

Tutorial 741

Chapter 741 - Into the final stretch

POV Weslin

For the remaining hours, I keep watching the event and come to the realization of what the Ruler of Humility likely wanted to show us. Most of the assholes on the screen are out of their depth. They're slow, they don't handle pain well, and they're not used to their bodies being so weak. Though as time goes on, everyone keeps improving as they adapt. After all, all of them do come from Hell difficulty and Beyond, so it would be lame if they did not adjust.

Everyone starts to use mana more effectively, and their bodies move with more force as they find ways to pull greater strength from it. Some even gather enough mana to use more damaging imitations of skills despite lacking their normal variants. There are fireballs, a few manage to float for a moment, some form barriers, and others crackle with lightning. Always in small amounts, since mana's become an increasingly valuable resource.

People loot the houses, finding rusty common grade weapons at best, many of them damaged or broken.

I watch a strong A rank I recognize lose to someone who usually tends to be far weaker, simply because that person adapted more quickly. But I rarely see anyone give up. Everyone there is a crazy motherfucker, and I feel the mood on the balcony shift the longer it continues.

People wish they were still inside so they could see how far they might push these weak bodies and how much more of their skill they could bring out.

And I see fear settling in.

There are people everyone realizes are monsters. Capable of ridiculous feats even with such low resources. And out of all of it, it grates on me as well, that I'm not there to compete with them, because I know I could. But even this might be part of the lesson. I was not humble enough and died by underestimating the woman with that metal shard, all too excited to clash with Morwag as if we were equals.

Meanwhile, Nathaniel shows himself to be one of those monsters. Everyone who watches him knows he has not used mana at all, except for extremely short bursts to dodge lethal attacks. Otherwise, he keeps gathering that tiny amount of mana from his five stat points into the faint halo above his head. He moves like a machine, showing no hesitation in running away when needed and often finds himself luring people into traps in the process.

And when it comes to it, he faces multiple opponents at once. He fights dirty, he fights smart, and if needed, he offers up his body to take a wound in exchange for getting a hit in.

And despite all of that, he keeps moving. Bloodied, exhausted, wounded, but still fighting. He kills multiple S rank candidates who are rumored to be on track to reach proper S rank in a few years.

He even kills both Brich and Kaari. Brich falls for one of his traps and gets buried under a building that was already falling apart. Kaari dies after throwing broken spears at him until she runs out, and once he reaches her, he faces her in a brutal clash where he nearly lets her kill him just to deliver his finishing blow. All while wearing an expression that chills even me.

Watching that, Morwag, whose heart I can almost feel pounding with hunger for a fight, stands up and leaves. He cannot keep watching without participating, and I worry these two will clash one day in a way that ends with only one of them walking away.

Then there's that young assassin. Out of everyone here, she's the deadliest. Not a single person slows her down. She seems to have sharp, almost animal instincts and moves through traps, hides, tracks people, and when needed, fights several opponents at once, slipping away without a single wound. Her talent for this style of combat is clear, and I doubt there is anyone who can watch her without feeling at least a trace of fear. I hear people compare her to Lyraen, who's feared in a similar sort of way.

Then there is that black haired, green eyed man who joined Crimson Forge not long ago. Nothing about him can be called eye-catching, except for the fact that he's just good at everything, and his use of his body reaches a level where his speed almost matches the assassin's. He seems to be able to exert what seems like the near maximum possible amount of strength from his stats, thanks to his ability to improve faster than most of the people inside.

He faces one of the S ranks, the mana oriented Quintan, and wins even though Quintan burns through all his mana trying to take him down.

And there are a few more as well. A man who floats atop buildings and moves from rooftop to rooftop while throwing things down at people. Another who relies on fire based attacks. Another who uses a movement technique to spike his speed. Another who oscillates mana along his body.

While watching them, I keep looking for Nathaniel's sister, but there is no sign of her participating in this event.

The area starts to shrink after a notification, and we can see just like the people inside, and the clashes turn even deadlier.

I shift my attention to Nathaniel again, just as he staggers back with a dagger jammed in his side, but his opponent screams, both eyes poked out with Nathaniel's fingers, which drip with blood. He didn't even use mana here.

Nathaniel leaves the dagger in his wound, takes a stone from his pocket, and throws it to the side of his opponent. The man turns toward the sound, and as he shifts his weight, Nathaniel steps in, grabs him from behind, and strangles him until the man disappears.

Nathaniel then stands and moves through the street onto a square where all the remaining people are beginning to converge. Numbering twenty in total.

A group of seven who have been moving together for the past hour are closest to Nathaniel and rush to attack him and get rid of him quickly before facing the others. Several of them even raise their mana a little, though they've clearly been saving it and have been doing so for a while.

Nathaniel looks at them with the same calm, unbothered expression.

Then the halo that has hovered above his head for nearly five hours begins to spin in a sharp, frantic blur, and a moment later it collapses with a heavy thump into a single orb. A tiny one, barely the size of half a fingernail.

Blood gushes from Nathaniel's eyes, ears, mouth, and nose all at once, drawing quick chuckles from the people almost close enough to reach him, but even then, they keep their guard up.

Nathaniel drags his hand across his face, only smearing the blood further, then combs his hair back from his forehead to reveal his eyes, eerie and endlessly confident. The orb over his head pulses and turns pitch black, then, in the same blink, expands into a black halo. This one much thinner than before, like a string of black mana, barely thicker than several strands of hair woven together.

The mana surrounding the people around him flickers, then fades. They slow down and come to a stop. I can almost see it, the mana they had gathered slipping out of their bodies while Nathaniel reaches toward the halo, pulling thin streams of mana from it.

A dozen or so mana projectiles shoot from him, obliterating the entire group in an instant.

Nathaniel's body sways, yet he still steps forward as more projectiles rise up around him.

The black haired, green eyed man faces him as orange light flickers across the metal rod he's been holding, forming the shape of a sword. They clash several times, but Nathaniel uses all that stolen mana for body strengthening and comes out on top by simply overwhelming him and stealing his mana.

It's not pretty, but it doesn't need to be. It's just an overwhelming force, used without care or efficiency. But nonetheless earned only thanks to a remarkable talent in the hands of someone who understands how to wield it.

In the end, only the assassin woman remains, and the two of them face each other in the middle of the broken fountain, water up to their ankles.

The black string of mana dissolves, and all that mana floods into Nathaniel's body, while the girl becomes even faster. I am almost stunned as I realize she hasn't been using mana to boost her speed until now. As I watch her, it becomes clear she's not really skilled at shaping mana, and that everything so far came from pure physical talent. Yet over the past five hours, she's adapted, trained, grown, and now she's drawing on her mana to push her speed even further.

With each passing second, their speed climbs higher, and their movements start to blur. Every moment lets them learn, improve, adjust, and grow.

Nathaniel staggers back with a slash across his neck, and the woman's finger flies into the air, cut clean by oscillating mana spread across the broken dagger in his hands.

They rush in together and collide, the shallow water beneath their feet splashing with every step. It churns aggressively under Nathaniel with his bursts of speed, and more calmly under the smooth movements of the young woman.

The fight continues until Nathaniel falls back one final time with a shard of metal lodged in his neck and blood pouring out. I expect any expression other than the one he shows, yet he looks happy and satisfied, almost as if he predicted this ending and feels proud of what he's achieved. There's not a hint of disappointment or shaken confidence, and his pride shines even brighter than before.

Smiling at her, he says something, more blood spilling from his neck.

The woman facing him nods, and a bit of mana gathers on the tip of her finger as she draws a symbol in the air before her.

(*^_^*)

Then Nathaniel disappears, and the event ends.

POV Nathaniel

My most valuable reward from the event is the simple fact that it only took me five hours and a little mana to create black mana. More than anything, it proves that even though some of the people around me are absolute monsters, though I'm not doing so badly either.

These few short hours revealed my mastery over mana even without system given skills, it's all the result of my understanding and control. All these days, weeks, and months of constant Mana Cycling and my determination to avoid upgrading or relying on my skills have paid off.

I value this more than any other reward.

But there are other rewards as well. For example, almost immediately after popping out of the event, a few of my skills level up.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 74 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 75]

[Manifestation - lvl 21 > Manifestation - lvl 22]

[Accumulation - lvl 44 > Accumulation - lvl 45]

With this, two out of three requirements to successfully complete the quest for the title of Absolute Candidate given by the system are out of the way. Even sooner than I expected. The last one remains, to hold out for ten seconds against a Champion grade being.

My other reward for the event is one of the ten named residences here in Megacity, meaning Tacita likely got a low pristine item. But from what I have seen, I am sure she gained something else that she likely values more than that item.

Tacita has always relied on the Dexterity of her body and her wild instincts to move. But now, left with no choice, she had to rely on her mana just a little. Over these five hours, she instinctively grasped a way to use it to increase her speed even though she'd never done it before, likely only having used mana for her field or her weapons.

I don't think she'll ever invest stats into Mana. She feels like a single stat enjoyer, same as me and Jean. But I think she'll find herself looking deeper into the stats she already has and search for ways to increase her speed even further. It is a terrifying thought.

Even now, I still consider her the most dangerous opponent one could face as a humanoid who's not currently building sized. That is why I knew the event was fucked, and clearly rigged the moment I saw Dexterity listed as the highest stat.

No matter what anyone says, the thought of fleeing from her always lingers in my mind, while it never rises when I think of Lyraen, Morwag, or Weslin. Even Nyssa might have been preferable if it ever came to that.

Maybe it is a sign of my humility, perhaps that's what the Ruler wanted to show me and everyone else. A reminder of how we used to be and how some people rely too much on the system for the shaping of their skills.

However, I have no problem running away like a little bitch when I need to, and returning only when it suits me. I'm just twisted like that.

But now, with the Humility event out of the way, it is time to go into the final stretch. The 3rd tournament is almost here.

Chapter 742 - Hello

The rest of my time before the tournament, I spend in Beyond, only returning to the ninth floor to go over some things with Lily or to observe the projects Maya and Sophie have been working on with thought acceleration. I take a lot of notes from that, adding everything to my own preparations.

Biscuit moves with me in and out of Beyond as he wishes, and during these weeks, he becomes infamous in the Headquarters of the Primordial Knights. I often sense his primordial energy as he "plays" with yet another one of the countless demons who've been throwing themselves at him.

While I notice different, challenging looks from demons turning my way after the Humility event, the looks they give Biscuit are adoring, almost loving. I'm sure these lunatics would die for him if needed. Or try to steal him, but they can make the attempt over my dead, cold manaless body.

As expected from the future overlord, Biscuit is taming these lunatics so easily.

There was an incident when he and I visited the third floor of Beyond, and Doc tried to grab him and sprint into the lab while screaming excitedly, but we don't talk about that.

After that, I slip into a steady schedule. Training, preparation, experimentation, item crafting, visits from Ruby every now and then, Biscuit time, dueling demons, examining items I acquired from the Ancient Armory, and the low pristine armor from the guild master of the Eternal Clowns.

It all feels comfortably busy, even though at times it feels like it's a bit too much.

I also sell the named residence I got from the event and manage to get ten million shards. Seven million I get right away, two million coming in a year, and the last million a bit later. All the transfer fees are handled by the buyer, whoever they are. I could probably have gotten better value if I tried, but I chose shards instead of materials or items.

Combined with the many items I sold through the auction, the ones I crafted and sold, even after managing to create a few low arcane items and one mid arcane with help, I've gathered a lot of shards.

I mean, it's really a lot.

Just a few days before the tournament, I spend twenty two million of them and buy a low pristine passive.

These passives are a bit different from previous grades, and there are fewer of them. While I can see thousands of arcane passives, there are only a few dozen pristine ones available. According to the information I purchased, the pristine passive offerings are tailored more specifically to me, and the system provides them based on my performance.

Ruby congratulates me, saying I am one of the few attendees to receive a pristine passive and also one of the youngest, since I achieved it so much earlier than most. Getting such a powerful passive should influence my body upgrade as well.

With that all, my shards now sit at a mere four hundred fifty thousand, but I don't feel bad about it at all.

The last few days feel longer than before. Where before a week felt like it passed in a blink, it now feels like a single day has stretched into a week. Yet even with that, I have a feeling that I won't find enough time to do everything I want. So I make the only smart decision.

I take a break for one entire day during which I push everything into the background.

I do not train, I do not experiment, and I even force my curious mind to shut the hell up so it doesn't drag me into some new construct idea sparked by seeing a random attendee walk past with an

interesting mana signature. For the morning of my rest day, I become the laziest creature to ever exist, or at least close to it.

Waking up at what feels like three in the morning, I go right back to sleep to get my eight hours, even though lately I only need two to four hours to function at my best. Biscuit, who syncs to my sleeping schedule, takes advantage of it and climbs into my bed, now the size of a labrador, and we fall into dreamless sleep again.

When the morning finally comes, I spend two more hours in bed, just lazing around, covered under the blanket, closing my eyes until I drift into that comfortable state where I feel like I might fall asleep again, even though I know I won't.

After that comes breakfast, made from the food I bought the day before. In my gecko pajamas, Biscuit and I leave my room in the guild headquarters and move to the small kitchen nearby, which, even at this time of day, is completely empty.

Here, Biscuit gets his ancient deer jerky with a side of sparkling water. He barks at that water a few times as it "bites" him. Meanwhile, I make a simple omelet from whatever egg this happens to be, it's as big as two of my fists, but it tastes just like a chicken egg. I add a fresh pastry, and for dessert, I eat one of my last Earth chocolates while Biscuit gets one of the expensive dog treats he enjoys.

I don't even wash the dishes, I just leave them in the sink.

Then I return to my room and sit on the balcony, enjoying the light on my skin with Biscuit in his puppy form resting on my lap. It is one of the most beautiful days I've ever had on the fourth floor. A light breeze presses against me, the air carries a touch of chill, yet the light keeps everything comfortably warm.

Later, during that day, I visit Weslin, where we talk about random stuff. I meet Ruby and Kindness in the city, where they make me buy them a sweet drink from a street vendor. I can't help myself and try to ask about the third tournament, but everything gets censored again.

I spend a few hours with Tess, Lily, Leticia, Luna, Jean, and Spacepup, who've finally reached the fourth floor as well. It is the first time Luna meets Biscuit, who is in puppy form, and she keeps moving around

him, speaking in that creepy way where her maw hangs open, and a human woman's voice comes out without actually moving her mouth.

The golden retriever doesn't seem to know what to think of the corgi, switching between playful excitement and raising the fur on her neck in fear. Biscuit, in sync with my laziness, ignores it all and just dozes on my lap, burping once in a while with how much deer jerky he ate today.

Jean especially catches my curiosity when I notice the ambient mana reacting in a strange way as it comes into contact with his body. Usually, I would try to estimate his strength since, in my eyes, he is more interesting than many others because he's a single stat enjoyer, but not today. Still, it is easy to see that he's gotten much stronger since last time, and his Physique and all the mana around him seem... I force myself to stop.

No one talks about anything tutorial oriented, and instead, we keep the topics casual. Favorite movies and shows, funny situations from Earth, past money problems, countries they visited, what they saw there, and the foods they tasted. They argue about whether Hawaiian pizza should be allowed to exist and which brand of candy is the best.

Sometimes I join the conversation, but most of the time I sit and listen with my hand running down Biscuit's back.

When I feel like I've had enough socialisation, I stand up and say goodbye to all of them, thanking Jean for letting the day pass without a challenge, something that seems to surprise him, but causes him to smile and energetically tap my back with his huge hand. I don't mention that it cracked a few bones.

Back in my room, I pull out the tablet I got from Izzy, connect the external hard drive to it, and play the pirated version of The Lord of the Rings. All three movies, and obviously the extended editions. Biscuit watches with me, his eyes following the screen with curiosity, and once in a while, he reacts to what's happening on screen. He barks in anger, stares in awe, or makes sad noises.

The day ends, and as the next one begins, I open my status.

Name:Nathaniel Gwyn

Title:Champion Candidate

Difficulty:Hell

Rank:A, Shimmering Silver

Guild: Primordial Knights

Floor: 9 - The Pit

Time left until forced return: 2y 1d 1h 19m 36s

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

Lvl 349

Strength: 315

Dexterity: 293

Constitution: 476

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1753 + 1753

Primary Class:Mana Weaver (Unique Arcane)

Sub-class:[Adept of Pride]

Active skills (9/10):

Focus - Lvl 74

Perception - Lvl 70

Redistribution - Lvl 71

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 75

Ley Line - Lvl 69

Eclipse (Pride) - Lvl 59

Empyrean Lance - Lvl 35

Manifestation - Lvl 25

Accumulation - Lvl 49

Constructs:

Reinforcement

Mana Regulator

Mana Sovereignty Mantle

Kinetic Mana Heart

Sealed Ignition Heart (Partially Sealed, 2/3)

Mental Frame

Thought Maze Circuit

Thermal Flux Regulator

Passive skills (5/5):

Mana Kinetic Conversion Reservoir (Unique Epic)

Mana Wavelength Tyrant (Mid Arcane)

Subdermal Combustion Weave (Mid Arcane)

Mana Wave Predation (Unique Arcane)

Cognitive Hyperprocessing Vector (Low Pristine)

Tokens:

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

Passive skill combination token (low arcane)

Beyond visitor token - 1 year (unlocked after tutorial)

Beyond 14 day stay token

Beyond 7 day stay token

Beyond 30 day stay token

Shards:449,606

As I check my status, I go through the other windows I have access to. In between them, I check all four Beyond rankings, with one of them especially grabbing my attention. The one that only resets once a thousand years, and will reset soon, in probably twenty to thirty years.

Exploration Leaders

1. Christoph (6th Floor)

2. Adrian (6th Floor)

3. Voss (5th Floor)

4. Nyssa Volare (5th Floor)

5. Orion (5th Floor)

6. Zenith (5th Floor)

Closing the window, I move toward the Quiet Circle, whose location I've finally been told, and sacrifice fifteen stats in Constitution to enter the fifth floor of Beyond.

I do not stay there, not even for a few seconds, and I head back to the fourth floor of Beyond in Megacity.

Then I return to the Quiet Circle, where I sacrifice another fifteen points in Constitution to step onto the fifth floor, only to leave again.

Instead of sticking to my earlier plan, I push myself much further and keep going back and forth.

In total, I do it 25 times, which lowers my Constitution from 476 to 101, and I gain 100,000 shards from the quest each time I repeat it.

The difference is noticeable right away, but it's something I expected. The subminds I created for this task activate, taking care of the wildly roaring mana and my body as it weakens even further.

I use a few active skills and observe the process to see if anything feels different, but it's not as simple as that. It will take time for my body to adapt to my active skills again, even though my body is much weaker now and my skills feel more powerful in comparison.

Just a few hours before the tournament starts, I exit Megacity once again and teleport to a cave where I left a mark after buying information on the enormous number of powerful monsters located there. It is around twenty miles from Megacity, but I am more than capable of long range teleportation when I need to be.

Once there, I pull all the mana accumulated in the crown I've manifested over my head, something I have been gathering for over a month, and I watch the time tick down.

Just a few minutes before the moment arrives, I start moving all that mana and create a cube in front of me. I chose that shape because of my recent experimentation. In the shape of an orb, mana can gather and remain stable, but a cube makes it bounce wildly against the inner walls. It becomes more unstable, much harder to control, and the final explosion grows stronger. I suspect that a pyramid would increase the effect further since evil pyramids were always the most difficult shape for training, but I'll leave that for future testing.

It's time to level up. I've been holding myself back for way too long.

The air around me starts shaking as I channel all that mana and continue to hold it in that shape. The cube is pale blue and transparent, and the mana inside keeps bouncing, spinning, and moving unpredictably. Through the sheer amount of interference it compresses, becoming tricolored, and I push further until small sparks of gold and white appear in the core, glowing more brightly than everything else.

Mana radiation in the area rises, something I can see with my eyes and feel as a sting on my skin. A low shimmer rolls outward as mana bleeds into the air, warping the light and leaving the ground cracked where the pressure hits hardest. The closest trees sag as if under a sudden weight, and the air thins, pushing steady, audible tremors rolling through the area.

This cube is the most powerful attack I've made so far without any doubt. And I just chuck it down into a deep, long, dark shaft where it lights up the walls as it falls. Then I teleport back to Megacity and watch from a distance.

I know the shaft is very deep and the monsters occupy caves across a wide area, so I don't expect to see anything from here. Still, I know what an explosion going off that deep looks like, and I want to be sure.

I count thirty seconds, and then the notifications start appearing.

From twenty miles away, I see a thin tricolored line stab into the sky over the canyon's ridge, so straight it looks as if it could have been drawn with a ruler. The blue outer glow stretches higher than the nearby clouds, while the gold and white core flickers like a pulse running through a vein.

[You have defeated Deepcore Mauler - lvl 399]

[You have defeated Ironshell Behemoth- lvl 386]

[You have defeated Deepcore Mauler - lvl 403]

[You have defeated Basalt Tyrant - lvl 402]

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[Lvl 349 > Lvl 350]

[You have defeated Deepcore Mauler - lvl 396]

[You have defeated Ironshell Behemoth - lvl 401]

[You have defeated Deepnight Harrower - lvl 406]

[You have defeated Deepnight Harrower - lvl 399]

...

[Lvl 351 > Lvl 352]

[You have defeated Basalt Tyrant - lvl 389]

[You have defeated Netherbite Colossus - lvl 415]

...

Notifications keep popping up for a while, rapidly one after another, until after a few minutes, they slow down to one every few seconds, then to even longer pauses later on. Finally, they stop with the last one.

[Lvl 366 > Lvl 367]

And a new one appears.

Level 350 status reached. Your body is entering a superior phase of structural refinement.

A necessary body upgrade is pending.

Your body will undergo an upgrade that enhances the density and resilience of its living material. Heat, cold, force, and absence of atmosphere fail to disrupt the cohesion of your body, granting you a body that endures extreme environmental conditions or overwhelming skill release.

This upgrade will also greatly strengthen your natural barrier.

Note: Following the upgrade, your physical structure will become much more dependable regardless of the extremes of your environment.

Individual enhancement: Your Mana Physique becomes more deeply integrated into your body and is affected by the body upgrade, also allowing for further trait strengthening.

Well done!

Just a few seconds remain until the tournament, and I already feel the changes gradually applying to my body, messing with my constructs, unwinding them, and sending them haywire, further influenced by my much lower Constitution and the pressure of mana flowing through my body.

Almost without realizing it, I find myself inside my mental space. Once more in that never ending white room where I can't tell where the floor ends and the walls begin.

There, only one thing exists. A black drape hanging on a wooden pole that does not seem connected to anything. Something I remember as part of the room I grew up in with Victoria.

I hear a giggle and notice small feet poking out from under it as the person behind the drape tries to hide. For some reason, that person, a child judging by the size of the feet, is missing one sock.

"Can you see me?" a young voice asks.

"A bit," I answer.

"You truly must be a genius to have such great powers of perception." The drape shifts, and a young boy walks out. He has black hair, and one eye is brown while the other is gray. Around his shoulders is an old, bleached out red blanket as he smiles at me. "The time has come."

"Yes?"

"Yes. You don't remember, but you were here before and asked me to hide the information that I will give you now. Then it is up to you to decide if you want me to keep hiding it or if you want to keep that knowledge for now."

I stare at him, fragments of old thoughts surfacing. Oh... Sneakythaniel.

He tells me the information, and I fall into deep thought.

Then I make my decision and appear back outside, only to be greeted a few seconds later with another notification.

Congratulations on your 3rd year in the tutorial! The tournament preparations have been concluded.

Throughout the duration of the tournament of Earth's tutorial, all Floor quests will be put on hold. The tournament will have a five day duration, and you can decide to participate or not.

More information will be given after entering the tournament floor.

Would you like to participate in the 3rd tournament of the Earth's tutorial?

Yes/No

I accept, and appear inside, and the moment I do, I know I am truly fucked.

The healing aura and impossibility to die that existed here during previous tournaments is gone, and the pending body upgrade continues shifting my body, completely ignoring my careful planning that relied heavily on the tournament's healing aura.

And that one sentence from the block of the notification I read confirms it further.

It is now impossible to die during the events. You will be healed and moved to the common area the moment your life is considered to be at risk.

Important note: It is now possible to die outside of the events.

A powerful force presses against my body, breaking it further, and I start activating Lily's healing marks one after another, currently not even having the mental capacity to use thermal energy with all the chaos I'm handling. My mana, my thermal energy, and kinetic energy spread outward, causing people nearby to shout and rush away from the pressure.

My minds keep splitting and combining as needed while I take over and start modifying my preparations, which now feel so useless, and only a bit over half of them remain usable.

It takes only a few seconds, and all the generated mana and thermal energy become more and more unstable. The pathways and the cycling I've been using become much more difficult as new problems appear constantly and break just as quickly as I fix them.

I clear my mind and let a small part of it observe the area.

All of Earth's participants have been placed on a single floating island, and opposite us floats another. The rest of the world is a pitch black void, with no ground below or around us. Just two floating islands in the darkness beneath what feels like a distant starry sky and a small sun above.

The other floating island must belong to the planet we're about to face in this tournament, and they decided to test our reactions, because multiple attacks rise from their island and head our way.

POV Lily Chen

The area we find ourselves in explodes in a burst of mana, and a transparent red half figure rises into the air, tall as a building. It raises one of its arms high, and a large staff appears in its grip. It waves it swiftly, drawing inscriptions into the air, and a huge barrier forms to block the bombardment of attacks coming from the other floating island.

I look at it only for a moment before I rush toward where Nathaniel is. He is impossible to miss as his mana and thermal energy keep shooting into the air, and a huge circle has cleared around him with a few people from Hell difficulty stacking barriers to keep the pressure from killing the lower difficulty attendees.

I send a burst of [Disintegration] in front of me and carve a hole through the stacked barriers, stepping inside and slowing to a walk as I approach him.

Where I expected him to be in agony and barely alive after seeing that notification about the missing healing aura, he would seem to be the exact opposite. The earth around him is scorched, the air thick with mana so hot and sharp it's damaging even my body. Most of his clothes are gone, long white scars tear through his body, tracing their way across his skin even as my healing marks close them.

But Nathaniel stands there tall and proud. There is not a single trace of desperation on his face, even as he hangs a step away from death.

The closer I get, the more my body is destroyed as the pressure and heat press against me. I doubt anyone else in Earth's tutorial could survive this other than me.

His eyes turn toward me, but he doesn't try to push me away or convince me otherwise, even though he sees my wounds. He trusts my decision and lets me make it. I know he would even if it were the wrong one. It is one of the reasons why... I shake my head and smile. He likes to say it, but all of us, here in the tutorial, have some serious problems.

My skin catches fire, and my hair and eyebrows burn off while my skin sizzles away, only to return in an instant as I heal myself as fast as the damage can form. I cannot even speak as the heat and pressure burn my vocal cords, but I force myself to smile at him, and he shrugs back.

Nathaniel reaches out his hand, and I touch it, sending my healing into him as I examine his body and begin working on the changes we need to make for all of this to serve its function.

I know he won't let me help much, only enough for him to get a better grasp so he can handle the rest on his own.

We do not get much time. Barely a few minutes later, the red figure with the staff that was defending the floating island turns and towers over the barriers that the other Hell difficulty attendees have stacked here. It flickers and passes through, and with it, a man appears. And from the descriptions, I assume this must be Christoph.

His and Nathaniel's eyes meet for the briefest moment before Christoph smiles. "Oh, so you know." Then he turns to me. "Would you mind giving us a moment of privacy, young lady?"

Something presses against me and throws me away from them, placing me outside as Nathaniel and the man are surrounded by an impenetrable red barrier that blocks any view inside.

POV Nathaniel

Once Lily is gone, the difficulty rises, though I keep my composure. I stand here with my mana roaring around me and golden flames devouring the air, while it continues to feel like I'm trying to patch dozens of holes in a boat by stopping the water with my bare hands.

Yet it does not matter. Even if everything turns against me, I will not give up. I will keep moving forward, my focus set firm, and nothing in this world will break me. Nothing and no one.

Then I allow a smart part of my mind to turn to the man in front of me.

A spike of healing from a mark fixes my throat just enough for me to say, "Hello, Adrian."

He scratches his cheek and gives a brief smile. "I prefer being called Christoph, so why don't we talk about it?"

Chapter 743 - Earthling

I watch as the back of that transparent figure over him splits, and two more arms grow from the shoulders. Both reach toward me, pushing through the torrent of my mana and thermal energy, until they touch my shoulders. Just like the Hornless Demon, Adrian calms my raging mana and helps me circulate it, easing the pressure so we can talk.

"I've always liked meeting people capable of pushing themselves this far," he says with a calm smile, "what you've done is impressive. Truly impressive. The sheer fact you can channel it all is a rare sight to behold in someone as young as you."

"But?" I ask, not bothering to hide my mood. From my conversations with Lioren and from the memories he showed me, I already know what kind of abilities this man has.

Adrian is an empath, among many other things. Someone like Izzy, but unlike her, he's extremely capable of using his empathy in the ways that benefit him most.

"I can sense such anger from you," he says, "I've heard about your challenge against Lioren's lurker, so I guess that's where your knowledge about me comes from." He pauses again as if thinking and looks up at the red barrier surrounding us. "As I said, I admire people who push themselves as you do, but being so young often causes you to make mistakes we older ones have already made and learned from. Yet you young ones never listen. Not that I mind, it's just how things are, and some lessons can only be learned by experiencing them in your own skin."

I use the chance to observe the way he's helping me ease the pressure while I continue making the changes I need, taking into account my lower than planned Constitution, my low pristine passive, and the lack of a healing aura. All while he reads my emotions without me being able to sense it at all.

"I would prefer to learn from the mistakes of others and laugh at them, but once in a while I can make my own," I say, "And also yes, I spent some time with Lioren. Betraying him and arranging his death on the first floor because you were busy shitting your pants rather than challenging him directly was kind of a dick move."

Adrian stays calm. "I would agree with that, and quite strongly. It's something I would've done very differently nowadays, and in the end, I truly regret my decisions and behavior from that time, even if you might not believe that. Sometimes I wonder what would have become of Lioren if he'd had the opportunity to complete the tutorial, heal his body, and improve his skills further. Maybe he would have become a Ruler by now, or maybe he would have challenged Pride as many others before and fallen against him."

Sensing my mix of emotions, Adrian watches me, then sighs and sits down on the ground, gesturing for me to do the same.

For a moment, I stand there, facing him, but the pale red arms lift up from me, releasing an avalanche of my own mana and thermal energy. So I sit down with him, and right away the pale red arms touch me again, and he continues to ease the pressure.

And he speaks. "I entered the tutorial as a really nasty seventeen year old boy. All the danger and constant betrayals in Hell difficulty didn't help either, but I will not make excuses. Simply said, I used to be a real piece of work. I killed people, I cheated them, and I betrayed them."

"Let me guess, but you changed?"

"I would hope so. After all, all of that was a thousand years ago. During that time, I returned to my planet, I became a Champion, I traveled to other planets, and I even served as a Handler in Beyond for a while. I met many people before returning to my planet, where I got married, founded my own clan, and later became an Absolute. Those few years in the tutorial were impactful, but so were the many others outside of it. I am not saying this so you'll forgive me for betraying someone you clearly viewed as a friend, even though he died so long ago. I am simply giving you my point of view."

As I look at him, I think that from a certain point of view, this must be amusing. Adrian now likely knows more about my emotions than I do, and I'm not stupid enough to miss how much he could take advantage of that if he wanted to.

I've thought about Izzy's abilities, and in some ways, they're just as scary as her sister's. While you can detect and defend against Sophie's Manipulation, Izzy can do something similar much more quietly. She can take her time and slowly nudge you toward whatever she wants by reading your emotions and reacting in ways that guide you into acting as she wishes.

Adrian must know I am thinking that. He must know I didn't know about him or his abilities when we met, not that long ago, and have only now begun to understand them for some reason.

I'm not sure if he's realized that Sneakythaniel exists, but his empathy was the reason I chose to hide my knowledge, so he wouldn't instantly discover that I know who he is.

From the moment I saw him the first time, I recognized the way he moved, the tiny shifts in his body, the deep rooted gestures. All things Lioren knew to watch for and use to better identify people.

But now I wonder, will he kill me the way I thought he would when I first met him, before I hid my knowledge as I learned just how brutal the Adrian from the tutorial used to be? Or did I eventually come to the conclusion he wouldn't, after seeing a tiny glimpse of who he's become?

As if I needed another fucked up situation to add on top of everything else.

"So how did you do it?" I ask.

He looks at me in a way that seems like he is considering the answer before he shakes his head. "I am still not sure if you will go against me or if we'll end up working together. So I'll keep most of that to myself."

"What are you more inclined to think?"

After looking at me like I am a puzzle, he scratches his beard. "I would say there is a ninety percent chance that you'll go against me once you think you are strong enough."

"And the ten percent?"

"That is either you serving as my Champion or both of us racing to see who becomes the Absolute. If I win, it will weaken your pride a little, but it will not break it. You will grow stronger and challenge me again in the future because you dislike the idea of having an "alien" as Earth's Absolute. That would keep me on edge and force me to stay strong. But over time, I would prove through my behavior that I have Earth's best interests in mind. And both of us know that's the only thing that matters compared to cheap words."

"I do not think the others would like the idea of you being Earth's Absolute, "alien" or not."

Adrian takes a breath, as if he expected that statement. "If you think about it for a moment, am I not the most Earthlike out of all of you? I lived seventy five years on Earth, and I even have children there. I am likely the oldest person in Earth's tutorial."

The words hang in the air as I stare at him. "Is the early Pairing your fault?"

"Yes," he answers honestly, and he cannot help it, as he explains more and tells me how. "I was born on Earth, I went through those years as a baby, and trust me, it was anything but pleasant to live trapped in a weak body with no bowel control." He shivers at the memory. "I thought since I was born into a world without mana, had no heart, no status, and none of my powers, that it wouldn't matter that I used to be an Absolute. But apparently it did. The system, somewhere in its background subsystems, must have partially classified me as an Absolute. And since Earth had no Absolute, it treated the challenge as accepted the moment the tutorial began. The Pairing began at that point as well, even though that doesn't seem like it should make sense, because if I had kept any status in the system, I wouldn't have been able to become a native of Earth or repeat the tutorial."

I rest my elbows on my knees. "So in the end, we're fighting against the planet you were Absolute on. Sorry, but this sounds a little bit like an invasion, and why the hell would you even do all that?"

"It does look like it, does it not?" He laughs shortly, and that laugh feels like the most honest part of him so far, as if he got tricked by the system and only now sees it, even though in hindsight it makes perfect sense. "Do you know why I'm telling you all of this?"

"Possibly as an olive branch or as a ploy to make me trust you."

"Exactly. I am sharing this with you alone, and I don't want anyone else to know, not even your sister. I will reveal my identity only when I choose. What I can promise is simple, I will never reveal myself as Adrian to my planet. I will act with Earth's best interests in mind, even if that puts me at odds with my own world."

"I will trust it when I see it."

"I know," he nods with a smile, "as for why I've done all of this, it's simple. I wanted to enter the tutorial again."

Adrian pauses and glances at the red barrier with a weak smile. "Your healer friend has some seriously dangerous skill." When he looks away, his expression shifts into something almost embarrassed. "It is awkward to say, but after a thousand years, I became stuck. An Absolute, yes, a very powerful one, but nowhere near legends like The Ancient Monster, The Magi, Pale Titan, or the Void Caller, even if many thought I had that potential. And nowhere near strong enough to challenge Rulers. I made many mistakes that limited my potential in the end. So I told myself, why not start over, and since then, I dedicated many years to making it possible, and sacrificed all I had for that single goal. Thankfully, one of my skills helped with that."

As before, I sit and listen, watching the mess inside my body, watching the pale red arms of the figure floating behind him with their hands still on my shoulders, gathering every piece of information I can. All the things he gives so willingly. I'm not stupid enough to think he's giving all this away for free. He might want me to join him, or he might want to amuse himself with another puzzle. But if I ruin it and tell anyone, someone will pay for it, and it won't be me.

"Do you think it is pathetic to want to start over?" Adrian asks seriously.

I think about it and shrug. "Not really. If the system is so easy to abuse, why not?"

He laughs. "Easy... you would not believe how difficult it truly was. I had to give up everything I had, and I only got to keep my memories. I calculated that the Earth's tutorial would start about 20 years after I was born there. With all my knowledge I trained, I prepared, and never in the history of Earth was there anyone with a body as fast and strong as mine back then. But then the time came, and nothing happened. So, did I miscalculate, and Earth would awaken later? Did something else change? I did not know. I waited because there was nothing else I could have done. Years turned into decades, and I became an old man, trapped in a breaking body, on the brink of accepting that I'd failed."

His mood shifts, and he reveals more emotion, a flicker of anger. "Was it a Ruler messing with me, delaying Earth's awakening? Did I make a mistake running the formula? Did I calculate wrong? None of it mattered except for that feeling I had. Never before have I felt so small and pathetic as I did in those last few years on Earth."

"But it doesn't matter anymore," I say.

He slips back into that confident calm and breathes out. "It matters not. I succeeded. I gained everything I ever wanted in the tutorial and built a foundation I could never have dreamed of previously. There's just one more thing I need in this tournament, and then I can continue down my path. I will become

Absolute again, I will protect Earth during the Pairing as well as my old planet, and then one day I will go after the man no one seems capable of defeating.” He reaches toward the sky with hazy eyes as he speaks.

“I still don’t like it,” I tell him.

His eyes return to me, and he nods. “I know. I can feel it. So watch me. Watch my actions rather than my words and grow strong enough to challenge me. But of course, only if you survive this great test you’ve put yourself through.”

The two pale red hands lift from my shoulders, and the presence helping me control my mana vanishes. A torrent of mana explodes from inside me. The effort I used to keep my thermal energy in check has to be split again to stop my mana from tearing me apart, causing both mana and thermal energy to spill from my body.

“In my opinion, it is fifty fifty whether you survive what you’ve done to your body, so please do your best,” he says as the barrier around us breaks.

Adrian then steps forth and disappears with a red blur just as Lily crashes into the spot where he stood.

Chapter 744 - All me

From where I sit on the ground, I watch the transparent half figure above Adrian lift into the air somewhere in the distance as wings grow from its back, and with Adrian hanging beneath it, he flies toward the second floating island.

I only have time to wonder what I should even call him in my mind before the mess I’ve landed myself in becomes too much and forces all my focus onto it. Lily tries to come back to heal me, but I gesture for her to stop and instead try to deal with it on my own.

The body upgrade keeps gradually applying, and that individual part of the upgrade that affects my Mana Physique makes the biggest mess. The constructs get erased, then try to come back in ways that absolutely do not work with a body that’s still changing under the influence of the upgrade.

I don't know if it is some sort of genetic memory that's making the constructs cling to existence, or if the system considers them a twisted sort of passive, or something else entirely, but they refuse to be erased.

It would probably be far less of a problem if the body upgrade applied all at once. But it's not that simple. The body upgrade applies a bit, the constructs get ruined, I fix them, the upgrade applies again, the constructs get ruined again. Constantly in a neverending loop.

Then there are my passives messing with everything. Usually, the system handles that automatically, but I think at least the two of my passives are probably too strong for my current Constitution, so the changes are deeper, heavier, woven further into my being. I wanted that, yes, I counted on it. But damn, I would have done things differently if I had known what I know now.

I planned on the upgrade not applying fully because of the constant healing aura of the tournament, which would have caused most of the body upgrade to apply after the tournament, but, with me having observed it, I prepared for it.

In a way, the body upgrade is similar to my body tempering or the restrictive training emblem. My body needs to take damage for it to work. Instant healing ruins the process.

Still, even through all of this, I refuse to change my approach. I am confident that I can do it.

I am sure of it even as I let my body get damaged to the point where I almost die. Then I stop handling mana and focus on thermal energy alone, letting it combust and heal me to the point where I can let go of it, watch my body break again, and the upgrade continues applying.

[Focus - lvl 74 > Focus - lvl 75]

Each time my concentration slips, scars form. Sometimes they're barely the length of a fingernail, small tears in my skin and the flesh below that heal quickly. Other times, they're as long as my finger, deeper, and hitting harder. There is also a longer one running diagonally across my chest over where my hearts are, it's the length of my forearm, and another on my back of similar size. These wounds heal, but the scars remain, pale white and visible on my skin, refusing to disappear even though they should.

And thus my body keeps tearing, healing, and scarring while my mind observes it all. Now, with my new passive, my cognitive vector, my mental capacity is stronger than ever.

Most of all, it feels like my mind itself became more durable, letting me abuse it more than ever and making some things disturbingly easy.

The only thing that holds me back is me. My talents, my capabilities, which still feel lacking compared to the potential I can sense right in front of me.

Cognitive Hyperprocessing Vector (Low Pristine) - Your cognition gains a compact internal framework vector that reduces thought into a refined conceptual structure. The model allows efficient manipulation of intricate concepts and maintains stability through heavy mental load.

The passive is, well, something. I have no idea what half of the description means, and...I pause only to handle yet another spike of mana. Another part of my body bursts open, but I gesture again for Lily to stop where she stands. With my eyes closed, I let my thermal energy combust while I hold my body together long enough to heal the wound.

It takes a few long seconds, but when it is done, I breathe out a shaky breath and check the last seal on my Ignition Heart. It still holds, and I hope it continues to do so.

A small part of my mind dives back into thought to distract me from all the pressure and pain. My new passive is certainly powerful. I spent shards gathering as much information as I could and used my guild's archives too. Pristine passives are, well, far fewer in number, each one specially chosen by the system and tailored to the user.

There are many options, categories, and subcategories. Vectors are one of those subcategories, and as far as I have found, at least five vectors exist. Cognitive, Spatial, Temporal, Causal, and Harmonic.

I was offered the Cognitive Vector, likely thanks to my mental capabilities, though how important it is, and how it happened will be up to future me to judge. I just know vector type passives are among the rarer ones.

So far, it doesn't feel like it changed or added anything. All the work is there for me to do. The passive provided a durable internal framework into which I must place the engine, meaning my mental capabilities, split minds, and everything that goes with them. It's simple in a way, but it's exactly what I need.

I blink and snap back to reality, only to notice Lily standing in front of me, her hand pressed against my chest as she heals a huge hole a spike of thermal energy burned through. A part of the leftover energy hits her too, adding to the damage my wild energies cause. I can see the area around us shimmering and the barrier outside taking more and more damage, forcing people to reinforce it.

(Food?) sounds in my mind. Like an offering, a gesture asking to step in and fix most of my problems. If it's him, I know he can help.

But I don't want it, which is why I rejected his help when I first appeared here and when I recognized Christoph. It's for me to deal with, to clean up the mess I created, and overall, something I know I can do. So I shake my head, unable to answer in any other way, and Biscuit's presence takes a step back.

Lily knows my intentions, too. She steps away after healing me just enough to keep from dying on the spot, but she stays close. It makes me turn toward her, searching her face for pity or hesitation. Instead, there is simply trust, a willingness to let me make my own decision, no matter how stupid it might be. And damn, sometimes I know I can be a difficult person to deal with. I know it, the system knows it, hell, anyone who's watched me long enough knows it.

What else could explain some of my decisions? Especially the ones fueled by pride, greed, and arrogance, supported by my constant urge to do everything myself and trust no one beyond myself.

Sometimes I wonder if I was born like that or if my environment shaped me, or if it is just the sum of all the decisions I've made that formed me into what I am today.

In the end, Greed and Pride both fit me quite nicely, do they not?

I feel myself smile as another spike of mana bursts out while the body upgrade makes yet another change to my Mana Physique. I examine my body right after, searching for pathways I could use to circulate the mana. The pathways are there, but so are the half broken constructs, blocking them, twisting a process that should be simple. I inscribe into my body, fixing the constructs and rerouting

them while knowing I'll just have to do it again minutes later. I do it to ease the load on my Mana Cycling, which I need to maintain constantly, pushing mana through a body with only a hundred-and-one Constitution while doing all of this at once.

Thermal energy is no better, having nearly the same problems. Sometimes, even my Kinetic Mana Heart pulses and starts turning mana into kinetic energy until I catch it and shut it down.

It's a never ending battle, further complicated by the healing I need every once in a while, each time raising the difficulty.

Through it all, I keep splitting and combining my minds. I push it further than ever before, often separating into more than ten subminds, many of them pre-prepared with arrays and inscriptions, making all of this possible in the first place.

And the body upgrade keeps ramping up, each wave bigger than the last, forcing me to improve or accept that I might not be able to keep up soon and will have to rely on others.

Again.

As if I wasn't enough. As if I've taken a far bigger bite than I can chew. Many people have told me that I've done that, stronger people, more experienced people, more talented people.

However... When did I ever care? Never. Not even once. Who are they to tell me what my limit is? Who are they to judge what my mind is capable of?

I straighten and stand tall, and under my own force of will, all the raging energies calm and hesitate. They stop and pull toward my body where they cycle in the exact way I want.

For that short moment, I see what I need to do, and what my goal is, before everything becomes too much and the energies explode into my surroundings again, and rage out of my control.

As if waiting for that moment, a finger plops onto the ground near Lily.

When I track where it came from, I notice a small opening in the barrier surrounding us through which it slipped in.

A moment later, Victoria grows from it, reliable and calmly composed as always, and takes a step toward me.

Lily tries to stop her, but my sister just slaps her hand away like an annoying fly without even looking at her. After taking a few more steps, Victoria stops in front of me and places her hand on my shoulder.

It is not like the mana and golden flames aren't there or hitting her. They slam into her body, trying to break it the same way they tried with Lily. I always suspected Victoria's body was more durable than Lily's, but the difference here is absurd. There isn't the slightest of burns, not the smallest sign of damage from the mana radiation. Not even a single strand of hair is disturbed.

That... shouldn't be possible. There is no way her body is this durable already.

Slowly, gradually, I realize what is happening. It is not that her body is impossibly durable. It's me. Somehow, even in this state, I can't seem to bear the thought of hurting her, not even by accident or as a side effect of my own mistakes.

When I try to figure out how this is possible, I realize most of my minds are in deep [Focus], overclocked to the point of tapping into the tiniest bit of thought acceleration. They brute force the behavior with help from my new passive, ignoring how much this should hurt and how impossible it should be without a specialized skill.

Victoria looks at me as if she never once considered the idea that I might hurt her, as if she knew from the start that this would be the outcome.

"Do you need my help, Natty?" she asks. "Tell me, is this someone else's fault, or is this one of your fun projects?"

"It is all me, Vic," I force out of myself. "No need for help."

She leans in and kisses my forehead. "Good. I'll leave it up to you then."

Walking up to Lily, she stops in front of her and says, "Do not ever try to do something like that again."

Then she heads toward the barrier and knocks on it. I see a bunch of people scrambling around, until her right hand, Gloria, a young blonde with a choker, stabs her hands glowing with white light into the barrier and tears it open wide enough for Victoria to walk out.

Once the others restore it behind her, the barrier closes again.

Chapter 745 - Events for the 3rd tournament

This tournament only has four events over the duration of five days. It's less than before, and the tournament itself is shorter too.

What gets me thinking is the fact that it's impossible to die during the events, might push the opposing planets to fight against each other. I wouldn't be surprised if this entire setup is designed so that we attack each other. Us being on two separate floating islands clearly hints at that. Especially paired with the fact that people can die outside the events.

It makes for a surprisingly cruel setting. For example, someone like Adrian could probably just fly to the opposing island and slaughter all of them. There are likely a few hundred people from Hell difficulty who can put up a fight, and maybe some Beyond attendees who could push him a bit further. But how the hell would they learn to cooperate fast enough to face someone who's already killed a Champion grade being on the fifth floor of Beyond?

When he flew toward them, I thought he might try exactly that, but that doesn't seem to be the case. He returns a few minutes after he left, landing in the middle of the group of people and talking to them.

I watch from inside my barrier when Lily brings my attention back to her.

"It hurts," she says from her position on the ground with her knees pulled to her chest.

I turn to her and tilt my head in question.

She keeps talking. "It hurts you. Every body upgrade so far has caused you a lot of pain, and with your current Constitution, it must be even more intense, especially since you also find yourself having to manage your mana. And I've felt it before, those golden flames of yours are especially painful. You would probably say you can ignore most of it with your concentration skill, but I know it would be a lie."

A few minutes of having to deal with the constructs pass, and the current stage of the body upgrade pauses, so I move thermal energy to heal myself and restore my vocal cords enough to talk.

"It's just like stubbing your toe or getting a papercut," I tell her, before all of it burns away again and forces me to close my mouth.

Lily laughs and buries her face into her knees so I cannot see, "When I healed you a little, I examined your scars, Nat. All these scars now covering your body. They're there to stay. I do not think anyone other than a specialized Absolute will be able to remove them. They feel like they've become part of you because of all these things happening at once."

I glance at my hands coated in golden flames that burn them, and through the flames, I see the pale white scars across my forearm and the back of my hand. It's not like my whole body is covered in them, but there are plenty. Some wounds heal without scars, and others do not.

There are scars on my back. Two long ones are on my chest. Two more crisscrossed over my shoulder. Another long one around my right forearm, almost like a ring circling its entire thickness. One even runs from the bottom of my left cheek and continues across my neck.

Interestingly, my pale left arm has none. There, every wound heals perfectly.

"Does it matter?" I ask Lily once I heal enough to speak again.

Still with her face buried in her knees, she says, "I guess not."

Similar to the prior tournaments, the first day has no scheduled events, so people can simply meet and talk with each other. Most of all, Christoph uses the opportunity to introduce himself to the others from Earth's tutorial.

Many people already know about him, and many more saw him defend the floating island or go to talk with our tournament opponents. I can only imagine how easy dealing with them must be for him, thanks to his [Empathy] or whatever similar skill he has. He'll know all their worries and suspicions, and with almost a thousand years of experience dealing with people and life in general, it'll be a simple matter for him to handle it without anyone noticing.

Maybe Izzy could pick up on something, but I doubt she's strong enough. I also doubt Christoph wants anyone to know he's an empath, so a part of me worries only for me to realize that that's probably exactly what he's been expecting. I worry for Izzy. I can imagine someone ruthless killing her to avoid the risk of being exposed by an empath. But he must know she's part of my group. Hell, he probably understands better than I what I'd do if he touched her.

And for now, he seems to want to stay on good terms with me and Vic, so I really don't think he'll do it. But if I stood in his way, if I was too weak to finish what I started, then he doesn't strike me as the type of person to hesitate.

He can talk all he wants about how he's changed, but I'm sure there are still parts of Adrian from the tutorial a thousand years ago still festering inside him.

Another question hits me. What does he sense from Vic? I know my sister, and I love her deeply, but I also know she doesn't experience much in the way of emotion, she's probably limited to one or two at most.

Forced to stop those thoughts, I focus on my body, only to realize it's getting worse, and the upgrade is starting to dig further and deeper. It feels like the beginning was just a soft touch, an examination and surface preparation, and now it's pushing into the core.

The upgrade should take a few days, though I don't know how many. I just know that when this is all done, my capabilities will be incomparable to anything I could've done before.

Freed for a moment after another spike of changes, I start reading the tournament notifications to keep myself busy while dealing with it all.

Events for the 3rd tournament of the Earth tutorial have been decided. They are as follows:

1st event - Stampede

2nd event - Bridge of Conquest

3rd event - Dungeon Challenge

4th event - Open Challenge Circuit

The first event will start in twenty two hours. More information will be shared soon.

One thing is clear. Only two hours have passed, though it feels like it's been much longer.

Fuck.

(Okay, I finally did it. Damn, if it wasn't a pain with the way it kept disconnecting. Nat, tell the twins to shut up. I need to focus and keep rebuilding the bridge because you decided to become mana radioactive. And Lily, are you sure you're okay?) Sophie's voice sounds in my mind the moment I let the communication attempt connect.

(I'm fine, Soph. I'm watching what this amount of mana is doing to my body, and working on simple defenses against it. It might be useful for the more mana sensitive people from Earth who're going to work with attendees a lot,) Lily answers calmly.

(Are you going to sell it?) Dennis asks. (You could make a lot of money.)

Tess joins in. (I seriously doubt Lily will ever lack for money. But Nat, you all good?)

(It feels like my body's going to break apart into a radioactive mess any second.)

(So your optimal state, where you're at your most powerful... ouch, what the fuck, Min-Jae!) Dennis doesn't finish his sentence properly.

(Are you okay with us talking, or do you need more room to concentrate?) Min-Jae asks.

Thinking of it for a moment, I shrug, though they likely don't see it, as I can't see them from here. (Lack of concentration isn't the problem.)

(Will you be okay?) Min-Jae's voice sounds slightly worried.

(As if something like this ever stopped me, I...)

I don't get to finish my sentence as Sophie barges in. (Sure, sure, you guys can have your manly men conversation later. Did you go with the third variation?)

I snort. (Obviously, though, we made that one in case the healing aura didn't prove effective against system-aligned damage, like the body upgrade, so I had to modify it a lot. Before you offer, I don't need help; I've already been working on it since the start. I just need to make improvements faster than the progress of the body upgrade.)

(And Izzy calls me stubborn,) Sophie sighs. (Fucking weirdo.)

(I've heard worse. How does it look out there?)

This time, it is Tess answering. (As you would have expected. Samuel's trying once again to build up an army, organization, or whatever he's been calling it nowadays. Our First Beyonder on the other side is surprisingly casual about all of it. He shows off a little, slips into the background, talks to a person or two, and gradually, more and more people have been growing curious about him and trying to talk to him because he just seems so approachable. But who knows what his goal is in all of this?)

As I listen to it, I give it a thought of how I should react, what I should say. Anything I do might hint at a thing or two, so I'd rather decide to say as little as possible.

Aaron thankfully helps with that. (Some of the Hell difficulty groups have lost people, including Whitewing. Brainiac's worried about Gareth, who's been taking everything on himself because he

couldn't protect them. And after the first attack, the other planet just went silent. Christoph said they were just playfully testing us, and they won't do it again.)

(He must have spanked them real hard. We have this tournament in the bag.) I can almost hear a grin in Dennis's voice. (Imagine how the third tournaments must look when both sides are equal. I bet people sneak in to kill specific people so they'll have a better chance during the events.)

(It's still possible it's going to come to that later.) Tess rejoins and addresses me again. (Our opponents are thylarin. I haven't seen anyone I'd recognize from the descriptions as particularly powerful A ranks, and I don't think they have any S ranks.)

(Tess,) I say, (please don't tell me you bought information on powerful A ranks in Beyond and memorized as many as you could.)

(I did, but as I said, only the most notable ones. Of course, even though I didn't see any such thylarin among them, that doesn't mean they don't have any or that they don't have any powerful people who just didn't go to Beyond, so we will keep our guard up. From our previous experience, it's safe to say there will be events where we will end up facing each other.)

(Won't it start with an event where we fight off hordes of monsters, then large-scale battles, before moving on to more individualized ones? The previous tournaments went like that.) Min-Jae muses.

(It might...) Tess doesn't get to finish when the conversation cuts off after yet another spike of changes done to my body.

I don't allow another attempt to connect and instead turn my attention back to my body fully.

"They're asking if you are okay," Lily says from where she sits.

"Yup, I'm okay," I say.

She doesn't react to it at all, so I turn to look her way out of curiosity.

"Liar, liar, pants on fire," Lily sings quietly, staring at me.

"Well, the part about pants on fire is suspiciously accurate right now," I say back.

"Nose as long as a telephone wire," she finishes quietly.

Just before the start of the 1st event, I get a notification.

The 1st event - Stampede will start soon!

In one hour, everyone will be transferred to the event area, both planets and all difficulties grouped together. The location of the event will be randomly chosen from the system database.

Your planet will compete against your opponent's planet. The winning side will receive boosted rewards, which will also raise the individual rewards allotted to the participants.

The 1st event will take place over the course of the next 12 hours, and the individual contenders will be rewarded according to their performance.

During the Stampede, more and more powerful waves of monsters will come through the portal to face you.

Your objective is to collect more points than your opponents.

You can collect points in two ways:

1st - Killing monsters

2nd - Sabotaging your opponents

The longer you endure the stampede, the better the rewards.

Reading it, I come up with a range of strategies right away. It's obvious you don't necessarily want to sabotage your opponent too much, so both of you can endure the stampede for as long as possible for the best rewards. Though you still want to sabotage them for more points, creating a need to strike a balance between the two.

I almost suspect that in the last minutes of the 12th hour, the monsters will become increasingly powerful. I wouldn't be surprised if it was the same as with the Witherclaw, where in the last seconds, he became comparable to an Absolute.

For the rest of that hour, I do my best. I prepare an array that would allow me to halt my mana as much as possible. Even going so far as to prepare to move away from the others.

I should still be able to do enough for some decent rewards. In my opinion, my state isn't that bad enough not to try. Actually, I've gotten used to it, so it doesn't even hurt that much anymore. It'll be a mess, but that's only to be expected.

So impatiently I watch the timer, and when the invitation comes, I press yes to accept.

I feel myself moved into the event the same as everyone else, and find myself on a far stretching flat plain with dust rising into the air and ruins of large structures all over the place.

When I'm about to take a step, I feel a pull and find myself outside. Back alone in the common area, where the barrier around me starts blinking off as its only power source is a few mana batteries quickly filled and set to power the structure.

A notification pops up.

You have been flagged as dead, healed, and removed from the event.

Good luck next time!

My healed body starts gathering damage once more.

I slide and sit on the ground, where I clench and open my fists. Then I look up, towards the huge screen that appeared in the common area, and start watching the event.

A second later, Lily appears in the area with me.

I stare at her, she stares at me. Then she sits down and pulls her knees up to her chest.

"Wounding yourself enough to get kicked out of the event just to sit here with my sorry ass is exactly the sort of abnormal behaviour I'd expect from group 4," I note.

Looking at me intently, she says, "You would've done the same."

"I wouldn't."

Lily just laughs and falls quiet.

Annoyed for some reason, I lean back from my sitting position and end up lying on the ground as I stare at the top of the barrier while an array of energies explode around me.

"I'm bored, tell me about something," I say.

"Sure." Her voice picks up with excitement. "Want to hear about how Grumpy once saved me from the neighbors' scary dog?"

"I don't mind."

She then gets to talking, and even with just a small part of my available mind, I listen to her.

Chapter 746 - Stampede

The location of the first event is huge. Set on an entirely flat plane, covered with ruins, stretching as far as I can see from the screen. These ruins aren't the remains of buildings, but of some other sort of gigantic structures. Some resemble pillars, others are broken arches, or, most strangely, an enormous cube that's been broken apart.

Both the Earthlings and our opponents are spread all over. They're not separated, there are humans mixed in with the tall, blue, multi-armed thylarin from a planet I've come to learn is called Nythis.

There are multiple smaller fights, and as a result, a few more people reappear in the common area, but they turn out to be the exception. Most of the participants simply try to separate and move to join their respective race.

I notice a group of thylarin elites, clearly from their round of Hell difficulty. A few of them have six arms instead of four, and they act with confidence as they organize their forces, though they don't seem to care about anybody from the lower difficulties.

Earth is a bit different. Although plenty of people from Easy difficulty and some from Normal have already cleared their 13th floor, there are still plenty of them here. As before, it's Samuel and his people going around and trying to organize them, and I would swear I saw an amused expression on Christoph's face when he glanced over at it.

Christoph then turns away and, with a long leap, lands near Victoria in the distance to tell her something. My sister listens for a while before nodding and gesturing at Gloria, with whom Christoph starts talking while Victoria moves through the area to find Tess. They talk for a while before they split again.

It's very likely that there'll be a short time for preparation before the Stampede starts, and I turn out to be correct. The event doesn't start properly until about thirty minutes later, once both sides are organized. Everyone inside seems to sense it, and many thousands of heads turn in the same direction, tensing up as it begins.

A swirl of air appears, kicking up a dense cloud of dust that blurs the environment. At its center, a pale blue color emerges and rapidly expands, growing into what seems to be a perfect circle suspended in the air. Its edges sweep outwards, intersecting the gigantic structures nearby and cutting cleanly through them, causing some to immediately collapse.

The edges of the mile wide circle snap shut, sending a ripple through. That circle fills with what looks to be liquid mercury that explodes forward like a geyser before pulling back, leaving the surface eerily calm and almost reflective.

The surface breaks a moment later as a head pushes through and falls toward the ground with a screech, unprepared for the portal's position high in the air. That beast, monster, lands with a thump before it erratically leaps into a standing position and starts looking around. When it detects the tens of thousands of people in the distance, it lets out a deep, loud noise, roaring in that direction.

It looks like a massive mutated bull the size of a car with a body that hangs low between six thick legs. The front set is the longest, causing the whole thing to lean forward as if it were constantly prepared to charge. Its head is broad and flat with a long, cracked horn growing straight from the forehead. On its back is a row of uneven bony plates that look as if they've been smashed and healed many times.

For a while, it's amusing to watch the panicking reactions of the people from the Easy and Normal difficulties. Though I still think they could easily take it down if a few of them worked together.

The beast then dies, its head pierced by an arrow launched from a bow that seems almost twice as long as I am tall, held by one of the six-armed thylarin. He raises the bow high into the air and screams while one of his arms moves, with deep yellow mana shining at the tip of his finger as he draws lines across his face.

I find Christoph, who so far has remained seated off to the side to observe, not seeming to want to participate so early.

Two more ripples roll through the mercury-like portal high in the air, and two more similar beasts fall to the ground, at which point they stand up and roar. These ones quickly sprinting in the direction of the groups of people.

As they run, the ground cracks under their feet, and some weird sort of vibrations spread through the air around them, combining and bouncing off of each other.

They get killed, and more of them continue to fall from the portal.

It goes on like that for an hour until the gradual drops turn into a constant waterfall of beasts. Where at the start, Easy and Normal difficulty dealt with the beasts with a bit of help from Hard difficulty, now the members of Hard difficulty are having to step in more and more.

Many of the non-combatants use this period for their preparation, and at the edge of the screen, I notice Christoph talking to Min-Jae, who laughs at some sort of joke the man must have told.

It takes five more hours until the sixth hour begins, and Hell difficulty starts stepping in. The monsters are still similar in strength to the first one, but now they number in the thousands.

Once in a while, a similar beast, but twice as big as the others, appears, causing them to follow it. The effect of their stampede is now more noticeable, it causes a weak area of disrupted mana. The more of them that run together, the more vibrations they create. These vibrations bounce off and feed into each other, forming a field in front of them and around them. This field deflects some weaker attacks and weakens any mana-based attacks it encounters.

Two hours later, Normal and Easy difficulty aren't doing any damage at all. The beasts are stronger now, and variants twice the size of the others are appearing fairly often now, and sometimes building-sized ones accompany them, taking on the role of leader. The beasts continue to run suicidally towards any group of people, not so much as hesitating under the barrage of attacks.

So, Easy and Normal difficulty people just move around awkwardly, throwing projectiles that do nothing, and watching Hard and Hell difficulty, who have now gone into full throttle.

There is around a four to five mile distance between most of the people and the portal, so it's almost dazzling to see all these bombardment attacks and projectiles being fired off. This event seems to be really fitting for people with such capabilities. Min-Jae, for example, does a good job, proving himself able to kill even the building-sized beasts with accurate, large scale projectiles and killing the weaker ones by the dozens with his metal orb. Meanwhile, I don't think Tacita has much to gain here.

However, without participating, I'm just unable to make myself excited enough to pay too much attention. Sure, I watch the people fight, there are some fun things going on, and information to be gathered. Tacita goes into subterfuge and kills a few thylarin instead, something the twins seem to have decided to focus on as well. Savant does whatever Savant does, Jean charges the monsters, swinging his arms, and each punch obliterates huge groups in explosions of pure strength.

Then there's Tess killing some of the more powerful beasts even as they fall out of the portal, or Maya forming a huge suit of armor around her and swinging a massive claymore. I spot Giga-Noodle with flames around his body, and Izzy's small figure shooting off some dangerous flames of her own, along with thousands of monsters just turning around and charging at their own.

Sophie also makes herself noticeable, taking over hundreds of beasts and turning them against the new waves coming through the portal.

For the first few hours, it's a massacre, and there are too many people to watch them all. But gradually, the frontline gets stomped, and the attacks wane in strength against the ever stronger stampede, and an infinite waterfall of monsters continues to pour from the portal in the sky.

People from Hell difficulty start dying, at first it's the tanks like Gareth in the frontlines, followed by the people behind them. Building-sized beasts are becoming common and much more durable.

Flying skills fail under the influence of the stampede, and people plummet from the sky as they try to escape. Camouflage skills flicker and deactivate, and huge explosions are now causing barely any damage to the beasts.

In the final hour, only Christoph remains, and he finally starts acting. The transparent red torso floating behind him grows in size. In one of its hands, it holds a huge staff which it uses to draw in the air. Inscriptions hang there, expanding into circles that cover the area. Pouring out from them, attacks begin to rain down.

Finger-thin streams of compressed mana that cut through even the most powerful monsters, the huge palms of its hands slamming towards the ground and smashing entire groups of monsters, or weird projectiles shaped into rings that slowly fall to the ground, where they explode and expand in size with an audible thump, cutting through everything in their way.

Monsters can't even get close to Christoph, who obliterates them in the thousands with his constant attacks.

He does the same when the Champion-grade beast appears five minutes before the end of the 12th hour. This fight takes longer, causing the "camera" to zoom out miles and miles into the air to show the sheer scale of the clash.

Massive circles are being drawn by the increasingly large and darker red figure, while the six-legged bull-like monster causes volcano-like explosions with each step, attacking with flames from these eruptions surrounding it as a mantle.

At some point, the scale becomes so ridiculous that I decide to turn my attention to Lily and observe her reactions as she stares with wide-open eyes, and only let a part of me watch the fight to gather the information.

I'm pretty sure Adrian is just playing around and that he's more than capable of facing a Champion grade monster. I also think it's possible he means wait a bit longer and face an Absolute grade one. Though I'm not sure how much he will choose to show off or whether he'd even be capable of that right now. I'm also not sure if doing so would make the people of Earth more suspicious, which seems like something he does not want.

But I think that if he "only" defeats the Champion grade monster, the tournament will still end with him as the winner, even if he decides not to take part in the rest of the events. What he mainly wants is to leave an impression, to erase whatever people believed about who's the strongest in Earth's tutorial, and to secure his position on Earth.

Seeing the expressions of fear and sheer awe on the people in the common area, I have no doubt he will succeed in that.

Out of boredom, and for some silly reason, and love for lame humor, I whisper while looking at Lily, "Meow."

Her head snaps toward me that very moment with such speed I worry she might have broken her neck, "What did you say?"

"Nothing," I answer simply. "There is something I want to try. Do you think you can heal my body for the next 12 hours while I work on it? My attention might end up slipping a little, and cause me to accumulate more damage."

"Maybe. But you're going to have to make the twins stop calling me a 'Ruler of Lust Candidate'."

"If I do that, they will just start calling you something more annoying to get revenge. But I can tell you a few of the more interesting things they've been talking about, so you can blackmail them."

"Deal."

I nod and gesture at her to come closer. Even if I can't get first, there is no way I'm not getting second place in this tournament. And maybe I can use that fraudulent alien to get something else as well.

POV - Angar Fidomar the Second

There are only minutes remaining before the second event starts, and flying in the air, I stare toward that second island where the planet Earth is. That monstrous man is nowhere to be seen, but I know he's over there somewhere. What is he even? He can't be from the tutorial, no matter what he says. Did a Handler sneak their way in? If so, I hope they're put to death.

Two of my arms move, and I fix my upper arcane bow on my back. Oh, how much I wish he weren't here. How much I want to notch an arrow and shoot it at the members of that despicable, two-armed, pathetic race. The first of my arrows would find that blonde woman with the lightning crown who keeps watching me in a way that tells me she has the same great sight as me.

How dare she think she amounts to anything? If that man wasn't here...

I look away from her and toward that barrier they've been holding in the middle, inside of which constant waves of mana and golden flames have been moving. There, these two utterly unhinged maniacal specimens sit. For some reason, their bodies keep getting damaged and healed while they talk. I look further and try to read words from the man's lips, but barely anything I catch makes any sense.

Instead, I land back in the common area, and Easy and Normal difficulty trash run out of my way as I walk over toward my group to wait for the event to start.

The notifications appear in the air, and I press "Yes" as with the event before.

Thousands of thylarin appear all around me on the edge of the white stone cliff, whose base I can't see, even with my eyes. From the bottom, spikes of green lashes of energy keep shooting out, cutting through anything over it. There is just a single place that seems to be unaffected by them, a bridge connecting us to the participants from Earth, just as the previous system message said.

The humans are on a similar cliff to ours, just far in the distance. There's nothing else connecting us and them other than a bridge just barely wide enough for 50 thylarin to walk side-by-side. It connects both sides without any structure, just a perfectly straight line of white material that endures the dangerous green lashes of energy.

Before I get to shout at the others to prepare, I look toward the bridge from where I sense an incredible burst of mana.

"Get ready!" I shout and notch one of my arrows, only to shoot it toward the figure.

I miss as he takes a step and moves in a way only a kinetic energy user can, and my arrow bends and trails him, only for it to blink out and disappear, void of any mana.

Now, through the mist covering the bridge, I clearly see that man. The same unhinged lunatic who was sitting inside that barrier. Something floats over his head, a pale blue ring. Just as our attacks reach him, the ring turns black, causing most of the attacks to disappear. Only primordial energies endure, exploding all around him but not damaging the bridge in the slightest.

I notch another arrow when I see a thin line of mana stretch into the air, invisible to most of the others, but not to my eyes. I reach to snap it, but it endures my attempt, and after a quick teleport, that man appears next to me, even through my group's attempts at disruption. He doesn't even attack me, only to teleport again and appear far in the middle of our group, where people start attacking him despite his elusive movement and mana disruption.

Barely any attacks hit him, but he already seems like he's about to fall apart, bleeding and breaking all over the place. Another ten of my arrows disappear, pulled away by that spinning black ring over his head, and I watch the mana itself from people around get pulled into it.

"Trash," I mutter, and, annoyed, I reach deeper into my reserves and let the tattoos of my trait cover my body.

Then, that pathetic human starts channeling mana in preparation for a powerful attack.

It almost makes me laugh. This has been amusing so far, but... in half a second, he channels an amount of mana that makes me stare in shock.

What?

Many of the others take notice and scream in panic. Now, much more powerful attacks rain down on him, with no concern for the lives of the thylarin in the area. Multiple Hell difficulty melee attackers rush him, but it feels like it might be too late. My most powerful arrow shoots at him, but it blinks out and just pierces through his chest, void of any mana.

I magnify my view, watching his face, now fully reading from his lips.

"Fuck this fucking fuck body fucking upgrade, fuck this event, fuck that pompous fraud fuck, fuck the system...fuck me too...fuck."

The black ring over his head dissolves, and all the mana it's trapped seeping into the area for him to grab and channel as well.

I feel an urge to vomit at the sheer amount of it. So much, so quickly.

Instead of trying to stop it, I run toward the bridge to put more distance between us as a cube appears over his palm, light blue, dark blue, purple, white, and golden colors bouncing around inside, and the air wavering around him.

The explosion catches me anyway and throws me to the ground. sending me rolling, and as I turn in the air, I see it heading my way. It pushes me even as I fight back, it disrupts some of the mana I'm trying to use, and throws me off the cliff, at which point one of the green lashes cuts through me.

You have been flagged as dead, healed, and removed from the event.

Good luck next time!

I appear in the common area, surrounded by hundreds of thylarin, and as I stand here, hundreds, thousands more start appearing all over the place.

Chapter 747 - Others you should be wary of

POV Lily Chen

When Nathaniel returns to the common area, he immediately sits down.

At first, nothing happens, he simply sits there, dealing with his body upgrade. But after a few seconds, his shoulders begin to shake. A moment later, he coughs, and a bit of blood sprays onto the ground in front of him.

I don't step in, but I worry that he may have injured himself too much again and that he's writhing in pain. That thought disappears when I realize what's actually happening.

Nathaniel starts laughing, his shoulders rising with the effort. He laughs loudly and openly, which only causes him to cough up more blood, staining his lips and chin. None of this stops him in the least. His laughter only grows louder and louder. And for a while, it seems like mana and thermal energy are exploding around him in sync.

He is laughing just like a child who pulled off a trick he's especially proud of.

The whole time he's laughing, he curses at the System, himself, the tournament, some random cowardly thylarin with a bow, Savant, and for some reason, the Ruler of Diligence for something that seems to have happened in the Armory and by the end of it he even wishes for Elydor to be resurrected, just so he can kill him again.

When his crashout finally stops, he turns to look at me with that bright smile still on his face. None of his complaints have taken even a speck of happiness out of it. Even as he is now, one second of lost concentration away from death, he looks more lively than ever before.

Seeing that I look at him in surprise, his smile only widens.

Any words I might have said get stuck in my throat as I watch that smile. As it slowly disappears, and he returns to his usual expression, I feel a great loss.

Just how could things have been if his childhood hadn't been the way it was.

POV Nathaniel

The rest of the second event continues even without me, and both sides fight for control of the bridge. Yet, it quickly becomes super easy for Earth to win. There's no buildup of defenses or the like, they just rush over the bridge while dealing with deadly green lashes, toxic mist, and the bridge's mana disrupting material. Then they clash against the thylarin, who are missing a good chunk of their number because of the unexpected explosion that went off in their midst.

Christoph doesn't participate in the event at all and just sits the whole thing out, which allows the rest of the Hell difficulty groups to do their own thing.

I honestly think Earth would stomp the thylarin planet of Nythis even without me or Christoph. Earth's talent pool is something truly incredible, even with the advantages some of the more "powerful" races should have. Earth has nothing like the Demon hearts, the Wyvern bloodlines of the vyssari, the integrated mana storage of the lumorans, the high strength and durability of the velnar, or the flying ability of feylith, and the talent they have for mental skills.

Yes, humans just keep chugging along and, through sheer spite and indomitable will, manage to contest all these races. Like cockroaches that do not have these advantages and instead have to come up with all these fucked up ways to stay in the race.

If you think about it, wasn't that what it was like for humans pre-tutorial as well? Every child in school, every adult at work, every greedy CEO, and everyone did everything they could to come up with a way to game the system and make things easier for themselves or gain an advantage.

I love that cockroach-like spirit. Go, humans, go.

Oh damn, my good mood is showing, isn't it? Though it lasted only a minute or so, I was able to function almost normally for that time, leaving a nice gift for those "blueies."

Of course, now I'm suffering for it, but it was worth it. That short burst gained me 1st spot in the second event, and I already moved my rewards towards the end of the tournament.

Too bad for the assholes who counted me out or the people in the common area spreading rumors about how I'm washed up or fell off, or whatever Dennis said they've been saying. Also, fuck Samuel, who once again seems like he wants to lock me up somewhere and have Biscuit eat the key.

"Lily, participate in the 3rd event," I tell her.

She's sitting far enough away to avoid a constant stream of damage, where her durable body can endure the effects of my energies, but close enough to keep an eye on me.

"Are you sure?" she asks.

I confirm, "Yes, I've already made some modifications and developed a few specialized subminds to help me. I also have a new plan."

"Sophie would be scared of anything that could be called a 'new plan' coming from you."

"Yes, but it'll be better this way, and it just requires a few modifications. I got a little inspired by our First Beyond. If you think about it, doesn't that make me the best thief? I am starting to lose count of how many of my best ideas have come from watching you guys, or some random monster, or the people I fight along the way. Anyway, please don't tell Sophie."

"I won't."

"Thank you."

"No problem, Nat."

"No, Lily, I mean it. Really, thank you. Like a true thank you, not just a word you throw in to be polite. Thank. You."

"Sure," she smiles at me. "I guess you owe me at least that much for everything I've done if you weren't entirely shameless. If you think of it, I gave up on two events and what would probably have been some very good rewards. While you get your improved upgrade, new plan, whatever that is, and even get to participate in the events."

"If you're going to put it like that, I feel sorry for you."

"You should."

"Okay, so what do you want? You know me, I'm not going to come up with anything good by myself."

"You know very well what I want, but it would be pathetic to force it out of you this way. I remind you, I can be very patient, after all, I even managed to make Grumpy like me. But... for now, I'll just keep your gratitude to myself and make use of it later."

I squint my eyes and ignore the goosebumps that statement causes. "I am not a cat, I feel the need to remind you of that, but okay, I guess," I say in the end.

"Okay," she says in turn, ending the conversation.

Unfortunately, it seems like Tent Creep will not be returning this tournament. I'm sure people are going to miss him and his great items as well. Yet, I cannot find it in myself to be too disappointed. I don't think I'd be able to make all too many shards, and even if I didn't have my body upgrade to deal with, I don't think it would be the best use of my free time.

Another thing I might miss out on is meeting some of the other people here. Damn, I almost sound like an extroverted lunatic here. But in this case, I actually mean it a little, there are some things I want people to pass on to Channeler outside, messages, items, and such. Then there's also, for example, Miwa, who could've shown me some of her blacksmithing. Now, with improved knowledge, I would like to look over her left arm again, that pink robotic one made by Champion Keiron.

I'm sure I'll be able to modify my subminds enough to handle the body upgrade to the point that I should still get a few minutes of free time. Even if the difficulty does keep increasing, I'm cocky enough to think I can improve faster, though. I'll use these minutes to make weapons out of my Manabloc. At this point, they should be capable of lasting over ten years if I focus on it and still be extremely durable and sharp, shields, projectiles, and simpler suits of armor. I can make a lot of things like that.

Then there's the Manatex, clothes I can make out of woven threads of mana. The same as the weapons, they can be made to stay stable for years, and the thread is more durable than some of the upper-rare armor I've examined.

As of late, I've even started making multiple threads, and experimenting with the stitching, and the like, to make Manatex better. So it feels softer, stretches a little, making it less bulky, and light enough to let air through. That sort of thing.

The only disadvantage is the color. All Manatex is pale blue, sometimes darker blue if I increase the density of the threads. One day, I might even be able to make them out of Ley Lines, but not anytime soon. Though tricolored Manatex would be nice.

Not long ago, Maya asked me to make chainmail out of Manatex mixed with Manabloc, where the outer layer was rings made of Manabloc, with softer threads of Manatex connected to it underneath.

It took me a long time, and she looked over my shoulder the entire time, but the result was really cool. If I can get items like these to Channeler, it'll really help him a lot, and I truly do trust the guy, he knows what he's doing.

I know the others are doing similar things, especially Lily, with her disintegration orbs trapped in boxes made from her bones, weapons crafted from her bones, and even armor grown from her bones.

There is a clear line of thought to follow here.

What excites others the most are the healing marks she's decided to place on a few different people. She's even started working on transferable ones, or ways they could work without being modified for each person. Perhaps allowing her to tie them to an item, like a piece of her bone, if we follow her line of thought.

Though there is always a risk with these marks and the way they heal. The ones I get are probably the most advanced ones because she created them by experimenting on me, and we've gone through a lot of variations.

Once the barrier flickers, it brings me back to the present, and I watch the flickering red light around Christoph die off as he walks closer to stop beside Lily.

He apologizes to her for sending her away before and then asks if she could leave to let the two of us speak.

Lily looks at me, to which I nod, and she leaves the two of us alone. Once she is gone, that red barrier surrounds us, and Christoph looks at me with a question.

I shrug, which causes him to smile, and two red arms reach out from him to touch my shoulders, after which the mana raging inside me calms to the point it feels like closing a window and cutting off the sound of a blizzard outside entirely.

"I want to congratulate you on your performance during the second event. I expected something like that, but it was great to watch anyway. I would like to offer you advice, or even to take you as a disciple, but I know how you would feel about that," he says.

He says it even though he knows the emotions it will make me feel, and seems to be doing it for the sole purpose of watching my reaction with amusement. I don't feel any cruelty in the act or like I'm being looked down upon, just as he said before... he's someone older and more experienced, taking an opportunity to poke some fun at the younger generation and the mistakes they've made.

In a way, I suspect he does it all with a distinct purpose, even showing me parts of him he knows I'll dislike. It's like he wants to be honest with me and show me as much of the real him as he thinks will work in his favor. The same as me, he knows no one is perfect, and he likely knows I prefer it that way.

He just needs to look at Group 4. There are many things I dislike about most of the members, and the same goes for them, and yet... it works out somehow.

However, this sort of behavior from him still irks me, but he clearly knows that as well.

“Thanks for the congratulations, and you’re right. So what do you want this time?” I ask.

Christoph seems to give it a thought before he says, “When you return to the Beyond, try asking your Handler, Lady Greed, who Lioren’s Handler was back then. Also, ask her how long she’s known about me and who it was that connected me with the Warden of the Parallax Eyes, when I sought to gain The Chronometric Formula of Planetary System Awakening.”

He offers a weak smile. “You should realize that even if you don’t trust me, there are others you should be wary of, others like me.”

“You seem to have had a lot of help. Are you sure you were a powerful Absolute?” I ask instead, watching to see if my words have the desired effect.

They do not. Christoph only smiles wider, looking at me in a way that makes it obvious he knows exactly what I’m trying to do.

“You know,” he says, “My Handler’s told me about your 'master' and everything she’s done so far, as well as where she is at the moment. It’s obvious you are comparing me to her. It’s even expected of you to look down on me. In the end, in your eyes and your feelings, I seem to have given up, do I not? I chose the easy way to start over, blaming all my failures on an earlier version of me rather than my lack of skill and effort. And now, three years into the tutorial, I finally kill a Champion with all the advantages I had, while her imitation has already defeated the Ruler of Envy. With all that in mind, I’m nothing, am I not? Just a failure.”

“But?”

“But, ask your Handler. She’ll tell you more. You might understand my abilities a bit more then,” his head turns towards the sky, looking to a very specific spot. “She won’t break any rules or agreements by sharing that information if I’m the one allowing it, but please, Lady Greed, don’t share too much. I deserve some privacy as well.”

No matter how long I look at that same spot, unlike him, I can’t see anything at all.

Chapter 748 - How do you become an Absolute?

During my wait for the next event, I find myself being interrupted by a bus-sized, pitch-black wolf with not a single hair of a different color. Only his eyes are different, giving off a golden shine of deep intelligence. I get a feeling from him, not unlike Biscuit, but much weaker, even now.

Biscuit's disciple appears in the common area the same way many other disciples do, as people summon them with rewards they achieved from the previous events.

There is obvious screaming and all that stuff, but most of the people seem to remember him quickly enough. Not that he cares, they still scream and rush out of his way. Some pull out cameras, and a drone even starts circling above him.

Ignoring it all, he heads towards the barrier and sniffs at it a few times before snorting and taking a bite out of it. He then pulls his head back, tearing a hole in it. At which point, the black wolf proceeds to walk inside while chewing the piece of the barrier he's torn free. That mana behaves very differently from how it should. It should just disrupt, turn into particles, or be devoured by him. Yet, it somehow seems to be turned into food.

Atop the black wolf's head sits a tiny figure: Biscuit in all his glory.

(Pathetic Human and member of my master's pack, I see you haven't changed at all!) As he talks, his voice remains the same as before, sounding like that of a young boy.

He doesn't get to say more, as on top of his head, Biscuit starts bouncing on his front paws and scratching the head of his disciple.

(I apologize, master! But I don't think I was being rude at all! And you must see it as well! What kind of lunatic would... Master, please... I did... It's all that humans' fault... Oh, I've heard about such food... I'm not hiding anything... Maybe we could... I can't fly, I told you already, please stop showing off... You are great, master, yes... One hundred ninety eight... Huh? Like this? I require sustenance... Thank you, but I need no vest...)

The conversation turns away from me, and Lily and I exchange glances. She smiles, taking a step closer and sitting down to rest her back against one of the wolf's paws.

He turns his huge head towards her, mouth slightly open in a show of sharp teeth and a lip lifted in a threatening manner, but he doesn't do anything else.

(Yes, master, I promise to tell you if I see any deer!) He finishes his conversation before turning back to me, (Human from my master's pack, I wish to see your disciple, that smelly young half-demon, so I can laugh at her once more and have revenge for the way she treated me before.)

"Minions do not smell. If they ever do, they get tossed into a volcano. I doubt she will join us this time, unfortunately," I say.

(How barbaric and unfortunate,) He truly seems a bit disappointed, but gets over it quickly. (I have decided not to call you an asshole anymore, so I hope you appreciate that. I have also become much more powerful since the last time we met, and while I had hoped to compare our skills this time, I can see that it would not be honourable to challenge someone in your state. Are you sure you're not a demon?)

For a short moment, the wolf pushes through all the mana and thermal energy around me, while primordial energy similar to Biscuit's surrounds him. It makes him feel like he is just a two dimensional shape of a wolf that is pitch black to the point that it almost seems to devour light itself. There are just two golden eyes shining where his head should be, like he isn't even real, just a nothingness wearing his shape.

His eyes get close to me, and his big nose sniffs a few times before he pulls back. That eerie feeling surrounding him pulls back as well as he moves further back and sits down. Lily, using the opportunity, once again comes closer and sits down, resting her back against his side while he ignores her.

"Why do you ask that?" I ask him.

(You feel like a demon, more so than some of the actual ones I've met. You carry the subclass of their Father very well.)

I blink a few times, almost forgetting about the body upgrade and everything else, "Tell me more."

The black wolf's teeth show in a big smile, and a rumble sounds as he lets out a noise that sounds like a laugh. (Ha! Wouldn't you like to know? This is something I have heard from the Elders of my pack, you will have to...)

"Biscuit," I say simply.

The black wolf whimpers as Biscuit, atop his head, bites into his fur there and tugs on it a few times. He then whimpers again, and a novels-long conversation is exchanged between the two of them before those golden eyes turn back to me.

(Treacherous human, I shall remember this betrayal!) He calls in that young voice, (This time I will share that information with you because of my great master. You will have to supply him with all the food he wishes and many... many pets. You also have to carry him around a lot.)

It is obvious where these requirements must have come from, and I look up at Biscuit, who shyly hides himself in the black fur.

"Deal," I say, and listen up the same as Lily, who also seems more curious.

(The Father of all Demons is one of the titles of the Ruler of Pride. A long time ago, he and the Ruler of Kindness were studying Mana Hearts together, and while they were doing that, they discovered a way to connect hearts to energies that had existed even before the system.)

"Why? How?" I interrupt him.

(How would I know, human? The Ruler of Pride and the Ruler of Kindness are close to what many would consider to be true gods, so who am I to know their thoughts? Just know they successfully created a trait called Demon Heart for those who became the 100 Progenitor Demons. These demons were then moved to distant planets of the universe where the system had yet to awaken, allowing them to multiply and grow for thousands and thousands of years before the system reached them. During that time, the Ruler of Pride continued to move them across many different planets, spreading demons through the distant edges of the universe.)

"Is Pride a human?" I ask.

(Yes, he is.)

"Did he and Kindness create more races?"

(Yes, I don't know much more, but many of the current races are the result of his and the Ruler of Kindness's acts.)

"But why?"

(Human, you are annoying, you surely must know that! No one knows. Rumour is that he's been building an army against a danger outside our universe. Some say he was bored. Others say he did because he just could. Many more say he did it, hoping to create a stronger species, so that in the future someone would finally be born who could challenge him.)

His words lose some of their edge as Lily buries her face into his black fur with an expression that shows just how much she likes the feeling.

That causes the wolf to finally snap, (ENOUGH! You animal!) he barks and twists to bite into her shoulder and fling his head to send her rolling across the ground.

After coming to a stop, Lily stands up, neither wounded nor scratched. Though there are a few bruises on her neck and arm from where the black wolf bit. I can't tell if it's because Wolfy held back or if the petite maniac is just that durable.

(My bloodline is that of an ancient wolf who used to devour entire planets. I will not let myself be bullied!) As he growls, Biscuit doesn't try to calm him down this time and continues to lie atop his head.

Lily and the wolf then exchange a conversation, with Lily apologizing multiple times while the wolf uses the opportunity to continue to brag about his bloodline.

When they finally stop, I ask again, "I've been wanting to ask for a while, but how does one become an Absolute?"

It is Lily who answers instead, "Nat? You surely must be joking. Tess already found out months ago and..."

"Shhh," I interrupt her, "I want to hear it from Biscuit's disciple."

It gets me a snort, and I watch that massive body sit down and then lay his head on his crossed front paws. Those eyes, each bigger than my head, look at me with that intelligent light in them.

Out of nowhere, Biscuit rolls off his head across the wolf's nose and slides down to bump off the ground with a short squeak. The corgi then stands up and shakes off the dust from his body before floating into the air and booping that enormous black nose a few times with his front paw.

The entire time, the black wolf watches him lovingly, and Biscuit then floats closer, where he nestles between the wolf's front paws and under his nose that blows into Biscuit's fur as the wolf breathes.

(Human, we have wolves like you in our pack. The Deep-Scarred One, The Two Tailed One, The One Who Flies In Darkness. They are all very powerful, but also... lacking in the intelligence department. It's not their fault either, they were just born that way, the same as you.)

"Okay," I nod.

(I could see it the day we met for the first time. Those two tiny sparks behind your eyes, trying to spark thought to life yet failing so often.)

"Okay."

(But The Deep-Scarred One, The Two Tailed One, and The One Who Flies In Darkness enjoy the thrill of battle, human, though sometimes I wonder if they just don't care. Perhaps they're intelligent the same way we are, that they may just prefer to let others think and like to be pointed towards the battle where they can put their bodies to use in the protection of our pack. You might be similar.)

"Okay."

(Yes, something about your expression still irritates me, but I can't find out what. I don't have much experience with humans, so I haven't learned to read your expressions well! Maybe it's your eyes. They tend to be extremely disturbing at times and very arrogant. But Master has said you can't be that bad because you feed him the best food in existence, so I have to believe what he says.)

"Yeah. The Absolute thing I asked about."

(Oh, I almost forgot! Human, it is the same in the entire universe. For you to hold a title of an Absolute, you need to hold ownership over a Sovereign Spark. Most planets have one, and even some moons have one. For worlds that have just awakened, you need to clear their World Dungeon deep in the center of that world and bond yourself with that Sovereign Spark.)

"I see, and if you kill an Absolute?"

(Then you can take over the Sovereign Spark and cause a Pairing between your planets if you happen to be an Absolute as well, or you can just leave it be for some other Native to claim.)

"So you don't need to clear the World Dungeon again?"

(You do, dumb human! The moment the first Absolute clears the World Dungeon, it starts to return to its previous power and then grows stronger with the Absolute and the planet. Once that Absolute dies, the dungeon is more dangerous than it was before, requiring a more powerful person to reach the Sovereign Spark. Some planets' world dungeons are so dangerous that they never get a new Absolute once their original Absolute dies. There are legends of Rulers dying in the World Dungeons of the oldest, most powerful worlds!)

This becomes an interesting thought. I have heard some of the things the wolf is telling me, but some are new even to me, and judging from Lily's expression, even to her.

"What if your planet already has an Absolute and you want to become an Absolute as well? Let's say as a Champion that doesn't want to stay on their world anymore."

The black wolf yawns and gently nudges Biscuit when he yawns as well. Turning back to me, he answers, (A Champion can't cause Pairing. You can try to challenge some other world, kill its Absolute, after which the system will acknowledge you, and then you can try to take over. Some even search for planets newly added to the system, where the World Dungeon has just been cleared. They try to kill the fresh Absolute since they can't enter the dungeon as non-natives. These people are trash and looked down upon by other Absolutes, but not as much as the final kind. If you have a thing of value or are willing to offer your service, you can buy a planet. These fools in The Corporation have a map of many dead planets or moons with danger levels of their world dungeons calculated, and they sell them to Champions, just so they can get the title if they are capable of it. Though there are such pathetic ways to gain the title, a World Dungeon is never simple and always tests a Champion and rewards only the most deserving with its Sovereign Spark.)

Chapter 749 - Should have expected that

The third event starts, leaving the disciples behind while their masters appear inside. The minion tournament should take place before the last event, with me still wondering if the black wolf is going to participate.

I don't enter this event, given that I don't want to be kicked out right at the start again, and it seems like Lily doesn't want to participate either. The very same girl who had promised me she would join has decided to remain behind in the barrier with me.

"I thought you were okay enough to join the event," she snorts.

"I lied. I thought you said you were going to join the event."

"I lied," Lily says simply.

"You know what? You're really a stubborn fucking musclehead. Just join the goddamn event and get some damned points finally instead of just sitting here."

"Fuck you," she answers.

I blink a few times, feeling my annoyance rise. "You know what? Fuck you too! I told you I'm okay."

“Try guessing how many times you’ve passed out for seconds at a time, and I’ve had to heal you without you even realizing.”

“Bullshit. Nothing like that has happened.”

“Twice.”

“I may not have emphasized it correctly, or maybe saying it like ten times wasn't enough. I don't want you to sacrifice any more for me. At this point, I can handle this on my own.”

In response, she shrugs at me from her place seated beside me. “I'm sure of that. Even unconscious, you’ve continued to circulate your mana, and I’m sure you would survive just fine. Maybe just with a few more scars. I’ve never seen anyone as stubborn as you, so I know you could have been okay on your own.”

I force myself to calm down. “So, Lily The Bulldozer Chen, why don't you just go to the event?”

She smiles weakly. “Just in case. I want to be absolutely sure it doesn't go wrong and that I won't regret it in the future in case something unexpected happens. In some ways, I'm still just a little pathetic and scared, so I’ll do this. What are some tutorial event rewards in the face of that? I'm plenty strong even without them. So, what are we doing?”

We exchange a gaze. I look at her, still annoyed, but she doesn't look away at all, and in the end, it’s hard to bring myself to stay angry.

With a groan, I stand and wave toward the stacked barrier, a structure created and powered by several people from Hell difficulty, along with the mana batteries linked to it.

The air around me resonates, and with a ripple, the barrier breaks into tiny particles that rain down around us. The pressure around me blasts them all away like they are particles of dust carried by the wind, before I force my mana back under my control. Standing there, I close my eyes and take ten deep breaths in and out.

When I open my eyes, all the mana and thermal energy are pulled back, contained inside my body, where they continue to clash. None of it's seeping into the area anymore. Not even a speck.

"We'll go and look for the thermonuclear warheads I had Tess bring here for me," I tell her and start walking towards where the residence our group rented should be.

On the screen, there are thousands of people standing in the middle of a circular cobbled area surrounded by thousands of dungeon entrances around the edge. And each of the entrances is different. Some take the shape of a door set into an old tree, others are simple sets of stairs leading down into the ground, while others might take the form of circular holes in the air, shimmering as if they were made of liquid mercury, or stone arches opening into vast interior spaces.

From the description, I know they're all dungeons, not unlike the ones that are due to start appearing on Earth.

None of them is marked to indicate their difficulty, and it's left up to each person to try and get an estimate for themselves. For some, it might be a simple process of checking how much mana is radiating from the entrance, while others seem to be hiding it.

Meaning that, if you aren't careful, you could end up in a dungeon that contains a Champion grade monster, at least here, in the tournament. I hope none like that exist on Earth. Though... maybe it would be fun if there were.

I stop again and close my eyes. Another ten long breaths and a new scar forms on the side of my thigh. Even as I'm improving, the changes to my body are becoming more far-reaching. I observe them the entire time, and I can feel them. I can see how much more my body is becoming fitted for what I need.

Future consequences be damned, but by going along this path, I don't think that after this tournament, there will be more than one or two attendees capable of facing me in Beyond. In a way, Nyssa, with her Primordial Blood, and I are a bit more similar now, with the only difference being that I'm doing all this voluntarily.

It's a cost I just have to accept, but I feel it's necessary. Otherwise, I'll only end up being thrown around and manipulated by people stronger than me. After all, I think I've already decided to kill Adrian, but let's have Sneakythaniel hide that for now.

Adrian is also one of the many people participating in the event, currently waiting with all the rest of them for the moment the doors open, and they're allowed to enter. He alone stands near one of the most unassuming doors, just talking shortly to a person or two as they stop by.

After watching for a while longer, I take my eyes off the screen just as we enter the forest nearby.

It's a weird feeling to walk around now so freely, though the area is empty and all of the other attendees are already participating in the event. I spot just a few young kids here and there, disciples of other people from Hell difficulty. Most of them just look our way and don't try to talk to us, and I don't make any attempts at conversation either.

As we get closer to the residence of group four, I notice multiple mana signatures. At the same time, my mana attempts to lash out, but I forcefully strangle it and pull it back under my influence to force it back into the raging river flowing through my body.

Yet another notification rings, adding to the flood I've gotten since the tournament started. Just as we find ourselves approaching Wolfy lying next to our apartment, I take a moment to check them all.

[Perception - lvl 70 > Perception - lvl 71]

[Redistribution - lvl 71 > Redistribution - lvl 72]

[Eclipse - lvl 59 > Eclipse - lvl 60]

[Eclipse - lvl 60 > Eclipse - lvl 61]

[Eclipse - lvl 61 > Eclipse - lvl 62]

[Accumulation - lvl 49 > Accumulation - lvl 50]

[Accumulation - lvl 50 > Accumulation - lvl 51]

[Accumulation - lvl 51 > Accumulation - lvl 52]

[Accumulation - lvl 52 > Accumulation - lvl 53]

[Accumulation - lvl 53 > Accumulation - lvl 54]

[Manifestation - lvl 25 > Manifestation - lvl 26]

[Manifestation - lvl 26 > Manifestation - lvl 27]

[Manifestation - lvl 27 > Manifestation - lvl 28]

[Manifestation - lvl 28 > Manifestation - lvl 29]

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 75 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 76]

I thought the skills were supposed to be harder to level up the higher the level they get. Has everyone been lying to me?

By the time we reach Wolfy, my mana has all been forced back into my body, causing him to give me a sniff. He doesn't say anything, just displays his teeth in a way that looks like a dangerous smile, especially with his maw looming so huge over me that it looks like he could eat me in a single bite. In that moment, he doesn't seem young at all, resembling something more like a dangerous predator. A beast with a body made for killing and devouring.

Then the moment passes, and he lays his head back down on his front paw. Only then do I see Izzy's disciple, Seneca, sleeping against his body. Her blue hair is longer now, yet still continues to reach towards the sky, moving just as a flame would.

There's probably a question as to why Wolfy isn't getting annoyed with that or making her stop, but I don't ask and instead head on towards the residence. Lily, after taking a moment to greet the black wolf, follows behind me.

"Let go of me, you six-armed lunatic!" we hear just as we enter the huge log cabin. Maya's disciple, the lynthari Enan, is fighting with said six-armed lunatic. That lunatic, going by Deva, is Sophie's disciple and doesn't seem all that surprised, unlike Enan, by our presence. After all, I sensed her mental magic taking note of us.

She doesn't let us bother her and continues using two of her six arms to choke Enan from behind, while two more keep themselves occupied pulling on his ears. I'm sure he is physically stronger, so he likely hasn't been fighting back, worried that he might hurt her, which she's been exploiting fully.

"Oh, look who's here, the liar who's apparently owed an answer to a question by the Warden himself. Tell me, liar, who else have you met as of late? Maybe you've gotten a lesson from the Magi? Did you make friends with one of the Twelve? Or did you by chance meet one of the last Elfs' replicas?" Deva asks, laughing at her own words as she shouts at me.

"Actually..." I start.

I don't get to finish as she screams, Enan having bitten into one of her arms. She starts punching him while shouting at me, "Don't say anything! I don't believe you! Damned liar! LIAR! LIAR! Demon-like Maniac! My master told me how you are, and I..."

I refuse to listen to the rest of it and continue upstairs instead.

"Your reputation is in shambles right now," Lily notes to no reaction from my side.

I hear her chuckle behind me. It causes me to stop, and I take another ten deep breaths. Then I continue again.

"So, where do you think she put the warheads?" Lily asks as I enter my room.

"Knowing Tess, they should be right here," I say, reaching out to pull the blanket off the bed, revealing the two boxes sticking out from under it.

"I should have expected that..." Lily whispers.

It takes me a few moments to take the wooden tops off to reveal two metallic cone-shaped warheads. Both of them are now entirely covered in inscriptions painted with mana conductive paint, and, more importantly, inlaid with melted wire of conductive alloy to make them more stable.

There are multiple mana batteries, Logic Cores, nodes, secondary circuits, tertiary circuits, mechanical switches in case of failures, and so on. A lot of it was inspired by what Vance did when he was stealing them on the 7th floor. I remembered some, and Sophie remembered more. Then we had a lot of help, divided up between a number of Beyond specialists we hired, and some volunteers we recruited, like a certain catboy.

Of course, we also had some people from Earth to help, even going as far as buying up any device with e-books that contained any relevant knowledge. To say simply, a shitload of work went into it, and I'm certain that I can make them go, as a minion would say, kaboom.

The question remains if that explosion will be bigger than anything I can create on my own at this point. Sophie and I certainly think so, especially after we modified them to create a synchronous explosion and added in a number of alloys and mana stones filled with chemicals that should react really well to explosions of this kind.

Enough to evaporate cities and small countries? Seems likely. Enough to kill a Champion with such defenses as Adrian? I don't think so. I'm just curious to see if I could survive them, too. I want to burn the eyebrows off that creepy alien jerk, and I want to see them go kaboom, with the results of our months of work.

All three of these things can come together during the last event. I just need to endure that body upgrade of mine and push myself far enough that I don't get kicked out the moment I enter. Though that seems to be even more difficult now than it would've been when the body upgrade had just started.

Once again, I feel the rusty taste of my blood in my mouth and feel my body weaken.

I'm sure Lily is going to notice and be annoying about all that soon, so when I turn to her, I don't let it show. Instead, I swing my arm and, with the palm of my hand, audibly slap the surface of one of the warheads.

The action causes her to jump up and let out a squeak. "That was so childish, lame, and mean!" she shouts at me.

So I repeat it once more, getting a nearly identical reaction.

She waits for a few seconds to see if I do it the third time, and doesn't say anything but stares at me with a blank expression, though I notice the corners of her lips tugging upwards.

Chapter 750 - Everyone knew it was coming

Speaking to the kids, I learned that it's apparently possible to summon a personal screen to watch the event. It is even possible to filter out individual people to watch the person you want. So, of course, I now find myself sitting outside, resting against the side of Wolfy and surrounded by kids, Lily's on one side and Biscuit, who, even now, is refusing to participate in the events.

Same as that black-haired bulldozer, the corgi chooses to remain in the common area, seemingly for the same reasons, though he's not being as forceful about it as she is. That damned, stubborn girl.

Now, Biscuit in his puppy form, is lying in my lap, and even though he's trying to hide it, I notice him helping me. Just that tiny little bit as he handles the bits I can't fully contain, so it doesn't hurt the kids. And the term kids seems to include that enormous black wolf as well. Though he's clearly annoyed, he lets us rest against him and watches the event with us.

Enan, Seneca, Deva, and quiet Irwys, Min-Jae's disciple, are all here. We also finally meet a vyssari girl by the name of Rye, Tess's disciple.

She's just like that tiny vyssari child I met in the Megacity. Tiny, huge eyes, cute scaly legs, and a small, round face.

It makes me want to protect her with my life, feed her all the precious earth sweets I have left, and tease her just so I can watch her be angry at me, which would make her seem even more cute. Just like a little kitten trying to look dangerous.

She's blonde and has eyes that seem to have been altered by a trait. They're... weird. It is hard to guess their colors as they shift with the light and, on occasion, her mood. It is to the point I wonder if she doesn't have a bit of feylith blood, though the color of her hair seems to remain static.

Rye is quiet, just like Min-Jae's Irwys, but unlike him, she's more decisive. Once we sit down, she rests against my side in a way that seems like a cat that's found a warm spot in the sun to rest in.

I realize my body is warmer than usual, even with my control, but it is not to the point of hurting anyone, so I let it be to avoid spooking her away.

Even the system screen she's watching the event on is smaller than the others.

Now only Lily's Pallius is missing, once again making me realize just how stubborn that girl is. Hah, I guess I'll have to supply her with a few dozen extra left arms. After the body upgrade, they'll make incredible sacrifices for her. Or maybe I could buy her flowers or something. I'll have to ask Tess... no, not her. She'd only make fun of me.

I'll ask Izzy.

I hear Deva shout excitedly and turn to watch her screen. There we see Sophie and Izzy, just the two of them walking through one of the dungeons. Like the others I have seen, this one has its own layout as well. It is an old, crumbling stairway rising towards the sky, leading up to what almost seems to be an old rocket silo.

They've already been walking for what feels like more than ten minutes, and no changes have made themselves apparent in the environment. But this time, Sophie seems to have detected something and disrupted it. The air around them flickers in response, and the stairway disappears, revealing that the true shape of the environment is that of a boneyard, with a great many skeletons, each as tall as buildings.

From its place behind one of them, a creature looks up. A lizard with a third vertically oriented eye in the middle of its forehead and four protrusions extending from its head like tentacles.

It hisses at the same time as Noodle drops from Izzy's arm and grows in size to match the monster.

The Fragment of the Eternal Flame blazes around Izzy, and her veins become visible through her skin. Sophie waves her hand, and Blackie escapes from her shadow, throwing himself against a pile of bones from which a golem emerges, composed of its contents.

Then, more monsters like the first start appearing. Dozens, hundreds of them start to climb out from under the bones and massive corpses scattered around the room. Each of them is the same in terms of the way they look, though they're maybe one-fifth the size. The entire area starts flickering with the environment constantly changing as the fight starts, as Noodle begins coiling around both girls to protect them, and the golem rushes into the fight with a cacophony of loud stomping.

Deva continues to shout for Sophie to finally stop playing around, with all six arms in the air, and curses probably a bit more than a kid should.

I feel a tug on my clothes and look to my right at the tiny vyssari girl.

"What?" I ask.

She points at Biscuit.

"Go on. He doesn't bite."

The girl nods and starts reaching out her hand.

I cannot help myself but add, "I think."

That causes her to stop and look back at me. That cute face furrows in an expression that strongly reminds me of Tess. With a tiny sigh, she then reaches anyway and starts petting Biscuit's back.

At this point, I wonder, with her being so tiny, she could probably ride Biscuit in his adult form, right? Or be really close to it. Honestly, wouldn't even I be able to ride Biscuit if he went around in his horse-sized form?

The corgi just turns around to look at her and yawns before turning back and lying his head on my leg.

"Deva," I rest back lazily and call towards the thylarin who still cheers on her master.

Just for a moment, she glances at me, annoyed, "What?"

"I have met several replicas of the Last Elf, and I even spoke with that petty saboteur. I've also met the Ruler of Greed and the Ruler of Diligence, or at least spoke with a few of their vessels. I ran into the Ruler of Kindness as well, and she helped me throw some guy off a balcony. I think I have seen the vessel of the Ruler of Wrath, too. By the way, have you heard about the Ancient Monster, the Absolute, Lissandra Hawthorne? Yes? Good. I met her, too, and she is constantly trying to become my master. What else... oh, the intent of the Ruler of Envy spoke to me at one point, and I met a demon with five hearts, a lunatic that almost became the Ruler of Wrath. One more thing, if you shout at me again, I will lock your kinetic movements until Sophie comes out, and before that happens, I will let the others stuff grass in your mouth or bury you in dirt."

There is no shouting, but her eyes are beautiful to watch. All six of her hands look like they are squeezing someone's neck.

Then I reach out and ruffle Enan's hair too while flicking his cat ears a few times to his utter shock.

Tiny Rye doesn't escape either. I lift her and hold her in front of me and stare at her as she stares at me. It is as great a feeling as I had thought it would be. I almost want to hug her too, but I don't push it, and instead, I put her back and boop her tiny, tiny nose while saying, "Biscuit, one deer jerky if you brutally attack this tiny vyssari."

It does not take even a second for Biscuit to twist around, shrink a bit, and jump against her, which finally forces her to make a tiny noise from her serious face. A cute squeak as Biscuit starts licking her face and rubbing himself against her, energetically, but very gently.

Looking to my left, Irwys meets my eyes, scared and worried of what might come, but I just shrug, “We introverts should stand together.”

He nods eagerly in relief.

My last target is Seneca, whose hair is moving wildly and shifting to a darker shade of blue. Even so, I reach towards the hair only to change direction at the last moment and poke her ribs a few times to tickle her.

In revenge, a ball of flames promptly crashes into my face, but I barely notice it, though it would likely kill someone from Easy difficulty.

Satisfied and feeling much better, I close my eyes and breathe deeply.

Life is too short to not rage bait kids.

The kids, silly little things they are, mostly forget what I’ve done half an hour later, and we continue to watch the event together. Well, other than Deva, that girl sure can hold a grudge, though she isn’t shouting anymore. She is suspecting, correctly, that I would do just what I threatened to do.

I’m an asshole.

Rye is resting against my right side, and Biscuit is leaning against her, while Seneca watches, lying with her head on my knee. Irwys is sitting off to my left, sometimes excitedly pointing out things on the screen and showing them to me. Enan, meanwhile, talks to Lily about the lynthari.

There are so many people fighting in the dungeons, and the dungeons themselves come in countless varieties. All of them contain monsters, though power levels differ greatly. There are a few Hard difficulty groups that get wiped out by different Champion grade monsters, as well as some Hard difficulty guys facing off against level 1 goblins.

I know the capabilities of Group 4, so I mostly watch the people from other rounds of Earth's tutorial, especially the Kings.

At this point, I've confirmed that Jean is likely to be the strongest out of all of them, as long as I don't count Vic, obviously. I'm not absolutely sure, but I think his Physique is starting to incorporate any primordial energies that hit him to bolster his healing and increase his durability, and it feels like he's probably gotten an adaptive defense passive that makes him more durable the longer he faces a specific element, primordial energy, or skill.

That boy Maxim with his void wolves is also proving to be interesting. He is young, yet decisive, and now he can summon new shadow monsters so large that one can even fly as it carries him around.

Derick and his wife, Noelle, are still a good duo, and the slim man is faster now, while his attacks and the tattoos on his body seem to be doing a better job of disrupting mana, and they seem to have gone through a huge upgrade.

I'm also curious to learn more about Baek, but most of the time, the laziest king just tags behind his group, and that girl Kang Jiwon, who seems to have gone for the same sort of bulldozer sim gameplay as Lily.

Yet, over all of them and the attendees from the other planet, Vic shines the most, and I'm not just saying that because she's my sister. Her duplicates have been cooperating better and better and always seem to move with clear intent, while her body is easily the most powerful out of anyone from Earth's tutorial.

She isn't as strong as Jean, as fast as Tacita, and doesn't have the regeneration of Lily. But damn, if she isn't impressively durable in her own right, and her strength and speed spike occasionally, almost becoming a match for Jean and Tacita, though it destroys even her enhanced body when she does. And that durability and other capabilities are present in all of her duplicates as well.

But I still have a bit of a hard time figuring out who would win if she and Tacita fought. And I swear it isn't because I have some irrational fear of Tacita, who might be my most natural-born predator.

Once the fights become more boring as people just walk through the dungeons, I turn my attention back to myself as I just notice something. The progress on my body upgrade is slowing down and alleviating

some of the pressure it's been putting on me. It's nothing huge, only around a 20 percent drop in difficulty, and it'll probably spike again soon, yet it still feels like having a horse sized corgi taken off my shoulders, giving me a chance to finally breathe.

Even then, I refuse to stop. I take it as a sign of weakness from my torturer and keep up my assault on the changes being made to my body, working around them in places, while working with them in others, and watching how far I can push them while learning from every change.

And that's when a few more notifications sound off in my head.

Due to the individual enhancements of your body upgrade, and based on your performance so far and the recalculated state of your body, additional adjustments have been applied to your traits to reflect individual enhancements more accurately.

Mana Wavelength Iris 2/3 > Mana Wavelength Iris 2/4

Mana Physique 2/3 > Mana Physique 2/4

And then another one.

Congratulations, you have successfully combined [Accumulation] and [Mana Manipulation]!

A new skill has been created.

You have acquired [Current]

[Current - Level 0 > Current - Level 19]

And then, as I move the tiniest speck of mana through my body.

I knew it was coming, Biscuit knew it was coming, the system knew it was coming.

And yet still I say, fuck the system.

Congratulations, you have acquired a new skill!

[Mana Manipulation]

[Mana Manipulation - Level 0 > Mana Manipulation - Level 74]

Welcome back, my beloved.