

Tutorial 751

Chapter 751 - Open Challenge Circuit begins

One of the first people to return from the event is Tess, who cleared her dungeon with Maya. Making her way over to us, she halts in her steps, seeing us resting there against Wolfy's slowly moving belly as he breathes. Her disciple is sleeping, and her tiny arms are draped over my chest in a manner that almost looks like she's trying to hug something in her sleep.

I would throw millions of people off the balcony for her.

"Tess, if you wake her up, I promise I will be your worst enemy," I say softly before she can say anything.

Speaking just as softly, she replies, "I'm not giving her to you."

"Too late, she likes me more than you. She's my disciple now."

"I'll tell Vega."

"Minions, under current laws, possess no rights save those expressly granted to them by their designated masters. She can't do anything about it, even if you do tell her. But still, please don't tell her."

It causes her to laugh softly. "Are you doing better now?"

"Like 20% better," I answer.

"So the slightest miscalculation is still threatening to tear you apart?"

"You know the saying: what doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

"I don't think that's what it's supposed to mean."

"Too bad. It literally fits my situation. Also, please talk with Lily, if she doesn't join the last event, I don't know what I'm going to do. I might tell Biscuit to attack her or something."

(Food?)

"Yes, Biscuit. Lily is food."

(Not a Friend?)

"Yup. Annoying, stubborn, food."

(Asshole!)

"Surely you didn't mean me. Tell that to her," I react.

The blonde turns to our healer. "Lily?"

"Maybe I will participate, maybe I won't," Lily answers.

Tess turns back to me. "I did what I could."

"That was a pathetic attempt, Tess, even from my socially inept point of view."

"Too bad, right?" she smiles. "Want me to bring anyone over for you to talk to? I know you had plans before."

"I mean... I don't know how useful it'll be. I'm dealing with my body and working on preparations. Soon, I'll get around to making some Manabloc weapons and Manatex clothes so we can send them to Channeler through some Normal difficulty guy. Along with a few other things like mana stones with

training regimens, information, materials for our scientists to experiment on before we return, and all that crap, you probably don't need my help with that."

"I don't, I already dealt with most of it."

"So reliable."

Our conversation then gets interrupted by Samuel, who walks into the area, followed by a few members of his gang from Hard difficulty.

"Sset, that guy disappeared-" The words get stuck in his throat as the view opens for him when he walks around Wolfy and sees me and the bunch of kids resting against me with some of them sleeping.

I lift a finger to my lips and whisper, "Shush. If you wake anyone, I will throw you off the floating island. I'm not joking, ever since we appeared here I've been curious to see what would happen."

I let my hand rest back on the back of Tess's disciple's head and use the opportunity while she's sleeping to caress it. Like a tiny animal, she shifts and pushes against the palm of my hand before breathing out softly.

I would throw billions of people off the balcony for her.

Samuel continues to stare as if the view isn't something he can comprehend, and opens his mouth and closes it a few times.

It gets Deva annoyed as she mutters in a whispering voice, "What are you staring at, old man? Just get moving, you're creepy, and annoying."

Hearing that, I reach out and tap her shoulder. Looking to her left, Deva catches my gaze.

I nod. She nods after a short moment, and I lift my hand again to close it into a fist that I reach toward her. After a bit of hesitation, she fist bumps me with one of her six hands and smirks. Not knowing how it works, she then fist bumps my fist with the remaining two of her left hands.

Tess uses the opportunity to reach Samuel and gesture for him to follow her as she starts explaining some stuff. Maya stays behind and watches them for a moment.

As she turns to me, she giggles. "Poor guy, it almost blew his head off his shoulders."

Waving her hand, she then pulls her disciple Enan away, who just waves towards us and leaves with her, likely for more training.

Adrian completes his dungeon fairly soon after. As expected, his was probably one of the most dangerous, though I'm not sure if it was the most. Maybe it's the toughest he can clear at the moment, maybe he's just doing the bare minimum. It's hard to say what exactly his goal is.

For a while, I've been wondering whether he's already reached the level of an Absolute, but more and more I'm inclined to think that he's not. According to him, Ruby should be able to tell me more, but I'm not dumb enough not to realize he's doing that in hopes of me coming into conflict with her over the other information he shared.

It is likely him thinking I'd trust her more than him and that he wants to show me that in the end she's the same as him, so I need to trust him in a similar manner or something dumb like that. Who the hell knows how alien jerks like him think?

All these people, scheming, preparing, twisting their words, and playing mind games. Yet in the end, it's all simple. The one with a bigger stick wins. Metaphorically. Just what are all these games good for against someone with overwhelming power?

It might be a simple and almost childish view I have, but that's just how I think.

At some point, the body upgrade lets up even more, and as I watch the minion tournament, I have enough freedom to start making Manabloc weapons for the lower difficulties to deliver to Channeler. I'm a very humble man, as shown during Humility's event, but damn, I'm sure some of them are at least

as durable and sharp as any low arcane item, though they lack any fancy effects. Just extremely densely woven and knitted, manifested mana, made to last and endure.

I also take the opportunity to examine [Current], which replaced my [Accumulation], to search for the differences. And as I thought, this one fits me much better. Where [Accumulation] allowed me to accumulate and hold mana, the new skill gathers it into currents that almost instinctively find their way into my body to be caught in the flow of my Mana Cycling.

How would I explain it better? It just syncs smoother with Mana Cycling. They work much better together, and these currents are easier to grasp and channel. As the name suggests, they behave like a current, so they flow more smoothly, but they're not as forceful. But that's already something I've taken into consideration as I've made small modifications to Mana Cycling to maintain the explosiveness of my mana's movement.

Until then, I can make these currents wider or narrower as I wish, and I can modify them. I can even grab currents and change their frequency, and given my experience with splitting my mind, I can make a lot of them.

Of course, all of this applies to my primordial energies as well, and I have ideas for future experimentation. In the end, it makes for a nice addition and feels much more dynamic than the previous skill.

Then, as if reminding me not to slack off, another spike of the body upgrade washes over me, damaging my constructs and forcing me to heal. As I start putting more attention into handling them, I stop creating Manabloc items. Still, a small part of me watches a screen in front of me and the Minion Tournament on it.

Wolfy is participating as well.

That dumb, bus-sized black wolf just curb-stomps everyone who comes face to face with him without any hesitation or shame in the world. After every win, he howls towards the sky, dedicating this glorious victory against little kids to his predecessors or something.

Every time he appears outside of the arena in between his duels, he stands very proudly. I even have a feeling Biscuit is the smallest he has ever been, as if to hide, so he doesn't get connected with this wolf.

Though there are a few minions that make Wolfy work a little. Some powerful red gorilla-like looking animal from people from another planet, a six-armed young thylarin with two primordial energies. Vic's disciple does well too, fighting in a similar way as she does, a demon without a demon heart, but possessed of blood-based powers instead and eyes that seem to be his inborn trait. One day, I'll have to ask Vic what it is.

Lastly, tiny vyssari Rye offers a surprise too when she, caught up in a duel against Wolfy, uses white lightning. It, for the first time, causes Wolfy to raise up his primordial energy to defend against it, though even then, he gets a scorching wound on his butt.

This time, Biscuit, watching it, lets out a noise that sounds almost like a snort of disappointment.

Wolfy nearly seems like he heard it as well and goes full ham, his figure turning pitch black with golden eyes glowing deep within. Each of his steps devours the area around him as he rushes the tiny vyssari.

Rye waits till the last possible moment and lifts her tiny arm, shooting white lightning she has been gathering into the shape of a javelin. That bright white then meets pitch black in a bright flash, and before the black wolf can reach her, she forfeits, appearing outside near Tess, who congratulates her.

I would throw a trillion guys off the balcony for her.

Meanwhile, Wolfy trashes inside like the spoiled kid he is, and when the all-devouring darkness around him disappears, there is a new wound on him, though it's not deep. A scorched patch of fur above his heart.

As he appears outside, he angrily stands up to move towards Rye, but before he takes a step, he entirely halts his movement, and slowly his head turns with fear in his eyes towards Biscuit in my arms.

The puppy-form corgi lets out a quiet, deep growl, causing the black wolf to pull back his ears and lower himself to the ground with his tail tucked underneath him. Biscuit's primordial energy, the same as the wolf's, flickers weakly in the air, though even this shows much more pressure than Wolfy ever did. It feels all-reaching, hiding in the shadow of everyone here. Raw and predatory.

(Fight. Friend?) Biscuit sends a single message towards the black wolf.

That causes the black wolf to lower himself even further in shame.

Well, it is clear that Biscuit draws a clear line for fights undertaken during the events, and something done out of anger and doing so on the outside is just not allowed.

"Call him a bitch," I whisper to the corgi.

To that, he just bites at my finger and gently keeps biting it between his sharp, needle-like teeth.

The rest of the minion event continues calmly, with Wolfy winning and soon after leaving along with all the other disciples, saying goodbye to their masters. I pity that Vega isn't here, as unfortunate as it is, but to my surprise, tiny Rye gestures at me to lower myself in front of her before she leaves.

I do so while getting on my knee, and she gently pats my arm as high as she can reach up to. She doesn't say anything at all.

I would throw a quadrillion black wolves off the balcony for her.

The last event starts with 24 hours of the tournament remaining, and it makes sense considering what that event is about. That time might be needed.

The event rules are simple.

The Open Challenge Circuit begins when the first participant enters the designated arena. The participant remains inside and receives continuous 1v1 challenges until their defeat. After a loss, the victorious challenger remains inside the arena and continues facing incoming opponents.

The system does not restore health, mana, energy, or any other resource between challenges. All participants must rely on their current capabilities.

Points are assigned based on the number of opponents defeated, the ranking of those opponents, the final ranking achieved, and the overall strength level of the defeated opponents.

A participant remains within the arena until they are defeated. New challengers start without pause, with challengers selected from the active challenger pool.

This event includes participants from both Nythis and Earth.

When the system registers a participant as dead, that participant is immediately healed and relocated outside the event area.

I kind of expected someone to be an asshole, for some guy from Hell difficulty to jump in and wipe the floor with all the Easy, Normal, and Hard difficulty guys challenging them. But it doesn't happen.

The first to appear inside is some thylarin seemingly from Easy difficulty, and then the Open Challenge Circuit starts.

After a long fight where they use simple skills and uncommon items, he defeats a human who also feels like they've come from Easy difficulty. While the winner barely rests, another challenger, an Easy difficulty thylarin, appears, and the fight starts again. The first guy wins again, but at this point, his wounds are getting worse, and after two difficult fights, he seems to be getting tired.

Yet he still wins a third fight and lifts his four shaking arms high into the air while bellowing in a primal shout.

Plenty of people outside shout as well in excitement. Many of them are drinking and sitting around, with many more grilling and eating all kinds of food. Some even bring furniture out of their residences and watch from nice spots under trees. I even notice groups sitting on the edges of the floating island with their legs dangling and watching screens there.

While I sit there outside of our residence and watch with the rest of Group 4, it goes on for hours.

There is a time when one asshole from the Hard difficulty group of Nythis enters, a cocky thylarin with six arms that, with a laugh, wipes out a poor guy from Easy difficulty.

The challenges then pause as the others hesitate.

But only until a thylarin from Hell difficulty steps in. That guy grabs the Hard difficulty asshole by the throat, saying something to him, and then proceeds to break all his arms one after another before throwing him to the ground, where he then stomps on both of his knees.

Likely because of what he said, the Hard difficulty guy doesn't forfeit and instead suffers there in pain, and a few minutes later, the Hell difficulty thylarin stomps on his head.

There is another pause in challenges before a thylarin from Easy difficulty enters, scared for his life. The guy from Hell difficulty just takes a few steps closer and smiles at the guy while putting a hand on his shoulder. Then he forfeits, and the challenges start anew with Easy difficulty guys and no interference from the other difficulties.

The last of the Hard difficulty fighters dies much later, and the first of the Hell difficulty fighters enters. That thylarin with six arms and the huge bow, which he immediately lifts into the air in challenge. His body is covered in yellow tattoos marking his blue skin as his opponent appears as well.

Lily.

The second she appears, arrows reach her as she moves swiftly, avoiding both of them. The thylarin, meanwhile, gets to work putting more distance of two miles in between them, launching more arrows at her that she deflects with her axes and lowers her body. She bursts forth at incredible speed, moving unpredictably as she mimics kinetic movement through sheer bodily power and the regeneration she possesses.

It becomes obvious that the thylarin won't be able to continue putting distance between them with her speed, so he throws the bow away, and the yellow tattoos become thicker, covering more than two-thirds of his skin. The pressure around him becomes stronger, and he feels even more dangerous than he was with the bow.

Lily doesn't let that stop her. She reaches him, ducks under his attack, blocks another fist, and moves in a confusing manner, before bursting forth with speed and dancing around him to slam a palm against his chest. With an almost playful ease.

There is no burst of gray mana as she hits him, but she staggers back as one of his fists slams against her face. Her nose and cheekbone break, caving her face in, but a mere second later, both snap back in place and heal.

The thylarin, meanwhile, looks confused and, with a weird expression, puts his hands against his chest, surprised to see no wound, but panicking more and more. He opens his mouth to say something, but coughs up blood. He then moves to take a step ahead, but sways and almost falls.

His skin starts melting and falling off in long pieces, revealing bare muscles that immediately start breaking apart, disintegrating. He coughs again, covering his mouth. Flesh disintegrates from his blood-soaked hand, and it falls off, and he coughs again.

He then proceeds to vomit out his insides and fragments of bone while his body is left staggering around, as it breaks apart.

Finally, he falls down and, as he hits the ground, his body breaks apart into disparate pieces with a sickening wet noise.

Lily remains standing and looking at that mess. There is no mantle, no visible gray mana around her.

She just calmly turns around and awaits her challenger.

Chapter 752 - It almost makes sense

The first person to challenge Lily is another thylarin with six arms, wielding a dagger in each hand. There's no waiting around either, the fight starts immediately with a sudden burst of speed.

The arena remains the same, a huge floating island with a few dozen other islands of various sizes floating around it. Some of them are connected to the main one with long vines, others float along freely. Some hold forests, others are covered in mountains, and still more are flat planes blanketed in lush grass. It all takes place high up in the blue sky, among the clouds, through which the orange light of the sun shines.

On that main floating island, Lily and the thylarin clash at high speed. He is faster than her, and four of his daggers do slice into her flesh, only to break against her bones. The remaining two prove to be much more durable and sharp. They sever Lily's arms and one of her legs, and he twists around to go for her head.

Before he has an opportunity, the stumps of her limbs elongate and stretch, reaching out to the disembodied limbs and reconnecting them, giving Lily a set of creepily long limbs. Bones pierce her skin from the inside and form an armor on her neck and forehead, carved with deep grooves from the weapons, but enduring.

Her long limbs then move like a snake, the bones within breaking and reforming as she grabs hold of the man.

In a panic, he moves to cut them off, but they squeeze and break the bones in one of his legs before he can cut it off and stagger back. Using the opportunity, Lily restores her limbs, returning her body to its original shape.

Lowering herself, she heals much faster than her opponent and charges him. Though still fast, with his still crippled leg, he just can't match her speed anymore, and the palm of her hand slams against his chest as she takes his slashes before jumping back and fixing her clothes. Her wounds, even those from their last clash, regenerate at a speed fast enough to be seen with the naked eye, while her opponent is forced to stagger around.

The same as before, but much faster, likely because of his weaker body, her opponent's skin melts, his muscles disintegrate, and he breaks into a coughing fit before vomiting out pieces of his insides and his bones. His body breaks apart as before, too.

After that, ten more people challenge her.

A number of them are from Earth, though the heavy hitters still haven't appeared yet, as if they were giving her an opportunity to enjoy the event. Lily wins each of these fights, some of them without even using mana, simply relying on her body's power and natural regeneration.

The longer it goes on, the more people realize she is a healer first, as she even restores a cut-off head or does not die as a projectile cuts her body in half. Like an undying Terminator, or some eldritch monster, her body twists and reforms as she stands up each time. When needed, she grows more arms, she elongates her torso. She starts changing her size mid-fight to confuse martial arts specialists.

She even faces people with powerful bodies head on, forming her "Skele-suit," as I still call it. Bones protrude from her skin to form armor from, well, her bones, a material likely more durable than many arcane materials one could use for armor.

Then, there is her new way she uses [Disintegration] combined with her healing. It pierces through armor, it has almost no visual signs, and it eats away at even the most durable people in the same terrifying way.

Some of her opponents try to snipe her and keep their distance, but Lily's fast and reaches them in mere moments. Some try to bombard her, but cause next to zero damage to her, and she proceeds to throw boulders at them at supersonic speeds. There are a few that try to tire her out, but she attacks aggressively, moves faster, and still doesn't even bother to use any of the fake organs she's prepared for sacrifice, nor has her hair shortened.

She faces ten more, including Noelle, Derick, and Monte.

And she wins, though each of these fights takes an effort from her. But Lily keeps pushing, not showing any sign of wanting to stop as she stands there with her wounds closing just as quickly as before, even without her actively healing.

"Do you think she can push it to the end and murder everyone here? I don't think she's going down until someone like Tacita goes in," Maya mutters.

"There goes the fourth event," Dennis snickers by her side as his brother does the same.

"Does it matter?" Tess says with a smile as she rocks back and forth in the rocking chair she brought outside. "Just let her enjoy the event. We've all had our dose of fun."

Everyone here seems to agree, and though our group gets some glances that seem to be begging for one of us to go in and put an end to this, no one does, though.

Earth currently has 200-300 people in Hell difficulty, and out of them, around 70-90 are also in Beyond. At least, that's our current estimate.

After three events, we've also come to estimate that the other side might have more people in Hell difficulty, but a similar amount on lower floors on average, and likely far fewer people in Beyond. The current estimate is that they have just 50 of them.

More people enter to challenge Lily, only to be defeated as well. No one can deal with her improved [Disintegration]. Just a single clean hit from her proves enough to end the fight.

Though there is one speedy guy who moves around her mid-range, throwing projectiles and using gravitational energy to slow her down while chipping away at her health. That guy dies anyway. At one point, he just starts slowing down and coughing up blood. It makes me wonder if Lily may have released some sort of toxin into the air, or a nearly invisible cloud of [Disintegration] particles.

But it is not like the others are weak, so though she still holds strong, her resources are beginning to run out. Her mana doesn't replenish sufficiently to keep up, and she starts running out of her sacrificial organs and begins sacrificing her hair, which she always seemed to value and which seems to make a good [Sacrifice] for that reason. Later, she moves to her fingers just to gain new bursts of mana or strengthen her body.

When it comes to her final duel, she stands there with one of her arms entirely missing, hair cropped short, and a missing eye, as her chest heaves with exhaustion. Fifty-three. That's how many Hell difficulty combatants fell to her, among them quite powerful Beyond-level fighters as well.

Her last opponent is Jean, who joins in to challenge her. Not to exploit her weakness, but to give her a chance to go all out against someone proper, rather than some hyena waiting to take her down. Even I can see that this makes her the slightest bit happier as she smiles and stands up taller.

Jean doesn't even get into his usual battle-maniac act, he smiles at her in a similar fashion and takes a step forward, stomping on the floating island they are on. In an explosion of the raw force of his strength, the island shakes, and cracks appear throughout its entirety. And while the two of them face

each other, the island cracks and splits into two pieces, with each of them on one piece. Both of these pieces continue to float in the air, bouncing and crashing against each other.

He charges in first and, in a powerful leap, shoots at Lily, which causes his piece of the island to be pushed back under the immense force of his momentum.

Lily smiles even more, and she takes a deep breath. I watch her face, big on the screen, her bangs falling onto her single eye. Her pupil widens, and she takes another breath just as Jean is almost there. Then, one of the small, fake hearts she made for sacrifice awakens and beats just once before breaking.

The frequency, the rhythm, everything other than the power of the output is entirely identical to my Sealed Ignition Heart.

Yellow flames of primordial thermal energy seep through her body, dancing across her hand along with the gray of her [Disintegration].

One of her ankles breaks in a sudden burst of speed as she avoids Jean's punch, and the piece of the island under her gets hit with that force, creating a huge crater and sending it spinning away through the sky. Jean quickly changes direction, jumping on the smaller pieces floating around and following Lily.

Another one of her ankles breaks as she charges against him this time.

For a moment, it almost looks like her fist will meet with his body, but Jean uses his [Pull] on her, just slightly enough to throw her off balance, and then makes use of his longer reach. His fist meets her head, and even with all the durability inherent in her body, it explodes, finally ending her fourth event.

Lily appears outside near us, confused for a moment but quickly regains composure. She looks around, her eyebrow moving as if asking me what I think about the trick she pulled with her fake heart. And I know what she did. She likely knows my Ignition Heart better than me, better than that catboy. And with how much talent she has dealing with this kind of stuff, it almost makes sense.

Almost.

As I stare at her, I cannot stop thinking about how ridiculous that all was, and how little sense it actually makes.

After all, for that shortest heartbeat, she just created that weak connection to a primordial energy that she knows the best from experimentation on me, by mimicking my heart and the way it was formed.

Just as the Ruler of Kindness once did when she and Pride bestowed demon hearts upon the first hundred Progenitor demons.

The next to challenge Jean is Sophie, causing the smile he had on his face to disappear the moment he spots the mind mage. The mood around him shifts immediately, and the pressure intensifies.

Neither he nor Sophie speak.

Sophie's swarm of mana constructs surrounds her, all of them shooting throughout the area, at which point they start preparing barriers and fields. Meanwhile, Blackie leaves her shadow, reaches Jean, and enters his. Jean lets it all happen, and as his own shadow tries to restrict him, he moves anyway. His muscles bulge, twist, and pull as he walks, tearing at his shadow, which stays behind with Blackie, who instead throws itself into a pile of rocks and grows into a golem twice Jean's height.

The bearded man doesn't even turn around, he just swings his arm, his strength in combination with some active skill, tearing the golem apart and throwing the pieces away.

Projectiles reach him, but each one shifts slightly as he tugs on them with his [Pull], and they all miss while crashing into the space around him.

He then reaches into the air, dragging his arm in a pulling motion towards himself.

The piece of floating island Sophie is on first begins to shake as it's drawn toward him. That enormous mass of floating stone. At first, it moves slowly, but its speed continues to increase, with his muscles shining in sweat as if he weren't just pulling with a skill, but with his body as well.

I'm sure Sophie launches a barrage of mental attacks against him, but I also know Jean, for some reason, has a very deep hatred of mind mages. Out of all Earth's tutorial participants, his mental defenses are among the best. Even so, as the floating island crashes against him in an explosion of debris and rock, his movements stop, and his expression turns blank.

His fingers straighten and pull together, and his hand moves in a stabbing motion towards his own head. His fingers pierce his eye and head towards his brain, only for his hand to stop at the last moment.

Jean regains his senses and pulls that hand out slowly, together with the remaining pieces of his eye. His blood is dripping down his face and from his fingers to roll down his forearm, yet he refuses to break eye contact with Sophie.

Likely because, by reaching a closer distance, he breaks through her natural barrier and defenses and pulls her body towards him, causing her to shoot like a rocket at him. His bloodied hand grabs her around her neck, and just as he squeezes, she disappears, only to be replaced by Blackie, with whom she switched places.

That black shadow twists and coils around Jean, attempting to hold him back. Stones from the area continue to be grabbed by Sophie's bond as he tries to grow back into a golem, yet the man doesn't even seem to care about him. The damage caused by Blackie seems to be doing even less than before, and each step Jean takes just breaks the bond apart.

Sophie, meanwhile, stands about a mile away on another floating island as it moves through the air. Around her, rocks form into dense javelins, further sharpened by her mana and littered with parts of her swarm clinging to them, covering them in inscriptions to make them stronger. She does all of it incredibly quickly, possibly tapping into thought acceleration a little bit or having plenty of these things stored and prepared. She also must know that the more she uses attacks against that man, the weaker they temporarily become, so her manipulation stays in reserve.

Her projectiles launch at him at high speed, just as he begins pulling on the floating island she stands on. It is incredible to watch it shift and gradually pick up speed, as if moved by the sheer strength of a single body.

Stone projectiles are pulled, redirected, and smashed through, and Jean bends down and grabs a piece of stone.

Sophie immediately moves to dodge, just as Jean pulls back and throws it with full force.

A loud thud sounds as the stone launches, and I see Sophie watch it with wide-open eyes.

And nothing happens, causing Jean to tilt his head in confusion, only for both of them and us outside to realize at the same time what just happened.

The stone just disintegrated under the sheer force of the throw.

Unfazed, Jean stretches his hand toward a nearby floating island, and a chunk of metal-like ore rips from its side, hurtling through the air and slamming into his hand with a heavy thump.

Without hesitation, he pulls back again, buries his feet into the ground, and throws. And though Sophie tries to dodge, a sonic boom thunders, and one of her legs explodes into a burst of pink mist.

Chapter 753 - A glass of juice

Another piece of metal ore gets pulled into Jean's hand, and he throws it. It breaks through the barriers, slowing down a little with each one, and even then, the fire shield melts it into glowing liquid metal, which begins to drop and fall across Sophie's body, burning through her skin.

The same happens with another, bigger piece, and liquid metal splashes across Sophie's face, burning her lips and chin.

Jean throws Blackie away again, and while pulling at the piece of stone Sophie's standing on, he continues to throw anything that comes into his hand her way.

And when it looks like the last piece will blow off her head, she disappears, only to be replaced with Blackie.

Jean turns around, pulling Sophie towards him at the same moment stone spears pierce the ground under him. It almost looks like he will shrug it off, but I notice how different they are, much denser and more durable, likely having been prepared over the duration of the fight.

They skewer Jean, a few of them piercing through his body, and yet even that doesn't stop him. Once again, he holds Sophie up by the throat.

"I could have killed you instead of doing this, but I want to tell you one thing. Don't step in my way. You are only alive because of the deal I made with your friend." He holds her throat as he continues to squeeze.

"Yeah? Then come on and try to get me outside. I'll take you down with me every time, you bitch" she hisses and puts her hand on his.

Jean squeezes, and Sophie's head pops from her body and falls down, followed by the body.

Standing there, his expression turns blank. Then his hands start moving. He starts tearing off pieces of his body, revealing his rib cage, tearing out his organs, and throwing away one of his legs. In the end, he grabs his beating heart, which seems bigger than it has any right to be, and squishes it, disappearing from the event at the same time.

Another challenger appears. The thylarin woman who just stares at where Jean was with a confused expression.

The challenges renew with the rest of the group finally participating.

Izzy wins against multiple Hell difficulty guys before she ends up facing Min-Jae, who exploits his longer range and spends the fight fleeing from Noodle while sniping both of them with a particular focus on Izzy. It ends up being one of the longer fights, but he does win in the end. He then goes on to win against another Hell difficulty thylarin before beating both Dennis and Aaron, one after another.

When Maya gets her turn, though, he loses, even though he can throw bus-sized boulders at her like it's nothing. He still can't break through her dark blue armor, and by using Boost, she moves herself through the air as if she were leaping off the air itself. Then, at close range, he has no chance, even as he puts up a truly impressive fight.

Maya gets to face Klara, the redheaded king of the 2nd round of Earth's tutorial. Both of them are nearly equal and seem to have a lot of fun before Maya just barely squeaks out loss in the end. Klara then gets defeated immediately by one of the stronger thylarin guys because of her wounds.

For a few rounds, some other people get to have some fun. Gareth, Brainiac, Yama, and a few of the more powerful thylarin before Tess joins in.

Then it is twenty wins for her in a row.

The moment someone appears, she shamelessly puts a five-mile distance in between them, using her flight and speed to do so. And from that distance, she just snipes them down, either by just using Endurium javelins or, for the more dangerous opponents, her railgun-like attack. With impressive single-target piercing damage, barely anyone endures more than a few attacks, and with her talents, Tess saves a lot of her resources.

There are fewer and fewer people as time goes on, and it becomes obvious the event is coming to a close when finally Savant participates as well.

The moment he appears, he pulls out his Sword of Aeons and absorbs the movement of some of the floating pieces of the island and uses that kinetic energy to charge Tess, who continues to put more and more distance between them.

Red and white lightning crackles around her hair and body as she moves from side to side, avoiding something I can't see from my place outside the event, and her projectiles often get their kinetic energy absorbed or deflected by his sword. Orange light starts ramping up around Savant, often shooting and expanding far into the distance in a single direction, which Tess is straining to avoid at all cost.

And though she is trying to put distance between them, Savant proves himself just as fast, not allowing her to do so.

"My power answers to me alone," Tess declares, and multiple attacks shoot from her.

This time, the man fails to absorb any of them. A javelin stabs into his side, and the one about to pierce his chest he deflects with his left arm, which he absorbed so long ago, along with its durable bones.

Finally, Tess charges him with all the lightning pulled close to her body, her blonde hair flowing around her head. Her movements are fast and explosive, like a mix of Maya's trained martial arts and Lily's unpredictable brutality. In her arms, a spear made entirely of red and white lightning forms, and it continues to shrink and elongate as she needs to confuse her opponent.

Meanwhile, Savant moves as little as possible and always does so as sharply as he can. His eyes don't seem to even blink as he wields his weapon and continues attempting to pressure Tess with his [Dawn].

I continue to watch their fight as I stand up and gently set Biscuit back on the ground. I wave at the others and start walking towards my room.

The door into the house opens with a creak, and I grab some snacks left on the table as I pass by.

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

Reaching the stairs, I start walking up with the wood creaking under my feet just as Savant avoids another stab from Tess, dropping his sword in the process, only for the orange light to cover his arm. He swings at her, resulting in a splash of her blood pouring from the wound he's caused.

Lightning around Tess sizzles, burning off the blood and stopping the bleeding, and from ten miles away, a javelin comes flying. The one she'd been setting up even as they fought. It comes flying with high speed from behind Savant just as her hand touches his shoulder, and lightning stuns him for a moment.

The javelin bores a hole through his chest and barely misses Tess, who immediately goes in for the kill.

I open the door into my room, take the blanket off the two boxes on the ground, and sit on one of them. The conical metallic shape of the warheads always seems so eerie, especially now.

On the screen, the second heart Savant absorbed finally beats. The one he hadn't been using until now, in an attempt to hide it from me. Thinking I wouldn't notice, though I saw through him the very moment he showed up here.

That heart sends void energy through his body and reaches out towards Tess, tearing her lightning apart to her sheer surprise. Her hand slams against his neck, wounding it, but not killing him, as it now lacks any mana.

The next moment, Savant moves his more durable left arm, finally killing her in the end.

As she disappears, he stands there calmly and touches his neck while moving his head from side to side and checking his state.

The next moment, Tacita appears inside, and all of that goes out of the window as he goes into full panic mode. His body turns to a blur as he damages his ligaments and muscles with the movement, and he barely dodges a slash through the air where he just stood. He doesn't even get a moment to breathe as she disappears, with just a glowing line tracing the air around her dagger coated in mana.

Orange light explodes towards her, but this time her field doesn't seem to activate. She just steps through it as if it wasn't there and totally outspeeds her opponent with a series of attacks ending with a dagger stabbed into his chest.

Savant moves back, pulling it out and throwing it on the ground, and in the next moment, much more mana blasts out of him, all pulled from the sword he holds. And he pours all of it into powering his domain skill.

Unfortunately, Tacita's already vanished, nowhere to be seen.

Like a stable light, that orange color of his [Dawn] fills the area when he locates Tacita. She is now two miles away, sitting on one of the smaller floating boulders and just watching him.

Everyone must realize how crazy her movement is, especially as she uses no mana. It is different to use your Dexterity or mana for sudden bursts of high speed, but to keep it up for a longer period of time? And with such ease and no wounds at that? She's the only person I have met so far who can do that.

I don't even watch all that closely, as I'm sure of her victory, especially against her wounded opponent. Instead, I carefully pick up the warheads and set them both on the ground next to each other while I sit in front of them.

The body upgrade, though still ongoing, isn't as dangerous as it was at the start, and I push it into the background as I feed my mana into the batteries that have been placed in the metal cones and activate the logic cores, one after another. The entire setup around the warheads lights up and starts letting out a deep, barely audible hum.

Savant, as expected, dies to Tacita's dagger, and a new challenger appears inside after ten seconds of waiting, as no one else remains or seems willing to enter and face her.

My sister in her full glory.

A blink. A cut.

Victoria's head is sent flying, cleanly separated from her neck.

The span of a heartbeat passes.

A new body regrows from her severed head. A new head grows from her neck, too. Both Victorias move at high speed, forcing Tacita to dance around with her incredible movement speed to avoid both of the attackers. The pressure of that high speed causes the Victorias to break apart across the ground.

From these pieces, five duplicates stand up, only for Tacita to turn into a blur. When she stops, all five duplicates break into cut off pieces.

One Victoria regrows and smashes into the ground, causing a huge explosion, and the use of such a surge of strength breaks the body. From it, two duplicates reform, moving like a blur in between the falling pieces and running at Tacita.

I force myself to take my eyes off the screen and continue launching the protocols and gathering more of the mana in my body. I continue to do my checkups and partially trigger my preparations, lastly performing one last test to see if what I have planned will work out.

[Manifestation - lvl 29 > Manifestation - lvl 30]

[Manifestation - lvl 30 > Manifestation - lvl 31]

[Ley Line - lvl 69 > Ley Line - lvl 70]

All seems well, and I allow myself to watch the rest of the fight, already knowing the result.

As stubborn as she can be, Victoria is also a very logical person. If it's not a life or death situation, she will never show her full capabilities, even when doing so might let her win. When we fought Lissandra, she must have noticed and understood how much Victoria was holding back. In the end, Lissandra called Victoria an Absolute candidate, and that says plenty.

It is likely that Victoria didn't go into this fight with the thought of winning, so much as to gather more data on one of the most deadly attendees currently in any round of the tutorial. A future S rank, feeling like it should be nearly impossible for her not to become one.

And Tacita just doesn't slow down, quite the opposite. The longer the fight goes on, the more she seems to be getting warmed up, increasing her speed even now as she supports her Dexterity with a small moment of mana use.

Ten Victorias, all tearing their bodies as they overclock themselves to their fullest capacity and generate incredible speed and strength, barely cause her any trouble as she dances in between them. She throws daggers with perfect timing. She avoids attacks like she can sense them through her instincts, and she just does not slow down.

One more Victoria regrows from one of the pieces, and for a moment, she stands there, looking at her opponent. Then Victoria nods.

"I have lost," she says and leaves the event.

The next moment, a final challenger appears. Adrian stands there, facing Tacita, who, for the first time, enters her camouflage and disappears from all senses and sight.

Taking it as a signal, I go all in and activate the trigger I made. Once it is activated, it cannot be stopped, and it will cause the warheads to explode.

Tacita's blurry movement comes to a halt just as she reaches Adrian. The field around her becomes visible and flickers out as she's held in the air by that transparent red half-figure behind the man. She throws her daggers at him, but both of them stop mid-air as if they've just hit a wall and fall to the ground. Tacita almost hisses as she struggles to get away from the firm grip. It all seems almost dreamlike for her to get caught seemingly so easily after all of that.

She swings with another dagger she pulls from her clothes, but it doesn't damage the figure at all. Her field fails to activate again.

Adrian lets go of her, and she stands there, shocked, as her feet touch the ground again.

No one can follow her as she bursts into motion at high speed and grabs the two daggers she threw at Adrian before. The transparent red figure disappears, and the man takes on a battle stance.

It looks like time slowed down on the screen as I watch her reach him while swinging her dagger in a movement that's hard to even perceive.

Adrian moves his hand ahead and strikes her forearm, redirecting her attack. His other hand moves to the other side as he does the same with her other attack. Then, while she is thrown off balance, he moves at a burst of speed higher than hers. He moves in front of her and slams his fist into her belly.

As Tacita staggers back, she seems to be falling down, but it's more like she's using the momentum of that to redirect her body to explode into another burst of movement.

Before she can do that, Adrian reaches her again. One of his hands strikes her wrist again, causing her to release one of her daggers; which he then grabs and thrusts the blade into her chest in another burst of speed. Then the transparent red figure forms over him again and slams down with both hands with fingers woven together, and crushes the woman.

I turn back to the warheads and fully release the trigger, and start counting down the seconds as the lights of the inscriptions start shining brightly and the hum intensifies. A high pitch starts ringing through the space in a constantly repeating rhythm that almost feels like a heartbeat.

"Nathaniel, I'm here, waiting for you," I hear from the screen, the same as everyone else.

I stand up and move towards the table from which I take a bottle of the juice they left here for me, pour it into a glass, and take a sip.

Then, taking another sip, I look towards the screen and glance at the warheads. The light is now very bright, and the pitch might start to damage my ears soon. People outside begin noticing it too, and the rising temperature starts setting the room on fire.

The glass in my hand cracks from the heat and breaks, spilling the juice on the ground, and I watch as the blanket burns while licking my fingers.

I say towards the air, "Ruby, I know you're probably watching, so just one thing. I have seen many people bring precharged attacks into the 4th event. For example, that thylarin guy who charged up his sword with oscillating mana or Maya pre-compressing her mana, and plenty of others. I can give you every example as I made sure to remember them. So, I count these two warheads as the same thing. You guys better keep it that way and make sure Diligence doesn't try to say it's against the rules and leave it outside."

I take a step forward and come to a stop in front of the warheads as I say, "Otherwise, if they stay here, quite a few people will be blown to bits."

Then I challenge the man standing in the arena through the tournament system notification.

I appear in front of Chris, who smiles at me and then twists his head in confusion at the two brightly glowing warheads in between us.

"What..." he doesn't get to finish as I manifest what looks like a transparent avatar behind me.

It's dark blue, but in places it is brightly light blue, with all the scars I now have showing on it. All my scars and all my constructs as well. My physique, my circuits, the pathways too. It's densely covered in them.

My manifested vessel through which I can channel all the mana I have, instead of forcing it through my weak body.

Then, both of the warheads explode at the same time.

Chapter 754 - Vessel

The flash blinds me, and I observe the rest with my other senses. The initial fireball heats up, reaching a temperature I can't even begin to grasp properly. It quickly grows, surrounding both of us and reaching further. Everything inside it is set ablaze.

I grab currents of heat from the explosion between us. It is the hottest I've ever dealt with... until now, and dealt is a strong word. Thankfully, there's no need to deal with a body upgrade if you may as well not have a body.

All of my muscles turn to ash that is then blown off as my skeleton is thrown through the air at high speed.

The fireball from the explosion spreads much further as the two explosions merge into a single burning sphere. My eyes restore themselves just for a moment, long enough to see the color of the explosion shift from bright white to more of a yellow splotched with white.

Only my absorption of the kinetic energy of the shockwave and the heat of the explosion stops my skeleton from disintegrating right where I am. Everything else around me breaks apart and melts, with the strong winds throwing everything, me included, far into the distance.

There are just two places I bother to protect more than the others, my chest cavity with my hearts and my brain. All the while, I absorb as much of that heat as I can and channel it through the only thing that remains, my bones, which are glowing brightly with the myriad inscriptions I etched into them before and throughout the tournament.

My manifested vessel behind me takes over all that pressure. This vessel has been created thanks to a part of my mind I've named Mapthaniel, which, for months, has been using a big part of my mental capacity to map out my body to learn about myself as much as possible. After all, I need all that information for [Manifestation] to work.

The vessel allows me to work in such a way that my mind is left as the only limiting factor. Especially now that I have a low pristine passive, allowing me to push further and further, I realized more and more that it was mostly my body limiting me. All these useful if restricting constructs, these annoying pathways, are all now hosted in the vessel I've manifested, with my mana heart connected to it through [Ley Line],[Manifestation], [Redistribution], and [Mana Manipulation].

The arena turns into a burning hell. All the floating islands are destroyed, blasted away, with the heat feeling like it might burn away at reality itself. Just a tiny piece of my skin remains, and under it, my passive activates. It combusts under the skin, powered by all the heat I've been redistributing into thermal energy. More skin regrows, the combustion continues, and my body regenerates in mere heartbeats. Much faster than pre-tournament, and not only thanks to that immense heat. It is thanks to my impressively low Constitution.

Then, as my body restores, it burns again to restore again, in unending cycles as the superheated air melts my flesh, face, eyes, everything, only for my passive to restore it so I can suffer again.

And yet, I'm not being counted as dead.

I am not thrown out of the event.

My restored teeth clack against each other on my face, which is mostly just a skull without flesh, as I feel like laughing out loud. I use my vessel to grab all that never-ending heat and thermal energy and start converting it into mana.

I reach towards a halo of spinning mana I've placed inside my skull, around my brain, and that I have been feeding mana the entire tournament, whenever I could.

It's more than enough to make my body explode, to break me even further than it already has. Yet it doesn't. My vessel takes on all that strain. It perfectly mirrors my movements, slightly transparent dark

blue with bright pale blue glowing scars and a myriad of inscriptions of my constructs. Just like Adrian's half-figure, it stands behind me, though mine is only a head taller than I am.

I move my hand, and my vessel copies the movement. Only it has a halo of mana over its head, and that halo quickly turns pitch black. I use it to power [Focus] and slide as far into thought acceleration as I can.

My body regenerates further, flesh and skin regrowing over bones that seem like they're steps away from melting apart, and I hold on to the heat that's swimming around me. The destruction is now far-reaching, going so far as to ignite islands several miles away. As my eyes restore again, I can see a bright yellow sphere burning in front of me.

Just three seconds have passed since I entered the event.

My vessel moves according to my will, and it channels all that mana. It then compresses it, and the dark blue of the mana it is made of turns black.

Pitch black, with the light blue scars still mirroring the positions they've taken up on my body, and two points of blue and golden light where my hearts glow inside. Though it is just a shape of me and does not see, two golden circles form where the eyes should be.

I move my hand together with the vessel, and a sphere of black mana surrounds us, fully closing us off from the outside world. All the shockwaves, destruction, and heat disappear as if they never existed. Then I feel an impact that ripples through the black liquid like a surface, and we're being thrown by an explosion. And I continue to count down.

My body restores itself fully, though it feels like my bones are burning inside of my flesh with a kind of pain I've never felt before. I transfer the rest of the heat into mana, which my black vessel absorbs and uses to power the sphere.

Another attack crashes against that sphere, and I shoot off like a cannonball into the distance.

Seven seconds.

I allow thermal energy from my Ignition Heart to flood me. I partially lift the last seal, just a little bit, as much as I can handle. Thanks to my connection to the vessel, especially thanks to the ridiculous [Manifestation], that thermal energy and mana can't burn through my body. It doesn't even begin to seep into it, instead appearing inside the vessel.

In a way, it is as if the vessel isn't truly outside me, it's more like the vessel is inside my body, a true part of me, and what I'm seeing is just a visualization.

I continue to strengthen the barrier further and further, feeling a ridiculous amount of mana crash against it in powerful, but thankfully, mana-based attacks. I'm being thrown through the arena as someone tries to crack me open like a walnut. It once again makes me realize just how ridiculous black mana is and reminds me of Lissandra's words that there will be no Champion, no mana-based Absolute, not wary of me if I want it.

And it is not just the mana resistance the black sphere has, as it endures it and even absorbs the attacks to make itself stronger. The sphere of black mana is also proving durable against the surrounding heat, as well as whatever aftereffects of the explosion.

Five seconds.

The black mana continues to try to escape my control, a ridiculous amount of it I have never managed before. My minds are all overclocked, thought accelerated, combining and separating into many parts. It all gives me a feeling that I could last as long as I need, and my confidence rises.

Then a crack appears on the sphere, causing me to stare at it.

What a ridiculous alien bastard.

I lift the seal on the Ignition Heart further, flooding my vessel with thermal energy. Those golden flames surround it before I grab it and turn it to mana, but this time, keeping it inside the vessel for use. I gather as much as I can, lifting the seal more and more. Like I'm poking a hole in a dam.

The crack on the sphere spreads further, and the radiation and heat of the surrounding area start flooding in.

Four seconds.

I take a deep breath, and the world around me seems to slow as transparent red fingers slip through the crack and push it wider, while the black mana draws mana from them and leaves them growing steadily paler.

Before the sphere cracks fully, I move all the mana it consists of, and like currents, it floods around me before being pulled to my vessel.

The elongated arm of the red figure pulls back to where Adrian hangs, floating in the air. There is not the slightest mark on his body or his clothes as he floats in front of the fireball, which now burns miles behind him. The colors of that fireball shift from yellow to orange and deep red. From its smoke, a tall mushroom column starts to form. The air itself still feels like it is vibrating, and the heat begins to attack me again.

I move my vessel, and two javelins of black mana shoot ahead, followed by an [Empyrean Lance] that's longer than a bus. The first black javelin disappears, the second one crashes against the barrier and feeds on it, and the lance pierces the same spot, reaching Adrian before that red figure moves and grabs it. The lance breaks in half under its grip.

Adrian's expression is difficult to read, but so are the emotions I've hidden away. Currently, I likely feel like someone wanting to fight, to challenge this man. And he acknowledges it.

The transparent red figure behind him grows in size. At first, it's the size of a small building, then as two. It grows into the shape of a skyscraper and then further, expanding to fill an area of about half a mile.

Three seconds.

One of its arms lifts high in the air, and a staff appears in it. The second one reaches to the side, and a transparent, crystalline sword forms there, which starts absorbing the heat from the area and trapping it inside. An audible boom expands through the area, and from the tip of the staff, an inscription circle spreads through the sky, multiple miles wide.

I let go of every worry, every useless thought. The seal on the Ignition Heart lifts fully, and for the shortest moment, thermal energy at the level of a powerful Champion floods my vessel from its center, where the shape of my thermal heart is. All my minds combine into a single one as I do my utmost to turn it all into mana with the aid of the black mana itself that powers the effort, and then takes over all of the mana created.

My vessel grows in size, too, but only until it's about two heads taller than me. The golden circles on the black head look like burning wheels.

Two seconds.

The figure behind Christoph swings down with the staff, and the circle activates. All colors in the area turn red, and from the sky, a single beam of mana shoots from the middle where the inscription was. As thick as my arm, it reaches, aiming at the center of my chest.

All the black mana I've gathered moves in front of me, creating a single, just wide enough, angled segment barrier that deflects the beam as it continues to fall on my position in a constant stream of mana. A huge amount of mana continues to feed into the black mana, causing big, pale blue sparks to shoot from the surface like sparks from an angle grinder.

For a few moments, I block it, and Adrian does not do anything other than shoot at that single spot as we push against each other.

The stream of mana eventually pierces through and drills a hole through the middle of my chest, damaging both of my hearts and piercing through my vessel as well before stretching multiple miles into the distance in an unbroken line.

One second.

Flames flood through my body, pouring from my damaged Ignition heart, combusting and closing the wound, but leaving behind my damaged hearts. Both of them falter, weakening and slowing down.

I grab hold of all the black mana around me, move it again back into the vessel as I watch the other hand of the figure moving, the one holding the building-sized sword. It moves slowly like a giant of immense

weight, but it continues to speed up, the movement cutting through the aftereffects of the explosion and reverberating through the air. It swings the sword, and a bright light explodes toward me. Bright white and yellow.

Yeah, there is no way I'll be blocking that. It's not even mana, just the heat from the explosion gathered together and condensed. Unlike mana, I do not have enough defenses to guard against it.

But do I really need to?

The notification I expected and waited for finally rings.

Congratulations. You have completed all three objectives of your personalized Absolute candidate quest authorized by the system.

- Raise the skill [Mana Manipulation] to Level 75
- Channel 50,000 stat points worth of mana within one second without any external assistance
- Confront a Champion level being without any of its power diminished, alone, for a duration of ten seconds

Congratulations, you have gained the title of Absolute Candidate!

You can now choose 2 of the five personalized rewards.

- low pristine passive
- low pristine item
- three active skills combination token

- trait evolution token

- 1 day Earth visitor token

Undergoing body upgrade has been detected. Your state of an Absolute Candidate will further aid your Individual Enhancement.

Your Mana Physique becomes greatly integrated into your being.

Your Mana Wavelength Iris becomes greatly integrated into your being.

I read that notification in a split second, and a wave of satisfaction washes over me. I love it when things come together.

Then I forfeit the event and get teleported outside to the common area.

Chapter 755 - Where are you headed?

POV Sophie Martinez

When the fight ends, the wall on the side of Nathaniel's room explodes, and I see his figure step through before using that kinetic movement to appear next to us.

We don't say anything, and neither does he, as he looks us over. Then he lies down on the ground before saying, "Lily, I might need a bit of help over here."

The body upgrade that he seemed to have gradually gotten under control, now, for some reason, has begun to ravage his body again.

Lily is beside him before he even finishes, and I see Tess nudging Biscuit and saying, "Go and help him too. Your stupid bond wouldn't ask for help if it wasn't serious."

The corgi moves as well and expands in size to his adult form before jumping on Nathaniel's chest. His weird primordial energy flickers around him, and finally, Nathaniel seems to breathe out in a sigh of relief. Not like it is obvious to see. I'm sure this man is still arrogant enough to think he can handle anything on his own. And I don't know what I should find more ridiculous, the fact that he survived the explosion of two modified thermonuclear warheads directly to the face, or the fact that he did it all while dealing with a body upgrade.

I can estimate most of what he has to deal with, and I heard about his current constitution and his new plan to exploit said low constitution to make deeper changes during the body upgrade. It's even edited his body and constructs enough to let him create what he's dubbed a vessel in combination with the help of an, honestly, ridiculous skill known as [Manifestation].

There are many things that should be causing his death, and yet here he is, scarier than ever.

The image of the thermonuclear warheads exploding and the contrast between his expression and Christoph's surprise still stays in my mind. It is obvious that Christoph is much, much more powerful. Hell, the guy even seems to be more stable than the average Easy difficulty person. But it all stinks, it stinks so much, especially with Izzy telling me that she hasn't noticed Christoph lying, not even once.

Yet, I don't know who I'd bet on if it came down to it.

"Congratulations on having your question as to whether or not you could survive an atomic bomb answered," Tess says, and I think she's talking to distract him from whatever's happening to his body now.

"Tess, it was just two of the smaller ones, it almost doesn't count."

"Nat, I don't think that's how it works. But tell me, how does it feel?"

"A little cool."

"You're going to be a menace when we return to Earth."

"Nah, Tess, humans are scary, and they're just too good at killing. Just wait, some Hard difficulty guy is going to bring magical metals back to Earth, and some country will lock their scientists in a lab. Then they'll create a magic bullet, a weapon, or something that'll be able to kill me. They don't have to erase my body for that, and they'll probably try to shoot out my brain through my eye or something from miles away. That's what I would do."

"Wouldn't you sense the kinetic movement of a bullet heading towards you? I bet you could catch it if you really wanted."

That makes Nathaniel go quiet, though it might be because of his body as he closes his eyes.

"What if they try to shoot me while I'm pooping?" he asks after a few seconds.

Next to me, Izzy chuckles.

I shake my head, checking the timer. Only around 20 minutes remain until the end of the tournament. The 4th event took almost the entirety of the last day. Then I look back at Nathaniel. He's slimmer now. Not in a way that makes him look ill, but that feels as if his body is denser. It's easy to see, even on his face, though his eyes show no suffering, nor do they show any of the effort all of this required.

Maybe I'm the only one other than Lily who fully understands it. That man is just taking it all too casually. As if he's locked into a single goal, the likes of which allows him to ignore things that should break him. And I think I'm the only one to understand another thing, what a glorious mind he has. His incredibly conductive body, his huge mana reserves, his powerful traits and passives, and hearts... I think they are nothing in comparison to his mind.

As someone with the sort of talents I have, I can see it. It's like he thinks differently from us. And by his mind, I don't mean the effort or focus he can put into things, though all of it is impressive. No, what continues to surprise me more and more is his ability to separate his minds, combine, or focus them on a single task, and do all of that at such high speeds.

His ability to throw himself into those currents of thought without worrying about losing himself inside. Not even for a moment does he seem to accept the fact that it could happen, even though he must remember Faora and how shattered her mind became when she tried to do the same.

What a maniac.

"Izzy, did you manage to record everything?" I ask my sister.

Before she can answer, Nathaniel calls, "Sophie, I fucking swear, if you've been supporting her in making those edits of me..."

"Oh, shut up," I shout back at him. "I just want to rewatch what Christoph was doing, his inscription circles, and the other things."

"I have to remind you I'm an extremely petty person, Sophie, if you're lying to you support that terrible hobby of hers, I will have my revenge."

"Will you have your revenge against me, too, Nat?" Izzy asks.

That causes the lunatic to shut up, finally, and Izzy giddily dances with her upper body while giving him a little laugh. I wonder what feelings she just felt.

My sister then leans closer and puts her arm on me while whispering very quietly, "Go over there and help him, too."

I look at her and just nod. I trust Izzy.

Standing up, I say to Nat, "I'm bored, I want to look over the process of your body upgrade."

"Go away," he calls from the ground.

"Biscuit, attack," I say instead.

The corgi looks at me and then at Nat, who stares at him with a blank expression. As always, the cute little animal proves very smart and understanding when he wants to be, and Nat knows what's coming.

"I will have my revenge," the lunatic threatens from where his place on the ground, before Biscuit expands in size and jumps to viciously attack his face.

POV Nathaniel

The tournament's ended, and it's been two days since I found myself back in the Megacity. I spent those two days lying in my bed and dealing with the additional wave of my body upgrade. As a result, my room in the headquarters of the Primordial Knights is destroyed, along with the array that surrounded it. I worry they will have me pay. I've seen the contract, that sum will be high.

I don't even remember what happened very much after leaving the tournament, losing the help of the others made it increasingly difficult. But I dealt with it anyway. I knew I could.

Now I stand up in front of the mirror, tired, but feeling unstoppable as the pain is entirely gone, causing me to feel incredibly light. The body upgrade has finally ended, and its gains are much bigger than I expected.

I used the upgrade to etch deeper inside of me and strengthened each of my constructs as I did, because why the hell not.

I have gained a new chance at trait strengthening. So instead of three, I can now do four. That makes me wonder what the limit is and how long it'll take for my trait to become something as special as Parallax Eyes.

Though this alone would be worth all of that pain and losing out on some tournament rewards.

But I also got a way to manifest what I call a vessel. The same as with improving my constructs, I used the opportunity to map my body and make changes that allow me to manifest that vessel to deal with mana and possibly primordial energies instead of me. It is a temporary solution, of course, and not something I want to rely on.

I still want to be able to channel mana so perfectly that it becomes possible even through a body with a Constitution of 10 or something crazy like that. In a way, manifesting my vessel will be like a clear sign that shit is getting serious.

And of course, there's the fact that I, at times during the body upgrade, ran the Restrictive Training Emblem to increase my stats. Anyone caught in my situation would've done the same. I wonder if that made some parts of the process more difficult, but well, it worked out. In the end, it gained me nearly 40 Strength and Dexterity. Each. And one extra point of Constitution for some reason.

Then there's the fact that I've gained the title of Absolute Candidate, thanks to Adrian. When we started disappearing from the event, I expected him to be angry, disappointed, or surprised. But there was none of that, more than anything, he seemed to be happy. It makes me nervous. Yet another thing to think of.

However, the Absolute Candidate title also improved the body upgrade, as I hoped. I still don't know what my traits being greatly integrated into my being means, but it can't be anything bad.

With the title come the rewards, which I still have to pick from, though I already have a few favorites.

Lastly, the fact that I have this title means my 3rd trait at Level 400 and primary class at Level 450 are going to be monstrous. Like, truly. And even until then, all my offered rewards should be improved. Passives, items, everything.

That's what I really wanted, what I ran after, and now that I have it after all this effort, I don't feel as excited as I thought I would be. I know I'm incomparably stronger than before. Yet, I just feel a bit tired, burned out.

I force myself to smile in front of the mirror, but my reflection doesn't show it. Instead, that asshole stands there with his upper body naked and visible scars tracing his body. My shoulder, side, chest, right forearm, elbow, the one going from the bottom of my left cheek through my neck, and more.

I touch a few of them before just shrugging and putting on a white T-shirt without any print.

Moving across the room, I sit behind the table and start eating a slightly stale, day-old pastry I find on it.

Of course, there's also the matter of my tournament rewards. Though I only won the second event and fought Adrian in the last one, I got myself a spot as 5th in the total rankings. And yet, I can't bring myself to be disappointed. In the end, the tournament almost didn't matter this time.

I open and reread the notification.

Congratulations on completing your 3rd tournament!

The fourth tournament will occur four years from the start of your tutorial. All rounds from Earth's tutorial will compete together against Nythis and 8 other planets undergoing their own tutorial.

Congratulations, you have placed fifth overall in the 3rd tournament of Earth's tutorial. Your rewards have been improved.

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

Please choose 1 out of 3 possible rewards:

- Passive skill combination token (up to mid-arcane rarity)
- Passive skill (mid arcane)
- 1,500,000 shards

So now I'm a bit richer. That's all. The rewards truly are much worse outside of the top three, or maybe I'm just too used to more "luxurious" rewards. It makes me wonder what Adrian even wanted or hoped to gain from the tournament. Though I should meet with Ruby today, and might find out.

Looking at the notification, I also remember what Maya said.

"Do you think Nythis will tell the other eight planets about how this tournament went, and they will all group up against us?"

It can't be, right?

When I exited the tournament before, Ruby summoned me to her weird, neverending space. Then she just checked on me and sent me to a room in the headquarters with a promise to talk later. That's what I try to do now, after finding her where she told me to meet up with her, in one of the smaller restaurants behind the inner walls of the Megacity.

Now, instead of talking about the things we should be talking about, she's just dragging me all over the city. We visit a barber where she pays to get my hair cut and styled. Then we visit a bakery where I get to taste what's probably one of the best cheesecake like things I've ever tasted in my life.

Our next stop is a liquor shop where she has me taste several varieties, then buys a bottle of all the ones I enjoy, even a little. She pays tens of thousands of shards, just for that.

She shows me a tree that Pathfinder Thane planted when she started building the city. It is heavily protected and seems to have produced a few weird orange-like fruits. Ruby tells me she sometimes steals some when Thane annoys her.

I listen to her tell stories from Eladore pre-destruction, about her master Lissandra, and how Ruby was just sent to her to spy before everything changed. I also hear a few stories about pre-Absolute Lissandra, a young girl born into a neverending war.

The entire time, Ruby disrupts my mana any time I try to train, and the whole time, I feel like I have nothing to do.

Lastly, she teleports us to one of the highest places in the Megacity: the roof of the Pathfinder's house.

"I used to be Lioren's Handler, and when he died back then, I did not think much of it," she says, meeting my eyes. "I saw Adrian as less talented, if more ruthless and more willing to do whatever was required. For me, it doesn't matter who it is or what must be sacrificed. I'll support anyone who has even the slightest chance of killing Pride, even if that chance is as small as someone managing to kill Kindness. I

don't care if they are cruel, I do not care who dies because of it, or how many worlds fall. I want Pride dead. That is the heart of my greed."

Looking back at her, I nod.

And she continues, "I met Adrian again two hundred years ago outside the tutorial and put him in contact with Kyralon. At the time, I didn't think much of his plan, and I did not believe he would succeed. What he's done by being reborn on Earth isn't really all that special. What truly borders on the impossible is the system accepting him as an Earth native and letting him enter the tutorial a second time. Even I wouldn't have been able to force something like that. The system isn't easy to fool, and yet he managed it. I also understand what he is doing by sending you to me. He's not foolish enough to believe this is going to change your view of him in any meaningful way. This is him mocking you and mocking me. He thinks he understands people far better than he actually does. His skill is not like your friend's, and it has clear limitations."

"Tell me more."

She does without hesitation, "One of the reasons why so many powerful people are interested in him is that he shares a skill that is also one of Pride's ten. That skill is called [Mirror]. Adrian uses it to reflect your emotions back onto himself, which helps him understand others and turn those emotions to his advantage. It also lets him mirror other things, such as skills, stats, and passives. There are limits at his current level, yet it remains a very powerful one. Adrian might look weak now, but he's always been the type who grows stronger when he's faced with stronger opponents."

"I have a question for you."

"Ask."

"What does he plan to do?"

"I can tell you, but if you're not careful, everyone you care about will die."

"Tell me."

She tells me, and I listen in silence. Soon after, I walk away, leaving Ruby alone on the roof.

A few days later, the Beyond rankings update one more time.

Exploration Leaders

1. Christoph (7th Floor)
2. Adrian (6th Floor)
3. Nyssa Volare (5th Floor)
4. Voss (5th Floor)
5. Orion (5th Floor)
6. Zenith (5th Floor)

I know I have three days, so during that time, I move around the Megacity and head to the 3rd floor of Beyond. Mostly to meet and talk to people from Group 4. I also pick my rewards for the Absolute Candidate quest.

Then I wait.

Just three more days.

POV Earth

A blanket of snow covers the mountains as far as the eye can see. The powerful wind continues to blow, moving the snow through the area in a way that gives it a rough sort of beauty. That view looks like something you would put on the front page of a tourist magazine.

That's where a man appears from the air. He looks to be in his mid-forties, and though he wears thin clothes, the cold doesn't seem to bother him at all.

As he catches sight of a familiar view, he smiles brightly and takes a deep, slow breath. Then another.

He looks around until his eyes find a cabin nestled against the mountain nearby. One of those modern ones with big, triple-layered glass for insulation. It has a terrace, a balcony, and a road leading up to it. Nestled there, it offers a beautiful view of the valley below and the mountains surrounding it. Though it seems empty, the area around it has been cleared of snow, as if someone were taking care of it while the owner was gone.

The man smiles even more and lifts his arm.

Under an invisible force, the cottage shatters into a million tiny pieces. And the destruction just keeps coming, as if something unseen were furiously hammering at it. Then it changes, and big pieces of the mountain are torn away, building-sized boulders which are immediately flung away, crashing into the other peaks and setting off avalanches. Some of the boulders fly far into the distance, others are crushed midair.

The man, who was smiling at the start, shows a deep seated anger on his face as he screams while the destruction continues until the entire mountain is gone. He moves his slightly shaking hand through his hair and then laughs shortly with relief that sounds like he pushed a wrong memory away, the one of decades of desperation and weakness.

He then fixes his clothes and, through the snow, starts walking the road heading down towards the closest village.

POV Nathaniel

I check the timer for the last time before I stand up. Then I use the 1-day Earth visitor token.

The world around me twists in a way that doesn't feel any more special than going on Beyond quests. It's just the same as always. I don't even know what I was expecting.

I find myself in the middle of what seems like a military compound with walls, vehicles, and even towers. An alarm rings right away, but I just take a step and use Wraith Dance. I repeat this multiple times until I find myself on the other end of the city.

The rush and presence of so many human beings hits me powerfully. Standing on the sidewalk, I just look around and take the view in, all these familiar smells and sights. It is weird, and I don't know what I had expected, but none of the people here feel any more real than the natives of the tutorial.

I take another Wraith Dance to cross the street as I spot a young man showing off his new watch to a girl. When I stop, I very carefully tap on his shoulder.

"What?" he asks when he turns around, but words freeze in his mouth, and he coughs and asks again, but in a very different tone, "What?"

"Can you lend me 100 bucks? I'll give you 100,000 tomorrow," I ask.

He blinks in confusion multiple times and looks between the girl and me before he laughs and pulls out his wallet. "Of course, you will," he snorts. "But take it."

As he hands it to me in multiple bills, I take it very carefully, aware not to touch him, wary of my strength. Though I'm still heavily restricting myself, and my little tap on his shoulder didn't break it.

I take the bills and search his expression. It is a mix of strong desire to show off, a bit of fear, but also a bit of kindness. I picked him because he seemed wealthy and an easy target, but he doesn't seem to be a bad guy.

"Thanks, I'll make it 200,000," I say. "What is your name?"

Almost forgetting the girl, he laughs, "As if, but whatever. It's John Murray." Then adds, "just don't spend it on alcohol, and help someone else down the road."

I nod and remember his looks before taking another Wraith Dance and disappearing to stop in front of a convenience store. There, I walk through the aisles and pick up a can of soda to drink and wait to have my hot dog prepared.

When I pay, I make my way outside and eat it all while resting against the wall near the store. As I chew, I watch cars and people pass by, with it all feeling extremely unreal.

On the opposite side of the street, I notice a bus coming to the bus stop, so I use Wraith Dance again to bring me over to it, and I rush the rest of the distance and jump onto the bottom step as the bus doors hiss open. I move up the stairs, and the air hits me with the heavy scent of diesel and cheap cleaners. The driver, a woman with tired eyes, doesn't look up right away.

"Good afternoon," I say.

She glances up, a weary, practiced expression on her face. "Afternoon. Where are you headed?"

"Wherever the line goes," I reply, handing her the ten-dollar bill I already had prepared.

She frowns slightly with a spark of annoyance in her tired eyes. "We don't do change for a ten, pal. The bus fare is three fifty."

"Keep it," I say, waving it off.

She sighs, pulling a small stack of crumpled bills from beneath the counter anyway. "Nah, I gotta give you something. Three fifty is the fare." She counts out some bills and coins, pushing a small, heavy pile toward me. "Six fifty change."

"Thank you," I say, taking the bills. I don't count it, just shove the change into my jacket pocket and walk down the narrow aisle.

I pass several silent, tired human beings. A woman glued to her phone, a teenager swallowed by his oversized headphones, and an older man just staring out the glass. I head straight to the back row and choose the corner seat. I press my back firmly into the worn, rough fabric of the seat, letting the steady, powerful rumble of the engine transmit through the bus and into my bones.

The bus doors hiss shut, and the entire vehicle lurches forward, pulling away from the curb.

I lean my head against the dusty window and watch the city begin to slide by while pressing my face close to the glass, studying my own reflection.

Chapter 756 - Threat Assessment: Extreme

After exiting the bus, I move through the city. Either by stretching out Ley Lines or use Wraith Dance. With the city I grew up in as a base for comparison, my abilities feel incredible. The street that took so long to pass now requires just a mere second to traverse, and the hour and a half-long bus travel is barely longer than that.

Finally, I come to a stop and look around a small park I start walking through. Though Earth is awakening, and there must be rumors, people still seem to love maintaining their schedule, and maybe all these things have caused them to cling to any hint of normalcy. Everywhere I look, there are people running, young couples on dates, and people out walking their dogs.

One such person comes to a stop next to me as her tiny brown dog halts and pulls her toward me while wagging its tail.

The young woman apologizes, "I'm sorry, she just likes to meet people. Don't worry, she doesn't bite, though."

Even now, I'm still weirded out by this normal conversation. In a way, it's Earth that feels fake now, not the tutorial.

I squat and carefully reach my hand toward the cute dog. She doesn't even sniff my hand but immediately pushes her head against my palm. It causes me to smile, and I pet her very carefully.

"What's her name?" I ask.

“Vivi, she is a Maltipoo,” the woman says.

Hearing her name, Vivi starts wagging her tail, licking, and jumping against my hand.

“What a cute little beast,” I smile at the dog one more time before I stand up.

The woman stares at me and nods absentmindedly before she asks, “Your eyes... Do I know you from somewhere?”

“I don’t think so?” I answer as I try to remember her face. “Nice to meet you, but I have to go.” Before leaving, I look down, “Bye bye, Vivi.”

The tiny dog barks at me a few times, and I continue walking while trying to remember the spot I had agreed upon to meet with Channeler, feeling her gaze on my back as I walk away.

I find the location after a few minutes of walking around, a small sitting area that, unlike most of the park, looks entirely new. A few wooden benches, a roof, and a small playground.

I send my senses ahead and find an empty space below it, something like a small room. My mana reaches there, and after tethering myself to the mark I make, I teleport to that room.

A small thermal orb forms in front of me, and I modify it slightly until it evenly lights the entire room as I let it float near the ceiling. Inside, I find a big, watertight box that seems to have been completely sealed. Finding no opening, I just cut it open, and inside, I find multiple stacked items.

A turned off smartphone and a few power banks in case the battery managed to discharge. I also find cans of soda, chips, some sweets, a pile of around 50,000 dollars, and a few other things. All of it’s here, left hidden for me by Channeler, either for people from Group 4 or some others. Most of it’s not even meant to be opened until after the tutorial ends in around two years. Similar caches like this are hidden all over the country and probably the world at large.

Grabbing a few snacks and a soda, I take the smartphone and slide down onto the ground, where I rest against the box and press to turn on the device. I don't really recognize the model, so I suspect it's likely the newest one that came out in the years we spent in the tutorial.

The logo flashes, and the phone prompts me for a code. With a sigh, I type in the one the twins forced on us.

80085

After the phone turns on, the battery still shows over 60%. Chewing on a snack bar, I open the contact list. There's only a single name: Channeler.

I press it and call, and it takes only two rings before a careful voice asks, "Thank you for calling Capital Operations Restoration Guarantee Insurance. How may I help you?"

"Channeler, I forgot the code phrase."

The voice on the other side cuts off for a few long seconds. "Noname?" it sounds again, as if wishing it had heard wrong.

"What's with the tone? Did you already forget me? Were you hoping I was still stuck in that hellhole?"

"But you love it there."

"That's not the point." I wave it off. "Anyway, I'm here for about 23 hours and some change before I return. Where can I find you?"

"People spy on me a lot. I don't know how much I can share, much less if we're being listened to."

"Is your life in danger? Is that why you can't give me your location?"

"No no no no. NO. Please don't do anything radical, and don't threaten anyone," he quickly gets out in a panic. "I'm more than safe, it's just that they spy."

"Whatever, just give me the location."

"I can send a private jet for you. I can have it ready in twenty minutes... are you eating chips?" he asks.

I throw another handful into my mouth, "Yes. The flavor's all weird now. I'm not used to so much salt anymore. And just give me an address, I can fly there faster."

"Okay, just please don't... don't cause any large-scale damage. Please, don't cause any small-scale damage either. I'll send you my location in a message, and you can use the navigation app."

"Don't worry, I'll be there soon," I say as I end the call.

A few seconds later, a message pings, and before leaving, I take all the money and drink one more can of soda.

POV Earth

"Colonel, sir! Colonel, sir!" The voice, sharp but bordering on frantic, echoes down the hall as two men in uniforms knock aggressively on the office door of Colonel Jonathan Kane.

The door, as if acknowledging the urgency in their address, is opened by the Colonel himself, who stands briefly to face the men. After gesturing for them to enter, he heads back to his seat surrounded by multiple computer screens.

The first man gives a quick, rigid salute before immediately moving to the desk. He taps rapidly on a ruggedized tablet, pulling up a file, and hands the device to the Colonel.

"Sir, this was received five minutes ago from NORA Outpost number Four. Priority One message," the man says, his voice regaining some of its professionalism as he hands over the device.

Colonel Kane takes the tablet. The display shows a photo of a young man with black hair and striking brown and gray eyes. There's a golden circle around each of his pupils. His expression is cold, almost pathologically indifferent, as he looks toward a distant guard tower armed to the teeth with guns. He's dressed only in a simple Earth-design white shirt and black sweatpants, with no visible items on him.

Swiping the screen, Kane accesses the next file, a video log. On it, the young man seems to materialize instantaneously at the camera's focal point before vanishing in the next frame.

The third file is an extremely slowed-down sequence, captured by a high-framerate surveillance camera. It shows the man becoming a blur as a single, impossible step covers dozens of meters in an instant.

The fourth file shows a thermal signature analysis made by another set of cameras. The brain of the man indicates an extreme level of activity, far beyond normal human capacity, marked by elevated temperature. More alarming is a heart-shaped 'hotspot' next to his actual heart, with a measured temperature capable of melting most metals.

The Colonel rapidly reviews the other files. A grainier, hyper-slowed-down video, footage captured through specialized lenses made from materials bought from a number of Returnees, and a final slide showing more photos. The man resting against the wall of a convenience store, eating a hot dog. The man-shaped blur flying through the sky. The man strolling through a public park.

The last display is the man's official profile. A few lines are highlighted.

Name: Nathaniel Gwyn

Difficulty: Hell

Threat Assessment: Extreme risk to personnel and infrastructure. Avoid surveillance escalation or containment attempts. Engage only under direct authorization.

Colonel Kane places the tablet face down with a sigh. He had already memorized every detail on this profile long ago.

The second soldier, who had been standing at attention, speaks up, "Sir, should we implement Family Watch protocol and initiate a secure contact with codename 'Channeler', and-"

Kane lifts a hand, cutting the man off mid-sentence. "Negative. Maintain the current status quo. Do not interfere with his movements or his immediate surroundings. You are dismissed."

"Yes, Colonel, sir!" The two men salute in unison and leave the office, pulling the door shut behind them.

Left alone, the Colonel pulls a personal smartphone from his pocket and calls the contact listed as Rafael Vaughn.

It rings twice before a voice on the other end says without skipping a beat, "I know, I know. He's already checked in with me and will be here in a minute or two. For the love of God, don't interfere." The line goes dead instantly.

Kane lowers the phone, a look of tired resignation on his face. He picks up the ruggedized tablet once more and begins scrolling through the data again.

POV Nathaniel

The flight takes ten minutes. Though I could probably make it even shorter if I really wanted to. But for now, I have a little bit of time, so I enjoy the experience of flying over the planet I was born on. I don't care one bit about who might see me, and there might be a few UFO sightings because of it.

What I find when I reach the spot the phone navigates me to is a small island just a few miles away from the coast. It looks nice, set with a huge central villa and multiple smaller ones. I spot a few helipads, and on the far side of it, there's even a small airport runway with a hangar and one jet parked outside.

My senses wash over the island in its entirety, and I detect thirty-six people. Fifteen of them come from Easy difficulty, five from Normal, and the rest are likely to be newly awakened humans. For some reason, I also locate what feels like a cat sitting in the lap of one of the people from Normal difficulty.

A boost of kinetic energy pushes me ahead, and after expanding a bit of mana, I place a marker and teleport. Trying to be polite, I avoid teleporting right in front of Channeler, appearing in the hallway instead.

Looking around, I think about how nice this place seems, and walk toward the door, knock, and enter immediately afterward.

Channeler stands behind a standing desk, wildly scrolling through a screen, while a woman sits on a nearby couch with an old looking black cat on her lap. I notice the woman is healing the cat.

"Is that Grumpy by any chance?" I ask.

"It is!" the woman answers before Channeler can. "I'm Jessica, Normal difficulty. I have kept this cat alive the entire time and will continue to do so as long as needed. Please make sure to let Lily Chen know."

"I will." I nod, quite enjoying the honesty.

Why can't everyone be that way? No hidden or difficult motives, just something easy to understand. A nice gesture offered with the expectation of repayment, one that would be very simple for someone like Lily to fulfill.

"Colonel Kane sent me five photos people took of you flying, and they've already started spreading online. One guy even had one of those ridiculous zoom smartphones, so your face is actually somewhat recognizable. The YouTuber behind the 'I Can Fix Him' series has already tweeted that they're willing to buy any videos of you they can get. And certain forums, whose names I'd rather forget, are going wild..."

Channeler stops and takes a deep breath, "Well, whatever. It's not like we didn't expect something like this."

Even with the expression he has currently and the clear stress on his features, Channeler is handsome as always. It makes me want to bully him, but I'm an adult man, so I hold myself back.

"'I Can Fix Him' series?" I ask.

"Ignore what I just said," he says, waving his hand and gesturing wildly as I move closer to Jessica and Grumpy. There, I reach out my hand to let Grumpy sniff it. The old cat lifts its head slowly, then, for the love of the game, bites my finger before pulling back and lying down.

"Lily sent a healing mark with me for Grumpy, along with a few other things," I say, keeping my eyes on the cat. "But I can do that later. By the way, what's with that huge-ass transparent spider cocoon on the moon?"

"It appeared there not that long after the tutorial started. I think the most popular name for it currently is the Moonster?" Channeler answers, looking with a questioning glance at Jessica, who nods.

Of course it is.

Chapter 757 - Party pooper and Grumpy

"So, how does it look here on Earth so far?" I ask. In an effort to avoid wasting any time, I start manifesting and weaving together weapons made of manabloc and piling them up on the floor.

"Please make some simple square plates, cubes, and orbs, I'm selling these, and passing some of them off to some of the scientists I've hired," Channeler says as he sees me doing so. "I would say it's going as well as it can in the current situation. Sure, they're trying to control us, but they have a few smart people who realize it's going to be nearly impossible soon, so they're trying to be more sneaky about it. If you want, I can tell you a bit more about that. About some of the more annoying senators, what the president's been thinking of this all, what the army's been planning, and more besides, but I think it would bore you."

"It would," I confirm and start making the shapes he just asked for. "Any danger to you or the people with us?"

"There's always something, but nothing too serious other than them hinting that they could do a bit of damage if we tried to push them too much. We mostly cooperate, but only to the point we want, while taking the opportunity to make contacts for the future. Some of the smaller countries are a mess after Normal difficulty people started returning, but we all know the real trouble's going to start when Hard difficulty starts appearing."

“Well, I wouldn’t rely on that,” I lean back and throw another sheet of manabloc on the floor. “I didn’t return alone, there’s another guy.”

“Hell difficulty?”

“You could say that, he’s a Beyonder.”

“Stronger than you?”

“For now. Confirmed Champion level.”

“Well, fuck.”

“Yup, I’ll talk to him soon to see what his plans are. But honestly, I don’t think there’s much I can do other than trying to keep my family safe along with you guys.”

“Do you think he’d actually try to use your family against you?” Channeler asks in worry.

“Quite likely if he was left with no other choice. And there’ll be nothing I can do other than maybe begging on my knees if that’s what he wants to see. Amusing situation, isn’t it?”

“It is fucked up,” Jessica says from the side. “Who even is this jerk? What godforsaken asshole did he crawl out of?”

“It’s complicated, and better if you guys don’t know too much. I’ve only got a bit more to tell you before I return to the tutorial,” I say and lean back just enough to see the sky through the massive ceiling window.

There, far in the distance, the moon is visible in the blue sky. Using mana to strengthen my sight, I observe the cocoon in the shape of a spider. A huge spider. I recognize it, of course, though Septa used to be much, much smaller and cuter when I saw her in the Academy.

Taking my eyes off it, I look back at Channeler. "Can you give me all the data, you know, the locations of everyone's family, and that stuff?"

He nods. "Yes, I'll give them to you when you decide to leave."

"Good. There are things I want to ask you to prepare before I return to the tutorial. Snacks, laptops, solar panels, Izzy's been wanting a drone too for a while, a tablet, a few more smartphones, a DSLR camera, and ebooks, with as many sciency ones as you can mix in. You can also add things the scientists have been learning about mana as well. Oh, and a detailed timeline of what's been happening on Earth since we've been in the tutorial, some music tools for Maya, and more besides. In fact, I'll just give you a list. There's a lot."

"I can gather that all easily in a few hours."

"There is also a guy named John Murray. I'll give you his description, so please find out who he is and send 200,000 to his bank account. You have that kind of cash, right?"

"Is this some sort of mind game? Is it one of those bullies the people from the tutorial were betting you meant to torture the moment you returned to Earth?"

"Who do you guys take me for?"

"I refuse to answer. But yes, I can do that, easily," Channeler says.

"Great. I don't have very much time, so I'll only be sticking around for another hour before I go to check on my mom and the families of the others. Before returning to the tutorial, I will return here for the stuff."

"By the way, it's eerie, the way you've had your eye trait activated all the time. It gives me goosebumps."

"What a nice way of you asking me to turn it off for the normal people. Well, that's just too bad. I evolved my trait, and now I can't turn it off."

"Oh..."

"I think it looks cool," Jessica says from the side.

"Any time I'm in Beyond, it threatens to melt my brain from the sheer amount of information from the mana wavelengths around me. Though here on Earth, it is much easier to handle."

"Certified party pooper," the woman smiles.

It amuses me a little. After the looks I got in the common area in the last minutes of the tournament, this feels better. There, even some of the people from Hell difficulty were decently scared, that much I could sense from their heartbeats.

Channeler coughs, and I switch my attention to the screen. There, a high-resolution recording shows me entering the 4th event with two metallic cones shining in front of me. Though I don't remember it, I'm there smiling for some reason. With interest, I watch the video as it shifts to a blinding light and an explosion. There's Adrian, surrounded by his figure-thing, and a skeleton flying through the air around which the flesh begins to regenerate in bursts of golden flames.

Like some maniacal lich, the skeleton continues clacking its teeth, and the superheated air of the explosion warps around it.

The cameraman and people around him shout in excitement and sheer shock. Someone shouts, "Go, go Mana maniac!" Another person shouts, "Is that a fucking mushroom cloud?" "Nukes? Nukes!?" and plenty more besides. There is even a voice screaming at the top of their lungs, "Nice bakery!" for some reason.

But after the fight ends, those words grow quieter, and although many people are shouting, some murmur hesitantly.

I watch as Channeler closes the file and then goes to YouTube, where he seems to be searching for a specific channel. There, he sorts videos by the newest, and a short, similar to the video we just watched, starts playing, though this one has more flashy edits added to it. There's heavy bass music and a bit of animation. For a moment, when the video zooms in on my skeletal face, the frame freezes, the music stops, and a pop-up asks for a subscription before the music unfreezes and the video continues. Perfectly synced to the music.

"Of course, that guy already made an edit. Knowing him, in a day or two, there'll even be a much more heavily edited video instead of this short one," Channeler sighs as he looks at me, likely reading my confusion. "The tournament ended, and there were plenty of people from lower difficulties who wanted to participate before clearing their last floor. So now, a few days later, after the end of the tournament, there are still plenty of them appearing, and of course, they've all got videos, items, materials, all that good stuff."

"That makes sense, I guess," I say.

"Yes," Channeler nods almost absentmindedly and clicks on the short video, setting it to play again in the background, seemingly for the purpose of listening to the song. On his computer, he opens a messaging app. "I'm messaging the others to prepare the things you asked for. By the way, you might not know this, but when you come in contact with a normal human, we think they'll be connected to the system and awakened."

I remember the man called John I touched, and the cute dog, Vivi.

Channeler continues to explain, "The time when it begins to show varies, sometimes in a few minutes, sometimes in days. We have a theory that it is faster the stronger the returnee is. You being from Hell, difficulty will likely take minutes for someone you touched and maybe half an hour for people close to you. We're still not sure, but for you, the effects could extend through an area about the size of a small city."

"Oh."

"Yes, oh," he nods. "But you couldn't have known. Also, we think that awakening continues to spread from people who came in contact with returnees. If they meet an Easy difficulty person, they might spread awakening only a little, but meeting or touching someone like you, they might spread it to hundreds, thousands, or even have their own 'field' of awakening."

I look at Jessica, who smiles at my expression, and then ask Channeler, "What does it do to people?"

Finally, he looks away from the screen, done sending messages, and turns off the video. "You see a system notification that tells you about awakening. It says: 'Congratulations! The earliest participants of the tutorial have completed their induction, and Earth will begin its awakening. More information will follow once the tutorial concludes! Welcome!' Then, if you know what to think or what to say, you can summon your status of level 0 and look over your two innate skills. If you kill a monster, you level up. You can even enter dungeons to level up. Some returnees are beginning to be hired to awaken rich people and teach them, or help them to level up."

"I could do that too, or heal and make millions, but instead I've decided to heal our precious Grumpy," Jessica says.

I sigh. "Yes, yes. Don't worry, I'll let Lily know. And since we're talking about it, let's give a healing mark to Grumpy."

As I say that, I move towards her and the cat. While I do so, I awaken the mark Lily placed on the back of my pale left hand, where it makes itself known.

"Are you sure?" Jessica asks. "She didn't get to examine his body or modify her healing mana..." As if realizing what she is saying, she stops and laughs shortly. "How dumb of me. I guess even without all that, she's still better than anyone else from Earth."

I nod and touch Grumpy, who growls while glaring at me.

Grumpy is an entirely black cat with differently colored eyes. One of them is yellow, and the other is blue. His fur, though, seems to lack the pitch-black shine it must have carried once, and his movements are slow and tired. He constantly keeps sniffing at the hand where the mark is placed, as if recognizing something in there, and slowly his growls turn to quiet, tired purring.

As I put my hand on his head, he presses against it and closes his eyes.

The healing mark in the mana disperses with such gentleness I almost don't notice when all of it is emptied and gone, and when I pull my hand back, Grumpy lies there sleeping.

In a quieter voice, I say, "Lily said it would be too dangerous to try to heal him on a deeper level, so she made it to strengthen his body and do some simple healing. Would you believe that she's been working on it since Floor 1?" I almost snicker. "She also couldn't explain how it works, though Sophie kept trying to put it in a bunch of fancy terms. Lily just said it will make Grumpy grow bigger and give him a stronger body so he can take care of himself. Once she's back, she'll do things properly and give him his old form back. Biscuit allowed her to study him a little, so it should be interesting."

Jessica blinks. "How big?"

"I don't know for sure, she said, maybe the size of a Labrador, at worst as big as a horse. She also asked for someone to take care of him as he might be scared and confused by the change."

The woman mumbles something that sounds like it'll be her getting scared when I pet Grumpy one more time before standing straight.

"Now, please, tell me where my mom is."

Chapter 758 - Pancakes

As per the last messages I sent to Earth, they inform me that they've learned that my mom is currently living on a nice tropical island, which I reach by ramping up the use of kinetic energy. During my flight, I notice fighter jets in the distance, but they disappear quickly before I can fly over to them and check them out up close.

But the closer I get to my destination, the more I notice myself slowing down. By the time I see the island coming into view, my speed is barely faster than a car, and my approach begins to slow even further.

My destination isn't just some small private island or anything like that. Instead, it is the kind of large island just big enough to host a small city and two villages, at least from what I can see. It has a beautiful beach of white sand and a nice set of mountains.

I take the phone out of my pocket to check the direction again and fly along a roundabout path over the sea to approach from the far side of the island. It isn't that far away from the city, and it's connected to it by a road following the shape of the beach. On that part of it are more grand buildings with huge estates.

The place I find myself heading towards stretches from one of the smaller hills to take up a large swathe of the private beach, as well as encircling a sort of cliff nearby. In the bay, I see a small yacht along with a few smaller vessels. There is some construction going on, and as I'm floating there in the air, observing all of this, I realize they seem to be working on a bunker a bit further away from the main house.

I'm sure by now Channeler's made sure to give the people here a call, and that my mother should know already, yet I hesitate. I just float there, feeling more nervous than I did before some of my life or death battles.

As amused as I am annoyed with myself, I take out the phone again and, turning on the front camera, I check my face, fix my hair as much as I can, and take a moment to touch up my clothes as well. There's nothing I can do about my eyes, with the way my trait is now permanently active.

Where before my Mana Wavelength Iris showed only when I activated it by creating a golden circle around my pupils, now it is a bit different. The circle is slightly less noticeable and more uneven, and feels like a golden light trying to peek from behind the edges of the black pupils. It shifts, its glow pulses from brighter to lighter, and it unpredictably circles my pupil. Much like an eclipse of the sun.

The phone then rings once, showing a censored number. Out of curiosity, I pick up, "Hello?"

"Good afternoon," the voice replies, measured and respectful. "Vice President Vernon Oakley speaking. I hope I am reaching you at a suitable moment. I wanted to establish contact and express that we are prepared to meet once yo-"

I don't even listen and leave the phone in the air, locked there with my kinetic absorption.

Then my senses expand across a mile wide area. Every human, every machine, every car, insect, animal, and anything else in motion freezes and halts, all held in place by my will. I allow just enough function to keep everyone safe, so people can breathe, and to ensure that any running machines don't explode or break.

All of it is done by a small part of my mind that takes care of all the calculations, perceives, categorizes, and then handles the absorbed kinetic energy, as well as halting other people, animals, or machines as they enter the area.

Boosting myself, I find the helipad where I land and once again fix my clothes and hair.

I pass by a security guard in a suit, frozen mid-step and a gardener with a hose that seems to have been watering the plants nearby. Both of them follow me with their eyes, the only parts of them I've allowed to move, and the water from the hose remains frozen mid-air.

Just one person moves freely, and I slowly move over to her.

She must have heard my steps because as when I enter the terrace, she stands there already looking in my direction, a hand over her chest. Her heart is beating like crazy, and I entirely block out these new senses of mine. I don't observe her movements, twitches, muscles, temperature, or movement of her blood. Instead, I look at my mom with only the senses I would've had before the tutorial. And all the words, all the plans I had for how this meeting would go are gone, my mind flushed clean.

She's better than me in this way. Before I can even think of what to do, she's standing in front of me, crashing into my body and pulling me into a hug.

"Oh my god, Nathaniel. Natty..." she continues, whispering my name, and I feel her tears on my chest as I put my arms around her. I don't think I've ever tried to hold something so carefully in my life.

She looks up at my face, grabbing my cheeks in her hands. "Your eyes, your pretty eyes, what happened to them? And this scar? Just what..." Her hands touch the scar going from the bottom of my left cheek and down through my neck. "Did it hurt?"

Her fingers trace the line of the scar. I feel the warmth of her palms, the tremble behind her touch. She keeps looking at my face with worry, that tries to read every inch of it.

I answer in a voice quieter than I'm used to. "A little. But it's alright now." These words come out slow and careful.

She cups my jaw again. Her thumbs sweep across my cheekbones. She studies the shifting rings of light around my pupils. They pulse with an uneven rhythm that I see reflected in her gentle eyes.

"You lived," she repeats. Her shoulders shake once, and she leans in, forehead touching my chest. "I thought I would never see you again. I thought I lost you... and Victoria... is she...?"

"She's okay. You know how she is."

I hold her steady, supporting her weight with an ease that feels almost weightless.

Did you know this text is from a different site? Read the official version to support the creator.

She smiles, small and trembling. "You came back different, but you still talk like my Natty. That part still hasn't changed. About what happened before, about the things I said and did..."

A soft laugh slips out of me. "It doesn't matter, so why would we make this awkward? I'm happy to see you, you're happy to see me. Will you be happy to see Vic, too?" I ask, knowing how much more difficult that question may be for her to answer than it otherwise should. In a way, it is a bit cruel from my side, but I think it needs to be asked.

"Yes..." she whispers. "I would be happy to see Victoria as well."

"Good, then that's it. There's no need to worry about such useless things anymore. Have they been treating you well?"

She touches the skin under my eye. "They've been almost too nice, to the point it gets annoying at times. Does it hurt when your eyes shift like that?"

"No. It's a trait thing. It looks strange, but it feels natural."

"Then I'll have to get used to it." She wipes her cheeks with the back of her hand, though the tears keep coming. "You look like you've survived a war."

"War," I laugh shortly. "Weird. It is fun there most of the time, but it can be fucked up at times and..."

"No cursing."

"I'm a grown man. I have to tell you I'm also renting out a property and just sold another."

That small woman in front of me, who is still early into her forties, looks at me just for a few long seconds before I look away with a sigh.

I give a slow nod. "It is what it is over there."

She holds my hands in hers. Her grip tightens as she asks an unexpected question. "Are you hungry?"

"Do you even still cook, or do you have a bunch of personal chefs now?" I ask teasingly.

It causes her to smile as she lets go of my hand, and I'm sure she's noticed some of the other scars, but doesn't ask about them.

It all still feels a bit awkward, but I follow her as she gestures.

"They keep forcing all these things on me. I'm okay with this place, you know, I always loved this kind of weather, and I always dreamed of seeing the sea and walking along the shore. Now I can wake up every morning, hear the sea in my bedroom. I wake up, walk out across the sand, and drink my coffee while watching the waves. It's nice."

"It does sound nice," I nod.

"But I haven't used any money. I was able to get ten million dollars out of Colonel Kane, and for some reason, then they sent a hundred more. Can you even imagine all that money? It would just be sitting in an account, but then that handsome young man who calls himself Rafael came, and he said he was your friend. He even showed me some photos of you standing with him. He helped me invest some of the money. Properties, and a few companies, he seems to think will do well after the tutorial. Everything's been put in your and Victoria's name, even though he tried to persuade me to take some myself."

"That's stupid. I told them to tell you to spend it all."

"I don't want it."

"Don't be stubborn, Mom."

For a moment, she turns around and smiles. It is a beautiful smile that makes her face even prettier. Almost without realizing it and without a good reason, I smile back at her.

"No," she says simply with that smile.

With a sigh, I follow, "Whatever."

She laughs again, "But don't worry, while you've been off suffering somewhere in the tutorial, I'm here enjoying all the luxuries we used to dream of. Do you remember those nights when we would sit on the couch and watch all those holiday resorts on TV, trying to think about the things we'd do if we ever got to go?"

Going along with her, I decide to ignore the remaining awkwardness of it all and all the past and things we probably should be talking about. And it's easy to do because right now, everything else just feels so inconsequential.

I glance in the direction of the sea as a helicopter enters the blocked-out zone near the mountain and freezes mid-air along with its passengers. Then I look around the kitchen and slide onto the high seat near the kitchen island in the middle. It really is a pretty kitchen, with big windows, nice furniture, and all sorts of fancy appliances.

Thalia Gwyn, my mother, moves around swiftly, which tells me that it's quite likely she cooks most of the food herself, and I wouldn't be surprised if she's even been cooking for the other people here.

"Do you really like it here?" I ask seriously.

She doesn't stop, but a smile appears on her face, and I can see from the side. "It is hard to enjoy it without knowing what's been happening to the two of you. But your friend visits me once every few weeks, and sometimes he brings me stories from the tutorial. He also helps me to train my skills and says he got some of his training methods from you. Did they make a scholar of you, Natty?"

I snort, "As if. But Mom, if you ever get the feeling he's trying to pick you up, just tell me, I'll beat his ass."

As she closes the fridge, she laughs shortly and turns on the heat under the pan. "Who would want a sad old lady like me?"

"Bullshit. You're the prettiest woman I've ever seen."

"Language."

"Bullshit. You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

She throws a few chocolate chips at me, but they freeze in the air just before reaching me, and smiling victoriously, I eat them as they hang in the air.

"When we finish the pancakes, you'll have to show me how you do that. By the way, can you even eat them? I mean, does it do anything for you? Rafael said he can go without food for a few days easily, but when he does eat, he needs a lot of calories or the meat of awakened animals or monsters."

"I can eat it, but other than the taste, it doesn't really do much for me. Honestly, I bet I could eat piles of them and not get fat at all."

"I'm envious." She returns to the pan and throws the chocolate chips onto the pancakes before flipping them around.

As she cooks, I sit quietly and watch her the entire time through my human eyes, memorizing every movement, every smile, and the way her black hair shifts as she moves.

When she's done, she gently slides the pancakes onto the plates and pours a bit of maple syrup over them before adding some grated apple mixed with a bit of sugar and cinnamon.

We carry these plates outside and walk by the frozen people, whom she looks at with wide eyes, but she still leads me to the beach. There, under a small patch of trees, is a nice spot where we sit down as we start eating the pancakes with the sound of the splashing sea in the background.

Chapter 759 - Just one day

Even hours later, we still sit there, back after two more rounds of making pancakes and getting some drinks to go with them. Chocolate milk, for example, or fancy brands of freshly pressed fruit juices whose names I can't even read.

At some point, we take off our shoes and walk into the sea to let the waves wash over us as we wade there. My mom shows me her favorite places and the places where she's seen whales far in the distance. She talks about taking a sailing trip on a small boat and how they tried to teach her to fish and snorkel.

For a while, she even cries.

She tells me how she still misses my father. Not who he became, but who he used to be. A young, dreamy boy, sometimes a silly one, full of his own goals and hopes. She talks about how it felt like the whole world had turned against him, slowly shaping him into a bitter shell of the man he once was. Searching for relief in alcohol, hiding, and lashing out like a cornered animal.

She says she doesn't deserve any of the things she has now because of what she did, and how awful she feels for enjoying these pieces of the life she always dreamed of.

She tells me how empty it all feels in the end, with me and Vic in danger.

Just silly things like that. She's someone who, when she loves, gives everything she has.

My silly little human.

The more time we spend together, the easier it is to talk, and the more confirmation I get that I was never truly angry at her, not even once. Even as she breaks the unsaid rule and talks about her feelings regarding what happened after Dad died, and Victoria was taken to prison. She lays out all her thoughts for me as she stands knee-deep in the sea with the sun shining over the waves behind her.

I listen to her as she does and tell her some stories of my own. What happened after we split, about the tutorial, and the people I've met.

That's when she asks, "You keep talking about your group, your team, and things like that. But what you really mean is that they're your friends, right?"

I open and close my mouth a few times before saying. "Yes, that's what I mean."

"I'm glad." Her face turns a bit sad as she grabs my hand. "You know it is okay. No one's going to shout at you or hit you for getting close to people anymore."

"I know."

She squeezes as strongly as she can before smiling, "Your hand is so strong."

"Actually, my body is one of the weakest out of my gr... out of all of my friends. Probably the weakest."

"Really?"

"It's a feature," I smile at her. "Some of the others could probably catch a bullet just with their baseline senses and the speed of their bodies alone. Others could probably get hit by a rocket and not even get a scratch."

"That sounds scary. So much is changing and so quickly."

"There's nothing we can do but adapt," I say, and then, while looking at her, I pull my foot out of the water and set it on the surface. I pull out the second one and stand on water. I cheat a bit, not standing on the wavy surface so much as using kinetic energy to float there, but I don't need to say it out loud.

"Show-off," she keeps smiling at me and even splashes some water towards me, which halts in the air.

She starts walking again, wading through the water, and I follow, pretending to walk on the surface.

"You can't stay long?" she asks.

"I only have a day before I get pulled back, but before that, I want to check on the families of all my friends and meet a few more people. Usually, I would've just ignored it all and stayed with you, but I think it's important for me to do this."

"Yes," she agrees with me with a little smile she tries to hide.

After that, I allow myself to stay a few hours longer while taking a moment to release everyone I held when my mom asks me to. Some of these people run in panic, there is a bit of screaming, and a few pass out. Though no one's been hurt, I know because I checked. All the machines restart, and animals start moving again, too.

To avoid all that commotion, we step into a garden I've blocked off for us and talk about silly things while watching some cooking competition show that my mom lets play in the background on TV.

Only when it feels like it is as good a time as any, we say our goodbyes, and I get another long hug.

Once again flying high into the air, I look down, miles below, using my strengthened sight to watch my mother, who can't see me at this distance. She starts shaking and even crying again, but also smiling with joy.

After a minute, she calms down, fixes herself, and heads to the front of the house, at which point she starts talking to the gardener and apologizing deeply, and then continues to move from person to person and apologize to each person in turn.

I remember her face one more time and force myself to look away as I grab the smartphone hanging in the air where I left it. There are multiple missed calls from the same censored number, a few from Channeler, and some other messages as well. I ignore most and find only the ones with the locations of my friends' families. I don't bother to hold my flight back much and travel all over the country, checking in on everyone.

Min-Jae's family has been moved to a nice house. I see his parents and siblings for the first time, it's afternoon, and they've gathered in the home. His dad especially reminds me of Min-Jae and is quite tall as well, likely hinting that his son can look forward to reaching a similar height one day. I remember who I should see, the number of members, and confirm everyone is there and safe. Then, as promised, I do some mischief.

I destroy homework. I damage the plumbing. I teleport to the bathroom and pour all the expensive perfumes into the sink, and leave all the toilet seats up. I even pierce all the wheels on both cars.

Next, I check on Tess' mother. I find her at home, alone, absorbed in her work at her computer in the luxurious apartment where Tess once lived, near the top of one of the smaller skyscrapers. One side opens onto a huge terrace overlooking the nearby park, while floor to ceiling windows face the city. Her mother looks fairly similar to Tess, tall, blonde hair, and a slim figure, though her expression is much more closed off, especially as she works.

I watch her for a minute longer before I fly away, waving at a kid I notice staring at me out of the window of his room as I was floating there.

As promised, I don't check on the twins and the sisters' adoptive families, though I really want to give the twins' aunt a little visit, having heard about the things she's done. But, in the end, it is up to them to deal with.

Both Maya's mother and father and Lily's father seem to be doing well. Channeler took care of most things, and they've been getting a steady stream of money. Almost as if out of nowhere, their luck has turned, and our country and the system itself seems to be helping them out with everything. It's nice to see.

Lastly, guided by flashes of shared memories, I find the place Biscuit used to live as a young puppy. The house of the girl who starved him so often, using him as a prop for all those cruel videos.

Sitting on a nearby roof, I watch the heat signatures moving inside, and through the window, I see their faces, and confirm that they're the right people.

It takes a good effort for me not to burn them to ashes where they stand, and memories and feelings from the tiny corgi linger in the foreground. In the end, I follow Biscuit's wishes and let them live. I tie Ley Lines to them and teleport them far away from the house, and with that, I don't care about them anymore.

Then I lift my hand into the air with a palm pointing downward and slowly start to move it down.

The house begins to collapse under an invisible force as if a huge, unstoppable press had begun to press down on it. It bends inward with a deep, hollow sound. Tiles crack, sliding over each other before shattering as the pressure keeps coming, steady and indifferent.

The walls follow soon after. Windows burst outward, crushing the glass into glittering clouds that twinkle briefly in the light and before vanishing. Beams snap deep inside, one after another, in a sequence of muted thuds that travel through the air loud enough for me to feel.

The smell of old wood, mold, and cheap paint spreads through the air. Somewhere inside, a doorframe twists and finally breaks, the sound sharp like a crack of a whip.

I keep my hand steady.

The walls cave inward completely now. What was once a house now becomes a shrinking shape, then a pile, then something flatter. The slow press continues until nothing remains but crushed material forced into the ground beneath it.

When I finally lower my hand fully, there is no house.

I turn away and leave before I can reconsider and search for the heat signatures I teleported away.

The sky is already darkening, colors deepening as the sun begins to set. I rise into the air again, faster this time and higher. Almost as high as I can before I allow my mana to spread and radiate into the area. Then I wait to be noticed.

It doesn't take long, and a mana signal directed at me answers, and I twist in the air and fly in that direction.

Absentmindedly, I open my status and glance it over.

Name: Nathaniel Gwyn

Title: Absolute Candidate

Difficulty: Hell

Rank: A, Shimmering Silver

Guild: Primordial Knights

Floor: 9 - The Pit

Time left until forced return: 1y 353d 20h 9m 16s

Traits (2/3): Preeminence Eyes 1/4, Mana Physique 2/4

Lvl 367

Strength: 355

Dexterity: 333

Constitution: 102

Mana (Stage 1/3 - Vast Mana): 1807 + 1807

Primary Class: Mana Weaver (Unique Arcane)

Sub-class: [Adept of Pride]

Active skills (9/10):

Focus - Lvl 75

Perception - Lvl 71

Redistribution - Lvl 73

Mana Manipulation - Lvl 75

Ley Line - Lvl 70

Eclipse (Pride) - Lvl 63

Empyrean Lance - Lvl 35

Manifestation - Lvl 32

Current - Lvl 24

Constructs:

Physical Fortification Matrix

Mana Flow Control

Mana Sovereignty Field

Kinetic Mana Heart

Sealed Ignition Heart (Partially Sealed, 1/3)

Combat Cognition Frame

High-Density Thought Network

Thermal Flux Controller

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 7 day stay token

Beyond 30 day stay token

Beyond 14 day stay token (x 26)

Shards: 4,449,606

And then there's a set of notifications from before.

Your trait, Mana Wavelength Iris, has undergone successful evolution!

This evolution was influenced by a cumulative assessment of your performance up until now and by your Primary Class: Mana Weaver (Unique Arcane).

Additional influence was derived from your passive skill, Cognitive Hyperprocessing Vector (Low Pristine), which has contributed to the adaptive refinement parameters.

Your designation as an Absolute Candidate has been recognized as a qualifying factor in this process.

The evolution has been influenced by Mana Wavelength Iris and Mana Physique, being greatly integrated into your body.

The evolution has been influenced by your Constitution stat.

Individual Enhancements resulting from prior body upgrades have been accounted for and incorporated.

Your total mana capacity and circulation efficiency were evaluated and influenced the evolution.

Due to the quality, complexity, and grade of your evolved trait and other influencing factors, the number of strengthenings has been reduced to 1.

Preeminence Eyes - The user's eyes resonate with the purest form of their mana, channeling it directly through their gaze and turning their very sight into a conduit of raw mana. The eyes grant complete awareness of all mana currents, while every fiber of the body aligns with the user's gaze, further deepening their insight into mana itself.

I wave it off and reach the skyscraper from which I can sense Adrian's mana signature. The doors on the terrace are open, so I use them to fly inside, where I find him standing near the bar and mixing some sort of alcoholic drink. The penthouse I find him in is huge and luxurious in a sort of old-school way. With lots of leather, wood, and ornaments, while somehow avoiding feeling tacky or overdone.

On one side of the room, a huge fireplace dominates the space with some wood already burning inside. The other wall is dominated by an enormous TV that plays news, where I notice a few short clips of way too big animals.

"Honestly, I didn't expect to see you here. It's a surprise, but not the sort I'd mind," Adrian says, and I watch as the other presence behind him moves. The spider, about the size of a small dog, climbs from behind the bar to set atop it, carefully and slowly. There it stops and, with one of its front legs, taps on Adrian's hand holding the glass.

“Yes, don’t worry,” he answers with a smile to the spider, and turns back to me. “Did you have the chance to meet Septa on the eighth floor?”

“Briefly. She used to be smaller, though.”

“Yes, yes she did,” he says and shortly rubs her head, which the spider seems to enjoy.

“You seem to be settling in,” I say as I look around the place.

Instead of answering right away, he pours another glass, mixes in some liquor, and adds a few pieces of ice. He then walks towards me and offers me the drink, which I take. Meanwhile, Septa moves back to the floor and settles in front of the fireplace, where she sits watching the flames.

Gesturing for me to sit, Adrian sits down first. “Settling in... I suppose I am. After all, unlike you, I will be staying here.”

Chapter 760 - Pretending to talk

“Want to show off and tell me how the fuck you did it?” I ask, sinking into the offered armchair.

To my left is a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the night city. The skyscrapers outside the window glow like a jagged set of teeth against the dark. A myriad array of cars coils along the roads below, punctuated by various parks full of greenery.

Adrian takes a slow sip of his drink. He closes his eyes, savouring the taste before speaking. “My tournament rewards included a Difficulty Change token. Usually, that’s the worst possible reward for someone from Hell difficulty or Beyond, but for me, it was exactly what I wanted.”

“Yeah, and maybe the rewards you could choose from were influenced a bit by your Handler, or by mine, right? So you were trying to get more out of the tutorial?”

He nods. “Of course. As much as the system allows. To claw every advantage I can get. You’d have done the same, I believe. But when I used the token, the Ruler of Diligence spoke out strongly against it.”

"I can imagine," I snort.

I don't know if he's mirroring my feelings, but a sharp smile crosses his face. "Greed, Kindness, and Wrath were all for allowing me to start over from Floor 1."

"But?"

"But the Ruler of Diligence invoked his veto. He gathered enough of the available Rulers to vote on it, and their side won in the end. They couldn't stop me from entering the tutorial, but they forced me onto the 13th floor to reduce my 'cheating,' as those bastards called it, to a minimum. So here I am, on Earth, after clearing the 13th floor of the tutorial."

"Didn't want to go to the 8th floor of Beyond?"

"Oh, I did. I really did. I just don't think it'll be possible for me to reach it in my current state. Perhaps with one or two capable people. But it just wasn't meant to be."

Adrian's smile remains fixed. "You know, I really enjoy your emotions. It's a fascinating feeling, sensing them like this even though your expression doesn't change. All these little impulses, and the other impulses controlling them. Your feelings constantly shifting as you feed yourself different thoughts, coaxing other feelings to overpower them. Tell me, how much has Greed told you about me?"

I sniff at the alcoholic beverage he's mixed for me before taking a small sip, "She hinted she would stick with you even if you slaughtered me or destroyed my entire planet. She told me about your [Mirror] and a bit about how it works, and a bit more about how you used to behave as an Absolute, that kind of stuff."

"So, a bit more than I'd like."

"Probably. She doesn't seem to like you very much."

"A lot of people don't," he says, abruptly shifting the subject. "Do you know that the entrance to the World Dungeon appears only after the tutorial is concluded?"

"I do."

"Do you know that even when it does appear, it's up to the natives to reach the entrance, and that process alone requires a decent bit of effort?"

"I know that as well."

"So you didn't rush here to try and become Absolute before me?"

"If I were so misinformed that I thought I could do so, I would've come here much earlier, wouldn't I? You know very well why I'm here."

"I do." He nods and stands up, gesturing for me to follow.

We exit the penthouse and step onto the terrace. The noise of the city rises up to meet us.

Adrian says, "I became quite wealthy before entering the tutorial. I have apartments like this all over the world. I spent a decade or two multiplying my wealth as much as possible. I think I just wanted to distract myself from the possibility that I'd failed."

"You sure do like to show off."

"I know," he laughs shortly. "It is in my nature, and there are a few more bad habits I've yet to break. Nasty ones, but as long as I've lived, and with the way they've hung around, I guess they're here to stay. I look down on people, I hate losing, I talk too much, I want people to acknowledge me. All the pathetic things that have stuck with me since I was just an unawakened human." He waves a hand dismissively.

Then he looks down and pours the amber liquid from his glass over the balcony. "Sometimes I suppress them. Other times, I do not."

I watch the droplets flicker in the air as the wind scatters them.

“Have you come here to try to gain the Fragment that Earth holds? The one hidden here should be quite powerful and valuable.”

“You know I didn’t.”

He lets his glass fall. Both of us watch as it plunges toward the empty street below, and after several seconds, I watch it shatter.

“So you just wasted your Earth visitor token like that,” he says, and the mana around him begins to surge. The figure that had been floating invisibly behind him becomes just a tiny bit more noticeable, even to normal sight.

“You know I don’t give a fuck about rewards in certain cases. You seem to love reading my emotions, so why don’t you tell me?” I say calmly, despite the fury rising inside me.

“How could I not know?” Adrian says, straightening up and turning to me. His eyes glow with the same blood-red hue of the Wraith he absorbed, the figure that follows him like a permanent shadow. “But Nathaniel, your searing heart, all the mana you’ve transformed and gathered inside your body, all these currents swirling around you. Your eyes, and your intent...”

As he speaks, his voice gains volume and speed. His gaze hardens as his voice rises into a deep, threatening rasp, with the figure behind him looking as if it is towering over the entire city, “HOW can you come here to beg, while pointing the equivalent of a loaded gun to my head?”

That deep red glow in his eyes intensifies, and his presence swells with it. Metal creaks, the air hums, and the sounds of the city below fades into a distant echo.

My mana surges to my fingertips, waiting for a single order to explode and kick off the fight, the sort of fight where I don’t give a fuck about my own survival, much less that of the millions of people living in this city. Not even the slightest bit. I’m still like that.

These thoughts settle inside of me with a calm, familiar cold, and I hate how easily it fits. I let the mana coil tighter instead of releasing it, forcing my breathing to slow as the terrace groans beneath the pressure of two monsters pretending to talk.

I meet his glowing gaze without flinching, because backing down now would mean admitting loss. The city below keeps moving and breathing, ignorant and so very fragile, while two of us balance on the edge of turning this night into a catastrophe.

But the tension passes. As quickly as it arrived, the pressure he's been releasing vanishes. Adrian smiles again, his eyes returning to normal. "Oh, to be young again. Want to hear something from an old man?"

"Tell me," I say, my voice cold.

"I used to be just like this, up until one hundred fifty years ago. Greed's weapon, just like you. For decades, we cooperated, with her knowledge and my abilities, and I grew even stronger. Up until the moment she tossed me aside like trash."

"What happened?"

"She gave me a record of one of the Challenges against Pride. It showed one of her previous weapons, someone capable of making even Pride take things the slightest bit seriously. And I froze when I saw it. I was intimidated. She noticed that moment of hesitation and threw me away like a broken tool. A failure. All because of a single second of doubt."

"Want me to be honest?" I ask.

"Be my guest. I promise not to hold it against you."

"I admire that you tricked the system and did the tutorial all over again. Honestly, ever since I learned just how impossible that is, I admire it. It's a beautiful middle finger to the system and all those assholes who call themselves Rulers."

Adrian looks at me with genuine interest. "But?"

“But why the fuck would you have ever trusted Greed? Why would you think she wouldn’t simply discard you again at any moment?”

The man in front of me smiles. “Did you not do the same?”

“That’s exactly why I’m asking.”

He doesn't answer and instead asks, “How does it feel, knowing she would throw your entire planet at my feet? All your family left for me to use against you while you’re stuck in the tutorial?”

“Very unpleasant. I expected some of that from her, but not quite to that level.”

Adrian nods. “Blights and Radiances taken to their extreme are like that. Their Rulers are no different.”

“So, what now?” I ask.

“Now?”

“Are we going to fight to the death?”

“We can, if you wish. I can sense that much from the emotions I’ve mirrored from you. You, coming all this way for the simplest of things: to confirm that your family will remain safe. A single parent, from what I can sense. A mother, probably? Did you spend a few nice moments with her? One last visit before you came here, thinking there would be a high chance that you’d meet your end? Do your friends even know?”

I stay quiet. Adrian looks back over the city, smiling knowingly. “Since I know that much about you, I’ll tell you a bit about me. And also because I apparently like to listen to my own voice.”

“Go on.”

"I almost killed myself. You know, suicide, the last shred of control I felt that I had left. It was fifty years after the tutorial was supposed to start, and I'd even developed cancer, leaving me with a scant few months of pathetic life. I don't think I've told you that yet," he smiles weakly, and looks at his hands, turning them slowly, palms up, then down again. "Do you understand how obscene that felt? All of this up here," he taps his temple, once, hard, "the knowledge, the plans, the potential, all of it trapped inside this." His voice rises, faster now. "This fucking thing."

His eyes gaze over his body with contempt as if remembering how it looked before the tutorial, "A sack of flesh and blood. Warm. Soft. Failing. Chemical garbage sloshing through its veins, hormones hijacking my thoughts. Signals crawling along nerves at a pathetic pace, milliseconds pretending to be speed, latency baked into my very being."

Adrian flexes his fingers again, harder this time, until the tendons stand out. His eyes don't see his current body, rather they're remembering the one he spent over 70 years in, "Muscles that need oxygen, that tyre, that tear. Fibers that tremble under the slightest hint of stress instead of executing my intent cleanly." His breathing sharpens. "Every. Single. Action, delayed. Every thought filtered through meat."

The words come quicker, almost tripping over one another. "A disgusting, useless pile of flesh pretending it deserved to house my mind."

He straightens abruptly. "I had already chosen the place. Mountains with clean air, and no one to witness my end. And then, right as I was standing there, right at that exact second, the tutorial started."

"Such interesting timing," I answer, watching as he calms down and fixes his clothes. He doesn't even look at his body anymore.

Adrian agrees, "I don't believe in coincidences like that. Someone out there rigged it. Even I'm not narcissistic enough to think Pride did it, or that he'd show even the barest flicker of interest in me. But I will find out what happened."

He steps away from the railing and walks back inside the room. Septa quickly rushes to his feet, tapping against his leg a few times. Adrian smiles down at her. "I went to the moon, where she'd been left without her master. Somewhere in between death and new life, I helped her shed her old skin, and now here she is. Not as powerful as before, but she'll get there."

Turning back to me, he says, "You sure don't talk much when you're pissed off and ready to fight. So let's make this crystal clear. As I said, I want you and Victoria to be my Champions. I won't hurt your friends or family, though things on Earth are going to change quite a lot. There are people who need to die. Countries that will fall, and governments that will need to be replaced."

He says it all with casual indifference. "At the start, humans will fight back. I know many will refuse to accept me. Those people will die. The Tutorial's attendees will fall into line more easily, they at least understand a fraction of the power we hold."

"I don't think there'll be anyone left to stop you, not until the tutorial ends."

"There won't be anyone, even after that," Adrian corrects me. "In just a few months, I will attempt to initiate an additional Pairing. With these old system logs still considering me an Absolute in the background, I might be able to pull it off, and I'll try to take advantage of that. I'll visit the Coordinates of planets I know I can handle."

Surprise washes over me, but I suppress it, and Adrian continues, "There are a few Coalitions Earth can join. After we make it through these Pairings and the planet grows stronger, we can settle in and make our move to join one and...."

Finally, sensing my emotions, he shuts up for a moment, standing near the fireplace surrounded by his curated luxury.

Then he starts laughing.

At first, it's like a child who's done something petty and wrong, but the sound swells, louder, more amused, as if he's mocking the entire world, and me in particular.

When he stops, the aftereffects of the laugh still dance on his face. "I'm so sorry for teasing you all so much. The waves of your emotions are just so delicious. Here you are, ready to fight. There's that tiny amount of fear in you, that pride of yours, the frustration, concern for your people, but not a single goddamn speck of intent to give up. I love that, and I fucking hate that about you. It makes me wonder what you would do in my situation, and in a way, it scares me to know the answer. I want to kill you and torture you, but at the same time, I want to keep you and control you."

He sighs, laughing again. "Ah, that was really fucking fun!" He snickers before his voice turns sharp and direct again, as before during our standoff. "If you attack me, I will kill you, and then I'll kill your mother and everyone else on Earth you've ever known. If you think you can win, do it. Challenge me. If there were even a small chance that you were right and you might be able to defeat me, I would simply run away. I'm more than capable of that. Then I'll wait until you return to the tutorial, and I'll crawl back here to slaughter your mother and everyone else you hold dear."

He chuckles once more. "Is it not satisfying to hear it all laid out? Does it make me a villain? If I stayed quiet and refused to state what we both know as reality out loud, wouldn't I still be one? Everyone in our situation thinks of the same options, probably even you. If that's the case, if you were stronger than me, would you be the villain from my point of view?"

I stay quiet. Adrian's smile grows. "I won the moment I completed the tutorial before you. The moment you had something to lose here, under my control. And the most amusing part is that your handler helped me gain the rewards I needed to return here, all on a silver platter. I told you not to trust that bitch."