heal me quickly enough and without too many questions. Please don't worry. As for void energy, I don't know what I can say except that it affects mana and other primordial energies. Unlike mana disruption, which destroys structures, void energy isolates them, rendering them inert and unusable even to their source, after which they dissipate."

"That doesn't really make much sense. It still sounds similar to mana based disruption."

He coughs up blood and wipes it away before shaking his head. "If you disrupt mana with mana, you need to either overpower the original structure, understand it better than the creator, or move faster than the creator to change it. Void-based mana disruption is like doing all of that at once, with isolation added on top. Some theorize that it's just the nature of the void, as infinite empty space, that makes it possible."

"Well, it doesn't really matter now. Just go and get your healing."

He bows slightly and leaves.

At first, I think he might walk away slowly, like before when he first came here, taking ten minutes to reach the exit and end up dying somewhere along the way. But there still seems to be some sense left in him, and he runs.

I head back to the middle of the room, where I find a puddle of gray metal, left over from the suppressive items they'd placed on me. I plop down on the ground and poke it with my finger.

A few hours later, the loop resets, and I find myself back in the room, surrounded by the rest of Group 4.