

Tutorial 621

Chapter 621: Number in the air

Right away, I open the status menu, select the three skill combination token, and use it.

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

You have acquired [Mana Relay]

[Mana Relay - Level 0 > Mana Relay - Level 19]

After reading the new skill name, I move my mana to activate it, and another notification pops up.

Congratulations, you have acquired a new skill!

[Mana Manipulation]

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

At this point, I should say it isn't even funny how inseparable the two of us are, but even now, I'm still laughing. Screw you, system.

Ha, is that the best they can do? Must suck to suck so much.

Anyway, I missed my lesson with Ari, so instead, I will meet her on the fourth day of this loop. Until then, I'll keep up my schedule while doing some wild stuff in my free time.

As I exit that starting room, Professor Elian is there again with his usual "greeting." He summons the servants to carry my stuff into the office and then leaves, radiating disappointment.

I spend the first day training my newest skill, which, out of all the skills I've gained so far, seems to be the weakest. I guess the combination didn't quite sync as well as I had hoped. [Mana Relay] doesn't sound like much of an improvement.

I have a suspicion it will make it possible, at least at higher levels, to share my mana. Of course, I'll still take the opportunity to learn from it as much as possible, but it's not really the way I wanted to go. Especially after using a three active skill combination token, which seems to be very difficult to get one's hands on, if not damn near impossible. I reserved all of my event rewards to get it, and for the points I sacrificed, I could have probably gotten a lot of shards. 500 thousand? Closer to one million?

It clearly shows how good the reward is, and I think, with the exception of [Ur Line], I haven't been using it "correctly." Other than that first time, it seems like the skills I am getting would have been possible to create with a two active skills combination token.

The system wasn't joking when it said it would be more difficult to find the right combination.

Please do not let this be the last loop.

And isn't that unnerving to think about? Why can I not get any information on the total number of the loops? Knowing there are ten or so would be better than just guessing.

Am I asking too much from the system, hoping it would allow me to abuse it just a little bit more?

As before, I try to use the Beyond Stay Token and get the same notification again. It seems the inability to enter is really being caused by this Floor. Maybe it's some sort of "nerf" that balances how much this mechanic can be abused. Maybe it's just the system being an asshole.

Or maybe it would be too annoying to deal with attendees getting stronger in Beyond and then not knowing whether to reset their stats to the start of the 8th floor or keep their Beyond stats. But in that case, you could probably advance to the furthest day of the loop, gain stats, skills, and equipment, enter Beyond, add to it more, and then return to the loop after a day and keep it all. Then abuse the loop again.

Hmm. I think if I had designed it, I would've said screw it and blocked Beyond entirely. That is what the tutorial gets for trying to come up with these fancy mechanics.

I also think about what Ruler's Floor this could be. If I am right, the Candidate or possible Candidates are going to be from the same subclass as the Ruler who created this setting for the 8th floor. That would make this the second floor to give us confirmation about who the Ruler is.

With these thoughts in mind, I enter the Sweatbox and quickly register for all the Challenges. The first one I try is the Target Gauntlet, and it is definitely not because Tess was ranked first in Tier 4 during the last loop.

It's a target-destroying challenge. You enter a room, and after the challenge starts, you have one minute to destroy as many targets as possible. They start out at the size of my head, but gradually shrink over time.

This one has much stricter rules than Breakline, where you can just act like a brute and hit barriers with your fists until they break. Here, large-scale attacks and skills like domains are banned.

Of course, that doesn't mean your attacks have to be as narrow as the targets. You can use a stream of flames or similar attacks, but there is a limit. Honestly, the rulebook describing what exactly is and is not allowed is too long, so I didn't bother to read it.

Simply put, you are expected to mostly use projectiles or similar attacks.

I may not like to admit it, but I might actually get my ass kicked by Tess here, no matter how much I try.

Last time, she seemed to attempt this challenge around the third or fourth day, so I hope she sticks to that schedule. I want to get first place and move into tier 5 before she can compete.

Is that cowardly?

Nah, I would say it's just smart.

At the halfway point of the challenge, the targets become as small as my fist. In the last ten seconds, they are barely the size of my fingernail and pop up all over the room, sometimes appearing briefly on the opposite side.

When hit with a powerful burst of flames, they tend to resist just long enough to disappear, and you get no points. When hit with a much weaker projectile, about the size of an arrow, they break easily. The whole thing's been designed to test reaction speed, accuracy, and control.

I would like to talk with the developers and recommend that they use flying ducks instead of targets.

When I finish, my points are at 1200, beating the second-place score but still far from the 1500 Tess scored in the previous loop. What a monster.

I choose to delay showing my points by one hour and select my alias as Emanon before leaving the room.

That's when I stop and go still.

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Nearby, Tess is waiting like she's expecting someone. When she sees me, she lights up and waves.

With my mood soured, I take a few steps toward her.

"You should be guarding that little asshole of yours," I say.

"I have a few minutes. It should be enough time to break the record. I knew I would find you here, so what score did you get?"

"Exactly 1700. I think you should give up for the next 24 hours."

"Did you now? Impressive," she says, her lips curling into a playful and challenging smile.

"You are evil."

"Gimme a minute," she says and disappears into the room.

She reappears exactly one minute later. Together, we head off into the crowd and take a seat. Another minute goes by, likely the result of whatever delay she had planned, before the score appears.

1st, 1701 pts - Sset

Damn. That's even more evil than I expected. Honestly, I have to admire it.

"You're breaking your schedule," I tell her.

She nods. "I am."

"Why?"

"Shouldn't that be obvious, Nat? We're in this together, are we not? I will not allow you to take on all that danger alone just to take attention away from us. Don't think I didn't notice you breaking your schedule on purpose."

"What do you mean? I just hate following it, that's all."

With her chin propped on her folded hands, she stares at me in silence.

"Sure. That's all," she says with a faint smile.

"You silly, stubborn, goddamned blonde."

"I have heard worse."

"You smell like cigarettes."

"I haven't smoked since the first floor."

"You can't even cook."

"Please, Nat, you can barely prepare instant ramen."

"My disciple loved the pizza we made."

"By the time you two were done with it, you looked like you had eaten charcoal out of the fireplace."

"I remember that time you thought pasta did not need water to boil."

Tess immediately leans closer. "Oh, so we're doing this now? Do you remember that time you wanted to buy a chicken and get me to take turns slapping it with you until it cooked, just because you saw a particularly funny meme?"

"What can I say? I have a curious mind."

"Or when you once cooked a steak at my place until it turned grey and we couldn't chew it? You said it was 'well-respected.'"

"You did laugh."

"I've laughed at weirder things."

"Didn't try to make a cake for dessert at one point, thinking all the while that baking soda and baking powder were the same thing? That cake could have killed a man, Tess. No, I'm sure if you made it here, it would've been classified as an upper rare at least."

Finally, she laughs and leans back.

"Just be careful, okay? Others in our group are starting to reach the point where they might break the schedule just to bring some of that attention back to themselves."

"That would be dumb. I'm taking a calculated risk, and unlike the others, I am sure I will be fine."

"Yup, it is dumb."

"Damn it."

"So?"

"I'll be careful, okay? And stop smiling, it's annoying."

"Nope."

At that, I just turn away. Indeed, I remain the most normal person here.

As planned, after a few days, I finally get to talk with Ari. With the lesson for her and Kays done, I leave first and wait in one of the side hallways. There, I deploy one of the detection arrays I've been working on for the past few days, just to be sure we don't get surprised or fall victim to eavesdroppers.

Then, as she reaches me, I give her access, and after a quick examination, she nods, "Nice work for someone who melted half of the tower in the center of the Academy."

"Cooking accident."

"Am I to think Professor Feran ended up in one, too? He nearly died, dragging himself to the Head Healer."

"He must have fallen down the stairs or something. I have questions."

"I'll have mine too, so I expect you to answer mine when I ask you later. Alright?"

"That much is fine. Who are the others?"

"The Candidates and the Examiners."

"How many? Who are Candidates and who are Examiners?"

"You're no fun, asking so many questions. At least show me some kind of fun reaction," she complains.

I twist my face into a shocked expression before returning it to normal and looking at her with a questioning gaze.

Ari sighs and says, "There were ten Candidates, including me, who've been placed in this loop, along with an unknown number of Examiners."

"What Ruler did this, and what do the Examiners do?"

"If you continue to interrupt me, it will take a while, you know, and I have only five minutes or so."

"That's fine, just answer."

One of her six arms caresses her hair, another two rest in her pockets, and she continues to gesture with the other three.

"We don't know which Ruler arranged this. None of the Candidates have gotten their subclass yet. As far as I know, this was all made possible by the Ruler, who put a great deal of effort into copying the mechanisms of the tutorial, just on a much smaller scale. They worked in tandem with the Absolute of the planet where the real Academy is located and created something called a 'record.' In exchange for his help, the Absolute asked the Ruler to make some twists and changes. One of these changes were the Examiners, the Absolute's people who were sent here to hunt us down and kill us. For this, they are rewarded and also able to use the loop to their advantage. But no one knows who the Candidates are or who the Examiners are."

"What a goddamn mess."

"I agree, Assistant Professor Gwyn, but it is a fun mess, is it not?" she smiles brightly.

She's not even bothering to pretend anymore, instead, she seems to have let her real personality show through. "Three years I've been here. Over 100 loops. I've improved so much, it's crazy. In that time, a dozen or so Examiners have died, and to my knowledge, seven out of ten Candidates. And that will continue until I become the Ruler's disciple and their true heir."

"Why haven't the Examiners wiped you all out? Aren't they stronger than you?"

"They are, but they have to follow rules the Candidates don't. If they kill someone who is not a Candidate, they will die themselves. But Assistant Professor, it's you and people like you that are more interesting," her eyes widen and she leans in closer, poking me with her finger, "You aren't a Candidate or an Examiner. And you haven't even asked what you are. Maybe you can't. Poor little thing."

Looking at me, she fixes my tie and then taps my chest with a smile.

"There are people like you. Bugs. Proof that this place, as much as the Ruler and the Absolute have tried, is imperfect. Once in a while, new people appear out of nowhere. Forgotten Assistants, Professors, or servants that were never loaded in the first loop. They tend to loop for a while before they disappear again. Examiners hate you and try their best to get you killed without breaking the rules. Some Candidates do the same."

"And you?"

"Me?" she asks as if surprised, but she smiles, and it is a dark smile. "I use them, obviously."

"You could easily end up dead," I note.

"Yet I am still here after all these loops." She covers her mouth with both hands and lets out a giggle, high and breathless, like she can't quite hold it in. The sound is almost childlike, but underneath it, there's something sharp, something broken. "It's fun, so much fun."

But then, just as fast, she stops. The smile fades. Her arms fall to her sides, and the glint in her eyes hardens back into something cold and calculating, as if none of it had ever happened.

"I have to go, I will ask my questions later. So be careful until then, Assistant Professor Gwyn," she tells me.

As she is leaving, I call out to her. "How many Candidates have you killed, Ari?"

She halts mid-step and halfway turns to me. For a moment, that bright smile, too wide and too sharp, flashes across her face, carrying a glint of madness and something darker beneath it.

Without a word, she flicks her hand through the air, a lazy, almost playful motion. Mana trails from her fingertips, sparkling and twisting like smoke.

Then she turns away and leaves without looking back.

Hanging in the air, written in shining mana particles, is a single word.

Seven.

Chapter 622: Student council

My opinion of this world's Absolute dims more and more by the day. That guy is way too unhinged. What kind of asshole works with Ruler to allow portions of their world to be recorded and used like this, even throwing in random ideas just for shits and giggles?

That almost makes it an interesting option. What if the Ruler who chose to use this place as a floor for the tutorial isn't the Ruler testing his successors, but the Absolute who became the Ruler later? Or is it, as we've come to think, one of the little guys who's been thrown in here with us?

Well, I'll get to the bottom of it either way.

Since I've already been caught and am likely to be a target, I don't bother to hide and head toward where the twins said the student council is, and the guy I should check out.

As before, they're going to act like they don't know me. Our conversations will only take place through the Community, at least with everyone other than Tess.

Silly blonde.

The student council, according to Dennis, oversees the laws of the universe and also decides what kind of desserts we'll be served for lunch. It's located in a set of surprisingly normal-looking buildings, which also play host to a number of research clubs, study clubs, and similar groups.

Located in the west wing, it sits on the highest floor, in one of the corner rooms, allowing it to have multiple huge windows on both sides that overlook one of the myriad gardens here in the Academy.

Of course, I barge in without knocking, destroying the weak attempt at a locking mechanism. It may have been good enough for the other students, but it's far from enough to hold me back. There isn't even a secondary lock or any kind of trap. Just a warning signal to be set off when the threads connected to it are destroyed.

A few more chairs are scattered about the room, along with some cabinets, a full-scale, enchanting table that clearly does not belong here, and deep scratches on the floor from dragging it in. One of the windows has been broken, and the resulting hole has been patched over with a plank torn from the floor.

The plank in question seems to have come from a patch of floor that seems to have been torn up for the sole purpose of fitting a huge stone crystal pillar into the room.

I might just be weird, but it actually feels kind of cozy.

Amidst the chaos, I notice that there are four students present, while Dennis and Aaron seem to be conspicuously absent today.

The one who steps forward to face me is a selari boy who looks surprisingly calm at my appearance. He even looks a bit annoyed and pissed off. Like the other selari, he has pink hair, pink skin, white freckles, but his eyes are pale blue instead of the normal mix of blue and green.

"Ah, Assistant Professor Gwyn," he says with the same annoyance his face shows.

"I see my reputation precedes me," I say as I grab one of the mana stones from the table to examine it.

"Yes, the girls can't seem to stop talking about you, they've been offering obsidian drachen for information on your schedule and even more for the times you visit the public baths."

The mana stone almost slips from my fingers. I had been fixing the line, since it was going to explode in a day or two, but now I undo it. Instead, I twist the inscription loop slightly to make the explosion stronger.

Only then do I turn to the boy. By this point, the two boys and the girl still in the room are clustered at his side, loudly whispering for him to calm down, but he just shakes them off.

"So what? This is our territory. We can't show fear, even if an enemy like him does appear," he says, facing me with the same defiant expression.

I pick up a piece of cloth that seems like it's destined to be made into a cloak.

"I don't visit the public baths for your information. Is this cloak an attempt to make yourself less detectable?" I ask.

"Oh? You noticed?" he says proudly. "It is an invisibility cloak I've been working on."

"Won't be worth much in a fight."

"Fight? It's for spying on the girls."

"I see," I nod and pause, replaying his answer in my mind. "Wait, what?"

"I plan to work on it a bit more, add some dehumidifying inscriptions, and possibly change the materials without increasing the weight. Then I should be able to sneak into the public bath..."

He does not finish as I fry the circuits and destroy all his work, then toss the ruined cloak onto a chair.

"And this?" I ask, picking up a tube.

"Telescope. I have an idea to make it see through walls. Then I can go to the main observation tower."

With a sliver of hope, I ask, "Bird watching?"

"No, the public bathhouse is just next to..."

I crush the tube in my hands and let it drop to the floor.

"This?" I point at the mirror.

At this point, my voice is challenging, and his face remains just as proud as he stands tall.

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"Remote Viewing Mirror."

I destroy it.

"This?"

"Bathhouse blueprints detailing a rumored hidden entrance. I just need to decipher them and..."

I burn the paper.

"Your name is Vance, correct?" I ask.

"Yes, Assistant Professor Gwyn."

"These items suck."

"Naturally. I'm not even level 100, I lack a subclass, and I'm constrained by the technology of my era."

"That is not what I meant."

"Well, too bad. I'll just create even better versions after you leave, Mr. Hottest-Assistant-Professor-I-Can-Fix-Him type currently."

"For fuck's sake, Vance, just stop, please," the other boy begs.

But Vance sticks out his chest even more and bears it all with pride, "I stand behind everything I've said. Show no fear, my friend. He can't do anything to us."

"We are so sorry, Assistant Professor. He is just a bit like that. He grew up very sheltered and..."

"Silence! No more information! Did you forget the meeting we had to declare him one of our greatest enemies? And you, do you actually need something from the student council? If so, then it's common courtesy to send a formal request or complaint first before simply barging in. As much as you might not feel like it, we students have rights too."

"Rights to spy on girls?"

"Only the hot ones."

I blink.

What is wrong with this guy?

I gesture for him to come closer, and he does so without hesitation, stopping a step away.

Then I hand him a brooch I found on the table and meddled with. It had a decent base, and with a few quick changes, I turned it into a low epic item after I finished the work he'd started on enhancing the base functions.

Its function as a mana signature detector is suspicious, given its connection to the boy, but I let it be.

The moment he takes the item and notices the changes, his eyes widen, and he turns to me.

"Holy fuck," he whispers.

I nod with satisfaction.

"How the hell can this work with such an ugly as fuck array of terrible circuits? It looks like someone stitched a dead mana beast onto a broken array," he blurts out, staring at the brooch like it might bite him. "There are no stabilization nodes, no compression filaments, and the flow channels are all jagged. Half of the conduction lines have been fractured intentionally, and the resonance core is exposed to

external interference. Even the anchoring inscriptions for the mana framework have been layered incorrectly."

He breathes heavily, as if he'd just borne witness to something that should be physically impossible.

"And yet it's stable. No, it is better than stable. It self-corrects the mana drift through chaotic realignment and handles excess energy like a champ through a dormant feedback loop instead of a stabilizer core. That shouldn't even be possible without at least second-tier material catalysts or high-grade auxiliary inscriptions. This goddamned brooch should collapse and explode the moment it activates, but it just keeps balancing itself by feeding on its own turbulence."

He glares at me like I personally broke the rules of magic.

"This is a mockery of the inscription principles themselves," he declares.

I pat him on the shoulder once before stepping back.

"Learn something," I tell him.

After that, I leave the room.

Walking away, I open Community.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -you were right, he is incredibly good at inscriptions.

NotDennis (Hell, group 4) -told you! That guy is a genius.

I close it again and think. Some of the items, while skipping the weird functions and what they were meant for, were incredible. Something I do not think should be possible to create at his level. Or at least not without incredible talent.

From some points of view, the skill of that selari boy I observed is scarier than that level 350 ten-year-old girl.

It seems like there is another name to be added to the list of suspects.

The Head Accountant looks surprised by my visit, especially as I start putting mana stones, materials, and some items onto the table. They are ones that do not require a permit or registration.

I know very well which items are best. During the previous loop, I asked this guy extensively. Overall, I end up dumping around 450 thousand shards worth of items onto the table.

"Assistant Professor Gwyn, may I ask where you got all these things from?"

"You can't, I'm shy," I answer, sliding a smaller mana stone worth around 20 thousand shards toward him. "For your trouble."

"I'm sorry, but I have to refuse."

I reach out and flick the mana stone until it falls to the floor and rolls under the table, out of sight.

"Damn, I'm clumsy. I hope I don't forget to ask for that mana stone before I leave this meeting. Now, tell me more about that Professor specializing in traits."

The Head Accountant coughs and wipes his forehead with a handkerchief. "He's one of the oldest people on the continent, from the Second Generation, and his master was a powerful Champion candidate from the First Generation before he died in a Challenge. He has a lot of experience and knowledge, but can be very... moody."

"I can deal with that. Please book him for me as soon as possible." I slide the rest of the items and materials closer to him. "Since I'm here, can you also tell me about the Head Crafter? What materials does he need, and would he be willing to help with a side project for the right price?"

"He's a very stubborn and straightforward man, not someone I get along with, so it is hard to say. But there are a few materials he always complains we're missing. The Head Supplier always vents to me

about his requests, so I can get you information on those materials. The problem is that they are hard to come by on our planet, and with interplanetary travel currently locked by our Absolute, they've been even harder to obtain."

"That's fine, just get me the list."

As swiftly as before, he does so. He checks a few accounting books and has a quick communication with the Head Supplier through a crystal ball. Then, written out on a piece of paper, he hands me a list of materials. Some of which I've never heard of before, but after a quick check, I notice quite a few are available in the system shop.

"Thank you for your cooperation," I say, standing up.

Before I open the door, he calls out, "H-Haven't you forgotten something?"

I turn around, pretending to think deeply.

"Oh, right," I say, walking back seriously.

The Head Accountant smiles awkwardly, and expecting me to retrieve the mana stone, he moves slightly so I can pass by.

Instead, I grab a pen from his desk. "This is a nice pen. Thanks."

Leaving him stunned, I walk out without looking back.

Chapter 623: Trait Specialist

As I was told, the Professor I'm supposed to be getting lessons from this time is an old man. Possibly the oldest one I've seen on the floor, looking like he is in his late seventies. All gray-haired, with a mustache that looks like he could sweep up snacks in it, and a slight belly.

The signs I usually look for when estimating someone's level are almost impossible to feel from him, and his mana is perfectly contained.

That makes me wonder. Let's say you have 1000 points in constitution. Wouldn't you think that'd keep your body in perfect shape for a pretty long time? By most logic, it probably should, but the things I've seen don't really seem to support that theory.

I guess that even with high stats, your body will continue to degrade, and the rate only slows when you break through into the higher levels. For now, it seems that around the time you start getting body upgrades, it slows the aging process. Possibly even more so when one becomes a Champion, and even more when reaching Absolute.

Kyralon is rumored to be one of the oldest Absolutes in the system, likely thousands of years old. But how long can he actually live? Thousands more? Is he already degrading and starting to weaken?

How would it even look if your stats show 1000 strength, but you are close to death? Are these stats "weaker"? Will the system show less strength to reflect the change? Will you still have that much strength?

What also comes to mind is that it is our brains and hearts that degrade. But if that is the case, how would healers be able to affect these organs?

I know some things are difficult to heal, and that some people advise against healing certain things at all. But if your heart were degrading, could you not restore despite the risk, or by using your resources as a Champion or Absolute to get a new one? Could you not fix your brain as well? The main question I have regards how difficult these things truly are, but more and more questions keep popping up.

In the end, I stay with the conclusion that it is possible to extend your life through means that some might consider unnatural. But it's likely to be difficult, and the things I can think of that could make it possible might affect you negatively. Otherwise, everyone would do it. It is also possible that some people simply do not want to live that long.

Yup, just like us. There's a bright future ahead of us. Surely.

Damn, now I'm sure I'm going to be thinking about this the rest of the day, especially about the implications of the possibility of stats degrading. It feels like either the system is not omnipotent, or it is purposefully not giving enough power for people to live forever.

Forcefully, I clear my thoughts and continue walking toward the small lake where the Professor sits on a bench with his eyes closed. There are no students around, and this area is heavily restricted. I even needed a permit to get here. Even the arrays are different from those at the Academy.

As for the Professor, he continues to sit there as I stand over him, caught off guard by his lack of response. His head wobbles a bit, and I get the strong suspicion he might be sleeping.

After waiting a minute and getting no reaction, I shrug and walk over to the bank of the lake, searching the ground for the best flat rocks. Even the ones that are less than perfect, I pick them up and grind them down a bit by oscillating my mana around them. Then, without boosting my body, I swing and throw a rock to send it skipping across the surface.

It goes terribly. The throw has too much force behind it, and the rock hits the middle of the lake where water splashes high into the air, as the rock sinks to the bottom.

The next time, I change the angle and actively hold myself back before throwing again. This time, the spinning rock makes a few skips before sinking.

I glance down at the rocks I have collected and pick up another one. I give it a much stronger spin, lower myself more, and leaning into the perfect angle, I throw it, sure of the result. The rock bounces across the surface of the lake, then flies high into the air and over the lake to hit the trees on the opposite side.

I pick up another one and look at it.

It is a gray, normal rock. Somewhat flat, with a scar on its side where I used oscillating mana to remove an edge. Looking at it, I hold it between my thumb and forefinger and press. The rock cracks immediately, and the pieces crumble into fine dust between my fingers.

I feel no damage to my skin, no resistance, and I didn't even need to use any strengthening.

So powerful.

Even after two years, little things like this make me giddy.

Instead of a small flat rock, a massive boulder catches my attention, a stone wider than me and standing waist-high. It might as well be a boulder. I grip it, then with a bit of effort, lift it and throw it up, high into the air. It rises to the height of a multi-story building before crashing into the center of the lake, sending up another massive splash.

Taking a few steps, I sit next to the sleeping Professor and close my eyes as well. Out of boredom, I start trying to estimate how much each minute of this lesson, which has already started, costs me based on the shards I spent on the lesson, and then I convert it to the value of items.

Maybe this is some sort of test where I have to prove I deserve his teachings. Maybe he's going to ask me to wash his car.

I turn to my left, where the old Professor is still quiet.

I hope he's not dead.

Turning away again, I enter my mind and start training with those impossible shapes that cause such irritating pain. It feels like something is burning in a number of places in my brain. But more importantly, I make progress.

These shapes, as weird as they are, start to feel more and more real. I even start imagining mana sliding across their surfaces. I also start experimenting by splitting my mind into as many parts as possible, or sometimes just splitting into two and cycling the one in control, trying to make the transfer as smooth as possible.

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When it is ten minutes before the end of the lesson, the Professor finally snorts and wakes up from the noise he made. After a lightning quick scan, he turns to the right and jumps up, surprised.

"Holy hell, by the dried tits of the Desert Witches, you scared me, you little shit!"

"I'm sorry." I apologize.

He snorts, "At least you have some manners. What do you want?"

"I paid for a lesson, most of which you've slept through."

The old man yawns and scratches his mustache like he might pull a snack out of it any second. "Lesson, huh? Shit, boy, half the bastards around here could use a nap more than another fancy lesson."

He leans back on the bench, cracking his neck loudly enough that it sounds like dry wood snapping. "You think waving your money around means I owe you something? You're just lucky I didn't beat your ass for waking me up."

"I see. Thank you."

He squints at me like I'm some kind of stain he's deciding whether to clean or ignore. "Fine. You paid, you'll get your damn lesson. The first thing you'll learn: mana is a bitch, and it loves nothing more than kicking idiots in the teeth."

He spits to the side, just missing his boot. "Second lesson: patience. You sit, you wait, and when I decide you're worth the breath, you might just learn something that keeps you alive longer than a wet fart in a hurricane."

The Professor taps the side of his head with one bony finger. "Try training your brain, boy. Not your muscles."

I nod. "I see. Amazing. I was told you know a lot about traits."

"You little turd, I personally hammered two of today's Champions into something halfway useful, and you stand there talking to me in that tone?"

"I'm sorry."

"Pah. A hundred years ago, I would have ripped your head off."

"That would be a perfectly understandable reaction."

"Damn right, it would. Now, spit it out. What are your traits? Let's see if you're even worth the shit stuck to my boot."

"Mana Wavelength Iris and Mana Physique."

For the first time, he pauses and seems to think. As if remembering things, maybe doing calculations or something else entirely. "Strengthenings?"

"Two for Mana Wavelength Iris and zero for Physique."

"Second strengthening for that trait already? Tell me your level, and don't lie to me. In my time, we showed our skill levels, traits, and levels with pride and simply beat the shit out of each other to prove who was stronger. Not this cowardly bullshit people like to do nowadays by hiding it all."

"Level 309."

"By the rotten balls of the Head Accountant, how are you still alive? Can you even handle using Mana Wavelength Iris?"

"Yes, I have passive and active skills to help me deal with it."

"Names, just give me the names."

"Mana-Fortified Mind, low arcane, Mental Attunement Loop, mid arcane, and [Focus]."

"Huh, surprisingly enough, you aren't all that bad at all. [Focus] is one of the best concentration-type skills there is, and having two arcane passives at your level... I could ask a lot of awkward questions, but I won't be nosy."

I want to ask him if it is not too late for that, but I eventually decide to stay quiet.

"I appreciate that," I say.

He takes some time to think again and then turns to me. His tone is more serious than before.

"Some might tell you that level and, in conclusion, stats are the most important thing to focus on. Others might sing the praises of active skills, dedicating their entire lives to breaking higher. There are even a few who strive for the best possible passive, a combination of multiple passives that give them a perfect, unique one that never existed within the system. Others might rely on primordial energies, fragments, items, inscriptions, knowledge, all that nonsense."

The old Professor waves his hand in a dismissive gesture. "They're all wrong in my opinion, and that's the only opinion that matters to me. Traits are more important than any of them. The perfect combination of traits can make you stronger than any passive or high level skill."

I want to disagree with him, but I'm curious too, so I listen. I have long since learned there are many people, each with their own different view of things, just as this Professor mentioned.

"Back in my youth, I was damn well known for it. At barely over level 400, I was beating the snot out of fresh Champions till they ran crying to cling to their mommies' skirts."

Standing up from the bench in a movement that belies his old appearance, he smiles under that mustache. "Oh, those were the times. Dozens of people telling me I was wrong, only for me to beat the crap out of 'em. They called me The Tyrant back then."

The Professor stands there for a moment, staring out over the lake like he's still considering whether it's even worth wasting his breath on me.

"Remember this, boy," his voice is rough but steady. "Skills fade. Stats can rot with time. Equipment breaks. Even strength itself can betray you when you least expect it."

He taps the side of his head with one bony finger. "But traits... traits are different. If you choose right, if you strengthen and synchronize them properly, they will carry you further than any sword or skill ever could."

I don't say it out loud, but once again, I don't completely agree with him. As much as I dislike Lissandra, I do share her belief that active skills matter the most.

Still, I'm curious about the Professor's explanations. If his talk is to be believed, he used to be powerful. Even if it's only to sate my curiosity, I want to hear what he has to say.

"Humans," he says, "we get the shit end of the stick. Some races pop out of the womb with traits already polishing their asses. Us? We have to start with nothing and pray we don't screw it up."

He glances at me with that same judging look from before. "Three traits. That's all you get. Pick wrong and it doesn't matter if you cry about your choices for the rest of your life, that's it."

Once again, the old man drops back onto the bench with a grunt.

"Synchronization of traits," he says, rapping two knuckles against his head. "It's the only way. Your traits need to feed into each other, build each other up. Thankfully, you didn't completely screw up your first two traits. With a bit of luck on the third, maybe you won't be totally useless. You'll get that third trait at level 400. Heck, you might kick the bucket before then, but if you're an optimist, I'll tell you about all the things you could do until then to get the best trait possible, the options you might have, and the best ways to get the most out of your traits."

Without waiting for any dumb questions, he starts talking.

An hour passes in a blur while he goes on about strengthening traits, rare chances for evolutions, hidden upgrades the system barely hints exist. He doesn't sugarcoat anything and talks about how idiots pick flashy traits and end up strong for a year, before ending up dead in a ditch.

He also brings up a few things I could do to acquire the best third trait possible at level 400. Surprisingly, he even recommends some books. Apparently, there's a lot of theory behind it.

After a while, as if realizing he is doing it for free, he stops.

"That is enough for today. Go chew on it before your tiny brain melts," he says, waving me off.

I stand up and give a single nod, doing my best to remember as much as I can.

I'll have to find an excuse to annoy this guy again in the future.

Chapter 624: Will you kill her for me?

Early in the morning, I enter the Craft Zone, and passing between all this machinery, forges, people, and students, I reach the hall that leads to a single door at the end. This hall has a ceiling full of hundreds of lamps, each one different from the last. Some are smaller than my fist, others are bigger than me. None of them is the same, and there are just so many shapes. Circular, square, a halo, as well as some that even look like a crunched-up blanket.

Each of them also gives off a different type of light. Some are colorful, while others shine in varying shades of white or blue, ranging from pale to dark.

The sides of the hallway are lined with suits of armor as well. There are some made from metal, while others have clearly been constructed from wood, glass, stone, and various other materials. A few are even formed entirely out of mana, maintained by tubes that connect to them and supply them with mana.

Two of the armors are the size of multi-story buildings, reminiscent of Exoria from the 6th floor. These ones appear to be the most ancient of the bunch, but just like everything else, they seem to be well cared for.

I know I'm being watched. I sense someone observing me from behind the far door, but I'm still incapable of resisting the urge to examine everything, and so I slowly make my way over, though I'm expected, and someone is clearly awaiting my arrival. I move from armor to armor, taking a moment to admire and examine each one.

Some are straight-up trash tier, others are incredible works of art, but all of them show the effort the creator invested in their construction, even the worst ones. I also have a suspicion that the creator of some of the worst ones made some of the best. In that way, the pieces are a record of their progression.

After knocking on the door, made of an alloy containing dozens of metals, I wait while observing the pattern. The different colored metals have all been smelted together in a way that's created a series of whirlpool-like patterns. Forming one large spiral, starting at the center and unwinding to the edges.

As far as I can sense, it doesn't seem to have any purpose other than design, or maybe some structural effect.

Since I've made an appointment, the door opens fairly quickly, and I enter, whereupon I find the Head Crafter of the Academy.

The man's arm looks to be about as thick as my waist, and he has a mid-length bushy beard that sometimes catches fire, to which he mostly pays no attention, simply tapping at it to kill the flames.

It is really hot in there, and the walls show it. Some of them are twisted, as if they had begun to melt and then cooled off. The floor is full of droplets of metal that cooled there and stayed, causing the formerly dark gray stone floor to shine like a night sky full of stars as the light reflects off these droplets.

I don't want to interrupt him during his work, even though he opened the door, meaning he is open to talk. Instead, I pretend to be polite and wait, using the opportunity to observe his work.

Just a few seconds after entering, I also have to use my skills to deal with the heat that reaches me. It really is hot enough to cook me alive otherwise.

Five hours pass like that.

Only then does he stop moving, all the while showing no signs of being tired. He grabs a piece of metal shaped like a helmet with tongs and throws it into a barrel full of some weird looking orange liquid.

Surprisingly, the liquid doesn't sizzle as it touches the red-hot helmet, and instead, the helmet sinks to the bottom while the liquid shows no reaction.

Could I steal a bit of that liquid before I leave? The room is small, so maybe I could pretend to be passing by and...

"What do you want?" the man turns to me and asks directly.

Instead of answering right away, I step closer, moving toward the only table nearby, which happens to be full of half-finished, smaller items. I drop a bag on it, which I then open and dump across the table, revealing various ingots of metal, all of which the Head Accountant has told me are rare here, with special attention to the ones the Head Crafter has been complaining about, asking the Academy to buckle down and find some.

I spent two hundred thousand shards just to buy this pile, and there isn't even much here.

And the Head Crafter asks again, this time with a different tone, "What do you want?"

"It's simple," I say, taking a step toward him and offering my hand, in which rests a mana stone, "I want you to help me finish the design."

Before taking it, he looks at me and does a few quick safety checks, only after which does he take it into his big hand. In his grasp, that stone looks very small.

For the next minute, he is quiet as he observes the design I etched inside the mana stone.

"What a monstrosity of an item," he breathes out, "I can see where the designer was going with it, but the core it would require shouldn't even possibly exist, not even mentioning how difficult it would be to connect it all. And even then, in the best case, it would be a weapon as dangerous to its wielder as those he wielded it against."

He observes it again, "Forget that. This thing would be more dangerous to the wielder than to the people it was used against."

"There isn't any need to worry about that. It's all been sorted out. I just need you to follow the instructions there and finish up the design of the main inscription framework."

"Finish up, he says. Hah. You brought me a pile of bones and asked for a living beast."

He grabs a piece of chalk and starts scribbling quick, rough lines onto the stone wall, lines similar to those inscribed in the mana stone. He looks at them for a moment, thinking, then he turns away from the board.

"First issue: the projected metal composition is fundamentally flawed. Once the real flow starts, the structure will fracture under stress. For this application, you'll need a purpose-built alloy, possibly several, each designed to handle specific load and fatigue conditions."

He moves over to the forge, throws in more weird stones that seem to serve in place of coal, and stokes the fire until it roars.

"Second, while the mana stone you provided is of decent quality, it is unsuitable for blueprint encoding. To store the design with the necessary precision and stability, I'll need a more specialized stone. I have a few in reserve, and I can have my apprentice handle the transcription."

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He picks up one of the half-finished items from the table, tossing it back down with a grunt.

"Third, must the form be a sword?" He gestures toward the mana stone. "The configuration is incompatible and would complicate integration. There are other weapon types that align more effectively with the intended properties, including purely geometric forms. Like an orb, or a disc. With a few adjustments, I could even redesign it for a crown, a helmet, or some similar structure."

"If you want to, do it. As long as it's something that might improve the function, I don't mind in the least."

He straightens up, looking me dead in the eye. "For the kind of person who would bring me such a design, you're surprisingly reasonable."

"Thank you. One more question. Can you have it all done in a week?"

"I take it back. You're batshit crazy."

I open my left hand and drop a small ingot of metal onto the table. Just one.

It's only as big as my pinkie and quite possibly heavier than Isabella. Just this piece cost me almost all my remaining shards. Three hundred thousand of them. It's a metal called Iridite.

As he looks between me and the tiny ingot, I know I have him where I need him. A minute later, I leave with our deal sealed.

Of course, it will be impossible to bring the design he makes back with me after the reset, but I already plan to memorize it as much as possible. Sophie should be of some help, too. Lately, she's been experimenting with something similar to my mind storage. While I set aside a part of my mind to constantly focus on the information and keep it fresh in my memory, she works on something she refers to as a memory pocket.

Together, we should be able to carry it through the loops, inscribe it again, and give it to the Head Crafter for further improvement.

And even though I'm sure it might take years for me to actually make that item, when it's done, it will be scary. I just hope the name ends up more like Fracture rather than any of the names the twins came up with, like Fractureer or Throngler.

The first lesson with Ari and Kays ends, and as Kays leaves with Melo, I meet Ari in the hallway, same as before.

"Did you try to kill me?" I ask her this time.

"You mean your cooking incident? We already talked about it. I should feel insulted, Assistant Professor Gwyn. If I wanted to kill you, we wouldn't be talking right now."

"That's what an unsuccessful assassin would say."

"Think what you want, but I've told you before. Don't underestimate the others, whether they're Candidates or Examiners. They've survived this far, so they're very resourceful."

"As long as it isn't someone at the level of Vice Director, I'm not worried."

"Yes? And what if it's Champion Dion who goes after you?"

"There's no way he's a Candidate or Examiner."

"I agree. For the first few loops, I thought he might be. The Absolute is just that twisted. But after he died the first time and re-appeared in the next loop, it was confirmed he isn't."

"Unless he's been faking his death."

"So paranoid. I like it! That's true, but Assistant Professor Gwyn, what if one of the Examiners or Candidates manipulates the Champion into killing you?"

"That would suck."

"Not for long."

"True. Is it you killing him?"

"Nope. And I have no idea who could do it or why. Whoever is must be twisted to the core to even pull something like that off."

I stay quiet.

Ari giggles. "It's funny, the look you're giving me. Like you're thinking, 'And you aren't that twisted?' I can't say I didn't think of killing the Champion, even if only to see how many levels I'd gain before the reset. But in the end, I don't know how, and with that person killing him, it's too risky to try to get to the Champion now."

"Does he start in the loop or appear here later?"

"Everyone starts in the loop, even if they show up at the Academy later. Champion Dion and his disciple begin in a small village north of the Academy."

"Disciple?"

She sighs. "Aren't I nice? Sharing so much information with you?"

"You're only doing it so I'll feel like I owe you and help you later."

"Is it working?"

"A bit. But to the point."

She giggles again. "The transfer student. That ten-year-old girl is his disciple. I suspect she might be a Candidate, but I've never tried to kill her. I think if I did while the Champion was alive, he'd just find and kill me. And every time the Champion dies, she starts to get very, very dangerous. Assistant Professor Gwyn, if that little girl is a Candidate or Examiner, she's very good at hiding it and likely the strongest one. Isn't that amusing?"

"Yes, and a bit twisted," I agree.

"Will you kill her for me? If it's you, I think you can do it."

"Nope," I say.

She doesn't seem disappointed. In fact, she looks like she expected the answer. "I'll try asking you again next time."

"Not going to threaten me into doing it?"

"By threatening those people you're weirdly friendly with?" she asks.

"Something like that."

"But then you'd kill me, and I don't want to die." Her six arms sweep outward in a theatrical display, as if mocking the idea. Then, with a slow and almost dismissive motion, she lowers them and leans back against the wall. Her posture is relaxed, but there's a flicker of fire in her eyes. Playful, defiant, and just a little bit dangerous.

"I see. One more question." I say.

"So greedy. Please ask," she gestures.

"What triggers the resets?"

"This is highly valuable information. Just remember that I gave it to you freely. There's a Core linked to this Record, acting as its anchor. It can take any form: an object, a random stone, even a scrap of paper. If the core is destroyed, the loop resets immediately. If not, the reset always occurs on the twentieth day."

"Thanks for telling me."

"That's fine. Let me tell you one more thing: after I finish killing the others and make it out, I'll find the real you beyond this record."

I stay silent, but she doesn't continue. So I ask, just as she anticipates it, "And then?"

"That's fully up to you."

I stay behind as she leaves and think about her words. As much as her last sentence sounds like a veiled threat, it doesn't have to be that way, at least not entirely. It feels more like she's absolutely sure I'll agree to cooperate in the end.

It's safe to say she's met others like me, "bugs", in previous loops and has used them this way. To me, it might feel threatening. But for a native of this world, someone who grew up in the system, this would probably seem more like an incredible opportunity.

As much as there are risks, the idea of pleasing someone this close to godhood would be tempting. We haven't seen much of the Rulers, but it's already clear how powerful they are and how much someone like that could do for you.

Well, it gives me more to think about later. For now, there are two valuable pieces of information. In one of our future loops, I will definitely need to visit a small village north of the Academy.

Chapter 625: In the Library

In this loop, the Champion Dion doesn't die. Or at least, they don't find his body. The usual day when he dies passes, and there's no information on it, no panic spreading through the Academy. Everything continues as if nothing had happened.

A change of schedule like this could've been caused by an Examiner or, more likely, by a Candidate. It also means that for some reason, someone is killing the Champion and that it's not part of the floor's "schedule.". It also means that, in some incredible way and with a liberal application of fuckery, there's someone here who happens to be capable of killing a Champion.

Or I'm wrong, and someone actually managed to save the Champion, disrupting the original schedule. At this point, I don't think the system even knows what's going on anymore.

I'm also reminded of the Floor quest that says: Locate and protect the Ruler Candidate.

The wording, as silly as it is, also hints at something. There are, at least according to the highly unreliable Ari, three Candidates remaining. Protecting any Candidate probably won't work, the system isn't nice enough to make it that easy for us.

So I come to the conclusion. One of the Candidates is a person who, in the real world, went on to become the Ruler's disciple and heir. Someone who could be called the Ruler Candidate. So it is up to us to find out which one of the three it is and to protect them, with us likely replacing the role of someone who helped that person to survive, or doing something the Examiner did that allowed the candidate to "win"?

Maybe there is a small change that would make that Candidate die, unlike the real history, that change made to create this quest for us?

Like some kind of butterfly effect, but dumber. One missed coffee break, and now the Ruler's heir gets assassinated, unless we can stop it. Wouldn't even be the weirdest thing we've seen in the tutorial.

That also likely means that if we leave things as they are now, the "true" Candidate will die. If that happens, I'm sure nothing good will come of it. The way this floor is set up, I think failing the quest would probably trap us in this loop until the tutorial ends. It's even possible that the 'record' gets destroyed when all the Candidates die, causing us to disappear along with it. Which would be a very on-brand ending.

That kind of stuff.

If my thinking is correct, that likely means Ari either isn't the true Candidate, or that she is, and is currently on track to die soon, and that her only chance to survive is with our help.

Or maybe I'm just hallucinating and overthinking a bunch of bullshit.

Wouldn't be the first time.

As much as the mental exercises and testing I've been working on with these shapes pain me, the unanswered questions here do as well.

In the end, there are four people we've come to suspect. Ari, Tyven, the ten-year-old girl, and Vance.

For the moment, the others don't really suspect the ten-year-old little monster all that much. Her personality doesn't make her seem like the sort to follow schedules or be tricky. She also enters the Academy on day 8, so this stands as another point against her. Yet her talent cannot be underestimated, and she stays on the list for now.

As for the assassin who tried to kill me, it's got to be one of the Candidates who somehow got access to some kind of incredible toxin. That, or an Examiner who manipulated a native into killing me while trying to dodge the rule that kills them for harming anyone other than a Candidate. I'm sure the rule wouldn't be so loosely defined that 'hiring' help would count. Of course, that's only if Ari was telling the truth.

But even here, Group 4 cannot come to a clear conclusion. Some seem to think that it should be possible for an Examiner to hire someone to kill people, while others think such cheap tactics would've been banned, causing them to be killed.

We also start searching for the core that triggers the resets. Controlling something like that would be incredible, and at this point, it's fairly certain someone here knows how to locate it, which explains the changing duration of the loops.

And we continue to abuse the mechanisms of this floor as much as possible. Knowledge gained or bought, lessons from skilled Professors, passives, skills tested. All these shards we have make our group likely the richest in Earth's tutorial by a wide margin.

Even though everything seems fine, that doesn't last long because the same person who tried to kill me tries to kill Tess next.

While guarding her target, she gets hit in the arm with the same kind of dart that hit me. Knowing what's about to follow, she destabilizes primordial lightning inside her body and blows off her entire arm, along with a huge chunk of her shoulder.

In a show of wild determination, she doesn't use the healing mark she got from Lily, worried that if the toxin were there, it would just spread faster, and proceeds to retrace the attack's trajectory as the attacker escapes.

Like some nightmarish manifestation of lightning brought to life, she smashes through a window and leaps from rooftop to rooftop, leaving a trail of blood behind her.

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She almost catches them. But just as she's about to close the gap, the floor resets. And all of us are pulled back into that small room.

That seems to confirm that whoever attacked me and her knows how to locate the core.

POV Kim Min-Jae

Another loop starts, and I've already spent most of my shards on passives I continue to test. One supports my Gravitational Wavelength Eye, and the other allows me to massively strengthen my [Telekinesis]. As far as I've tested, I think these are the ones I'll keep, and it doesn't hurt that they're both mid arcane.

Not that long ago, I honestly believed it would take a lot more time before I could even hope to get my hands on any proper upper epic passives. It always seemed like something far off, like one of those goals that always remain just out of reach, no matter how much you grind.

It is an incredible amount of shards. But the knowledge in the library is incredible as well.

Somehow, even though I tell myself to hold back, I keep spending more and more time here. The temptation is constant. With every book I open or mana stone I touch, a dozen new ideas take form in my head.

At this point, whenever I'm here, I tend to forget all about following my schedule. I know I should try harder, and I know that Tess and Nat wouldn't like it, but I'm tired of the rules. I just read what I want and focus on mapping the books and mana stones I plan to bring to the next floor. There's so much to learn, it makes my head spin. It's like I'm drowning in ideas, in a good way. The deeper I go, the more I realize how little I really knew before.

Some in the group, the twins, might tease me, but I've already learned enough to improve the ways I'm using my mana and gravitational energy and apply them to my future plans. I've also discovered better ways to use [Telekinesis]. The skill isn't actually all that rare, so there's a lot of knowledge about it. I've found ways to lift heavier objects more easily and reduce the mental effort needed to control multiple projectiles.

There's even an obscure method buried in a flawed book of theory that suggested I should be syncing my [Telekinesis] with external vibrational frequencies. It sounded ridiculous at first, but it worked. A bit. Though I'm trying to connect it to Gravitational Wavelengths instead of the normal range of vibrations.

Most of what I learn, I keep to myself, planning to surprise everyone when the time feels right. At this point, I'm confident I could defeat both Dennis and Aaron at once, especially with all the work I've put into seeing through their illusions and countering their speed.

The others have warned me to be careful around Tyven, especially after Nat and Tess got themselves attacked. With how I've been acting lately, there's no way he hasn't noticed me. Every Candidate's probably been suspecting that we were "bugs" since our first loop, when we appeared out of nowhere. That's why I don't think we really need to stick to the schedule, like some in the group say.

If they're already watching us, what's the point in pretending? I'd rather dig deeper while I still can.

Tyven spends a lot of time in the library, and from what I've seen, he follows the schedule exactly. He uses the same door to enter, at all the same times, he sits at the same table. Even the bottle he brings is always filled to the same level, with the same drink.

He always takes mana stones from the same shelf and reads them at his table. Every single day, without fail, no matter how closely I watch.

If this floor is really over three years old, and the Candidates are 100 loops in, it's hard to believe it's possible to keep exactly the same schedule for over three years, especially with Ari so close to him and watching the whole time.

Maybe I'm feeling off after the early reset, or maybe it's the shock from one of my friends almost dying, but I decide to break my schedule a bit more. For the first time, I walk over to Tyven's table and sit across from him.

"Is this seat free?" I ask quietly.

He looks up in that shy way of his and nods. Then he glances back at the mana stone in his hand. He does that often, even though you can't read them with the naked eye. Still, I've noticed it helps with concentration, the same way waving my hand helps me focus whenever I'm using [Telekinesis].

"My name is Kim," I whisper. "What are you reading?"

"I'm Tyven," he replies softly. "Foundations of Basic Arrays by Solen Vey."

Then a small smile appears on his face. "It sucks."

"Solen Vey? Didn't he write Advanced Studies in Magical Geometries? I wanted to burn that thing five minutes in."

"Just be sure to use an advanced geometric structure when you set it on fire."

That makes me laugh for a moment, and I glance down at my own mana stone. The stone in my hand is old, slightly chipped, but it pulses with steady light. I run my thumb over one of the surfaces without thinking, feeling the warm hum through my skin.

I look up again when I notice something moving in the corner of my vision. Tyven is waving slightly to get my attention.

When I meet his eyes, he shifts his jacket. And underneath, a spider clings to his black sweater. With its legs spread, it's about the size of my hand, excluding my fingers. The spider is missing one of its eight legs, much like Tyven is missing one of his four arms.

Tyven smiles shyly, and the spider, still clinging to his clothes, wobbles from side to side as if greeting me.

“That’s Septa,” Tyven whispers, gently petting the spider with the tip of a finger. The creature moves excitedly, even nipping his finger in what looks like a playful gesture.

“Septa is very cute,” I say, and I mean it. As much as I dislike arachnids, Septa moves in a way that actually makes her seem adorable.

The thylarin boy nods and pulls his jacket back over her, then says in a voice mimicking one of the strict professors I know, “No pets allowed in the library, Mister Tyven, unless they’re annotated with a three-part classification system.”

He lets out a soft laugh, clearly amused by his own impersonation, then glances at Septa. She peeks out from under the jacket and taps his sleeve with two of her remaining legs, as if she were playing along.

I shake my head and turn back to my mana stone. Tyven does the same, and the Library falls quiet.

Chapter 626: Normal thing to do

My plans for this loop are fairly normal, so before that normal thing happens, I have to do some other normal stuff. It’s because, however normal that thing is, it’ll still... incapacitate me a bit and make some tasks more difficult. But it is very normal, so it’s okay.

I’m the normal one here, after all.

A theory that’s only further confirmed as I gather more information on the Professors and any Assistant Professors who might be able to teach me a thing or two. The Head Accountant is quite willing to share details and has been very... talkative? Simply said, the man just seems to love gossip.

Thanks to him, I also conclude that my shards are best spent taking lessons with the Vice Director, the Trait Grandpa, Professor Feran, the Head Crafter, and possibly Professor Elan. The problem is that Professor Elan doesn’t offer such personalized lessons.

In the end, Sophie will deal with the Head Crafter as she has before, and I will pay. I don't think I need any more lessons from the Vice Director. Even though I'll miss watching cute Lulu, I doubt the Vice Director has anything more useful to show me. And even if she did, I suspect it would be things I don't really want all that much, since I'm not directing my growth that way.

So that leaves Professor Feran and the Trait Grandpa, whom I currently find myself watching once again, sitting on his bench.

This time, I amuse myself by creating a tether high in the air and teleporting stones through it so they fall from that height into the lake. Gradually, I move that tether higher and higher and pick bigger and bigger stones.

I tear up the beautiful lawn and start digging for more stones buried under the ground. When I finally let them fall into the lake, it takes a few seconds before they hit the water with a huge splash.

It's actually starting to get really fun, and deeper underground, I detect a boulder the size of a small room, so I start digging in that direction.

Listening to a reaction that is nearly word-for-word the same as before is still eerie. As much as I think the main objective of this floor is to identify the true Candidate and not the loop itself, the setting remains unsettling.

Then he sees the mess I've made of the lawn and hurls a fresh round of insults at me.

For me, it doesn't really matter much, since I've kept my distance from most of the natives from the start. But I've seen Community logs from Izzy, Lily, Min-Jae, and the twins, who have been a bit shaken by it at times. It's not surprising, since this is one of the rare opportunities for them to interact with someone their age and have some fun.

Watching that person loop over and over without recognizing you, and having to force yourself not to act too familiar with them, can be disturbing, I would guess.

As the Professor starts once again working through his tirade about how traits are the best, I keep thinking about how interesting it is that, even though I have my own experience of this floor, the others

have something entirely different. I think I even sometimes forget that this is a loop with how much I change what I do or who I interact with. Only sometimes.

I throw in a few words to avoid the impression that I'm just dozing off, and having learned more about what to ask and how to behave to gain his approval, I get more useful information this time around.

I learn he's the sort of old-guard person who doesn't care much about the knowledge contained in books or mana stones and has his own set of terms he and his comrades once used on the battlefield. Their own trait categorizations used to be Cognitive Domain, Structural Domain, Interface Domain, Vital Domain, and Cross-domain traits. Knowing even one of these details allowed them to face the enemy with confidence.

Even such a seemingly 'small' bit of information can be extremely important when dealing with people over level 400. It can help you prepare countermeasures, making the fight much easier and often ends up saving a lot of lives.

He tells me about the most dangerous people on the battlefield, how to deal with them, who to focus on, who to kill at all costs, and who to ignore.

There also used to be challenges before each big clash, where the most powerful people from each side fought rather than risking the many deaths that would be caused by a person like that forcing their way through. Often, fights ended after such a challenge.

He complains to me about how much of a pain a proper healer can be, or how a good detector can mess up all your plans.

After that, he rattles through a number of stories: Champions throwing entire mountains at people, and by entire, he means entire. Miles-tall colossi. Or another Champion freezing the sea so more units could cross.

He also speaks with a high degree of respect about one of the most dangerous Champions he met, a person capable of orbiting the planet and, with the support of an entire unit doing calculations, launching projectiles at targets with perfect accuracy.

Like some crazy old-guard grandpa, he talks excitedly in the same rough tone, his speech littered with curses.

I think I should feel a bit ashamed for not pushing him to tell me more about traits, but I just can't help my curiosity and end up listening to all these stories.

This time, I don't even think he's exaggerating. At least, not too much.

Soph (Hell, group 4) -I'm sure our stats reset because of the system. Imagine if they didn't, if Rulers could create places like this, where you could abuse the loops and level up by killing Champions or people just under that level.

Knight (Hell, group 4) -It makes sense, but we're not in the original loop made by the Ruler. We're in a copy that's more closely monitored by the system to be used for tutorials.

Soph (Hell, group 4) -My logic still stands.

NotDennis (Hell, group 4) - So we're in a copy of the copy of the copy?

Soph (Hell, group 4) -More or less.

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NotAaron (Hell, group 4) -So even most of the natives aren't just fake, but were copied for the loop and then copied again by the system for the tutorial? Poor guys.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Dennis usually talks first, and Aaron follows. That means NotDennis is actually Dennis, and NotAaron is actually Aaron.

NotAaron (Hell, group 4) -Suuuure. I'm confident we wouldn't expect that, and totally didn't make countermeasures.

NotDennis (Hell, group 4) -Maybe we actually didn't, just to confuse them.

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) -Be not afraid!

Soph (Hell, group 4) -Nat, what are you teaching Biscuit?

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) -Be not afraid!

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) -

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) -Be not afraid!

Noname (Hell, group 4) -I got bored. I swear, when you hear it outside of the Community, it sounds much scarier and more impressive. He'll stop when you feed him.

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) -Food!

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Sure, but next time try saying it in a deeper voice, with no emotion, and slower.

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) -Food?

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Yes. I'm sure it'll get you more food.

Knight (Hell, group 4) -Biscuit, he's lying. Don't listen to that guy.

FoodFood (Hell, group 4) - Friend!

Noname (Hell, group 4) -Don't bother trying. Me and Biscuit are inseparable. By the way, do we already know who got to the 8th floor from the other groups? Is it that cowardly guy?

Soph (Hell, group 4) -No one talked yet, but he seems like the most reasonable option.

Noname (Hell, group 4) -

Soph (Hell, group 4) - Sure. I've already transcribed the design onto a mana stone. I'll be visiting the Head Crafter today. You really want to go through with your plan?

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Yup. See you later.

For the last time, I check my surroundings and stop my mind from focusing on mental exercises. I still don't understand how it's possible for me to feel pain just thinking of these shapes.

Why am I like this?

Maybe at the end of the tutorial, it'll be 8th Floor Nat who proves himself to be the craziest. Even though the 3rd Floor Nat still feels unbeatable. Creating constructs on his heart, condensing tricolored mana, and black mana.

What a legend.

If he had only managed to hunt one of those goddamn sparrows, I probably would have declared him the winner right away.

With Sophie's confirmation that she'll handle getting the design to the head crafter and picking it up later, I'm ready. After the last round, the design is already improved, so the guy will have a better start. It might be awkward if he recognizes his own work, but I believe Sophie and I changed it enough to prevent that. And if he still does, she can come up with excuses or try to mindblend him.

I take a deep breath and focus on my Ignition Heart.

Then I lift the first seal and part of the second. I could probably lift the second fully, but I don't like doing it. Each time I do, it hurts terribly, and only my passives keep me alive. Even then, I can keep it lifted for just a few seconds before risking death. The aftereffects are terrible as well. Even with healing, there's damage to my circuits and body that takes weeks to fully restore, and in the meantime, I have to work around it.

It's a good thing.

As I like to say: if it does this much damage to me, imagine what it'll do to the other guy.

It's the second day of the loop when my golden flames seep out of me and burn my room, the tower's walls, and a few neighboring rooms. Just like when the toxin hit me, I damage the tower, the defensive arrays, and probably scare the shit out of a few people.

When it's all done, I stop and look at the destruction around me. This time, I even manage to keep my clothes on, though slightly burned.

To perfect the impression, I smudge some coal on my face and tear my clothes a bit more.

Then, while the alarm rings and the guys with the professors start getting closer, I lift my arms into the air and walk toward them, trying to look as innocent as I can. I make sure to look weak and shocked.

I just barely survived an attempt on my life, after all.

Sitting there, the Vice Director adjusts her wide-brimmed, pointy hat and says, "So, you were poisoned, cursed, something like that, 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 with a nod.

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

The man takes a moment to answer, and I can sense him examining me before he responds.

“I noticed remnants of thermal energy at the site. I have also been observing him since we arrived, and I do not believe he is lying.”

The conversation continues more or less like it did last time. The only thing that changes is my behavior toward the demon Professor. I keep glancing at where his demon heart is, not subtly, and every now and then, I let a slow, deliberate smirk curl across my face. Just enough to make a point without saying a word.

Obviously, he notices. His heartbeat becomes more aggressive in a clear contrast to his otherwise composed exterior. He’s still sitting straight, still calm on the surface, but I can feel it: the irritation building.

While I speak with the Vice Director, I keep the act going, confident, almost dismissive, like I’m not just explaining myself but putting on a show for him. Every sideways glance, every measured pause, is designed to make him feel like he’s being sized up... and found lacking.

It turns out I'm surprisingly good at playing the arrogant asshole.

It’s a gift.

And damn, if he doesn’t look pissed off beneath the surface.

When they finally leave, it doesn’t take days for Professor Feran to come back to fight me. It only takes a few hours.

Both the bracelets and the metal loop are already down and taken apart for examination, and he finds me there, in the middle of that huge chamber.

Just like before, it takes ten minutes for him to walk slowly over to where I am, but this time his heartbeat is different, more angry.

Our conversation is much shorter than before, and we fight almost right away.

I will use this loop and the fights to learn from him as much as I can.

Chapter 627: A demon, after all

I think demons as a race are a bit... well, weird. Not in a racist way! Unlike our paladin of Justice, Gareth, who almost certainly wouldn't mind annihilating an entire city of demons, I hold no such opinions.

It's just that they're weird. My minion has a human part and can't truly represent full demons, so it's not as noticeable on her, even though she's clearly been heavily influenced.

Unlike her, Professor Feran is a full demon. White hair, red eyes, horns. Even though he can control himself to the point that he's allowed into the Academy without people worrying he'll eat kids, he's still a demon in the end.

During my time here in prison, he's come to see me every day. We've already had six fights, and each time he's nearly died.

Anyway, while the new active skill is kind of really, really bad. But what I would have expected from the skill called [Yarn]. I think even [Knitting], which formed the base for the skill, was more powerful, and the weird combination I made ruined it. Is it too much to hope I can get rid of [Knitting] without ending up with something equally lame instead?

At least I'm learning a lot from the demonic Professor.

As a true mana enjoyer, one of the biggest dangers I can face is misclicking when investing stat points and accidentally putting them into strength instead of mana.

The second biggest danger is someone cutting off access to my mana. I've experienced that many times, especially back on the 3rd Floor, where I almost died after being hunted down with no access to my mana. Ever since then, I've made huge steps. With all my effort, I can use my mana under my natural barrier, even against someone stronger than me trying to suppress it. Using mana outside my body is different and it's more difficult, but I'm working on that too.

Of course, I have a fuck-you-and-every-trace-of-mana-in-this-area card called black mana. It's just that I try not to rely on it too much, even now. It's just another thing I dislike about LissLiss, because, of course, she was right.

Plus, I get to fight this demon guy, I train, and I think they've noticed the broken suppression devices. They might put stronger ones on me, which I can try to break again, training myself against mana suppression in new and exciting ways. I hope they try something fancier this time.

My thoughts stop there as Professor Feran, whom I thought might be dead, moves and groans. He lies on the floor, curled up in a small pool of his own blood.

I watch as his eyes focus and he remembers that he lost yet another fight. Slowly, he gets back up on his feet. Even though burned and torn—he, not his clothes—he fixes what remains of his suit before sitting back down across from me.

"Who is the strongest person in the Academy?" I ask him.

Before answering, he coughs up blood that lands on the floor between us, "That would be the Director, but he's off-planet at the moment. After him, that's likely to be the Vice Director, though it's hard to say because she refuses my invitations to fight."

"What about Professor Elian and that old Trait Professor grandpa?"

"When you talk about the old Trait Professor grandpa, do you mean Hywell, the Tyrant?"

What the hell!? That old fart has such a cool name, and he didn't lie about his cool nickname to me?

"I'm terrible at remembering names," I say out loud.

"It would seem so. As for him, I think he's likely to be very powerful, but it's been decades since he had to fight seriously, from what I've heard. I had hoped I could awaken his old fighting spirit and we could fight, but he dislikes me quite a lot for some reason."

“Tell me more about him. I’m curious.”

“There isn’t much I can say. Long ago, he was a mentor to two of our current Champions. He and the Vice Director also used to fight together under the Champion Angar before he died.”

“So who are the baddies here? The current Absolute, or Champion Angar, who tried to become Absolute?”

“History is written by the victors. I believe you know what that means. Both sides committed terrible atrocities. The Vice Director and her black unit interfered with and destroyed the main defensive array of the capital, which allowed Champion Angar to kill tens of thousands. The Tyrant Hywell was known for killing his own forces if they tried to stop fighting or enact a retreat.”

“What about the current Absolute?”

“As a Champion, he was more craft-oriented. For a long time, he acted as a neutral party and created and sold items to powerful people on both sides. Then one day, all of those items exploded while generally killing or crippling their owners, and he appeared as a new force and pushed for the title of Absolute.”

“You don’t seem too bothered by this.”

To that, he tilts his head in a confused way. “Why should I care? I had no ties to them. I understand some people prefer that I at least act shocked to fit into society. I can do that, sure, if I have a goal that requires it, but it’s not how I feel.”

I sigh. A demon, after all.

“Why don’t you try to attack me with stealth? Or come up with some bullshit plan to work with the others to kill me?” I ask.

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“Do not insult me,” he snorts. “While human, you have two hearts, and each one is certainly better than some of the demons’ I’ve met. More than that, you fight like one of us. There are purists among my people who wouldn’t care one whit, but some like me give people like you the same respect we’d give a half-demon or even a demon.”

“But you would kill me if you could?”

“In a proper fight, yes.”

“Shouldn’t I do the same and kill you to prevent that from happening in the future?”

Again, he seems a bit surprised. “It’s something you could have done ever since the start, and you decided not to for your own reasons.”

“So you wouldn’t mind dying the next time we fight?”

“If I die, I die. I just wish for it to be the best fight of my life.”

“Of course you would say that,” I mutter, still watching him. “If you had to explain how demons think, not just act, but actually think, what would you say?”

Feran scratches behind his horn like he’s trying to remember something. “You humans always want structure. A definition. We demons don’t all hate humans, if that’s what you’re asking. Some do, sure. Others don’t. We demons start from instinct. From pride. From strength. A wolf doesn’t hate the rabbit, it just eats.”

“And if the rabbit fights back?”

“Then it’s not a rabbit,” he replies simply and actually chuckles at that. Low and dry. “It’s not personal. We just expect strength to prove itself.”

“Yeah. That’s a very healthy societal model.”

He leans forward slightly, hands steepled like he's mimicking a human professor again. "You keep trying to think of us in human terms. We're not corrupted humans, but something else entirely. Born from different laws."

"And yet here you are, in a nice, cushy, Academy job. And pants."

"I adapt. Unlike most humans, I can."

"Let's say I kill you for real in the next fight," I say. "Are you okay with that?"

"If you can and feel the need, then I deserve it for trying to challenge you. It's something I've accepted since the first time I fought you."

"You say that, but you'd still claw at my throat as you died."

"Naturally."

I never thought of myself as particularly eloquent, so it's probably partially my fault, but it's hard to get a proper explanation out of him. At some point, I can "feel it." I instinctively understand what he means when he speaks of the rule of the strongest and the respect due to proper demons, or people like me who, in his eyes, are at a level similar to half-demons.

Simply put, the stronger you are, the more demons will listen to you.

I'm willing to bet that if you became the strongest person to ever exist and told all demons to wear pink sundresses for the rest of their lives, they'd do it.

They would even admire you for it. They'd fight anyone who would mock the order.

And the entire time, they'd keep challenging you and trying to kill you, smiling as they died in the duels.

What a bunch of lunatics.

But isn't that kind of cute? At least a little bit?

I shake my head and change the topic.

"Tell me more about your kind," I ask. "I'm trying to figure out if you're all wired the same way or if you're just the academic version of a maniac."

Feran hums. "Depends. There are many factions. Some demons go by their instinct mainly. Pack and hunt types, always trying to find the most dangerous environment possible to live in. Others, like me, follow our old war orders. There are purists who don't respect anyone except other demons. Bloodline elitists. There are even demons who think peace is worth something. We avoid those."

"Do they get laughed at or eaten?"

"Both. In either order."

It takes me a while to realize it's a joke. His expression tells me he's very proud of it, and he even giggles like the lunatic he is. Probably some kind of inside joke among demons.

After that, he coughs up blood a few more times before leaving to get healed by the Head Healer. Judging by how fast he runs, he really might die in the next few minutes if he doesn't find the guy.

Left alone, I turn my attention back to examining the flooring of the huge chamber I've found myself in.

Professor Feran survives and victoriously returns the next day, just to get beaten up all over again.

This time, I use mana mostly to push him into using void energy. I don't think it would be that easy for me to gain it myself, but I observe it anyway, even if only to improve my disruption process. There are a few things I can take inspiration from, so that's good.

I also get a better sense of how it feels and how to face it. Primordial void energy is very versatile, and it can certainly be terrifying. It's powerful, hard to detect, and it affects almost everything, primordial energies, fragments, mana.

It's kind of fun. Someone who uses void energy has an advantage over a person who relies on mana, but they can't do much against someone who focuses on physical stats, like Jean or Tacita. Then again, those physical stat junkies tend to struggle against mana users... okay, maybe not the best examples.

Jean's trait makes him oppressive even against someone who relies on mana, and Tacita is... well... scary. Thankfully, those two are rare edge cases.

While I spend my time focused on that, the loop stretches on until the 14th day, before it resets.

In the next loop, I spend a bit more time examining the Sweatbox and its challenges, and actually get pretty good at them. To avoid looking like a lazy ass, I also start thinking about the floor quest.

By now, we've put most of the pieces together and have been getting close to figuring out what the hell is going on. I'm not shameless enough to take credit, Sophie, Izzy, and the twins did most of the work. With Sophie's mind-bending stuff and the twins' skill in espionage and deception, they're a perfect fit for this floor.

Of course, I helped. A little.

Izzy also shares some things with me about Min-Jae, stuff that worries her, and I get why after hearing them. Apparently, it's been a while since the others started keeping an eye on him and protecting him without him even realizing it.

It's kind of like what happened with Tess back in the Mana Desert. The others are giving Min-Jae space to choose what he wants, to make mistakes, and to indulge himself.

It's dangerous, of course. Spending this much time around someone we suspect might be a Candidate can't be safe. But stuff like that is par for the course in Hell difficulty.

Whatever happens, this floor is slowly heading toward its end. And a very explosive one, if the Candidate who keeps stealing my thermonuclear warhead has anything to say about it.

Chapter 628: Kenah

The loop resets, and just a few minutes later, it resets again.

Then this repeats ten times in a row before we finally manage to stay in a loop for longer than a few minutes. Even then, even after we finally separate, we still expect another reset.

Only after a full day passes does everyone start to believe it will actually continue.

It's around that time Sophie tells us one of the students she's been teaching is missing. A human boy. She says he was fairly average, but she had been observing him because she thought he might be paying too much attention to her.

During careful probing, she does, everyone acts like that human boy never existed.

Sophie remembers him clearly, his face, his seat in the classroom, the way he always seemed to be watching just a little bit too closely, as if he knew something. She doesn't know what exactly caught her attention, only that it was enough to make her keep an eye on him. But when she tries to speak to the others about it in a way that won't draw suspicion, no one else recalls a thing.

His classmates don't recognize the name. The staff says she must be mistaken. There are no records, no assignments bearing his name.

There are a few possibilities. One is that he was a "bug," basically the same kind of thing Ari thinks we are, though in that case, he wouldn't have shown interest in Sophie. The second option, which is more likely, is that he was a Candidate. Desperately hiding, doing his best to improve his abilities while searching for the other Candidates.

Now he's dead. Possibly having been killed by Ari, one of the Examiners, or another Candidate.

Then there's something that's been bothering me about that crazy thylarin girl. After thinking on it for the first day of this loop, I come to the conclusion Ari has been lying to me about certain things. I also think I know what she might be lying about.

So the plan changes. Tess and I are free to move around, while the rest of group 4 decides to stick together as much as possible, only doing the bare minimum to avoid getting kicked out of the Academy. Consequences be damned. The goal now is to lure out the Examiners or the Candidates.

In the end, Lily manages to get Tess's permission to move on her own as well. I'm honestly surprised by that decision. Sure, Lily is a near-unkillable terminator, but I also know how protective Tess can be.

As for me, I get a new skill.

Congratulations, you have successfully combined [Mana Domain], [Perception], and [Ley Line]!

A new skill has been created.

You have acquired [Foundation]

[Foundation - Lvl 0 > Foundation - Lvl 4]

So far, this seems to be the best one. Somehow, even compared to my very first combination. The low starting level confirms it - assuming that's how it works.

Now I create an orb and...

Oh, I haven't used [Mana Manipulation]

Anyway, suck it, system.

I'll have to get around to teaching Biscuit to say that at some point as well.

I spent the beginning of the loop north of the Academy, staying in a small village and moving from inn to inn, mapping the area as I go.

Now I find myself sitting in a cozy inn, sipping a nicely chilled drink and biting into small cubes of smoked and crispy cheese, fruit, meat, and who knows what else. This is already my second bowl, and I'll be sure to get another once I'm done with these.

A big part of my mind is occupied with the torture of visualizing impossible shapes and trying to imagine my mana flowing through them.

One day, I'll find the guy responsible for this training idea and maybe force him to do the same exercises as punishment.

The second part of my mind is focused on analyzing my new skill and growing more excited by the hour. It's not purely combat-oriented, but it has the potential to be very, very useful. Especially when it comes to making longer-lasting webs, arrays, mental constructs, and ultra-durable projectiles. More interestingly, it seems to affect other skills too. [Mana Crown], [Eclipse], [Knitting], [Empyrean Lance], these four in particular.

With [Mana Crown], for instance, I have a feeling it's more stable if I manifest it while the new skill is active. The difference is tiny, but the new skill is still low level, so I would expect bigger improvement later.

With [Eclipse], the connection is obvious. It's a domain skill, and [Foundation] strengthens the base, making the domain more... present? Powerful? It is hard to put it into words. Even now, I think [Eclipse] is one of my top two or three most powerful skills. The fact that [Foundation] can affect it says enough about the skill's potential.

I suspect more skills are being affected, too, but there's a lot of testing to be done before I can be sure of that.

So far, this is my favorite. Even though [Ur Line] feels extremely powerful in its own right.

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Lastly, the third part of my mind is carefully watching the strange duo sitting a few tables ahead of me. A selari man and a young human girl.

They sit alone, talking quietly while eating the same thing I'm eating. Actually, I asked the waitress to bring me whatever they were having. I have to say, Champions sure know how to enjoy life.

The ten-year-old prodigy of a girl sitting next to him seems calm. Far more than when I last met her. I know people say I have a punchable face and expression, but when she nearly attacked me on sight last time, it... it hurt a little. My face can't really be that bad, right?

A few times, when she glances around the room like a nervous animal, she notices me, but shows no reaction this time.

It would be silly to take it as her failure to recognize me and take that as proof that she isn't a Candidate, but considering everything, it seems more likely.

"Can I help you?" a quiet voice asks beside me.

I turn to my left. The Champion is sitting there. When I look forward again, I see him still at the table with the girl, continuing his conversation.

I glance back to my left, and he sits there.

I glance ahead, and he's still there.

"He might be a spy, Master," another voice says from my right. Turning, I see the ten-year-old girl.

I glance ahead, and she is there with the Champion.

I glance back to my right, and there she is, still sitting there.

She reaches into my bowl to take a cubical piece of airy and crispy cheese, but I react fast, grab it just before she can, and throw it into my mouth.

When I bite down, the airy cube crumbles with a satisfying crunch. The taste hits me again. Amazing.

At first, she doesn't react. Then her mana rises quickly, and I see anger flash in her eyes.

The next second, it vanishes. Like someone had hit pause on a song. All gone without a trace.

"Kenah..." the selari man says in a gentle tone.

At that, the girl doesn't say anything. She just looks down at her hands. More than anything, she doesn't seem angry at him, honestly, she seems ashamed.

I glance forward and see the table with the two of them still sitting there. The second selari man and the little maniac continue their quiet conversation, sharing their food all the while. It doesn't matter what I do, I still have no idea which ones are real. The ones next to me, or the ones sitting a few tables ahead.

"You're Champion Dion, right? I'm a big fan! Sorry if I couldn't take my eyes off you," I say, turning to my left and forcing a smile.

"He is lying..." the girl whispers.

"Kenah, my stubborn ray of morning sun, the only child I know who thinks a compliment is a tactical weakness, I know. Can you tell me how you noticed it?" the Champion asks her, ignoring me completely.

"After I noticed him watching me, I made a wide-range scan and found traces of his mana in the air at the edge of the village. I scanned further and figured out that he probably flew in, only arriving here a few hours ago. The touch of his mana was by the other inns too, but they were very faint, like he didn't stay in any of them for long. He probably only stayed in this one because he found us."

"Very good. Now, a question. Do you think he noticed your wide-range scan?"

Kenah hesitates, looking at me and then back at the Champion. "Probably yes?"

"I noticed," I confirm.

"See, Kenah, he noticed. What does that mean?"

"T-that my scans aren't as good as they could be?"

"That too, but the question is why would he stay here, knowing you'd noticed?"

"Maybe he gave up after we found out? It's impossible to escape from you, Master, even if he had an hour or two for a head start."

"Kenah, my dear, my poor heart hurts from such a downplay of my abilities! I know my skills aren't as sharp as they used to be during the war, but I should still be able to track him even with a whiff of his mana, anywhere on this planet, even weeks later."

"I'm sorry, Master." Kenah once again looks down at her hands and fumbles with her fingers.

"It's okay, dear Kenah. Now, what else have you noticed about this man?" he asks her.

The entire time, neither bothers to try to include me in the conversation.

"I..." Kenah hesitates and looks at me. In her eyes, there is a hint of desperation as they flick around.

Out of the Champion's view, I touch the cloth of my suit and shake it slightly, which catches Kenah's attention, and she glances at it.

Her eyes light up. "He is wearing the Assistant Professor uniform from the Academy! He must be from there!"

"Very good. But must he be?"

"He... maybe isn't?"

"Uniforms, clothes, suits, these can be stolen or imitated, even if the associated organizations make it difficult to replicate them. That kind of disinformation can be a very useful tool, Kenah. Imagine how easy it would be for someone to steal a uniform, commit terrible acts, and let the suspicion fall on an innocent organization, nation, or group."

"Ohhh, I see!"

"Yes. Anything else?"

In response, Kenah looks at me again. This time, she starts by looking at my face, her expression desperate, as if silently asking for help again. Likely without realizing, her mana flares up again, but as before, the Champion disperses it, probably without Kenah even noticing.

"Can I order more food?" I turn to my left and ask the Champion.

"Please."

I do as told, and when the server leaves, Kenah says excitedly, "He doesn't seem nervous at all!"

"Really?"

"Yes, Master! They usually bow and look nervous, and then they start saying all these things about how powerful and amazing you are. You remember that uncle from last time? He soiled himself when you got even a bit angry!"

"Kenah, my dear, my brave little ember, the sun of my days, my newest disciple, my precious little flower who spent her childhood fighting instead of being a child, the man's dignity should be preserved at least a little. Things like that should be forgotten and never mentioned out loud."

"But I didn't lie. You told me not to lie."

Another bowl with crispy cheese, pieces of bread, and a mix of fruits and nuts arrives. I take a few cheese cubes into my mouth before picking up a bowl and offering it to Kenah, who absentmindedly takes a few while looking at her master.

Meanwhile, the selari Champion sighs. "Kenah, not saying it out loud isn't lying. You must have noticed by now that my behavior tends to be very different when we're around other people, and even more so when I address groups of people or those who match my rank. You are the light that warms my old bones, but damn if you aren't socially inept. That's why I think the Academy will help you."

"Just being with you is enough for me." The little girl sighs, looking down at her hands in silence.

"I won't be here forever for you, Kenah, so you will have to find other people to stay with, okay? As for you, our dear little spy, you are terrible at your job. I'm thankful for your cooperation and for your patience."

He turns to me with a friendly smile and stands up with Kenah following him. Only for a moment does she glance back with the tiniest thankful nod.

After that, I'm left alone.

I know he is a Champion and that he's probably used to people spying on him. Hell, even Lissandra had Ruby with her, a woman who was sent as a spy only to become her disciple.

Still, it's frustrating and amusing at the same time how little he acknowledged me, without seeing me as a danger at all.

Chapter 629: Current

The loop resets just a few days later. It seems like it happened because Sophie got close to locating the Candidate by taking over dozens of students and creating some sort of quasi-hive mind, and going through their memories while she was at it.

Just the fact that she was able to do it here in the Academy, under the noses of a number of decently powerful Professors, is scary. I would have expected at least the Vice Director to notice, but even she didn't seem to have figured it out. The speed at which Sophie has progressed in making her abilities more difficult to detect is impressive, to say the least.

Sophie said she's been doing this kind of stuff over the last few loops and comparing the results. Just in the latest one, she noticed inconsistencies, likely caused by someone moving in the background, thinking the Examiners or Candidates wouldn't notice. So she decided to follow that track. And so the loop reset, likely because of that.

This loop starts with her doing the same, while the rest of our party moves around in groups. Even if it's risky, I don't expect anyone to make an attack on us, maybe with the exception of a surprise morning dart. The Candidates should see us as "bugs" and will likely choose to wait it out. Especially after seeing us move this way, they'd come to the conclusion we're likely working with one of the other Candidates.

With me removing the 10-year-old Kenah from the list, and the one who died not long ago, it's possible that there are only two Candidates remaining. I think the bit of information I got from Ari regarding the number of Candidates can be trusted, and I already have an image of what's actually happening after putting together most of what we have found out and my own suspicions.

It all feels like the floor is coming to an end within the next few loops.

So I start this loop by putting a mark on the thermonuclear warhead, even though I think I know who is responsible for stealing it, having analyzed even the tiniest remains of the mana I noticed when it got stolen in the last loop. I place similar marks on the rest of group 4.

These marks are some of my best work so far. Even though there are no Ley lines stretched between the members of our group, it works in a way somewhat reminiscent of my [Tether]. As much as I have been focusing on the lines, creating marks like these is still something I can do. And I've been working on these improvements for a while.

A new loop also means a new skill.

Losing [Ley Line] makes some things difficult, but I'm someone who tries to properly master the skills, so even though it's gone, there are still things I can do. Just like the marks I've created and placed on the warheads and group 4.

As for [Conduction], it is good. Crazy good. Goddamn good. Like holy fuck.

Still, I'm a gambler. I'm a little shit. If someone were to come to me, give me 10 million dollars, and ask me double or nothing, and the result relied on a coin flip, I'd likely flip that coin myself, and then complain for years that the result wasn't what I wanted it to be.

Probably.

Or maybe that's just when it comes to the system? I don't know anymore. I'm just sure that even though it's possible the next loop might be the last, I'll still try to cycle through all the combinations I've been thinking of.

Even after seeing [Conduction] in action.

I tested it in the Sweatbox, in the challenge known as Current.

This one is the second longest after the Run, which can take over thirty minutes. Current takes 10, and you're put into a room shaped like a sphere. That sphere gets filled with mana that bounces, changes frequencies, and increases in density to the point where the later stages build up enough mana radiation to wipe out most of Hell difficulty.

The objective of this Challenge is to stay in the room as long as possible. You get points for endurance and for how well you can channel the mana around you.

You can make it easier by grabbing that weird neutral mana, channeling it, swirling it around you, and fighting against all the currents clashing with each other. You can also add your own mana to the mix and make it even more difficult. In the later stages, even the slightest mistake can kill you.

There are safety measures, of course. But after reading through a long text written in that odd lawyer speak that causes brain damage on sight, you can sign it, and lower those safety measures to allow yourself to continue longer. A ten-minute challenge can turn into a much longer one then.

Once again inside that sphere, I move my mana around me. I synchronize it with the waves. I watch it swirl, bounce off the walls. I radiate it to defend myself from the mana surrounding me.

After some time, just using my own mana isn't enough. The idea behind the Challenge is to use the mana filling the sphere. It's made for that.

I continue even as the amount grows, and the whole experience begins to feel like I've been thrown into a huge whirlpool in the middle of the sea. The pressure continues to increase. Waves of raw mana crash against me, the air crackles, thick with ozone, and the constant hum of mana. Colors I cannot name flash at the periphery of my vision as the mana density climbs to absurd levels.

Even then, I stay calm. I spin it around me. My mind splits into as many parts as needed. Sometimes upwards of twenty times, just to help manage the smaller currents, sometimes just one powerful, focused will is all I need, a singular vortex of intent to counter a particularly massive surge. Most of the time, there's a powerful main mind with two supportive ones, interweaving and working together, one predicting the incoming waves, another smoothing the transitions as I absorb and redirect, all as the main one focuses on maintaining the overall integrity.

My body endures it all with practiced ease. All that experience with Mana Cycling transfers over as if this is what it was made for. The sheer radiation pressing in would probably kill me if I were to slip up, yet here I am, weaving it all around me.

The ten minute mark passes, then fifteen.

The sphere's output intensifies again. Now it's not just currents, it's like spears of solidified mana searching for any weakness. The drain on my mana is immense, but I continue to take and channel everything in my reach and force it under my control. Something like this just can't compare to the trouble black mana gives me every time I use it.

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

It's a very fine balancing act I'm doing, it's exhilarating and utterly terrifying. The slightest miscalculation, the smallest lapse in focus, and the raging mana I am currently dancing with will consume me instantly.

But for now, I hold and continue to channel it for as long as I'm able, pushing my body and mind to their limits.

I don't leave the room until one of the walls cracks and the Challenge shuts off while wildly flashing red lights fill the room, along with the sounds of an alarm, and the pressure of the Academy's defensive arrays increase in the area around me.

Outside of the room, I find dozens of people. Professors, students, and assistants.

There is a defensive array placed around the door I just exited through, and there are more further out, encompassing the entire sphere I took the Challenge in. All around the place, an intense mana radiation lingers.

Like some of them, I glance at the screen.

My score is still in Tier 4, though, given that this is my first challenge of the loop.

1st, 9783 pts - Loop Loop Loopity Loop

First place in Tier 5 sits at 5500 points.

Professor Elian is not offering lessons, unfortunately. The longer this goes on, the more I suspect the guy might be a fraud. Could contact lenses mimic someone with Mana Wavelength Iris? Is there a skill that could make a person seem stronger than they really are?

A few days later, my warhead gets stolen, and I track its location, which crops up exactly where I expected. After a quick check, I confirm that we have time and leave it be.

The Champion dies again after his talk, but this time, they find Kenah dead next to his body. It seems like the Candidate came up with a way to kill her, even if only to confirm that Kenah wasn't another Candidate.

This time, I stand over their bodies as one of the first. Over the loops, we have narrowed the area where the Champion often dies, and I act like I noticed a commotion before making my way over.

Both the Champion and Kenah are very pale, their eyes are burned out. For some reason, that sight hit me harder than I expected. I still remember Kenah and how much she reminded me of Vega. The way she lies there on her master's body almost makes it seem like she died after him, all the while trying to protect him.

Not even a speck of mana remains inside their bodies or the area around them. Even when I send out a bit of mana to probe the spot, my mana refuses to approach.

It is quite terrifying.

In the following days, I meet with the Head Crafter. Since I'm not sure when the loop will end, I visit him daily for updates on his design. It clearly annoys him, and lately he's been growing more suspicious, seeming to notice that parts of the design have begun to resemble his own style.

I also get a lesson from the good old Trait Specialist. He tells me about a number of ways to use my eyes to a higher degree. According to him, Wavelength Irises are one of the best ways to perceive different things. In my case, mana. Also, according to him, even specialized skills rarely match Wavelength Irises.

It's something I've suspected, but it's good to have confirmation.

In his usual rude manner, he gives me a few more recommendations and some useful information. He knows a lot about combat specialists who've gotten close to the rank of Champion or just a step below, and he has a good idea of what they did to gain the traits they received.

As with all the knowledge I'm taught, I just take what's useful to me. I'm doing things my own way, not following what someone else thinks is best.

Then I ask him if he was one of the people who killed Champion Dion and his disciple.

I ask out of curiosity, not because I actually care whether he did or not. Even though I thought Kenah was cute and, in some ways, innocent in that way kids tend to be, I also know she was native to the tutorial. I also know that Champion Dion, for all he might care about consequences and the lives of the people around him, wouldn't hesitate to kill me in a second if he wanted to.

The sense of danger from the old man in front of me rises to an incredible degree.

All three of his traits activate. He hasn't told me about them in this loop, but in the previous one, where I spent more time with him, he did.

Hollow Core, Mirrorskin, Still Blood.

An area devoid of mana forms around him, a very similar one to the one that hung around the Champion, just much weaker.

"I could kill you for the things you've said."

"Probably," I agree with him.

He turns to his left and looks toward the tower that stands far away, likely on the edge of the Academy grounds, around one or two miles away.

"I see that blonde loitering over there, and I can already feel that genius brat nearby, the one all the healers won't shut up about."

"How?"

His eyes slide back to me. "What do you mean, how?"

"How did you know about the blonde? I understand being able to strengthen your sight to see her, but how did you know she was watching you? She isn't even using any attack skills. And I've met others like you before, who seemed like they could sense others just from being looked at, so I'm curious."

"You little shit, are you serious?"

I nod.

He looks at me for what feels like a minute. Even though his eyes stay cold, his mouth under that mustache twists into a smile.

"Ah, so you are one of those." His traits deactivate one after another, and that terrifying field around him disappears. "And stop gathering so much mana. The main defensive array will notice it."

As if it's not worth dealing with, he leaves, and I don't try to stop him..

(So?) Sophie sends through our connection. She is also waiting nearby in one of the diners between a lot of students and is the only one the monstrous man hasn't noticed.

(I think he did it, but not alone. They probably put their old gang back together, so likely the Vice Director helped, along with others we don't know about yet.)

(Even then, I don't think they would be able to kill the Champion so cleanly.) Tess says, joining the conversation.

I try to look in her direction and strengthen my sight as much as possible to see her. Even then, she's barely a blurry figure, I only even find her because I know where to look.

Shaking my head at finding yet another area where I'm lacking, I answer, (It's almost certain one of the Candidates had a hand in it for some reason. I bet that, over 100 loops, you could come up with some method to either help these guys or manipulate them into doing it. It's also possible that they already had plans to start killing Champions back in the real world, and in so doing, start another war, either to

replace the Absolute or simply to get revenge. And hell, maybe that weapon the Absolute left behind really does exist, and it played a part?)

(I don't like that old Professor.) Lily says.

(Me neither,) Tess agrees with her. (At least we've more or less confirmed it. I know the end of this loop is probably getting close, but let's just be careful and leave the Academy for now.)

I give up trying to strengthen my sight. (School trip it is. So what do you prefer, an airship or a train?)

Chapter 630: Greetings

The 11th day comes, and we all decide to join the trip. Some of us, being students, just go, while the Assistant Professors either file their own request to join the excursion as well, or they simply quit their jobs and go regardless, while, of course, making plans to pay the fine later.

Tess and Maya, being guards, have a bit more difficulty, but they manage to come along, too.

As we head toward the station, Maya seems to relax, almost like a weight has been lifted from her shoulders.

"You wouldn't believe how good it felt to tell that little asshole to screw off," she says happily, adjusting a small bag on her back.

Most of us have a similar setup, just enough for a few days. We're dressed more casually now, too, finally getting a chance to wear something other than those annoying uniforms and suits.

"She's just a young girl, Maya. We all used to be like that," Tess notes. As usual, she has a different hairstyle, this time straight, with bangs covering her forehead and reaching her eyebrows.

"Some of us are still like that," Maya shrugs. "I broke her crystal ball. I swear that girl was addicted to it, given how much time she spent 'calling' people."

"We should modify it and turn it into a smartphone. It would ruin the younger generation and maybe earn us some better rewards," Dennis smirks.

"Maybe we could serve ads to it, too," Aaron nods seriously.

"So what, Maya? This is what high-end schools do to people. It's called entrepreneurship."

"I wouldn't blame it on the school."

"Aaron and I are perfect as we are."

"Sure," Maya sighs. "But I think I'll miss this floor. It was nice to have a proper bed and good food for once. Being able to train here, the Challenges, and even all the knowledge here. I'll miss it."

Lily slides closer to her side and smiles, "I thought I would get bored faster, but it was weirdly fun. I think I could've even become friends with some of the natives."

"Yes, I noticed you students really slipped into your roles," Maya ruffles Lily's hair a bit before turning to me. "I blame you, Nat, for not being able to stay here any longer."

"Understandable," I nod.

"If you want to stay here and keep looping for three more years, just say it," this time it's Sophie who answers.

And Maya sighs, "I don't. I've seen enough movies to know I'd go crazy. So, where is this airship even going?"

Tess looks at her with what seems like disappointment. "And I thought you at least would know. It flies around the region for three days for a bit of sightseeing. There's some kind of firework celebration in the south, a visit to the city near the Academy that students usually go to for shopping, then..."

“Okay, okay. Sometimes you’re way too responsible, Tess. Where’s your sense of adventure? Not knowing where we’ll go or what surprises await?”

I listen to the conversation with amusement, knowing all too well just how much Tess hates surprises. And as expected, poor Maya then has to endure Tess calling her lazy, irresponsible, childish, and other things besides.

Meanwhile, Izzy and Sophie walk around visiting small shops along the way. The boys, having formed their own group, are probably doing some unethical and likely evil things.

I just tag along, holding the sleeping puppy form of Biscuit in my arms, while Lily, who snuck up beside me, starts telling me about some interesting things she learned in the Academy.

And in this fashion, we finally reach the airship.

The station is a tower-like platform. It’s quite massive overall. The construction is made of stone, metal, and other durable materials. It holds all these shops and hundreds of people. The tower station has multiple terrace-like platforms, and hovering next to each is a flying ship, securely docked.

These ships are massive. Maybe not Earth-style-cruise-ship massive, but big enough to hold a few hundred people. They’re all made of smooth white wood and shaped mostly like ships. They’re wide, with no masts. The bottom of the ship has protruding crystals and some inscriptions that have been expertly concealed, they’re probably patented or something, if I had to guess.

The windows looking out from the hull of the ship are huge, mostly circular, and from what I can see, the rooms inside look especially cozy.

After giving our identification, we board one of the ships, and everyone heads to their rooms to wait for the airship to launch.

The ship starts flying without any noticeable shaking. Though I’m sure I could if I used my kinetic senses, but without them, there’s nothing. It just smoothly lifts up.

It's so slow. Not to be rude, the airship is probably fast for someone around level 100 or by comparison to normal people. But more than anything, it feels like a holiday vessel. A luxurious weekend hotel. Even my room, which I'm sure isn't one of the more expensive suites, is amazing, nearly as good as what I had at the Academy. Complete with a bedroom, a small living room, and a bathroom, it's not missing anything.

For a moment, I look around, and a giggle escapes my mouth. My room here is bigger than the entirety of our old flat on Earth, the four members of the Gwyn family once shared. Just the bed here alone might be worth more than that entire place.

I open the Community, and after reading through a few messages, I head to the place where the excited Maya told all of us to meet. When I knock, the doors open, and I step inside to find everyone already waiting.

The living room I enter is bigger than my entire suite. On one side, there's not just one but two windows, circular and huge, with wide window sills that have been designed as a sitting area. I immediately go over and sit down, surprised by the comfort of the cushioning. The window beside me offers a view of the beautiful countryside below us and the clear sky above. Biscuit, still in my arms, gives a sleepy woof, and I boop his nose until he settles again, then I continue holding him.

Then I learn, as I suspected, that this suite belongs to Lily.

Stolen from its rightful place, this narrative is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

Maybe I should try to become a healer as well.

In the hallway just outside the room, someone left a tray of untouched pastries with a note that said "for suite 8." None of us is in suite 8, and we don't know who is, but after about three seconds of discussion, the tray ends up in Lily's suite anyway.

"They shouldn't have left it outside," Sophie says, already eating one.

"It was probably intentional," Dennis counters.

“If it was a trap, you’re already dead,” I add.

They eat all of them.

For a while, the conversation drifts to random topics—half about the floor, half about nothing at all. I let the chatter wash over me until movement in the corner of my eye pulls me back in.

Lily is wearing a yellow-golden dress that fits her almost perfectly, and as she twirls, it moves as if it is light enough to float in the air. Even so, I notice special stitching placed in just the right spots to prevent it from moving in ways that would be too revealing, like if the skirt were to rise up too high.

The way the dress responds to Lily’s movements looks ethereal, as if it belonged to something not of this world. It flows, it glows, it dances, and it breathes with her. Watching her, it feels as though I’m witnessing something divine.

Lily explains how the dress came to be, and the girls around her look ready to pounce if it means getting their hands on it.

She tells us about how two people led a team of thirty who spent two years collecting the silk for it from some very rare spiders. Then they did the refining, the delicate work, and figured out how to process it and everything else. Thirty people spent two full years creating it, crafting it from one of the rarest materials there is.

Of course, with certain skills, the process could have gone much faster, but the time and effort invested are what make it pretentious and oh so valuable.

Someone apparently gifted it to her as part of an invitation to join their clan.

Maybe I really should become a healer.

Sitting on the plush windowsill, I keep looking up while ignoring the conversation that slowly develops into a party, as the entire gang stays here, ignoring the rest of what the airship has to offer. I watch the

countryside below us shift and day turns into night, while the lights of the cities disappear, replaced by the shine of stars overhead, giving way to the nature below as the airship begins to slow.

The conversation fades away to a distant hum in the background as I make no attempts to listen to the words being said.

My thoughts drift, and I start to doze. Right before I'm fully asleep, Biscuit exploits the opportunity to boop my nose a few times with his front right paw.

The loop resets just a few hours later.

Two days after that, the Champion dies, and the warhead disappears during one of my walks around the Academy, as I mark the things I want to take with me to the 9th floor.

I walk around for a bit longer before sending the signal, and everyone moves.

POV Dennis Dalton

I open the small box, and Lily's [Disintegration] orb dissolves as I blow onto it, causing it to eat through the excessively reinforced doors, which I honestly don't think even Sophie would be able to open quickly enough to matter.

With that done, I channel mana through my body to strengthen it, then kick the door open before my brother, Sophie, and I rush inside.

Vance is in there, in the middle of the small room filled with inscriptions covering the floor, walls, and the thermonuclear warhead he stole a few hours ago, which he is currently drawing on and etching into. All of it has the look of something he must have done in just two days.

He tries to move, but his body freezes mid-motion as Sophie steps forward, holding him with her skill. Only his mouth is allowed to move.

"What is a mind mage doing in the Academy?" he asks.

His usual friendliness and easygoing nature are gone. He looks colder than ever before.

"Honestly, we should be asking why you want to blow up the Academy," I say. Even now, I keep my guard up while Aaron circles around.

"Dennis, shouldn't that be pretty obvious?"

"Is the bomb modified to target only guys, so all the girls stay for you?" I ask.

This time, he smiles, "As stupid as it sounds, it's amusing how much it makes people not want to deal with you while causing them to overlook the items I've made to spy on the other Candidates. Listen, Dennis, don't you want to help me? I promise to find you and Aaron outside and repay you. I even think the three of us could be friends."

"I really think we could be," I agree with him, "but I'm sorry."

He goes quiet for a while and bites his lip. I can see thoughts flash through his head as he searches for a way out. There isn't one, not faced with Sophie, who's already begun to erase some of the inscriptions.

"So what was the plan? Blow up the Academy and hope all the Examiners and Candidates die along with it?" she asks.

As if, an insulted Vance snorts. "The Academy? Please. That was never my only target. Shame I couldn't get these idiots to kill the Champion first, but I had to take my chances."

Blood covers his teeth, seeping from his bitten lip. He feels so distant now, so much unlike that image he built up, one that fooled even me, no matter how closely I looked.

"I anchored the core detonation to a containment lattice of delay inscriptions and reverse-indexed circuits, synced with a pulse-lock to the Academy's own warding infrastructure. The device wouldn't blow, but it would absorb."

I squint. "Absorb what?"

Vance's lips twist into something between a smirk and a grimace, "Mana siphoning. Radiation folds in on itself, feeds the array cage. Everything inside stays locked in until I cause a spark, and then..."

His words cut off as a short sword pierces through his back, stabbing through his heart and coming out through his chest. Even then, his body doesn't move. I and Sophie stare in shock at Aaron, who now stands behind him.

Vance coughs up blood, "I always knew you were the more fucked-up twin."

Mana glows in his mouth, and only now do I realize what he's been doing. There are inscriptions carved into the inside of his mouth, something he was working on during the conversation, masking the blood by biting his lip.

Before whatever he was doing fully activates, Aaron pulls back the sword and swings it. Vance's head flies through the air, and the light of mana inside his mouth dies along with the light in his eyes.

Out of nowhere, with a curse mumbled under her breath, Sophie moves quickly and starts layering her web around the warhead.

Only now do I notice a change as the walls begin to light up. Like living beings, more inscriptions crawl across the surface, covering the warhead and the floor. Some of the inscriptions even crawl from the open mouth of Vance's severed head, all formed from blood.

"Stop staring and help me before this thing blows up!" Sophie's shout snaps me back to reality, and I quickly join in her efforts, hoping it's not too late.

POV Nathaniel

I locate Ari in one of the gardens, and no longer caring about the rules all that much, I boost myself with kinetic energy to fly for a short while before landing near her and slowing to a walk.

At first, I think she might ignore me, but then she stops and faces me. Even now, she continues to act and keep up with her schedule.

“Greetings, Assistant Professor Gwyn,” she says.

“Greetings, Examiner Ari.”